



THE RECURRENCE OF HEALTH IN URBAN PLANNING: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASPECTS

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Abstract

While urban planning and health were initially interlinked, in the twentieth century planning practice slowly moved away from its public health origins. In recent years however there is a growing interest in the health effects of our spatial organization. Although the direct impact of the physical environment on health has decreased – due to better standards of living, sanitary developments, improved housing – environmental quality still deserves our attention. First, the focus has shifted from life expectancy to health expectancy and quality of life. Public health impact no longer predominantly involves clear mortality risks, but rather comprises aspects of human well-being in a broad sense. Several direct impacts, like noise or air pollution, do not immediately kill people, but cause physical or mental disorders on the long term or severely reduce the quality of life of people. Second, the physical environment has many indirect effects on lifestyle and health, for example a reduced physical activity caused by a lack of walkable neighborhoods. A final important reason to justify this research is the aspect of environmental justice. The spatial characteristics responsible for direct and indirect health effects are spatially heterogeneously distributed, causing important differences in health status and healthy life expectancy between various residential neighborhoods.

Today a lot of research exists on different health impacts caused by aspects of the physical environment. Most of this research focuses on one single impact (e.g. noise) or one spatial aspect (e.g. a road). An integrated approach, in which all the impacts and aspects are combined, seems to be lacking. However, there is a giant need for a better understanding of this issue, to inform community leaders and spatial planners about which community design and land-use choices are most effective in improving the physical, mental and social well-being of people.

In this paper an attempt is made to give an overview of the main environmental characteristics with an effect on people's health and well-being. The aim is to evaluate the evidence of the existing research output and to explore the relevance for spatial planning.

Finally the results are discussed and recommendations for urban planning policy are formulated. Here the aspect of environmental justice comes into view, the right on a healthy living environment for every citizen regardless of social and economic status.

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