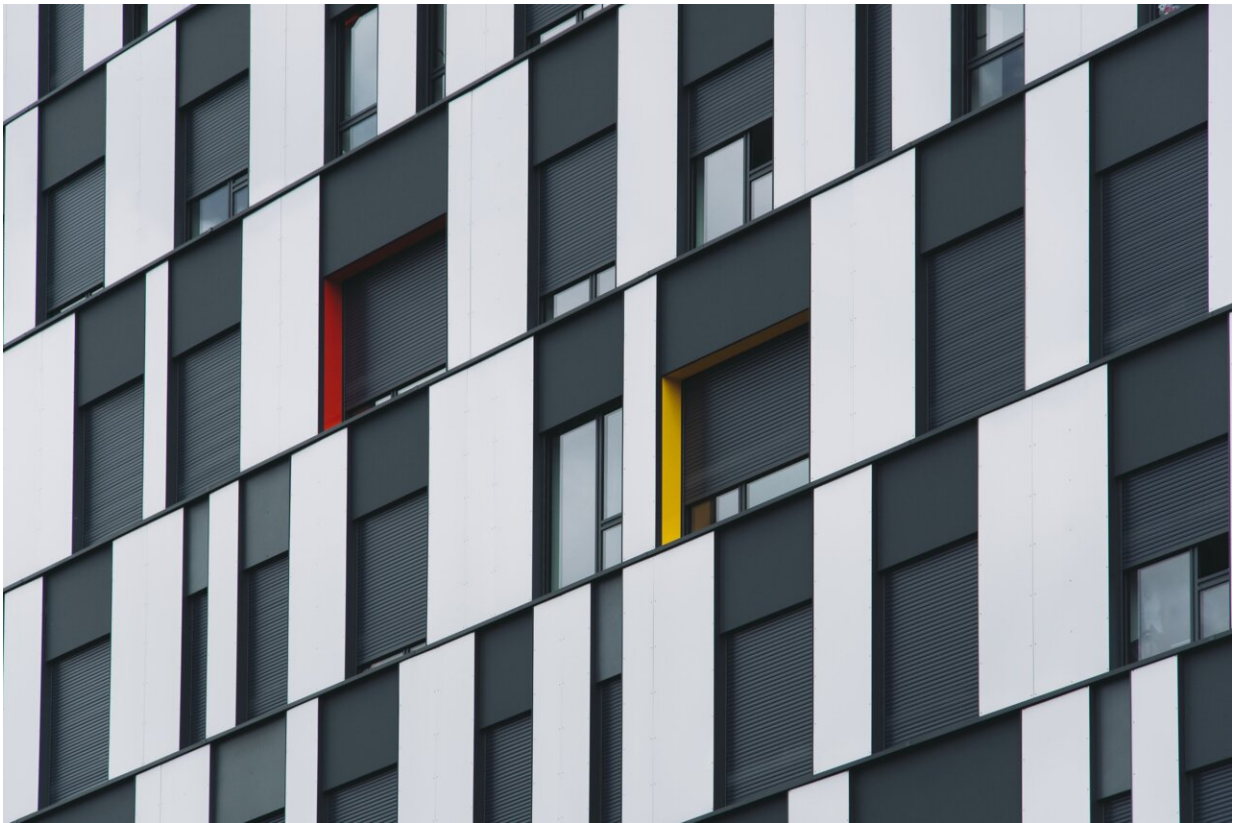


Working with nature can help us build greener cities instead of urban slums

June 26 2018, by Paul Osmond



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

As Australian cities grow and transform, we need to ensure we are not building the slums of the future by making buildings so tall and tight they turn our streets into stark canyons. Sydney's Wolli Creek, where

[buildings dominate](#) and tower over a transport hub, is an example of where this is happening. It is now considered one of the city's densest areas.

Dense, high buildings limit the space available for urban greenery and, unfortunately, the current development boom privileges concrete and glass over vegetation. A more strategic approach to urban growth can ensure our cities maintain adequate green space and become low-carbon, efficient and affordable.

It's also vital the community and individuals are enthusiastic drivers of such change, with shared ownership of it. Imaginative projects – at times described as [urban acupuncture](#) – can all play a role. This is where small-scale interventions (like green balconies) are applied to transform the larger urban context, improve the environment and make the city liveable.

Going up or out

Whether you go *up* (higher) or *out* (more), or both, there are always challenges and opportunities.

The drawback in going *out* is that we start creeping into our remaining [open space](#), including important biodiversity hotspots.

Going out can also encroach on agricultural land. Farmers around the Sydney basin produced up [to 20% of the area's fresh food needs](#) in 2011. But researchers have predicted urban sprawl and rising land prices will lead this to drop to 6% by 2031, losing both produce and jobs.

Going *up* is an approach driven by proximity to transport, utilities and employment, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. Major upward developments, like Wolli Creek, are logically being located around

transport nodes. But these then become dense and concentrated areas, putting growing pressure on open space and community facilities.

Community projects

Community consultation is key before any major project and redevelopment, as genuine dialogue supports shared ownership of the outcomes. Existing community projects must be celebrated. Having an [engaged and empowered community](#) leads to a healthier, happier population.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

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their own

In Sydney, new precincts like [Waterloo](#) are ambitious and have good intentions. These areas aim to deliver new homes, shops, major transport services, community facilities, parks and open spaces over the next 20 years – and they're located close to the urban centre.

Waterloo already has [three community gardens](#), which bring together public housing residents through growing and sharing fresh produce. This approach is important to continue and initiate new projects.

Around the world there have also been successes with [city farming](#) where the community grows and sells agricultural produce locally. In skyscraper Singapore, they are farming vertically at [Sky Greens](#), providing an alternative to importing food for this densely peopled city-state.

Green roofs are another alternative where communities can grow flowers and vegetables while providing training and jobs. A good example is the [Uncommon Ground](#) rooftop farm in Chicago.

In Australia, the [Grounds](#) is a former pie factory in the industrial heart of Sydney's Alexandria. In 2012, the site began to metamorphose into a cafe, restaurant, bakery, organic mini-farm and more. This is a successful example of how a little greenery has turned a bleak post-industrial site into an enjoyable destination, where young and old from far and wide come to enjoy the plants, animals and coffee.

A domestic garden, a green balcony or a green wall can all play a role – but these need ongoing care and attention, which means individuals and engaged communities must drive the enthusiasm.

Nature in the city

So, for a start, let's not build fast and furiously without grasping the place as a whole and making the most of what is already there. This means preserving mature trees and shrubs, leaving open space unpaved and protecting areas of deep soil for future planting.

Maintaining, enhancing and creating urban green [space](#) not only fulfils the requirements for urban acupuncture, but – to mix medical metaphors – provides a kind of urban vaccination against the emergence of slums, where nothing can grow and depression sets in.

We can combine building development with what Stefan Boeri Architects have described as "[vertical densification of nature within the city](#)" to achieve a new kind of urban nature – nature *in* the city to transform the nature *of* the [city](#).

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