



Healthy Built Environments

A closer relationship between planning and health

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The improvement of human health was one of the founding principles of the discipline of town planning. Much of the early work of planners focused on getting people out of dirty and crowded living conditions to green and pollution free settings. Advances in public health were closely tied to these achievements, but as the profession evolved it moved away from this original concern.

But things started to unravel in the latter part of the 20th Century. Medicine struggled to address escalating rates of chronic disease associated with sedentary lifestyles. There was also a growing understanding that suburban, spread-out residential forms and car-based transport, were major contributors to ill-health. Reversing inactive lives required much more than pills and surgical procedures. We needed to make it easy for people to be active as part of everyday life. And so, began the return to the origins of planning and its focus on health and wellbeing.

Since the early 2000s, there has been remarkable progress in reacquainting planners with health and the positive ways in which the profession can contribute to people's wellbeing. Today planners increasingly acknowledge health and wellbeing as part of their core business. This column has played a small part in that realignment. Here I reflect on this evolution as part of reviewing 2020 and consider where healthy built environments are at the end of one of the most disruptive and unsettling years in living memory.

The Healthy Built Environments Column

At the invitation of Robyn Vincin, then Executive Officer, NSW PIA, this column started in 2010, alongside the commencement of the Healthy Built Environments Program in the City Futures Research Centre at UNSW. This Program was a five-year collaboration between urban planners and health professionals funded by the then NSW Department of Health. The focus was on advancing research, education and advocacy for the creation of healthy built environments – places which are planned, designed and managed to enable all people who live, work and spend time in that area to undertake health supportive behaviours (especially those that address risk factors for chronic disease) as part of everyday living. A survey of key stakeholders undertaken in December 2018 affirmed that while challenges remain, healthy planning has progressed in NSW, in part due to the knowledge disseminated through the 'Healthy Built Environments' column.¹



Figure 1: This mural in Sydney's Haberfield reminds us of planning's original connection with health

Authorship from planning and health was in part a demonstration of the collaboration to progress healthy planning. I was initially joined by Tony Capon (then Professor of Public Health at the University of Canberra) and more recently, Peter McCue (at the time, Manager of the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living, which was a leading and powerful force in advancing healthy built environments in NSW).

A range of topics across the breadth of healthy planning has been covered over the years, spanning active transport provision, green infrastructure and environmental sustainability, housing, and healthy planning initiatives for rural areas and minorities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Advocacy opportunities for healthy built environments has been a recurring feature of the column, especially in relation

to the 2011 – 2013 comprehensive review of the EPA Act. Core principles of healthy built environments from a planning perspective have been consistently reinforced. These are the 'three domains' – the ways in which planning can most effectively contribute to supporting people's physical and mental health as part of everyday living by creating places that:

- (i) support physical activity (for both recreation and transport),
- (ii) support social connection and belonging, and
- (iii) support access to nutritious and fresh foods.

In more recent columns, a fourth domain emerged – that of planetary health. This is the foundation of a healthy built environment as all life ultimately depends on a healthy planet. In June 2012 the entire issue of *New Planner* was devoted to healthy built environments. All columns are accessible from the City Wellbeing website.²

Developing the evidence to create healthy built environments

The column has consistently communicated current research in healthy planning and provided examples of good practice both internationally and within Australia. Through the lens of planning, resources have been highlighted to assist practitioners build an evidence base to create health supportive environments of relevance to their local communities. The growing suite of policies and guidelines from the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment on placemaking is one such example. As cities densify and more families move from houses to apartments, the increasing importance of public spaces is undeniable. The draft NSW Public Space Charter embeds health and wellbeing throughout its ten principles, including making it easy for people to be active everyday by encouraging a 'culture of walking and cycling' as well as ensuring that there are spaces for relaxation and respite. Safety, accessibility for all ages, community belonging, and the provision of green are also health supportive features of the draft Charter.³

Other work which shows excellent promise is a recent collaboration between the Government Architect and Transport for NSW (TfNSW). This is a guide for practitioners to connect movement and place, noting that balancing

efficient transport networks with public space provision in safe and liveable neighbourhoods is essential.⁴ It's also great to have TfNSW's 'Walking Space Guide' as this mode of transport is both health supportive and environmentally friendly.⁵ 2020 has seen the release of the long-awaited NSW Ministry of Health's revision of the 2009 'Healthy Urban Development Checklist'. Now called the 'Healthy Built Environment Checklist', this is a comprehensive handbook for assessing the health supportive capacity of plans and development proposals. Well worth the download.⁶ So too the Heart Foundation's newest addition to its 'Healthy Active by Design' (HAbD) website – active ageing.⁷ For those unfamiliar with HAbD, this resource includes research evidence, practice guides, case studies and all-inclusive checklists.⁸ Finally, while not new this year, the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), to which Australia is a signatory, puts the interconnections between health and a sustainable environment into sharp relief.⁹ For anyone wanting an overview of the SDGs, check out this set of videos.¹⁰

Looking to the future

December 2020 is the last regular Healthy Built Environments column. It has been an enormous privilege to bring the column to you since 2011. As 'New Planner' hits refresh it's appropriate that different columnists and contributors

come forward and showcase the ways in which planning has, and continues to, support and improve health and wellbeing for diverse communities in urban, rural and regional localities. COVID is an ongoing, if relatively recent challenge, but in no way diminishes the importance of planning's contribution to human and planetary health. Quite how this will be played out is still unfolding as the unimaginable global disruptions continue, but it is clear that there is much to be optimistic about as planners take a leading and positive role. ■

Endnotes

1. Thompson SM, 'Healthy Built Environments – Reflections a decade on!', *New Planner*, December 2018: 33.
2. <https://cityfutures.be.unsw.edu.au/research/city-wellbeing/city-wellbeing-resources/new-planner/>
3. https://www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/327732/Draft-NSW-Public-Spaces-Charter.pdf
4. <https://www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/guidance/movement-and-place>
5. <https://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/business-industry/partners-suppliers/document-types/guides-manuals/walking-space-guide.html>
6. <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/urbanhealth/Pages/healthy-built-enviro-check.aspx>
7. <https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/healthy-active-ageing/active-ageing/>
8. <https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/>
9. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/>
10. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHSIfoizVW14SYhHbQA9-umdzQ5khY13>



Figure 2: A healthy built environment in the 21st Century must prioritise provision of green, natural environments.