

Health and Planning in Green Square, Sydney:

A contextual review of planning documents relating to Victoria Park and the Green Square Town Centre

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This document reports a review of planning strategy documents relating to Victoria Park and the Green Square Town Centre, in Green Square, Sydney as part of the *Healthy Higher Density Living* research project involving the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales, for NSW Landcom.



Background

This review was undertaken for NSW Landcom as part of the *Healthy Higher Density Living: Translating Evidence to Support Planning Strategies for Healthy Higher Density Living* research project. This was a two-year project (2018-2019) undertaken by the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Sydney, and the University of New South Wales on behalf of and in partnership with NSW Landcom. The project seeks to advance knowledge of the ways in which higher density precinct development can be planned to improve health, and to then identify ways in which industry can integrate health and wellbeing into higher density precinct development policy and practice.

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Disclaimer

The authors have used all due care and skill to ensure that the material is accurate as at the date of this report. However, the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales, Landcom, and the authors do not accept responsibility for any losses that may arise by anyone relying upon its contents.

The findings outlined in the Executive Summary at the front of this report are to be read in the context of the entire report and its appendices.

Citation

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Executive Summary

Aim and purpose of this study

This Report details the third document review undertaken for the *Healthy Higher Density Living: Translating Evidence to Support Planning Strategies for Healthier Higher Density Living* research project.

The first two reviews examined the local and international research literature. The first review (Connon et al., 2018) looked at health and planning for higher density urban living. The second review (Connon et al., 2019) looked at the types of evidence used to link health to planning strategies for higher density development. This third review examines a range of planning documents specific to the two chosen case-study localities – Victoria Park and the Green Square Town Centre – located within the larger Green Square redevelopment area in central Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The specific aims of this third review were to assess:

- How higher density living environments are defined and understood by planning institutions involved in the development of each of the two case study localities.
- The extent to which health was a consideration in the development of these two areas; and:
 - a) whether this consideration was made directly or implicitly,
 - b) the degree of ease or difficulty in making these considerations and subsequent decisions.

Methods

The documents examined in this review comprise publicly-available planning strategies (primarily the initial master plans), and planning strategies sourced ‘internally’ from Landcom. Both sets of documents were separately examined to ascertain the extent and nature of any content relating to (i) ‘density’, (ii) ‘health’, and (iii) health and density as a composite pair.

The results in respect to matter (i) were then assessed against the understandings regarding density resulting from the first literature review. It considered where density was not referred to at all, where density was referred to and defined and whether via quantitative measures or qualitative references (or both), and where the term ‘density’ was used by then not defined.

The examination in respect to health matters utilised the 53 attributes of a health-supportive environment, also identified in the first literature review, and developed into a composite schema, the ‘Three Theoretical Frameworks of Health’ (or ‘three healths framework’).

In addition, this review also canvassed a further set of 96 documents relating to the social, economic and planning historical and contemporary context of Green Square. The results of this examination were used to assist in answering two further questions:

- What were the factors that assisted or hindered the inclusion of health as a consideration in the planning and development of the two case-study site localities, and
- To what extent is this experience replicable (and able to be translated) into higher density redevelopments elsewhere.

Findings

Given the scope and range of all these documents, considered together, the analysis and drawing of conclusions took on a networked, rather than linear, approach looking, as much as practicality allowed, all of these documents together.

In respect to the analysis around density, only one quantitative definition of a density as being 'health-supportive' was found, referencing the minimum density of dwellings needed to achieve viable local public transport. A search then for more expressive references to and measures of healthy high density in the documents was not successful. Rather, densities appeared to be determined by the marketability of building forms, and the delivery of green space (often also used as a proxy for providing actual 'health' initiatives).

