

Summary of findings and recommendations for Victoria Park.

Executive Summary.

Victoria Park is a major urban achievement, comprising a new medium-high density suburb of some 8,000 residents on former industrial land with no particular residential amenity and limited services. Although there was little or no specific attention to healthy built environment matters at the time, there have been fortuitous health co-benefits from an emphasis on environmental and community actions (and a need to generate a marketable residential environment from scratch), including open spaces, water-sensitive urban design, light and ventilation, direct access paths to encourage “active transport”, and establishment of a sense of ‘community’ through provision of facilities and support. As such Victoria Park presents by and large as a healthy built environment.

When participants were asked to nominate the things that currently assist them to keep healthy, most matters cited relate to their local built environment. All achieve recommended minimum levels of physical activity, generally via a combination of active transport (walking and bus), recreation walking, and active recreation. Some use gyms and/or swimming pools at their work or in their residential building. Although active transport use is high there is still a high propensity to use the car for certain trips, particularly for household shopping. This may now have been reduced with the recent opening of a supermarket and other shops within Victoria Park. Car use is likely to further decrease when the extensive additional commercial, retail, recreation and social facilities and services in the larger surrounding Green Square also come on-stream. The provision of these facilities is also likely to address various frustrations expressed by participants about the lack of various “necessary” local facilities including fresh food shops. Some were established during the Study – but the comments do point out an important timing issue for such developments.

Social interaction with neighbours is relatively low, but most participants are content with this, generally because they have sufficient avenues for social interaction elsewhere. That said, they also express some frustration about not knowing who their neighbours are, due to the ‘transitory’ nature of spaces in their multi-unit buildings coupled with the short-term tenures within certain (but not all) of these buildings. It has resulted in the open space areas (a central dog park with market area, a childrens’ playground, and a ball court) becoming important gathering spaces where, as suggested by participants, there is a propensity for incidental conversation. This suggests the ‘community’ aspects of the original design have been successful, but also that multi-unit building designs need further attention to address this limitation.

Participants do though express lingering concerns, for their health, from the anonymity of residential buildings (leading to concerns about drug-related crime, and a possible growing lack of trust generally); loss of outlook and light from (higher) newer buildings; inner-city noise and grit; and insensitive placement of driveways and garbage storage areas adjacent to residential living spaces.

Overview of findings and recommendations.

In Australia, like, they've built forever in the '50s and '60s, all these new suburbs...There was no public transport, no hospitals, no schools, but they were keen. It's a typical problem, here in Australia...[Even when] they've tried making complete new suburbs...within the inner city, they've tried to address that but they just haven't quite got it.

...can people agree upon a minimum service that should we provide while it is being developed. So, a chemist and post office and a doctor. Do you know what I mean? Just for every area? Because the basic things that [every] area needs...just a few essentials to make it easier for people while the places are building up....maybe, then, the whole, the road noise and the night works and the things like that - you wouldn't be so overcome by it all if then you just...post a letter, you can pay a bill, you can go to the chemist, things like that.

Looks like a lot of the issues that we have, though, will be resolved and we're working to rectify them with getting the shopping centre there. They'll have the chemist and there is one doctor, sounds like there'll be another one, there'll be less traffic, there'll be less noise, and pollution, all that kind of thing, because all of the extra [construction] traffic and the trucks will be stopped. So a lot of our issues are going to be resolved. It's already in the plans, so that's good.

1. Victoria Park is a major urban achievement, comprising establishment of a new medium-high density suburb of some 8,000 residents within the space of some 10 years on a brownfield site in a transitory industrial area with no particular residential amenity and only limited services. Victoria Park also comprises the lead development in the similar, larger Green Square urban renewal project. Although not the first such developments in Australia, both Victoria Park and Green Square are somewhat experimental and innovative in their scale and conception.
2. A number of the innovative aspects of Victoria Park are also 'of their time', with an emphasis on 'green' environmental matters, water-sensitive urban design, and the establishment of a sense of 'community'. There was also a close fit between these aspects and the need to generate, in this industrial area, a marketable residential environment from scratch. Although there was little or no specific attention to the way the built environment influences health, there are fortuitous co-benefits from the environmental and community-building objectives. As such Victoria Park presents by and large as a healthy built environment.
3. Participants also currently present as healthy. Although this would be mainly due to their individual characteristics (generally a younger age group with high mobility and social connectivity, and with personal inclination to participate in physical activity), the built environment of Victoria Park and its location relative to the centre of Sydney also means there are substantial facilities to assist these inclinations. When participants were asked to nominate the things that currently assist them to keep healthy, most matters cited relate to their immediate built environment.
4. It is also true that when participants are asked to nominate those things they need to keep healthy and do not have access to, most matters cited also relate to the built environment. Positively, for most of these matters this is likely to be a passing phase as a significant range of active transport, active and passive recreation facilities, other community facilities, and commercial retailing and services come on-stream as the surrounding Green Square renewal is progressively completed. Participants expressed frustration at the existing lack of such facilities, and suggested urban development processes need to ensure better up-front provision of these needs. Some matters (a local supermarket, other fresh food shops, a gym, and medical services) have already been provided in Victoria Park itself during the latter stages of the Study, and as such would now address most of these concerns.

