

Healthy Built Environments

Making public places for a healthy city



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As our cities densify, we have fewer private gardens and play areas on our doorsteps. Public spaces are, therefore, becoming increasingly important for everyday activities and special occasions. It is in public spaces that we can relax and contemplate, enjoy a bike ride, power walk or leisurely stroll, play with our children, have a picnic with friends, or celebrate a family birthday.

Planners have a key role in creating meaningful and health supportive public spaces in the denser city. For this special issue on placemaking, we propose a set of principles for public space-making to support health – for people, the environment and the creatures with whom we share our lives.

What is a public open space?

Public open space encompasses land that is freely accessible by everyone. It often includes green space – from expansive parklands to smaller gardens and hard surfaced plazas or town squares with trees and shrubs dotted around. Other spaces in cities today are increasingly seen as potentially open and public. These include laneways, shared spaces, community gardens and temporary spaces given over to a community for a short time. The key distinction is that such spaces are not commercially owned, nor is there any fee charged for use. When we think of how public spaces are used, the principal activity is recreation – again, this varies from formal sporting events, to passive pursuits such as walking, sitting and just being in the space. Artistic and cultural expression is a feature, ranging from grand installations to small cultural artefacts of belonging, including musical and other performances.

The health supportive role of public spaces

Public spaces support physical and mental health in different ways. They are particularly important in connecting us with each other across our diversity and difference, building relationships which lay the foundation for social capital, local belonging and a sense of cultural identity.

For those who are isolated from others, whether they are elderly and alone, disabled and unable to easily get out and about, or simply at home a lot – maybe in a caring role – the provision of accessible public space is vital to health.^{1,2} Green natural space is a critical component of public space and is fundamental to the maintenance of wellbeing. It contributes to positive mental health and provides us with respite from the stresses of urban life.³ Providing space for recreational physical

activity and access to healthy food – be it a community garden or a convivial eating place – are frequently accommodated in public spaces.

The URMO principles for health supportive placemaking in the denser city

So how can public places support the community's physical and mental health? Our model, URMO (Understanding; Reviewing; Making; Ongoing), brings together traditional ideas about placemaking using a health lens. URMO's 20 principles are designed to be employed flexibly to accommodate diverse initiations of placemaking – from the community to the local council or a long-term proposal in a plan.

Understanding

This principle is about knowing the community – its needs, hopes and



The Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston is a great example of a healthy public space. In the heart of the city, it incorporates 'green' and 'blue' space, a community food garden, a mix of private and public areas, and is a place for family celebrations, as well as citywide events.



aspirations. There will be variations depending on who has initiated the placemaking, but here are some vital issues:

1. Review the scholarship on placemaking – there is a wealth of information, ideas and inspirations from the classic placemakers to more recent gurus such as Jan Gehl and consultancies specialising in social and cultural planning.
2. Review examples of good practice across the range of abundant local and international ideas.⁴
3. Determine why the public space is needed and the roles it can play to support human and environmental health. To answer these questions, an understanding of what is already available in a local area is crucial – as is an appreciation of how the community is changing and the nature of local environmental stress and threats.
4. Understand who the space is for – what is the demographic make-up of the relevant community, its health status and cultural needs? What needs are currently unmet and how can the proposal help?

Reviewing

This principle is about what might be in the place – the elements that planners need to consider in creating a public space that supports health. It goes without saying that this needs to be done in close consultation with the community:

5. Include green (vegetated) and blue (water) space, which has health benefits for both humans and the planet.
6. Consider fellow creatures and how their health can be supported by the space – from dog parks to bush gardens for biodiversity.
7. Consider food to create a convivial, celebratory space – this might be the

- inclusion of commercial cafés, pop-up kiosks or community gardens.
8. Incorporate opportunities for physical activity, including play, as appropriate.
 9. Ensure accessibility from nearby areas, ideally by active transport.
 10. Incorporate universal design principles.
 11. Use Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles to make this a safe place.
 12. Ensure personal comfort by providing infrastructure such as seats, toilets, bubblers and rubbish. What else does the community need in this particular space?
 13. Design with environmental conditions in mind – for example, is there shading and wind protection?

Making

This is the central tenet of URMO – community participation underpins successful placemaking. Here are some essential steps to ensure that this occurs:

14. Work with the community from the start – build partnerships across public, private and NGO sectors in creating the space and ensuring its longevity.
15. Try it out – if possible, install a temporary space to see how it works and how it might be improved. This can bring everyone on board or force a necessary re-think. The eventual outcome will be a better public space.
16. Argue the budget – use the co-benefits framework to help persuade the cynics.⁵
17. Enlist champions to support the placemaking venture!

Ongoing

This final principle is about governance and the future of the space. It is critical that

the community is engaged in this process from the start. It will be up to them to ensure that the space continues to meet emerging health needs, as well as being adequately maintained. The community is the ultimate custodian of the space – the key to successful placemaking:

18. Maintenance – how will the space be maintained in the short, medium and longer terms?
19. Responsiveness to the community’s changing needs over time, particularly shifts in health status and family formation stage.
20. Ensuring accessibility for everyone, so that the space is truly democratic and inclusive.

We invite feedback on URMO – let us know what else should be included and tell us about some of the great health supportive places you are making! ■

Endnotes

¹ HBEP Literature Review: <http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/city-futures/city-wellbeing/literature-review>; HBEP Fact Sheets: <http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/city-futures/city-wellbeing/fact-sheets>
² Healthy Urban Development Checklist: http://www0.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2010/pdf/hud_checklist.pdf; Healthy Active by Design: <http://www.healthactivebydesign.com.au/>
³ Beyond Blue to Green: http://www.hphpcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/beyondblue_togreen.pdf
⁴ Project for Public Spaces: http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/
⁵ See Thompson, S and Capon, A 2015, ‘The co-benefits framework for understanding and action on climate change’, in Barton, H et al: <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781138023307/>

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