

Public Realm and Wellbeing: How the public realm can be created to increase mental and physical well-being in cities

Abstract

The following essay explains the importance of access to the public realm in terms of an individual's health and well-being and how different elements can be incorporated into the design of a city to increase the overall well-being. The essay first introduces what the public realm is, why it is important for people living in cities to have access to the public realm spaces, and how access to public realm can affect an individual's health and well-being. Outlining different initiatives and approaches that are used in the urban design and planning field, such as biophilic design, and using project examples in North America and the United Kingdom, the essay highlights what key characteristics and objectives in the public realm can help to improve the overall health and well-being of individuals.

Public Realm and Wellbeing

By Design (CABE; 2001) lists one of the key objectives of Urban Design as *Quality of the Public Realm*, a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas to promote public spaces and routes that are attractive, safe, uncluttered and work effectively for all in society, including disabled and elderly people.” (CABE; 2001; p. 15) The wellbeing of people in a community is the most important part to consider when it comes to urban design, planning, and the development of places. People are what make a place. They are the ones who interact with any given space and create the character of the space. People are attracted to places that improve their moods, reduce stress, and can increase their health and wellness. For many people living in cities, access to quality public realm can increase their health and well-being. A person's well-being pertains to not only the physical aspects of their health, but the emotional and mental as well. Different aspects of each individual's life can influence their health, whether it be where they live, what activities they participate in, how they eat, etc. Pacione suggests that quality of life generally refers to the condition of the environment in which people live and/or some attribute of people themselves, such as their health or educational achievement. (Pacione, 2003, p. 19) This statement identifies the importance of considering and assesses the quality of spaces that one dwells in. The Mayor of the City of London, Sadiq Khan, developed a document in 2017, titled *Good Growth by Design*. In this document, the mayor and his design team have emphasised the importance of the overall well-being of people and the communities in London. Broken down into six key parts, (*pictured to the right*), the programme sets out precedence of how it will design and what standards to follow when creating new developments in and around London. The first two parts highlight the importance of setting and following standards. Setting these standards that make it so designers will consider the people and future occupants of the space when designing the public realm, focusing on their health and well-being and how the space might improve that is important in creating urban spaces that help people grow and improve their lives. Studies and projects through North America and the

1 SETTING STANDARDS

Using design inquiries to investigate key issues for architecture, urban design and place-shaping, in order to set clear policies and standards.

2 APPLYING THE STANDARDS

Ensuring effective design review across London, including a London Design Review Panel.

3 BUILDING CAPACITY

Enhancing the GLA Group's and boroughs' ability to shape new development to deliver good growth.

4 SUPPORTING DIVERSITY

Working towards a more representative sector and striving for best practice while designing for diversity.

5 COMMISSIONING QUALITY

Ensuring excellence in how the Mayor and other public sector clients appoint and manage architects and other built environment professionals.

6 CHAMPIONING GOOD GROWTH BY DESIGN

Advocating best practice to support success across the sector.

United Kingdom have shown that putting the people’s health and wellbeing first and setting standards to do so will allow for projects to be successful and over time, all while improving the overall wellbeing of a city or place.

