

When Cultures Collide: Planning for the Public Spatial Needs of Muslim Women in Sydney

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ABSTRACT

Western multicultural democratic societies commonly hold two basic assumptions. First, that every person should have equitable access to and enjoyment of public spaces. Second, that everyone should be free to practice her/his culture and religion, subject to the national legal system. In reality however, such rights can be difficult to uphold. This is especially so given the growing complexity of the religious, cultural and gendered needs of different ethnic groups residing in multicultural cities. Situated in this broader context, our paper reports the findings of a study focusing on the public spatial requirements and experiences of Muslim women in Sydney.

The research revealed three main areas of concern for Muslim women in their use of public space. First is the notion of perceptual (dis)comfort. The Muslim women described a sense of otherness and not belonging as they moved about in the public domain. They encountered aggressive and subtle forms of discrimination, such as physical and verbal abuse, as well as experiencing unease moving about in places which were perceived to be dominated by the physical presence and gaze of men. Second, the Muslim women expressed frustration and dismay in not being able to find culturally and/or religiously appropriate public recreational facilities to achieve a healthy body. Difficulties related to the strict dress code of modesty required of most Muslim women when moving about in public. Even when slight building modifications could have rendered a facility suitable, these were not undertaken. Third, the research uncovered inadequate design and unsuitable placement of facilities within existing public spaces such as passive parkland and outdoor eating areas. This confines Muslim women to the home and restricts family outings.

Despite the reported difficulties, the Muslim women interviewed did not avoid public spaces. Indeed they had no choice as these environments are where they must shop, access essential services and catch public transport. But as they move about the public sphere their experiences of discrimination reinforce feelings of not belonging and otherness, thereby denying Muslim women their rights as citizens. This study raises important considerations for both the day-to-day provision of public space and the deeper philosophical and moral implications in meeting the needs of different groups in culturally and religiously diverse communities which is contemporary Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Australia is a multicultural nation. Immigration has been a significant contributor to the country's population growth since 1788 when white colonists invaded a land already occupied for millennia by Aboriginal groups (Burnley, Murphy and Fagan, 1997:1). In the intervening period some nine million people have settled in Australia, largely attracted to the urban centres along the coast. Today the most populous cities of Sydney and Melbourne accommodate the largest share of ethnically and religiously diverse communities (Burnley, 2000:244).

Muslims have a long history in Australia going well back before white colonisation to the 10th century when Arab traders arrived on the coast (Kettani, 1986:216). The present Muslim community traces its origin to the adoption of camel transport in 1860 when 24 camels arrived in the country with three Afghan camel drivers (Kettani, 1986:216; Saeed, 2003:5). While Muslims came to Australia over the intervening years, it was not until after the Second World War and the demise of the White Australia Policy that Muslims started to arrive in large numbers (Yasmeen and Al Khudairi, 1998).

At the most recent census, Muslims in Australia totalled 280,871, 1.2 per cent of all Australians (CDATA, 2001). Although Muslims come from more than 70 nations, including Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, South-East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Albania and the Cocos Islands, people born in Lebanon accounted for most followers of Islam in the 2001 census. The most populous states of Australia, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, are home to the majority of Muslims. In NSW there are 140,907 Muslims, followed by Victoria with 92,742 (CDATA, 2001). Sydney, the largest city in Australia and capital of NSW, is the destination for 95 per cent of the state's Muslims, which equates to 48 per cent of Australia's Islamic population (CDATA, 2001). Muslim communities are concentrated within the city's inner west and western suburbs. Auburn, Bankstown and Canterbury local government areas account for 35 per cent of Muslims in Sydney, with Parramatta and Blacktown accommodating a further 14 per cent. (CDATA, 2001). Islam is the third largest religion in Australia after Christianity and Buddhism.

Despite being a culturally and religiously diverse nation, those of non-Christian faiths are often viewed with suspicion and not part of mainstream Australia. Muslims have been targeted in this way both before September 11 and even more so since. There is a long history of community opposition to the establishment of non-Christian places of public worship, particularly Muslim Mosques. Racist abuse has also been reported against Muslims and the most recent 'anti-terrorist' federal legislation is worryingly putting the Islamic community under unfair scrutiny.

