

CORRECTED VERSION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into environmental design and public health

Melbourne — 6 September 2011

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Witness

Dr V. Romero.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Vivian, for joining us today, and thank you for your submission as well. I need to remind you that in terms of parliamentary privilege you are covered in terms of things you say inside this hearing, although the same comments are not covered by parliamentary privilege if you say them outside of the hearing. You will also receive a copy of the Hansard transcript in the next week or so, and if there are some issues or things you want amended, please contact Keir to resolve those issues.

As you have seen with previous witnesses, what we are seeking is a 5 to 10-minute presentation to allow us to have maximum usage of questions and answers and some genuine interaction with you and the issues that you raise. Could you please for the record state your name, the organisation that you may or may not be representing and your address.

Dr ROMERO — Good afternoon. My name is Vivian Romero. I am speaking on behalf of myself, although I am a post-doc researcher at Victoria University, in the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Over to you for your presentation.

Dr ROMERO — I applaud the committee's efforts to investigate the relationship between the natural and built environments and people's health and wellbeing. I am honoured by your invitation to speak today on this matter. I would like to emphasise two points in my very short statement today. The first point is for you to consider the whole experience of children's outdoor engagements, and the second being that to do so you must seek and acknowledge children's voices about their lives.

As stated in my submission, my prior research is on children's walks to and from school, and when I say 'children', in particular I was looking at children aged 9 to 11 years. Within the last five years there has been much research in the active living/active travel domain, and in particular those researchers who have looked at my topic have primarily focused on what makes children's walks easy and safe for them and have simply ignored or have not considered the joy and wonder of these walks. I think there needs to be a focus on discovering — or rather rediscovering — the ability of the natural and built environment to engage such innate curiosity among children and subsequently how that curiosity can embed overall health and general wellbeing in children.

I say 'rediscovering' in that back in the 1970s and 1980s urban observers such as Roger Hart, Kevin Lynch and Colin Ward showcased children's interactions with the world around them, and their research suggests that the character of the places that children are exposed to can have a profound impact on the way children grow and develop. Fast forward to today, slowly but surely there are projects and programs that are promoting children's interactions with the outdoor environments. Locally you have Victoria Walks, which is championing these tangible interactions amongst families. You also have local councils like the City of Brimbank, which, sponsored by VicHealth and the TAC, has commenced a project called Footloose Footpaths.

That project proposed that more than just a trip to and from school, a neighbourhood excursion is an opportunity for an experiential adventure where environmental, historical and cultural knowledge can be passed and shared amongst families, particularly parents and children, as they walk this particular route. When spaces are made inviting, children can engage in exploratory and self-testing play and, incrementally, if children are allowed, they can begin to develop their autonomy. The walk becomes more than just travel from point A to point B or a mode of transport. I think a walk can actually help the social, physical, environmental or emotional development of children. Moreover, my research has been based on the notion of understanding children's views of their neighbourhood travels.

Understanding children's views of their neighbourhood experiences is certainly not new; nearly 40 years ago Kevin Lynch, funded by UNESCO, conducted studies across Argentina, Australia, Poland and Mexico. Collectively called Growing Up in Cities, Lynch, with his team of researchers, asked children how they used, conceived of and felt about their surroundings. This project was revived in the mid-1990s to revisit these sites along with four additional sites. Generally what these projects show is that they use a medley of interactive and creative ways to understand children's thoughts about the world around them. Children talked about what they liked about their neighbourhoods and what they did not like and the changes they would like to see, all of which can provide a foundation for urban development policies.

Local policies, such as the City of Melbourne's Children's Plan, recognise the importance of children's voices in creating a healthy environment. The children's plan is specifically united by the vision that creating a livable

city for children is creating a livable city for all. Listening to children's voices about livability then becomes pertinent and necessary.

In closing I would like to leave you with a quote from Clare Cooper Marcus, who is a prominent designer of family environments. She states:

Part of the process of growing up is learning to do without our parents, to move bit by bit from their nurturance and watchful eyes and to test ourselves in those parts of the environment that are not home.

What kind of test are we creating for our children? With that I am happy to take any questions.

Mrs PEULICH — Could you just explain to us your doctorate? Which particular faculty are you mostly associated with, so I can understand which academic discipline you are drawing on?

Dr ROMERO — Sure. I did my PhD with the University of New South Wales. Most of the research I have submitted today is based on research conducted in Sydney's metropolitan areas.

Mrs PEULICH — I understand that. What sort of body of academic knowledge? Which particular discipline are you drawing from mostly? I understand that PhDs are undertaken as theses —

Dr ROMERO — Yes.

