

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE
AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

At Sydney on Tuesday, 9 May 2006

The Committee met at 1.15 p.m.

PRESENT

Mrs B Perry (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods
The Hon. Kayee Griffin
The Hon. Sylvia Hale
The Hon. Melinda Pavey
The Hon. Penny Sharpe

Legislative Assembly

Mr John Bartlett
Mr Stephen Cansdell
Mrs Judy Hopwood
Ms Virginia Judge

BRENDAN JAMES GLEESON, Professor of Urban Management and Policy,
Director of Urban Research Program, Faculty of Environmental Science,
Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Professor Gleeson, we have received a submission from you as part of our inquiry. Is it your wish that the submission be made public and included as part of your sworn evidence?

Professor GLEESON: I am happy for it to be made public.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Professor GLEESON: Perhaps a short one if I may. Firstly, thank you for the invitation to be a witness for the Committee and to congratulate the Parliament of New South Wales for having such an inquiry. I think it is very timely and it has the potential to both respond to but also, as the inquiry moves forward, to begin to lead some of the public debate around children's welfare in urban areas. There has been quite a bit of debate in the last couple of years, spiked by a couple of particular concerns, it has to be said, things like evidence about children's growing obesity, which has really been the main focus of the debate, but perhaps some other issues about risk and children in the urban environment, children's vulnerability to risk from criminals, I guess, but other forms of harm, and the public liability issue as well being an intensely urban one.

I think there is a sense in which that discussion is starting now to synthesize or come together as a more general discussion about children's welfare in urban environments. We see nationally and internationally the coming together of some threads of scholarship as well and I guess that is what I bring to the inquiry, some knowledge of that scholarship that has been looking at different aspects of children's welfare and the different ways in which urban environments shape children's welfare.

That is actually not a new scholarly discussion. Anxiety about children's welfare in cities goes right back to the reform movement, the mid 19th Century, the idea of rescuing children from some of the more threatening aspects of the industrial city. There was a sense in which into the middle of the 20th Century that tended to subside as a major concern and it came back again into scholarship in the late sixties and early seventies, particularly in Europe, when there was a renewed interest in discussion amongst some scholars about the way in which cities either enhance or harm children's welfare and that was picked up by the United Nations, which had its own program on children and cities. It was inspired by that scholarship, people like Kevin Lynch from North America and Colin Ward in the United Kingdom. In the time since, I think we have seen again that interest subside, only to come back again from the late 1990s, again talking about a scholarly sphere and a strong and renewed interest in children's welfare in cities. The United Nations has continued its Children in Cities program but that has had a largely but not exclusive focus on children's welfare in developing cities and we have not quite had that kind of discussion and attention about children's welfare in developed cities.

To bring all this to some sort of conclusion, we do now see different

strands of scholarship coming together, the first attempts at synthesis to link different investigations and different aspects of children's physical and mental well-being and then to tie that back to the built environment. What I would want to bring to the inquiry is the idea that I believe that scholarship is still at a fairly uncertain stage. It is mixed with public debate, so that you had some surges of ideas, including this idea in the last couple of years that there are so-called obesogenic environments. There are ways of building and creating cities that greatly raise the risk of children becoming obese. I think that it would be fair to say that there are several people in the scholarly community who are concerned about that, that it might have gone down a fairly simplistic path, and some of the ideas and relationships between low density environment means it must be an obesogenic environment, I think were wrong-headed and I think that has proved to be a bit of a cul-de-sac in scholarship, and we are moving to a much more nuanced and contingent view of the relationship between built environment and obesity with children.

To put that practically, you can create low density environments which are obesogenic or you can create low density environments which are not, and this can work in much more positive ways in terms of children's physical well-being. I do not put myself forward as someone who is an expert in the psychological debates, although I have picked up some of that in my writing, some of the concern coming from child psychologists and experts in mental health in that field, picking up on that theme of the so-called pampered prisoners and some of that made its way into the media. It is a kind of emotive term but what I think it is really pointing to is increasing anxiety amongst scholars from that background and expert practitioners about the rigid scripting of children's lives and routines, the kind of culture of anxiety that has been folding around children.

