

Healthy Built Environments

Designing Urban Activation Centres for Healthy Communities



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Urban design for health and wellbeing is an important part of what planners do. It's increasingly core business and is a consideration in creating both new, and revitalising older, urban spaces and places.

Past Healthy Built Environments columns have presented a range of design features that support healthy activities as part of daily life. We've reported on research that shows how environments can make it easy for individuals and communities to be physically active, socially connected and readily access healthy food. Neighbourhoods designed in this way are also low carbon. In the last Issue of *New Planner* we discussed design features to improve the walkability of streets and local areas. Accessibility of services and

facilities, safe localities, and connectivity between destinations on quality infrastructure are all significant.

We'd now like to consider how these design features could be specifically implemented in the NSW planning context to create urban spaces that support health and wellbeing. One mechanism is the recently created Urban Activation Precincts program. This has been identified by the State Government as an important way to deliver high-quality

urban areas with broader social, economic and environmental significance, to meet Sydney's growth needs. Eight precincts, with the potential to provide 30,000 homes, have already been identified under the program. Further, a number of guiding principles to shape development have been determined. They are:

- A strategic precinct-based approach (rather than a single site or development)
- Close involvement with local government at an early stage and throughout the process as an integral partner
- Precincts located in close proximity to existing and planned transport and service infrastructure
- Precincts, zones and development controls that are based on financial viability and affordability, and reflect market demand and investor feasibility.¹

These guiding principles make the program ideally suited to the prioritisation of active transport (that is, public transport, walking and cycling) within future Urban Activation Precincts.

In parallel with this state based initiative, the Division of Local Government's Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) Manual acknowledges that local councils may wish to prioritise precinct level active transport. This augurs well for local government engagement in the creation of health supporting Urban Activation Precincts. The Manual contains a list of evidence based active living indicators under ten key areas to measure progress toward the achievement of broader active living goals. Urban design features include safe, attractive and connected streets, promotion of active travel options and provision of open space. The NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (www.pcal.nsw.gov.au/local_government) has prepared an 'Active Living IP&R Resource' with guidance on how to incorporate active living and active transport



Design is a key component of Urban Activation Precincts to ensure economic viability, long-term health benefits, anti-congestion and environmental savings

principles through all stages of the IP&R process. Practice case studies and an updated resource, incorporating healthy eating considerations, will soon be released.

The third guiding principle for Urban Activation Precincts is proximity to existing and planned transport and service infrastructure. This key design feature will promote increased levels of active transport. Ready access to public transport also provides commuters with options other than the car. In the Sydney Metropolitan area alone there are over half a million single occupancy weekday car trips of less than one kilometre. Easy access to facilities and services will give us a significant opportunity to replace even a small percentage of these car trips, particularly those that are short and local, to walking and cycling modes.

In addition to decreasing traffic congestion, making economic savings and improving environmental conditions, public transport also brings health benefits.

For example, recently updated National Physical Activity Guidelines continue to recommend adults should accumulate a minimum of 30 minutes of movement on at least five days a week. Astonishingly just over half of the NSW population achieves these targets with significant population health and health budget consequences. Victorian data has found that public transport commuters walk on average 43 minutes a day. This compares with car drivers who only accrue around 13 minutes a day of physical activity. So if inactive people (in this case, car drivers) catch public transport to work they will acquire the recommended amount of health protecting physical activity. This equates to halving their chances of cardiovascular disease – which will ultimately mean a huge reduction in state health expenditure.

Prioritising walkability within a mixed-use precinct can also improve retail viability of precincts. The Heart Foundation's *Good for Business* (2011) collates Australian and international case studies which demonstrate increased business and urban vitality that designing for pedestrians delivers. The report asserts that a well-designed, quality street environment that promotes walking, cycling and

public transport underpins successful revitalisation strategies. Common recommended design features to improve active transport in retail districts include widening footpaths and providing cycle lanes, reducing traffic speeds and road danger, improving public transport, and greening the street.

Clearly we have an opportunity with Urban Activation Precincts to incorporate a range of active transport considerations. These have little or no additional upfront costs, and come with significant long-term savings.

By incorporating active transport design features within Urban Activation Precincts we will improve ongoing retail viability, as well as create long-term health, anti-congestion and environmental savings ■

¹ See <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Portals/0/HousingDelivery/UrbanActivation/UAPGuideline.pdf>

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