

## THE HIGHER DENSITY LIVING CONUNDRUM

Support for Higher Density Living in Sydney has recently found a new ally in the Heart Foundation ([www.healthyplaces.org.au](http://www.healthyplaces.org.au)), which puts the case for how such development can foster improved Public Health in physical and mental well-being at both individual and community levels. I am sure most would agree the environment where we live and work should support physical activity, and the built environment is a major player in the health game! As stated on the Heart Foundation website, *'the environment influences opportunities for walking, cycling and public transport use, as well as recreational physical activity.'*

### ***The built environment can promote increased physical activity through design elements such as:***

- *Connected, walkable and rideable neighbourhoods with easy access to key facilities and destinations such as shops, schools and public transport*
- *Compact, mixed-use planning:*
  - o *higher levels of street connectedness and density*
  - o *activity centres with a variety of land uses*
  - o *high quality public open space and opportunities for social interaction, such as town squares*
- *Transit-oriented development.*
- *Facilities for physical activity such as sporting grounds, swimming pools and playgrounds*
- *Lowering speed and improving streetscape amenity (street trees, places to rest and converse, shared community gardens and green verges)*

It is encouraging that some new major developments around Sydney are being conceived with these aspirations, but they are predominantly in larger sites and precincts and often where there is less conflict with existing neighbourhoods that are resistant to change. On a recent visit to New Zealand I was impressed with the manner in which cities like Auckland and Wellington were integrating quality higher density residential infill in built up urban areas, together with a good standard of public domain improvements to support more active and walkable local precincts. In Auckland where a single metropolitan council was recently established, there appeared to be a very positive attitude to urban density and its contingent community benefits - the new Wynyard Quarter along the Auckland docks and Ponsonby Central markets were standout examples.



In our own leafy environs of Lane Cove, as in many parts of Sydney, a battle continues between advocates for a sustainable urban density approach and the naysayers to any more development that include many resident action and environment groups against more of the same unless significant improvements to both architecture and urban design can be achieved.

A key issue is that much of new medium density infill has been forced onto the community by State Government and Department of Planning and Infrastructure plans without local consensus on an integrated urban design approach or process for ensuring design quality outcomes, sadly missing in many current and recent developments. While there are some positive signs for new unit developments around Lane Cove village, albeit with the contingent inconvenience during construction, the Mowbray Rd and Stringybark Creek precinct is a classic case of urban densification that is undermining support through poor appreciation of broader environmental concerns, infrastructure planning and architectural standards. The same looks set to happen in Greenwich and St Leonards South where major new high rise is set to stir more passionate opposition, and Council is ill prepared to deal with looming conflicts.

Potential public domain benefits listed in the case for High Density Living can provide for active transport, connectivity and vibrant ground planes via mixed-use zoning, but only if due consideration is given to and monitored for the relationship of buildings to each other, the open spaces created within the broader context of streets and precincts. While there is suspicion of much community 'engagement' in these areas, Design Review Panels and Joint Regional Planning Panels can help to raise the bar for quality urban and architectural design that is so necessary to improve development and infrastructure standards. Such professional input should also give local communities greater faith in both process and outcomes being subject to wider expert scrutiny, and show how denser residential areas can deliver on the potential to improve health, the environment and even affordability.

Although the pre-election forum 'Meet the Candidates – Focus on Development' on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> March has preceded this article, I expect that discussion about these pressing urban issues and more will have given the participants plenty to ponder.

Whether or not TVO readers have attended the forum, I encourage all to watch this space for feedback next month, when we will also know an election outcome that will determine in which direction planning reforms might be heading for the next political cycle.

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