



DSQ: Spring 2001 >> The Games for Everyone? Planning for Disability and Access at the Sydney 2000 Paralympic & Olympic Games

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Introduction

This paper examines how the Sydney 2000 Paralympic and Olympic Games (the Games) planning processes sought to incorporate disability and access related issues. Firstly, background information and a rationale for paper will be presented. The paper will then examine the planning processes of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG), the Sydney Paralympic Organising Committee (SPOC), the Olympic Coordination Authority (OCA) and the Olympic Roads and Traffic Authority (ORTA). This will be followed by an investigation of the issues associated with the Sydney 2000 Games from a disability perspective. These include the operational issues associated with the test event evaluation of access to venues, transport, accessibility of the urban domain, ticketing, and wider social impacts. Lastly, the paper will discuss the likelihood of any lasting legacies that the 2000 Games may have for Sydney's community of people with disabilities.

Background and Rationale

Disability and access are not issues just to be associated with the Paralympics. These issues should be central to the organizational culture of the Host City's Games planning generally. The Sydney 2000 Games includes not just the Olympics, but the Cultural Olympiad and the Paralympics aggregating into a three month festival from the beginning of August till the end of October. While the Olympics included demonstration events of wheelchair racing, some 4000 athletes with disabilities and 2000 officials participated in the Paralympics (SPOC 1999).

The majority of people with disabilities involvement with the Games occurred as spectators, workers and volunteers. Both the participants and visitors to Sydney want to visit other areas of Australia, given that Australia is a long haul tourism destination. The issues that faced Games organisers to be inclusive of people with disabilities were those same issues that face people with disabilities living in Sydney everyday. However, because of the nature of the Games and the concentration of Games activities in certain areas of Sydney, the everyday lives of people with disabilities living in these areas were disproportionately affected.

Games planners not only have a common sense responsibility to incorporate access and disability issues into the planning process, but it is a requirement of Australian human rights legislation. Under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 (DDA), and associated state anti-discrimination legislation, it is illegal in Australia to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability.

Accessibility of the Urban Domain

Sydney is a sprawling urban metropolis of some 4 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2000). There are a range of well documented physical, social and attitudinal barriers that people with disabilities face in Sydney (PDCNSW 1999). The Sydney 2000 Games occurred in some 14 separate precincts covering roughly 70km from East to West as well as soccer matches in four other inter state locations (SOCOG 2000a). The main Games precinct where most of the venues were built was at Homebush Bay.

Homebush is a suburb in the geographic and demographic centre of Sydney. The Sydney Games agenda included a massive urban renewal project for the Homebush Bay precinct that was the industrial heartland of Sydney. With the exodus of heavy industry Homebush Bay was left as one of the most contaminated sites in the Southern Hemisphere (OCA 1998b). The Sydney Olympic Bid for the Games sought not only to develop the bulk of the Games venues in this precinct and to undertake a major urban renewal project, but to do so using by using the very best environmental practice to decontaminate the site (Cashman and Hughes 1999).

Public transport is essential for community participation and citizenship. Sydney historically has not had a public transport culture with the private motor vehicle being a major influence on public policy discourse. Few areas of Sydney are well served by public transport, the exceptions being the Eastern suburbs and suburbs on the New South Wales City Rail network. These general public transport issues are compounded by a public transport system that has not been inclusive of people with disabilities (Downie 1994).

People with disabilities viewed the Games as an opportunity to improve both the accessible infrastructure and the transport coordination of Sydney. Sydney was planned and constructed in an ad hoc fashion (Spearitt and Demarco 1988) since European invasion in 1770 and subsequent settlement 1788. As such, Sydney is a mix of accessible and inaccessible areas. Apart from the Games precincts, the focus of public events took place in six largely accessible "Live Sites" (SOCOG 2000a) in the Sydney Central Business District. Many areas underwent major streetscape refurbishment as part of the Sydney City Council (SCC) Living Cities program (SCC 1994) aimed at revitalizing the street life of the Sydney CBD. However, SCC had been at the centre of a number of controversies with the community of people with disabilities about the accessibility of the urban domain.

