## Podcast Transcript: The Placemakers – Navigating Public Spaces with Vision Impairment

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Dave Dean

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**Stephen:** Today we're talking to Dave Dean. Dave is a vision-impaired man who lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. I've invited Dave on today to help us understand what it's like to experience public places as a vision-impaired person. Dave works as a music promoter and has had a long career in the music industry, and while I would love to talk all things music with Dave, today we're going to instead be focusing on learning from him the ways in which we can better create places that cater to people who find it challenging to navigate. So Dave, thanks for being here and welcome to The Placemakers.

**Dave:** Welcome everyone and thanks Stephen for having me on the podcast.

**Stephen:** So Dave, I guess the first question is an obvious one. What is the difference between vision impairment and someone who is actually blind? How do we refer to people these days who don't have full vision?

**Dave:** It's an interesting one because I'm not the most politically correct person. I say that I am blind. "Vision impairment" is probably the technical word, and there are different variations to that word, but for me, I'm pretty much blind. I've got pretty much no sight, so it's easier to say I'm blind.

**Stephen:** And I understand, Dave, that that wasn't always the case for you. You weren't always blind, is that right?

**Dave:** Yeah, that's definitely right. I was born with a syndrome that's very rare; through research, I found out it is called Bardet-Biedl syndrome. There are only about 150 people in Australia with it. I can have many things wrong with me, and one of the main things is my sight. They picked up astigmatism when I was about five years old and I got glasses. A few years later, I was diagnosed with RP—Retinitis Pigmentosa. It usually gives you tunnel vision, but because I like to be different, I have a rare form where the pigmentation grew *across* my eyes. As I got older, about 15 or 16, I had my greatest loss of sight. I had spots in my sight that I could scan through. Then, in my early 30s, I got a cataract in my right eye. So, I've got no sight in my left eye and maybe 1 to 2% in my right eye. It was more teenage years and then early 20s it got worse, and early 30s was when it really got knocked out.

**Stephen:** And so, in terms of your story and your path from there, what sort of things changed in your life at that point when you realized your vision was going?

**Dave:** Not a great deal because I'm a bit of a stubborn person; I don't let things get in my way. I've always had good people with my family, friends, and work to help me around and

guide me. About five years ago, I bought my own place and moved into it by myself. I had to "man up" and do some training with Guide Dogs to learn how to use a cane properly and navigate around my town.

**Stephen:** When you are navigating around your town, how different is it navigating in a public place compared to navigating in a private place such as your home?

**Dave:** Well, obviously in my house, I know where everything is. Things don't get changed. I don't need a cane to walk around my house. But walking down the street is a whole other world. There are things that always move; you have to be very aware of everything and listen properly. Cars can be parked where you didn't think they would be, bins left out, or mail. The cane is a great thing; it's about two steps ahead of you. There is a whole learning curve that goes along with it—getting used to where the stick goes out relative to your foot so you are aware of stuff. You need to find landmarks on the travel path to make sure you know where you are so you don't walk out in front of traffic.

**Stephen:** "Landmarks" is an interesting term because in urban design we always talk about landmarks and entry markers as navigational beacons. In ancient cities, the cathedral was often a landmark. What is your experience with landmarks and how do they differ from that visual experience?

**Dave:** It depends on what sort of town it is. My town, Nambour, is kind of an old town, so there are old parts and new parts. An older town can be difficult to navigate, even with a sighted guide, if the ground is uneven. In my town, I've done work with a trainer from Guide Dogs to map out a lot of stuff. At first, I needed a lot more landmarks than I do now. I've become more confident and can walk down the middle of the path straight instead of having to "shoreline." Shorelining is where you use your cane against a gutter, a footpath edge, or the side of a shop so you know where you are and walk straight. But as you get more confident, you don't need those as much. A landmark could be a simple thing like a different texture in the ground that you feel with the cane or your feet, a light pole, or even a Telstra box or mail box that sticks in the middle of the pathway. It's just knowing where that is so you don't hit it.

**Stephen:** So once you come across these landmarks, it's almost like you have a map in your head which tells you that you're about to step into an area with a traffic crossing, for example?

**Dave:** Yeah, I suppose. It identifies that I'm so many meters or paces away from the next driveway or crossing, so I need to be careful.

**Stephen:** One of the big things in the industry is the use of tactile ground markers. When people who are vision impaired move through spaces with their canes, they run across these tactile ground markers and it tells them there is something coming. Are those things useful?

