



Introduction

In the coming decades, the world's population will grow substantially reaching around 9.6 billion by 2050.¹ Almost all of these additional people will live in towns and cities. How can the neighborhoods and districts people live, work, and socialize in be made healthier? What role can physical planning and design play?

Creating Healthy Neighborhoods: Evidence-Based Planning and Design Strategies is a guide for this practice, covering both the process and substance of making places healthier.

This book creates an evidence-based approach to both the process and substance of making healthier places.

Creating Healthy Places focuses on health because this is a fundamental aspect of human quality of life and well-being. It emphasizes the neighborhood and district scale of development because such places are where people live out their daily existence, and they are important building blocks of larger urban places.

Research, Health, Well-being, and Place

Planners, designers, civic leaders, and activists seeking to change existing neighborhoods and districts or to revise proposals to make them healthier face a complex challenge. They need to consider a variety of topics relevant to health—from air quality to social interaction—and scales—from the blocks that make up the district to the town or city the blocks are embedded in. They also need to know the limits of how much the physical neighborhood environment can affect health. How much does a place matter compared with other sources of health and healthy behaviors from biology to culture? Healthy built environments are as much about how a place is used, maintained, and priced as they are about physical

development and redevelopment. Policies matter. A beautiful play area that is too expensive to use is a visual amenity only.

This book helps planners, urban designers, activists, and public officials gain access to and assess the evidence base on healthy places, largely produced by other fields. Those in public health will be familiar with many of the ideas covered in the book. However, it provides insights into how to engage with planning, development, and redevelopment activities focused on neighborhoods and districts.

Making the leap from research to action can be tricky, however. There are three main reasons:

- In some topical areas there is a great deal of research that needs to be evaluated. Unfortunately it is often highly specific, requiring much sorting and analysis to find the big picture. This is the case even when only considering one scale, that of the neighborhood or district of a few hundred to a few thousand people or few hectares to a few hundred hectares or acres. While

there may be summaries of the research, they do not necessarily specify actions.

- In addition, there will never be research on everything of importance as there is so much environmental variation. So some kind of bridge is needed between theory and practice.
- Finally, much work on the connections between health and place focuses on the substance of the connections between health and built environments.² To actually make change to places requires knowledge of both—process and substance. Further, the process is complex from prioritizing health issues and engaging stakeholders to finding the right tools for incorporating health into plans and programs.

This handbook bridges this gap by doing three things: synthesizing and adapting research findings, proposing how to make informed decisions in the absence of research, and embedding this in a health-informed planning process.

We use guidance based on research findings where those are available. However, because there are so many domains in which health and place are connected that have not been researched, we fill those gaps with guidance based on frameworks about how health and place are related. In addition, some aspects of making healthier places—the processes of developing proposals and implementing good ideas—are not unique to health but rather draw on a larger base of research evidence and professional experience.

This book creates an evidence-based approach to both the process and substance of making healthier places, taking a broadly international perspective. It draws on health research, conceptual frameworks about how health should matter, and the body of professional and research knowledge about the planning and design process. Overall, making healthy neighborhoods and districts is both a set of methods and products that build upon other aspects of neighborhood planning and design to create a rich and comprehensive approach to the quality of place.

This, of course, raises the issue of what is health. As we describe later, health is a topic of enduring interest that predates fields and professions, and interests



A broad view of health includes physical, mental, social, and possibly spiritual well-being.