Certainly many people would say that their experience and my own experience as a parent, compared with my experience as a child, even at that very personal level, reveals that as a real influence, that anxiety about children now, whether it is safe for them to walk to school, whether it is safe for them to leave the bounds of your property, those sorts of things, the issues about public liability, and we are registering quite a shift there. We are not quite sure what that is going to mean and these influences on children necessarily take some time to manifest. They are, in a sense, our most vulnerable stratum of society but obviously some of these impacts take quite some time to manifest as they develop and mature, so I think that particular issue about the ever stricter choreographing of children's lives, I think that is only opening as a discussion and as an area of scholarship. We are unsure about what that means.

I do not think there is any easy approach or criticism. I have written and have been concerned as a scholar about that as a social phenomenon, but I am guilty of it as a parent. I drive my son to school. It is a short distance but it is truly too dangerous for him to walk or ride that distance on his own, such is the congestion in Brisbane, even though we live in a middle ring suburb. You get this issue of social traps. You might realise that this might not be the best way of managing children's lives in built environments, but it is difficult to know how to get out of that kind of trap. I might leave that there as an opening statement, if that suffices. I am happy to take questions.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You paint a very glum picture for the future of children in your paper, I would suggest, but given that we are looking

at improving the built environment for young people, could you give us, for example, five policy areas that we should be looking at, good policy suggestions, and/or highlight things where governments across Australia are doing the right thing, some positives?

Professor GLEESON: Sure. I hope that I can give you five. One area I think of intervention that is very important, and we see signs of this already, is in master planning. I think that we need to put children much more at the centre of that area of development practice and it may be that this inquiry may or may not be aware that I chaired - our centre had a Creating Child Friendly Cities symposium a couple of years ago in Brisbane and that was actually sponsored and supported by Delfin Lend Lease, a major residential developer, and we have been in discussions with them and some other developers and they are very interested in that as an idea.

I think that the time is propitious to have this discussion with the development industry. They are not opposed to this as an idea. They are concerned about legacy as well. They are searching for expert input. They might act surprised and say: We have been doing that with the bike ways and the nice parks and things and then we might come back and say that that does not exhaust the list of needs for children. That might make it more aesthetically pleasing for adults, but that is not necessarily a way of placing children at the centre of master planning. We are seeing the opening of a very fruitful and interesting engagement with the development industry. There is going to be a second child friendly cities symposium, again supported by the development industry, in this building later in the year. That is one area of intervention that I think is already under way but which I would like to see generalised.

The second area is in the area of redevelopment and I think we have to be aware - I am not an opponent of the policy of urban consolidation, although as a scholar I have raised, as have many other scholars, concerns with the way it has been implemented and the ecological and social outcomes from urban consolidation. I think that one of the outcomes which has not been what we would have wanted is the creation of child and family friendly environments. It is not universal but I think that most child welfare experts would be quite critical of the high density environments that we have created. We have not tended to offer housing choices for families. They have tended to be smaller units. The buildings have been constructed in ways that are not family friendly.

Again to register a personal note, we lived in a new multi-unit development in North Parramatta for over a year and it was just a hellish place for anyone with children. There was no noise insulation. There was no accommodation in the design of that built environment for children. It just was not a good place for families. I think we can do a lot better. The Europeans have been very good at creating high density child friendly environments, so I think it is possible.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Out of necessity?

Professor GLEESON: By necessity indeed, but if we are going down the road of necessity in terms of consolidation, that is the policy cast that we have to learn, I believe, how to apply that necessity well rather than in an unthoughtful sense from the perspective of children. I do not know that I will

get to five suggestions. Another dimension there that is of real concern, and the play space experts have been at me about this, is again in the cause of consolidation and well meant, the Queensland Government has recently removed the stricture that child care centres and the like, removed the stricture that they have to provide open air play space. The idea is that that is the only way to get child care centres into the inner city. Again, the play space experts say that is not true. The Europeans have found ways to do that. That is not my area of expertise. They were absolutely aghast at what that means for children and the development of their motor skills, not having open air play space. That was not the right policy intervention and we ought to think much more carefully.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Was there a caveat on that policy that in cases of high density inner city that that be the only excuse?

Professor GLEESON: It may well be. I have not read the policy. I have seen it reported, but there has been that concern. Two other quick things: The phenomenon of large houses on small lots has to be looked at carefully, not condescendingly, and not in an unmitigated critical way. I have lived in such an environment myself. We have to think carefully about what that green field built environment means for children. It is coming back to a development practice issue, but large houses with very small play spaces. Again from personal experience, we lived at Mt Annan in such a place and we had a very small backyard. We only had one child at the time, but he never went outside. There was nothing we could do to make him go out there. He wanted to stay inside the house. It was an uninteresting space for him. We could not make it interesting. It was unviable. It was a courtyard backyard. This was in a green field development. We moved to Brisbane and have a more typical, at least historically, larger backyard and I cannot keep him out of it. That is just one small anecdote about that area of concern about that type of development practice.