This is the backdrop to the research reported here.¹ This study examines Muslim women's public spatial requirements and their experiences of the public realm in Sydney, focusing on localities where large Muslim communities have settled. The project relates to the broader concern of all contemporary planners in multicultural democracies – the increasingly complex task of accommodating the needs of culturally diverse communities in respectful and appropriate ways. The planner today also works with two key assumptions: that every person should have equitable access to public spaces and that everyone should be able to maintain her/his cultural beliefs and practices. Our research indicates that these assumptions do not necessarily hold for all in the community, despite the multicultural rhetoric of equity and fairness. Further, the research exposes

¹ This study was undertaken in 2003 as a final year thesis project for the Bachelor of Town Planning degree at UNSW by then student, now town planner, Carolyn Whitten, supervised by Planning Program academic, Susan Thompson.

some important dilemmas for planners working in democratic multicultural and multi-faith communities.

Having set the broad context for the research, we now turn to a discussion of the nature of public space and how it is used and perceived differently by men and women. We then present the research on Muslim women in Sydney, focussing on the following:

- Perceptual comfort in the use of public spaces
- Use of public facilities to achieve a healthy physical and spiritual body
- Role of public space in nurturing relationships

The paper concludes by asking how planners in contemporary democratic multicultural communities can appropriately accommodate the needs of Muslim women.

PUBLIC SPACE

Public space is variously defined as an area which is in public ownership and is accessible to all people (Mossop, 2001:12); all things beyond the 'privacy' of the home (Iveson, 1998:22); spaces not controlled by private interests (Bondi and Domosh, 1998:279); locations which provide a setting for political participation (Mossop, 2001:12); and social space in which human beings interact with other members of society outside their family life (Nyang, year unknown). Most definitions of public space incorporate the likelihood that an individual in using that space will come into contact with a stranger (Ruddick, 1996). "Public spaces are critical in the expansion of the public sphere, as they allow, at least potentially, for encounters between individuals or groups who might not otherwise meet" (Ruddick, 1996:133). This goes back to the origins of urban public space, the Greek 'agora' where strangers interacted, as citizens, buyers, or sellers.

Historically public spaces were provided by the state, but today more and more private companies carry out this role (Mitchell, 2003). There is growing concern that this is leading to the demise of public space as people retreat to semi-private spaces to which access is controlled and monitored (Mitchell, 2003; Atkinson, 2001; Banerjee, 2001; Mossop, 2001; Iveson, 1998; Ruddick, 1996; Mitchell, 1995). Retail malls are replacing the traditional shopping street, recreational facilities are becoming privatised, and public squares are increasingly located on the private land around commercial buildings. In these spaces it is unlikely that a wide range of groups and individuals will interact.

Gender and Public Space

Women have not always been accorded free access to the public realm, although prior to industrialisation there was little distinction between 'public' and 'private' spaces. Once spaces of production became removed from the home, women were assigned to the domestic private sphere usually located on the outskirts of suburbia (Bondi and Domosh, 1998; Domosh and Seager, 2001; Scraton and Watson, 1998). Not only was a woman's place at home, her presence in the public realm was problematic. "Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian" (Wilson, 1991:6). The public spaces of the city were gendered and a circumscribed, appropriate behaviour in this space was demanded (Bondi and Domosh, 1998:279).

In western countries, women in the last century have asserted their rights to use public space in the same way that men have been doing. Nevertheless, there is still an inequality of spatial appropriation. Women's vulnerability to sexual violence limits their use of, and willingness to use public space (Valentine, 1990). Women's use of space can differ during the day and night because of the perception that deserted and poorly lit spaces are dangerous and put women at risk (White, 1998). As such, women's access to public space continues to be constrained.

Muslims and Public Space

People from different ethnicities can also be constrained in the public sphere (Ruddick, 1996). The concept of public and private space in Islamic societies differs from western countries. Public space, known as *umma*, is male space, and can be defined by the absence of women (Chowdhury, 1992:9). Conversely, private space is associated with females (Mernissi, 1987:138; Esposito, 1991; AlMunajjed, 1997:33). The constitution of public and private space is largely dependent on the Islamic notion of *mahran* and *na-mahran* (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:304). *Mahran* refers to a category of people of the opposite sex with whom marriage is explicitly forbidden. For a woman this includes her father and brothers and for a man, his mother and sisters. *Na-mahran* are those of the opposite sex whose kinship does not represent any impediment for marriage (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:304). For practising Muslims, the sharing of space with people who are *na-mahran* is problematic. Spaces which are defined as restricted for both men and women are where one is likely to encounter, meet or interact with *na-mahran* people. These spaces can be located both within the home and neighbourhood.

