Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health

City of Stonnington submission

14 July 2011

Review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being.

A number organisations and reports have commented on the strong connection between health and wellbeing and the design and structure of towns, cities and regions. Several of these reports are listed in the references section at the end of this submission.

Health improvements at the population level are difficult to measure in the short or medium term and the link between cause and effect can be tenuous at best. Consequently, planning for health can be reliant on educated guesswork rather than concrete evidence. In obesity prevention, for example, a number of education and dietary interventions have not proven effective despite initial high hopes.

In Stonnington, the recent renewal of the Glen Iris Wetlands as a walking destination, installation of lighting on bicycle paths and the urban renewal of the Glenferrie Road shopping strip has increased satisfaction with and use of these facilities. Whether this translates into improved physical or mental health is not yet determined.

Identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes in Victoria.

Public Space as defined in the Planning Scheme is fundamental to the wellbeing of the community and the environment and all categories of public open space need to be protected and maintained in a sustainable way.

Emerging trends in public spaces

The City of Stonnington Public Realm Strategy identifies the following emerging issues in public spaces:

- Community desire for different and non-traditional types of recreation. Traditional sport is always popular, but other types of sports such as skateboarding and personal training are increasing in popularity.

- The shrinking of private outdoor space, particularly in the western suburbs of Stonnington. For example, the increase in apartment dwellers has led to a decrease in the availability of private open space, and a subsequent increase in the use of viable public space.

- Changing demographics and changing needs. Over time, the age and culture of the population changes, which may dictate a change in the way spaces are designed and maintained.

- Sustainability, including reduced energy consumption and greenhouse emissions, sustainable materials, reduced water consumption in parks and public buildings and water sensitive urban design.

- A gradual increase in registered dog numbers together with an increase in population density and a corresponding reduction in private open space has resulted in increased wear, tear and damage to open space and particularly sports grounds in dog off-leash areas.

Water sensitive urban design (WSUD)

Examples of WSUD in public spaces include:

- Rain gardens – garden beds that capture and treat stormwater run-off in streets and parks, filtering pollutants prior to excess water entering Stonnington's storm water system and waterways.
- Water tanks (above and below ground) for irrigation of sports fields and garden beds.
- Use of low-water consumption vegetation.

Virtual and physical public realm

Public space is increasingly being used for computer-based virtual 'chat' in a manner similar to the bench seat's traditional use for face-to-face chat. Such chat is particularly well-utilised by younger people. There are opportunities here to embrace emerging technologies in our public realms, to encourage outdoor and group interaction. Providing communications technology (e.g. wireless internet or hot spots) within public spaces (particularly dense urban spaces) with a strong community service orientation has benefits, including better access to information, and potential physical interaction between internet users in public spaces.

Non-traditional sports and activities

The provision of traditional sports activities is fundamental to the provision of quality public space in Stonnington. However, there is an increasing need to accommodate non-traditional activities. While many areas provide space they are not designed to facilitate non-traditional activities. For example:

- Outdoor fitness training requires fitness station equipment or appropriate grassed areas for training groups.
- Dog walking requires parks or special areas within parks designed for off leash dog exercise.
- Youth activities require areas like Community Youth Activity Nodes that include space to 'hang out', skate parks and BMX tracks.
- Markets and events spaces need to be highly adaptive and flexible for small and large-scale events.
- Adult play requires non-standard play and recreation equipment, such as large-scaled sculptural play elements, climbing walls, and interactive public art to encourage adult activity and interaction.

Mini street green spaces (pocket parks)

Many small green spaces are created through road closures and extending nature strips further into the road. Though small, these spaces provide much needed green space and amenity in areas where open space is limited. Well-coordinated green spaces can create a green fabric for a suburb.

Controlled commercial uses in public space

There is a tradition of providing hospitality functions in public space. Small cafes can provide the opportunity for social activities and facilities sought by the community. It is not suggested that commercial activities should be a common element of public spaces, but in selected cases their addition can be of benefit to the community.

