

Healthy Built Environments –

Getting the Balance Right: 21st century planning for human wellbeing

Susan Thompson and Anthony Capon

NSW planners, and other stakeholders, are currently awaiting the release of the Government's white paper. For the past 18 months, we have been engaged in a raft of consultations for the new planning legislation. As readers of our column well know, we have been arguing strongly for the inclusion of human health and wellbeing as an objective of the new act. Human health is central to sustainability and if we incur health costs as a result of an unhealthy environment, productivity suffers. So how can planners balance the environment, health and the economy into the 21st Century?

The Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure and Transport's Major Cities Unit (MCU) has a useful framework for considering this balance. In its most recent State of Australian Cities Report (2012; <http://www.infrastructure.gov.au/soac>), measures of productivity, sustainability and liveability are presented, showing how they underpin the health of Australia's major cities.

Although sustainability is already well on the planning agenda, the SOAC report paints a concerning picture of Australia's major cities in relation to the adverse impacts of climate change. Since 1952 average maximum temperatures have increased by up to 2°C, and annual rainfall is declining in all but our northern most cities. It is estimated that days of high and extreme fire danger will continue to escalate, as will the incidence of other extreme weather events. Some regions will be affected more than others as we have seen over the past summer. This puts many thousands of properties at risk resulting in huge economic losses, as well as devastated individuals, families and communities. Extreme weather can wreak havoc with the availability of fresh food supplies, threatening food security for low income Australians in particular.

On the economic front, the MCU reports that Australian cities are undergoing significant change resulting in a shift in the growth trends that have been evident since the end of the 2nd World War. Of particular interest is the geographic concentration of businesses in the centre of cities where labour is in plentiful supply. This has implications for transport and how we move around in cities and regional centres efficiently. Some of the related issues include people travelling less kilometres to get to work, not using car transport as much as they did in the past, and the peak hour congestion in Australian



Planners have the skills to balance the needs of urban populations to ensure that we create liveable, sustainable and productive cities

urban areas growing. And while heavy rail use is on the increase, so too is road freight which has consequences for metropolitan transport systems.

And as for liveability, Australia ranks highly on the world stage. According to the SOAC report, liveable cities 'support the health, wellbeing and the quality of life of people who live and work in them' (page 203). Good planning, design and city governance are essential for the creation of urban liveability. This encompasses the spectrum of issues we discuss in this column such as provision of quality public space, green environments, active transport infrastructure, and accessibility to employment, schools, health and community services.

Understanding the 'needs of the people who use cities', as Jan Gehl (quoted in the SOAC Report, page 203) asserts, is a fundamental principle in the creation of liveable environments. And given that our cities are populated by very diverse groups with changing needs over time, how do we balance their complex patterns of need with achieving sustainable built environments that support health and well-being as part of everyday living?

An interesting approach has been developed by Arup and Naked Communications working with the Built Environment Industry Innovation Council. Funded by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, the framework proposes a community engagement strategy for the built environment. It can be downloaded

from: <http://www.innovation.gov.au/Industry/BuildingandConstruction/BEIIC/Documents/FrameworkCommunityEngagementStrategy.pdf>

The framework acknowledges that Australian cities, and our behaviour within them, need to change if we are to have an environmentally sustainable and healthy future. Engaging communities in this endeavour is challenging but it is clear that the sustainability message needs to be much more positive, focusing on what is already being done and how everyone can be a part of the action.

Similarly, the Cooperative Research Centre for Low Carbon Living headquartered at the University of New South Wales is researching how to engage communities in sustainable environmental behaviours and practices. Read more here: <http://www.lowcarbonlivingcrc.com.au/>

The takeaway message is that liveability, sustainability and productivity are all foundations for human health and wellbeing. When balancing social, environmental and economic priorities in planning processes, we should keep human health considerations at the forefront of our minds ■

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