



# Greener cities would be fantastic – but we need to walk the talk



## Urban greening is popular – but that doesn't mean it's on track.

You've likely heard about urban greening as something cities should do more of. Whether it's for heat, flooding, human health, or just making things beautiful, there are lots of reasons we should have more trees, parks and nature in our cities.

Firstly, it's an issue of equity. People on lower incomes often have to live in hotter, greyer neighbourhoods. The parks are lower quality and there's much less shade; a wealthy landowner of an inner-eastern suburb might have around three to five times more shade around their home than a tenant in Melbourne's west.

## More nature, and less paving, also makes a lot of sense as our climate gets tougher.

If you cover a large portion of the land in materials that soak up heat – things like asphalt and concrete – then you'll eventually have a city that gets hot, and stays hot, whenever the weather is warm. During heatwaves, this is deadly. The same goes for rain: asphalt all the land that normally soaks up rainwater, and you create a landscape that generates massive amounts of runoff when it rains, with none of the normal natural filtering of water through soil and vegetation before it gets to the river. Flooding, and a dirty brown unswimmable river, are inevitable results.

There's an abundance of research showing that we're physically and mentally healthier when there's enough nature around us. We also have a chance to bring native species back into our communities – our kids deserve to live in cities that have more living things than just rats, seagulls and pigeons. Critically, for those of us in colonised places, the urban fabric was often built to obscure or replace the characteristics and culture of the land. Showing residents the real trees, shrubs, insects, birds and animals that belong to the land they're living on is part of rebuilding our understanding of where our cities truly are in the world.

And then, there's also just ... beauty. Enjoying a walk with a view like this shouldn't be a rarity.

## Why we aren't there yet?

In urbanised areas around the world, reversing the level of risk from flooding and heat will require massive amounts of de-paving and tree planting.

**In central Melbourne, we'll need almost 90 cricket ovals (180ha) worth of new shade, and even more asphalt removed, within the next 10-15 years to avoid severe climate risks.**



With heatwaves and downpours both set to become more intense as our climate changes, we don't have a lot of time to get this work done, and progress to date has been slow. This is despite an abundance of quality evidence in favour of urban greening, which has now translated into bold local and state strategies that call for more canopy cover and green space in cities.

Unfortunately, targets and evidence don't plant trees. Delivering adequate levels of nature to urban residents will require a major program of greening investments. This 'implementation gap' is where we aren't walking the talk just yet. The budgets our cash-strapped municipalities can allocate to greening remain very small – a tiny fraction of what we spend on highways.

Money isn't the only currency that matters in this arena: cities also need to be willing to allocate space. To do this, cities must either buy up expensive privately-owned land, or green-up public land that's being used for other things. Buying a property to make a new park can occasionally be effective, but the big change will come when we're able to take public land that's already in use and convert it to green space, in a systematic way, at scale.

Changing land use is politically difficult, particularly because most of the public land in our cities is in streets, and it's currently allocated to cars. Politicians and bureaucrats are scared to be seen to make parking more difficult, or traffic

slower, regardless of how generous a street might be to vehicles. This partly explains why councils embrace politically safe tactics, like making upgrades to existing green spaces, or announcing a single showy 'flagship' project, or running feel-good community events. While worthwhile, these actions are also a way to offer an impression of progress while avoiding the difficult, contested work of large-scale land use change.

**Delivering urban greening at a scale that actually protects us from heatwaves and flooding is going to need a new approach.**

This isn't just about urgent climate risks; rapid, large-scale delivery is key to preventing gentrification. Delivering a lot of new trees and parks, quickly, simply and without fanfare, means that access to nature becomes normal, rather than a reason to raise the rent.

It's crucial that we push forward with reforms, (State) funding and a decided step away from petty local politics if we hope to realise the many benefits of nature in our cities.

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