Can We Ever Build A Healthy City?

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For the increasing population of city dwellers worldwide, leading a healthy lifestyle isn't just about eating well and doing regular exercise – the infrastructure and environmental factors of the city itself also play a crucial role.

But creating an entire city that can be called a "healthy city" is no simple task. The first goal is to conquer what is conquerable, says Franz Jenowein, director of JLL's Sustainability Consulting. City governments should focus on what they can control – like access to hospitals, green spaces and active modes of transport such as walking and cycling. But it's also important to provide health enhancing features to cities and to do so in manageable chunks.

"Districts within a city are a great place to start and they allow private initiatives to be integrated more easily because an entire city is too large to control and more costly as well," Jenowein says.

This district by district approach to developing a healthier city has, in fact, proven to be a popular strategy across the globe.

Taking an entirely innovative approach to the healthy city are the people behind the $2 billion, 40 acre project in Tampa, Florida that will bring about the world's first WELL certified city district. Based on the fact that most people now spend about 90 percent of their lives indoors, the WELL criteria of building performance consists of seven categories: air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind.

Applying the technology and design strategies used in smart cities, the mixed use development project will include enhanced walkability, low pollen trees, sound barriers, green infrastructure and daily air quality monitoring. Slated to begin construction in 2017, this project in Tampa is proposed as an example of how cities of the world can be designed with citizens' health in mind.

A new urban environment

Other cities are experimenting with their own ideas. In Paris, the 100-hectare Saint-Ouen Docks is a district currently under construction along the Seine River as part of the wider Grand Paris urban transformation project. The design inherently encourages a healthier lifestyle among all of its residents: a biodiverse, 12-hectare park, featuring promenades through grasslands and meadows, allows residents of all ages to participate in tending to the landscaping, beehives and allotment gardens; an educational greenhouse features a learning kitchen and studios for yoga and tai chi; a zero energy school building features maximized daylighting and plenty of outdoor classroom space.

HafenCity in Hamburg is considered to be Europe's largest inner-city development with a focus on "ripping down walls" between private and public spaces to encourage walking and healthier living, according to Jürgen Bruns-Berentelg who is overseeing the transformation.

He believes that space and choice are key to urban design to help people be more active. "The walking process can be redirected. It is not only a linear issue but [also] a spatial extension issue. It allows the use of space for leisure activities and provides incentives to walk within these spaces," he tells the Urban Land Institute Annual Conference. Additions such as a basketball court within residential areas make it easy for children to keep up a more active lifestyle.

"This way, sports becomes integrated, families can send their children down to play, and this has good consequences for health," he explains.

The role of big data

As more cities look to meet the challenges of providing healthier spaces for their citizens, Big Data plays an important role in understanding how people interact with their environment and where improvements can be made.

"Urban citizens are practically walking around with a database in their pocket, thanks to the smartphone. The increased ability to measure more of the various health related factors in their lives allows them to increase their understanding of and demand for higher quality living. And city governments should provide answers for those demands," Jenowein says.

Putting this mountain of citizen data to use requires the installation of smart infrastructure that makes up the foundation of a "smart city"–and can facilitate the construction of healthy cities. After all, Jenowein adds, a healthy city is actually one of the desired outcomes of a smart city.

One district that is dealing with its data is the multi-billion dollar Toronto Waterfront Revival project. The city teamed up with IBM and Element Blue to launch a community portal to keep residents connected to each other and the community. By using the portal to report on any health or safety hazards in the area and to access up to date information on public transport, traffic

congestion and air quality, residents can become more aware of daily health – mental and emotional as well as physical – and wellness issues and improve their overall lifestyle.

In Auckland, the innovative district of Wynyard Quarter runs an online reporting and tracking platform that collects live pedestrian and environmental data from sensors. Such information helps to measure progress towards its goal to achieve 70 percent active travel via walking, cycling and public transport.

The healthy city challenge

More cities may be taking up the challenge of creating healthy districts but there's no standard blueprint to follow. Although the "hard" features, such as energy efficient buildings and more green spaces are simpler to define and create, it's the "soft" features regarding quality of life that present a challenge.

Jenowein explains: "Health also depends on an individual's mindset and emotions, which depend on many variables in their lives and surroundings. There's a wide variety of metrics to consider, so when city authorities are deciding on how to approach building new districts the question is do you go more toward happiness or toward green and energy efficient?"

Indeed, the concept of healthy districts is very much in the fledgling stage but as urban populations grow and expectations evolve, so will the complexity of maintaining the health and wellbeing of a community – let alone an entire city.