Merging Smart and Healthy Cities to Support Community Wellbeing and Social Connection

Subjects: Construction & Building Technology

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Urban planning has long pursued the improvement of health and wellbeing through the rapidly evolving scholarship and practice of health-supportive environments, underpinned by the seminal World Health Organization's Healthy Cities Framework. Although a much more recent development, technology has been informing urban planning, as well as advancing healthcare and personal wellbeing monitoring and assessment. Known as the Smart City movement, it has much to offer regarding life in towns and cities, as well as how they are managed, maintained, and developed. There is also a growing appreciation of the potential for smart city technology to enhance human and environmental health in the context of urban planning and public place making. This has been reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic with its reawakening of community interest in health and wellbeing, including mental illness, a greater awareness of the importance of local environments, and an explosion of technological knowhow in the embrace of remote working, online shopping, and education. Using the example of the authors' "Smart Social Spaces" project, this entry discusses the potential benefits of an evolving integrative concept called "Smart Healthy Social Spaces". The aim is to support community wellbeing as part of everyday living, especially associated with social connection, in densely populated and culturally diverse urban environments, where locally situated public spaces are increasingly important for all citizens.

Keywords: COVID-19 ; environmental sustainability ; healthy cities ; smart cities ; loneliness ; public spaces ; social connection ; wellbeing

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The global COVID-19 pandemic (variously referred to here as "COVID-19", "COVID", and the "pandemic") reawakened community interest in health and wellbeing and the importance of local environments. It is no exaggeration to say that patterns of daily life and regular routines were upended as governments responded to public health advice in a desperate effort to reduce the incidence of the epidemic. The threat of an easily transmissible and deadly virus shifted our long-held health and wellness attention away from the risks of noncommunicable chronic diseases such as obesity, cancer, cardiovascular conditions, and mental illnesses. While the fear of catching COVID-19 and becoming seriously ill has now diminished globally, the need to engage in health-supportive behaviours has never been more pressing. So too has the provision of a sustainable built environment that makes it easy to engage in activities that keep us, and our planet, healthy and well.

Being based at home during the pandemic resulted in a renaissance of locally situated pursuits, as well as gigantic leaps in and reliance on technological skills. Communities sought solace and respite in their local parks and public spaces—sitting under a tree, walking the dog, strolling along the street, going for a run, peddling down a cycle path, or just kicking a ball around. Local environments have never been more critical to the health of residents irrespective of cultural background, age, or ability level. Working from home also strengthened the importance of local environments in daily life for many. During the height of the pandemic and its consequent lockdowns and work-from-home orders, we saw people tapping on laptops, taking business calls and zooming clients and customers while sitting in, or walking around, an outdoor setting, including parks, plazas, paths, and streets.

As we emerge from the pandemic, there is greater appreciation for the home environment and less of a separation between leisure activities and work. The importance of health-supportive behaviours has been reinforced, along with the need to provide environments where this is facilitated. We have an enhanced respect for those viruses caught from each other, while also appreciating that the chronic diseases that have plagued global populations for decades are still rampant and must be addressed. Being separated socially, experiencing deep feelings of loneliness, and struggling with anxiety and depression have also been very much a part of pandemic life. This has resulted in a newfound appreciation of the importance of supporting mental health across the life course.

This is the context for this entry. The central aim is to contribute to the growing recognition of the value of integrating smart city technology and health-supportive cities research and practice to enhance human and environmental health. It is

somewhat ironic that despite the widespread use of technology in society and everyday life, especially since COVID-19 appeared, the potential of technology to reinforce the supportive role of the built environment to reduce the major risk factors for chronic disease remains underdeveloped [1]. A connected, networked, and data-driven society enables citizens to better self-manage their own health and wellbeing [2][3]. As we have witnessed during the pandemic, and now in transitioning to urban life post COVID-19, the use of smart technology is more important than ever. Not only can technology maximise the potential of urban and recreational spaces in our communities, but it can also facilitate a better work–life balance for many residents. Through the example of our “Smart Social Spaces” project, we illustrate how smart public street furniture can provide equitable access to technology and infrastructure, in addition to traditional functions such as offering a comfortable place to rest, relax, and find relief from an overstimulating urban environment. The activation of the project’s two examples of smart street furniture provides insights into how these installations can support healthy behaviours for community connection, social interaction, and general wellbeing in densely populated urban locations where public spaces are increasingly important. The entry makes suggestions for creating health-supportive smart spaces while discussing their health benefits in local communities to improve social, environmental, and economic conditions. The theoretical foundations of health-supportive environments and smart cities are the starting point for this entry, and from there, consideration is given to the emerging common ground between these theoretical positions. This entry then presents the “Smart Social Spaces” project. The final section is a synthesis of the theory and practice as a contribution to the evolution of an integrative concept called “Smart Healthy Social Spaces”.

References

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