Connected Communities

Principle 2: Inclusion

Social connections: building social capital

Social capital means the ability to build relationships and networks with the community around us. It is what makes our communities and societies function, and significantly affects our quality of life. Social capital not only helps those who most need it but it also alleviates pressure on governments and the economy. Successful cities and precincts are high in social capital.

For example, if a young family goes through a destabilising event such as a significant illness or loss of income, they will need strong support networks around them. While governments provide some essential safety nets to support our most vulnerable, there are ways that communities and networks can also help, such as through financial support, job opportunities, or helping out with essential childcare. We should not underestimate the capacity of social networks in providing support in times of need.

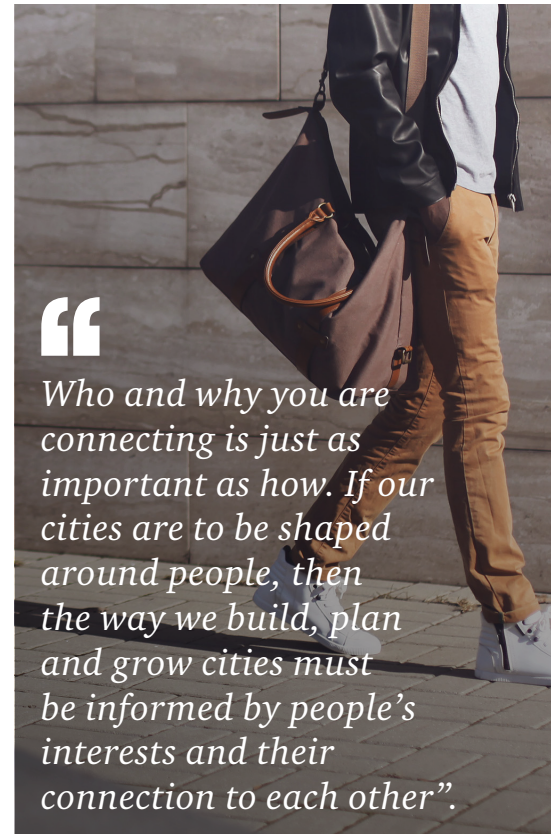### Access, amenity and choice

Everyone should be able to feel at home where they live while being connected to their community and having access to the services and facilities that will enrich their lives. But to bring this level of liveability to everyone, our 'Great Aussie Dream' needs to be reimagined.

Although Australians are largely urban-dwellers, we are still in the grip of a suburban mindset. In Sydney, this 'affordable urban fringe' is now 70km from the CBD, and public transport is less likely to work for some jobs, such as shift-workers, nurses on night-duty, police officers and other key workers.

The further out people live, the longer their commute and the less time they have to spend with their family and friends and enjoy a balanced life. It often means being further away from services and amenities, placing a heavy reliance on cars because proximity to public transport is compromised. Infrastructure cannot keep up with the sprawl, and building new infrastructure to the far reaches of suburbia is going to come with significant and unsustainable cost.

Housing and diverse communities

A precinct approach considers housing both in and around a designated area with the aim of meeting the needs of a diverse community – a mix of cultures, incomes and ages provide a rich tapestry from which we can all benefit. By providing housing within and close to precincts, particularly where there is a large employment base, we can reduce commute times, enabling people to spend more time with their families and friends.

"
Who and why you are connecting is just as important as how. If our cities are to be shaped around people, then the way we build, plan and grow cities must be informed by people's interests and their connection to each other".

Of course, housing within a precinct needs to be of a scale and density reflective of the precinct's desired future character and the agreed objectives for current and future residents.

Technology

In an age of technological advancement, we are at risk of further disconnection from those around us; we risk becoming more isolated and losing the essential social capital to catch us when we fall. We need to leverage technology to open up connections that strengthen our communities, driving positive connections and interactions.

Digital services can assist in facilitating organised opportunities for interactions and allow for this to occur frequently. Take Meetup, for example, an app with over 32 million users in 182 countries that brings people together by allowing them to find others with shared interests and organise gatherings and activities. Such face to face connections within communities would likely not have occurred without this kind of digital support.