Mrs PEULICH — I am just trying to understand where you are coming from.

Dr ROMERO — It is interesting, because I am drawing from urban design and town planning as well as from sociology.

Mrs PEULICH — Okay, that makes it easier. As a former schoolteacher I know that obviously children's voices are very important, but at the same time surely you would not necessarily build a children's plan just on the basis of children's voices. I can just imagine some of the children that I have had contact with — you might have Wagon Wheel fences and video arcades. I am going to be provocative. Is this just a trendy way of saying that adults pick some of the things that are worthwhile in children's comments about their urban environment? Is that what you are talking about? I cannot see that all children's voices would reflect very good planning for our community.

Dr ROMERO — From my research I know that you do get some of those airy-fairy-type of images from children —

Mrs PEULICH — I would say they would be pretty common.

Dr ROMERO — Yes. I think what you have to understand is that a general statement that can be made is that children need some interactive aspect. It does not necessarily have to transfer into Wagon Wheel-type fences but something that can engage their imagination. I think that the City of Melbourne is spot on when it says that creating a city that is livable for children is for adults as well. Looking at children and why it is important to bring in children, it is because they bring back that palpable, tangible, on-the-go feel of environments —

Mrs PEULICH — I am not disputing the need to build environments that foster the best interests of children at all, so do not get me wrong. If I could just follow up on that, you say that the focus of your research is predominantly towards children aged 9 years to 11 years. But to use another proverb and drawing on the Jesuits, 'Give me a child until he is 7 and I will give you the man' or perhaps the woman. Why so late? Surely those formative behaviours are established in the early years when the primary socialisation agents are the parents and then there are the wider socialisation agents as their mobility increases. Why age 9?

Dr ROMERO — When I was looking at research for my thesis it was shown that apparently between the ages of 9 and 11 years is when children begin to develop their independent mobility. In particular that is the age when parents start giving them the ability to walk to and from school alone. That is what I was concentrating on.

Mrs PEULICH — But only if the value of walking is established prior to age 9.

Dr ROMERO — Yes. What I am realising after the fact — and obviously hindsight is wonderful because you can contemplate it — is that you need to look at it across the lifespan and especially look at earlier ages, and so my research at Victoria University is looking at pre-school-age children and physical activity there.

Mrs PEULICH — That is good.

Dr ROMERO — Again, it is looking at families and what families can do to help encourage that.

Mrs PEULICH — And just one very specific question. One of the perennial concerns for parents, who would like to see their children more independent and more autonomous, is driveways and cars reversing out of driveways. How do we get around that? For example, yesterday we heard of a very tragic incident. I think we found out this morning that a father had reversed and inadvertently run over his son. It is absolutely heartbreaking and absolutely devastating for any parent to lose a child, let alone to be the inadvertent cause of it. How do we get around that in creating a safer environment?

Dr ROMERO — I saw that on the news. I think the newsreader read a good statement in saying that drivers and people on the streets need to be aware of children. I was happy to hear that rather than saying that children need to be careful of cars; it switches the onus to say, 'Look, we are sharing spaces and you need to be cognisant of what is going on around you'. I think it is more about influencing that and emphasising the point that as individuals we need to see what is going on around our neighbourhoods.

Mrs PEULICH — But cars mostly back out of driveways, and a lot of the time that happens at the same time that children are walking to school. I guess that is also a problem with them riding their bikes. Have you come across any creative ideas in your research as to how to get around that?

Dr ROMERO — Not recently, no. I can try to look at that for you. If I find anything, I will be sure to give that to you. Again, it is more just an awareness campaign — that is, when you are backing up you do need to be aware. I know that people have started installing cameras in their cars so they can actually see.

Mrs PEULICH — The newer ones are better.

Dr ROMERO — I think it is an awareness campaign, but thank you.

Mrs PEULICH — Thank you.

Mr SCHEFFER — I have a couple of questions. Thank you for that presentation. It sounds like you are talking about managed space the whole time. I would have thought that children also need an experience of unmanaged exposure to the city that they negotiate and organise themselves without the ways that you are describing that sounded to me like it was a very organised approach. This is happening increasingly in the cities, where our experience of the urban environment is almost completely controlled — pleasant but controlled.

Dr ROMERO — I was hoping to pinpoint that what children need is actually unscheduled time — for them to be kids and, as you say, to sort of manage their own time.

Mr SCHEFFER — I was not thinking of the time. I was thinking of the environment or the space.

Dr ROMERO — Are you saying that the spaces that I am suggesting are actually adult-created for children?

