

Document 3: Tobias Volbert Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Tobias Volbert – Sensory Design & Inclusion

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Tobias Volbert, Landscape Architect & Co-Founder of 7 Senses Foundation

Stephen Burton: Tobias Volbert is a German landscape architect now living here in Australia. He's a leader in the field of sensory park and playground design and he works at Urban Play in Brisbane. He's the co-founder of Seven Senses Foundation and has been involved with research projects with the University of the Sunshine Coast and Queensland University of Technology since 2014. He is actively publishing in professional magazines on the topic of landscape and park design, and in 2023 he started his PhD at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He also works as a guest lecturer at QUT teaching sensory design. So Tobias, thank you so much for joining us here on the Placemakers.

Tobias Volbert: Thanks Stephen. Thanks for the question.

Stephen Burton: I'm really curious to unpack this notion of sensory design. I've known you for a while but I never really had the chance to dive deep into that and really understand it. And it's something that I've always been fascinated with and something that I really haven't had an opportunity to employ in my design practice. So perhaps you could start off today by telling us what is sensory design? What's it all about? Why is it important and why should we be paying attention to this in the design industry?

Tobias Volbert: Yeah, that's a big passion of mine. I guess I got introduced to sensory design through my wife who is an occupational therapist. So when I came to Australia, I worked first in the building industry designing eco-houses and eco-landscapes. And then I worked on a farm in Warwick. And my boss was really passionate about to create a sensory garden. So we really got into this idea like, okay, what is a sensory garden? And everybody knows the five senses. So we really unpacked that and looked at how do we create spaces really engaging with the human senses—the five human senses because that's obviously how all humans experience the places they are in.

And then my wife as an occupational therapist, she introduced me to the seven senses. So the two senses I wasn't aware of, but all the health professions talk about, and that are really important especially when we talk about inclusiveness. So when we talk about designing spaces for everyone—so going beyond accessibility, not just physical impairments, but mental health, anxiety, etc.

So I guess it's really for us as designers, it's like a thought provocation. As you said, when you design a space, do you really take a break afterwards and look at it and go like, "Okay, a lot of times we tick the box of sight. Yeah, the visual things we considered. But have we considered smell, taste, sound, touch? And then the two other senses, vestibular and proprioception, which a lot of people don't even know exist."

So I think it's really a thought provocation as us as designers: once we have done our part, let's really step back and make sure we have all these senses integrated to make sure that the places we are creating are for humans and are comfortable for every human and also provide choices. So again, some smells are off-putting for some, so others are inviting. So how do we create choice and variety and really understanding and going deeper into sensory design? And I think every designer needs to do that.

When I started the Seven Senses Foundation in 2014, I thought by now every big landscape architecture firm would have psychologists, occupational therapists really in the offices. Because again, we're creating so much just for the award-winning thing and hey we created this amazing visual thing, but then it's not for the humans because it's not sensory engaging. So I guess this is where the philosophy comes from and that's where I use the seven senses as a very simple framework for all of my designs.

Stephen Burton: Seems to me that there's a huge gap. I mean, I couldn't help but have a chuckle before when you said I thought by now we'd have occupational therapists in landscape architects' offices. And I thought, how wonderful that would be, but also how aspirational that kind of thinking is. Because when it comes to the commercial side of design, it's hard for a client to sort of justify spending money on something that they don't understand. And I feel like there's a real knowledge gap between what you're talking about and what we're doing in practice and perhaps what a client's expectations are of what we're doing in practice.

I just want to unwind a little bit here and go back to what you said before about the use of the term inclusion. And for people who might not be familiar with what that term means, when you're talking about designing something in an inclusive way, just in a basic sense, what exactly do you mean by that?

Tobias Volbert: So for me, inclusion goes beyond accessibility as I said. So a lot of times when we talk in the built environment profession when we talk about inclusion, a lot of times we go still back to universal design principles. So it's all about, and again when you look at the disability signage is a person in a wheelchair. So a lot of time from a design perspective we look at **physical impairments**. So how do we get a ramp to a space? How do we make the doorways wider that you can come in with a wheelchair or with an adapter, etc?

