



Why is it so hard to engage communities in healthy city making?

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Why is it hard to get people from all walks of life and across the age spectrum genuinely involved in planning? Is there a crisis in community engagement? Surely the issue of how cities can be supportive of health would be a motivating factor for getting involved? The epidemic of chronic disease threatens to compromise both our physical abilities to enjoy our lives, as well as our mental capacity to be happy and well. So why isn't this a motivating factor?

Is there a problem?

Change is everywhere, particularly in our cities and urban centres. So why should planners be surprised that this is unsettling for many communities? The comforting familiarity of home, broadly defined as the dwelling, local street and surrounding neighbourhoods, is threatened by change, particularly when it is ongoing and significant. This is often blamed for the 'NIMBY' response, nearly always judged negatively, when it can be a powerful way of understanding deep-seated fears of residents.¹ Busy lives and the constant flow of information from multiple sources further challenge planners trying to engage communities in decision making. But it seems surprising that concerns about health and wellbeing are not motivating communities to participate. Perhaps the healthy built environment connection is not well understood and worries about chronic disease lie dormant until illness actually strikes.

What can be done?

There are examples of community involvement in planning – inspired, either wholly or in part, by concerns for health and wellbeing. Community led protests can be a sign of care, as well as deep frustration with government decisions and actions. In Sydney, a current example is the WestConnex motorway project which has enraged affected local groups. Rozelle Against WestConnex (RAW) is arguing for alternative investments in public transport to encourage walkable and car free cities.² Their stance is supported by healthy planning experts who spoke at the most recent Active Living's FitNSW Forum.³

Unexpected disaster can see communities coming together in unprecedented ways, lobbying for health supportive urban planning initiatives. The earthquake in New Zealand's Christchurch was the unfortunate catalyst for the creation of urban food gardens across the city, enhancing understandings of food security and resilience. Community gardens,

fruit and nut producing street trees and urban orchards are some of the projects being championed in the post-earthquake city.⁴

Professional practitioner led projects can involve communities in positive, innovative and ongoing ways. This can occur in placemaking as the recent awards by Place Leaders Asia Pacific attest.⁵ Large and small scale projects, as well as exemplary procedural approaches, demonstrate the key role of communities in every aspect of placemaking, including different aspects of health supportive environments.

Governments have a central role too and we are encouraged to see the recent release of the NSW State Infrastructure Strategy 2018-2038.⁶ This sets out the government's infrastructure priorities for the next 20 years. In the context of current, and increasing, high levels of expenditure on health, the Strategy notes that the built environment can improve health and wellbeing. Recommendation 99 in the Strategy proposes 'that the NSW Government increase investment in walking and cycling infrastructure and parks and open spaces as part of the ongoing integration of health into land use planning and transport strategies.' This will enable communities and local councils to fund and promote healthy active living infrastructure, possibly

via their Community Strategic Plans. These Plans featured in the HBEs September 2016 column, which included information about healthy living and the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework.⁷ The new State Strategy is a further opportunity to pursue funding to translate healthy planning related objectives into local community facilities.

Communities can also be involved in research to enhance urban health. A particularly exciting and innovative project is UK based 'Urban Mind' – a collaboration of academics at King's College London with landscape architects J&L Gibbons and art foundation Nomad Projects. Engaging via smart phone technology, individuals utilise an app to record information about their lifestyle, mental wellbeing and experiences of city living.⁸ Such projects are critical as cities densify and the public realm increases in importance. Communities enthusiastically engage as this is part of their daily activities in space. The opportunity to have a say (that's easy and personally relevant) about how our environments make us healthy and well is really important to all of us!

Send your thoughts on how we might motivate people to become more involved in the creation of healthy local environments ■

Endnotes

- <https://theconversation.com/30-minute-city-not-in-my-backyard-smart-cities-plan-must-let-people-have-their-say-59161>
- <http://rozelleagainstwestconnex.org/>
- <https://www.activelivingnsw.com.au/fitnsw/fitnsw-2018/>
- <https://www.ecofind.co.nz/food-drink/otautahi-urban-foraging/>
- <http://placeleaders.com/2018-place-leaders-award-recipients/>
- <https://www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/projects-and-initiatives/nsw-state-infrastructure-strategy/>
- <https://www.nswpcalipr.com.au/>
- <https://www.urbanmind.info/>



The Urban Mind App