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Greening for a resilient 21st Century

'The great green city of the future is ecologically and economically resilient; it's made up of healthy, liveable neighbourhoods where the benefits of nature are available to all people'¹. The importance of natural green places in our ever expanding and densifying cities cannot be overstated. Green is a foundation of planning policies and practices for a resilient 21st Century.

Having worked at the interface of urban planning and public health since the early 2000s, I have witnessed a growing focus on greening environments for wellbeing – both for human health and that of the planet. While it's not the entire picture, green environments play a central role in resilience – it cools a warming globe and offers opportunities for individuals to reduce their risks for chronic disease. Green environments support physical activity, fresh and nutritious food access, as well as social connectivity. These activities underpin personal resilience and community strength, which are key pillars of the Resilient Sydney Strategy². Green is a powerful tool for planners assisting communities responding to and preparing for the environmental and socio-cultural challenges encountered daily, as well as those that lie ahead.



Figure 1: Take time for your own resilient practices in green, tranquil places (Source: Author)

Defining green

So, what is 'green' in the context of resilience? Multiple and wide-ranging definitions exist. From 'vegetated urban spaces'³, such as street trees and grassy roadsides, to parks (big and small), children's playgrounds and inter-connected green corridors. Then there's 'green infrastructure', which typically implies purposeful planning and ongoing maintenance of initiatives such as green roof tops and walls, forested urban precincts, community gardens and wetland regeneration.

Planners can convincingly argue the case for the preservation of existing green spaces and advocate for extra green infrastructure by pointing out the broad and well documented benefits. A green space can be calming and restorative, providing health benefits from reduced blood pressure and stress, to improving physical activity participation rates and facilitating faster recovery from illness⁴. Benefits are available across the life course and enhance the natural and built environments, as well as bolstering the local economy. These multiple outcomes of greening, or co-benefits, provide additional weight for a strong planning case. A variety of resources are available to assist Planners, including the NSW Government Architect's draft *Greener Places Policy*⁵, Active Living's *Urban Cooling with Green Infrastructure*⁶ and AECOM's *Green Infrastructure*⁷.

But of course, there are complexities. Attention to equity is one. Ironically, if we make places green and lush to improve health conditions and build resilience in areas of low socio-economic status, this can price the community being targeted for assistance out of those localities⁸. Besides, why should a local council allocate

funding to improve health if the resulting economic gains subsequently flow to another level of government? Responsiveness to differing cultural and social needs are also challenging. But this is where Planners shine with their local knowledge and appreciation of the myriad qualities and characteristics of the people for whom they plan.

Personal resilience

Green places also play a vital role in our own personal lives. Not only do they nurture the resilience we need to adjust to a rapidly changing world, immersion in a range of green experiences brings a deeper appreciation of their importance – for ourselves and others. We will reap benefits for our physical and mental health through being active and participating in urban agriculture. Quiet gardens and forest bathing offer opportunities for psychological restoration and peaceful reflection in nature. So, take some time to lie on the grass and look up at the sky – feel the textures, breathe the smells and hear the sounds around you. Be IN green and remember, a green environment is the foundation for a resilient and healthy planet. As we were recently and starkly reminded in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services⁹, our very existence depends on it ■

Endnotes

¹ Mittermaier, P. The Nature Conservancy: <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/asia-pacific/australia/>

² https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/303700/Resilient-Sydney-A-strategy-for-city-resilience-2018.pdf

³ WHO, 2017, *Urban Green Space Interventions and Health*: http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/338074/full-report-for-archiving.pdf?ua=1

⁴ Townsend, M et al, 2015, *Healthy Parks Healthy People*: https://parkweb.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/672582/HPHP_state-of-the-evidence_2015.pdf

⁵ <https://www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/policies/greener-places>

⁶ <https://www.activelivingnsw.com.au/assets/Uploads/PAR1-UrbanCooling-GreenInfrastructure-FINAL2.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.aecom.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Green-Infrastructure-vital-step-brilliant-Australian-cities.pdf>

⁸ Wolch, JR et al, 2014 'Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough', *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 125: 234-244.

⁹ <https://www.ipbes.net/>