

Canberra, 20th October 2017

Subject: ACT Housing inquiry submission

Dear Sir/ Madam and honourable members of the Standing Committee,

On behalf of Urban Synergies Group, I wish to make a submission as part of the ongoing consultation into housing as part of the overall planning and urban renewal process in the ACT.

About Urban Synergies Group(USG)

USG is an international think and do tank providing services to collaborators in the space of health and well-being in urban systems. The philosophy of USG is to find the best ways to improve urban systems without borders by creating effective synergies in a complex global environment that enables better health and well-being outcomes for all people. USG is creating bridges between cutting edge academic research, non-government organisations, governments and practices, enriching community spirit with a focus on outcomes.

USG hosts a strong network of international specialists that share critical thoughts and have very curious minds around sustainable urbanism that can truly benefit all people.

We would like to emphasise that Urban Synergies Group operates completely independent with objective to progress in a meaningful way towards a framework that allows us to sustain planetary health and well-being.

Further information can be obtained under the following link
<http://www.urbansynergiesgroup.org/>.

Our contribution

Over the duration of last two years Urban Synergies Group has engaged and collaborated with local partners in the ACT on several occasions, resulting in novel evidence based resources that can make a meaningful contribution to the city building process. The following section will highlight relevant the key outcomes of resources that in involved grass-roots and community led co-design participation locally in the ACT as well as cutting edge academic evidence.

Relevance

This is a holistic submission and relates in its broader sense to the following parts of the inquiry:

3. The effects and implications of suburban infill, housing in centres, land release and greenfield developments, including in relation to:
 - housing affordability
 - the environment
 - suburban amenity and aesthetic
 - cumulative impact
 - infrastructure and service delivery costs
4. the effectiveness of existing regulation and zoning in encouraging, and any barriers to achieving:
 - sustainable, high quality housing design sympathetic with the environment, site and broader amenity
 - development that accords with community expectation and needs
 - housing affordability
5. Best practice in managing this interaction in other jurisdictions; and
6. Any other relevant matter.

With the above in mind, our team seek to highlight issues that impacts all members of the community that choose to live, work and play in the ACT. This submission is based on cutting edge research evidence, supported by a strong shared philosophy on health and well-being with our collective bio history in mind.

We seek to inform, share and critically reflect on the current state of planning and design, based on the internationally shared and agreed goals on how we can systematically implement the New Urban Agenda in a local context as an outcome of the Habitat 3 process, initiated by UN-Habitat.

Our submission is sub-divided into several sections:

1. Right to the City
2. Healthy and Intelligent Communities
3. Shaping Spaces for Gen Z
4. Realising the value and significance of Urban Landscape Space

1. Right to the city

Canberra as a city that is designed for and with people in mind that enables health societal benefits so that no one is left behind. Canberra can be approached by a dualistic relationship when it comes to urban form and its related typologies. On the one hand Canberra development is determined by sprawling suburbs (greenfield developments) and on the other hand affected by urban renewal (green and brownfield developments).

Both approaches are complex and require concerted as well as holistic efforts by all stakeholders to enable long term liveability for all people that choose to live, work and play there. Naturally, the ACT government should be able to respond and offer pathways towards enhanced engagement of the citizenry in achieving improved health and well-being and therefore efficient economic outcomes in Canberra, Australia.

The context- The concept of “Right to the City”, developed originally by Henri Lefebvre, offers a useful pathway for any government, that shares with us the objective to enable healthy and liveable community. Our conceptual framework of “Right to the city” informed the development of the New Urban Agenda¹, which outlines the agreed pathway to build cities worldwide over the next two decades. UN-Habitat successfully included the concept under the term “leaving no one behind”. Based on the worldwide adoption of this document by all federal governments, we are now in the implementation phase on the New Urban Agenda, which responds to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)² that are relevant to build better suburbs.

