# Elisha Matthews Change Maker Interview Transcript

Lisa - Welcome today to a new series called Just Cities and Communities. And we're talking to a range of fantastic change makers out there. Doing their bit to change the world. So today we've got Elisha Mathews here talking to us and sharing their insights about what they've been doing in terms of making our cities just and inclusive for everyone.

So, Elisha, thanks for having us here today.

Elisha - It's great to be here.

Lisa - That's brilliant. And look, the first thing I'd love to do is just for you to just tell everyone a bit about you, like the overview and the change you've been helping to make in your city,

which is Brisbane.

Elisha - Sure. Well, yes, I live in Brisbane. I live fairly close to the city, so I'm often utilizing services within the CBD as well as in the outer suburbs. And when I moved here four years ago,

I was quite surprised after living in a much outer suburb in a regional area, I was quite surprised

at how poor accessibility was. Even so close to the city, even going into the CBD.

It was this is fraught with all these perils for people with disabilities. So, I figured that if no one was doing anything about it, it meant that no one was talking about it.

So, I made it a talking point.

Lisa - And it's really brilliant and you want to share

some of the things you've been doing is just starting to make the change,

you know? What did she get in there and do?

Elisha - Sure look, mostly I've, I'm just creating the conversation by being visible.

So rather than avoiding these places that I know are difficult, that I know are inaccessible, I keep turning up and reminding them that we exist.

So, I was being visible in my community.

I was having conversations with business owners, with councils, with state government representatives, you know, saying, look, I want to be able to be a part of this community. I want to be able to go to work. I want to be able to do all these other things.

And every time an event is advertised, I find myself having to find the number to be able to call to find out what accessibility is available. And quite often it hasn't been considered.

And by having those conversations with people, it kind of makes them realize how complacent they have been about accessibility, that, you know, they've kind of followed the protocol of slap a symbol on it and call it accessible without really understanding what the needs of the disability community are.

So just being out there and I guess forcing people into those conversations so that they understand that they're not quite getting it right.

Lisa - Absolutely. And there's been a whole range of different areas. And it's not just the one thing. There's footpaths parking too, to share a bit of those sort of battles and some of the wins like. And how you got some wins.

Elisha - Yeah, I've had a few grassroots campaigns that I've run on a zero budget, and they've been very successful in terms of changing policy and even legislation.

So, we began with the no permit, no park campaign. I think that's almost must be about ten years ago now.

So, the success of that was not only that it changed legislation because at the time I discovered that the reason that people weren't deterred from using misusing disability parking is because the fine was $40. And even ten years ago, a $40 fine was minimal effect on people.

So, when I had the discussions with state governments with Council, they realized they needed to make an improvement to this, not just to the penalty, but also to the way it's enforced so the fine was increased significantly.

At the time it was increased to $200 and $240 I think it was then, and it's continued to increase

as the, the penalty increases each year. And they also realized that because it wasn't treated with any significance before, that authorities didn't know how to police it.

So, we had a lot of conversations about how, you know, what the permit system is, how it's expected to be used, what the spaces should look like. And, you know, it got a lot of conformity between all of councils in making sure that everybody had the same or a similar fine and that they understood who is and is not allowed to use those spaces.

But as well as that, that was significant in itself. But as well as that, the most important part was that it started a conversation with the community, and it changed people's attitudes. Most people would look at it and go, 'Oh, that's disgraceful.' But people realized that they kind of

did have the attitude that 'you know what, if it's late at night and no one's going to see me, it's okay for me to use it', because they don't expect that someone like myself is going to be out at night. And they get quite surprised when they discover that I am.

So, it really did change the conversation around, you know, why access this type of access needed to be legislated and and what impact you have on a person's day when you take up this space that you really don't need

Lisa - Yeah. And I love that story because you've highlighted, you know, you can have rules in place, but if people there's no incentive or value attached to it, and, you know, or of, you know, value to not doing it, you know, it cannot happen.

 And what I loved about what you've just talked about is the importance of conversation, too. Like it's not just about changing the rules, but the work you've been doing about

changing conversations about disability and inclusion. I think that's so powerful and obviously has led to quite a lot of the success, whether it's the people on the ground

doing it or the decision makers. So yeah.

And do you see that as being it's one of the areas that we've had so much battle with and problems in the past?

Elisha - It was a significant problem because it was something quite new that was introduced, and people didn't have an understanding of it. And it - the difficulty with accessible spaces, disability accessible spaces, was that they were watered down by complementary parking.