But for me inclusion goes beyond that. So we need to look at the **non-physical impairments**

like people with autism, sensory processing disorder, dementia. Like all of these challenges society is facing and nobody in the design industry really looks at that. So that's where I mean exactly what you're saying, there's this massive gap. And it is hard because we have all these other pressures on. We have very short time frames as designers. Like look, when we look at what Brooke said in one of the podcasts as well, like obviously with community engagement a lot of times that gets cut. That's so incredible that it doesn't get cut, but we're cutting it because of the time frames.

And we need to have the engineers involved, we need to have First Nation we should have involved which a lot of times doesn't happen. And now we're even talking about getting occupational therapists and psychologists involved. Like where does it end? But I think where does it start? Because the spaces and the places we are creating at the moment, especially what I see here in Australia, is not inclusive and it's not great, I have to say. So I think sometimes to slow and less is more, so we really have to, as you said, educate the developer especially. And say guys, this is why we need extra time. This money you spend now will save you hundreds and hundreds of thousands later because the community will truly engage with the place you're providing them. They will create a community, not just a development where they live and then they sell because they made some profit on their asset. They really create homes. And they really create community and we create social connectiveness again where we help and grow together. So I think this is why it's so important.

Stephen Burton: I feel like I know how you're going to answer this question already, but what do you think the most important ingredient is for creating a successful public place?

Tobias Volbert: Well as I said, for me it's the people. The people create the great place. And how do people experience a great place is through the senses. So for me it's very it just makes sense that we include the senses to create great places. So and that's the whole thing. And how do we make a place that more people are in a place, we make them stay longer. We don't even need to get more people there. So the longer people stay, the more crowded it is, the more vibe there is and the more the place get loved.

So I guess if and that's what I found like like great places are not made by the best paving we're using or the nicest art sculpture we're putting in. It's by creating a place that connects to the history, that connects with all of these different ingredients that you as POMO find out as well through the process. But then it also how the people feel in that space. And that they find the, I call it the **just right place**. So if I feel vulnerable, there is a space for me. If I feel I am open, I want to entertain, there is a place for me. It's like designing a house, you know? Like you don't have just bedrooms where you are private. Like you have a big deck where you meet with people, you have the kitchen where everybody congregates. But you also have your little courtyard, you have your bedroom where you are private. So it's the same thing with great places. They have these affordances, they have really engaged with all senses and they provide choices for all however you feel. So I think it's not one ingredient, it's complex

and it's a system but it's really coming back to the senses which makes it very simple.

Stephen Burton: It's interesting you know that this is your perspective on public place design because it's not a perspective that I've come across in practice I must admit. And I guess that's why you know I've always been interested in the work that you've been doing. Is this something that you learned when you were in Germany studying as an undergraduate or is this something that you became involved in after university and in your professional practice? Like where did your interest in sensory design come from?

Tobias Volbert: Well actually all started in probably 2011 when I started in the play industry. Because obviously like and that's a funny thing is well like when I talk about the seven senses a lot of people think I'm only talking about kids. Because my paid profession is I am a playground designer so I work with kids. But actually the seven senses as I said, it's for all ages, it's for all build environment professions as well. If I'm designing a library I need to consider it. If I design a house, a front yard, a garden, a development, it's actually simple and should be applied everywhere.

But I guess as I said and then my wife really challenged me on that through her as an occupational therapist obviously. And then the big breakthrough came in 2013 where I partnered with Guymer Bailey Architects and we did a competition. It was from the Building Trust International. It was an international competition where you could be anywhere in the world. The brief was find a [bad] place and come up with an idea to make this [bad] place better.

And I actually looked out of my window and I was like, my street is [bad]. Like again in Germany I grew up on a play street. Where again everybody played on the street, it was community. My street in Clayfield, Alma Road, was just designed for streets. Not for humans at all. So I actually so the whole thing where the sensory design came from, we designed a seven senses street.