The SCC's attitude and behavior led to the Physical Disability Council of New South Wales and People with Disabilities Inc. (two peak disability organizations in New South Wales) taking three separate DDA complaints against the SCC (Horin 1999b). These have had to do with street "improvements" that did not meet the Australian standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia 1993; 1998). These included: kerb cuts that prevented wheelchair users from accessing and egressing from the footpaths; kerb heights that subsequently hindered access to the newly introduced low floor accessible buses; installation of street scape furniture (benches, phone booths etc.) that did not comply with Australian Standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia AS1248 Series); installation of streetscape furniture that impeded people with vision impairments access of the city streets; and

removal of an accessible overpass connecting a car parking station to a government building housing a range of services for people with disabilities (Horin 1999b) As such, the accessibility of the urban domain remains problematic for people with mobility and vision impairments.

Inclusion in the Games Planning Process

There were four organizations charged with the planning of the Games. Table 1 presents their name, acronym & role:

Table 1: Games Planning Agencies

ORGANISATION ACRONYM ROLE

Sydney Organising SOCOG Staging of the Olympic Committee for the and Paralympic Games,

Olympic Games and the Cultural Olympiad

Sydney Paralympic SPOC SPOC is charged with the

Organising Committee staging of the Paralympic

Games

SOCOG and SPOC entered

into an Operational

Partnership whereby the

Paralympic programs (sporting
competition, volunteers,
venue management, medical,
security, accommodation, arts
festivals, marketing programs
etc.) will be delivered by

SOCOG (SPOC 1999:6)

Olympic Coordination OCA Development of venues

Authority Operation of sites during Games

Development and maintenance

of facilities for future

co-ordination across

agencies (OCA 1999a)

<http://www.oca.nsw.gov.au/>

Olympic Roads and ORTA Planning and co-ordinating Transport Authority transport services during the Olympics and Paralympics

Travel demand management

maintenance of existing

services during Games

Some 30 other NSW See the following website for

Government Dept. more information about the

organisations, their roles

and general access provision:

<http://www.gamesinfo.com.au/ac/index.html>

The organisation that was charged with the greatest degree of access planning was OCA. This is because OCA oversaw the planning, design, construction and operation of all Games venues. It is the OCA planning processes that this section will concentrate on prior to reviewing other access and disability issues that arose. The OCA approached access and disability issues by developing Access Guidelines (OCA 1998a), used an inclusive planning process through the establishment of the Olympic Access Advisory Committee and other consultative mechanisms, and developed guidelines for project management to include an access culture. As well as venues, the process involved the issues of the urban domain and transport (with ORTA).

Access Guidelines

OCA together with Australian Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (ACROD) and the Olympic Access Advisory Committee developed a set of Access Guidelines that were adopted by OCA in 1996 (OCA 1996; 1998a). They incorporate current access requirements stipulated in the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and the referenced Australian Standards for access, mobility and other relevant standards (Standards Australia AS1428 parts 1-4; AS4299 etc.). Further, they were proactive in seeking to incorporate the spirit and intent of

the DDA.

The DDA is Commonwealth legislation that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability. As such, the guidelines went beyond the application of the technical requirements of the BCA and the Australian Standards by seeking to provide 'best practice' at all stages. One of the pressing issues of the built environment has been the need for harmonizing of the DDA and the BCA to bring a higher degree of certainty to the stakeholders involved (ABCB 1999). The OCA (1996; 1998a) guidelines sought to do this from the outset.