It is not simply arising from personal choice. In many cases people do not have any choice and that is all they have to build on, that kind of envelope, but again we just have to think about how that impacts on children.

Mr CANSDELL: Firstly, I think it is a well put together paper and I agree in some part of it with what Melinda is saying, it is negative to some point, but they are the negatives we are going to look at to try and fix up.

There are just two things I would like to raise, on the front page here you have got, "It is difficult for the poor to access adequate housing, safe play areas, public transport and fresh foods." The only thing I will take you to task with from there, I think the fresh food part, it is just as easy to get a piece of fruit as a McDonald's burger and the fast food mentality we have sort of been pushed into, I think the kids are more inclined to get fast food than pick up a bit of fruit, and the fruit is probably cheaper anyway.

The other thing I believe and correct me if I am wrong here, but on page five you have got here that "the prime culprit in the rise of the corporate sector and the demise of the community sector" as in child care, "is the Federal Government. Its free-for-all development policies have encouraged entrepreneurs by significantly increasing the number of childcare places

available. However, the simultaneous removal of operational subsidies to the community sector has virtually eradicated the right of choice.”

The community sector and community preschools are State government. The Federal government funds the child daycare centres, which are commercial operations and you are probably right in some respects, they do take away that hands-on care and community involvement, but I think you will find that the preschool area is State government, not Federal government.

Professor GLEESON: I am happy to take both of those points on board.

CHAIR: That is the point that you make and you can note it but you do not have to comment in relation to that and get into the politics of that.

Professor GLEESON: I am absolutely glad to receive that kind of feedback. Anything anyone writes – and I am not necessarily saying there are any areas of doubt here, but it is always good to look for feedback and have your own points polished.

The point about the fresh food is absolutely right, but we do have the problem – again back to development practice and back to a personal note – when we moved into Garden Gates at Mt Annan, the community waited a long time for the shops to appear but the fast food outlets were there from the day the place was rolled out and they were well patronised from the beginning.

Again, mere anecdotal, but it is not atypical, that we are not always good at thinking through the retailing of that and in some of the more stressed areas of our cities, as we said, the sort of outlets that do provide fresh foods, have disappeared, so we need to think about that with some concern, but generally I take your point, thanks.

Ms JUDGE: I am interested in the issue of provision of childcare and specifically provision of childcare in places like the city here, where you have got a lot of old buildings and adaptive use of old buildings, because the reality is, I think it is wonderful if parents – we have thousands of people working here – if they have that, they can be near their children during the day, if their child has a headache, they can pop down, see how they are going, maybe take them out to lunch, for a milkshake or whatever.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You can travel with your children.

Ms JUDGE: Yes, that is another issue, but you can do that. But to actually revive the city and to have children – I believe that is the idea, that you can have childcare close or nearby to where you work, that is the ideal.

Of course, with a lot of the old buildings it is very difficult structurally because there are heritage listed buildings and there has to be some sort of give and take somewhere, because you might be in a huge high rise opposite

Hyde Park and you are just not going to be able to have that provision in that building, particularly around the Queen Victoria Building and down the Rocks area.

So, what can you do to provide some sort of formula whereby – okay, they might not have as much opportunity for developing fine motor skills but yet they would have a lot of emotional and psychological benefit from being near their parents or parent – as the case may be in our blended families these days. This is something that I have had a number of people talk to me about. What are your views on that?

Professor GLEESON: It is a difficult issue – sorry, I don't know whether you were here earlier, I spoke with some concern about the changes in Queensland which remove the imperative for childcare centres in higher density environments to provide open air play space. Pru Walsh, who is internationally regarded, is a very important person in that field, from Australia, is just absolutely aghast at that idea and thinks that is not an area for compromise.

I recognise what you are saying, that with the adaptive re-use there are those kinds of probabilities. We are probably getting to the limit of my expertise in that area and one of the things I am doing is raising it as an issue for attention and discussion.