Principle 3: Proximity

Permeability

Precincts thrive on proximity – close distances between people, spaces and transportation. When people can easily connect to each other and to the places in which they are living and working, precincts become more active and vibrant and productivity increases.

A key determinant of proximity is the 'permeability' of a precinct, which refers to how easily people move through and within it. Permeability is affected by many things including design, visibility and walkability.

> *Connectivity and proximity are the underpinnings of strong district ecosystems. A well-connected district is paramount to its success—transit, bike paths, sidewalks, car-sharing, and high-speed fibre. At the same time, districts should measure their success by steps not miles. The experience of proximity—or a physical concentration of firms, workers, and activities—is what differentiates a "buzzing" district from a boring one".*
>
> The Brookings Institute

Visibility enables users of the precinct to identify key markers and improve efficiency and ease of moving through the precinct. The use of frequent intersections and grid systems assists in wayfinding, familiarity and identification of how to use the precinct.

Technology can play a significant part of enhancing permeability. Location-based services, such as GPS, are now an integral part of how we move, function and connect with people and places. The acceptance of these now common-place apps and devices is evidence that society is evolving and adapting to new ways of using the spaces around us.

Reach and limits

Reach and limits is closely linked to the permeability of a precinct. Short links and intersections are advantageous and likewise, shorter distances are optimal for interaction and knowledge transfer. Research indicates that walkability is optimised within an 800m radius, while knowledge transfer extends to a 1600m radius.

Cities, like commercial office design, can be optimised to increase the 'bump factor' between people to promote engagement and collaboration. Social cohesion and face to face interaction, both inside and outside an organisation, is a positive predictor of productivity. Allowing organic as well as organised opportunities for interaction is vital to strengthening networks and connections in a knowledge economy.

Krakow's Rynek Glowny Grand Square is the largest of its kind in Europe and forms the lively hub of the city since the 13th century. With a rich history and architectural form, the square is the centre of Krakow's gathering and activities.

Permanent places of gathering including shops, restaurants, residences, commercial spaces and nightlife, the square is also the city's most popular site of open-air events, regularly bringing the city to life. The history in the buildings is strongly identifiable, giving the area its rich character and attraction.

Principle 4: Urban Fabric

The urban fabric of a precinct is expressed primarily through the built form. This includes the physical treatment of the streetscape, the architectural elements, the character of the buildings, and the diversity of built form in terms of materiality, scale, height and function. These physical aspects underpin the 'character' of a place and can invoke strong associations. The Rocks in Sydney, for example, is strongly associated with a rich history, heritage, tourism and its link to Sydney Harbour. These associations are a result of the built form: the sandstone retail strip, the terraces of the backstreets, the historic paved streets of the markets.

How built form and spaces are arranged, how inviting they are and what they offer to the community can have a significant impact on how the community identifies with and uses a precinct, and can either encourage or discourage connectivity. Successful precincts incorporate an appropriate balance of building scale and expression, with the right mix of open space and buildings.

To achieve this outcome, mechanisms like well-considered design guidelines and governance structures should be implemented to ensure quality spaces of high amenity are delivered.

As we adopt new ways of working and activities-based workplaces, cross-discipline and industry mixes are on the rise, leading to more collaborative and productive work environments. With careful planning of our precincts, we can curate these collaborative and cross-disciplinary environments – from open hubs for start-ups to innovation centres to novel ways to interact in the public realm. But to really harness these new ways of working, we need to challenge the traditional workplace, both in its physical environment and approaches to working and interacting.

And while technology and automation has the potential to further isolate individuals, we are seeing workplaces interacting and collaborating more than ever thanks to the benefits that technology can bring. The ability to contact colleagues in locations not only within the office, but all over the globe, through video conferencing and online tools, means that we are communicating more than we did in enclosed offices. Because technological systems enable us to connect faster with each other, it also helps facilitate more planned and frequent face to face contact.