

Urban Design and Health

"The closer you live to the city, the better chance you have of being trim, a study of Sydney suburbs has found. University of NSW researchers, in conjunction with the NSW Department of Health, examined residents in 40 local government areas across Sydney. They found those living in the outer suburbs were 30 to 50 per cent more at risk of being overweight and 40 to 60 per cent less likely to be physically active than their inner-city counterparts. 'We set out to replicate other studies that linked urban sprawl and obesity that were conducted overseas, particularly in the US, and to see how Sydney compared', said Bin Jalaludin, who led the study. Professor Jalaludin said the lack of urban development in more sparsely populated areas meant people were less encouraged to walk. 'We hypothesised that areas with greater population density had more mixed land use and commercial development, which means more places to walk to', he said. The study also connected car use in sprawling areas to obesity. 'It seems that people living in purely residential areas tend to drive more and we know that people who drive more tend to be more obese', Professor Jalaludin said.

"Anthony Capon, who studies the relationship between the urban environment and health at the Australian National University, agrees with the findings. 'Today, people living in regional areas are less likely to walk down the road to a local shop and will more likely drive longer distances to larger shopping centres', Professor Capon said. The researchers warned local governments and developers of an urgent need to improve health by promoting aspects of urban planning in Sydney. 'Unless we rethink the way we develop our cities, to making them more compact and mixed, and also to improve mass transit with shops and services closer by, we're not going to be able to convince people to walk and cycle more', Professor Capon concluded."

Ref: Ehssan Veiszadeh, SMH, 14/12/08



Roads are for People: Pyrmont Bridge, Sydney

Picture: November 2008

Congestion Charging

"Following the lead of other congested cities such as London and Singapore, San Francisco is considering charging drivers a fee when they enter notoriously clogged neighbourhoods. The San Francisco County Transportation Authority is studying various 'congestion pricing' options. If approved, such pricing would make San Francisco the first American city to charge cars a fee to enter certain neighbourhoods at certain times. 'I want a San Francisco that is far less congested and far easier to navigate', said city supervisor Jake McGoldrick, who has shepherded congestion pricing proposals. Congestion pricing is generally aimed at nudging drivers out of their vehicles and onto buses, subways and bicycles by pushing up the cost of driving a private vehicle into certain parts of a city during peak commuter hours. The fees help generate money to improve public transport."

Ref: Malia Wollan, The Age, (NY Times) 5/1/09



San Francisco Cable Car Picture: November 2006

New Truck Routes?

"New laws that would see some Melbourne roads prioritised for tram, bus, bicycle, pedestrian or freight use have alarmed local councils, who see them as an attempt to ram through new heavy truck routes. The changes would give the State Government power to prioritise transport types on all public roads across the state. A new VicRoads register would be established, listing how roads had been prioritised and the laws could mean new bus or bike lanes on a local road or the sudden appearance of massive freight trucks. The local government sector is concerned about a lack of detail in the new laws and the potential for new truck highways through suburbs. The proposed laws before the State Parliament would give Roads Minister Tim Pallas the power to prioritise bicycle, pedestrian and freight roads. The Roads Minister and Public Transport Minister Lynne Kosky would have the power to prioritise roads for trams and buses. The only check would be that if the public road were a municipal road there must be consultation with the Local Government Minister. There is no mention of the local council."

Ref: Jason Dowling, The Age, 30/12/08

Urban Design & Traffic Calming

"Sometime in the 1970s, a hippy Dutch traffic engineer, Hans Monderman, noticed that the effect of improving the roads in villages adjusting to car traffic was a decline in pedestrian safety and a counter-intuitive rise in fatalities. What he was observing was a loss of the public domain to the movement of traffic often in the guise of protecting pedestrians but ultimately making their experience less enjoyable and safe. Monderman set about changing the paradigm through street designs that typically removed regulatory traffic control features such as kerbs, lane markings, signs, and lights to great effect for the usability of the public domain by non-drivers. Others took up his work, most notably Ben Hamilton-Baillie in Britain under the umbrella of 'Shared Space' concepts, and it is gaining ground in Europe and North America. Sadly he passed away early this year [2008] ...



Bendigo's Hargreaves Mall (in Victoria) 30/12/08

Note the bike parking. In the few moments of taking photos I noted two wheelchairs, two electric mobility chairs, a scooter, numerous prams and hundreds of pedestrians. Vehicles can enter the mall (at restricted times) – a good case of 'disappearing traffic'.

"The problem of designing out conflict is that we rob people of the opportunity to cooperate and trust others on a continuous and social basis with all the personal rewards that entails. When we over regulate the use of the public domain to ensure the safe and speedy movement of cars through providing certainty to drivers, the awareness of a wider social responsibility evaporates and the pedestrian, rider and public transport user loses out socially as well as in travel.