Shared-use spaces

These areas, where the road and pedestrian surface is one level surface, promote a balance between car, pedestrian and bike use, rather than creating a space where vehicles predominate. Shared-use spaces are becoming more popular throughout Victoria and Australia.

Community gardens

These spaces provide horticultural growing spaces or plots for people without gardens or with only small private gardens. They are highly valued shared spaces that can become important social, environmental and educational hubs.

Community streets

There is an opportunity to encourage and enable local street communities to form and then play a part in local sustainable actions. This can take the form of street parties and activities, community street tree planting, edible fruit trees, productive use of nature strips, group composting and the safe use of streets for play and people.

Public realm as economic value

Public spaces are increasingly providing space for activities, events and commercial facilities that add economic value to the broader community. For example, seasonal events in suitably sized and located parks bring pleasure to the community, as well as additional visitors and commercial patronage to the area.

New trends in private areas that contribute to the public realm

Private space contributes significantly to the character, amenity and function of public space. One term used to explain this is 'borrowed landscape', meaning that the public space borrows elements such as gardens and private buildings from the broader landscape. It is important to note that private areas are not directly controlled by the Council. A productive dialogue between Council planning and new development is encouraged to ensure development contributes to quality and experience of public space. The emerging issues discussed below are significant as they contribute to the future shape of the public realm.

Private–public pedestrian links

These include pedestrian path links through private developments and ensure pedestrian connectivity is maintained or enhanced in the area.

The private forest

Mature trees within private gardens contribute significantly to Stonnington's green character. Their value to the public realm should not be overlooked.

Vertical green walls and green roofs

Green walls (vegetation grown specifically on walls) and green roofs on private buildings that are highly visible to the broader public contribute to the amenity of the public realm. Green walls and roofs are increasingly being used in new developments to improve the sustainability of buildings and their public interface. In dense urban areas, these green elements provide a new form of city greening.

Landscape setbacks

Setbacks occur where the lower floor of a building is set back from the property line along the street frontage, providing additional green space.

Setbacks for buildings are regulated through traditional urban planning tools and spaces. Designed and managed appropriately, their contribution to the streetscape will increase in importance as areas become denser and private open space is limited.

Public art in the public realm

Public art can contribute to the public realm more comprehensively when the artwork or art program is integrated with the values and design of public spaces. Many new forms of contemporary art reinforce physical and cultural links to the site.

Public art in developments

The use of public art as part of larger developments is to be encouraged to further contribute to the quality of the public realm.

Stonnington's Public Realm Strategy identifies the following potential opportunities for improvement of public spaces:

- Better utilisation of railway land to increase the amount of open space. This requires negotiation and agreement with railway authorities.
- Improving the number of trees for shade, amenity and biodiversity.
- Review small parks to ascertain if they are fit for purpose and provide meaningful public space.
- In some areas consider small road closures to allow street tree planting in areas with few parks and very narrow streets.
- Timely implementation of masterplans.
- Negotiating quality maintenance regimes with utility authorities and programs for spaces that are not council owned but are perceived as Council facilities (e.g. railway reserve land and freeway easements) areas.

<u>Increasing public space to meet growth</u>

According to the Metropolitan Melbourne Investigation Discussion Paper (VEAC Oct 2010), Stonnington has the second lowest amount of public open space as a proportion of the land area of any Victorian Municipality at 6.7% while the average across Metropolitan Melbourne is 17.9%.

Comparison of Public Space* **with Neighbouring Municipalities**

Council	Ha of Open Space	% of area	Population	Ha per 1000 population	m^2 per person
Stonnington	182.0	7.0	89083	2.0	20
Boroondara	665.0	11.0	158,701	4.1	41
Port Phillip	435.0	21.0	78,227	5.5	55
Glen Eira	163.0	4.2	117,199	1.3	13
City of Yarra	235.0	12.2	68,800	3.4	34
Melbourne	565.0	15.5	57,200	9.9	99

Source: City of Stonnington Public Realm Strategy. * Figures apply to green spaces only

The 2008 Planning for Community Infrastructure in Growth Areas report suggests a total provision rate for active and passive open space of 26.4 m^2 per person. Though aimed at Victorian new growth areas, the principles can be applied broadly to all councils.