In respect to the analysis around health, it was found that health has indeed been a consideration in the planning and development of these localities, and includes attributes from each of the three broad understandings around health identified in the 'three healths framework'. There is however, considerable variation in the form that these inclusions take. Sometimes they are quite direct and explicit; at other times, and more often, they are implied rather than expressed directly. The exact form of this 'implied' character is often difficult to assess and can require considerable interpretation when undertaking an analysis. This is where the review of the third and larger set of documents assisted, by providing an indication of the various contexts and 'spirit of the times' in which decisions were made.

Sometimes a particular implied viewpoint, perception, or predominant way of understanding by the authors is suggested, but communicated implicitly rather than explicitly. At other times the presence of health results from another intention, either required or desired for other, non-health, reasons. In this sense, health is a co-benefit or additional benefit of a process undertaken with different or additional goals in mind. Again, this presence of health as a resulting co-benefit may be known and be made explicit; at other times there appears to be little or no awareness of this and with the co-benefit arising more by fortuitous chance than explicit action seeking a particular health outcome.

This last finding is particularly evident in more recent documents. Although health was quite prominent in the master planning undertaken in the 1990s (and also particularly in the metropolitan plan for Sydney developed in the 1950s), more recent documents tend to focus on other matters, such as ecological sustainability, the establishment of communities, place-making, and social and economic activation. Fortunately, many of these matters also have clear co-benefits for health.

Conclusions

The findings suggest a potential dilemma whereby attention on such sustainability, community, economic development and place-making matters without a concurrent understanding of both the health co-benefits that can arise and the importance of health generally, risks the possibility that health outcomes will be neglected as a key consideration in any 'densification' process. Supporting this overall concern has been the assessment that:

- There seems to be, particularly in more recent documents, a lack of a clear *lingua-franca* around what constitutes dense and health-supportive environments, and which would be understood by the diverse range of practitioners involved and within all stages of a development, and

- There is a lack of design investigation and a subsequent diverse ‘tool-kit’ of responses around different models of higher density development, and on the implications of *high-rise* high density in particular.

Nevertheless, this review does show that in Green Square there has been an identifiable and positive *engagement* with the complexity of high density development by the two main planning institutions involved, Landcom and the City of Sydney. This engagement has then generated the opportunity for useful lessons to be learnt. There is also a caveat to this finding however in that the transferability of the Green Square ‘model’ to other localities may be limited by two other key characteristics:

- The positive, hybrid nature of Landcom itself as an organisation with a wide (legislated) corporate brief as a public authority to not just develop new housing estates but to also establish ‘communities’, and within a triple bottom line accounting regime, and
- The extensive financial resources available within Green Square to establish health-supportive infrastructure (both ‘hard’ infrastructure such as open spaces and transport facilities, and ‘soft’ infrastructure such as community programs and effective maintenance) given its location within the well-resourced City of Sydney local government authority.

Recommendations

The review illustrates the need to factor in multiple and diverse elements (as identified above) when developing new understandings about the nature and process of generating health-supportive high density environments.

To support this work, the following potential further enquiries (detailed in Section 7 as ten investigations) have been identified to further the *translational* overall objectives of the Project:

1. Explore with key Landcom and City of Sydney personnel through a series of interviews and focus group workshops:
 - (a) the particular attributes (skills, attitudes, motivations) they have required, and utilised, to deal with the complexity that comprises the Green Square redevelopment, and
 - (b) the extent of their knowledge and understanding of health-supportive environments, and the institutional and other enablers and inhibitors experienced when seeking to achieve such environments.
2. Undertake a review of recent studies on resident satisfaction to ascertain the success, and the health co-benefits, of the intention to establish Green Square as a highly liveable built environment.
3. Review existing studies, commentary and architectural responses around the ‘lived-experience’ of high-rise high density living.
4. Compare different high-density localities within Sydney to understand the implications of different ‘shapes’ of high-density buildings and estate layouts, and assess the extent to which high density needs to be high-rise.
5. Examine the extent to which the well-resourced Green Square ‘financial experience’ can be replicated in planning strategies for the development of health-supportive environments elsewhere.