



A home or a shelter?

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More than a shelter

A home is more than just a roof over your head; it is an environment in which people live, sleep, eat, perhaps bring up a family, and maybe even work. As such, it should be an environment that enables occupants to be healthy, comfortable, and contented; in short a place where people can thrive.

Look in many estate agents' window however and currently homes are described by value, age, style, number and size of rooms and their location. But rarely are homes described in terms of how they might help occupants flourish by contributing positively to their health and wellbeing.

That might be about to change. The idea that behaviour can be influenced by context is starting to gather momentum backed up by a growing body of research that has identified a number of parameters that, when addressed effectively in a home's design can help improve occupants' health and wellbeing. And there is even some evidence that homes that contribute positively to wellbeing can command a

higher price.

In response, the *UK green Building Council* (UKGBC) has launched a task group to examine health and wellbeing in UK homes, led by *Joanne Wheeler*. She says the task group will investigate the metrics available to investigate health and wellbeing in homes, as well as looking at the business case for them. A third work stream will provide design guidance to support health and wellbeing.

One reason for this move towards a more holistic approach to housing design is in response to the *World Health Organisation's* (WHO) broad definition of health as **"a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."** In other words, in addition to physiological and psychological wellbeing it is about how people function in society, which is related to the environment in which they live.

Just like in a zoo

Environmental psychologist *Judith Heerwagen* uses the analogy of zoo to



explain the notion of environment promoting positive human experience.



In her paper *“Investing in People: the Social Benefits of Sustainable Design,”* she describes the first zoos as being focused on keeping aged animals alive. This they did, but the animals often failed to reproduce and frequently exhibited signs of boredom, stress and aggression. Later, enclosures started to be designed to incorporate features similar to those the animals would have experienced in the wild, which help support an animal’s physical, psychological and social wellbeing. The change worked and the animals started to flourish, so much so that zoos now play a major role in conservation.

Heerwagen argues that a similar approach to that used by zoos should be adopted in the design of buildings. Rather than start with an external image, she suggests a sustainable design should start from an understanding of “fundamental human needs and goals.” She lists these needs as: connection to nature; opportunity for regular exercise; sense of community and belonging; behavioural choice and control; meaningful change and sensory variability; and privacy when desired.

5 key behaviours

Many of the themes *Heerwagen* categorises as contributing to sustainable human environment align with key behaviours

identified in the report on the UK government’s Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project. This describes the five key behaviours which have been shown to relate to improved mental wellbeing: connect; keep active; take notice; keep learning; give.

The challenge now for designers and developers is to address many of these behavioural needs and goals in housing schemes.

One of the least radical ideas is to incorporate natural, green landscaped into a scheme. Many homes incorporate a garden, but there is a body of research that shows just how important this is in providing a connection to nature, or biophilia as it is more properly known. *“There is a lot of evidence of the importance of biophilic design,” Bateson says.*

One example *Bateson* cites is research by *Patrick Grahn* and *Ulrika A Stigsdotter* at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Their paper, *Landscape Planning and Stress*, suggests that the more often a person visits urban open green spaces, the less often they will report stress-related illnesses. The researchers found that distance to the public green space seems to be significant because *“people do not usually compensate for lack of green environment in their own residential area with more visits to public parks.”* Evidence from this study suggests that green spaces should be close to homes if they are to have significant positive effects on the health of urban populations.

The inclusion of green spaces in a scheme will also provide numerous other wellbeing benefits including provision of space for play and exercise, and to encourage socialising. Considered planting will increase the





diversity of flora and fauna, which should encourage people to engage more with the space, while the addition of allotments will increase the opportunities for exercise while encouraging people to grow fruit and vegetables. *“Designing homes so that people feel part of the community and the importance of peoples’ connection with nature will form part of the UKGBC’s report.”*

Contact with nature could be direct, where a home has access to a garden, or indirectly through a window which will still enable occupants views out of the sky and weather and, perhaps, natural vegetation and even the sea or a river.

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