Accordingly, spaces are not defined as 'public' or 'private'. Rather, they are differentiated on the basis of who is interacting in the space (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:304). For example, in the private sphere when the *na-mahran* guests arrive, part of the home becomes redefined as public. Conversely, when women entertain their female friends, who are *na-mahran* to the males of the household, men are disallowed entry into the interior spaces of their own homes.

In spaces outside the home there is a much greater chance of meeting *na-mahran* and as a result, women's mobility is restricted. In order to protect themselves in the *umma* sphere, women in many Muslim countries abide by *purdah*, which in Persian means 'curtain' (Mazundar and Mazundar, 1997:185). In spaces where they are in contact with *na-mahran*, the Qur'an requires women to dress modestly by covering themselves (Esposito, 1991:99).

If a woman has to leave her house she is expected to go about her business quickly and not to loiter (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:306). Accordingly, major streets and squares are primarily used by men. So too are teashops where men socialise and exchange information. While not prohibited, women do not typically attend mosques. When they do attend, they are separated from (*na-mahran*) males either by a screen or by being seated in a separate room or section (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:307). Nevertheless, as long as they are dressed appropriately, Muslim women are able to visit friends and relatives, and to participate in different religious activities (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:308). They can also participate in shopping. In wealthy families shopping is done by servants, in middle class or poorer families the males are in charge of this task. Merchants often bring their goods from household to household since women are discouraged from going to the bazaar (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:307).

Another element of *purdah* which prevents contact between *mahran* and *na-mahran* is through physical segregation. Sexual segregation is a rule that touches on virtually every aspect of public and social life. Almost all public places have areas that are restricted to women (AlMunajjed, 1997:33). Segregation is achieved both by controlling where women move and also through the architecture. Public transport in India, Iran and Saudi Arabia has compartments exclusively for women's use (AlMunajjed, 1997:33; Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:306). In Saudi Arabia restaurants have special family dining rooms for women. Hospitals have separate waiting rooms for women, and there are shopping centres exclusively for women (AlMunajjed, 1997:33).

From the above discussion, it is clear that Western understandings of public space are not universal. The notion of public spaces being open to all is at odds with the notion of public space in Islamic societies. The street, square and park are not necessarily 'public'; nor is the home exclusively a 'private space'. While the female spends most of her time in the domestic

environment with other women and children, males are denied this intimacy and are forbidden ready access to the homes of other men (Mazundar and Mazundar, 2001:313). It is also important to note that despite modernisation, the spatial needs for privacy have been sustained to the present day.

MUSLIM WOMEN'S USE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN SYDNEY

We now turn to discuss the findings of the research with Muslim women in Sydney.

The Research

The methodology for the study was principally qualitative and constituted a series of five individual interviews and two focus groups with Muslim women. Eight interviews were also held with community service staff at the selected local councils, migrant resource centres, mosques and local police authorities. The study was geographically focused on the inner west region of Sydney where the Muslim population is concentrated. Focus groups were organised with the assistance of Muslim women interviewees. The group meetings were held at local mosques. All interviews were conducted in 2003 by Carolyn Whitten.

In all, 23 Muslim women were involved in the study, ranging in age from approximately 16 to 50 years. The women were born in or had lived in Australia, Afghanistan, England, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon and Turkey. Not all women involved wore the hijab, although the majority did. Further, the women had not necessarily followed Islam their whole lives. Interviewees are not named in this paper to ensure confidentiality.

All interview data was transcribed, coded and analysed according to rigorous qualitative methodological protocols.

Perceptual Comfort in the use of Public Spaces

The Muslim women in this study talked about having a perception of otherness and not belonging to the broader Australian community, despite this country now being their home. They linked this perception to individual experiences of discrimination, prejudice and abuse. They also reported being affected by popular opinions expressed in the media that Muslims are to be feared and not trusted. This reinforced their feelings of otherness, discomfort and not belonging. This has been magnified since the events of September 11 and more recently by terrorist attacks in Indonesia and London. The Muslim women's perception of otherness underpins a significant aspect of their behaviour in public space, as well as their attitudes towards public space.

