

Healthy Built Environments – The Value of Planning for Interdisciplinary Understandings

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Creating healthy built environments is an interdisciplinary endeavour. It requires disciplinary knowledge from the built environment – including planning, urban design, landscape architecture, as well as the health sciences – public health, clinical medicine and health promotion. And when we consider the broader context of environmental health, ecology and climate change, other disciplines have to be at the table.

Such challenges have been called 'wicked problems', as they require joined-up systems thinking with researchers, practitioners, policy makers and educators working collaboratively, respecting each other's disciplinary knowledge and methodologies.

Planning has much to contribute here given its multi-disciplinary foundation and its focus on engaging a broad cross-section of professionals, as well as diverse communities, in delivering places that meet diverse needs, hopes and aspirations. This way of working begins in the classroom and continues through career long professional development.

Education about healthy built environments is a good example of interdisciplinary learning. Such education draws from a range of built environment and health subjects, as well as diverse ways of looking at problems and working to solve them. NSW planners are benefitting from this type of learning – at university and, increasingly, as part of their professional development.

'Healthy Places and Spaces' is a national initiative of the Planning Institute of Australia, the Australian Local Government Association and the National Heart Foundation, with funding from the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing. A web-based resource, it includes practical tools, case studies and guidelines for planning and developing sustainable communities to encourage healthy ways of living.

The Australian Heart Foundation is a leading health NGO at the vanguard of thinking about relationships between the built environment and health behaviour. The Heart Foundation provides free internet resources for professionals and students, including guides to designing healthy places, research on urban density and health, and checklists for neighbourhood walkability and food sensitive planning.

The NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (PCAL) takes an interdisciplinary approach to its work across government portfolios. A range of resources, including its guide to assist planners and developers design for active living, is available. The PCAL newsletter is a good way to keep abreast of this rapidly evolving field – details on their website.

The Healthy Built Environments Program, which we lead at UNSW, offers cross-disciplinary education on health and the built environment for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The course content, while at different levels and taught in a variety of ways, addresses relationships between the urban environment and contemporary chronic disease associated with obesity, lack of physical activity and social isolation and loneliness. Both courses use PIA, PCAL and Heart Foundation resources. They bring built environment and health students together in the classroom.

Doctoral research is also conducted under the umbrella of the Healthy Built Environments Program. Exemplar theses by masters and undergraduate planning students are placed on the HBEP website for free access.

The Healthy Built Environments Program has been developing the capacity of the NSW health workforce to understand and deliver healthy built environments, including through the regulatory urban planning system. The HBEP uses the excellent Healthy Urban Development Checklist to assist in this work. A series of day long training workshops is currently being rolled out across rural and metropolitan regions in NSW – details on the HBEP website.

Interdisciplinary education presents both curriculum content and educational delivery challenges in the classroom and professional development seminar or workshop.



Professional development education bringing planners and health professionals together

Content issues arise from different levels of understanding, awareness and experience of key concepts between disciplines.

Educational delivery challenges frequently emerge where there are differing degrees of familiarity with varied teaching modes. Some students may feel more at home in a formal lecture than on a field trip or working in student centred groups. Evidence of impacts of the built environment on human health comes from different research traditions across the natural and social sciences and respect for these different disciplines is an essential prerequisite for learning.

There are potential institutional barriers to cross disciplinary education. Funding and administrative responsibilities, together with shared course development, organisation and leadership, have to be negotiated and in some settings, can prove difficult to resolve.

Interdisciplinary education in health and the built environment is playing a significant role in the education of designers, urban planners and health professionals. The complex challenges that we face in the 21st Century require joined-up systems thinking that can only be achieved when we work cooperatively together, respecting each other's disciplinary knowledge ■



Field work is an important component of understanding how the built environment influences health