



An optimistic outlook as opportunities emerge from challenges

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While it might be easy to be overly pessimistic coming to the end of 2019, in relation to healthy built environments there is reason for optimism. The past few months have presented a range of opportunities for planning to showcase what it does well – situating problems in context, working across disciplines, and linking stakeholders for positive and productive outcomes. These strengths are central to providing a health supportive environment for everyone.

Opportunities for Healthy Planning in NSW

Without question, the ongoing drought ravaging the Australian environment is our biggest challenge. Not only is it a stark reminder of climate change on our doorstep, it demonstrates how devastating environmental catastrophes have significant impacts for the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of our communities. These closely interlinked issues require integrated and joined-up thinking if we are to arrive at sustainable solutions. As 2019 draws to a close, it is also undeniable that the nation is mobilising to demand appropriate political action on climate change – both in Australia and across the globe. This presents a crucial opportunity for planners given that we are well-versed in how to work closely with communities. The co-benefits approach is a further opportunity here – implementing policies and practices to enhance human wellbeing which simultaneously contribute to the planet's health. The Global Health Alliance recently put together a very accessible overview of the interconnected health implications of climate change with an excellent set of references for further reading.¹

This year heralded a new set of Premier's

Priorities which afford planning a further range of opportunities to shine. "Well connected communities with quality local environments" is a key priority for the Government. There is a focus on greening which can achieve multiple benefits for health. Specifically, the priorities are:

- Increase the proportion of homes in urban areas within 10 minutes' walk of quality green, open and public space by 10 per cent by 2023
- Increase the tree canopy and green cover across Greater Sydney by planting one million trees by 2022²

Our newly 'returned' Minister for Planning, the Hon. Rob Stokes, MP, is also the Minister for Public Spaces. As well, we have a freshly minted division in the Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment whose remit is public space. These initiatives are supported by the ongoing work of the Government Architect's Office, including the Draft Greener Places Policy, which, incidentally, has an excellent diagram of the co-benefits of green space provision – really useful for arguing the case for additional, quality green space.³

Research Partnerships and Translation

Collaborations across disciplinary and professional boundaries are critical for the advancement of healthy planning. The Healthy Urban Environments Collaboratory (HUE) is a promising initiative with these aims at its core. The Collaboratory brings UNSW, UTS and UWS together to work alongside health practitioners in SE and SW Sydney Local Health Districts. This partnership focusses on improving urban Australians' health through various activities which aim to deliver evidence-based research that supports policy and practice for equitable and health supportive urban environments.⁴

A new project funded by HUE is being undertaken by researchers at UWS and UNSW. Our objective is to better understand what resources and skills are needed by built environment practitioners to deliver healthy urban places. To do this, the research will consider attitudes, skills and capacities, and explore barriers and opportunities. On-line questionnaires will be appearing soon, together with requests for focus-group interviews – so please participate!

Finally, a new book emerged this year from Routledge: *Planning Australia's Healthy Built Environments*.⁵ With lead co-author Dr. Jennifer Kent from Sydney University, we examine the relationship between land use planning and human health in Australia, illustrating exemplars of national practice and research, as well as highlighting future challenges. It's clear we've come a long way in the healthy planning journey, which is an important achievement, worthy of acknowledgement and celebration.

So, as 2019 draws to a close, all the best for an activity filled new year in lots of green space ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Global Health Alliance Australia 2019, From Townsville to Tuvalu, http://gham.org/wp-content/uploads/GLHAA_TownsvilleTuvalu-08.pdf
- ² See: www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/premiers-priorities/
- ³ See: www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/policies/greener-places
- ⁴ See: www.thesphere.com.au/work/healthy-urban-environments
- ⁵ See: www.routledge.com/Planning-Australias-Healthy-Built-Environments-1st-Edition/Kent-Thompson/p/book/9781138696365



Figure 1: Communities, led by our young citizens, are demanding climate change action – are we listening? (Source: Author)