With Stonnington's population anticipated to grow to 109,705 by 2021 there would be a total open space deficit of 108ha using the above benchmark. Even to retain a similar open space amenity to what exists currently; Stonnington needs to acquire approximately 6.9ha, over the next 10 years. 6.9 ha of additional open space would cost $285m (in today's dollars). This would equate to an average annual expenditure of $28.5m on the acquisition of open space to meet the anticipated population increase. Clearly in the context of the municipal budget this is untenable.

Council will therefore need to do as much as possible to ensure developments provide their own open space, and that open space contributions from developers are recovered to fund future open space purchases and improvement. In particular, there should be bigger contributions from new development particularly for the inclusion of pedestrian links and cycling to destinations.

However, it is unlikely that these measures will do much to mitigate the projected open space deficits outlined above. It is important to pursue alternative open space opportunities by redevelopment of Council owned sites, gaining high quality design outcomes in other areas of the public realm such as roadways/walkways, and pursuing opportunities for development of other public land such as railway corridors.

The City of Stonnington is investigating the establishment of a program for strategic acquisition of property, and the potential for budgeting to allocate an annual sum toward the program.

<u>Key goals for the preservation of future open space amenity:</u>

Future public space strategies in inner urban areas should include new public space acquisition and should reflect the great diversity of ways of making use of public spaces. In particular, more pocket parks are needed to add to the greenness and social connectedness of the community.

Stonnington has recently identified the following key goals for the preservation of future open space amenity:

- Increase the size of existing public open space areas by actively acquiring strategic parcels of land.

- Establish a forward program in the annual budget to support the ongoing acquisition of strategic parcels of land.

- Investigate opportunities for use or redevelopment of non traditional public spaces to improve public open space e.g. Cato Street car park, other Council car parks, development forecourts where appropriate for passive and active recreation.

- Investigate the opportunities within the planning scheme to increase the open space contribution requirements from developers.

- Investigate the opportunities within the planning scheme to require developers particularly of high rise residential apartments to provide open space as part of the development e.g. internal courtyards, roof top gardens etc.

- Investigate the opportunities within the planning scheme to require developers to provide set back/forecourt opportunities to augment the width of the adjacent roadway/pedestrian way thereby increasing the available public realm.

- Explore opportunities to increase linkages and the quality of existing linkages along railway lines, waterways and other government owned/controlled land.

- Pursue ventures with other public authorities to improve the quality and accessibility of their land with improved vegetation programs.

<u>Enhance Community Safety</u>

Permeability is the 'blurring of the edges' of design so people are encouraged to enter/pass through an area. Permeability can increase usage of a site, increase public surveillance and therefore increase safety. It should be noted that residents (e.g. near Chadstone Shopping Centre) have expressed a preference for a lack of permeability to maintain a clear distinction between their local neighbourhood and large-scale commercial uses.

Fence heights can affect the perception of permeability and hence safety. Front fence heights could be legislated to be low or non-existent which increases both actual and perceived safety of those in the public space.

<u>Encourage Links</u>

The Stonnington Public Realm Strategy identifies four key categories of public space types: hubs, streets, green spaces and links. Links are generally long linear spaces that form important pedestrian, cycle and natural links through the municipality. Links are the less obvious public realm type, however they contribute strongly to the permeability and 'walkability' of the environment.

Links include: interconnecting green spaces such as the Gardiner's Creek path way, interconnecting waterways such as the Yarra, infrastructure such as the railways, bicycle lanes and shared pathways and pedestrian links. Links encourage movement hence they promote health and wellbeing.

Integrate flexible and active uses

Diverse communities are healthy communities so good environmental design ideally includes a range of different commercial and residential uses. It is important to include accommodation for different types of people and consider the variety of family structures.

Flexible use of community space, for example the use of car parks as basketball courts, for car boot sales etc to create a sense of public ownership of community space. One option could be to use land along railway lines for community uses, such as gardens.

