



# Digital Opportunities and Challenges

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New year, new you! An often-heard refrain as another January comes around—that time when we take a break from demanding professional lives and reflect on our priorities for the challenges that no doubt lie ahead. Getting and keeping fit and healthy is regularly on the agenda! In our first column for 2018 we consider how the digital world can assist us both personally and professionally to create a health supportive environment.

## Digital developments

Healthy built environments are no stranger to the digital world.<sup>1</sup> The Pokémon Go smartphone gaming phenomenon was heralded as a great way to get kids outdoors and active. The craze demonstrated how gaming digital technology can be used for health benefit, while highlighting the dangers of individuals overly focussing attention on small screens oblivious to their surroundings. Several cities have now embedded traffic lights in footpaths to help protect smartphone users who forget to look up and register what's happening in their environment.<sup>2</sup>

The manner in which technology is incorporated within our lifestyles will determine its impact upon our health, as well as providing opportunities and challenges for planners. Driverless cars are one such example.<sup>3</sup> Some of the dangers associated with driver inattention may be reduced with the introduction of autonomous vehicles, but they won't increase our physical activity levels if one type of car is swapped for another. An alternative vision of private transport as part of a unified mobility system is demanded—one that encourages vehicle sharing, efficient and effective public transport integrated with appropriate land-uses, all easily accessed via walking and cycling.

Dockless bikes, a recent feature of the urban streetscape in Australian cities, can be a convenient way to access a bike anywhere and anytime. Just download the app and away you go, but in practice these bikes pose considerable management challenges, especially their haphazard placement causing dangers for pedestrians. In response, guidelines have been imposed on bike sharing companies by councils in Sydney, Melbourne and

Canberra.<sup>4</sup> Cars parked across footpaths pose similar dangers. A balance needs to be found to help ensure the share programs become a safe active option of an integrated mobility network.

## Tools for professionals

And how can we as professionals create supportive environments for health and wellbeing—what's out there in the digital world to help? The increasing availability of large data sets enables digital mapping, which is a powerful way to demonstrate spatial differences within and between cities and regions. At a national level, the Australian Urban Research Infrastructure Network (AURIN) has much to offer researchers and policy makers.<sup>5</sup> While free, users interact with the site via their organisational affiliation gaining access to over 1800 data sets from 80 sources encompassing health, urban planning, infrastructure and demographics. The site is complex and powerful—well worth a look!

Late 2017 saw the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet launch the National



Figure 1: Dockless bikes are a recent feature of our urban environments.

Cities Performance Framework.<sup>6</sup> This is a dashboard which includes indicators of 'productivity and progress' in 21 Australian cities to track their social, economic and environmental 'progress and performance'. There is data on a range of measures (from infrastructure and investment, to housing costs, liveability, sustainability and planning regulation) which can be selected for each city in varying combinations (for example, dwellings with access to green space).

In the context of healthy built environments, another tool of interest is Australia's Health Tracker by Area.<sup>7</sup> This interactive site has data on chronic diseases and risk factors, which can be mapped across the country giving planners a better understanding of how well the environment is supporting healthy behaviours.

## Personal tools for health and wellbeing

And finally, a few thoughts to keep you on track to achieve those health and wellbeing goals as the year unfolds. There are many on-line tools to motivate and monitor your physical fitness progress. We'd be interested to know your favourites! To keep on track with healthy eating, the Georges Institute for Global Health's 'FoodSwitch' smartphone application allows you to assess food labels while shopping and make the healthiest selection.<sup>8</sup> And as the year gets busier, don't forget to take time out—walk in green, leave your phone at home, take in the sounds of nature and breath in the silence as you refresh and recharge! ■

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-12/augmented-reality-why-2018-might-be-year-of-the-mainstream/9321472>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/25/this-city-embedded-traffic-lights-in-the-sidewalks-so-that-smartphone-users-dont-have-to-look-up/?utm\\_term=.fcdf52a8a9873](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/25/this-city-embedded-traffic-lights-in-the-sidewalks-so-that-smartphone-users-dont-have-to-look-up/?utm_term=.fcdf52a8a9873)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-03/driverless-cars-could-be-better-or-worse-for-our-health/9299104>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/bike-sharing-companies-have-three-months-to-comply-with-new-council-rules-20171219-h070vi.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://aurin.org.au/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://smart-cities.dashboard.gov.au/all-cities/overview>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.atlasesaustralia.com.au/ahpc/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.georgeinstitute.org/projects/foodswitch>