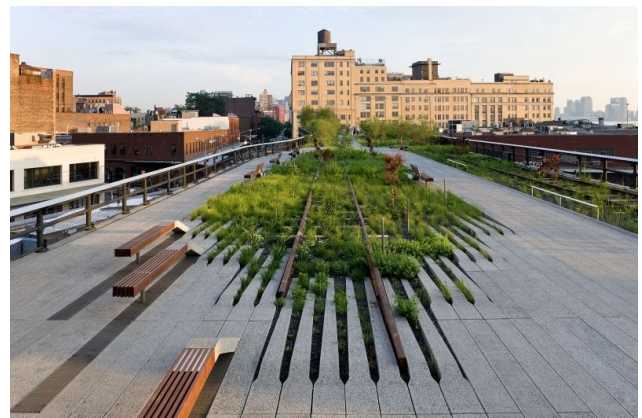
There are quite a few initiatives that have been proposed in recent years that focus on the enhancement of the public realm. One interesting approach that has come up is the idea of creating biophilic cities, using biophilic design, to increase well-being for residents. “A biophilic city is a city abundant with nature, a city that looks for opportunities to repair and restore and creatively insert nature wherever it can. It is an outdoor city, a physically active city, in which residents spend time enjoying the biological magic and wonder around them.” (Beatley, 2011; p. 2) There have been hundreds of studies on how nature can benefit the health of an individual, and many see it a bit outrageous to even have to defend the idea that greenery and nature improves wellbeing. Studies have been done by universities, researchers, and charities that deal with the mental health and wellness of people, specifically MIND in the UK. It has been proven that the ability of nature can reduce stress, enhance moods, improve productivity and skills, and help moderate effects of various childhood illnesses. (Beatley, 2011; p. 4) With these studies conducted, it is important to see the great impact that the elements of nature can have on people and a design project. In the following table, (Beatley, 2011; p. 84) *Biophilic Design Elements Across Scales* provides information on the different elements that can be used to enhance the cities biophilic design and provide a connection to nature.

Biophilic Design Elements Across Scales

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Biophilic Design Elements</i>
Building	Green rooftops Sky gardens and green atria Rooftop garden Green walls Daylit interior spaces
Block	Green courtyards Clustered housing around green areas Native species yards and spaces
Street	Green streets Sidewalk gardens Urban trees Low-impact development Vegetated swales and skinny streets Edible landscaping High degree of permeability
Neighbourhood	Stream daylighting, stream restoration Urban forests Ecology parks Community gardens Neighbourhood parks and pocket parks Greening gray fields and brownfields
Community	Urban creeks and riparian areas Urban ecological networks Green schools City tree canopy Community forest and community orchards Greening utility corridors
Region	River systems and floodplains Riparian systems Regional greenspace systems Greening major transport corridors

Source: Beatley, T. (2011) *Biophilic Cities: Integrating Nature into Urban Design and Planning*. Washington DC: Island Press

Broken down by each area of development, there are a variety of options that can be used to increase the use of natural elements and nature. Incorporating just a few of these biophilic design elements into a city can help increase and improve the well-being of the people through the connection to nature. The High Line specifically has been adapted to serve as an elevated park and garden, with views of the skyline. With over 500 different plant species located along the walk, the converted railway has created another green space for the people and visitors of New York City to engage with. The High Line was created with the idea that it would be more than just a park. The walkway offers gardens, art, events, and leisure activities. There are spaces for people to sit and relax or sunbathe. The 1.45 mile of greenway gives people a break from the busy city streets, where they can relax and enjoy the many biophilic design elements that have been incorporated into The High Line, as well as the art that is showcased along the walk. The High Line proves to be very successful examples of good public realm, placemaking, and biophilic design.



Sources: [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com), [designobserver.com](https://www.designobserver.com), <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/the-high-line>

Two public realm strategies and initiatives that have proved to be successful in London are Paddington Central and King's Cross / Granary Square both along the Regent's Canal. These two sites were developed to create attractive spaces that improve the wellbeing of people who visit, live, and work in the area. British Land, a UK property company, lists wellbeing as one of their top components when it comes to a design strategy. Matt Webster, Head of Sustainable and Smart Buildings for British Land, says "Placemaking has a vital role to play in improving health and productivity. Places designed with wellbeing in mind can provide the foundation for people's wellbeing and happiness." They understand the importance of putting people first in the design process. The Paddington Central public realm strategy was designed using their seven wellbeing principles (see below):



Source: Corney, H., (2016). Public Realm and Wellbeing at Paddington Central. British Land. Available from <https://www.britishland.com/sustainability/our-views/articles/2016/public-realm-and-wellbeing-at-paddington-central>

