

Healthy Built Environments

Let's Get Walking: The Legacy of Sydney's Walk21 Conference



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It's that time of year again when we reflect on what we've done and achieved over the past 12 months. The key role that planners play in creating environments that support people being healthy, as part of everyday living, continues to be reinforced.

The message is being heard across NSW state and local governments, and together with private sector involvement, we are increasingly seeing developments that include infrastructure and facilities to make healthy ways of living easy and convenient.

Much of the work here in NSW is starting to influence other states, as well as attracting international attention. Our first column for 2014 outlined the value of prioritising walkability in urban development and in a fitting culmination to the year, the Walk21 Conference, held in Sydney in October, was a timely reminder of just how far we have come.

Walk21 is an international movement that champions the development of healthy, sustainable and efficient communities where walking for transport and recreation is available to all. This vision is achieved through annual Walk21 conferences and an international Charter on Walking. The Charter has eight strategic principles which embody broader healthy built environment objectives. Improving integrated networks and supportive land-use and spatial planning are specific principles putting planners and their work at the heart of creating walkable environments.¹ Twenty-one NSW local council mayors signed the Walk21 Charter as part of the Sydney Conference.

With just over 500 registrations, delegates at the Sydney Walk21 Conference came from far and wide representing the health, planning, community and development sectors. There were over 100 papers, 11 'walkshops' exploring different aspects of walkability around Sydney, and a 'speed dating' session where 35 researchers and practitioners talked about their work. Topics ranged from programs that encourage the take-up of walking by communicating

its compelling physical and mental health benefits, to an audit of walkability for the visually impaired and the provision of infrastructure for walking, including ways to better share paths for recreation and transport. Cultural shifts in the way that we live in a denser world are also a significant part of the equation here. Success in translating evidence into policy and practice was canvassed, as well as the often repeated need to work across and within built environment and health sectors. There are examples of good practice but we still need to do more. Compelling evidence on the economic case for walking included updates on the benefits for local businesses. Opportunities within Australia to systematically quantify the significant health gains emerging from walking trips (for example, as part of most public transport journeys) were noted. There was also discussion about the economic productivity benefits that emerge by decreasing the amount of time we have to wait at traffic lights in high pedestrian traffic zones.

One of the highlights of Walk21 was the launch of the Heart Foundation's *Does Density Matter? The role of density in creating walkable neighbourhoods*.² This publication presents key built environment principles that work in combination to enhance walkability: density, design, diversity, distance to public transport, destination accessibility, and demand management (parking policies) and placemaking.

Walk21 Conference presentations, abstracts and other material can be downloaded from the website: www.walk21sydney.com

Hot on the heels of Walk21, the City of Sydney, a co-host of the Conference, released its Draft Walking Strategy with the key targets of a third of all commuter



Shared pathway infrastructure is critical in ensuring that walking and cycling can be successfully accommodated (Source: New Planner)

journeys to be walking trips and a 50% reduction in walking related crashes by 2030. The Strategy summarises the benefits of walking under three themes – economic, social and environmental.³

Walk21 has sharpened the focus on where we need to go in creating environments that support health. There have been a number of immediate outcomes. Of state interest there is reinvigorating Walktober as an annual walking promotion event⁴ and the launch of the NSW Active Travel Charter for Children. This outlines government and non-government agency commitments to support active travel for children.⁵ There are some Sydney based projects too – the Clovelly Road Parklet⁶ and a proposed shared space laneway project in Parramatta. A soon to-be-released special issue of the Health Promotion Journal of Australia will summarise evidence of the impact of the built environment and active transport on physical activity and population health.

And looking to a new year – we hope to see you at FitNSW on 18 February 2015 at Parliament House. In the meantime, enjoy being active, healthy and happy over the festive season! ■

Endnotes

- ¹ See: www.walk21.com
- ² See: www.heartfoundation.org.au/active-living/built-environment/Pages/Density-and-Health.aspx
- ³ See: www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/explore/getting-around/walking
- ⁴ See: www.sydneysydney.com/events/walktober-in-sydney
- ⁵ See: www.preventivehealth.net.au/childrens-active-travel.html