Healthy Built Environments –
The Value of Planning for Interdisciplinary Understandings

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Creating healthy built environments is an interdisciplinary endeavour. It requires disciplinary knowledge from the built environment – including planning, urban design, landscape architecture, as well as the health sciences – public health, clinical medicine and health promotion. And when we consider the broader context of environmental health, ecology and climate change, other disciplines have to be at the table.

Such challenges have been called ‘wicked problems’, as they require joined-up systems thinking with researchers, practitioners, policy makers and educators working collaboratively, respecting each other’s disciplinary knowledge and methodologies.

Planning has much to contribute here given its multi-disciplinary foundation and its focus on engaging a broad cross-section of professionals, as well as diverse communities, in delivering places that meet diverse needs, hopes and aspirations. This way of working begins in the classroom and continues through career-long professional development.

Education about healthy built environments is a good example of interdisciplinary learning. Such education draws from a range of built environment and health subjects, as well as diverse ways of looking at problems and working to solve them. NSW planners are benefiting from this type of learning – at university and, increasingly, as part of their professional development.

“Healthy Places and Spaces” is a national initiative of the Planning Institute of Australia, the Australian Local Government Association and the National Heart Foundation, with funding from the Australian Government’s Department of Health and Ageing. A web-based resource, it includes practical tools, case studies and guidelines for planning and developing sustainable communities to encourage healthy ways of living.

The Australian Heart Foundation is a leading health NGO at the vanguard of thinking about relationships between the built environment and health behaviour. The Heart Foundation provides free internet resources for professionals and students, including guides to designing healthy places, research on urban density and health, and checklists for neighbourhood walkability and food sensitive planning.