The Guidelines covered all Games facilities, venues and operations, and require an access strategy to be prepared for each venue and an access audit to be carried out. Further, these requirements were extended to include cultural festival venues and to undertake audits for any other necessary services that would be considered part of the Games precincts. The Guidelines sought to incorporate access from all dimensions of disability in all of the roles that the Games offer - athletes, performers, spectators, officials, media, volunteers and staff. They are based on the principles of providing people with disabilities with an accessible environment that they can function in independently and with equity and dignity (OCA 1998a). As the Guidelines state,

Access is not only about buildings. A truly accessible environment is one in which a person with a disability can freely express their independence, and one in which any impediment to integration is removed. It involves "seamless" blending of numerous key components such as communication, transport, employment, education, external pathways, community awareness, housing and buildings. Special access provisions should not be necessary if the environment is built to adequately reflect the diversity and needs of the community (OCA 1998:3).

The Guidelines were issued to all professionals involved in OCA developments.

The Process of Inclusion and Access Advisory Committee

The Olympic Access Advisory Committee (OAAC) was a committee set up in 1996 by OCA to provide input from the disability community into the access planning of the building and operations of the facilities and services for the Games. Of the 25 person committee there are 9 separate consumer bodies represented on the committee for people with mobility, vision, hearing and intellectual impairments, and ageing (10 positions in all). Of the 25 person committee 14 positions were held by people with disabilities.

Importantly, the philosophy of establishing the committee was to include people with disabilities within the key planning process rather than to just undertake a consultation process. This began with each project's presentation of a facility brief, the development of an Access Strategy (includes a specialist access consultant), where the OAAC reviews/modifies the Access Strategy. The Access Strategy then had to be approved by OCA's Director General before the final design was then checked for compliance with the Access Strategy. Finally the design was implemented with OAAC monitoring during construction and operations. This was an important inclusion and has been an omission by many planning authorities in the past and an identified weakness of access planning (Fletcher 1998).

The ongoing monitoring through development stages (planning, design, construction and operations) was mandatory. Integral to the process was an active and two-way consultation with the Olympic Access Advisory Committee and other people with disabilities (Fletcher 1998). This process puts in place a series of checks and balances that are sadly lacking in mainstream environmental planning in New South Wales (NSW). For example, the best plans can be compromised during construction by 'snap decisions' by supervisory or construction staff (e.g. continuous pathway impeded). Similarly, people with disabilities are too familiar with the "the locked toilet syndrome" during operations stages. This is where accessible toilets are provided, but when people with disabilities attempt to use them they find the toilets are locked. The authorities in charge keep the toilets locked to prevent vandalism or other inappropriate uses.

An essential component of the process was the employment of specialist access/disability consultants. The process of selecting an access consultant has been problematic in the past. While consultants with architectural and planning backgrounds have called themselves access consultants there has been no system for assessing knowledge of access and disability related issues. Part of this problem can be firstly traced to the lack of access and disability inclusion in University curriculum for these professions in Australia (Darcy 1999; SRDRN 1999), and hence, the subsequent lack of inclusion of people with disabilities in consultation

process of projects organized by these professions.

Consultations with people with disabilities are essential to understand how space is used and not just how to technically adhere to access requirements. Examples abound of access planning completed by "qualified professionals" where the result was unusable for people with disabilities. In 1997 OCA called for expressions of interest for a register of access consultants for Olympic projects. This was the first attempt to develop a resource of "suitably qualified" organizations to provide access advice. This process still lacked a systematic form of evaluation and that is being addressed by two other initiatives (NAWG 1999; Access Institute of NSW 2000).

OCA has continued the process of consultation beyond the official Olympic Access Advisory Committee. From July to November 1999 OCA undertook wider consultation with disability groups and individuals with a series of workshops, tours and information sessions with groups and individuals representing physical, vision, intellectual, hearing, and senior groups.

