



CAWRI

Community wellbeing and playgrounds: Enhancing community wellbeing through an intergenerational playground

Final report

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Project summary

The project investigated users' views on the influences on the use of children's playgrounds. The purpose was to inform how a playground may be designed and developed within a high-density social housing precinct and directed to intergenerational service. The methodology was facilitated by the participation of students from the Richmond West Primary School, where a teaching period was set aside for children to contribute to the work by drawing a memory of a playground and explaining the features of the playground to their teachers. To achieve a broader spectrum of data from multiple age groups, an anonymous Qualtrics open online survey was advertised through the Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House (BANH) and completed by 560 people. Once analysed, the results of this survey are expected to have significant implications for intergenerational playground design.

The project's initial objectives were severely compromised by a range of factors but most notably due to the COVID-19 pandemic with its concomitant restrictions to research fieldwork and access to persons. Researchers could not directly engage with the teachers and students, and all communication was limited to online Zoom interaction. Access to adults could only be made via the online survey.

Key findings from the student workshops and partner discussions were that there is an awareness of playgrounds' role as significant sites for community development, community capacity building and resilience. Although playground interaction was often presented as a play feature, the motivations behind these outward descriptions arose in a deeper engagement and recognition of a playground's function. These findings resonate in the context of urban design, social connectivity and the development of self-efficacy and resilience.

This project's data collection ran from 3 December 2020 to 1 August 2021.

Research team

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Partners

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Background

Research context

Playgrounds are important partly because of their active health benefits and social inclusion opportunities. Investing in the built environment to promote active health benefits has a long-standing tradition in Australia and can potentially reduce the financial burden on the health system. For most, community assets such as playgrounds are often considered self-referential provisioning, in this case directed to children.

Playground design has been subject to criticism of an adultist approach to planning and placemaking that ignores the agency and capacities of children to make decisions about their needs (Bosco & Joassart-Marcelli, 2015; Rorabaugh, 2019). In addition, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of intergenerational communal spaces catering to the needs of multiple age groups (Lynch et al., 2018), with Fitzgerald (2021) demonstrating the benefits of ten activities that could be located within an intergenerational playground. In investigating playgrounds from the user's perspective, a much deeper understanding of the role of playgrounds may arise, with important implications for design.

An increasing body of evidence has also shown that engaging community members in co-design processes helps to promote improved well-being outcomes for end-users and longer-term engagement with the space itself (Anderson et al., 2017). Yet few studies focusing on the design of playgrounds adopt user perspectives or accommodate considerations of the environmental context. In areas of high-density social housing, where communities evolve with changing immigration and other governmental policies, identifying preferences and priorities through community consultation during the design phase of any new playground project is likely to contribute significantly to maximizing opportunities for communal benefit.

Impact of COVID 19

This project's research was undertaken during the peak lockdown periods of COVID-19. Significant delays occurred as all fieldwork ceased and partner bodies were unable to contribute within the research's original terms and objectives. Although directed at investigating user input for intergenerational playgrounds, the study had to be balanced in favour of online surveys. Zoom-type interaction was facilitated with primary school student participants. The researchers could not participate in any in-person engagement with participants, and access to respondents was severely impacted.

Project aims

Note: The initial project aims required modification or replacement due to circumstances over and beyond those associated with COVID-19. The adjusted aims, upon which this report is based are:

1. to contribute new knowledge about the role and value of intergenerational playgrounds in fostering social inclusion and community well-being in high-density social housing.
2. investigate the role of playgrounds in contributing to community resilience;
3. research user perspectives on how playgrounds contribute to urban design, social connectivity and

the development of self-efficacy and resilience.

Aims 2 and 3 were constructed part way through the project, when it became apparent that the project's original second aim could not be achieved due to matters beyond the researchers' control. The original aim was:

to facilitate co-learning opportunities and a co-design process between local community members and University of Melbourne architecture academics to create a model for customised designs and good practices which have the potential to be used by DHHS in the design and development of new or refurbished community assets.

DHHS had approached the research team, inviting them to submit a community grant application with Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House (BANH) as the lead applicant. The application was to fund the upgrade of an existing playground, with community consultation embedded into the design process. The grant was seen by the researchers as a means to incorporate community co-learning and co-design into applied research in a significant project. The application was successful with \$200,000 awarded. Unfortunately, the funding authority subsequently withdrew the offer due to an internal policy conflict and initiated the community consultation and design process themselves. As BANH did not have the resources to continue with the project in any significant way, we could not progress any further with our original second aim. More positively, the playground was rejuvenated, and BANH did assist with distributing the community survey that will inform outputs that will be generated once analysis is completed.

