



Policy brief: Maximising the benefits of urban greening transformations

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Implementing urban greening transformations can yield vast benefits for local communities, but there are also risks to be considered

This policy brief highlights some key challenges that government partners may encounter when planning urban greening transformations and policies.



Background

Government members of multi-stakeholder partnerships experience unique challenges in undertaking urban greening projects to benefit both people and nature. Project dynamics and logistics, such as delays and budget changes, can challenge the achievement of outcomes that benefit humans, other species, and the environment. These challenges vary depending upon stakeholder capacity to facilitate healthy relationships between people and places, and to advocate on behalf of community stakeholders to ensure promised benefits are realised.

Whilst the benefits of increased provision of high amenity greenspaces are well-understood, standard approaches to urban renewal in complex geographical and social settings can jeopardise the distribution of these greening benefits. This policy brief offers some global reflections on urban greening practices, with reference to a case study in Melbourne's western suburbs.

The Upper Stony Creek Transformation Project, sought to [transform a section of Upper Stony Creek](#), an urban creek and drainage

channel in Melbourne's western growth corridor. It is a unique partnership of government and non-government agencies conceived to improve residents' health and wellbeing through better greenspace provision.

Prior to the transformation, the site included a concrete drainage channel and an informal greenspace. Works commenced in early 2018 and were expected to be completed 12 months later. However, in July 2019 the discovery of significant asbestos contamination at the site put the project on hold. The cost of remediation consumed a large portion of the project budget. However, the partners maintained their commitment to complete the works and the project was able to continue with a modified design.

The concrete drainage channel that contained the Creek has not yet been able to be removed. However, a large-scale wetland and revitalised greenspace has been accomplished around the channel and retarding basin, in large part through the strength and effectiveness of the multi-stakeholder collaboration between project partners.

Research findings / Research methods

The research used a mixed method 'pre-/post-' design, which involved establishing a baseline before greening and measuring changes after the transformation. A total of 23 residents participated in pre-greening interviews and 150 survey respondents.

Sunshine North has a low socio-economic status and there were few greenspaces in the neighbourhood available to residents pre-transformation. Despite having poor access to greenspace, only 2% of participants reported using the informal greenspace at the site and there were concerns about safety and maintenance.

A strong connection to nature was evident in resident interviews. Analysis found that the project vision activated emotional connections with nature and that there was a high degree of support for the project; however, concerns were raised about historical industrial pollution, toxicity and the potential of negative health effects.

A key finding of the research was that there was intense community investment in the project that made implicit connections between the project delivery and enhanced psychosocial wellbeing, personal health and future economic prosperity.

Policy Recommendations / Practice Recommendations

Enhance community engagement and communication

Government partners have a significant role in renewing relationships to place as well as the places themselves. Urban greening projects that consider the historical, current and future utility of spaces, both formal and informal, are well positioned to encourage demonstrable positive outcomes for communities. Communities that have more input into the design of urban greening projects are more likely to maintain the space, monitor and report issues, and sustain health and wellbeing. It is paramount that partners articulate 'why' urban greening is an important management intervention, for example, to mitigate against heat waves, enable better water management strategies, create attractive greenspaces and provide habitat for urban flora and fauna.

Staged/phased approach to renewal

Urban renewal programs are often intensive practices that occur over short periods of time with limited budgets. With greening-led urban renewal, components of projects should be staged so that the life of the renewal program is expanded. This will allow the project to absorb unexpected disruptions over the long-term, more effectively manage community expectation and input, and protect essential outcomes, such as removal of inhibiting infrastructure, from the risk of non-delivery.

Sustained commitment from project partners and support for longitudinal research

Within the urban landscape, renewal projects are often made more complex by the variety of land tenure arrangements, responsibilities for ongoing maintenance and the range of deliverables sought by stakeholders. Clear and robust partnership frameworks are essential to the successful delivery of projects, but also to realising how outcomes develop over time and how their potential may be enhanced. A monitoring and evaluation programme, and management responsibility arrangements that outlast the implementation phase, are essential to understanding the net benefits.

Championing projects

Individual champions within organisations are often the key catalyst of urban greening projects and instrumental in driving the project to delivery. One major risk is that these champions shoulder the burden of the project and its delivery can rely upon their ongoing attention. When champions move on, this attention can wane. Urban greening projects require institutions that are bound by partnership commitments, to wholeheartedly champion projects beyond the tenure of individuals. This includes embracing projects that are often outside the realm of organisational core business, and incorporating new mandates and knowledge to ensure that successes may be replicated in future projects.

Contingency planning

When working on urban infill and renewal projects, or with former/current brownfield sites, it is imperative to ensure that the cost of any remediation does not risk the delivery of key project outcomes. Long-term work is needed to develop a protocol and funding framework to return lands back to project readiness, prior to wide scale implementation.

About the CAUL Hub

The Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub is part of the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Programme. The remit of the CAUL Hub is to undertake "Research to support environmental quality in our urban areas". This includes research on air quality, urban greening, liveability and biodiversity, with a focus on practical implementation of research findings, public engagement and Indigenous Australian participation. The CAUL Hub is a consortium of four universities: the University of Melbourne, RMIT University, the University of Western Australia and the University of Wollongong.



Further Reading

1. [Threlfall, C.G., Soanes, K., Ramalho, C.E., Aiyer, A., Parris, K., Maller, C. \(2019\) Conservation of urban biodiversity: a national summary of local actions](#)
2. [Farahani, L., Arcari, P., English, A., Maller, C. \(2020\) Residents' perceptions and use of Sheils Reserve Pre-greening](#)
3. [Upper Stony Creek Transformation Project:](#)
4. [Farahani, L. & Maller, C. \(2018\) Investigating Residents' Use and Perceptions of Informal Greenspaces: A Study of Stony Creek in Melbourne's West.](#)

This Policy Brief was prepared by Dr David Kelly and Associate Professor Cecily Maller as part of Project 6: Social, cultural and biodiversity benefits of urban greening: An integrated network of sites.

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