Every Muslim woman interviewed had experienced some form of verbal or physical abuse. This included being shoved while waiting on train platforms, told to go back to their own country, and having their hijab tugged and pulled off their bodies. Many women also experienced abusive treatment, such as being served last or not at all, as they went about daily activities such as shopping or seeking service in banks, post offices and local offices. More subtle forms of abuse were also recalled. A commonly expressed concern was that an hostile and patronizing tone was often used by non-Muslims when speaking to Muslim women. One interviewee, who was born in England and of Anglo-Celtic origin, mentioned that it was often assumed that she cannot speak English (Focus Group A). This was experienced by other study participants. Another woman described an experience where classmates were surprised to learn she used the Internet (Focus Group B).

Younger women were reluctant to voice their spatial needs to local councils for fear of being negatively targeted. One respondent noted that there is no problem in giving 'women' space but when you add the 'Muslim' factor to the equation it becomes a different story (Focus Group A). Young Muslim women felt that whenever any service was made available for Muslim women it

always gets taken away. Services for Muslim women cannot be widely advertised as when non-Muslims discover these services complaints are made, and the services are usually shut down. This makes it very hard to provide services for Muslim women and to advertise their availability. The point was made that Muslim communities cannot even create their own space (Focus Group A) which is responsive to their needs, on their own land, with their own money. This comment refers to the enormous controversy which surrounds Muslim communities attempts to construct mosques in Australia².

All interviewees talked about the problematic issue of men hanging around shopping centres and main streets. Concerns related to the way men dominate urban spaces and the effect that this has on Muslim women.

...there's just too many men. They're just in the shopping area and they don't have anything else to do but just sit down and talk and talk and stand. I mean you just feel like they just got the whole space and even at the doorway you can't even go in the doorway even if you feel like a water or a drink or something. It doesn't annoy me but you sort of feel it turns you off. You just don't feel like going in there. Not that they're going to look at you... there are a lot of ladies with the hijab, the scarf, so that's not putting me off, but there's something bothering me (Focus Group B).

The discomfort felt by Muslim women is associated with a feeling that there is not enough space for the women to share these spaces.

I think that it's true that men have taken that space so it really doesn't leave very much room for women to be able to use the space because it just feels a bit too dominating... (Individual Interviewee)

Use of Public Facilities to Achieve a Healthy Body

Islam encourages physical activity as an important part of the Muslim's responsibility in caring for the body and pursuing a healthy lifestyle (Nakamura, 2002:21). The Qur'an recognises the value of physical activity as long as it is conducted within an Islamic framework which includes rules for sex segregation, modest uniform, possible abstention from vigorous activity during periods of fasting, and the moral acceptability of particular activities (Nakamura, 2002:22).

One of the most commonly identified spatial needs raised by the Muslim women and community workers interviewed is the lack of appropriate recreational facilities. While the Islamic code of modesty and the practice of *na-mahran* renders most conventional recreational environments unsuitable for Muslim women, facilities can be adjusted with relatively minor modifications. Indeed a set of recommendations to facilitate Muslim women's participation in exercise emerged as an outcomes of the 1st National Muslim Women's conference in 1992 (MWA, 1994:12). These recommendations focus on relatively simple measures which involve the good will and cooperation of facility providers, especially local councils in areas with high Islamic populations. 'Women-only' time and special programs, in places screened from public viewing, underpin the suggested actions (MWA, 1994:12).

In the interviews Muslim women identified swimming and going to the gym as desirable activities. To a lesser extent, tennis and team sports were also mentioned. Issues associated with access to physical activity affect Muslim women in different ways. Young women for example, who are not yet wearing the hijab, did not share the same concerns for privacy. Conversely, for others physical activity can only be undertaken in an environment where there are no males or non-Muslim females. There is a fear that after seeing a Muslim woman in immodest clothing (such as swimwear or without the hijab) a non-Muslim may then describe her bodily features to someone else (Focus

² A recent development application to Baulkham Hills Shire Council was refused. Council received 5170 submissions objecting to the development (Morris, 2002). Dunn (2001) also discusses community objection to the establishment of mosques and describes this opposition as 'cultural imperialism' (Dunn, 2001:306).

Group A). The body is considered sacred and is only temporary while a person has use of it on earth (Focus Group B). As an individual has no ownership of her body, it is not hers to disrespect. By covering the body in modest clothing, the individual is protecting it from harm. But the need to exercise in an exclusively Muslim women space was not shared by all. Some interviewees merely desired an all female environment, a situation which is demanded by other women in the community. Exemptions granted under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 for women only related recreational services acknowledges this broader need (Lawlink, 2003).