When shopping centers started to introduce complementary parking, they had parking for parents with prams, parking for the elderly parking. Now there's this parking for people

with electric vehicles. People saw disability parking as a convenience. When it's, if you're, if you're anyone with the lived experience of disability, you know that it's a necessity.

Because if I can't get out of the car, that's the end of my day. There's nothing else gets done.

Lisa - 100%, isn't it? And that's a lot of things. It's understanding and helping. How do we change that understanding to, you know, this isn't just something that's nice. This is something that's essential and it's important to our day-to-day life without it. It's just a nightmare, as you put it.

You know, it really does make a huge difference in just doing the day to day. Yeah. So, I loved hearing about that.

And so there have been other things I know that you've been battling footpaths as well.

Elisha - Yeah, yeah footpaths is my biggest bugbear. They - footpaths to me are the most basic part of our community infrastructure. They're the, the spaces that connect us to other spaces. And they should be safe, and they should be accessible.

But we don't give footpaths the same priority as we do roads, even though at any point in the day, whether you're a driver or a pedestrian, you will use a footpath at some stage. When you park your car, you've got to walk somewhere.

So, I, I started to highlight a lot of the obstacles that I faced as a wheelchair user, just trying to go and do everyday things, like picking up my granddaughter from school, getting to see the doctor going to do shopping, even just going to catch up with friends. And highlighting those things, I began the conversation with the community about what they can do to be more inclusive themselves.

Because a lot of the obstacles that I face are created by people and they don't do it intentionally and they just they're not thinking about how what they do impacting anybody else. So, making them think about it by being visible, like, I'm the person who sits there on the footpath giving you a stare when you parked across the footpath, and you haven't seen that. I'm there. It makes people think twice about how their actions can impact on somebody else.

So, I've done a lot of work around footpaths with the Queensland Walking Alliance, and particularly Queensland walks up here and trying to continue to raise awareness with councils.

But I think my biggest strength is has been using social media because it doesn't just reach the people who need to fix the problem. It reaches those people who don't realize they are a part of the problem and it's also influenced people to understand that they can be part of the solution too by simply downloading an app like 'Snap Send Solve' to report any issues

that they see on footpaths, like if the footpath has been lifted by tree roots and it's now, you know, just completely inaccessible for someone using wheels, that's not just the wheelchair user, that's also someone with a pram, delivery drivers, scooter riders, cyclists. So, it affects a much bigger part of our community than people realize.

So, giving people the power to take responsibility for that I think has had a definitely the best impact in my area.

Lisa - I mean, there's so many brilliant examples. Just again, the collaborations

with key walking groups like, you know, Queensland Walks and I know Victoria

Walks is got a similar approach. They've been doing some great stuff too.

And you know, but that was, you know, you know, starting that, you know, bringing people together and having those conversations which I think is it's an undervalued and it's one of the most essential things that happen is that networking connections that we can do to help change.

And I think that's what your highlighting but also the you know snap and report, the app you're talking about. So has there been a uptake since, you know, since through your social media

using it. Like is there a council reported there's been an uptake?

Elisha - I don't know. They haven't reported anything back to me about an uptake and I don't know how many more people specifically have downloaded the app.

So many people have contacted me, and they'll send me photos to and say, 'look at this, I saw this today and I reported it' and you know that they're really proud of what they've done.

And and I let them know I'm I'm I'm proud of them. So, I'm so grateful for what they've done.

But so many people contacted me and said that since watching my videos or since hearing my stories, they've become more aware of it. And they're noticing things now like they noticed how for them, it was just too convenient for them to just walk onto the grass around an obstacle. And then they stopped and thought, 'oh, if this was Elisha, how, how would she do this?' You know, they're starting to realize that it's not just about them. It's about being responsible for your whole community.

Lisa - And that's this just brilliant. Like, that's such impact, isn't it? That's really just, you know, I think powerful ways of informing and empowering the community as well. You know, the standard disability awareness training.

Elisha - Yeah, it's definitely, you know, what I'm proud of most about what I've achieved with social media that that people have been influenced and understand it from a different perspective. And it's, you know, it's motivated them to actually want want to do something, to want to change the community with me.

Lisa - Which is great, isn't it? Because it is such a lonely battle sometimes by yourself and you feel like, you know, your're taking the fight by yourself. But yeah, it's always more powerful, the collective, isn't it? The, you know, the grassroots and having people around you to Yeah. Help do that.

