

Healthy Built Environments

The Built Environment and Strengthening Communities: What's the Evidence?

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A sense of community and belonging where people live, work and travel are important determinants of physical and mental health. Sense of belonging fosters perceptions of security, confidence and comfort which can encourage people to be active and engaged in their neighbourhood, as well as socially connected to others. Incidental interaction enhances possibilities for human connection and caring. In turn, this increases perceptions of safety and reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation, all of which have benefits for mental health.

In this column, we explore ways planners can enhance social connectedness through the built environment. These are summarised in the diagram. Our recently published literature review – available on the Healthy Built Environments Program website – provides detailed research evidence.

The location and treatment of green and open spaces facilitates contact with nature, as well as contact with community. The benefits of natural, green and open spaces extend beyond the provision of areas for physical activity. The 'biophilia hypothesis' suggests there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. Removal of this bond by 'building out' natural elements – plants, animals, and even the weather – can be detrimental to health.

Community gardens foster incidental and organised social interaction and have multiple benefits for health and wellbeing. They are spaces for people to establish and maintain contact with each other and nature, as well as providing access to healthy fruits and vegetables.

Spaces between buildings – on the street and in town squares – are also important for encounters and social interaction. An incidental greeting between individuals waiting for a bus or walking along the footpath can begin a conversation which contributes to sense of community. Active transport presents further opportunities for casual interaction not afforded by the private motor car.

Thoughtful design of open spaces, neighbourhood streets and buildings can encourage human interaction as part of community creation. However, even with good design, people will not interact within, nor feel part of a community when they feel unsafe. A neighbourhood where derelict buildings, graffiti, rubbish and other signs of disorder are evident is not conducive to community connection.

So what are the policy implications from this research for planners?

The evidence is unequivocal about the health benefits of green open space. As cities densify – and the urban environment becomes busier with more hard surfaces and increased visual and aural stimulation – planning policies must support the provision of green open space.

With continuing urban population growth, provision for additional green open space is essential. In rapidly developing urban areas where land costs are high, governments must ensure that funding is available for the purchase of adequate amounts of open space, as well as landscape design and upkeep. The well documented benefits to health – including prevention of chronic diseases – provide strong arguments for such policies.

Policies need to encourage the establishment of community gardens and related spaces such as edible street verges and school kitchen gardens. To be effective, these policies require support from other agencies such as schools,



gardening clubs, and recycling and sustainability groups.

Planning policies based on new urban design – with increased densities and mixed uses – may support social interaction. The research suggests, however, that these interactions will not occur without adequate provision to protect individual privacy. This evidence should inform policy and design guidance. Further, such policies should be accompanied by socially oriented programs, including the facilitation of community groups, staging of community events, and even the support of fledging local retailing to help ensure viability in the establishment phase.

Finally, the issue of safety should be recognised as the foundation of healthy spaces that connect and strengthen communities. Policies that involve community members in their development and utilise Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) guidelines should be pursued. The research evidence highlights the benefits of integrating crime prevention with other healthy built environment policies.

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Community gardens are an important way to connect communities, as well as providing a myriad of other health benefits.



Public spaces in mixed use centres can support social interaction and connection – this one is in Rouse Hill.