Swimming facilities have been particularly problematic in providing for Muslim women's physical exercise requirements. Swimming is part of the Australian psyche - the focus of family activities throughout the long hot summer and a physical skill that every child routinely attains as part of their education. The absence of an appropriate place to participate in swimming is tantamount to a denial of one's rights as an Australian as one interviewee attested. Having lived in the country all her life, she did not know how to swim and could not find a suitable location to undertake lessons. Despite lobbying by the Muslim Women's Association (MWA), there has been limited success in shifting government attitudes on this issue. Even in areas where there is a very high Muslim population there has been a strong reluctance to accommodate women only use of public pools. Canterbury Council has objected to such requests on the following grounds:

- The use of the pool by this group would not be in accordance with the Public Health Act (although no specific section was referred to);
- The request is not in accordance with Council's Policy on Swimming Pools which states that a minimum of two lanes must be available to the public at all times (with the exception of carnivals) (Council Community Worker Interview).

Nevertheless, the Council has explored a number of options for out of hours use of swimming facilities. At the time of this research, a group of Muslim men who under Islamic law are required to dress modestly and not interact with *na-mahran* females, were permitted exclusive use of the pool outside normal opening hours. This opportunity was also made available to Muslim women but the evening time was difficult given women's family responsibilities and concerns about going out after dark (Council Officer Interview; Focus Groups A and B). Discussions have been held with Muslim women about the possibility of exclusive day use of part of the pool. One of the swimming complexes in the local government area has multiple pools, including an indoor pool which could be used exclusively by Muslim women. However, the glass nature of the structure means that privacy cannot be ensured and the cost of altering the construction material is prohibitive (Council Officer Interview). Clearly there is a need for architecture and design to be more flexible in a multicultural community.

Negative public reaction can also have an impact on Muslim women's access to public swimming pools. A Muslim school booked Auburn pool for a series of swimming classes for female students. During these classes, the pool was restricted to women only. This arrangement was for one hour a day for ten days over winter. On 22 August 2002 a talkback radio show aired a complaint by a listener who was aggrieved about being unable to use the pool during this time. This led the Council, which controls the pool, to cancel the learn-to-swim program for the Muslim girls (ADBNSW, 2003:72). We could not help wondering had the caller complained about the exclusive use of the pool for competition swimming training or water polo coaching (a common occurrence in public swimming pools in Sydney) whether those programs would have been cancelled.

Gyms provide an opportunity for exercise and unlike swimming pools a number of female only gyms are now available. This type of facility has met the needs of some interviewees. Nevertheless, these spaces can be problematic in that men are not always absent. Some gyms allow older men to use the facilities and a lot of gyms have male staff (Focus Group A). A gym, which caters to the special needs of Muslim women, was established in Sydney in 2002 and was the source

of numerous articles in the “Daily Telegraph” newspaper. The gym, which was granted an exemption under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977, caters for other needs by providing services such as a prayer room, appropriate music, comfortable changing facilities, women only staff who speak Arabic and most importantly, no men (Murray and Morris, 2002:9; Puplick, 2002b:11). A further reason for the exemption was that Arabic women suffer from high rates of diabetes, cholesterol and heart disease, and as a result access to a gym has major health benefits (Murray and Morris, 2002:9; Puplick, 2002a:21).

The Role of Public Spaces in Nurturing Relationships

Women talked about using different public spaces for a variety of purposes. In this part of the paper we focus on activities involving interacting with friends and family. These centred around shopping, dining and the use of parks for passive recreation.

Shopping was identified as both a necessity and an enjoyable pursuit but a problematic activity due to the presence of men. Unlike Islamic countries where shopping malls tend to be women only spaces during the day, gendered useage patterns are different in Australia. This is especially so in the council areas where Muslims are concentrated due to the high number of recent arrivals (Community Worker Interview). Accordingly, Muslim women reported discomfort in shopping spaces and a curtailing of their retail activities as a way of sharing time with women friends. Their concerns have been further aggravated by the growing trend of providing outdoor seating for cafés on public footpaths. This has encouraged more men on the street and in areas of high Muslim population, raises serious concerns for Muslim women.