Methodology

The project undertook a sequence of activities with members of a community living in or close to a high-density social housing estate in inner Melbourne and included children attending a primary school adjacent to the estate as well as adult community members. The following activities were designed to utilise qualitative research methods:

1. Drawing workshops with children

1.1. Design and conduct drawing workshop activities with children at a primary school

Class time was set aside for students to draw a playground from memory. They were invited to explain the drawing. Respondents were identified only by an alphanumerical identifier. Teachers managed the process, with a research team member observing via Zoom. A review of the voice recordings has commenced but has not yet been completed.

1.2. Discussion and analysis of the creative outputs produced.

The drawings and limited explanatory background information were reviewed independently by two researchers and a research assistant. A recurrence keywords analysis was undertaken to identify common themes.

2. Design, implementation and analysis of online survey of adult community members

BANH advertised a Qualtrics online survey to their contact network. 560 respondents completed the survey. Analysis of the survey is in progress.

Due to COVID-19, the following intended activities and outcomes were not deliverable but are included here for consideration for future studies.

- Workshop with users to expand on the survey findings and enhance user-group perspective on the key issues related to the positive outcomes and impediments of arts-based community programs.
- Workshop with the service agency (BANH) to elicit feedback on the findings of the survey and issues arising from the participant workshop to glean the service-provider perspective.
- Symposium with findings forming a symposium agenda for the industry, government agencies, academics and community members.
- Report and web presence for the preliminary project findings and symposium

Cross-disciplinary collaborations/interdisciplinary connections

The potential benefits of disciplinary collaboration could not be leveraged as anticipated due to the restrictions arising from COVID-19. This meant that the planned investigation of music and soundscape in the context of playground design did not occur. However, a clear benefit of the collaboration was the infusion of differing disciplinary perspectives during the review of user drawings and explanations of playground experience. The results of these contrasting perspectives fed the researchers' creativity enabling greater nuance in the preliminary findings than may otherwise have been the case.

Key preliminary findings

A preliminary analysis of the data suggests that an awareness of playgrounds' role as significant sites for community development, community capacity building and resilience. Although playground interaction was often presented as a play feature, the motivations behind these outward descriptions arose in a deeper engagement and recognition of a playground's function. These deeper motivations resonate in the context of **urban design**, **social connectivity** and the **development of self-efficacy and resilience**.

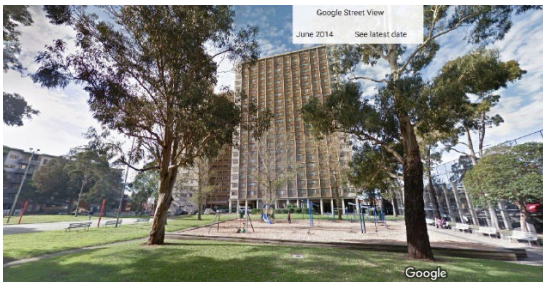
Urban Design	Social Connectivity	Self Efficacy
Safety: Playgrounds are considered safe places, and this was broadly the case in this instance despite a range of elements adjacent to the planned playground associated with this study potentially impinging on perceptions of safety from time to time.	Familial: Consistent association of the playground with familial connections (grandparents, parents and siblings).	Self-efficacy: Engagement with relational challenges provides self- belief in capacity building.
Locations: Most respondents walk to the nearest playground. Tenants and non-estate residents used the playground nearest the periphery of social housing estates.	Social interaction: Identifying activities undertaken are not always about the objects; social interaction with family and friends is valued— demonstrating the collaborative nature of design production.	Risk: Children have a higher risk tolerance and see this as an important feature. Adults are risk averse and tend to be wary of playground features potentially posing a safety risk.
Liminal space: The journey to and interactions with people and the surroundings are important to a playground visit.	Social inclusion: Playground activity supports diversity awareness internally (in established group dynamics) and through external interaction (beyond established relationships or contextual differences within internal relationships).	Memory: The four types of memory were evident in children's sensory and working short and long-term activity responses. Playgrounds support implicit and explicit memory, physiology development and resilience.
User design: Identification that playgrounds, although a provision for the user, often occur without user input. Several examples of extraneous or associative provisioning, e.g. adjacency of dog walk to reduce children and dogs being scared, lack of amenity of non-playground users, and leverage of asset by integration with the local community beyond residents of the estate itself.	Sociometry: Although most activities were undertaken individually, the tasks of formulation, output and explanation displayed sociometric qualities of groups and connections within and external to the group worthy of exploration had COVID-19 not closed this avenue off.	Unstructured play: An important feature of playgrounds was that they provided the capacity to undertake spontaneous, improvised, and user-led activities.
Several other themes are likely to arise upon closer review of the data. For example, emotive response, activity range and intensity, a distraction from boredom, challenging, facilitation via particular equipment, lack of or recognition of landscape.		

