

Urban aesthetics and equitable health impact

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The issue

Where we live creates our opportunities for health and well-being. Housing, transport and other infrastructure serves different populations differently. The classic Australian 'tyranny of distance' epitomises this. But simply providing hardware is insufficient to provide health equity. It also needs to look nice.

What we already knew

There is significant anecdotal evidence that aesthetics that are pleasing to the senses (engaging cityscapes; tree-lined boulevards; jasmine-scented rolling paths) are more prevalent in 'better' neighbourhoods. A key question has been whether higher SES/SEIFA residents create such environments, or whether such environments contribute to better lives.

New evidence suggests...

Ewing and Clemente (2013) undertook a solid review of 51 perceptual qualities of the urban environment (Table 1). Of these, **imageability, enclosure, human scale, transparency** and **complexity** could empirically be measured and associated with quality of life. In order to enhance urban health equity these should be front and centre of stakeholders in the urban planning sphere. Communities should also be made aware of these. Coherence, legibility and linkage

are other dimensions that are emerging as important. The remaining 43 qualities are as yet not validated. These pose a challenge for city, housing and streetscape designers, planners and operators.

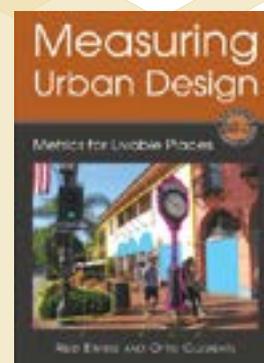


Table 1. Fifty-one perceptual qualities of the built environment

Adaptability	Singularity	Naturalness	Identifiability	Deflection
Distinctiveness	Clarity	Texture	Ornateness	Interest
Intricacy	Enclosure	Compatibility	Upkeep	Regularity
Richness	Meaning	Formality	Continuity	Vividness
Ambiguity	Spaciousness	Novelty	Imagineability	Depth
Diversity	Coherence	Transparency	Prospect	Intimacy
Legibility	Expectancy	Complementarity	Variety	Rhythm
Sensuousness	Mystery	Human scale	Contrast	
Centrality	Territoriality	Openness	Intelligibility	
Dominance	Comfort	Unity	Refuge	
Linkage	Focality	Complexity	Visibility	

Source : Ewing, R., & Clemente, O. (2013) *Measuring urban design: Metrics for livable places*. Island Press

The strength of the evidence in practice

Aesthetics are important and impact on spatial equity. Not all aesthetic qualities, however, are strongly connected to health and quality of life differentials. Only a few out of a long list are. Yet – imageability, enclosure, human scale, transparency and complexity have been operationalised in the literature and can be integrated in practice. This will not have to require additional resourcing, but only imagination.

Putting it into policy and action

Policy makers in local councils, the development industry and departments of planning can encourage frontline application of better aesthetics without significant risk. Communities could be approached to stimulate their sense of beauty and aesthetics, and local planning workshops may enable operational wishlists.