

The Opinion Pages

Designing an Active, Healthier City

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Despite a firm reputation for being walkers, New Yorkers have an obesity epidemic on their hands. Lee Altman, a former employee of New York City's Department of Design and Construction, explains it this way: "We did a very good job at designing physical activity out of our daily lives."

According to the city's health department, more than half of the city's adult population is either overweight (34 percent) or obese (22 percent), and the convenience of their environment has contributed to this. "Everything is dependent on a car, elevator; you sit in front of a computer," said Altman, "not moving around a lot."

This is not just a New York phenomenon. Mass urbanization has caused populations the world over to reduce the amount of time they spend moving their bodies. But the root of the problem runs deep in a city's infrastructure.

Safety, graffiti, proximity to a park, and even the appeal of stairwells all play roles in whether someone chooses to be active or not. But only recently have urban developers begun giving enough priority to these factors.

Planners in New York have now begun employing a method known as "active design" to solve the problem. The approach is part of a global movement to get urbanites onto their streets and enjoying their surroundings on foot, bike or public

transport.

“We can impact public health and improve health outcomes through the way that we design,” said Altman, a former active design coordinator for New York City. She now lectures as an adjunct assistant professor in Columbia University’s urban design program.

“The communities that have the least access to well-maintained sidewalks and parks have the highest risk of obesity and chronic disease,” said Joanna Frank, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Active Design; her work focuses on creating guidelines and reports, so that developers and planners are aware, for example, that people have been “less likely to walk down streets, less likely to bike, if they didn’t feel safe, or if the infrastructure wasn’t complete, so you couldn’t get to your destination.”

Even adding items as straightforward as benches and lighting to a streetscape can greatly increase the likelihood of someone’s choosing to walk, she said.

This may seem obvious, but without evidence its importance could be overlooked. “We’ve now established that’s actually the case,” said Frank.

How can things change? According to Frank, four areas are critical: transportation, recreation, buildings and access to food.

In buildings, one focus is on whether people will opt to use the stairs.

Have you ever stopped to think why you would take the stairs? Or what might dissuade you from riding the elevator? Quite a few factors affect this otherwise subliminal decision: their location, their proximity to the entrance of a building, their lighting, their grandeur, their odor, etc.

Though it was built long before there was a movement dedicated to active design, the dramatic grand staircase of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrates what the movement’s concepts can achieve. The invitingly wide, centrally placed stairs are among the first things people see on entering the museum, while using an elevator involves walking to a nondescript corner of the building. That makes the stairs a natural lure and a memorable part of the visit.

“We really want stairs to be enticing,” said Frank. “So things like natural light, views onto a second-story landing, those kind of things pull people along.”

Seemingly small things, she added, can help people change unhealthy routines. “Just six flights of stairs a day greatly reduces the risk of stroke in men, and also offsets the average annual weight gain of an American,” said Frank. But there is a problem: Do alluring stairwells exist, or could they be restored where they have been allowed to deteriorate, in the areas where they are most needed?

“If you look at a lot of buildings, they might not have safe stairwells,” said Carol Horowitz, an associate professor of health policy and medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine who is trying to stem a high incidence of overweight and severe diabetes among her patients in Harlem.

“There are bike rentals all throughout New York City, but they haven’t come up north to East Harlem,” she added. “There’s malls people can walk in — they’re not in East Harlem.” The same can be said of other underserved neighborhoods, including much of the Bronx. “Access is the big issue,” said Frank. “Poorer neighborhoods have less access to this infrastructure.”

In other areas, meanwhile, some things are changing.

Altman and Frank have been helping to redesign the streets of New York City, and the buildings found on them, through their respective organizations.

One gargantuan project is the city’s plaza program, which has created a series of pedestrianized plazas across the city by converting unused pockets of land or changing traffic patterns. The decision was aided by studies showing that people needed to live within 10 minutes of a park, or open space, in order to use it.

“This has increased the number of people gathering and walking more,” Frank said.

Community nonprofit organizations are now able to apply to create plazas in their neighborhoods, and a number of them have sprung up in scattered areas. The most prominent, perhaps, is a 25-block pedestrian walkway that stretches south from Times Square toward Union Square along Broadway, complete with room for

stands where local vendors do business with the passers-by.

“This program was one of the first to make use of active design strategies,” said Altman. “One of the most congested major traffic arteries was closed off for pedestrians and it was a crazy experiment that worked.”

Experimentation has also reached into buildings, from schools and hospitals to Housing Authority structures like Arbor House in the Bronx, which opened in 2013. The 1,240-unit eco-friendly building encompasses a range of active design strategies, including stairs visible through glass doors, inviting fitness areas and, most notably, a rooftop hydroponic farm that grows healthy food for residents.

“It’s a really thoughtful building right from the streetscape to the fencing and window guards,” Frank said. As a part of the experimentation, a randomized population was chosen to live there, in order to accurately study any benefits the building provided to human health.

“Women have changed from obese to overweight,” Frank said, and have experienced hip-to-waist ratio improvements. In surveys, 58 percent of residents reported an increase in the number of flights of stairs they climbed weekly, and in interviews others described feeling inspired to live healthier, Frank said.

The Center for Active Design is now partnering with Mount Sinai Hospital to replicate the experimentation in a new affordable housing development named Prospect Plaza, in central Brooklyn.

“We would very much like to see this become the status quo, like sustainable design has become the norm in good design practice,” she said.

Across the Atlantic, similar goals are in place in Britain, where the Design Council, a similar nonprofit, is using design to reduce obesity. Nearly 60 percent of Britain’s women and almost 70 percent of its men are overweight or obese.

“There are projects and places all over the U.K., including housing schemes, parks, playgrounds and changes to streets,” said Rachel Toms, a program leader at the Design Council. **To address weight problems among young children, her organization has advised local councils and organizations in central London on**

projects that include changing the design of new playgrounds and play equipment to make them more inviting.

One example is the playground at the city's Olympic Park, where a vast playscape with varying topography has minimal boundaries and rules, so it can tap into a child's imagination as he or she plays.

"Designers worked with children to come up with play equipment that the kids scramble all over and challenge themselves," Toms said. The playground was also intended to improve social cohesion in a multicultural and underserved part of London, while also appealing to different age groups. "The key point was to be inclusive," Toms said.

In its campaign against obesity, the Design Council is hewing close to the pattern used at Arbor House in New York.

"Currently there is big housing demand in the U.K.," said Toms, adding that "it's an enormous opportunity to build great neighborhoods that are appealing, mixed use, offer lots of activities and resilient for the future." She emphasizes that Britain's national economy also benefits alongside public health.

Toms, Frank and Altman all stress that active design is not difficult to do and can have a large social payoff.

"People need to love where they live and where they work," said Toms, adding that they also need to be "in a place that really boosts their health, not making them unhealthy."

Meera Senthilingam is a British freelance journalist who covers global health issues. For more insight into how health is affected by your city and environment, listen to her podcast, "The 96th Street divide: why there's so much diabetes in Harlem," on Mosaic Science.

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