Games Disability Issues

Test Event Evaluation of Access to Venues

Whenever a major program of public infrastructure provision is undertaken there are always parts they could have been done better in hindsight. However, the test is always in the use of these venues and whether there was a process in place to address these issues. Valuable testing and feedback to OCA, ORTA and the venue managers was provided through a series of major test events (OCA 1999b). This included recruiting people with disabilities to road test the events (provide tickets ==> receive information ==> transport to ==> spatial use of the event site ==> provision of goods/services ==> the event itself ==> transport from etc.) and provide feedback to through a questionnaire and phone service. The Australian Quadriplegic Association (Hughes 1999) have also assessed their member's experiences of one test event. The major findings of the evaluations and solutions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Issues and Proposed Solutions from Test Events 1999-2000

ISSUES SOLUTIONS

1. Poor understanding of access Training for identified requirements of different staff over and above common

disability groups and how to disability awareness

provide appropriate assistance

2. Poor understanding of how to Venue 'walkthroughs' with make best use of venue from venue manager and people

access perspective, e.g. with disabilities

pathways of travel, location of

handrails, TTYs etc.

3. Modifications required in Modifications, where

some venues possible, to be undertaken as part of 'overlay' work. Where

not possible operational

assistance to be provided

4. Shade and shelter Principles of equity to

apply, i.e. ensure shade and

shelter, where provided, is

accessible to people with

disabilities. Consideration to

be given to shade and shelter at transport nodes

5.1 Distances and linkages Public communication

between shuttle drop off points strategy to recognise that

(and parking) and venue entrances this will be a problem for some people and at some venues

Operational strategies to be

developed

5.2 Distances within venues Intra-site transport to be considered if possible and

appropriate

Parking and drop off points

to be considered if possible

(Paralympics only)

6. Poor condition of drop off Fix as per Access Guidelines

points, e.g. surface unsuitable Contingency planning for wet for wheelchairs, people with weather etc.

vision impairments

7. Lack of locational, directional Fix as per Access Guidelines

or inaccessible signage Staff training to ensure knowledge of all amenities etc.

8. Potential problem of crowd Consideration to be given

management and queuing to separate entrances etc. if appropriate

Contingency planning

9. People with very particular As much information as

requirements e.g. 'long' possible sought from ticketing

wheelchairs, can not climb Contingency planning and

stairs etc. operational assistance, e.g.

keep some seats on aisles free

10. Some temporary facilities Fix as per Access Guidelines

inaccessible, e.g. ramps too steep

11. Lack of information about Access booklet

transport, venues etc.

12. Trouble accessing Access booklet

information about transport,

venues etc.

Sources: Questionnaire; Hughes 1999

Many of these issues related to the large size of the Games precincts. In the earlier stages of development this was compounded by a lack of available shade, shelter, seating, drinking fountains and toilets to enable people to rest or shelter from the elements. Some of these issues, like shade, required time for the trees to grow. Others have been addressed by OCA with modifications to the common domain (open space areas linking the venues) operations plans incorporating greater level of tree planting in some areas, and an increased level of seating, shading and drinking fountains. As more venues were completed the need for directional and location signage became essential. This has been an ongoing exercise of improvement with each test event together with staff training for each of the venues and the common domain. The remaining issues can be grouped into two areas.

Firstly, operational issues surrounding the venues and their use by people with disabilities. As the venues and common domain were used a range of issues arose about the accessibility and use of these areas. Further, it became apparent that venue managers were not aware of how to make best use of their facilities, and staff were unfamiliar with the best ways to offer assistance to people with disabilities.

OCA and SOCOG addressed these issues through operational audits of venues to assist managers in best understanding the use of their venue from a disability perspective. Accredited access auditors from the aforementioned register of access consultants carried these out. This has been complemented with staff training of customer service for people with disabilities. This training involved an instructional video that was used for all staff and volunteers at Games venues (TAFE 2000). While it was recognized that video based disability awareness training is not as effective as training involving direct contact with people with disabilities (Daruwalla 1999) this was considered the only training format feasible for the 50,000 staff and volunteers involved in the Games.