One thing I would say is that having spent sometime – my wife is German and living in German cities sometime ago – it struck me in those high density environments, just how good and dedicated they were at getting children out of those spaces and down into the hofs and the play areas. You go into those little parks and things in German cities and they are always filled with children, it is interesting, because you go to other parts of Germany and you do not really see children anymore, but those high density environments—

Ms JUDGE: You do not really see children in the city, apart from a couple of schools here.

Professor GLEESON: That is right.

Ms JUDGE: And yet when you look at what sort of population figures are just across the road here.

Professor GLEESON: There is quite of a lot of green space – grey space as well – but green space places that you could take children to. We are staying across the road here and I think we are spoilt for choice here.

I do not know why that is not happening and whether it is even an issue, but if we are forced to go down the track for the reasons that you say, that we cannot provide an open play space, then there have got to be other ways we can use the green space in the city and make them inviting for

children and for their carers, who may at this point have some anxieties about taking children to those spaces.

Ms JUDGE: The other issue I have, and it is more the local government, is where we see Councils approving medium density. I was actually down at a block of medium density units on the weekend with a local issue, I was trying to find a unit and a couple of boys on their skateboards were actually using the road within the complex that was there and they said: Can you try and tell them that we need a park. They had a little swimming pool, but it was enclosed, for everyone to use. This is the thing, trying to get developers to put in appropriate grounds for children to exercise in and play in.

Professor GLEESON: Two things to note there – if I am going over the theme too much, tell me – but children are this kind of afterthought often, not necessarily for reasons of malfeasance or bad intention, but it just often is the case, that in areas of development practice they are not at the centre and when they are not, particularly as they get older and more mobile, they will just find ways of appropriating space, and then you get frictions and people getting upset about the ways that they are legitimately looking for space to use.

I am the first one to get grumpy about skateboarders threatening my life too. But we keep coming back to the importance of instating them from the beginning at the centre of development practice and planning practice, and also to underline more broadly – and designers who are more expert in this than I am – would say that a child friendly built environment is friendly for the whole community. It is something that is workable for a range of people's mobility needs and providing the sort of spaces that are good and safe for children are often the sort of spaces that are good and safe for other people to mix in as well.

That idea of putting children at the centre is not a trade off. It is not creating an environment that then starts to marginalise other more legitimate interests.

Ms JUDGE: I am sure Kayee would have come across that with other Councils too.

The Hon. SYLVIA HALE: I must say I very much enjoyed your paper and I largely agree with many of its conclusions. However, I noticed that you focussed on the example of the Lansdowne caravan park. I had quite a lot of involvement with the residents out there and I think it is pretty easy to fall into the notion of demonising the area, because talking to many of the residents of that park, they felt secure within that park and the outside world was hostile.

I am not for one moment suggesting that the environment is a good environment but for the children there, there was a sort of collegiate feeling

among them, that they did mix as a group and there was also, because of the way in which the park was set up, a lot of oversight of their activities by other people. I do not think it was purely due to the fact that people were going to be pushed onto the private rental market and all those insecurities – some of the residents had been there twenty, twenty five years – there had been that development of a sense of collective spirit, us against the world.

I really think that is an important thing for children to develop too, particularly as we see more middle class households becoming more dispersed and cut off from that sense of community.

Professor GLEESON: I think you make a very good point. This submission is drawn from a larger work, it is somewhat adapted for the Inquiry's purposes. It is drawn from a book called Australian Heartlands, which I just finished.

One of the reasons it comes across as a bit relentlessly negative is because it omits the last part of the book, the sub-title of the book is Making Space for Hope, and it is all about the good things that are going on and what we can also do.

Unfortunately this submission had to be kept this size but in it is all this other stuff that I have talked about and all the hope. Our cities remain incomparably good places to be in an international context. The book relentlessly makes that argument, but there is a kind of passion driving it, because I am concerned that we are losing some of that advantage and that great quality about our suburbia. I am a defender of suburbia. I have always lived in suburbia and we have often taken the wrong headed view in Australia to put down suburbia or say that good things do not happen there or it is a kind of slumbering unfortunate blot. Precisely the opposite is true. I have called it Australian Heartlands.

Back to the Lansdowne caravan park issue, you are right. In those kinds of poverty concentrations and those marginal areas, there are some very good things happening as well. There can even be high levels of social capital. I guess the issue is, and which does not come out perhaps as clear as it could here is, is this really the best we can do for these children? These, nonetheless, are environments infused with risk and the possibility of harm and they do capture the kind of multiple policy failure that I believe has unfolded over a long time.

