

Healthy Built Environments

Looking Forward to the Healthy City



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The theme of this 100th issue of *New Planner* provides an opportunity to reflect on the issues that have been canvassed in this column for the last five years and pose an optimistic vision for the future.

When *New Planner* first appeared, for most of us it was unimaginable that an organisation like the Heart Foundation would be an advocate for good urban planning. There weren't many health professionals, if any, who commented on planning proposals suggesting how a new development or land subdivision could be adjusted to better support healthy living. And yet today we see this happening.

After a long separation going back to the early 20th Century, planning and health are beginning to come together again. Rising rates of chronic disease, which cannot be addressed by the health care system alone, and environmental degradation, are contributing factors to this emerging re-connection. So too is the growing body of research about the important role that the built environment plays in supporting health. And as *New Planner* has blossomed in NSW, the State's embrace of healthy built environments has grown. PCAL has been a defining force in this work, bringing different agencies and stakeholders together in contributing to both policy development and practice. The Ministry of Health has also been instrumental – most recently in its *Healthy Eating and Active Living Strategy* which has as its number one strategic direction: 'environments to support healthy eating and active living'.

In looking forward to a healthy environment, what might an optimistic vision entail for planners in NSW?

At the policy level we have a comprehensive health objective in the State's planning legislation. This sets the direction for all plans, from state to regional and local. Supporting good human health is mainstream planning practice, sitting alongside environmental sustainability and protection. Planners work in close consultation with health

professionals and are proud of the positive contribution that their work is making to planetary and human health.

This is acknowledged by the community. Their health has never been this good. Escalating rates of diabetes have turned around, heart disease and many cancers are rapidly declining – it's easy and fun to be physically active as part of everyday living. Obesity is a thing of the past. The health budget no longer struggles to keep funding expensive drug treatments and lengthy hospitalisations. Spending on preventive health programs matches dollars invested in disease management and cures.

Developers routinely include infrastructure to support healthy living – community food gardens and communal composting, together with the provision of bicycle and



Looking Forward to a Healthy City – one of the images created by Emily Mitchell of the City Futures Research Centre to illustrate the HBEP's Symposium Visions Booklet.

car share parking are standard inclusions in medium density housing developments. The economics stack up – walkable neighbourhoods are keenly sought and developments sell well. It is commonplace for buildings to have green roof tops, often with edible vegetation and composting facilities, as well as communal spaces for relaxing and enjoying the psychological benefits of simply being in a green natural space.

Neighbourhoods are much more localised. People work from home, or nearby telecommuting hubs, for some of the week. They walk and cycle to get to the shops, services and recreation facilities. Neighbours know each other and look out for elderly residents who might need a hand with shopping or getting around. Children walk to school and tend kitchen school gardens, proudly taking home their harvested vegetables and fruit to share – and in the process, eating a nutritious diet. Productive street trees flourish along local streets, providing shaded walkways and with some well-designed community spaces, the public realm is safe and lively.

The transport system is focused around efficient, safe and affordable public transport, well connected to residential areas and employment opportunities. Peak oil requires judicious use of automobiles, but as car share systems are everywhere, sustainable motoring is readily accessible. A network of dedicated cycling paths makes commuting by bike convenient, safe, economic and enjoyable for all.

Earlier this year, the Healthy Built Environments Program held a Symposium where participants worked on their own visions of a healthy city. These have been compiled in a booklet which you can download from the Program's website. While the visions are different, they all share in common the hope for an urban environment that is in tune with natural systems and supports healthy ways of living. Such a city is much more locally based and ecologically responsible, giving its citizens more time to enjoy their lives. So in looking forward, let's be hopeful and plan this future ■