And then we actually we didn't win this competition or didn't get announced but we got the Courier Mail interviewed us on it. And Australian people really liked this idea. So we got thousands like we got heaps of interviews on ABC radio and everybody thought like wow what an amazing idea to create seven sensor streets. I also call it human corridors. Because 80% of our public ground is streets. We don't even look at that. A lot of times when you talk about people what is a great public space they think about parks or plazas or town centers. They don't look at our everyday streets. So this is 80% of our public ground are streets that we don't even look at.

So as I said like we designed this Seven Senses Street. Got a lot of great feedback from the community and then we did tactical urbanism. So we actually turned Alma Road into a Seven Senses Street for a Saturday. And the people absolutely loved it and they connected and

these people that are still living there really created a community. And then people all over Australia did it. So we had like seven senses so we created a little website that explained how to do a Seven Senses Street. Like with steps from one to seven, what you need to do, where you can get approvals from your council, here are some ingredients that you can use. And then to really again as you said educate but from a bottom up. Get the actually consumers to ask their designers then to say hey this is what we want rather than educating the designers what they should do. So it was like trying to get it from the bottom up.

And then yeah we did interventions all over Australia for many years and that's where we even get and that's another passion of mine to then have evidence base behind it. Not just oh that's this crazy German idea with the seven senses like who made that up. How do we actually provide evidence behind that we can then again go to the developers and say hey look these are the benefits of it. And that's what I worked on with Nick Stevens from the University of the Sunshine Coast in 2014 where we did a full seven senses engagement with Palmwoods at the Sunshine Coast close to where you live. And that was incredible. So we really kept a lot of data and saw how the entire town center changed by engaging the seven senses.

Stephen Burton: It's interesting you talk about data. It's become a bit of a recurring theme through these podcasts. People saying that you know we need more data and me challenging people to say do you get enough data in the profession to make any kind of evidence-based decisions. And it's rare that someone would say oh yeah I've got all the data I need. Like you know I've got everything at my fingertips to make all kinds of great design decisions to create all kinds of wonderful public places. So when you're talking about evidence-based decision making for the seven senses, what does that evidence base look like? Like how can we get more of this data? What does the data look like that you've that you've come up with and how can we use that in practice?

Tobias Volbert: Yeah so we developed it's nearly like an audit. So we go through our audit at the street for example as it is right now and then we look for example at objects. So we look at all the objects that are in the space let's say there is a bench. There is a fence. There is a bubbler. There's a couple of plants, there is a tree and then we actually rate it. And then we go like okay with the seven senses what could we do? Like a fence can be so much more than just the physical fence. It's a psychological barrier, it becomes a tactile feature, we can add some color to it. We can you know like all of these different things. We can put some paint on it with eucalyptus oil so it becomes a smell effect. Like we can actually apply to all of these ingredients or objects the seven senses lens and make everything and then we voted or we audited again and say hey look we improved the affordance from one to five and that again and then we actually got the people to experience it and say hey we stayed actually longer there. We really engaged with this space. It helped us to navigate because we just followed the smell of lavender to come to our next destination and we explored something

new there. And yes I found this awesome like proprioceptive zone there with a few beanbags where I could hug myself and felt like safe. You know like and I stayed longer than I normally would have done. So we have a bit of an audit tool that I'm happy to share with anybody that is interested. And we also then have I I guess for each of the senses ideas. Hey have you thought about A B and C for this to improve that object. So it's all object based and then it's interconnected as well through the through the systems analysis from the university.

Stephen Burton: It seems that it's a natural fit to be talking about this kind of approach to design and then working in the field of playground design. I mean it seems like such a perfect fit. Is playground design one area in which this type of stuff is being done properly or are we still do we still have a long way to go even in playground design with it?