Just the other night – or maybe further ago than that – I was listening to Radio National, there was a debate on de-institutionalisation. The young man who committed that atrocity, that murder, his mother was on the radio and it was really difficult to listen to. She said he should not have been there. He should have been in custodial care. That is an area I have also written on, de-institutionalisation and I have been an enthusiast for de-institutionalisation but a guarded one. There are also security and risk issues around that.

Just to not let this be too uncontrolled an answer, I take your point but I just come back to that issue two fold, they do tend to be capturing this kind of multiple failure and also the issue is, is it the best that we can do?

Mr BARTLETT: Can I take you back to your opening statements that urban areas lead to obesity or urban areas do not lead to obesity? I have had quite a lot to do with Japan over a number of years and have been in quite a lot of Japanese homes and if you had to look at an urban area where you did not have such a good urban area for children, you would have to say Japan had to be one of them. On an obesity front you could not say, despite the fast food outlets that are everywhere in Japan, you are actually getting obesity in the Japanese population. I then started looking at Japanese children's TV and to my way of thinking there was not this constant bombardment of fast food ads that our children seem to be bombarded with every time you turn on TV. Would you like to make a comment on that in terms of urban environments and obesity?

Professor GLEESON: I would like to, thank you. What I think we are pointing to here - I guess a base submission I would like to make to the inquiry is to steer clear of the simplisms, the deterministic notions that sometimes get into popular debate, the idea that low density leads to obesity, the idea that high density could be simply harmful. Those sorts of simplisms are wrong-headed and take us in the wrong direction. Once they take root they lead to policies that have unfortunate outcomes.

The comments that you are making, I think, point to - and scholars would back this up - the multi-dimensionality of some of these problems, obesity, it is obviously simply not a built environment issue. There may be instances where the built environment is having no immediate or direct effect. It may have an indirect effect when we do not allow children - we do not build built environments and invite children to stay away from the television. You might say the debate about what is on television is another one. It is not for us in the built environment perhaps, and that debate is going on, but the built environment, if we do not regulate what goes on on television and we take that position and have built environments where children are always watching television, there is a problem.

What I am trying to get back to is I would urge this multi-causal careful view of the situations so that we do not get caught in any deterministic views, because we have had the study here in Sydney recently which says that, measured at a gross level, children are actually exercising more than they were in the past. I am fascinated to look at the methodology and there is wheels within wheels in that study that they are asserting, and it is a useful intervention to make a distinction and say hang on, be careful with simplistic views here. If children in Sydney are actually exercising on average more than they were a decade ago but are still getting fatter, what is going on, and that is what that study showed.

It could come down to what sort of exercise it is and it also raises the issue of the different forms of children's physical expression and activity and the idea it should not be all about scripted sports and being controlled. They are a good thing but there is also the idea that children need time for spontaneous and wild play. They should never be out of our supervision

generally, but they need to be out of the parents' gaze at times too. They need some autonomy too and child psychologists will tell you that is critical for them to build their own kind of sensibility and confidence.

That is a rambling answer but what I am trying to say is the first thing is to work out the broader multi-causal thing which the built environment fits into. The whole problem is not the built environment. It is something that can condition results but then even within that built environment discussion we have to look to multi-causality as well and steer away from simplistic ideas. I will finish by saying that I have a very close friend who is a very senior developer in a residential development corporation.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Not Christopher Gall?

Professor GLEESON: No, not Christopher Gall. He pointed out to me whimsically the other day that if you look back in history low density residential areas have been blamed for everything over the last century.

Mr BARTLETT: Low density?

Professor GLEESON: Lower density residential, the typical detached dwellings and garden. Low density suburbia has been blamed for everything and it tends to come and go in cycles. I think that is evidenced and it is often contradictory things. I think it is further evidence. We need to be very much aware of the danger of these kinds of deterministic views.

CHAIR: Your last chapter in your book Making Space For Hope, obviously that is your view on how we can arrest the developments that you are actually talking about. Would you like to comment on some of that?

Professor GLEESON: I think that I have probably given some specific answers to Melinda, if I may, about some of the things that I think need to be done. In that last analysis I point to some broader structural things. Cities do not exist unto themselves. They are not sealed systems. They reflect the sorts of decisions we make about labour markets, about housing markets, about the way we manage the environment generally, the way we manage population, resources, all those sorts of things. I am urging in the closing of the book that we think about when we organise work life that we think about work family balances and I am not taking a partisan view here, I am urging us to think about it. I know there is a view from either end of the spectrum about that, which can accommodate the idea of balancing. I get concerned when we do not think about that balancing.

