



Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health Mind the GAPS Framework

This evidence-based framework can be used to begin to consider impact of urban design on mental health at the individual planning/design project or at the whole city level.

Green places – There are important relationships between accessible green spaces and mental health and wellbeing. Access to natural settings in neighbourhoods and in the course of people’s daily routines seems to help improve and maintain mental health and wellbeing. This effect seems to be most heightened in walkable green space, but all exposure, including visual exposure from a window, seems to have some positive impact.

Active places – Exercise and mental health are closely correlated. Regular activity improves mood, wellbeing, and many mental health outcomes. There are almost limitless opportunities to design cities in ways that integrate physical activity into daily life. From facilitating accessible, convenient, safe active transport to placing outdoor gyms, action can be taken to help integrate exercise, social interactions and a sense of agency into people’s daily routines to promote good mental health.

Pro-social places – Urban design should facilitate positive, safe and natural interactions among people and promote a sense of community participation, integration and belonging. This includes potentially vulnerable groups like refugees, migrants, homeless, young and older people, with multi-faceted engagement from passive observation to active participation. Interesting, flexible, accessible public places and amenities are important, and their creation should involve citizens during design and development.

Safe places – A sense of safety and security is integral to people’s mental health and wellbeing. People benefit from feeling safe and comfortable moving around their neighbourhoods. Urban dangers include traffic, getting lost, environmental pollutants, and risks posed by other people. Appropriate street lighting and surveillance can reduce crime and fear of crime; distinct landmarks can help people with dementia navigate their neighbourhoods; and people-centric design of residential, commercial and industry routes are good examples of important urban design interventions to improve safety. However, a balanced approach is necessary: a safe environment may improve accessibility and comfort, but risk-averse city design can reduce people’s sense of agency and choice.

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