In conjunction with good lighting and open surveillance, an active environment (e.g. gyms, coffee shops deli, supermarkets) operating over as much of the day as possible increases the perception of safety and usage of open space.

Public space in front of buildings can be very important in creating a sense of place for people to rest and take stock of where they are. Good design should incorporate focal and meeting points such as sculptures to create a sense of place. The inclusion of wider footpaths, for example can allow a slow, meandering passage through an environment rather than the frantic rushing that narrow paths can encourage. This contributes to 'ownership' of public space by those who use it.

Create 'neighbourhood hearts'

Currently, inner urban neighbourhood centres are most commonly defined by a row of shops. These local 'centres' can often lack a 'heart' and we need to provide more well-rounded spaces to encourage neighbourhood hearts. Well done, local strip shopping can promote health and wellbeing by promoting smaller more local neighbourhoods and creating social connections that are especially valued by older people.

The quantum leap of the future is to investigate ways current neighbourhood 'centres' can become true neighbourhood centres incorporating a public heart (for example as has been done in Barcelona and Vancouver). We need to consider current and future needs and ask what is needed for neighbourhood centres to function as a true social, economic and physical neighbourhood centres. This would be a truly transformational leap that would result in greater wellbeing.

A policy-co-ordinated focus is required and this may require serious intervention. Ideally, local and state input is needed with a 50-year timetable in order to leave a legacy for future generations to improve the lives of today's children and their children.

In the meantime, we can begin to increase wellbeing now, by looking at the dynamics of neighbourhoods and strengthening them through targeted interventions, in agreement with the community.

<u>Design for people</u>

Environmental design must address not just buildings, transport and ecology, but also the people who are its actual or desired users. British architect Christopher Alexander says 'Positive urban spaces need to better provide for people, their feelings, for their needs and their emotional life'.

The creation of pedestrian malls can introduce a human scale to urban environments. However, designing malls is a delicate process and one that can take some time to get right. They can most effectively be made to work by capitalising on the built form, creating strong pedestrian links and by ensuring that people have a reason to visit

<u>Preference sustainable transport</u>

Designing for sustainable transport is an important element of designing for both mental and physical health and wellbeing. There needs to be a consistent State-wide agenda to promote sustainable transport and to prioritise roads for walking/cycling over roads for cars. To work, this requires co-operation and collaboration by neighbouring councils (e.g. IMAP) so initiatives don't cease at the border of one or two LGAs.

Support structures such as child care and community centres provided by council need to be easily accessible by public transport.

<u>The role of councils</u>

It is particularly important for councils to work within existing structures and resources to ensure that consideration to environments that support physical activity is integrated across council policy and planning processes.

The next round of strategic planning should be neighbourhood-focused and include the strategic purchasing of properties for public use and as social gathering places to support mental and physical wellbeing. It is vital to have a range of types of uses to allow for a range of different ways of engaging with the space – from observing to full participation.

Public sectors can be influential as can negotiate with applicants for planning permits – but the needs of each sector are often opposed.

Determine opportunities to influence environmental planning and design for health, including consideration of the role of legislation, guidelines, and public-private partnerships, and the costs and benefits of various options.

The strongest opportunities to influence environmental planning and design for health are centred on shared public/private spaces negotiated with the aim of good health and wellbeing outcomes. For example, in an area such as Windsor Station which has a lot of movement through it, the surrounds could be developed to create an urban plaza where people could stop as well as pass through. This would also encourage community safety.

The Victorian government role is to set a new agenda, for instilling a new set of values around a 21st Century mindset (for example road prioritisation). We need State-led genuine discussion around a co-ordinated policy platform with the objective of improving people's lives.

The Victorian government should consider a much more substantial co-contribution to new environmental design that promotes health and wellbeing. The co-contribution should be towards

both developers and councils as both have a vital role to play in implementing design for health and wellbeing.

The most effective and enriching places are developed through local initiatives so it is vital that this is the process we continue to support in future.
Planning Schemes should be based around a Social Environments for Health framework. The Transition Towns program is an example of a movement aiming for lifestyles that are more sustainable and connected to the community.

