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## Choosing Healthy Food in Sydney's Inner City Neighborhoods

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### Abstract

Diet-related chronic diseases are a major health problem faced by developed and developing countries. Although individuals' dietary patterns are often associated with varied psychological and socioeconomic factors, built environment factors can be important determinants of food choices. Whilst there is some evidence to suggest a link between access to food and food consumption, it remains unclear how a wider range of built environment factors influence residents' food choices. A deeper understanding of these relationships could reveal under-researched aspects of a healthy built environment. This paper explores how residents in inner Sydney neighborhoods access food and investigates how characteristics of the built environment influence their food choices. Eighteen participants, representing a range of ethnic backgrounds and levels of income, were selected for in-depth interviews. Several urban barriers to healthy food consumption were identified through analysis. Distance, land use and urban form, in particular, shape the food choices of individuals in different ways. These findings have implications for urban planning and policy making for healthy cities.

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### 1. Introduction

There is growing concern about alarming rates of illnesses related to contemporary urban lifestyles. In Australia, for example, 63 percent of adults and 25 percent of children are overweight or obese [1]. If current trends continue,

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over two-thirds of Australians would be overweight or obese by 2025 [2]. The epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases is harming the well-being of those directly affected and has been placing a burden on the public health sector.

With the focus on promoting population health and well-being, there is an emerging scholarly consensus that the public health issues facing most cities are driven by a range of changes in lifestyle behaviors, including diet and physical activity levels, influenced by changes in the built environment [3–5]. There is, therefore, an urgent need to investigate how and to what extent the built environment affects city residents' food choices.

An individual's food choice is often seen as a result of different interrelated factors, including built environment characteristics, dietary behaviors, and socioeconomic circumstances. Food deserts, places 'with poor access to retail provision of healthy affordable food' [6], have been reported in different countries as constraining residents from making healthy food choices. These studies, however, tend to focus on extreme situations where community infrastructure is inadequate. Another approach involves investigating the relationship between Body Mass Indexes (BMIs) and spatial distance between home and grocery store or fast-food restaurants in different cities [7–9]. For example, Morland et al. [7] reported that higher BMIs were associated with the presence of convenience stores, whereas lower BMIs were associated with the presence of supermarkets in four selected areas in Mississippi, North Carolina, Maryland and Minnesota respectively. Zenk et al. [10], however, analyzed fruit and vegetable intake in a multiethnic urban population of Detroit and found that fruit and vegetable consumption varied for different ethnic groups in the same neighborhood.

Previous studies have overlooked a number of other ways in which the built environment shapes food choices. Consequently, currently very little is known about food choice in the built environment, particularly in areas with diverse social groups as well as multiple food options. In light of urban renewal and high-density development in Sydney, a rapidly changing built environment offers both opportunities and risks for healthy food consumption. It is, therefore, important to learn how people choose food and whether their needs are being met in inner city communities. Therefore, this study examined food choice and investigated whether and how the built environment influences the healthy diets of people.

The remaining sections of the paper proceed as follows: the first part deals with the research methods of this study; the second part includes preliminary results discussed in 18 in-depth interviews; the third section discusses emerging concepts and themes from the interviews.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study population and settings

The study was carried out in inner city neighborhoods of Sydney, all within the Local Government Area of the City of Sydney. Inner city areas include districts within a 1.5 km radius of the Sydney Central Business District (CBD). Four communities were selected in Sydney inner city for recruiting participants, see Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Location of study neighborhoods and the City of Sydney

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