A lot of women were appalled by the decision made by Council... they haven't consulted with women in the area. Because in their countries of origin those places or hangouts are only for men to basically sexually harass women. ...it's actually revolting for women to go past them or to use them as such... It's only because its male dominant and women find it so difficult to even use the streets or the foot path walking past them (Community Worker Interview).

Muslim women were further constrained in their use of the public sphere by the paucity of suitable rest spaces. They wanted somewhere to relax with their friends after or during shopping excursions. They also desired prayer spaces to accommodate the Islamic requirement of praying five times a day. A suitably designed and located centre could provide for these multiple needs. Interviewees identified local libraries as potentially suitable for praying if a private room could be booked. But this ruled out spontaneous activity for women away from home shopping or socialising with friends. Interviewees suggested that a women's centre could accommodate this and other needs for both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Such a facility could be designed to accommodate different activities such as classes and exercises. It might also include a tea room and craft centre. Toilet facilities could provide appropriate plumbing to accommodate Islamic hygiene requirements (Individual and Focus Group Interviewees; Community Worker Interviews).

Some of the Muslim women in this study identified poor provision of family space as a major concern. They found it difficult adjusting to Australia because of the lack of family spaces for them to use. Many Islamic countries have family clubs where a variety of facilities and activities including a swimming pool for the children, cafes, and video and computer games are on offer (Focus Group A). Parks were the only space in Australia identified by the Muslim women as family space. However, this had limitations in terms of when the area could be safely used and the lack of large shelters to accommodate big gatherings. Further, Muslim families may use the public space of a park in ways that differ from non Muslims.

...you find families sitting at the furthest spot back there so that no one sees how they're moving... Men don't want to be seen dealing with their own family in public, even with their women, it's culturally not acceptable, even... to have a public display

of affection, it's a big no no in those cultures, so men can't even touch their wives hand in public or have a kiss or even a pat on the shoulder (Muslim Community Worker Interview).

As such Muslim families like to use shelters which are isolated or where there is enough space surrounding the shelter to create a sense of privacy.

MUSLIM WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPACE: ADDRESSING NEEDS AND EQUITY

The outcomes of this research pose important considerations for both the day-to-day provision of public space and the deeper philosophical and moral implications in planning for different groups in a culturally and religiously diverse community. In this final section of the paper we engage with the emergent dilemmas in an attempt to suggest how planning and other built environment professionals can meet this challenge.

What is Public Space?

There is a need to reconsider the notion of public space as western concepts are not universal. Further, the ways in which communities desire to use public space is not necessarily about the domination of one group over another. Nor is it iniquitous. Understanding here can be informed by re-thinking the principle of equality which does not necessarily mean equal treatment (Iveson, 2000:228). Accommodating needs of different groups creates a more inclusive, fair and accessible society for all (Puplick, 2002c).

Equity... is about recognizing that although all citizens are meant to be equal in their rights and in the way they are treated by government, they are in fact very different in their needs, interests and values. Treating everybody the same simply perpetuates existing inequalities... intervention must provide appropriate rules, programs and service provision to combat barriers on social markers concerned with language, culture, race or religion, [and] gender, if we are to provide a socially just customer service commitment to our NESB community (Liverpool City Council in Thompson and Dunn, 2002:266).

This response highlights that it is arguably more inequitable and unethical not to provide special access to spaces for different communities. It is also instructive to ponder the ways in which space is being privatized for security reasons rather than interaction (Mitchell, 1995:119). The exclusion of certain groups such as homeless people and groups of youth from public space is seen as a legitimate way of securing public space. Of course this has wider implications in how we provide and maintain public space, but it begs the question that if social interaction is controlled in public space for security reasons, why not mediate it for Muslim women?

Planning for Difference

The era since the early 1990s has been labeled the “age of migration” (Sandercock and Kliger, 1998a:127), resulting in cities across the globe with high levels of cultural and ethnic diversity. And while policy has moved from the assimilationist rhetoric of ‘White Australia’ to one of tolerance under the guise of multiculturalism, settlers from abroad are largely expected to conform to the norms of the dominant society. This discourse assumes that it is in the best interest of the ethnic minority population to be like the majority (Yilmaz, 2000:354). With the exception of food, festivals and fairs, displays of cultural identity are best confined to the private realm where they do not challenge dominant uses of space or public behaviour (Thompson, 2003:1).