5. All participants achieve recommended minimum levels of physical activity, even though most have other commitments (eg. work, family). Generally this is via a combination of active transport (walking and bus), recreation walking, and active recreation pursuits. Some use gyms and/or swimming pools at their place of work or in their residential building. Although active transport use is high there is still a high propensity to use the car for certain trips, particularly for household shopping. This may now have been reduced with the recent opening of a supermarket and other shops within Victoria Park; car use is likely to further decrease when the additional facilities and services in Green Square also come on-stream.
6. Few participants cycle, with most citing road safety concerns. This may dissipate as more local facilities able to be accessed by local streets become available, and as regional cycle paths are established as per the local Council's cycle strategy. These additional local facilities will also be easily accessed by walking, which will further assist levels of physical activity given the small scale of Victoria Park means that although the quality of its walking environment is high distances are short and so yield only low numbers of 'active' hours. Attention though will need to be given to a particular concern raised by participants – safety when crossing the busy main roads bordering Victoria Park and which have only limited crossing facilities. Further, the propensity for residents to undertake longer recreational walks to major (and high quality) regional open spaces is limited by a lesser quality of the adjacent walking environment. This needs to be similarly improved, perhaps in manner similar to the existing identification of cross-regional cycling routes).
7. Participants cite a range of responses when asked about their level of social interaction. Although interaction with neighbours is relatively low most are content with this, generally because they have sufficient avenues for social interaction elsewhere. That said, participants also express a level of frustration about not knowing who their neighbours are. The cause is a combination of (i) the 'transitory' nature of the physical spaces within their multi-unit buildings where people do 'bump into' each other (foyers, lifts, corridors), and (ii) the inability to know whether those other people are long-term or short-term residents or visitors, coupled with a difference of view as to the level of social interaction considered appropriate. This situation may be a causal factor in the popularity of the main open space area of Victoria Park as a general gathering space where, as suggested by participants, there is a propensity for incidental conversation. This, along with the provision of a ball court which is actively used by younger groups, a neighbourhood branch library, a Saturday market, and various casual meetings of particular interest groups suggests the 'community' aspects of the original development design have been successful. These opportunities will increase as the surrounding Green Square renewal also develops. Further, most participants feel very safe at all hours in the local streets and public spaces. Nevertheless, innovative solutions that encourage better social interactions with immediate neighbours also deserves attention; there is a risk the current 'anonymity' might lead to a level of insecurity and lack of trust in the community, and which could be already discerned, to a minor extent, in some comments.
8. Participants have a good range of sources of fresh food, and there is a low visibility and provision of non-healthy food shops. Attention may need to be given to supporting the viability of fresh food stalls at the Saturday markets, which appear to have been affected by the new local retail development; and to taking advantage of an apparent semi-active interest by participants in growing their own foods.
9. Victoria Park as a case-study has also identified a range of other lingering frustrations about high-density living and which deserve recognition and attention when designing other similar areas: the impact on local amenity of the higher scale of the most recent developments, local safety due to traffic speeds, inner-city air pollution and grit, and poor interface design between residential units and garbage storage areas and building driveways.

Physical Activity
“Getting people active”

Facilitating “active transport”

Facilitating recreational physical activity

Description

Personal mobility is high in terms of both physical health and access to a variety of transport modes. Use of active transport (walking, bus) is high, though local walks are generally of short duration. Cycling is rare due to road safety concerns, and bicycles have been stolen. Participants also often use their car to access shops and recreation facilities (and sometimes work) because these are lacking in the immediate neighbourhood. However overall proportion of trips by car is relatively low. Some use car-share schemes. The pedestrian environment is good within Victoria Park, except for current construction traffic; but can be variable in surrounding area. Frustrations expressed about erratic bus services (with acknowledgment this is often due to traffic and not the service provider) and safety in crossing busy boundary roads due to inadequate pedestrian crossings. Proposed light rail is viewed positively provided the route is well-positioned.

Description

Although facilities within Victoria Park are limited, overall access to facilities is high given high levels of mobility and high provision in surrounding area, at places of work, or within residential buildings (gyms, pools). All participants meet minimum weekly levels of physical activity. Victoria Park is conducive to walking and jogging (but less so in surrounding areas and in streets now with high-rises) and to active exercise in parks (though dog droppings are a problem, and the half basketball court has been “taken over” by one user group). There is a regular tai chi group. Suggestion that installation of outdoor exercise stations and an (affordable) personal/group trainer or similar at a regular set time would induce greater use of facilities/opportunities. Future access to a swimming pool and other active recreation facilities will be high when constructed nearby in next few years.

Response

Use of active transport should increase and car use for local trips should decrease as shopping and recreation facilities are progressively established in the local area as planned (and traffic & parking congestion is likely to discourage car use generally). Concerns regarding the local pedestrian environment should reduce as construction levels decrease and other facilities come on-stream. Immediate improvements re pedestrian crossings could be implemented, particularly to the new Town Centre. Need to monitor efficacy of bus services (routes/timetables/running times), and to maintain longer-term plans for light rail.