Elisha - It absolutely makes me feel more like I'm a part of my community rather than just the other in the community.

Lisa - Yeah, that's perfectly put. Absolutely.

So, I mean, you've been doing so much to guide the change. Is there areas that you still think

you know we've got a long way to go yet in terms of change, in terms with our cities and communities?

Elisha - You know, it's interesting. I just did a page with Channel Seven News

Brisbane, last week about a business person's attitude towards disability parking and something that was raised for me was the fact that here I am ten years later. And while I can absolutely say

hand on heart that it has improved, we still have people with this attitude in the community that, you know, disability parking is not important to anyone else, their job is more important than anybody else's day.

And I realize that the only thing that has held the disability rights movement back for the last 30 years, because we are now 30 years since the Disability Discrimination Act was passed by government, the only thing that has held it back, really, is the attitudinal barriers. Because everything else can be fixed, everything else can be changed. It's whether you want to or not.

Lisa - Hundred percent.

Elisha - I think that's just something I'm commonly commenting on as well. We have the technical solutions. That's not the problem. It's the value we place on this. And that's the thing. It's, it's, it is the attitude. It's holding us back because we're still... Disability still devalued. Let's face it. You know, this is still seen as other as you put before, you know, you're not the other.

Lisa - And so these are some of the ingrained sort of problems we're dealing with and, yeah,

how do we change this? And I think you've given some good examples of what you've been doing.

Elisha - One of the things that I that people say to me most when I write is the lack of accessibility with them. And I'll point out, look, this isn't this isn't very disability friendly and it's not welcoming. They'll say, 'oh, people with disabilities don't really come here.' And I kind of look at them and go, 'Did you ever wonder why?' Like if you're not seeing me in your business, chances are it's because I can't get in.

Lisa - Yeah, that's, that, Yeah, that's gold. And it is right, isn't it? It's it's that, 'Well, well, they don't come here' or 'they don't use this, so they don't need it then'. And it's a really interesting connections they make between just because we present doesn't mean we don't need it rather than what you've done is, you know, flip it. It's going well 'no, because people can't actually get there'. Have you really thought about what you're actually signalling and not just the physical accessibility, it's also the environment, you know, the communication, it's the sensory experience. It's often not signalled as inclusive as well. Yes, absolutely.

Elisha - Yeah. Yes.

Lisa – 100%.

Oh, this is just brilliant. I love chatting about these sort of ideas.

And so, the last question was, what was the one message that you would give to a non-disabled person involved in the planning and designing of other cities and communities?

And that was a tough one because there are many. We can have more than one.

Elisha - Yes. What what it really comes down to is that when you are creating a space that you expect people within the community to use, you need to ask yourself, 'does this welcome everybody?' You know, not just 'is it accessible?' 'Is it inclusive?', 'is it culturally safe?', 'is it welcoming?' Because you can have a ramp on the bus that's great, but better is me feeling like I'm going to get to my destination safely.

Lisa - A hundred percent. You know that it's so much more than just, you know, putting a ramp to something. It's the whole whole experience, the whole journey, because if the ramp might be there, but it's not on the other side or, you know, there's lip or someone's there or something.

Elisha - Yeah. If I get to my location and, you know, I'm stuck there, because I can't go any further and the rest of it's not accessible or, you know, being a wheelchair user, it's it is a very difficult ride on the bus.

I go to so many places where they have a ramp, but when I go up the ramp, the door is difficult to open or it opens outwards, which for a wheelchair user is absolutely our worst nightmare. You're trying to get up a ramp against the force of gravity while, you know, opening a door where you have to reverse. When you see it in action - People think that they look at it and go, 'yeah, that's easy to do.' But when you see it in action, you realize how very complicated it is.

Even simple things like shopping in retail spaces. I was actually shopping this morning and I have a few photos and short videos of me trying to navigate my way through some very narrow spaces where they squeeze, trying - You know it's Christmas, they're trying to squeeze all the stock in. All this extra stock has to be put out, and that comes at the expense of accessibility.

Lisa - A hundred percent. And all of the embarrassment

when you actually run into them

Elisha - and take them out accidentally. Yeah, it's....

Lisa - yeah, I've done that.

Elisha - Whole, there was a whole wall of Christmas baubles that I'm looking at it going, 'Please, just stay away from me'.