That is part of the tenor of the last part of the book, which is to think about some of those larger structural relationships and larger structural decisions that we are making and I do believe that it is important that we have a flourishing public realm and again I do not think that is a partisan view. It is an idea historically that has been well-known and supported across the political spectrum. It does not matter whether your objective is liberal democracy or social democracy. Democracy in general depends on its flourishing for itself a vibrant civic realm. Of course we also need a vibrant private realm and a vibrant communal realm. The position that seems to be emerging in some sectors is that you do not need civic or public realm.

Coming back to children, it is in civic and public realms where children

experience difference, where they mix, and it is a form of civic schooling for them and preparing them for adulthood and the kinds of complexities that being an adult brings upon you, and realising that you are living in a society that is bigger than your own neighbourhood and your own immediate family, so that is a theme in the last part of the book, that we need to be careful about nurturing a good and vibrant public realm, including in the cities.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I am interested in the language of some of your analysis and a lot of others, where we talk about middle class children and the problems they face and then we talk about poorer. It seems to me the language problem should be the old-fashioned language of class, but it is almost as if we are saying everyone has a problem. The rich have problems because they have the right to exercise choice and the wealth to exercise choice but they make the wrong ones for kids. The poor, or the working class, or whatever we call them, perhaps do not have the same choice, but things are also going wrong there. It just strikes me as a bit odd in that some of the factors that are at work are obviously affecting our whole society, but so many discussions talk as if there is a kind of a them and us but without actually using the language we used to use.

Professor GLEESON: Okay. Firstly, I would be surprised to think that this submission and the book in general would be read as somehow admonishing people for making the wrong choice.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: No, I do not mean that.

Professor GLEESON: A strong theme in the book is that people are making the best of it in the circumstances that they have. As much as anything it is an attempt at intervention and policy debate. Are our policies really helping people? Are they really providing the basis for the best choices that people might want to make? I am actually pretty positive about people's instincts. I do not think there are many bad parents and I think most parents make the best decisions that they can in the circumstances.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I think you have misunderstood me, if I can interrupt. I am talking about things where we talk about fairly affluent people who can afford good houses, can afford good everything if you like but, for instance, there is lots of house on very little block. They drive their kids to school. They drive their kids to violin class, or whatever it is. That is what I meant. They have choices, but in terms of the fitness and well-being of the children, the discussion we are having, they are making some wrong choices. Then we are talking about a very much poorer group in the community and I think there is an implication often that there is a lack of choice, but what I am curious about is that we are saying that all of our children have got, in the end, similar problems but we seem to be putting them down to two quite different sets of causes.

Professor GLEESON: Okay. I did not seek to make the cast that they are the same problems. I think there are different forms of risk facing children at the affluent end of the scale and different risks facing children at the more impoverished end of the scale. If that did not come across clearly that is an error on my part. I would distinguish them. I think there is some middle ground. There is some shared risk. I think that the public liability crisis, or whatever you want to call it, is affecting children generally. The stories that I hear back from local government and play space experts is that

there is a universal problem impacting on children's welfare generally.

I think that the risks that arise from social exclusion at that end of the scale are distinguishable from the risks that manifest at the wealthier end of the scale. I guess a sub-theme there is that nobody wants to urge on anything other than everyone being well off. It is a great idea but the whole idea in the children's debate from the fifties and sixties was that rising affluence would simply extinguish all these problems for children. That does not appear to be the case. We still have to be conscious of risks at the affluent end of the scale too, but I think they are distinct to the kinds of risk that we see at the other end of the scale.

The Hon. PENNY SHARP: You spoke earlier about low density and cautioning us against a look at low density equals bad or, equally, high density equals bad. Obviously many of our communities are facing urban consolidation and struggling with these issues. I am interested in any examples that you can point us to in terms of planning around children in high density environments. That is coming to suburbs in Sydney right now. I live in an area where green space is at an absolute premium and we are already seeing the user conflict in a number of places, so I am just interested in any practical suggestions that you are aware of for things to look out for.

