Messy Cities: Mental Health and Urban Planning

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The origins of urban planning are often identified as planning for better health. At the turn of the 20th century, sewage, water and clean air were of the utmost consideration in designing and maintaining our cities. In the 21st century, when most (but not all) communities in BC have the infrastructure needed to ensure basic needs, mental health has risen to be one of the key health issues for communities everywhere.

By 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of global disability[1], with a 10-25 year life expectancy reduction in patients with severe mental disorders[2]. In keeping with the history of planning for better health, urban planners have the opportunity to explore how mental health is impacted by the communities we create in both physical and intangible forms.

When looking at mental health indicators, one of the main areas of concern is the issue of social isolation – people are not connected to each other as we once were. This is perhaps best known from Robert Putnam's study *Bowling Alone* which documented the loss of participation in group activities in favour of being alone. More recently, the Former U.S. Surgeon General sounded the alarm on the loneliness epidemic: "It turns out that loneliness is associated with a reduction in your lifespan that is as severe as the lifespan you see with smoking 15 cigarettes a day."

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"Messy Cities" explores how public spaces can work to either bring people together or keep them apart.
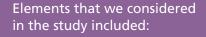
"Messy Cities" explores how public spaces can work to either bring people together or keep them apart. The project was originally inspired by the redesign of a dog park in East Vancouver, where an open, communal off-leash area was relocated and fenced. The results of the dog park redesign have been mixed, but initial anecdotal experience was a loss of a sense of community. The park previously had allowed for family and friends to gather in the open space with their pets; the park now only permits limited activity which only works well for one person and their dog.

Contrasted to this is another nearby park which has mixed uses including a children's day care, a hospice, a playground, tennis courts, and an open, off leash dog area. The second park allows for a mix of people to come together, including parents who come to the park with both their children and pets.

Whether one park is more successful in breaking down social isolation, and thus forging better links to mental health, is in itself a post-doctoral study. But the experience of the parks did invite the idea of examining what physical features of our cities encourage more socialization, and thus may have a positive impact on mental health.

For the Messy Cities study, we looked at data from the "Our Health, Our Community" survey completed by Fraser Health and Vancouver Coastal Health. The survey provided neighbourhood level data on self-reported health and well-being, including mental health. By looking at data for two of the larger cities in this study – Vancouver and Surrey – we explored whether there was a link between self-reported mental health and neighbourhood design.

Elements that we considered in the study included:

• Number of street trees

• Park space per capita

• Mix of zoning types (e.g. all single family housing vs. residential mixed with commercial/institutional)

• Size of neighbourhood blocks (e.g. shorter blocks encourage more pedestrian flow)

• Population density

• Density of social housing

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The study was admittedly limited by the data available, and provides analysis at a high level of consideration. We also had to identify that income is still the greatest indicator of mental health – the more money you have the better your self-reported mental, and health in general, will be. When looking at Surrey and Vancouver, both cities with significant income inequity, the data showed that higher ratios of poverty were generally associated with lower levels of mental health.

However, there were a few urban design features that did show a positive or negative impact on mental health across the study areas. The first significant finding was that population density is co-related to a higher level of poor mental health. It seems that after a certain point, the more people who share a space, the less healthy they may feel. This finding was also identified in the

Vancouver Foundation's "Connections and Engagement" study that found that young people living in apartment towers in downtown Vancouver often felt more alone than any other demographic in the city.

As our cities grow, density is a key factor. As cities chose neighbourhoods that will carry more density than others, the likelihood is that residents of those neighbourhoods will experience more mental health issues than in other, less dense areas.

The second significant marker was the amount of park space per capita. Generally, the higher level of park space per capita, the happier and healthier the residents. While the importance of street trees was inconclusive – we did not find a relationship between positive mental health and street trees – there was a positive relationship with park space.

The Messy Cities study is really a first look at how mental health and community design are linked, and can suggest many more questions than answers. However, if

urban planning is going to consider community design through a mental health lens, then we may want to carefully consider the directions we are taking in planning our communities.

For urban planners, there are questions we can consider as we move forward. As we increase density across our communities, are we balancing this with increases in public amenities that will connect people? If our communities are becoming more dense, how are we off-setting this negative mental health factor with more positive factors? Are buildings being designed with connectivity as a major concern? For example, a coffee shop and lounge in the main floor of an apartment tower may be far more important than an underused gym in the basement.

The second major factor is whether we are providing adequate park space across our communities, and especially in neighbourhoods where income equity is a noted concern, or where there is greater population density. While parkettes and street

trees may add to an overall aesthetic, from the data we analyzed they don't show any significant impact on mental well-being. What is important is open green space that can provide a mental reprieve for residents with the opportunity to relax and find, if only for a moment, a sense of community and connection. ∎

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[1]https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317387155_Premature_Mortality_Among_People_with_Mental_Illness_Advocacy_in_Academic_Psychiatry

[2]https://www.who.int/mental_health/management/info_sheet.pdf

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