Secondly, there were issues with information provision, access about the site and how best to get to the site via public transport. These information issues were seen as central to educating the general public, and people with disabilities in particular, about transport and access issues during the Games period. A publication about spectator information for the Games (SOCOG 2000b) and a separate Access Guide for the Games (OCA 2000) were completed to address these issues.

Transport to the Games

Homebush has an excellent Easy Access railway station for handling large numbers of the general public and has excellent access provisions. However, the Sydney City Rail Network system has only 5 percent of stations as Easy Access wheelchair accessible stations (City Rail 2000). This is compounded by the system of ingress and egress from trains that consistently leaves people with mobility disabilities stranded on stations waiting for ramps or for staff to escort them through the labyrinth of access tunnels (PDCNSW 2000; No author 21/11/1999). People with vision impairments are faced with a myriad of access problems ranging from inaccessible ticketing machines, lack of tactile indicators and absence of voice information systems.

The NSW State Transit Authority (STA) has increasingly purchased accessible low floor buses since a complaint was lodged under the DDA to the HREOC in 1995 (HREOC 2000). To this point in time the number of accessible buses has meant fully accessible services are restricted to a few select routes. This is further compounded because private operators have been resisting the implementation of low floor accessible buses (Todd 1999) and it was a consortium of these operators, through Bus 2000, who won the contract to service a number of these Games routes. This meant restricted services on the Games bus routes for people with disabilities. For example, all Games ticket holders got free public transport to the Games and on these routes buses were available every 5 minutes. However, accessible buses were available every two hours. There were also uncertainties about the departure and return times of these services (Hughes 1999; Darcy and Woodruff 2000).

An inaccessible public transport system means that people with disabilities were reliant upon either private transport, rented vehicles or the Sydney taxi service. The Sydney accessible taxi system has been known for a range of problems that have been well documented (Folino 1998). This includes taxis being consistently late for bookings (1-3 hours is not uncommon!), not enough vehicles, drivers of vehicles who choose not to pick up passengers with disabilities, and lack of availability at night (Folino 1998). OCA and ORTA rightly identified all these transport issues as a major challenge to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities were identified and appropriately addressed. They have specifically targeted the

issues of staff training, increasing the number and consistency of accessible transport routes.

Ticketing

Contrary to the approach taken by OCA, SOCOG was plagued by a number of controversies during the Games planning. From a disability perspective ticketing was a major controversy of planning the Games. For example, The Official Olympic Games Ticket Book had a section of frequently asked questions, where it asks,

I am confined to a wheelchair. Will I miss out on the Games?

No. Provision is being made for disabled spectators to attend any session of the Olympics. (SOCOG 1999:7)

The language used does not reflect the way people with disabilities want to be represented and reinforces stereotypes that the disability community have been fighting against (Hume 1995).

The process of allocating seats for people with disabilities left more unanswered questions than answered questions. Each line of the application form had a box to be ticked if accessible tickets were required. However, no details of the dimensions of access were noted. SOCOG had a number of DDA complaints brought against them for a range of ticketing and information issues.

A summary of these complaints include (also see HREOC 2000):

the lack of provision of the ticket book in alternate formats (Horin 1999a); wheelchair users were restricted to ordering a block of 3 tickets, 1 wheelchair ticket and two other tickets, a restriction not placed on other members of the community; a website that was inaccessible to people with vision impairments (Jackson 2000a and 2000b); and attendant/carer ticket refund based on it was discriminatory against people with high support needs who required assistance to attend the Games (Gregory 2000).

Volunteers

The Games period required the involvement of 50,000 volunteers. Disability organizations identified the tremendous strain that was placed on their volunteer resources because of the Games drive for volunteers. SOCOG was offering volunteers a range of extrinsic incentives to join the volunteer program that disability organizations could not hope to match. As Darcy (2001) states,

Olympic volunteers received free uniforms, transport to and from venues, meals, tickets to either a dress rehearsal of the opening ceremony or a morning athletics session, Olympic pins and entry into a raffle for prizes including trips to IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland and Holden cars. There was also a tickertape parade held in their honour. However, very few organisations working with volunteers have the resources to provide such recognition and rewards to their volunteers beyond perhaps the reimbursement of their expenses.