To enable a pathway that leaves no one behind our collaborative and progressive work builds on SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

Sharing our concern on Canberra’s future

Cities across the globe increasingly demonstrate systemic spatial violence where social polarisation and environmental degradation results from an urban form that disproportionately benefits the empowered and resource rich minorities at the expense of the remaining majority. Our team suggest to revisit approaches to urban sprawl not from a health and well-being perspective but from an health equity and long term efficiency perspective.

Through a lack of meaningful engagement, residents become passive rather than active participants in the city, its landscapes, social networks and economic prosperity. This prosperity might work in the short term, but will ultimately result in unintended long term consequences that can compromise the ability of future generations to prosper to their full potential.

¹ To learn more about the New Urban Agenda of UN-Habitat, please access the following link:
<http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

² To learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals please access the following link:
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

The very reason why people move to cities, in order to prosper, find fulfilment and happiness, becomes an unreachable goal. Especially when thinking of the indigenous, children and young people also referred as vulnerable people of a community.

Canberra is not free of our concern as housing affordability is an issue forcing more people either not able to afford a good life or to even lose their home.

However, our contribution looks beyond housing affordability and seeks to make a meaningful contribution that relevant to all of us.

Perspective statement on ‘Right to the City’

Together with passionate people we developed an evidence based resource that is founded on the principle of co-design and engagement on grass-roots level. The document complies with Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and UN Rights of the Child (United Nation, 1989).

The right to the city can be understood as a call for transformation. A renewed effort on human and environmental health and well-being as a shared responsibility in defining a new paradigm for urban prosperity with our collective bio-history in mind.

This shared responsibility can only be achieved by:

- Evidence based research
- Open mindedness through consciousness and respect for diversity
- Collective wisdom through collaboration and critical reflection
- Trust between stakeholders, time for each other and the absence of domination

Six principles were developed that can work specifically in the ACT context:

- Right to public spaces and places
- Right to playful quality experiences
- Right to trust and diversity
- Right of time
- Right of movement
- Right to a healthy, safe environment

Please access the following link to learn how those principles can be translated and measured as an indicator for success in the local context:

<https://urbansynergiesgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/perspective-statement-right-to-the-city.pdf>

In addition, the resource contains several useful case studies, where the “Right to the city” principles were successfully accomplished.

2. Healthy and intelligent communities

We are currently experiencing a driving force and push towards the “smart cities” approach as part of the digital transformation, which will affect urban systems not just in Australia.

The context- Planetary health for all is dependent on creating bridges from one small island of civilisation that is surrounded by a sea of barriers reaching out to other such islands. If we want to deliver healthier and more sustainable urban communities through the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, we need to understand how to connect these islands well. Surely, we can create beautiful beaches and green sanctuaries on them, but until we learn how to reach out to others we will not succeed in solving some of these wicket problems we are facing today. In order reach those other islands it is imperative to create innovative bridges that can serve the greater good.

One of those bridges serving to connect is named Smart Cities. This concept functions as a strategic device strongly associated with the use of information technology in relation to modern urban production ecosystems (Caragliu, Del Bo, & Nijkamp, 2011).

Getting the terminology right

Prior launching blindly into uncharted territories and adoption of disruptive technologies, we suggest a revisit of the overall terminology applied in government policies. The statement on “health and intelligent communities” investigates and critically reflects on the current state of the debate. It argues that the digital agenda should be built inherently with people and the broader health and well-being in mind. Digital technology if deployed conscious and well can allow a “collective mindset” to develop. This mindset translates into collective and shared wisdom based on educated lifestyles that can enable not just better health and well-being of a community rather help to achieve better outcomes for the species on planetary level.

Three principles of an intelligent community

The statement outlines three dimensions that intelligent communities should have. Firstly, linking objective and perceived (qualitative) measures to the environment around us. Secondly, harnessing and fostering social capital to emerge in suburbs, based on shared ownership with the grass-roots community. Thirdly, by superimposing the initial two dimensions to the existing policies, tensions and barriers can be identified that hinder better health and well-being outcomes for all. The statement concludes and suggest an establishment of an ethical code of conduct, which is based on trust and equity.

