



Planning a Healthier Environment

The Planning Institute of Australia and its partners believe we need 'Healthy Spaces and Places'. **Anne Moroney** explains why



The facts of Australia's obesity epidemic are well known. With more than 60% of adults and one in four children overweight or obese this is widely seen as one of our greatest public health challenges.

The Preventative Health Taskforce, appointed by the Commonwealth Government in April 2008, has found that addressing the burden of chronic disease caused by obesity, tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption requires a coordinated, multi-pronged approach to reshape behaviours over time.

Healthy Spaces and Places fits the bill as one of these approaches. Its work will show how and why planners and the other built professions are critical contributors, along with the health professions, decision makers and communities, if Australia is to respond to the health burden of obesity and overweight.

Currently, the Healthy Spaces and Places project is developing a website and complementary National Planning Guide showing how well-designed spaces and places can encourage active living, so that more people regularly walk, cycle, use public transport and enjoy physical recreation.

The National Planning Guide and website, and associated advocacy work, aim to fill an identified gap at the national level. While research in multiple disciplines – medical, health

promotion and health prevention, urban studies and planning, and transport planning – has consistently concluded that there is a relationship between the built environment and health, there has not been the same consistency to solutions.

Healthy Spaces and Places is a partnership between the National Heart Foundation, the Australian Local Government Association and the Planning Institute of Australia, with funding and support by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Its overall aim is to show the connection between the built environment and people's lifelong health and wellbeing; to provide tools (often by way of example) to those who can make a difference when designing and building new places or redeveloping existing places; and to show qualitative research on the importance of the built environment (those spaces and places) to health and wellbeing.

The built environment can promote active living through design elements such as suburbs and neighbourhoods that people find interesting and easy to walk around; key facilities such as schools, shops, parks and public transport; provision of walking and cycling facilities (eg footpaths and cycleways); facilities for physical activity (such as sports centres and swimming pools); activity centres with a variety of uses; and transport infrastructure and systems (including public transport), linking housing to jobs in commercial and business areas.

Planners and other built environment professions can help improve the health of people at every level from the strategic planning levels of state or metropolitan plans, to the detailed design of master planned neighbourhoods or centre redevelopment proposals. And it is not only obesity and overweight that are at issue. Research also shows that regular physical activity improves people's physical and mental health and wellbeing. It also engenders a sense of belonging in a community and is a fundamental building block of improving social capital.

In order to bring about long-term, consistent change, Healthy Spaces and Places is aimed at an audience of not only planners and other built environment professions but also decision makers including elected representatives in governments, communities and the health profession.

Each group has a role and responsibility in order for change to be systemic. Planners and the other built environment professions, governments (including elected representatives) and communities need to better understand how the built environment can benefit or adversely affect people's health; the health professions can provide the evidence in support of active living. Communities can push for change with their elected representatives.

By bringing together planners and other built professions and health professions, Healthy Spaces and Places aims to bridge gaps between the 'languages' of these different groups that may have impeded understandings and actions in the past.





Another strength of Healthy Spaces and Places is that it will actively promote examples of successful practice and partnerships underway, by way of case studies. These case studies will apply to urban environments across the board: from retrofitting changes to transport infrastructure and urban design in established areas to incorporating healthy design and planning into new developments.

The genesis of Healthy Spaces and Places was work undertaken in 2006 through the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, looking at issues of obesity for older Australians. That work identified that long-term success will not come by focusing on one group alone – that fundamental change needs us to be working comprehensively and in partnerships, to be focusing on people from childhood through to old age.

During 2008, the Healthy Spaces and Places project consulted throughout Australia, particularly via workshops held in each State and Territory. In addition to discussions and feedback on project Discussion Paper 'Towards a National Planning Guide', there were case studies of the types of partnerships and collaboration that can make a genuine difference.

At the Darwin workshop, Dorothy Morrison, Chief Executive of the Heart Foundation Northern Territory, presented the Foundation's national initiative 'Healthy by Design' and the Northern Territory's 'Active by Design' initiative through which, among other things, the Heart Foundation and the property development sector are working together to ensure new developments are designed for walking and cycling. This includes developing a walkability tool to help consumers critique their own communities and provide feedback.

Ideally, Morrison stated, good solutions are multi-disciplinary with a wide stakeholder base. Partnerships were essential. One of the roles the Heart Foundation saw for itself was to bring physical activity and health expertise into the spotlight. Others then needed to apply it. As Dorothy Morrison explained, "partnerships can help harness broader design and planning expertise to achieve more comprehensive, long term and effective urban living solutions."

Multi-faceted approaches were being taken, to use existing forums and networks, to learn from other states and to make a

difference to structures in the Northern Territory. As well, 'Active by Design' is working with remote communities.

In Adelaide, the work of the South Australian Active Living Coalition was presented. The Coalition is a collaborative forum for the planning and coordination of active living in South Australia. Its members include four SA Government agencies/departments, the Heart Foundation, the Cancer Council of South Australia, the Planning Institute (SA Division) and the Local Government Recreation Forum.



Currently, it has two major projects: an analysis of the South Australian planning system to identify opportunities for active living and issues that impact on these opportunities, and a pilot project, the Northgate stage three joint venture between industry and the South Australian Government, an example of integrating active living principles into a new residential development.

The Northgate joint venture has committed to a range of community building initiatives, including using the Heart Foundation's 'Healthy by Design' guidelines to foster a healthy and safe community; creating active open spaces, including bike and walking paths; providing community focal points and a community garden; and designing socially responsive and equitable housing types to meet diverse socio-economic and senior needs.

The Coalition is involved at pre-design, design, post-design and ongoing maintenance. It has also been able to identify planning issues outside the site that impact on active living opportunities for surrounding residents, identifying opportunities for remedial actions.

The Healthy Spaces and Places National Planning Guide and website are to be launched in mid 2009.

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For more information, go to www.planning.org.au and follow the links to Healthy Spaces and Places.

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The Planning Institute of Australia's Discussion Paper 'Towards a National Planning Guide' is available on-line at www.planning.org.au

The Heart Foundation's 'Healthy by Design' guidelines to foster a healthy and safe community can be viewed at www.heartfoundation.org.au



Palmerston City Council Northern Territory