

HUMAN HEALTH AND WELL BEING (2013)



Policy Statement

The American Society of Landscape Architects believes that the planning and design of our communities and landscapes have a significant impact on human health and well-being. The physical layout and the materials used in our environment can enhance physical and mental health by promoting active lifestyles, mitigating the impacts of environmental stressors such as air pollution and heat, and providing a diversity of public spaces that foster social interaction and contact with nature.

ASLA advocates for individuals and community leaders to incorporate the best practices and knowledge from both the design and health fields with the goal of improving human health and well-being through sound and creative planning, design, and management of our communities and built environment. ASLA urges the employment of a broad range of policies, practices, and development incentives that will encourage the creation of communities that are safe, affordable, lively and healthy. ASLA encourages increased research and collaboration between the design professions and health professions to advance our understanding and ability to create environments that enhance human health and well-being.

Rationale

There is a growing body of knowledge that makes clear the connection between how communities are designed and built, and the impact on an individual's physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. Disconnected communities contribute to sedentary lifestyles with reduced opportunities for physical activity and social interaction. The lack of access to environments that encourage daily exercise, moderate extreme environmental conditions, and offer affordable services and nutritious food has meant growing epidemics of depression, obesity, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease. However, the design of our communities and environment can counteract these trends.

Supporting active lifestyles: Built environments can promote healthy physical activity by providing safe, attractive and convenient choices for meeting transportation needs and participating in active recreation. Policies that support mixed land use, residential density, and street connectivity with pedestrian and bike facilities increase the walkability of neighborhoods. Places with a strong link between aesthetics and active recreation encourage people to be more active.

Mitigating environmental stressors: Air pollution, extreme temperatures, and mismanagement of water resources all have adverse impacts on human health and well-being. These environmental stressors should be minimized particularly where people spend significant amounts of time or engage in physical activity. Additional impervious surfaces intensify the health and safety risks from increased temperatures and stormwater runoff. The integration of open space and green infrastructure helps moderate the negative impacts. Green infrastructure techniques such as green roofs, permeable pavement, bioswales and increased urban tree canopy use vegetation, soils and natural processes to manage water, moderate temperatures and remove pollutants from the air, thus creating healthier urban environments.

Fostering social interaction: Communities with integrated public parks and other open spaces are essential settings for creating and sustaining basic bonds between



generations, friends and sexes. The integration of these common spaces within the built environment provides spaces for a diversity of people to use either individually or in groups, provides places to build social and civic capital through formal and informal interactions, and gives expression to a diversity of cultures. These activities can also lead to development of a sense of belonging. Identification with place is essential to development of community and community resiliency.

Promoting mental health and contact with nature: The design of the built environment and the opportunities it provides for contact with nature has a significant impact on our mental health and well-being. Natural settings and green landscapes have the capacity to alleviate mental fatigue, help restore the capacity to pay attention, and facilitate faster recovery from surgery and illness. Environmental designs that reduce crowding and noise, and enhance wayfinding can reduce feelings of annoyance, distress, and anxiety that can lead to a range of negative mental health impacts from depression to aggressive behavior. The built environment promotes contact with nature through views out windows, plantings in and around buildings, community gardens, parks, greenways and open space.

Preventing crime and injury: Proper planning and design of the built environment reduces the risk of injuries and improves public safety. Transportation-related injuries and deaths, over 90% of which involve motor vehicles, are closely linked to design. Proper roadway, barrier, and lighting design, traffic calming measures, and community and roadway configurations that reduce the distance and frequency of vehicle use enhance safety. Design features that increase pedestrian and bicycle safety include pedestrian safety zones, separation from motor vehicles (e.g. sidewalks and bike lanes), installation of traffic signals, and similar design features that increase the visibility of pedestrians and bicyclists and reduce the speed of vehicle traffic. Crime prevention is enhanced by incorporating the environmental design principles of natural surveillance, access control, and territoriality into the design of our communities.

Supporting healthy food systems: Access to healthy food is critical to supporting human health. The development of farmers markets and grocery stores, particularly in underserved communities, increases local access to healthy food. Preservation of agricultural land and promotion of home and community gardens are the basis of a healthy food system. Community gardens increase the availability of produce and contribute to physical activity and social capital that support human health.

Resiliency to natural disasters: Community design and land management practices affect the exposure of people and property to harm caused by natural and man-made disasters. Advanced planning is critical to creating communities that are better prepared to withstand physical, social and economic impacts of these events. Community resilience requires consideration at multiple levels. Neighborhood and regional planning best practices safeguard critical infrastructure, recognize high-risk sites, and protect natural systems that mitigate the intensity of disasters. Individual building and site design can improve survivability.