

HEALTHY SPACES AND PLACES: AN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GUIDE FOR HEALTH AND PLANNING

Stephanie Knox
Planning Institute of Australia

Rolf Fenner
Australian Local Government Association

Healthy Spaces and Places is a new national planning guide that focuses on promoting built environments that make a tangible contribution to health and wellbeing.

The main resource is a website: www.healthyplaces.org.au. There is also a hard copy overview document, *Healthy Spaces and Places: a national guide to designing places for healthy living*. For those who do not have online access there is also CD reference resource available.

Healthy Spaces and Places is an Australian first in that experts from health, local government, planning and design have worked together to produce the interactive guide. It includes wide-ranging research evidence about the connections between health and planning and why planners should give priority to facilitating people movements rather than just catering for car movements when planning. It provides useful guidelines, practical tools and interesting case studies to help with planning, designing and creating sustainable communities that encourage healthy living and wellbeing.

Healthy Spaces and Places has been developed through a unique collaboration between the National Heart Foundation (NHF), the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). There was extensive consultation during its development and expert review of content. The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing funded the guide.

Healthy Spaces and Places arose out of widespread concerns about the high levels of preventable diseases in Australia and the role that the built environment may have in this space. Somewhat surprising for a sport loving nation, Australia is one of the most overweight of the developed nations, with overweight and obesity affecting about half of Australian adults and up to one in four children. It is estimated that almost 9 million Australians – 54% of adult population – do not undertake enough physical activity on a daily basis.

Not doing enough physical activity doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity, and increases the risk of breast and bowel cancer, depression and anxiety. Cardiovascular disease is Australia's leading cause of

death, with almost 23,000 deaths in 2007. Diabetes is the fastest growing chronic disease in Australia, with about 275 people developing the condition every day.

Physically inactive Australian adults are costing the health care system \$1.5 billion a year.

Research shows that the built environment can significantly affect people's desire to be active, as well as facilitate their actual levels of physical activity. Ten per cent of all car trips are less than one kilometre (the equivalent to a ten minute walk); thirty per cent are less than three kilometres. There are substantial direct benefits in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions with encouraging people to walk or cycle rather than drive. People friendly spaces and places can promote engaged lifestyles by encouraging walking, cycling, public transport and both different forms of active and passive recreational activity. Places where cars get priority over people movements or poor urban design can severely limit our opportunities and desires for being physically active.

What makes A healthy place?

The way the built environment is designed, planned and built affects how physically active people will be. For example, poorly designed low density suburbs with detached houses and very few (if any) community facilities, distant from public transport, reduces residents' choices in relation to accessibility and opportunities to interact with their immediate neighbourhood. *Healthy Spaces and Places* includes urban design principles considered necessary to design and plan for increased health and wellbeing benefits.

Towns and cities, neighbourhoods, public spaces and places, shopping areas, town and neighbourhood centres, designed for all stages of life will result in greater use and physical activity, and provide for increased social interaction and inclusion. This can result in improved health outcomes, including greater levels of general physical fitness, and improved mental health wellbeing.

The right urban density, mixed land use and higher levels of street connectivity can increase walkability and an individual's desire to walk, cycle or use public transport. People walk more if they perceive streets are safe and aesthetically pleasing and attractive.

Design Principles

Consideration of design principles such as land use mix, connectivity and density is essential when designing a Healthy Place. *Healthy Spaces and Places* includes information, including links and references, about ten different design principles. These are active transport, aesthetics, connectivity, environments for all people, mixed density, mixed land use, parks and open space, safety and surveillance, social inclusion and supporting infrastructure.

Development Types

Healthy planning principles can be incorporated into a range of development types including schools, shopping precincts, neighbourhood planning and design, infill development, parks, regional recreation facilities, retirement accommodation, public spaces and workplaces. Advice on key considerations and practice implications are outlined for these development types.

Making It Happen

Healthy planning calls for multiple tools and cross-sectoral approaches. It cannot be stated enough: every planning policy, development assessment decision, planning process or action can benefit people's overall level of health and wellbeing. Everyday planning decisions can make a difference. Small changes can count as much as big or strategic ones. Many different actions can lead to improved health and wellbeing. What is required is for planners to routinely consider planning and design for people movements as well as car movements.

Specific actions that can contribute to the process of creating healthy spaces and places include the following:

- Research
- Integration
- Implementation
- Education & Training
- Partnerships
- Measuring Success

Resources

The website also includes a photos gallery which is a further source of materials that will be useful when preparing reports, submissions, presentations, talks etc (with appropriate acknowledgement), case studies and references including websites, links, a glossary and information about what is happening in Australia as well as internationally.

Conclusion

The strengths of *Healthy Spaces and Places* include the synergies that arise from the three peak national organisations working together collaboratively, enabling traditional silos to be broken down and its practical, hands-on approach. The case studies on the website show the variety of ways how built environment planning that is inclusive, strategic and holistic — can make a positive contribution to all those people living in our communities.

For more information go to: www.healthyplaces.org.au