**Dave:** Yes, they are. But do you know what I call them? I call them "I'm about to get fucked up dots" because I'm either going to fall down some stairs, get run over by a car, or fall down escalators. That means there are either stairs, an elevator, a lift, or a road crossing. They usually are at both ends—top and bottom of stairs. Some roads have them on one side and not the other because councils haven't done the other side.

**Stephen:** So if you are navigating with a cane, you come across these tactile markers, they work. But they don't work if you don't have a cane, is that right?

**Dave:** No, you can actually feel them under your feet even if you don't have a cane. I can feel them just because I'm used to them and I've probably got a bit more tactile sensitivity with my feet than normal people would. They are definitely useful.

**Stephen:** What other ways do people with vision impairment navigate? Obviously Guide Dogs is one.

**Dave:** Yeah, I've had a trial to see what it was like. It's a completely different experience using a cane versus a dog. It's a full-on process to get a Guide Dog. They have to match a dog with you that can walk at the same speed as you; it can't be slower or faster dragging you along. You walk at its back leg—you have a harness and a lead. An interesting thing people might like to know is that when you come to a road crossing, *you* still have to tell the dog when to cross. It won't tell you. It will stop you if it's unsafe, which is an interesting concept. It gets you to the curb and you stop, but you have to decide when to proceed.

**Stephen:** So you still have to make that judgment as to whether or not it's safe to proceed? That must be very hard unless you are in circumstances where there are lights and audible signals.

**Dave:** Yes. Some of those audible crossings beep loud and some don't. The interesting thing about them from an audio point of view is if you are at a crossing with four different crossings, and the other one goes off, you have to be really careful that you aren't listening to the wrong one and walking out into traffic. Some of them vibrate too, so you can put your hand on it to feel the signal.

Stephen: Going back to one of your earlier points about intersections and crossings not being straight—the danger of drifting out into traffic.

Dave: Yeah, you really have to use your hearing properly and balance. I've learned you don't go fast; you take it slow. I've got to focus and not think about anything else. Even if someone says hello, I need to stop and be aware so I don't face the wrong way. Some roads aren't straight across; they might be on an angle or at the top of a hill. You have to find a crack in the concrete or bitumen to guide you, or ensure you don't drift into traffic. It would be good if there was some sort of tactile thing to help navigate across the road, though that would be expensive.

**Stephen:** What are some other considerations or challenges in public places that designers might not think about?

**Dave:** One of my pet hates—and I think this is a council thing—is shops having A-frame signs out the front. That gives me the shits more than anything. You can't find the shoreline because you're trying to find the building, and you knock over a sign. They are obstacles in your path. Everywhere has them, and you don't think about them until you trip over them. Other obstacles include bench seats or shopping trolleys left out. You have to be careful not to hit them.

**Stephen:** What about for people who have a little amount of vision? Does the contrast in pavers or concrete help?

**Dave:** It's a good suggestion. I'm not sure what percentage of sight you need for that to help, but obviously stairs are something I have to be very wary of. You don't want to fall down stairs. Finding the rail is key. With a cane, there are different techniques for going up and down.

**Stephen:** Accessibility is a massive issue in Australia given our aging population. It's not just about wheelchairs; we need to take into account vision and other disabilities. What is one thing you would like designers who create public places to understand from your point of view?

**Dave:** I suppose it's making things tactile enough or using audio prompts. It's hard to make it perfect for everyone. But things like making sure rails are accessible and obstacles are minimized helps. A good thing would be to actually blindfold yourself and walk through the space to see how hard it is to navigate. My teachers did that in high school and realized how difficult it was. It increases empathy, which is important. Most people with disabilities just want to be treated like everyone else.

**Stephen:** Well Dave, this is a big topic and we've only just scratched the surface. Thanks heaps for joining us today on The Placemakers and helping us understand how we can better create public places.

**Dave:** Thanks Stephen.

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## Key Research Insights for Placemaking

- **Shorelining:** The importance of clear, uncluttered edges (building lines/gutters) for cane users to maintain a straight path.
- **Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSI):** Crucial for warning of hazards ("fucked up dots"), but inconsistent application by councils creates confusion.
- **Crossings:** Audio and tactile (vibrating) signals are essential. Angled crossings pose a severe risk of users drifting into traffic without tactile guidance *across* the road surface.
- **Obstacles:** A-frame signage and street furniture (benches, bins) placed in the travel path break the "shoreline" and create trip hazards.
- **Empathy Testing:** Designers should physically test environments while blindfolded to identify navigation difficulties that visual plans cannot show.