

Inquiry into environmental design and public health



Submission –Sustainable Population Australia (Victorian branch)

The environment is critical to public health both in terms of its integrity and in terms of its design.

We know from the State of the Environment report, 2008 that the health of the Victorian environment is in decline. This decline, in the report is repeatedly attributed to population pressures on specified localities and natural systems. As high population growth has continued since the report came out late in 2008 and in the absence of any mitigating measures the environment will be further damaged now in 2011.

This inquiry focuses on design; therefore I will not refer again to the health of the environment in isolation from design.

The principle debate in urban planning appears to be – “out” or “up” or both with high population growth (necessitating these forced choices) taken as given into the indefinite future.

This continual high growth and rapid development process- which changes little between state governments except perhaps in relative emphasis progressively reduces our exposure to nature in large centers like Melbourne and in smaller regional centers.

Exposure to nature is important for both physical and mental health. Accessibility only to a predictable built environment is not conducive to unplanned exercise. Open space is needed for children to run around and play. The demise of the back yard means that exercise is increasingly more organized- either in a park where they may need to be supervised by an adult or unstructured play will be substituted by organized post school activities. Childhood obesity is on the increase. It has been shown that children who play in unstructured environments, not directed by adults are likely to have vastly different and more complex neural connections than children whose activities are largely structured.

The most important aspect of design of our living space is in fact the proportion which is **not** designed, which is random, interesting unpredictable and exciting. Spaces that people can escape into and restore themselves after work and prolonged exposure to only man made settings. These areas must be easily accessible, places that can be enjoyed spontaneously, therefore places that are close to where people live.

The gym is not the answer to human exercise in the coming decades. It is the entire aspect of where we live which is important. Seeing the destruction of private and public open space progressively over the last few decades has created angst and taken up people’s precious spare time in trying to preserve it ; time that could other wise have been spent enjoying nature.

The most important aspect of design in the interests of public health are the extent to which we leave alone that which is unspoiled and re-create nature in areas where it is now compromised or completely ruined.

As a guiding principle, we could in the future, if growth could also be curbed regain the exceptional environment which was once Victoria. We could have a situation of “healthy state, healthy people”. It would be hoped that in this process we can maintain some space for wildlife. Given that Australian native animals are mainly harmless frightened creatures, from the human perspective these places could

be shared ignoring the fact that humans are dangerous to wildlife but a shared space may be better than no space!

There are many other factors in urban design which have to potential to affect health outcomes- those affecting air quality will determine incidence of respiratory problems, traffic patterns will affect the number of traffic injuries, "walkability" of the city will affect cardiovascular health and obesity etc. which time does not allow me to go not in any detail

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this with the committee.

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That this House requires the Environment and Planning References Committee to inquire into, consider and report on the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria, and in particular:

(1) review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being;

- (2) identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes in Victoria;
- (3) assess the extent to which these factors are currently taken into account in environmental planning and design in both the public and private sectors, and their effectiveness, with particular reference to new growth areas;
- (4) 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; and
- (5) 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;
 - (b) the State Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, the Transport Integration Act 2010 and the Planning and Environment Act 1987;
 - (c) international experience such as the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Healthy Cities initiative;
 - (d) the consistency of policy approaches across the Victorian Government to promote health through evidence based environmental planning and design measures; and
 - (e) the role of public open space in promoting health;

and that the Committee present its final report to Parliament no later than 12 months after this reference is given to the Committee.