

The role of planning and urban design in fostering active, healthy communities

Planning and urban design can have a significant effect on physical activity and health outcomes.

National data indicates that in some parts of Melbourne, more than 30 per cent of residents are obese, up to 12 per cent of residents have diabetes, more than 18 per cent suffer from circulatory system diseases, and up to 14 per cent of the population have asthma.

The alarming figures were presented during a forum focussing on the role of planning and design of the built environment in delivering better health outcomes. Co-hosted by the Metropolitan Planning Authority and the NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence in Healthy Liveable Communities, the forum touched on demographics, hospital admissions, walkability of our suburbs, design and development of new suburbs, and the effect that future population growth will have on our health system and way of life.

Professor Billie Giles-Corti, Director of the McCaughey VicHealth Centre for Community Wellbeing, presented an evaluation of the impact of Liveable Neighbourhood Guidelines on communities in Western Australia. The research covered 73 new housing developments from 2003-2012, evaluating the impact of “Liveable Neighbourhoods” on walking and cycling behaviour, public transport use and sense of community.

Prof Giles-Corti said that a key finding was that residents were far more likely to walk when liveable neighbourhood guidelines were implemented.

“There are barriers to healthy design such as timing of infrastructure delivery which increases car dependency, but there are ways to provide incentives to developers to incorporate healthy design principles and to fast track infrastructure delivery,” she said.

Obesity has been described by many experts as one of the biggest health issues of our generation, comparable to the negative health effects of excessive smoking.

Up to 25 per cent of Australia's tax revenue is devoted to healthcare, with instances of diabetes, heart disease and chronic disease on the rise.

Colin Sindall, Director of Prevention & Population Health, Department of Health & Human Services focussed on how designing environments and public spaces to encourage physical activity and social interaction could enhance health and wellbeing.

Victoria is experiencing high population growth, with more than 102,000 new residents calling the state home during the past year. This is due to a number of factors, including a recent baby boom, interstate migration and immigration.

Metropolitan Planning Authority CEO Peter Seamer said it was important to plan for the future to ensure that residents continued to enjoy the high quality of lifestyle that Melbourne and Victoria's regional centres have to offer.

“One of the key pillars of our planning approach is developing a network of 20 minute neighbourhoods, where people can access jobs, services, open space, groceries and the other things they need within a 20 minute walk, cycle, car trip or public transport trip from their home,” Mr Seamer said.

“This means providing better paths and trails, locating key services close to transport nodes, and encouraging business growth and the expansion of employment hubs across the city to give people the opportunity to find jobs close to home.

“We also need to ensure that we have access to great public spaces and parks and that planning and development activities improve links to services, town centres and open space.”

Acting Victorian Government Architect Jill Garner said the removal of level crossings to improve transport links would act as a catalyst for urban renewal. The Office of the Victorian Government Architect is working closely with both government and industry to encourage better design of intermodal transport hubs that integrate local walking paths, bike trails, public transport and cars.

Successful urban renewal extends to design consideration for schools and apartments. “The principles for apartment design are linked to the liveability and health of our city,” Ms Garner said.

“We are also working with all parties involved in the development of schools. We promote the concept of a school master plan being seen as an ‘education campus’ design that encourages greater community use of facilities and open space.”

Lend Lease’s State Business Development Manager (Communities), Sean Pinan highlighted how town centre design had contributed to increased cycling and walking within the Laurimar precinct. This approach included the integration of safe cycling and walking trails to the Laurimar Primary School, which has the highest proportion of active trips to school in Victoria.