Tobias Volbert: Well I guess there's some amazing examples where people naturally and like just because it's a lot of times it's common sense as well. So there is amazing playgrounds all over Australia where people do it right. But there's a lot of time still where it's like um where the process is in the way. You know where we are still doing hey here is like a 10 by 50 meter area and we put a swing and a slide in there and tick the box. Where it goes through all these different processes. And I think that's another thing I always challenge councils and everybody on as well like in the past like and and you see that from an urban design from a planning perspective. Like we have a house and then we make a circle and within the 500 meters there needs to be like a pocket park. So a lot of times these pocket parks have and then council has it's an engineering based template nearly where they say well this needs to have a swing, a bubbler and a little slide thing just to tick that box of being a pocket park. So that's not sensory engaging that's not nothing and then the people still have to maintain it. It gets vandalized because it's boring nobody utilizes it. So that's again where for me I think makes much more sense to create human corridors and yes still have these parks but use them differently and then that's instead of 500 meters you go one and a half Ks but then you have a proper destination. A park where all the senses where you have different zones where everybody feels welcome where you can stay longer where you can create relationship where you meet your new friends where you meet people and you can you know like all of this stuff would make so much more sense to me. And it would be less maintenance that's again going to this less is more. And then you have a proper I I guess setup. And I think as you said like in the playground industry we're getting there and a lot of the bigger projects really consider it. But I think when we look at our developments when we look at how still a lot of communities are getting designed and built we are long long long long way away from it. Unfortunately we're still creating a lot of ghettos.

Stephen Burton: No doubt. I totally agree. Are there examples of this done well in other places whether that be Australia or overseas? Is this something that in Australia we're lagging behind in? Is it being done well in Europe? Or is everybody kind of struggling to incorporate a sensory approach to design?

Tobias Volbert: No I think in Europe we are like especially like in the Netherlands actually like play streets came from the Netherlands. And then we introduced it in Germany as well. And again where my my wife grew up like she like in her entire community is like a play community. All the streets for [people] like there's 5K zones like nobody can drive fast through it. It's really sensory engaging because we have all these like the front yards are amazing so they give you clues through the smell and the touch and that they're like seating areas there's natural shade there's a lot of we have a lot of rain so it's like rain shelters. So I think there is some amazing um examples. And and a lot of countries have some little pockets. But then sometimes we even like there was this great example I can't remember the um I think it was at the Sunshine Coast in Buderim where we had this beautiful community where people turned the verges into like edible gardens and stuff and then council shut that down. Like this is like wow like it was amazing and then we shut it down. I don't this is crazy. So because that was a great example how how we should really incorporate sensory design and creating communities outside of our door. And I think that's for me again yes I'm a landscape architect but you don't need to be an architect or a design profession to make change. Everybody that listens to this now can actually start to change their front yard. Get rid of your front fence and actually put a bench there connect with your community you know you don't need a 1.8 meter fence. It's actually not safer it's less safe. Once the thieves are behind the fence nobody sees them. So there's a lot of this research where again we all can make such a big difference to create better places for all of us.

Stephen Burton: How much do you think a lot of this um sensory design conversation has been driven by a better understanding of of health like mental health. You know what what we can do to improve people's experiences in the public realm who might not be um you know able-bodied or have certain um challenges around whether that be vision or hearing or you know other other mental challenges that you know anxiety for example. Is it being driven by this larger conversation in health do you think?

Tobias Volbert: Well it was interesting I got asked the other day to to do um um a lunch and learn online for example to a UK um architecture firm. And the guy came from Australia and he listened to my conversation here and then he went to the UK and he said Tobi nobody in the UK talks about it. So again that he could find. So I think I don't think as I said like for me it's common sense. Like it just makes sense we all experience our spaces through the senses why wouldn't we use the senses to make sure our designs get ticked. And then to go beyond that as I said like it's it's powerful for when you talk talk to people like one in 20 have now sensory processing disorder. So with one in 20 it not only affects this one child for example or this one adult it affects the entire family. So again the conversations are starting more and more like Moreton Bay Regional Council are really pushing hard on it as well. So they really want to go beyond it. But but I think yeah it it's it's a hard one. As you said like um what drives it the most. So so there is great like initiatives came out with um um New South Wales they doing some fantastic work in um they did the inclusive guidelines for playgrounds that also go

beyond just the physical accessibility as well which is awesome. But there's nothing and that's obviously where where I work on with my PhD as well like there's I couldn't find any I guess like guide or any any proper document that helps you with sensory design that I know of at the moment. So hopefully I can contribute to through that through my PhD as well in the future.

