



Healthy Spaces and Places:

A national guide to designing places for active living



Author: Anne Moroney

*Project Manager, Healthy Spaces and Places Project
Planning Institute of Australia*

Australia has an obesity epidemic with more than 60 per cent of adults and one in four children overweight or obese.¹ This is seen as one of our greatest public health challenges and with statistics such as these, it is not hard to see why:

- » Based on current trends, the percentage of the Australian population who will be overweight or obese will have grown to a record 73 per cent in 2025, including one-third of children and three-quarters of the adult population.²
- » Recent trends shown by research into Australian children predict that their life expectancy will fall by two years by the time they are 20 years of age, taking them back to levels seen for males in 2001 and females in 1997.³
- » High body mass alone was responsible for 7.5 per cent of the total burden of disease in 2003, including 20 per cent of cardiovascular disease burden. High body mass and physical inactivity were responsible for 60 per cent of the burden for type 2 diabetes.⁴
- » The total financial cost of obesity in Australia in 2008, not including overweight, was estimated at \$8.3 billion.⁵
- » A projected rise in the rates of type 2 diabetes, mainly due to expected growth in prevalence of obesity, will increase healthcare costs by \$5.6 billion each year (from \$1.4 to \$7 billion) by 2032.⁶

The Preventative Health Taskforce, appointed by the Australian 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. The Taskforce is due to report in June 2009.

In its recent report on the inquiry into obesity in Australia entitled *Weighing it up: Obesity in Australia*⁷, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing recognises that urban planning plays a significant role in creating healthy urban environments which increase levels of physical activity and decrease sedentary behaviour. The Committee further suggests that healthy urban environments can encourage healthy living and that urban planning has been identified as a key driver of obesity and an area where action must be taken in order to reduce the levels of obesity in Australia⁸. It should be noted that the Planning Institute of Australia made a submission to the inquiry and appeared at a hearing.

The Standing Committee acknowledges that while ultimate responsibility for the implementation of design strategies lies with local government, it is state and territory governments' policy and legislative frameworks which set the scene for environments that embed physical activity and healthier environments.⁹ Further,

The Committee recommends that the Federal Government work with all levels of government and the private sector to develop nationally consistent urban planning guidelines which focus on creating environments that encourage Australians to be healthy and active (Recommendation 13).¹⁰

1 Australian Government, Preventative Health Taskforce, 2008, *National Preventative Health Taskforce, Technical Report No 1, Obesity in Australia: a need for urgent action*.

2 Ibid.

3 Australian Government, Preventative Health Taskforce, 2008, *Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020*.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, 2009, *Weighing it up: Obesity in Australia* (report on the inquiry into obesity in Australia as tabled on 1 June 2009) www.apf.gov.au/House/committee/haa/obesity/report.htm

8 Ibid para 3.1.35

9 Ibid para 3.136

10 Ibid Recommendation 13



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What we need: *Healthy Spaces and Places*

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) has been fortunate to have received funding support over the past two years from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing to develop, in collaboration with the Australian Local Government Association and the National Heart Foundation of Australia, a national guide for planners and design professionals addressing how the built environment can influence people's physical and mental health and wellbeing.

The *Healthy Spaces and Places* project is being developed as a practical guide demonstrating how and why planners and other design professions are critical contributors, along with the health professions, decision makers and communities, if Australia is to respond to the growing burden of largely preventable diseases and the ill effects of largely sedentary lifestyles and car dependency.

Healthy Spaces and Places 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
- » to show qualitative research on the importance of the built environment (those spaces and places) to health and wellbeing, and
- » 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 *Healthy Spaces and Places* project aims 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.





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 (eg swimming pools)
- » activity centres with a variety of uses
- » transport infrastructure and systems (including public transport) linking housing to jobs in commercial and business areas.

Planners and design 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 over-weight 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.

Planning, health and sustainability are closely linked. Building on the widespread recognition of the principles of sustainable development, due to the significant challenges that confront society today including climate change, fossil fuel dependency, food security and rising greenhouse gas emissions, healthy planning contributes to sustainable outcomes for all because it:

- » encourages active transport—walking, cycling and using public transport—rather than car dependency, especially for local trips, and
- » encourages socially inclusiveness and safe communities where residents feel part of their local community, and are engaged and active.

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 design 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 already 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.

Timeframes—what’s next?

It is thanks to the active contribution made by many PIA members, together with many design and health practitioners who have assisted with the development of the project, particularly through a series of workshops held in 2008 and, more recently, through focus group testing in March–May 2009. This feedback has helped shape the manner in which the information is presented to be:

- » evidence based policy with strong connections to recent research findings
- » largely web-based with supporting printed material
- » demonstrating examples of good practice
- » a reliable source of information.



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Substantial work is continuing on the project. Expert reviewers have provided comment to ensure the robustness, relevance and up-to-date-ness of material. The release of the *Healthy Spaces and Places* website and printed documents is due shortly in mid-2009. In the meantime, for more information, go to the PIA website (www.planning.org.au) and look for *Healthy Spaces and Places* on the home page, or contact the project team by email at healthyplaces@planning.org.au or phone on 02 6262 5933.