With these principles as the core of their design and development process, *British Land* puts people and their health at the top of the list of beneficiaries. The result of the project at Paddington Central will provide Paddington with new spaces that will enforce socialisation, create connections between people, incorporate more natural elements (such as green walls) to increase productivity, and provide relaxation. Through the various phases, small improvements are made in order to enhance the area for those who live, work, and visit. Phase One has been completed, with Phase Two completion scheduled for February 2021. Phase One consisted of widened sidewalks, improved cycle routes, added bike space for those who commute to work or visit the area via cycling, extra seating for events (see image below), and new species of trees and plants. Phase two involves creating 'a greener, more pedestrian-friendly environment' (*British Land*) with the new *Woodland Garden* where people can relax, socialise, and enjoy the space.



Source: <https://www.paddingtoncentral.com/press/film>

Each enhancement has a specific relation to how it will improve wellbeing in the area, with greenery improving productivity, extra bike space to increase the number of people who will cycle to work, and seating areas for relaxation, so that people can take a quick break and enjoy the fresh air outside the office. Throughout the design process and after each phase has been implemented, it is important to conduct surveys and receive feedback from the people who interact with the space the most to see if it has affected them and their well-being in a positive, negative, or neutral way.

King's Cross, specifically Granary Square, is another example in London of a public realm strategy that has completely converted a space to be more appealing to the public. With King's Cross St. Pancras Station, Google, and Central Saint Martins surrounding the area, it was highlighted in the London Plan to become an attractive place for people to visit, making the public realm a very important part of the development. The strategy focused on developing smaller areas, Granary Square (*pictured below*) being one of them. Located in front of Central Saint Martins, the proposal incorporates a water feature, greenery along the canal in a form of seating to increase socialisation, and a variety of different types of street furniture. (Kingscross.co.uk) Another vision for Granary Square was to be "a generous space at the heart of the site – a place for formal events or spontaneous activity and a focus for the life of King's Cross Central." (Allies and Morrison Architects) Since the proposal in 2004, Granary square has become a prominent location for retail and leisure, and with the development of Coal Drops Yards nearby, the area attracts many visitors and is often very busy on warmer days.



Source: <http://landezine.com/index.php/2014/03/granary-square-townshend-landscape-architects/>

In 2017, CBRE and Gehl Architects reviewed placemaking initiatives in eight different countries, with Granary Square being one of the sites. The study showed that real estate prices increased by 61% upon the development of the public realm strategy surrounding King's Cross. (news.cbre.co.uk) This shows the overall importance of creating spaces that make people feel good and that which they enjoy. People are more likely to relocate or visit an area that enhances the human experience, which is important for developers and urban planners to recognise. Gehl Architects has proved to be one of the leaders in urban design and producing in-depth studies of the public realm and how it benefits the people above all, stating that 'Public Space and Public Life are more important than ever' (Søholt, 2020) in their most recent article addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. During the current world events, it is more important than ever to have quality public spaces for people to take quick, open-air breaks from their lockdown or 'shelter in place' orders. Light, air, and connection in general are necessary to a human's health and wellness. It is important to think about the future and how cities might redesign spaces to allow for 'social distancing' while also improving human connections at the same time.

Conclusion

Through a variety of examples and studies, it is concluded that the most effective design element that increases the wellbeing of a person is greenspace, or greenery. Examples that incorporate green space or other elements from nature are seen as higher quality and more engaging than spaces made solely of concrete or brick. Another conclusion is the importance of incorporating people into the design whether it be by asking for feedback/suggestions or just considering their daily needs and how certain elements of the design can improve their health and wellbeing. When the overall wellbeing of people is improved, the city becomes more desirable, leading to improvements in other sectors such as economic development and tourism. In the future, designers need to set standards that meet what the people need and want, because this will increase their wellbeing and desire to dwell in that space. If the designers follow those standards, they will create quality spaces and a good public realm. When the people see those quality spaces, they will contribute to placemaking.

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