Professor GLEESON: Thank you. I wish I did, but I do not have much, but that also probably reflects that I do not have universal knowledge about what is going on. There could be some good quality higher density environments that are child care or family friendly. My survey is that there is not much of it, and I have personal experience confirming that. The sort of high density development that has been built in Brisbane around the Roma Street parkland, that redevelopment I think takes us down that direction of a potentially more child friendly form of high density development. I do not know if you know it, but it is perched on disused railway yards that have been regenerated, but it is a wonderland. Whoever designed that, and I cannot remember the name of the chief architect, clearly had children in mind. We take our kids there all the time. We live out in the suburbs and we go into the inner city to use that space for our children, not because it is inner city but because it is one of the best parks that we can think of. It is not simply a park, it is a space that is good for adults with children. That is another dimension of to it. There is a great cafe there that is open.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It must sell coffee.

Professor GLEESON: It sells coffee.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You can have your coffee and keep them right in sight.

Professor GLEESON: That is right. It is not a place where you are ashamed to have a screaming child or feel that anxiety. It flows out into the park. The high density development that has been built around there has a mixture of dwelling sizes, which is also important. How many families want to live in a one or two bedroom unit? I do not think too many. That is another thing that we have to urge on the process of consolidation and it really does offer dwelling choice.

The other dimension of it, and it's a very practical one, which we have experienced first hand, is just how well you actually build these units. If you want to have people with families and children and maybe it is not a universal trait, but I think it might be, you have got to make them soundproof or you have got to improve their acoustic quality.

We have lived in one of these places and you could hear every child or every movement in every part of the building. It is just incredibly stressful if you have got children, particularly my wife and I breed children who do not sleep. There are all those kind of architectural and design related issues that are actually immensely important.

The way that some of these multi unit developments are placed on the block are just leaving no – I mean, they could be placed in a different way so that there would be a play space for children but the fact that all the space is residualised and all you get is maybe a strip to hang out your washing, just thoughtless design. There should be more design at the block scale rather than the cadastral scale, and that is again what the Europeans do. They pool some of the space. Four developers will collaborate – and developers will do this to provide a common space for recreation, a safe space for recreation. Those sorts of things I think we ought to be thinking about. I cannot give you too many examples of where we have done that well unfortunately.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I was pleased to hear in your testimony to hear in your testimony earlier that most parents are doing the right thing in attempting to provide a better life for their children than what they had, which I think is an instinct we all have, but why are so many children at threat of (1) obesity and (2) difficult circumstances? Where has the common sense gone?

Professor GLEESON: I apologise, I do not have a convincing answer for you and I think that is where debates are at too. We are moving into a new phase which is questioning some of those simplistic things which we thought were at play, it is simply about the fact that they drink too much soft drink or it is simply about the fact that they have too much Play Station. It is not as simple as that.

I think that the actual causality of it is complex and that may be why it has crept up on a generation of parents. Parenting is a hard task. It is a form of chronic decision making. Every day you are on the hop, on the fly making decisions about what you are doing in your children's welfare and it is possible that some of these bigger changes are creeping up on us and we have not been aware of the complex causality.

You look at parenting in a compartmentalised way, you do not think, well, maybe this dieting, in combination with driving them to school, in combination with them having Play Station, in combination with them having these other kind of things, maybe the aggregate effect of that is a bad one in terms of obesity but you may not have that as a synthesised understanding in your own mind.

I think that complex causality is at issue and also I think there is a question mark – to come back to the point I made earlier – there had been, even amongst child health and welfare experts, a pretty strong view that all we needed to do was to generalise affluence and it was a very strong theme in the sixties and seventies, in that early literature on children in the city for example, that Colin Ward book. The idea is the main threat to children is poverty, impoverishment and I think we are now starting to understand that that is not a good thing but it is not the only thing that can harm children's welfare. There are other things that we think that is good for them, which are not necessarily working for their advantage.

Mr CANSDELL: It might be a drawn out question. I know it is hard to simplify these things because they are not simplistic. If you had freedom of policy and unlimited funding, are there three simple issues that you believe could improve – I suppose maybe not so much the built environment for our children but maybe a better future for our children or has it come down to parent education, no matter what, whether it is the wealth or the lower wealth community. Is it getting the best bang for your buck through education, for parents to be better parents to the children and taking those better options?

Professor GLEESON: I think education is important but I do not think it is sufficient. It is important and we have not tried it as strongly and as well as we might, but again I come back to that idea that we can keep educating parents and we can keep assuming a kind of deficit of knowledge or goodwill, but I am not sure that is really where the problem is. Again, the bulk of parents and carers are making the best decisions that they can in the circumstances that they find themselves in and I think the role of policy is to try and improve, give them more space for decision making.