Response

Need to improve management of existing dog park open space to ensure diversity of use possible. Consider whether quantity of overall provision of active recreation facilities in the larger Green Square Renewal Area will meet demand for all anticipated age groups (eg. the diverse facilities at Prince Alfred Park cited as a good example to follow). Consider non-built services to encourage physical activity in the public spaces already provided (eg. exercise groups, trainers) (with associated social interaction co-benefits).

Social Interaction.
 “Connecting and strengthening communities”

**Facilitating incidental
n’hood interaction**

Making community spaces

Build for crime prevention

Description

Potential for interaction is high in public streets and park given good design and seating (there is always someone about) and new retail development provides an additional meeting point; but variable in individual buildings given the “transient” nature of most common areas, queries about just who is a long-term resident or not, and inactive management of common areas (eg. potential cinema area not used). Suggestion that interaction in social housing blocks is actively discouraged. Some comment that balcony use is restricted because of air pollution-which may reduce interaction. Some individuals have chosen to act as catalysts, to establish informal conversations, etc.

Description

There are four well-maintained and used social foci – the dog park, Saturday markets, main playground, and basketball court (for youth). The new retail development now provides another. The streets generally are also seen as pleasant, safe and well-lit. There are also frustrations:

- dog droppings in park restrict use by others.
- the ball court is taken over by one user-group
- reduced amenity of streets with new high-rises.
- limited range of activities for younger age-group.
- library/community programs not continuous and not kept pace with population inflow.
- dust, grit, construction noise and traffic limits amenity.

Description

Satisfaction with personal safety is high notwithstanding apparent crime issues within the more anonymous multi-unit buildings. Lighting in public areas is good, and presence of others on streets even at late hours is viewed as a positive. General ambience of area is amiable. Concerns expressed over apparent drug manufacturing activity within buildings, prevalence of break-ins and bicycles being stolen, and effectiveness of surveillance cameras is reduced due to poor positioning. Anonymity of these buildings could result in future increases in levels of anxiety, thus diminishing further incidental social interactions and overall wellbeing.

Response

Consider how the design and management of common shared spaces within residential buildings might better promote incidental interactions with immediate neighbours - as a case study for similar developments elsewhere. Consider ‘formalised’ support for individual residents acting as ‘social catalysts/.

Response

Design of public environment appears successful but need to ensure management allows for intended diversity of use. Ensure continued viability of Saturday markets now that the new food retailing complex is open. Ensure new planned facilities in the Green Square Town Centre meet needs of all age-groups. Overall amenity should improve as construction diminishes.

Response

Existing design of the public environment appears to be successful. Future uses of non-residential floor space should recognise the predominant residential nature of the area. Action to increase social interactions with immediate neighbours may be important to ensure existing high levels of community trust are not diminished.

Nutrition
“Providing healthy food options”

Facilitating access to healthy food.

Description

A frustration about lack of fresh food shops in the immediate neighbourhood (other than the Saturday markets which are seen as too expensive for “everyday” household shopping) now likely to be dissipated with opening of new retail complex. Nevertheless, access to other fresh food sources is high given high personal mobility, though a general feeling that supermarket food is not particularly fresh. Some use of a local subsidised “food boxes” network by those with limited mobility or income; and concerns if it is not continued. There are some public planter boxes of herbs etc. maintained by a local “growers” group – but use of the produce by others was not really mentioned. A reasonable number of participants have tried to grow their own food (supported by the local “growers” group), but with overall limitations due to space and concerns about air pollution.

Response

Concerns about local access to fresh foods should have been resolved with the opening of the new retail complex in late 2014. However this appears to have a negative impact on the provision of fresh food stalls at the Saturday markets. This may require attention to ensure a diversity of outlets and its role as a “neighbourhood focus”. The subsidised community food-boxes network should be maintained as long as required. Use of the public planter boxes could be re-invigorated, and that ability of all residents to use the food grown in there could be better promoted (this may then prompt more individuals to grow their own as well).

Promote responsible food advertising.

Description

There is good awareness of the importance of fresh food, eg. as evidenced by the questioning of freshness of supermarket food, use of the Saturday market, and mention of lack of fast food shops as one of the things assisting participant health. Fresh foods are given prominence in the new retail centre, and there is no noticeable availability or advertising of non-healthy foods. The local neighbourhood social media advertise a local “growers” group and there are visible “communal” planter boxes in public spaces. However any effect of this and use of the produce from the boxes by others is not particularly noticeable. The closely built-up and residential character of the built environment means a limited number of food premises generally in the area, and that prominent advertising panels are unlikely.

Response

Monitor and action if required the relative prominence of advertising and presence of healthy compared to unhealthy foods as additional food premises are established as the population grows and new retailing floor space comes on-stream. Ability of all residents to use the food grown in the public planter boxes could be promoted (this may prompt individuals to grow their own as well).