Lisa - Yeah. And these are the signals, isn't it? It's not just even the placement. It's like the message that 'we just haven't thought about it'. And I think that comes back to that attitude where it's just not front and center of people's minds and thinking from that different perspective, you know, 'can anyone get through here regardless of who they are or what they need?'

Elisha - Yeah, yeah, that's right. So, when we're creating these spaces that we want the community to be in, we need to make sure everybody has the opportunity to be able to participate.

Lisa - Yeah. Brilliant. Exactly right. I love that. You know, you've just, you know, shared some really important insights that what you're doing on the ground, the change you're making, but also where we still need to go.

I think you know, there's key learnings here. And I just and I think, you know, those messages you said really early on about bringing people together, communicating and just trying to share and get people to understand this is how much that is such a powerful way of making change.

Elisha - Yeah. It's really important for for anyone who's responsible for creating a space, whether it's council, state or federal governments, private enterprise, to understands that you know, if you hire people to do the jobs that you don't know how to do. So, they hire architects, they hire builders, they hire designers, but they never consider hiring people with disability to give their input about their experience. Their lived experience in creating spaces. Yeah.

Lisa - Do you think that's another big gap that still missing in terms of, yeah, inclusion?

Elisha - Yeah, look, it's something we've been working on, I've been working on it with Queenslanders with Disability Network, trying to give people the opportunity to connect with those of us who have a vast amount of knowledge as well as lived experience that we can put together when it comes to creating inclusive spaces and I think if there was more consultation with and not just with one person with a disability, you need to consult with various types of disability because everybody has a different experience. But if they consulted with groups of people with various disabilities on creating these spaces, I think they'd probably get it right the first time.

Lisa - Yeah, exactly. Wouldn’t that be a novel, a novelty.

Elisha - It would be wonderful, it would

make such a difference

Lisa - and yeah, that power of knowledge, that lived experience, knowledge, I mean, it's getting talked about quite a bit at the moment.

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Elisha - Lived experience is knowledge that we earn the hard way.

Lisa - That's a great way of putting it. Yeah. And do you think it's still not valued

as much at the moment?

Elisha - I’m starting to see an improvement in the acceptance of its value, but there still is a lot of attitude that because this knowledge wasn't earned in a university degree or a trade certificate, that it's it's not really the same. But I never miss an opportunity to show a builder what they did wrong.

Lisa - Brilliant, love it. Yeah. And see, and as you said, if it's done right from the get go from the beginning by engaging properly, listening to the knowledges that are available to you and designing with people. It's such different, different end results, isn't it, to what we're constantly trying, what you're, you know, been having to do is trying to fix things in retrofit, which isn't great.

Elisha - Yeah. Look, retrofitting always turns out to be more expensive. Queensland trains are a perfect example. You know, we had a few governments ago where they bought the new generation rolling stock and said we've got new trains and people with disabilities went to go on them and said, 'they're not accessible.' Now, you know, the current government is having to spend the money with retrofitting all of those trains. So, what was a saving has now become a cost. So, if you if you do the consultation before you buy the train, you might not have to spend the money later to fix them.

Lisa - Yeah, absolutely. It's, it's way more expensive in that case. It's Yeah. You're talking a millions mistake you know, and that's not great. You know, that's wasted about what could be done on spending that money on something else that could, you know, is equally just -

Elisha - They could be fixing footpaths...

Lisa - Exactly. Which is an essential element for anybody. As you said, everyone uses even if you drive the car, you get off the footpath, you're into the house or into the shop or whatever. Everyone uses the footpath it's yeah, so devalued.

So, is there a last burning comment you want to sort of share with people about you know, what they can do better?

Elisha - I guess aside from just remembering that, you know, when you get a disability and if you live long enough, you will your life is going to change because you're going to realize the world was not built for you. So, if you start... if you remember that now and start building the world for that later, when you acquire your disability later on in life, maybe it won't be so hard. It's future planning. Access, benefits, everyone.

Lisa - Love it. No, thank you so much. You know, there's brilliant, brilliant words and I think a great way to end it in terms of, you know, that it this about future planning for everyone. You know, it really does make a huge difference in terms of reaching the just sort of inclusive cities

and communities we all want. Yeah.

Elisha - Absolutely.

Lisa - Thank you so much, Elisha for sharing your experiences today as an important change maker.

Elisha - Thank you. I'm glad that we have the opportunity to have the conversation and I hope that it opens more minds to looking forward to creating inclusive spaces.