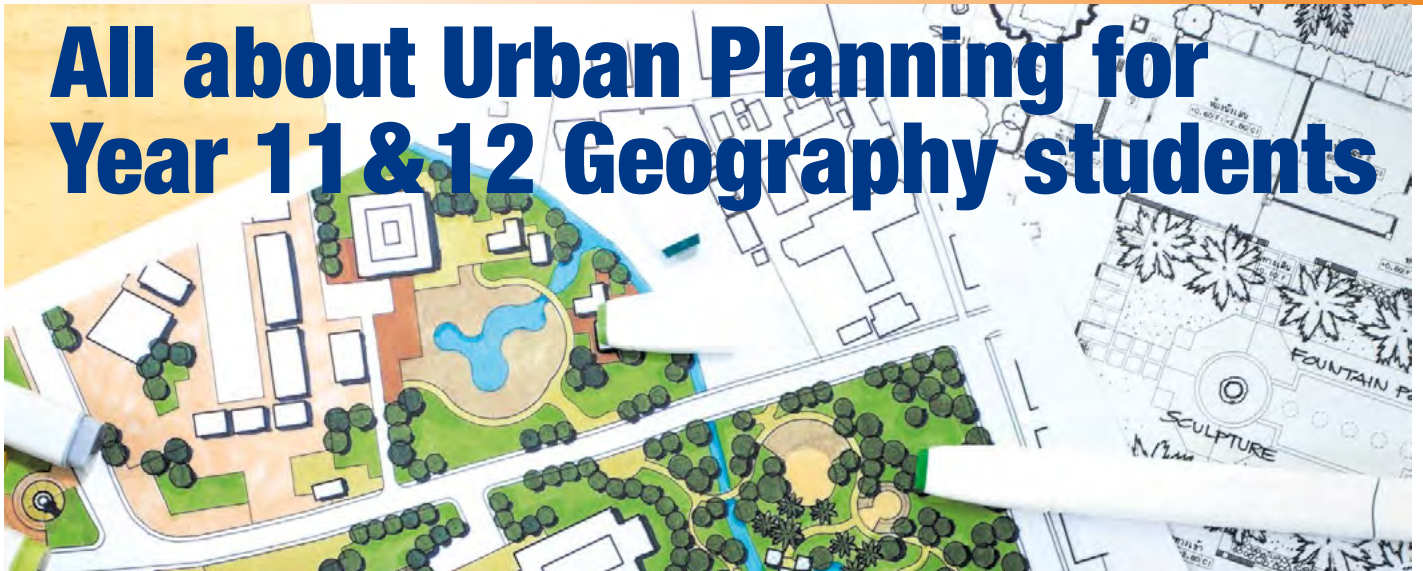


All about Urban Planning for Year 11 & 12 Geography students



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Geography and Urban Planning are so closely related and the transition between the two is refreshingly smooth and painless. This is how I felt it anyway. I always loved Geography, I studied it all the way through school and University and after being a High School Geography Teacher for a few years I took a sidestep into the wonderful world of Urban Planning. I continue to tutor Geography and one thing I love is that I can use case studies I see and hear in my day job to help students. Nevertheless, anecdotally at least, Urban Planning is still not getting the love it deserves as a really interesting career choice and study tool for students of Geography.

FOR STUDENTS

Urban what?

Urban Planning used to be more commonly known as Town Planning and is sometimes called Regional Planning or City Planning depending on the context. This can be very confusing for students who are likely to come across a range of degree programs, all using different names. These names include: Urban and Regional Planning (USYD), City Planning (UNSW), Urban Management and Planning (WSU), or Regional and Urban Planning (Southern Cross). Furthermore, it is also commonly part of a broader university degree, such as a Bachelor of Environment and Sustainability (ANU).

Rest assured, these degrees all teach the same fundamental skills needed to be an Urban Planner. The range of titles reflects the fact that it is very hard to define what does and what does not fit within the bubble of Urban Planning. Geography students often remark; 'hey this isn't Geography, it's Economics!' (or biology, or sociology). As an Urban Planner, day in day out, I too find myself in a similar situation, wondering if I am, in fact, an Ecologist, Lawyer, Architect, Engineer or Demographer.

So, what do Urban Planners do?

This is the great part of being an Urban Planner, you get to dabble in a range of fields. For example, if there is a new apartment block that a developer plans to build, they will check the government rules and regulations for that location to see if it is permissible to build. Did you know that most locations have limits on how high a new building can be? The developer may discover that the height of the building they are planning is not allowed. Of course, we live in a democracy and the developer has every right to lodge an application to the government to review these limits. This is called a 'planning proposal'.

For Urban Planners working in the State government like myself, one of our many jobs is to assess such an application. We will consider social, environmental, and economic ramifications of increasing the allowed height of a building on the site. This is not a simple process, and to make the best decision possible we need to ask for expert reports such as architectural designs, assessments by ecologists, studies of how transport will be affected, and the list goes on. Generally, Urban Planners will not write any of these reports, but we will have to read and understand what they say.

CAREERS: URBAN PLANNING

In the end, an application is approved if it is judged to have 'strategic' (broad scale) and 'site specific' (local) benefits which outweigh the costs, the Urban Planner will need to write a report to justify the decision and help rewrite the planning 'rule book' – which we call a Local Environmental Plan – to make the change.

Is that all they do?

This is definitely not all that Urban Planners do, there are hundreds of different roles an Urban Planner can have, but the one common feature is **how** we do our job. We make decisions on the best possible land use for an area now and into the future, thinking equal parts socially, environmentally, and economically. We also have to be able to understand a little bit of a large number of different fields of expertise. In this sense, if you have ever done a personality test and being categorised a 'peace maker' or if your friends describe you as a 'jack of all trades', you will probably enjoy being an Urban Planner.