"Many recent examples of Monderman's approach exist, particularly in Europe, but you don't have to travel far to observe it in action. Areas in inner Sydney such as Newtown possess streets as little as 9m in width which contain dual footpaths, a parking lane, a two-way traffic lane and no intersection priority. To add to the chaos, many dwellings are built on the boundary with outward opening doors, mats and umbrella stands mixed in with street trees and telegraph poles. The effect of all this is that there is only a 4m single movement path for people, prams, bikes, cars and the odd brave truck and it works wonderfully on the premise that pedestrians, riders and drivers alike simply cooperate politely otherwise you wouldn't last a minute. Despite the odds, these are very liveable streets that are safe, deeply domestic, socially rewarding and wonderfully efficient. The dream of every professional is only they can resist solving every problem."

Ref: Greg Dowling, The Flyer, January 09
www.scapestrategy.com.au

"In an unusual move, the 2008 Australia Award for Urban Design was bestowed on the incremental transformation of an entire city centre. Rather than a single project or space, the judges recognised the accumulated impact of successive initiatives, policies and commitments contributing to revitalisation of Bendigo's city centre under the leadership of a succession of Councils and officers since the early 1990s. ... In delivering on a commitment to enhanced pedestrian amenity, safety and convenience, the Bendigo has adapted a radical mindset shift from European to Australian conditions. Core retail streets in the city centre are being converted, applying the 'shared space' approach that essentially makes streets pedestrian spaces that vehicles can enter as subsidiary users. The logic is that ambiguous uncertainty reduces speed, enhances vigilance by drivers and reduces collisions and their consequences. A by-product is greatly enhanced public areas devoted to pedestrians and passive uses."

Ref: Bill Chandler, Urban Design Forum, December 08
<http://www.udf.org.au/>

Taxis in the US

"Serious differences remain between the cab culture in America's two largest cities. New York has more than 13,000 cabs. Los Angeles has about 2,300. A typical cabbie in New York can get about 50 fares a day; in L.A. it's about 20. Less than half the residents of Manhattan own cars - meaning they're transit dependent. Car ownership rates are far higher in L.A. And because there are more cabs and more customers in New York, fares are lower."

Ref: Steve Hymon, Bottleneck Blog, Los Angeles Times, 16/7/08

Food Security

"An insidious problem is creeping up on us that could affect the world for decades. There could be ongoing food shortages that go well beyond current concerns on food security, and which will result in regional unrest and conflict. ... The tightness in grain supply and demand has led to significant price rises over the past 18 months. This in turn has led farmers to plant more grain & on forecasts it appears stocks will rise this year.

"However, this is no reason for complacency because compared with historical demand, we have a different picture ahead that could fundamentally change the relationship between supply and demand. World population is projected to grow significantly over the next 30-40 years, with the United Nations medium population forecast predicting that world population will be more than 9 billion in 2050, an increase of more than 2.6 billion since 2005.

"It is possible that the world agricultural system could cope with this increase through normal productivity improvements, but two other large demand factors are coming into play just as we appear to be approaching limits on arable land and water. The first of these is that we are seeing exponential growth in world affluence ...

"The second major new demand factor is the significant push for biofuels in response to climate change and fears of peak oil. As an example, the US ethanol industry alone will use 104 million tonnes of corn next year to produce ethanol. That is 100% of average annual world coarse grain trade and 6.4% of global cereal grain production."

Ref: Paul Higgins & Sandy Teagle, Business Day, The Age, 26/9/08

And Also ...



Bicycle Built for Three

Pictured in Melbourne's CBD, 2008

Black Boxes

"The 'black box' technology used to unravel the mystery behind plane crashes has been installed on all Sydney ferries. NSW Transport Minister David Campbell said all 28 vessels, including Harbour Cats and River Cats, have been equipped with the vessel data recorders (VDRS). The devices record mechanical, geographical and other trip data. 'Fitting these data recorders is a complex job, which involves putting sensors all around the ferry to record things like engine speed, the rudder position and the hydraulics,' Mr Campbell said in a statement. 'The black boxes can't prevent accidents, but if a crash does occur they can help investigators understand what went wrong.' Each vessel was equipped with VDRS technology during major scheduled maintenance, Mr Campbell said." **Ref: The Age, 22/12/08**

More on Air Bags

"Doctors at The Alfred hospital's trauma unit are perplexed - but excited - by a recent big drop in dangerous head injuries in Victoria. The trend, which is almost entirely due to a fall in the severity of road accident injuries, has been unofficially labelled 'the airbag effect', though it might also be a silver lining to the global financial downturn. In the past year the number of serious head injuries across Victoria's trauma system has fallen by 12 per cent - from 1272 to 1121 - and the number of comatose trauma patients fell by almost a quarter from 326 to 246. The Alfred has seen an even more remarkable drop - from 181 comatose trauma patients in 2006-07 to 117 in 2007-08. The trend can be linked to road accidents. The hospital billed more than 19,000 hours of intensive care to the Transport Accident Commission in the last quarter of 2006, but in the most recent reported quarter it was down to about 7000 hours."

