

Healthy Built Environments

The Built Environment and Access to Healthy Food: What's the Evidence?

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This year we have focused on how planning policy and practice can enable the creation of sustainable environments that support human health as part of everyday living. In this last column for 2011 we consider how the built environment – particularly via zoning and land use regulation – can support healthy eating. The material presented here is a snapshot of the findings of the Healthy Built Environments Program Literature Review which can be downloaded in full from our website <http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/hbep/publications/>.

For most people, access to healthy food is determined by the presence of supermarkets and other fresh food stores, as well as the variety and price of foods available for purchase in these shops. Research indicates that convenient food access is a determinant of food choice. Proximity of fresh fruit and vegetable outlets can positively influence the consumption of such foods. However, socio-demographic and economic factors complicate this relationship. Residents of lower socio-economic neighbourhoods are consistently found to have the poorest access to supermarkets where healthier foods are usually available.

Some studies have found that neighbourhoods with high concentrations of fast-food outlets are associated with higher body weight. Nevertheless, it is not simply exposure to fast-food that is the issue. Research has shown that even when there are

many fast-food outlets in a locality, the availability of 'healthier' foods in the same locality will have health benefits. It is therefore important to understand the nature of what food is available in all food outlets, and at what cost, rather than to simply quantify fast-food outlets in a neighbourhood.

Food availability within and around school environments is a determinant of what children eat. While built environment professionals have little influence over the 'interior' food environment of schools, planning processes can – through land use zoning and regulation – influence the types of uses near schools, including the number of fast-food outlets. Research, much of it from the USA, shows that higher accessibility to fast-food outlets for schools in poorer suburbs is consistently associated with childhood obesity and unhealthy eating. Although parental food habits and attitudes also play important roles, without a supportive built environment, it is unlikely that communities will consume the healthy food necessary to reduce the prevalence of obesity.

Planners also have a role in supporting local agricultural initiatives such as farmers' markets, community gardens and other edible urban landscapes. As well as increasing the availability of fresh vegetables and fruit, such initiatives provide opportunities for physical activity and connection with neighbours. Research shows that community attitudes to buying, preparing and eating fresh produce are positively influenced. Farmers' markets and community gardens can also provide a degree of competition for nearby food stores, which can decrease the price of fresh produce for other people.

Larger scale food producing regions – particularly viable agricultural land around Australia's cities – must also be supported by the planning process. There is mounting evidence that different types of development, especially low density residential estates, are disrupting some of these productive areas. Land use zoning and regulation can be used to influence food production systems by protecting peri-urban agricultural lands capable of producing healthy food close to urban consumers.



The Kiama Community Garden is supported by the local Council. It is located next door to the Council's seniors' housing development providing residents with delicious fresh food, as well as the opportunity to be physically active and socially connected.

Although the research is on-going, it appears that zoning and related regulations can be employed to limit marketing and advertising infrastructure such as billboards and signs to advertise unhealthy food. Billboards are a relatively inexpensive method of advertising which typically has high impact as people tend to view the same billboards regularly. The research tells us that if co-located with food shops, unhealthy food advertising messages are effective in encouraging purchase of promoted items at the nearby outlets.

Finally, the built environment's capacity to provide healthy food options is potentially very sensitive to cultural and social norms within place. While we have an evolving appreciation of these issues, we need more local research from an Australian perspective. An improved understanding of the cultural and social customs and traditions that define our complex relationship with food – both its production and consumption – will strengthen planning for access to healthy food.

Associate Professor Susan Thompson and Professor Anthony Capon direct the Healthy Built Environments Program in the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (<http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/HBEP/>). The Program receives funding from the NSW Department of Health. ■



Farmers' markets are regularly held across NSW and provide communities with access to a great range of healthy fresh produce.



Development of viable agricultural lands has to be carefully monitored to ensure that food production remains in reasonable proximity of consumers.