Project outcomes

Despite the challenges encountered, the preliminary review of the workshop data has yielded important findings, demonstrating the potential value of such work. The planned further analysis of the data will reveal the fine grain aspects of participant responses. Analysis of the survey results will contribute to understandings of adult preferences and ideas regarding intergenerational playgrounds.

Grant:

Successful partner in a **\$200,000 Community Grant** awarded for refurbishing a playground for intergenerational use. While the provisions of the grant excluded BANH or this project's research team from achieving their objectives, the playground has been refurbished based on the funding body's community consultation, which was informed by the outline of a suitable methodology and approach by this project's researchers in their grant application.



Work in progress August 2022



Publication propositions:

Journal articles on the following topics are proposed, however, additional outputs may arise following completion of the data analysis.

- Playground Safety: User perceptions & issues.
- Liminal space & playground design.
- Playgrounds and their role in social connectivity and resilience.
- The role of playgrounds in the development of self-efficacy

Discussion, implications and future directions

This study has provided a method and findings of interest to multiple spheres and stakeholders associated with designing community playgrounds, both within and beyond the academy.

Academic:

The idea of intergenerational community playgrounds is ripe with potential, yet it is only just beginning to inspire research. Moreover, little of the considerable literature focusing on children's playground design is undertaken from the user perspective. Similarly, literature investigating the broader implications of playgrounds for urban design, social connectivity, and community resilience is sparse, particularly studies of relevance to the social housing sector. In response, this project broadens the design investigation methodology by incorporating user feedback before the design process commences. Despite the challenges associated with completing the project as envisaged, and cognizant of the need for further analysis of the data collected, as a reconfigured pilot study the research conducted has nonetheless identified a range of implications for policy development, community group involvement and for built-environment designers, as listed below.

Policy:

An array of policy considerations relevant to community playgrounds were illuminated through this project:

- The research offers an avenue for review of policy and whether policy application is meeting its objectives.
- The research broadens policy objects, focusing on community consultation for optimising benefits.
- The research offers meso and micro application reviews to improve and leverage existing frameworks. These may be in guide documents for policy and to promote better social and health outcomes and use of government-owned assets.
- The Australian Standard AS 4685.1:2021 is the legislative guide for playground equipment and surfacing. As a regulatory compliance document, it understandably limits itself to safety, which is internalised into the play space. As such, it becomes the reference for regulatory compliance, which leads to a compliance outcome rather than a consideration of a broader community-based benefit. There is no Australian Standard that serves as a playground design guide; this type of research could inform the drafting of these performance-based guides.
- Government-led social housing estate providers approached the research team to provide independent input-based community consultation, which suggests the applicability of the research.

Community groups:

This project has underscored implications of importance to enhancing community wellbeing by:

- demonstrating the value of user group research based on community consultation;
- providing an evidence base for community advocacy and community consultation processes related to policy directed to health, accessibility, and ageing. It has the potential for social

connectivity and community building to be empirically supported and be a factor in budgetary expenditure for community assets;

- providing a method of user group consultation and its trajectory to formulating outcomes that offers a means to empowering community groups and providing an avenue for their voice to be recognised;
- presenting a means for the community to reflect and account for other aspects of object-based asset provision and to define these cogently.

Built-environment designers:

There are few Australian-based design guides for design practitioners. Guidance for designers tends to arise from play space advocates who provide principles or list common playground design issues. This user group and community consultation-based approach may contribute to establishing a robust guide which includes empirical research and play space recommendations by play advocates.

Designers often do not undertake or are not encouraged to undertake post-occupancy evaluations of their design outcomes. This research may provide a reference for integrating front-end design briefing and end-user feedback.

Future directions

Future directions for the research include providing empirical and independent research to support the community voice, which is often subject to funding and the basis of allocation being at the lowest cost rather than the best amenity or community outcome. Once the data analysis has been finalised, a report will be produced that outlines the findings. The information may provide the basis to invite community and design representatives to a forum to discuss the findings.

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>