

# Healthy Built Environments

## Supporting planning policy and practice

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The year has just begun and already we are facing the challenges of a national environmental disaster.

The floods in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria are a stark reminder of the force of nature. Climate change will increase the frequency and severity of such extreme weather events in Australia. Planning has an important role in post disaster response and there is a pressing need to build the discipline's future on solid environmental sustainability principles. Part of this is creating healthy built environments that are also environmentally sustainable. This is a key relationship and one that is critical for planners to understand and exploit. Simply put, our efforts in addressing climate change can also be beneficial for everyone's health.

In 2011 the Healthy Built Environments column will focus on how planning policy and practice can best create environmentally sustainable environments that support human health as part of everyday living. We will explore three significant ways that planning can support human health – getting people active; connecting and strengthening communities; providing healthy food options. In terms of human health, these three aspects or domains of planning address three of the principle risk factors for contemporary chronic disease – physical inactivity, obesity and social isolation.

The built environment can be planned, designed and managed to increase opportunities for, and reduce barriers to physical activity. The varying



*Policies that protect the environment directly benefit human health*

needs of different population groups such as children, youth, older people, the disadvantaged and the mobility impaired must be considered in understanding how the environment can best support physical activity. Similarly, the purpose of the activity, whether it is for transportation or leisure, and characteristics of the built environment such as residential and commercial densities, land use mix, connectivity and accessibility, influence the way people move.

Communities can be strengthened and connected by facilitating interaction in neighbourhood and public spaces. These can encompass a variety of forms including gardens, town squares, parks and lively streetscapes. Such spaces have to be safe, inviting and meaningful for the communities that they serve.

Through zoning and land use regulation, the built environment can support healthy eating. Community gardens, edible verge planting and fresh food markets can all be

encouraged. Food production systems can be protected by prohibiting inappropriate development in viable agricultural lands. Restrictions can be placed on marketing and advertising infrastructure, as well as particular food retail outlets.

Each column will feature one of these domains, providing research evidence, key policies and case studies. The synergies between policies that support both climate change adaptation and healthy environments will also be discussed. Significant 2011 planning initiatives will be part of the conversation, as will the Walking Strategy currently being developed under the auspices of the Premier's Council for Active Living. We will also draw on new research presented at important planning conferences during the year. These include the World Planning Schools Congress (July) and the State of Australian Cities Conference (November-December). Details can be found on the Healthy Built Environments Program web site.





Health is definitely on planning's agenda for 2011. Many of you will be preparing submissions in response to the Australian Government's 'Our Cities' discussion paper. The subsequent preparation of a national urban policy is long overdue and human health should feature as an important aspect of the liveability of our cities.

Late last year the NSW Department of Planning released the 'Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036'. Healthy planning issues are specifically incorporated in the Plan's Strategic Direction H - 'Achieving Equity, Liveability and Social Inclusion'. In addition, they are linked to other aspects including transport, climate change and balancing uses on the city fringe.

So keep abreast of how the built environment can get

people active, connect and strengthen communities, and provide healthy food options. Healthy spaces are environmentally sustainable places that support low carbon ways of living for everyone.

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.

*Note: The last Healthy Built Environments column (December 2010) was incorrectly titled 'Housing and Health'. The correct title is 'A Healthy Built Environments Year'. New Planner apologises for this error - Ed.*

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