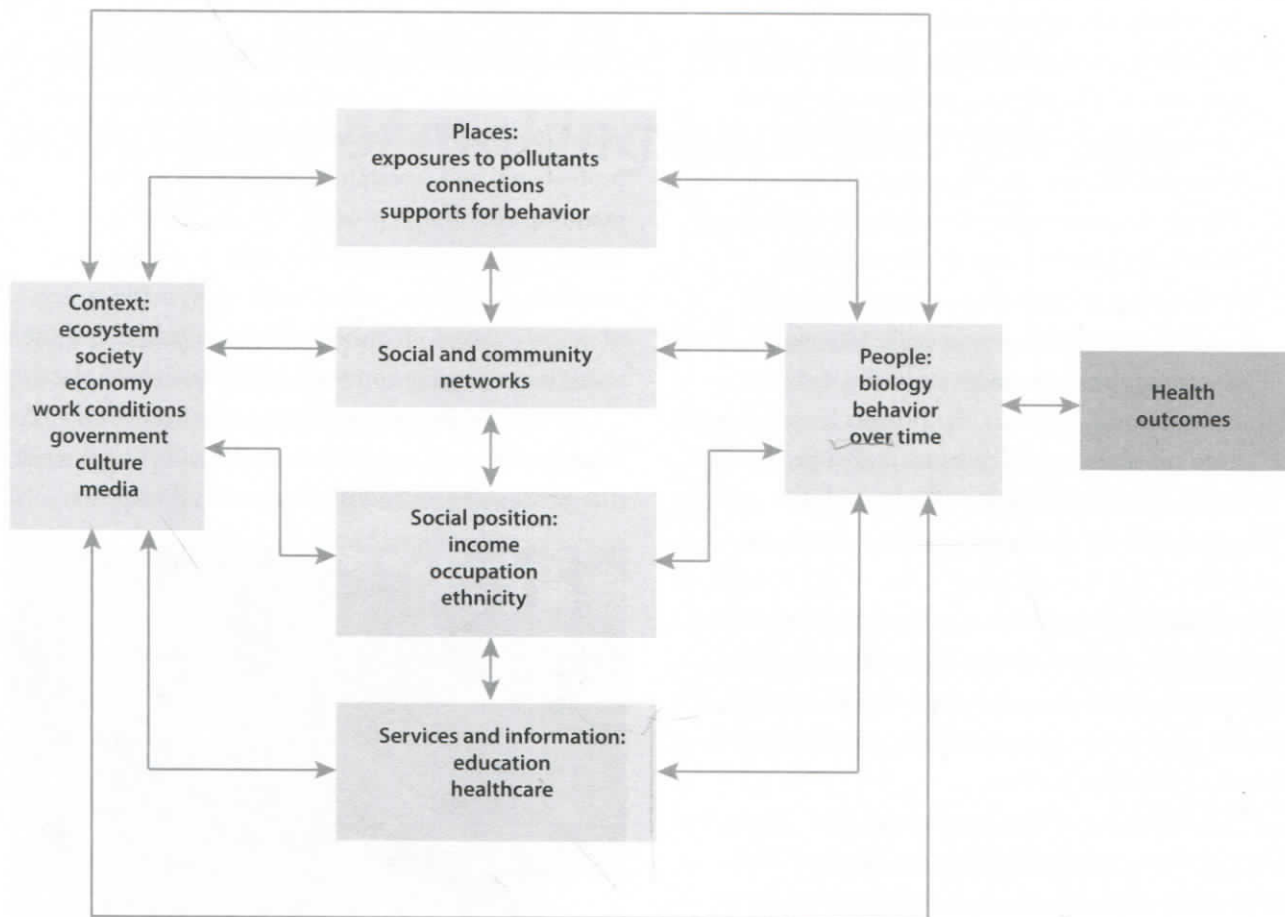


Figure 1. How health, people, places, and wider context are linked over time

Health outcomes are related to biological and behavioral factors, and the context—which includes physical spaces, wider social influences, and change over time. The arrows illustrate the complex relationship between these elements.

Source: Synthesis of materials in this book with some adaptation from UCL Institute of Health Equity 2014

most people in a way few other issues do. While it can be seen narrowly as an absence of disease, those in public health typically see it as much broader—about physical, mental, and social well-being.³ Some would add spiritual well-being as well. As such, health deals with issues of disease, disability, and death, but it is cast in larger terms.

Health and Place over Time

Health is connected to place through a number of facets. Figure 1 shows generally how health outcomes relate to biology, behavior, and context over time. First, a person's biology (gender, heritage, and age) affects health, and these factors interact with behaviors over decades.

Beyond the individual is the larger context, of which places such as neighborhoods and districts are a part. Places—at varying scales, from the room to the region—expose the biological person to various hazards either now or over time. These include harmful contaminants and hazards (from toxic chemicals to insect-borne diseases), irritants (like pollen), and events (for example, floods). Some of these are the direct or indirect result of human activity. But others—like earthquakes—are natural. These affect a person's biology and behaviors to create health outcomes like diseases or disabilities.

The design of a local environment may support healthy behavior, making it interesting, fun, or easy. Examples include opportunities to eat well and exercise, to achieve mental health benefits from

contact with nature, or to live in a safe environment. Design can also make unhealthy behavior inconvenient, expensive, or difficult.

Finally, places may provide access at varying levels to the resources for leading a healthier life, such as physical access to employment, healthcare, shopping, or social connections, for persons of all abilities. It should be noted that not all connections are positive. Some let people indulge in unhealthy behaviors and some social networks are not health promoting, but rather the reverse.

Of course, the place itself is only part of the picture and patterns of use, only partly determined by the detailed specifics of a place, also play a key role. One's social position—occupation, income, education, and the like—as well as wider community networks is crucially important for health. All these are set in a wider context from the economy and the wider media environment to specific policies and programs that shape places and health behaviors and outcomes. Physical places have a role, but there is a lot more happening.

A Trilogy of Investigations and Proposals

This book is one of a set of three books coming from a project at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, the Health and Places Initiative (HAPI), investigating connections between health and urban environments. Each looks at part of this picture. This book provides a framework for connecting health and place, proposing actions for those planning and designing at the neighborhood and urban scale in