

# **Designing Cities for Health, Sustainability, and Wellbeing**

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The health of people is closely connected to the places where they live. As cities continue to grow around the world, the way we design and manage urban environments is becoming increasingly important for both human wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

Today, cities are at the centre of many global challenges. Issues such as climate change, social inequality, housing, infrastructure, and public health are increasingly concentrated in urban areas. As a result, discussions about sustainable development are placing greater attention on the role of cities and the importance of effective urban governance.

Cities influence many aspects of everyday life. They shape how people move, where they work, the air they breathe, and the spaces where communities gather. Because of this, decisions made by urban planners, local governments, and policymakers play a significant role in determining whether cities support healthy, resilient, and sustainable communities.

## **Cities and public health**

The connection between cities and health has long been recognised. In the nineteenth century, physician Dr. John Snow famously mapped cholera cases during an outbreak in London and identified a contaminated water pump as the likely source of the disease. His investigation demonstrated how environmental conditions within cities can directly influence human health.

Modern public health research continues to examine these relationships through the field of epidemiology. Epidemiologists study how diseases occur across different populations and locations, helping identify patterns between health outcomes and environmental conditions. Research approaches such as cohort studies and ecological studies allow scientists to examine how neighbourhood characteristics, including housing conditions, infrastructure, transport systems, and environmental exposures, may influence health outcomes across communities.

These approaches highlight an important lesson: the built environment plays a critical role in shaping population health.

## **The Healthy Cities perspective**

Urban design perspectives such as the Healthy Cities approach show that health is shaped by much more than medical care. The design of neighbourhoods, access to green spaces, transport systems, and environmental quality all contribute to the health of communities.

Urban design influences whether people can walk safely, breathe cleaner air, and enjoy public spaces that encourage social interaction and physical activity. These factors can help reduce chronic disease, improve mental wellbeing, and strengthen community connections.

Thoughtful urban planning can be seen to play an important role in preventing premature deaths, increasing life expectancy, and reducing long-term economic pressures on healthcare systems. When cities support healthier lifestyles, both individuals and society benefit.

## **Health, equity, and urban sustainability**

Health is also closely linked to questions of fairness and sustainability. Access to healthy environments is not always equally distributed. Some communities experience higher levels of pollution, fewer green spaces, or limited access to essential services.

Urban sustainability therefore requires attention not only to environmental outcomes but also to social wellbeing. Effective urban governance can help address these challenges by creating policies and planning strategies that support inclusive, healthy environments for all residents.

Planning healthier cities means recognising that everyone should have the opportunity to live in an environment that supports health and quality of life.

### **Cities and the future of sustainable development**

As cities continue to expand, the decisions made today will shape the wellbeing of future generations. Urban planning, governance, and policy will play an increasingly important role in guiding how cities respond to challenges such as climate change, population growth, and social inequality.

Cities that integrate nature, encourage sustainable transport, and prioritise people-centred design can create environments that support both human wellbeing and environmental resilience.

Urban planning is therefore not only about buildings and infrastructure. It is about shaping places that support healthy communities, sustainable development, and a more resilient future.

At its core, the way we design and govern our cities will determine how well we care for both people and the planet. Cities that are planned with foresight and care can become places where both people and nature thrive, laying the foundation for a healthier and more sustainable future.

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