What is a new and exciting area of Urban Planning?

Have you ever wondered how a National Park starts? A long time ago, the government may very well have just put a fence around some unwanted bushlands, but these days with the fast pace of biodiversity decline, we have to be really careful to protect the most important and rare ecosystem types from development. An Urban Planner may be involved in managing a team of Global Information System (GIS) experts and Ecologists to map areas based on biodiversity to inform decisions of where the reserves of the future will be. In Sydney for example, some key species Urban Planners are helping to protect with this process include the green and golden bell frog, Cumberland land snail and of course, koalas! Urban Planners will be the ones in charge of creating a long-term plan for land use in areas of sensitive biodiversity to protect it into the future.

Urban Planning is a field that wants to lead the curve of social change rather than follow it. If you want to be involved in a career that takes the global challenges of climate change, health inequality and biodiversity loss seriously, Urban Planning is for you.

Skills of an urban planner:

- * vision
- * data collection and analysis
- * project management
- * communication and collaboration
- * project management

Urban Planners talk in maps

It is no secret that a big part of Geography is maps, this is also true of Urban Planning. Maps can describe what a whole essay can on just a single page, and they are also great for showing a vision for a place. So Urban Planners love maps and are often skilled at expressing things visually.

In school Geography mapping skills often emphasise accuracy, when you are an Urban Planner, many maps are more about simplicity, impact, clarity and vision. Below for example is the strategic vision for Sydney to 2056.

As an Urban Planner, you get to think creatively and leave a long-term legacy.

The Metropolis of Three Cities, a vision for Sydney to 2056 (ref 1)



Source: Greater Sydney Commission. (2018) Greater Sydney Region Plan: A Metropolis of Three Cities, available: <https://www.greater.sydney/metropolis-of-three-cities/vision-of-metropolis-of-three-cities>



Urban planning, Montreal. Image source: <https://unsplash.com/@sergiosala>

FOR TEACHERS

How can Urban Planning help students to succeed in Geography?

If you can think like an Urban Planner, you can think like a Geographer.

There are hundreds of links which could be made between the NSW Geography syllabus and Urban Planning, but one thing that overwhelmingly becomes the focus of many of my lessons is stretching students to challenge blanket and oversimplified understandings of urban consolidation.

Excuse the Sydney centric example, but urban consolidation happens in all areas of Sydney and students might benefit from knowing that urban consolidation does not have one driving force, rather there are three key drivers: government (regulation on the one hand and strategic investment in key 'precincts' on the other), developers (necessity for return on investment, waiting for the market to be right) and the public (demand for high density living, changing demographics etc).

Have a look at the NSW ePlanning Spatial Viewer (**ref 2**).

Find your local strategic centre (Parramatta, Penrith, Bankstown, Randwick etc.), turn on the 'Land Zoning Map' layer under the 'Principal Planning Layers' section of the menu on the left, then compare what is allowed to be developed in that centre versus what you actually see. Student may benefit from discussing possible reasons behind how consolidation is playing out and comparing that to another centre.

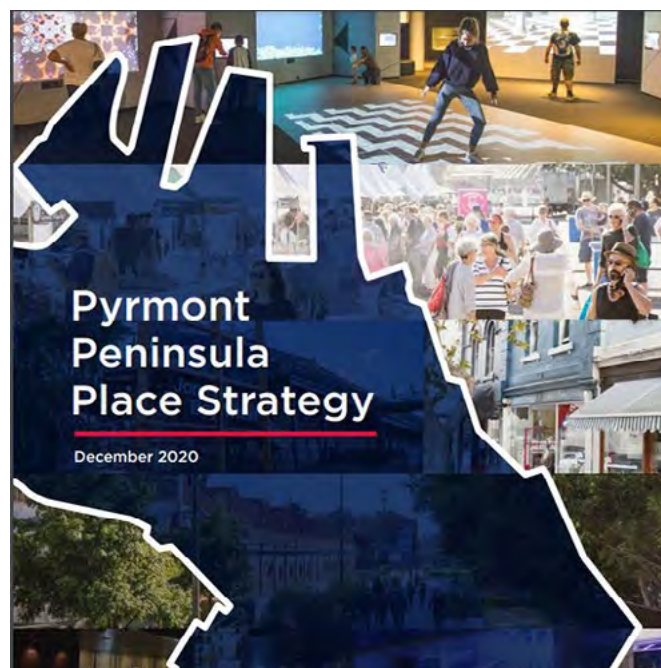
Also note these existing planning regulations may change based on the strategic vision of the government, keep an eye out for strategic documents for your area. One which cannot be dismissed for many students is the 2020 'Pymont Peninsula Place Strategy' (**ref 2**).

It is important to cover the different way consolidation has played out and will play out in different centres for students to engage with objective H3 of the Stage 6 syllabus *'analyses contemporary urban dynamics and applies them in specific contexts'*

Please reach out if you have any questions or comments on how Urban Planning can become more of a focus for Geography students now and into the future. I would be happy to chat.

References

- Greater Sydney Commission. (2018) **Greater Sydney Region Plan: A Metropolis of Three Cities**, <https://www.greater.sydney/metropolis-of-three-cities/vision-of-metropolis-of-three-cities>
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About the author

Edmund McGrath has a background in Urban Planning and Education in organisations across the globe and lately in NSW Government. He has a Master of Urban and Regional Planning, Sydney University and a Master of Teaching, Deakin University.

"My purpose in my career is to deliver innovative and effective improvements to the economic, social and environmental outcomes of urban places and communities. The ideal city for me would be like a giant garden – a lot quieter and greener".