

Urban planning, healthier living

In the US, research shows that for every dollar spent on developing walking paths, eleven dollars were saved in healthcare costs. Catherine Heffernan argues that our cities should be planned with health in mind.

A couple of weeks ago, I was flicking through yet another woman's magazine protesting against the 'Size Zero' status of film stars. My colleague leaned over my shoulder and said, "It's just what the elite do. When the masses were thin and overworked, the rich were plump and overfed. Now that the masses are facing obesity, the elite differentiate themselves by being skinny and super fit."

She has a point. Physical exercise and healthy eating all seem to have become the domain of the rich. To be fit, it seems you need either an expensive gym membership or a personal trainer - and you have to have a high income to afford organic food. Yet there is one resource that is free to all and which could be designed and developed to be not only an 'outdoor gym' but which could also improve mental and emotional health. What is the name of this great place? The city you live in.

Paris and New York are hailed as two of the world's greatest cities. Paris is noted for his wide architecturally beautiful streets where city dwellers are inspired to stroll around, taking in the cultural sights. Although New York may look like it was put together by architects who played with Lego, it has thriving neighbourhoods. Residents experience life within urban villages with close networks of relationships and everything within walking distance, which have helped to deter crime and reduce feelings of isolation. The secret to the cities' success is that both cities were planned.

At present, many UK cities are undergoing urban renewal and a suburbanisation of the inner city. Apartment blocks are springing up seemingly driven by property developers rather than actual population projections. Because the renewal is happening rapidly, very little planning has gone into the physical shape and the social structure of the changing cities. This has given rise to problems such as lack of green and open spaces, ugliness, social problems like crime, poverty, pollution, racial discordance and now obesity.

Inner cities have long been marked by lack of green spaces and inadequate access to education and public services because most of those were relocated to the suburbs. Depression, crime, drug taking,

alcoholism and lack of community were rife. Current suburbanisation of the inner city may move young professionals and their expendable income to the city centre but they do not tackle the existing problems.

For example, in Leeds, there are an estimated 11,000 people living in the city centre and apart from a walk-in health centre, there is not one GP practice. Access to supermarkets in city centres are limited. Outdoor exercise is impossible in many cities, as people have to negotiate litter-filled streets, often covered in cigarette butts and vomit from the previous night's binge drinking.

It is not difficult to rectify this problem. Where there is an empty car park, earmark it for a park rather than for another high-rise apartment block. In the short term, you may lose money but in the long term, the benefits are far reaching. A well-designed park makes a city appealing. It entices people to live and work there and the commercial sector to invest. London annually attracts many visitors and residents and its parks are often cited as the main attraction for going there.

Having somewhere pleasurable to walk will encourage people to walk their dogs or with their children. They can meet fellow walkers and develop friendships. They are also able to do the

recommended 30-minute exercise a day. This would help prevent health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and obesity. Another way would be to develop a path up and down a riverbank. A map of paths could be used to highlight loops and different distances to alert people to it being an exercise route. It may seem simple but in the USA, it was found that for every dollar spent on developing walking paths, eleven dollars were saved in healthcare costs.

Managing public spaces is crucial to the smooth operation of a city. Having long-term plans and forecasts for public transport and links is important. So is the need to tackle the litter problem. If streets are clean and people are persuaded to take pride in clean streets, we are a step closer to having a nice environment to live in.

Another step is to encourage urban villages. Instead of impersonal high rise block after high rise, aim for self sustained communities with a grocery store, cafes, restaurants, dry cleaners, pharmacy and other services. Health is determined by the interaction between genes, environment, social structure and social ties. Ensuring a clean environment, access to services and enabling social relationships will help maintain people in good mental and physical health. 

