

# Architecture for Well-being and Health

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The purpose of this paper is to define well-being, and to examine the potential implications and opportunities for housing design. The emphasis is on the presence of well-being rather than the absence of ill-health. There can be no doubt that negative physical health-related considerations associated with, for example, poor indoor environmental quality should be avoided. However, this paper will focus instead on supporting positive mental well-being which in turn has implications for physiological health.

The World Health Organisation now defines health not as the absence of ill-health but as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”. Health is no longer simply a question of access to medical treatment but it is determined by a range of factors related to the quality of our built environment. This wider definition of health comes at a time of increasing pressures on health services as a result of an ageing population, increasing obesity, rising mental health problems and higher expectations. Staying healthy in your home and in your community is the way to limit the increasing pressure on health services, and thus designing the home, neighbourhood and work environment to improve health and well-being is an opportunity that presents itself.

The notion of well-being consists of two key elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone with a positive sense of themselves. Having positive relationships, control over your own life and a sense of purpose are all attributes of functioning well. International evidence has recently been gathered to measure well-being, demonstrating that this field has now emerged as a rigorous discipline

The science of well-being is a relatively recent area of enquiry. However, the UK Government’s ‘Foresight’ project related to well-being provides the critical mass of evidence that led to the definition of the ‘Five Ways to Well-being’. These represent the key behaviors that have been shown to relate to improved well-being. Each behaviour is associated with subjective well-being as reported in research papers, notably in medical journals, that draw on large-scale and meta-analysis of existing studies. Thus there is no shortage of evidence to support the assertion that such behaviours result in improved well-being. The ‘Five Ways’ are as follows:

1. **Connect:** The quantity and quality of social connections (e.g. talking and listening to family or strangers) correlates with reported well-being as well as physical health.
2. **Keep Active:** There is ample evidence from global and meta-studies to demonstrate that physical activity reduces symptoms of mental and physical ill-health.
3. **Take Notice:** Being mindful – paying attention to the present and being aware of thoughts and feelings – is a behaviour that reduces symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression.
4. **Keep Learning:** Aspirations are shaped in early life, and those who have higher aspirations tend to have better outcomes. Such aspirations are modified by the environment. The evidence shows that, also later in life, those participating in music, arts and evening classes, for example, attain higher subjective well-being.
5. **Give:** Evidence has emerged that pro-social rather than self-centred behaviour has a positive impact on happiness. Such consequences of altruistic behaviour are related both to spending on others as opposed to oneself and through volunteering and offering help.

The key proposition of this paper is to discuss how the ‘Five Ways to Well-being’ relate to and are influenced by the built environment. This presentation will describe design from the large to the smaller scale, and how they relate to the Five Ways. Below are examples:

## **Neighbourhood scale:**

- a. High density mixed-use development to encourage walking and cycling (Keep Active) to access local services (Connect) - including public transport, health, social services, etc.

- b. The availability of diverse public open space (in higher proportion than private gardens), including a variety of high quality and accessible green space for play and exercise ('Keep Active'), contemplation ('Take Notice'), training and performance ('Keep Learning'), allotments and socialising (Connect and Give), etc. and hard landscape, ideally traffic free, to enable all Five Ways to well-being.
- c. Providing facilities and interest (Take Notice) in public open space - such as a biodiverse environment (encouraging a richness of flora and fauna), seating and WIFI - adds to the potential for social interaction (Connect and Give) and extends the use of the space.
- d. The threshold between the home and a neighbourhood, particularly in high density scenarios, can be mediated with vegetation, both to give close contact with nature (Connect and Take Notice) but also to provide a degree of separation and privacy (to support a more introspective and mindful version of Take Notice).
- e. Views of the neighbourhood and nature from the home are associated with psychological benefits and encourage social interaction (Connect) and supervision (Take Notice) (thus low window sills and openable windows are valuable aspects).

### **Circulation areas:**

- a. To encourage in habitants to Keep Active it helps to make circulation an enjoyable experience and provide rewards for the movement (e.g. avoid boring corridors, aim for good natural light, views, opportunities for spatial variation and encounter (Connect), use art, etc.). This also supports Take Notice.
- b. Separate key spaces with stairs, which provide the most intense personal energy expenditure, to encourage movement and further encourage Keep Active (e.g. put the living space on a different level to the kitchen/dining area, don't have wc's on every floor level).

### **Kitchen, Dinning, Living**

- a. Poor nutritional eating habits can lead to the obesity and related health problems. The preparation and cooking of (fresh) food (Take Notice, Keep Learning) can become a more social activity (Connect, Give) if the kitchen is designed to enable interactions with other members of the household or community.
- b. At a community level, the provision of neighbourhood allotments to grow fresh food is recognised as enhancing health and well-being due to fresh produce, physical exercise (Keep Active) and social interaction (Connect).
- c. With respect to the design of the home, the strategy is to create a sense of 'theatre' related to cooking (Take Notice, Give), and enabling 'audience participation' (Connect) through the design of accessible worktops and adjacent seating. To support communal eating, and the social interactions that result, the dining area/table should be in close proximity to the kitchen. Conversely, the lounge/TV area should be less accessible from the kitchen (potentially upstairs to encourage physical exercise – Keep Active), limiting the temptation for 'TV-dinners' but also providing potential separation in terms of noise, odours and pollutants.

One of the opportunities of architecture is that, through the design of form, space and materiality, it can order our relationships with each other and our environment by creating interactive settings for life. It can do this in such a way so as to provide opportunities to improve our sense of well-being, enrich our lives, make our lives healthier and more pleasurable.

### **References**

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