

Healthy Built Environments

From Rhetoric to Reality: Mind the gaps!

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What a year it has been – and it's not over yet! In NSW, the most significant overhaul of the planning system in a generation continues. Healthy built environment stakeholders have made considered submissions to every phase of the review arguing that human health and wellbeing should be an objective of the new Planning Act.

Given that the evidence is very strong (as we have discussed in this column now for three years), why is this message not getting through? If we accept that the purpose of planning is to create a better society, then it follows that planners need to provide communities with environments where they can live full, healthy and happy lives. The Green Paper's focus on evidence based strategic planning provides a strong basis to embrace the compelling and growing evidence for healthy built environments. We cannot risk the long term costly consequences of an environment that makes people physically unwell and mentally sick.

It hardly seems worthy of mention, but perhaps we do need to remind ourselves that life is complex in the 21st Century. We see changes everywhere, particularly in the form and shape of the built environment. Communities are living closer together in denser urban neighbourhoods – and much of the research demonstrates that this is a good trend. Australia's sprawling and spread-out suburbs are neither environmentally sustainable nor conducive to active and healthy lives. Nevertheless, as we make this transition, we have to ensure that we are not designing and building places that have undesirable health outcomes.

We recently considered some of these issues at an all day forum hosted by the Heart Foundation, Premier's Council for Active Living and Healthy Built Environments Program. Professor Billie Giles-Corti from the University of Melbourne provided an overview of her report examining the impact of urban density on health. Undertaken for the Heart Foundation and available on their website, the review presents evidence about how physical and mental health is affected (positively and negatively) by building siting, design, construction and governance, as well as neighbourhood demographics, amenity and location. The provision of open space for apartment dwellers, particularly



Higher urban densities have many health benefits but are there any negatives?

children and older adults, is a significant consideration for health. The forum included a panel of local planning, design and mediator experts. We heard that while Sydney is doing well in providing higher density residential development for a growing population, balancing housing production with good design and the provision of an engaging and inclusive public realm continues to be a challenge. Cultural and social issues are important too, as is our understanding of the lived experience of residents in higher density developments. Is it easy to access open space every day? How is the use of communal areas, including gardens, parking and internal building spaces, negotiated? Designers, landscape architects and planners need to appreciate these issues so that the higher density neighbourhoods they create support healthy and happy communities. For updates on the forum, including a report on the day, visit the Healthy Built Environments Program website.

And as we look towards another year, what's on the horizon for healthy built environments? The Healthy Built Environments Program is undertaking a survey of NSW based organisations to map the activities being delivered across the state that support healthy built environments. A systematic review of this work is long overdue. We will be surveying government and private organisations, NGOs and academic centres from health and the built environment sectors, including planning, architecture, landscape architecture and transport. The research will improve knowledge

about healthy built environment activities in NSW and facilitate information sharing about different projects. We'll keep you posted!

2013 will see the 6th State of Australian Cities (SOAC) Conference held in Sydney in November. Hosted by a consortium including the Universities of NSW, Sydney, Technology and Macquarie, the Conference takes a multidisciplinary focus showcasing research about Australian cities. It is also about connecting academics, industry and government to build the body of knowledge on Australian city form and function to underpin evidence-based policy development. Health, well being and liveability are sure to be prominent in the research reported at SOAC 2013. We will keep you in touch with SOAC 2013 throughout next year.

And let's not forget about our own health as we approach another year. A new resource is being developed by the Healthy Built Environments Program called BE Healthy! The aim is to help create a healthy and enjoyable workplace around three themes: Be Active; Be Relaxed; and Be Nourished. The dangers of our sedentary work lives are now better understood, as are the health consequences of long term stress and poor eating. There are lots of ideas on the BE Healthy! website (<http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/programs/healthy-built-environments-program/be-healthy>) to inspire and encourage you to make a contribution towards building a healthier and happier work place into 2013 and well beyond.