Environments for All People

Definition
Environments for all people means that neighbourhoods, towns and cities are safe and easily accessible for all members of the community regardless of age, ability or income, with a suitable range of facilities and services that are available to all. The aim is for people to feel connected to, and part of, a community.

Community event at Federation Square, Melbourne
Source: Planning Institute of Australia

Overview
Engendering a sense of belonging can positively benefit an individual's personal mental health and wellbeing. This can be achieved through the provision of a range of opportunities such as: a mix of house styles and densities so people of different ages and at different stages of life can be accommodated; provision of community facilities; and public spaces and places where people can meet and congregate. Connecting new neighbourhoods to existing facilities with a network of paths, trails and routes is also important.

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Why?

Research has shown that getting out and about, meeting people and making social contacts (and developing social capital) can help people have longer and physically and mentally healthier lives. Conversely, people with fewer social contacts, networks and emotional support are more likely to be obese (Department of Human Services, 2002) or to become an offender (Clarke, 2004). Research has also indicated that social capital is a prerequisite for the community development process. Where there is no or little social capital people will not be able to come together to work for the common good.

Social capital enables communities to form networks, norms and social trust, to coordinate and communicate together, and to act on common issues. The 'capital' in social capital relates to physical, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, which communities draw upon to encourage social inclusion. Social capital involves both social bonding and social bridging efforts (Putman, 2000) and has been described as social glue that holds communities together (Baum and Palmer, 2002).

There are several correlations between physical activity and strong social capital, including:

- greater social participation can be associated with reduced likelihood of having low levels of physical activity
- having social networks, such as friends or family who are supportive or with whom you can participate in physical activity, or having neighbours with recreational facilities, is associated with being physically active
- aspects of social connectedness such as positive neighbourhood relations and having other children living in the neighbourhood have been shown to be important for children's walking and cycling, active transport to school, and outdoor play (Hume et al, 2009; Timperio et al, 2006; Veitch et al, 2006).

Community activities at a public square
Source: National Heart Foundation (Victoria)

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Lower neighbourhood safety and social disorder have been found to be negatively associated with physical activity participation among children (Molnar et al, 2004). Adults are more likely to engage in physical activity when they perceive their neighbourhoods to be safe (Northbridge et al, 2003). These factors, combined with a positive impact on crime and an increased sense of community cohesion, are all important contributors to encouraging community-wide physical activity in neighbourhoods.

Public space with good lighting, surveillance and places to meet and gather
Mornington shopping centre, Victoria
Source: Planning Institute of Australia

How?

- Promote a sense of wellbeing and involvement through interventions and initiatives, such as walking groups for older people, walking school buses and activities and facilities for young people.

- Ensure there are opportunities for all members of the community to interact and that plans and designs acknowledge and are responsive to local communities.

- Ensure there are opportunities for participation by all user groups (including children) in planning and decision-making.

- Plan well designed public spaces where people can meet and congregate.

- Include facilities such as children's playgrounds, picnic areas, shade, shelter, seating, toilets, drinking fountains, facilities and equipment, and appealing activity spaces for youth such as basketball hoops and skateboard ramps.

- The presence of groups of teenagers in local parks is often a deterrent to park use by younger children and families therefore it is important to provide separate facilities/spaces in the neighbourhood that are designed specifically for different age groups (Veitch et al, 2006).

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- Ensure facilities are accessible to people in wheelchairs.
- Provide places for organised activities and sports as well informal activities and gatherings.
- Connect local facilities and meeting places with a network of walking and cycling paths with housing and other destinations.
- Include a mixture of housing densities, styles and types so people can "age in place" if desired.
- Ensure paths are suitably wide, with suitable surfaces and gradients for users in wheelchairs or those who are otherwise mobility impaired.
- Consider including cul de sacs/courts (with through pedestrian access) as well as through roads in new housing developments as living in a cul de sac has been shown to have a positive influence on the time children spend playing outdoors (Veitch et al, 2006).
- Community facilities, parks and open spaces, public places are well maintained to promote a sense of community ownership.
- The ability to walk to walk to destinations such as shops and transit stops is associated with physical activity among children and adolescents, therefore it is important to provide safe and easy access to a variety of destinations in the neighbourhood ((Davison and Lawson, 2006).
- Neighbourhood safety concerns (relating to road safety and stranger danger) are the main reasons why parents limit children's ability to walk and cycle to places without an adult (independent mobility) and restrict their outdoor play (Carver et al, 2008; Veitch et al, 2006).

Park with walking and cycling trails, picnic and barbecue facilities, shelter, toilets and children's play equipment, Bendigo, Victoria
Source: Planning Institute of Australia

Encourage

- Walking and cycling connections between and within neighbourhoods.
- Provision of community infrastructure and facilities that is accessible by public transport and with good pedestrian and cycle connections.
- A range of community services targeting specific needs groups such as children, young people and older residents.
- Local education facilities as well as child care, recreation and community facilities to increase social capital by providing opportunities for residents to connect and for parents and children to get to know each other.
- Community participation in decision making and in the management of local facilities.
- Attractive, well designed and maintained public spaces and places where people can meet.
- Involve children and youth in the planning of public spaces.
- Opportunities for incidental contact.
- Cultural diversity and the arts including public art.
- Adaptable and flexible buildings so use can change to meet changing community needs and expectations.
- Government, community and private agencies to work collaboratively in the planning, design and management of community facilities.
- Ways to optimise neighbourhood road safety such as provide safe crossings of busy roads and lighting.

Avoid

- Facilities that are remote from the communities they serve and difficult to access except by car.
- Provision of community facilities without adequate resourcing and management.
- Barriers that divide residential areas, such as heavily trafficked roads or large commercial uses.
- Rough surfaces and gradients that make use difficult or impossible for wheeled transport users.

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