

Spatially challenged as the new generation takes over

By Ruth Ostrow

OVER the Christmas break I went to the Woodford Folk Festival, an annual music event outside Brisbane attended by over 100,000 people. Acts come from all over the world and do a sort of Woodstock for a week, while punters camp out on the land.

I've attended the festival for five years now, but this year something was quite different. The event attracted a host of younger people in the under-20s age group.

I observed some interesting behaviour. The first time it happened I was dancing to a funky band. A young girl came and stood almost on top of me and began moving.

At first I was angry. I have determined that about half a square metre is the personal space I need at a concert, giving me room to flay my arms and bounce around. Suddenly, I didn't have an inch either side as another young girl and then a boy seemed to invade the plot I'd unconsciously natted out for myself.

I looked around the room and noticed a similar phenomenon. Young people were squished far too close to other human beings, not seeming to mind the inevitable knocks on the head and thumps to the stomach they were enduring, or inflicting, as they jumped up and down.

I noticed the same strange spatial behaviour in the street. Whilst I stood reading a map, a young girl came and stood within centimetres of me, oblivious to my body as she screamed into her mobile phone and swished hair into my face. In stalls, teenagers were not so much pushing me away from mirrors as I tried on clothes, rather attempting to share them with me -- squashing in front or to the side of me, without so much as an ``excuse me".

I got to thinking about personal space and how the next generations seem to have a completely different definition of what psychologists consider a healthy distance between people. Weaned on doof music, hanging out in groups rather than one-on-one relationships, screaming into mobile phones, and watching too much reality TV -- a genre promoting the ultimate in privacy invasion -- they seem not to understand the human need for space or quiet.

It's not about bad manners. They always apologised sincerely when I confronted them. Rather, the phenomenon is a socialisation process that's occurring without us realising it. Kids are being trained by TV and technology to take up less space, and be quicker, leaner, meaner and more aggressive.

But it isn't just changing youth culture that's making us feel invaded. Mobiles now take photos and record us; cameras watch us on every street corner. God forbid anyone should be going somewhere they shouldn't. We are fast being robbed of our privacy as well as our spatial requirements.

As the sound of drills increase in the suburbs year by year, and the buildings get higher, and our work stations smaller and less sound-proofed, there is this all-pervading sense of claustrophobia that's afflicting many of us, causing real depression and anxiety.

A rock festival is clearly not the place to complain about sensual bombardment -- especially since Woodford is such a blissful experience. But go into any store or airplane and muzak is being spewed out whether we like it or not; insensitive space invaders are spraying sickly perfumes into the air without care of who may be allergic or asthmatic, whilst neighbours hammer.

The younger generations are a symbol of this brave new world, but what is the ultimate cost to their psyches, and ours?

The fact is, there's a health dimension to all of this.

In Japan, where there is little or no personal space, the suicide rate is alarmingly high. It has been well documented that in crammed cities there are higher levels of violent behaviour.

Inadequate physical boundaries can lead to co-dependency. A journalist friend recently observed a group of Japanese tourists not knowing how to cross a road until a clump of other people came along and pushed them across in a sea of bodies.

Recently, in a totally empty picture theatre, two German tourists came and sat directly next to me and proceeded to chat until I got up and moved, probably leaving them feeling very anxious or abandoned.

Australia is still not an overcrowded place, and despite weekend home renovations and lawnmowers, and the plethora of people yelling into mobiles instead of talking to each other, we are still not as invaded as people in many of the places I've lived -- including New York, where road rage and general anger are the norm.

But we do have to prepare for what's coming. And it is coming quicker than we think, not so much in population growth but in socialisation and reprogramming of the up and coming generations, and in the technology that is changing the way they and we relate.

While we can't stop progress, acknowledging our spatial overload is the first step to managing it. There are days when we all need to get out of town as a health precaution and drive to the nearest hilltop or park -- at least while these space havens still exist.

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