“Only if those well- connected and committed islands become the global majority by sharing their wisdom and resources, only then advancements to planetary health and well-being outcomes for civilisations is possible” (Mews, 2017).

The document can be accessed under the following link:

<https://urbansynergiesgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/a-perspective-hic-web.pdf>

3. Shaping Spaces for Gen Z

In close collaboration with the ACT Government, UN-Habitats World Urban Campaign and the University of Canberra, Health Research Institute, we hosted a in March 2017 an Urban Thinkers campus here in Canberra.

Under the umbrella slogan “The city we need” we summoned leading international specialist on children health and well-being and collaboratively explored with more than 120 participants, representing eight countries and 39 organisations from nine different legal constituency groups, tangible solutions that can enable better and healthier urban environments including suburbs.

The key outcomes of the Urban Thinkers campus were addressing children and the built environment, design around children’s health and play. The democratic participation process resulted in a voting by all stakeholder and the delivery of recommendations that have an integrated systems approach.

In ranking order these include:

Children and the built environment

- Design and place “Kids at Play” signage to promote speed reduction on streets; *and*
- Co-location of amenities including local shops and play spaces.

Designs around children’s health

- Apply Co-design and engagement principles in school curriculum to ensure children’s engagement and ownership of initiatives that are relevant to their overall health and well-being; *and*
- Safe walking and cycling paths (map and smartphone apps) QR coded check-points, social school support element.

Play

- Safer speeds (30km/h or 15km/h) near areas where children’s play has priority; *and*
- Promote awareness of the importance of play and related strategies by targeting governments, stakeholders, communities and schools.

Based on the latest evidence on hand and in collaboration with the group indicators and measures, where developed that can be applied in the ACT context. Key actors and their roles were identified to enable better outcomes in line with the “Right to the city” concept.

Outstanding issues

Last but not least, the document outlines outstanding issues that need to be addressed in the near future, if Canberra truly seeks to be or become a healthy and liveable city for all its community members. The ACT policy landscape faces an alignment issue that, if not addressed urgently and comprehensively, this will result in un-preceded consequence on societal scale that will compromise future generations to prosper to their full potential.

The full report can be accessed under the following link:

https://urbansynergiesgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SS4GenZ-Report_Web.pdf

Our team would like to thank the ACT Government for the opportunity to provide input on this pressing issue to a degree. We would welcome the option to collaborate and explore with the directorate the outstanding issues addressed in the report above.

4. Realising the value and significance of Urban Landscape Space

As part of our commitment to shape healthier communities worldwide, our team is currently developing a new perspective statement on the value of urban landscapes. This document will be formally launched at the upcoming World Urban Forum (February 2018) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The document provides another perspective that addresses the issue of urban landscape being generally perceived to have little to no economic value and little political value. By seeing landscape space as natural or empty belies the enormous intrinsic value of urban landscape space for the key part that it plays in the health and well-being of people, and the health of our cities.

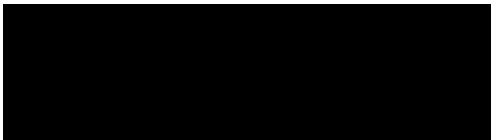
Canberra is blessed by a generous open space system, however in times of resource constraints and economical pressure, that are built around short term gain, this perspective statement may become of value. More recently, there have been attempts to ascribe an economic value to the vegetation in cities, or green infrastructure. This has been done in terms of temperature mitigation, air quality, carbon sequestration and even property value.

There is undoubted significance in this work in that it starts to build a rational economic argument for urban landscape space. We believe that even this work falls short of realising the full value and significance of urban landscape space. This statement describes how fundamentally neo-liberal models of government do not preclude decision making that benefits the health and welfare of populations as a whole.

As indicated above this document will be released early 2018 in collaboration with UN-Habitat and with kind support of the World Urban Campaign. Copies of all other key documents are provided in the appendix of this submission.

Should the standing committee seek further advice in relation our resources and submission, please don't hesitate to contact us (details below).

Yours faithfully on behalf of the team at Urban Synergies Group,



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