Sustainable Transport

To reduce reliance on cars, it has been suggested that car parking in new apartment buildings close to activity centres and public transport be restricted with residents ineligible for street parking permits. This could be done at local government level but, it is highly likely that such a policy would be overturned by VCAT in the current economic and political climate.

Some principles for good sustainable transport design include:

- Locating things in appropriate spaces – within walkable distance. The optimal location of services and facilities can be influenced State government investment decisions.

- Focusing on general hubs that are community/activity centres aimed at all ages and socio-economic backgrounds with a mixed range of purposes rather than aimed at one group.

- Setting a consistent state-wide agenda to promote sustainable transport and to prioritise roads for walking/cycling over roads for cars.

- Allocating a significant amount of money and thought needs to be put into this and sustainable transport should be prioritised.

- Greening spaces that are comfortable to walk in summer to encourage walking rather than car use.

- Implementing high-quality mandatory sustainable design targets for all buildings and other design elements.

Sustainable Living

Health and wellbeing is influenced by the types of housing people live in. Housing built using passive design principles is both more comfortable and less expensive in the long run to live in, contributing to the economic environment for health.

The current energy rating system should be improved with the adoption of a better system such as the Greenstar energy rating system which is currently the best available.

Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS)

It is very difficult to translate health and well being objectives into the MSS and health and wellbeing has not had a high profile in the relevant legislation. However the recent proposal to include a reference to 'health' in the Act is promising.

We recommend having a 'Health and Wellbeing' heading in the Planning and Environment Act.
Act which currently focuses too much on building and not the outcomes/solutions for health.
State policy needs to take the lead on the implementation of design for health and wellbeing by ensuring Planning and Environment Act makes the important link between design and health and wellbeing.

Provide recommendations for future planning and investment; and that the Committee will consider:

(a) The effectiveness of the Environments for Health Municipal Public Health Planning Framework.

The Environments for Health framework adopted by Victoria in 2001, identifies that health and well-being is affected by all the environments that interact with residents' lives: including the social, natural, built and economic environments. The framework identifies that the design and planning of the built form, public spaces and all aspects of the public realm can affect health and wellbeing. The Environments for Health framework has been used as guide for municipal public health planning for some years and was positively evaluated in 2005. It would be worthwhile to formally re-evaluate the framework again, now that five years has passed since the previous evaluation.

From a local government perspective, the framework is a strong base upon which to plan for health. However, it has proved challenging to implement health planning that focuses equally on all of the environments as some are influenced by factors outside the control of local government (e.g. the economic environment). Recent work by the Department of Health in supporting Councils in the Southern Metropolitan region to implement the framework has proved valuable.

(b) The State Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, the Transport Integration Act 2010 and the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

Transport Integration Act 2010

The Transport Integration Act 2010 should be based on outcomes and include a stronger focus on health and wellbeing. Social Impact Assessments should be popularised and ideally included as a requirement in the Act.

Planning and Environment Act 2008

The Planning and Environment Act 2008 currently focuses too much on building and not on the outcomes/solutions for health. State policy needs to take the lead on the implementation of design for health and wellbeing by ensuring that the Planning and Environment Act 2008 makes the important link between design and health and wellbeing.

We recommend having a 'Health and Wellbeing' heading in the Planning and Environment Act 2008, not just a mention of 'health'.

(c) International experience such as the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Healthy Cities initiative.
Future planning and investment should be based on the recommendations arising from a collaboration of the best international minds in this area. It is crucial to ensure that any policies adopted are evidence–based (or at least evidence-informed).

(d) The consistency of policy approaches across the Victorian Government to promote health through evidence based environmental planning and design measures.

It is vital that policy approaches are consistent and evidence-based as well as outcomes-based. However, in health planning it can be very difficult to be certain about the impacts of policies as the outcomes can be based on the passage of decades rather than years. There must be diligent evaluation of all policy approaches.

The design of public transport and sustainable transport in particular needed to be consistent throughout the state.

(e) The role of public open space in promoting health.

The role of public open space is fundamental in promoting public health and wellbeing, though the definition of 'open public space' is certain to change over time.

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