Mr SCHEFFER — When I was a kid growing up in the 1950s and 1960s we just marauded through the back lanes.

Mrs PEULICH — You went out there because there was nothing else!

Mr SCHEFFER — We went into the pipes and onto the building sites. It was terribly dangerous, and I am not necessarily recommending it, but there was an understanding that grew out of that of what made the city and the urban environment tick. I can understand that we do not necessarily want our own children to be going into some of the places I went into, but on the other hand we do not want children to only be restricted to, in inverted commas, 'walks' that are curated for them.

Dr ROMERO — True. I think the basis for that is that we need to say that we will build environments that are actually inviting and welcoming, and that we will have opportunities for children to explore and find nuances. Without generalising, if you go out into the suburbs and have those rows and rows of developments, no parkland and just the continual houses that are developed, there is not that place where children can go off and spaces where they can go and explore. If you can set aside places or leave natural areas wild, they can have those spaces. I am not necessarily recommending that you need to design specific places for children, but you need to make it inviting for them to even investigate.

Mr SCHEFFER — The other part of my question, which you did kind of circle around, was about the work of Kevin Lynch in *Growing Up in Cities* and how the likes and dislikes and children were assessed. What do they like and dislike?

Dr ROMERO — I had a checklist and I forgot to bring it. Off the top of my head I know the positive things that came out of that — there was a checklist; I can send that to the committee — included vibrant places, places where children can meet other children, the element of safety and a diversity of places and green spaces. That comes off the top of my head.

Mrs PEULICH — You will send that to us, won't you?

Dr ROMERO — Yes, absolutely.

Mr ELSBURY — Thank you for your presentation today. I noted in your submission that you said in relation to design patterns that they 'provide few opportunities for children to freely and safely navigate their neighbourhoods autonomously'. Being a parent and knowing a lot of parents with older children as well, do you see that there is a movement among parents at the moment to overprotect their children with the perceived threats that are out there? If we look at the Daniel Morcombe case in Queensland, suddenly — even myself — you get even more 'mother hen' about your kids. Do you see that that is a threat to children being able to have their free play and go off and make a mud pie and chuck it at their sister or something like that?

Dr ROMERO — Yes, absolutely. There is all this terminology that surrounds that. You have this thing called mollycoddling, cotton-wool children, battery range rather than free range, and then you have terminology for parents who are called soccer mums and helicopter parents, where there is this overemphasis on — —

Mr ELSBURY — It even gets into the home. We are no longer able to clean our homes properly, so we now need antibacterial scrubs and such. Initiatives such as walking school buses sort of help take that edge off the perceived threat for parents. Do you see scope for that sort of thing to be available for kids? Also, back when I was younger we had safety houses. You would have that little yellow sticker on someone's letterbox. Given the more dormitory nature of our suburbs now rather than someone being home most of the time — Mum and Dad both go off to work — do you really see that there might be a future for that sort of program to be reinvigorated?

Dr ROMERO — On your first point about the walking school buses, yes, there is a funny argument about that. There was a study by Kearns, Collins and Neuwelt, I would like to say, who appreciated that that was out there, because it allowed children to go out and walk on their own, but at the same time that program of itself was sort of stifling that independent mobility, because parents were all of a sudden taking control of this walk and not allowing children to explore, as you would, if they were allowed to go from home to school.

There are several other programs. I know that Bicycle Victoria has studied a project where they are trying to do these meeting points to school. One of the recommendations that I suggested from the study is just slowly developing and incrementally developing children's ability to walk alone. You just set radiuses where children have to walk from home and they all meet 500 metres or 1000 metres from school, or they can walk alone. I know that Bicycle Victoria has trialled that as far as cycling is concerned. I believe there are projects and there are probably initiatives that can help children develop.

Children and parents understand how important it is to walk alone. It is okay. There is risk, and there will always be risk, but you need to overcome that and understand the benefits associated with being outside.

As far as neighbourhood houses are concerned, I know that during my study I found that children actually said it was still alive and well, at least in Sydney. There was a neighbourhood house they could go to.

A tangent off that from an urban design and planning perspective is perhaps really looking at neighbourhood primary schools and seeing that as a centre and hub for a community and linking that up for all ages — for parents and family members. People will get to know one another, and as children start venturing out into the neighbourhood, because of encouraging this neighbourhood space they can go, ‘Yes, I know Johnny’s dad because of this, and I can go to his house’.

Mr ELSBURY — You create the village aspect.

Dr ROMERO — Yes.

Mr ELSBURY — And we are not talking the YMCA!