Ref: Nick Miller, The Age, 22/12/08

Walking and Health

"One of the best ways to ward off Alzheimer's Disease may be walking regularly. Dr. Jennifer Weuve, from the Harvard School of Public Health, said, 'Better memory, learning and attention may be achieved by walking as little as two to three hours per week'. New studies show that does not necessarily mean you have to power walk to feel the benefits. But taking a stroll at age 70 & beyond can help keep the mind sharp. Another new study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association says that walking can even help stave off dementia, especially for older women. Dr. Weuve said 'This is good news, because walking is a relatively easy way for people to preserve their learning, memory and attention'."

Ref: Sarah Pollak, CBN News, 22/9/04

The Next Wave (Part 1)

"The financial crash is developing a whole industry of responses that can tell us where we went wrong and what we must do to make our future more resilient, especially in our cities where so much of the crash is hurting. Finance and economics dominate this discussion. I believe that a better understanding of what makes cities work will help in this debate. So what caused the crash and how does this relate to our cities?"

"Toxic loans in the US are the target of most crash analysts. However although they locate the areas where these toxic loans were mostly taken up, they rarely show why these particular locations were so much more vulnerable to mortgage foreclosure. These locations were often quite distinctly removed from the main metropolitan areas that developers assumed for the jobs and services of those living there. Whilst the post-war suburbs are often called sprawl, these areas could only be called urban scatter. These areas invariably had nothing other than houses, they had no real employment, shops or services and public transport was non-existent. These were highly car-dependent places where people had to travel long distances for anything.

"Such urban areas are highly vulnerable to the multiple problems of car dependence, particularly peak oil. Russell Gold and Ann Davis in The Wall Street Journal on November 19th, 2007 said, 'The world is approaching a practical limit to the number of barrels of crude oil that can be pumped every day.' This is peak oil and it is caused by a combination of depleting oil resources, rising economic costs and political volatility in the remaining oil-rich regions. A recent report from the UK Industry Taskforce on Peak Oil and Energy Security shows that the five Mega Major oil companies are all now experiencing decline in oil production, despite having access to any part of the earth, collectively they peaked in 2004. Extremely volatile prices are characteristic of this peak period. The report suggests that the underlying trend in the price of oil is 6% growth per year and that this may accelerate as oil supplies go into permanent decline after 2013. The CEPA Index, which measures exploration and development costs, has doubled since 2005 as new oil is deeper and harder to extract. No simple alternative to gasoline and diesel exists, hence peri-urban places that are built where there are no alternatives to using cars over long distances are highly vulnerable to peak oil.

"In U.S. cities the proportion of household expenditure on transport increased from 10% in the 1960s to 19% in 2005, with very car-dependent cities like Houston and Detroit having even higher percentages. Families with household incomes between \$20,000 and \$50,000 spend almost 30% on transport. In Atlanta, a city that features urban scatter within this income range, 32% of household incomes goes on transport.

"Households on the fringes of car-dependent cities are therefore much more vulnerable as the cost of transport escalates. The doubling and even tripling of gasoline prices this year as oil reached over \$100 a barrel, was the catalyst for the crash. This increase in oil prices provided the spark that lit the bomb underneath the subprime mortgage crisis, hitting many with a double whammy of increased transport costs and ballooning mortgage payments. At the same time there has been a continual growth in the size of houses on the urban fringe which has increased the costs of heating and cooling. Financing homes that are beyond the capacity of average householders to pay is not just due to poorly designed financial packages, it's also due to poorly designed cities and buildings. As the fallout from the toxic loans rolled across the US economy it began to pick up bad debt estimated at over \$US18-trillion. The Wall Street Journal estimates about 16% of Americans now own homes worth less than they owe. From there the crash spread out into the highly linked global economy, picking up similar kinds of debt in cities around the world and leading inevitably to the September 15th Wall Street crash.



"In Australia this issue has been documented by Jago Dodson and Neil Sipe who have developed VAMPIRE maps ('Vulnerability Assessment for Mortgage, Petrol and Inflation Risks and Expenditure') These demonstrate the areas

of Australian cities that are vulnerable to mortgage foreclosures due to the combination of low income, high fuel costs and heavy car dependence. The evidence of the poor becoming more and more isolated on the car-dependent urban fringe is very clear in Australia and increasingly so in North America as the emphasis in urban policy has been only on affordable housing through cheap land at the fringe. This policy has now dissolved in the crash of 2008." {To be continued in #94}

Ref: Peter Newman, Ockham's Razor, ABC Radio National, 21/12/08 See the full transcript: www.abc.net.au/rn/ockhamsrazor/stories/2008/2445159.htm