Mr CANSDELL: That is education too.

Professor GLEESON: Well, education could be part of that but it could be intervening and in partnership with a development community more strongly in the process that is creating and recreating our cities, to put children at the centre. It may be that we need to have a Children's Cities Commission for a time. I do not necessarily think that we need that forever. I think that idea should then be absorbed back into the bureaucracy and back into the development industry but it may be for a time we might need something like that, that will just say, right, we are going to be the focal point for thinking and intervention about children's wellbeing in urban areas. The rationale is strongly there. Most people of New South Wales live in this urban region, so there would be a strong rationale for that kind of State government intervention.

I would urge that that would be in partnership and collaboration with the professional sector and the development industry rather than simply a government stand off. I think it also needs that as well.

Mrs HOPWOOD: I am sorry I missed your prelim to the questioning. I am just very interested, and you do touch on it in your paper to some extent, but in terms of the effect on behaviour of children in relation to maybe having an environment that is not open air or being cramped in a city and so on. Do you see that as a continuum, say for example, bullying at school or other behaviours that children might be exhibiting more now than they would have done in years gone by when there was more space, regardless of what socio-economic levels these children come from?

Professor GLEESON: We are probably reaching the limits of my expertise. I am not sure I am qualified to make that kind of assessment. In a lay sense I would be asking those sorts of questions but I think you need to ask people like a Pru Walsh who have that understanding behind that question, that I probably do not have possession of. Perhaps even the scholar in me says that is a very legitimate question to ask.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You mentioned and I think one of the Committee members mentioned about skateboards and so on, what would you see in terms of having a better environment for children and young people, given that not the small children, but the next group of children into young people, what sort of things would you see as important in relation to their recreational needs but also one of the things that has been commented to me on another Committee is the issue of young people not having meeting places, so they congregate in a shopping centre, they are keen to have skateboard parks, things like that they want their local councils to build. What else is needed for that group, so they are further out of the supervision but there are probably some similar and different needs for that group in terms of what the built environment might give to them and also the security and freedom. What sorts of things would you see as being part of a better environment for them, particularly say whether it is an urban area or rural or whatever it might be?

Professor GLEESON: I think it is a big continuum we are looking at legally children, you have got children, then you have got young people and there are some questions that link them but it is important not to collapse them into the one category. That does not work from a developmental perspective.

I think the things that link them is in terms of both groups, they both need more formal spaces in which to interact and less scripted, wilder spaces. It is a theme I have not really addressed here yet but again, child health and play experts tell me it is immensely important that children's recreation spaces and areas are not simply manicured parks or places in which athletic sports are performed. They need those kinds of wild spaces, that strange bit of undeveloped land or bushland or otherwise wild spaces in which they can take safe risks. Pru always keeps coming back to me that children need to be able to undertake a level of risk, sort of safe risky behaviour. She has a way of putting that.

Mr CANSDELL: Climb trees.

Professor GLEESON: Climb trees, for example, but naturally we do not want them to take too many risks. There is a level of risk taking that they need to take if they are going to develop. We need those kinds of spaces in which risk can occur.

The same for youth, I do not know what those spaces are for youth but they need spaces where they can congregate and in a positive way have some autonomy. I do not think it is the answer to drive them out of shopping centres. I think youth friendly spaces and ways of operating shopping centres, if that idea can be entertained. What you constantly get back from youth workers or workers with young people is the idea that they want respect. They want to be treated with respect in public places. I think it is an important axiom which we should approach provision of space for them. Skate parks is an obvious one. I think we have learnt that we need to provide things like that, for example, but maybe not always so isolated. There may be ways of providing more within the urban fabric, because even with the provision of things like skate parks, they are still coming back and appropriating public space because it is more risky, it is more exciting, that is where everyone else is. They do not want to have to catch the bus and then wander across a paddock to a concrete hole.

I am not giving you an exhaustive or perhaps convincing enough answer but I know there are designers who think about these sorts of issues and ways of integrating youth without separating them out finely, but ways of integrating spaces for them that allow them some autonomy but which they do not have externalities for the rest of the people using the city and the space.

CHAIR: Professor Gleeson, time has beaten us, I think we could have been here another two hours with you. I have got to say, it was really informative. You have really set the agenda I think in Australia in this regard. We are really very privileged to have had you here to give us your views and your evidence and your expertise.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 2.15pm)