

Healthy Built Environments

Susan Thompson and Anthony Capon

from the University of New South Wales introduce a new Column and a new program

Human health is a new connection for planning in NSW.

This is an old story, in one sense, because the planning profession arose from concern for human health. The garden city planning ideal was a response to the crowded living conditions of the urban poor, and associated epidemics of infectious diseases. The development of garden cities enabled people – who could afford to do so – to move to environments that were more conducive for health and wellbeing.

Times have changed. One legacy of this planning model is the separation of where we live from where we work. This was sensible when many people worked in polluting industries. However, there is now limited point-source industrial pollution in NSW. Most of us could safely live close to our workplace.

Times have changed with respect to health, too. Our most common contemporary health problems are now the so-called “lifestyle diseases” – obesity, diabetes, heart disease, chronic respiratory conditions, cancers, depression and anxiety.

In recent years, the evidence linking these contemporary health problems to the way we live in cities – enabled and constrained by the built environment – has strengthened. Car dominated transport systems, diminishing opportunities for physical activity, increasing fast food availability (and reduced availability of fresh food), and lack of social connection are all implicated.



Local Shops

For some time, health professionals have been looking beyond the health sector in attempts to address these contemporary epidemics. The solution is well beyond costly medical treatment, drug therapies and surgical interventions. Rather than only caring for people once they are sick, the health system must move to a greater emphasis on prevention. And to do this successfully will require effective collaboration with other professions – planners, urban designers, landscape architects, transport planners, engineers, among others.

What makes a healthy place? We will explore this question in this new regular column in *New Planner*. Certainly, health should be a planning consideration at all scales – buildings, neighbourhoods, regions, and the whole-of-city. We don't

propose a single model for a healthy built environment. This is because the development of cities and towns is highly context-dependent and should respond to local geographies, climate, history, cultures and economies.

Many readers will already be familiar with the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (<http://www.pcal.nsw.gov.au/>). PCAL is a whole-of-government initiative, established in 2004, to promote active living. It has developed key resources for urban planners and health workers and runs successful workshops on healthy planning.

Last year, the Planning Institute of Australia launched Healthy Spaces and Places (www.healthyplaces.org.au). This national initiative, a partnership with the Australian Local Government Association and National



Open Space Walking Paths



Vegetable Gardens Near Apartments

Heart Foundation with funding from the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing, is an informative resource for planners. It signals a renewed national professional interest in health and the built environment.

And now this year, we are delighted to announce that the NSW Healthy Built Environments Program (HBEP) has been established in the Faculty of the Built Environment at UNSW (<http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/hbep>).

With funding from the NSW Department of Health, this new Program will foster interdisciplinary research, deliver innovative education and workforce development, and provide leadership on health and the built environment. The Program will contribute to the development of policy relevant research that can be used to advocate for the creation of environments that support people being healthy in their everyday lives.

The *Healthy Built Environments* column in *New Planner* will keep NSW planners up-to-date with the latest information coming out of the HBEP. In responding to contemporary human health challenges, there is a pressing need to revitalise the relationship between the planning and health professions. Planners are well placed to respond positively and pro-actively, in ways that showcase the profession's ability to conceptualise strategically and holistically, as well as its understandings of the spatial needs of diverse communities.

We look forward to sharing ideas and approaches to healthy planning.

Associate Professor Susan Thompson, planner, and Professor Anthony Capon, physician, co-direct the NSW Healthy Built Environments Program in the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales. The Program receives funding from the NSW Department of Health.