This drain on the volunteer workforce was of particular concern to disability organizations where current government cutbacks had further eroded these organizations ability to provide basic services to their members (Cumming 1999; Horin 1999c). Many of these and other cutbacks in government funding had been linked to increased expenditure by the New South Wales State Government on the Games. As Fallon (1999) noted, some disability organizations saw the Games period as a time for protest in much the same way that indigenous groups did.

Wider Social Impact

An Olympic and Paralympic Disability Advocacy Service (OPDAS) for people with disabilities was established for the Sydney Games period. OPDAS was established to assist any people with disabilities or their associates who may have problems or complaints with any services, facilities or events during the Games Period. This extends beyond the Games to generic disability services that may be disrupted during the period. OPDAS role included advocacy and legal support provision. The latter role was coordinated with NSW Disability

Discrimination Legal Centre and included letter writing, attendance of meetings, and assistance with lodging complaints under the DDA or NSW Anti-Discrimination Act.

OPDAS (2000) pre-Games planning report identified a range of social impacts that people with disabilities asked for their assistance in addressing. These included: severe access activity restrictions and surveillance of residents of a residential facility accommodating people with high support needs located in the grounds of the Olympic media village; disruption to respite arrangements due to the extended school holiday period related to the Olympics; anticipated social isolation and lack of support services for people with disabilities during the Olympic period due, in part, to major increases in traffic congestion and transport restrictions in areas surrounding major Games precincts; anticipated increased homelessness among people with disabilities due to boarding house closures and government decisions regarding the removal of homeless people from Sydney streets during the Games (Jama 1999; Hill 2000); extensive confusion and anxiety about the potential non-availability of accessible taxis; disruption, and reduction of support services during the Olympics due to staff leave arrangements, service closures, traffic congestion etc.; lack of availability of accessible cabs due to block bookings by organisations (e.g. by major hotels) to provide Olympic shuttle services for able-bodied people; significant taxi fare increases (10%) during the Olympic period; and price increases for food, drinks and services at Olympic venues and live sites (e.g. Darling Harbour, Martin Place).

Conclusions

To achieve a well-run Games there needed to be a change in operational attitude towards disability and access issues. The Games offered the disability community a range of challenges and opportunities that would otherwise not have eventuated in Sydney in such a short time frame. Access issues were addressed by OCA and there was an inclusive process for this to occur. This saw the beginning of a shift to an access culture within these organizations and with those who worked closely with them (planners, designers, architects project managers etc.). This saw a range of material developed about access (guidelines checklists, best practice etc.) and has produced a series of largely accessible Games precincts. Yet, at the same time SOCOG's approach to ticketing and information issues was deliberately exclusionary.

The logistics of staging the Games tested the operational planning of all agencies involved. This will be critical during the Games where vast numbers of spectators will be transported to and from venues each day. There is also concern about the ability to transport, accommodate and entertain athletes and visitors with disabilities outside of the Games precincts (Kennedy 1998; Rudzki 1999). Once athletes and spectators have feasted upon the orgy of sport and culture at the largely accessible venues then they may wish visit other areas of Sydney and Australia. It is these recreational and tourism experiences that people expect to participate in that may be the most problematic (Darcy 1998). This requires a greater commitment to accessible public transport and the accessibility of the urban domain.

The other possible legacy is increased profile of people with disabilities through the images and messages of Paralympics. However, whether this increased profile has any lasting impact on the general public and politicians can only be assessed a reasonable period after the Games have finished. It will be an interesting time.

Notes

1. This paper was prepared prior to the Sydney 2000 Games taking place. A further paper is in preparation evaluating the post Games experience from a disability perspective.

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