Stephen Burton: And that is what you were talking about earlier was it not that you have a template um you have some information that you can share with people who are interested in incorporating this kind of an approach to their design. Is that is that right?

Tobias Volbert: Absolutely. So we have the Seven Senses framework we have in place we have the audit in place. But I guess there's nothing that yeah we developed that ourselves. But I'm happy to share that with anybody because and then would be always great to get that data back because that would build up the entire database to then put into my um PhD as well. So the more data we're getting of these things are great. So we just did like for example in partnership with University of Sunshine Coast we did a full audit on a um play space that I did with the Saunders Havel group at Lockyer Valley Regional Council. So it's at Hatton Vale it's a massive like really a community heart and so we we we did two things there like we really went through the full audit and we wrote like a full report that I'm also happy to share with anybody that is interested which is quite um comprehensive as well and fantastic. So the more I guess and I think that's it's about all partnerships. As I said the more like as design profession we should engage more with the health professions but also we need to engage more with um academia. And I have to say that's how I studied in Germany like my entire study was very practical based. So I'm actually an an engineer so it's a I have a master in engineering in landscape. But it was always a partnership between university um council and private practice. So again through all the projects we did university was involved and can actually capture the data. Because there's nobody and again you have your own firm we as Urban Play like nobody pays you to do the data stuff and uh do the research as well you know like it you you just can't do it. So you need the collaboration and the partnerships to to really get bigger change happening.

Stephen Burton: It's a really good point. It's a big topic and I'd love to talk more about that. I mean I think that the role that universities have to play in the design industry particularly in the placemaking industry is massive. And I don't think it's done as well as it could be particularly in Australia. And every time I engage with universities on this topic you know my mind is opened to what's coming out of universities. It makes my practice better it makes me a better designer and I just think that two-way dialogue between practice and academia is so important. And quite frankly it's part of the reason that that I started the Placemakers. I think sharing of this knowledge is going to change the way we approach design of public places. I mean that's my objective anyway. And that's why I've really loved understanding more about what you do um with with seven senses and sensory design. So other designers out there

who are listening who are really keen to know more and want to employ some of this into their practice. Can they go somewhere online Tobi to find this or how can they reach out to you to find out more I guess.

Tobias Volbert: Yeah so one is like they can go on the um sevensenses.org.au website. It's uh hasn't been updated for like 10 years but still there's some good information on there. But um cause it's a bit of a laugh thing but again send me an email to [tobias at sevensenses dot org dot au](mailto:tobias@sevensenses.org.au) and I'm happy to share a lot of this information. I also gave you a link to the Seven Senses Seven Years Celebration where I have seven different I guess um professionals talking about how they engage with the seven senses and that's fantastic because we have my wife talking about really in detail about what the seven senses really mean from an health perspective. She can explain it so much better than myself so everybody can listen to that. Then there is um Nick Stevens on there as well how we utilize the seven sense approach with university. There's also Deborah Cushing on there there is also Ka Kathy on there from UDL there is also a counselor on there so again there's some great information that everybody it's it's seven minutes per person. So it's seven people seven minutes 49 minutes of knowledge that anybody can um check out and then if they need more information always happy to share anything send me an email.

Stephen Burton: Tobi thank you so much that's great. And inspiring I'm you know I just want to rush out there I want to learn about all that stuff. I want to bring it into my next project I hope other people do too so thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Tobias Volbert: Really appreciate that. Thanks Stephen.