

# Healthy Built Environments

Making our towns and cities walkable

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**It's good to start a new year refreshed with optimism and energy for the tasks, and no doubt challenges, ahead. 2014 is shaping up to be such a year for healthy built environments. We hope to see a new planning act, with health as an objective, setting the foundation for healthy built environments in planning policy and practice. A diverse range of opportunities will subsequently emerge – from state to local government, to private planning practices and innovative developers' offices, and across a raft of not-for-profit organisations. Local community groups, concerned parents and motivated individuals, all troubled by escalating rates of lifestyle related chronic disease, will be able to make the decision to be active, to eat healthy food and to connect with others who live or work nearby because the built environment supports everyone being healthy. And as we know, healthy behaviours, as part of day-to-day living, are critical in combatting major risk factors for chronic disease.**

The role of physical activity is particularly important. Physical activity helps to protect against heart disease and stroke, diabetes, and cancers such as colon and breast. It also diminishes the impact of clinical depression and anxiety. Further, the protective effects of physical activity are independent of obesity – so even if you are overweight, being active will make a positive contribution to your health [see more in the PCAL 'Why Active Living Statement']. Walking is one physical activity that's available to nearly everyone. Participation can occur from a very young age to well into later life, irrespective of cultural background, income levels and education.

These are all good reasons for planners to have a strong focus on creating neighbourhoods, precincts, suburbs, towns and cities that are walkable. For many, walkability is the foundation of a healthy built environment. A walkable environment is one where it is easy, safe and enjoyable to walk for both recreation and transport. Nevertheless, not all places have such qualities. Suburbs in the poorer parts of towns and cities are often not walkable making it difficult, if not impossible, for residents to be physically active, thereby exacerbating poor health throughout life.

So what are some of the considerations for planners to take into account in creating walkable environments? Accessibility is a key criterion. If we want to encourage walking for transport, the services and facilities that people need to use on a daily basis have to be close, as does public transport. When thinking about walking for recreation, paths have to be handy to residential areas so it's easy for people to use them. Connectivity is another principle of walkability, as is the quality of the infrastructure. Connections between walking and cycling paths, and quality green open space, are some of the issues here. Path width is an important consideration if walkers and cyclists are to be accommodated safely. Differently abled users, as well as parents with strollers and prams, may be another factor in determining the adequacy of shared paths. Facilities such as water fountains, seating (with shading), public toilets that are clean and well maintained, and rubbish bins are all characteristic of good quality walking infrastructure. Interesting things to see along the way, a pleasant ambient environment free of pollution and excessive noise will also encourage walking. And above all else, walkable areas are safe. Paths are free from trip and fall hazards and users perceive the locality to be safe for walking. This might mean ensuring that a wide range of demographic groups are out and about and that behaviour on shared paths is respectful of multiple users – signage is important here.

There are more and more resources to help planners create walkable environments. In December late last year, Transport for NSW released 'Sydney's Walking Future: Connecting people and places'. This policy document focuses on walking for transport and links to a set of background reports that

support the case for walkable environments. These are all available on the PCAL website ([www.pcal.nsw.gov.au](http://www.pcal.nsw.gov.au)). Information about the economic benefits of walking is also available here. It is estimated that achieving a 5% switch to walking from vehicle trips of less than one kilometre (around a ten minute walk) would accrue benefits of \$134 million in the greater Sydney Metropolitan area. A 10% switch would be a staggering \$214 million. This evidence can be used by planners to argue the cost effective benefits of creating walkable environments.

There are lots more resources on walkability. Have a look at the Heart Foundation's 'Walkability Audit', which focuses on the key criteria of walkable environments for communities – walker friendliness, comfort, safety and convenience, and connectedness. VicHealth recently released a useful manual entitled 'Measuring Walking'. As well, there are many excellent international resources – some of them are listed on the Healthy Built Environments Program website at UNSW.

And this year in October, Sydney hosts 'Walk21', the world's leading conference on walking. There will be a wealth of research evidence, practice initiatives and inspiration for creating walkable environments. See the Conference website for further details: [www.walk21sydney.com/](http://www.walk21sydney.com/)

So get walking and activating healthy built environments! Peter McCue will be joining Susan Thompson in writing the Healthy Built Environments column in 2014 ■

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Good quality shared paths are essential infrastructure for a walkable environment