

24 June 2011

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002

RE: Parliamentary Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health

Dear Secretary,

As an academic with a passion for planning and designing healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods, I am writing to provide this submission to the Parliament. I appreciate the opportunity to address terms of reference (1) review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and wellbeing and (2) identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes in Victoria.

Kevin Lynch, a notable designer and observer of urban places described a good city as “one in which children can grow and develop to the extent of their powers, where they can build their confidence and become actively engaged in the world, yet be autonomous and capable of managing their own affairs”. Victoria has the capacity to design, develop and retrofit its cities to create environments that influence children’s healthy development.

Yet current design patterns of poor street layouts, inaccessible facilities, and vehicular congestion depict an inhospitable landscape for children. These design patterns provide few opportunities for children to freely and safely navigate their neighbourhoods autonomously (whether on foot, bicycle or skateboard, etc.). The health and developmental benefits of encouraging children’s independent travel are well documented. For example, independent travel gives children opportunities to make judgements about where to go, what to do and who to see. Learning to make such choices gradually prepares them for adulthood. Moreover, independent travel provides the incremental and incidental exercise necessary to promote an active lifestyle. Given these benefits, it is important to ensure that the built environment does not act as a deterrent for autonomous travel among children.

As part of my doctoral thesis, I conducted a study investigating children's perspectives of their walks to and from school. Specifically, I was interested in learning about what makes their walks fun. Much research has been conducted on what makes neighbourhoods safe for children often at the expense of making such areas inviting and attractive to children. Although conducted in the Sydney metropolitan area, I believe the findings of my study can assist the Victorian Environment and Planning References Committee. As reported in a paper I submitted and presented at the State of Australian Cities Conference in 2007, there are planning and design strategies that can encourage children's healthy development:

- Augment the neighbourhood with natural amenities
- Invest in neighbourhood diversity
- Recognise the importance of companionship

I refer you to the conference paper for additional clarification of these points

(<http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cityfutures/SOAC/iwillbenotanerd.pdf>).

I strongly encourage you to assess the nature of current and future neighbourhood development and focus on the importance of making attractive and safe places accessible for children. By advocating the creation of welcoming places for children, the number of opportunities for children to exercise their autonomous travel and the health benefits associated with doing so can increase.

This submission represents my personal views. As this is a public document, I would like to request that my contact information be kept confidential. Thank you for considering this submission. If you need further clarification of this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Vivian Romero

Supplement: Children's Development, The Built Environment and School Travel