Current planning systems fail to respond to the increasing cultural diversity of the city. The values and norms of the dominant culture are usually embedded in planning legislation (Sandercock, 2000:15). These principles also underpin the “attitudes, behavior and practices of actual flesh-and-

blood planners” (Sandercock, 2000:16). Serving the ‘public or common good’ is another foundation of planning (Watson and Gibson, 1995:258). Traditionally, the public interest accounted for the “greatest good of the greatest number” (Sandercock and Klinger, 1998a:129), but this does not work in pluralist and complex postmodern societies. The planning system and the way it is practised is in the main insensitive to cultural difference. As one local planning officer commented:

Local laws and regulations are framed for the majority of the community. If the minority can't fit in, then bad luck (Sandercock and Klinger, 1998a:129).

The difficulty for planning is in embracing a notion of multiple publics as a “heterogeneous public, with different cultural values, interests and concerns” (Sandercock and Klinger, 1998b:226).

In Australia a long history of separating physical (i.e. landuse) planning from social planning further stymies the accommodation of cultural diversity in public urban spaces. Cultural diversity is seen as belonging to the community services staff of local government, not to planners (Fincher, 1998:62). This was evident in the research presented here. Approaches to planning staff for interviews were met with referrals to community services staff. Nevertheless, there are indications that integrated and cross-disciplinary approaches are being slowly broken down in some organisations (Thompson, 2003a). Whether this becomes systemic remains to be seen.

Modernist versus Particularist Planning

So what approach should be taken to plan for Muslim women in Sydney? The current mode of practice can be identified as a ‘top down’, modernist method of planning. Practitioners are usually from different cultures than the people for whom they are planning (Fenster, 1999:147). Modernist planning assumes homogeneity of a community and can have negative effects on particular members of that community (in this case, Muslim women). Planners have two options here: one holds western (non-Muslim) culture as superior and claims that other cultures should adjust to western cultural norms. The other, which can be referred to as the particularist approach, claims that different civilizations have variant cultures which need to be understood within their own terms. This may mean acknowledging gender and class inequalities (defined from a western view point) as part of those cultures (Fenster, 1999:148). While Fenster discusses these two options in relation to Bedouin and Ethiopian women in Israel, her model may be applied to Muslim women in Sydney. From a western perspective, the allocation of an exclusive space for Muslim women to exercise may be judged as sexist and contrary to equal gender rights. An attempt to ‘liberate’ Muslim women from such a space would be based on western norms and may well result in the further subjugation and exclusion of Muslim women.

Planning decisions which only support the needs of the dominant community can serve as a powerful tool in the control of space and the well being of certain groups within those spaces (Fenster, 1999:159). If planners reject the need for Muslim women to have their own spaces at any time, such a decision can harm Muslim women more than it is likely to benefit them. Based on the research presented here, it will serve to prevent Muslim women from undertaking activities such as recreation, which is a right that the dominant community takes for granted. The Anti-Discrimination board in its decision to grant an exemption under the Anti Discrimination Act 1977 for a women only gym, acknowledged that exclusive use of space by a particular group can be justified in terms of equity (Lawlink, 2003). Muslim women were considered to have genuine difficulty in using the other 499 gyms in the state. The rest of the community still had access to these other gyms, whether or not the Muslim gym was provided. Therefore the access to exercising in gyms for the dominant community was not adversely affected.

Planners need to be open to the needs of different groups and understand that public space is used in a variety of ways. Planning for difference does not necessarily adversely affect the freedom of other community members.

CONCLUSION

This research and the issues discussed here raise important dilemmas for planners providing public space in Australian cities. Planning for different uses of space, as well as rights to occupy space, does not necessarily adversely affect the freedom of other community members. It can broaden and enhance choices by opening up spaces where a variety of socialising and interacting modes are supported. Built environment professionals, whether they are planners managing existing spaces or designers shaping new ones, can initiate processes and strategies that help to accommodate many voices, and thus foster the emergence of an inclusive and comfortable space for users.

Modifications to existing facilities to accommodate diversity are often easy to implement if there is a coordination of providers along with good will to enact change. Just as Muslims are not likely to fully integrate into the dominant Australian Anglo-Celtic culture, others due to their age, gender or ability, do not utilise the full array of the city. Nevertheless, they do not face the social and cultural discrimination which is the common experience of Muslims. Planning processes and practices in contemporary multicultural communities must be cognisant of these realities and open to innovative and creative ways of ensuring that spaces meet the needs of all citizens.

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