Mr TEE — I suppose one of the depressing things I have seen recently, of course, is the fact that we very much do not allow our kids to walk to school, and the trend over the last 20 or 30 years has been very downward and depressing. I think that is counterintuitive in a sense, because the research also shows that is the safest way to get to school. The car is probably one of the more dangerous ways in which you can get to school. As a father of a nine-year old the only brake on his curiosity is his parents’ fear. Do the sorts of initiatives you are talking about in terms of making the space more attractive make it safer from a perception perspective in terms of the parents as well and therefore allow the child to engage in those walks? Is that one of the benefits?

I understand that benefit from a child’s perspective, and I understand the importance of hearing the child’s voice so that it is generally a positive thing from the child’s perspective, but is another benefit in terms of making the parent more relaxed?

Dr ROMERO — I think it could, absolutely. Obviously parents are, first and foremost, the major influence of a child’s life. When children feel their parents are fearful of their lives, naturally children will be.

If you take those incremental steps to start encouraging parents to go outside and say, ‘Yes, let’s see what is out there, and let’s try to navigate a way together how we can get to school safely’, that will slowly let them go along. It is building that confidence and trust among parents and children. There is obviously strength in numbers. When one parent does that, then ultimately you get on board. ‘Who’s that?’. The first thought is, ‘That’s a strange parent. I wouldn’t allow my child to do that’. But it is about slowly starting to bring that strength in numbers where you start to change that psychological feel that, ‘No, it’s dangerous to take my child outside’.

Not to comment on the news, but there are too many stories that — as you said — comment on the loss of children or something tragic happening with children rather than accentuating all the positive things that are going on. If parents were to receive all of these positive actions, then — —

Mrs PEULICH — But news is news. It is not just PR and spin, with all due respect. We are not just talking about car safety; we are also talking about sexual predators. Every time there is a story about a sexual predator, it is every parent’s nightmare. You can never really obviate those types of concerns that parents have. With all due respect, researchers have to factor that into account. Until that is done, we are not going to be able to move forward.

Mr ELSBURY — But you have also got the fact that parents do not take into account that the majority of sexual predators are actually known to the family.

Dr ROMERO — Yes.

Mrs PEULICH — The majority, but not all.

Dr ROMERO — I can cite statistics about the number of children abducted versus the number of children who are suffering from some health ailment because they are not allowed to go outside. But I am just thinking in terms of the project Footloose Footpath; I learnt about it by going to a conference. I think it would be such a great news story for communities to hear that. They might say, ‘Wow, something great can happen. Maybe this might encourage me to go out to my council and say, “Why can’t we do this here?”’. That is a news piece in and of itself. Why could that not be written?

Mrs PEULICH — I lived on a secondary road and probably had thousands of cars pass by my house every day. I had a small child and I had a small fence. My conscience was not relaxed until they built a fence that was 6 foot with a gate I could close, because with all of those thousands of cars that passed my house every day when having a small child of one, two or three years of age, my daily fear was that some nutter would come by and sweep my child away out of his front yard. You cannot tell me that is an irrational fear.

Dr ROMERO — No, fair enough. You have to really think about: why did they situate a school near a major thoroughfare?

Mrs PEULICH — No, that was my home.

Dr ROMERO — Yes, why is your home — —

Mrs PEULICH — Why is my home on a secondary road?

Dr ROMERO — Yes.

Mrs PEULICH — There would be thousands.

The CHAIR — Can you touch on the different outcomes for children who live in a more urban environment versus children who live in rural and regional Victoria?

Dr ROMERO — Unfortunately my experience is not in rural and regional Victoria, so I cannot comment on that. The only observation I would like to make, having coming into the city today, is that I have always noticed that there are always schoolkids here in the city. I wonder if it is the same — if city kids go out and there is that reciprocal program to go out into the rural side and experience that.

The CHAIR — They congregate in the city?

Mrs PEULICH — They come to visit.

Dr ROMERO — They come to visit. You see school groups exploring the city with their teachers. I wonder if there is something similar where they go into rural areas.

Mrs PEULICH — They do, but it is probably to Sovereign Hill or something like that.

Mr ELSBURY — That was my experience with rural Victoria when I was at school — it was Sovereign Hill. That was it. No, we went to Geelong once.

Mrs PEULICH — Werribee zoo.

The CHAIR — The second-largest city!

Mr ELSBURY — I was lucky we had a family in the scrubs.

Mrs PEULICH — As of 1 July we now have three zoos which are free to children under 16. That is a very good thing.

The CHAIR — There any no more questions. See — it was easy.

Dr ROMERO — Thank you all for your interest. I will send the checklist out.

Witness withdrew.

