

Planners have the power to help us lose weight

July 29 2010

Urban design is making us fat and needs to work harder to be healthier, warns a leading academic.

Tim Townshend, director of planning and urban design at Newcastle University, says decades of creating car-focused [urban environments](#) is beginning to show in our waistlines.

“Our [urban landscape](#) is full of shopping malls and fast food restaurants, escalators and huge car parks with people battling to get the space closest to the doors so they don’t have to walk very far,” he said. “These environments are simply not designed for people to walk around in.

“We need to think seriously about what kind of environment we are creating for ourselves and have a sensible debate about what’s acceptable and what’s not in our towns and cities. Health needs to be back on the town planning agenda before it’s too late.”

With UK rates of obesity predicted to rise to half the population by 2050*, there’s not much time left to reverse the trend.

There are many well-documented factors that influence obesity. At its simplest level, it is caused by eating too much and not getting enough physical activity, but obesity is actually an extremely complex issue.

Our built environment and how it allows, or prevents, us from taking healthy and unhealthy lifestyle choices is now recognised as an area we

know too little about.

Many of the examples in his co-edited book *Obesogenic Environments*: complexities, perceptions and objective measures come from the USA and Australia, where there are more low density car-orientated suburbs - often referred to as 'urban sprawl' - which have become a focus of concern in obesity research.

“Although we’re not as extreme as these countries we’re still making some of the same mistakes and some different ones too,” said Mr Townshend. “We don’t tend to build very low density suburbs but we do go for lots of houses without any local services and poor transport links which force people into their cars.”

However, it is possible to 'build in' more active spaces into our towns and cities to avoid creating these environments, allowing people to take exercise almost without noticing.

Recent attempts to make everything level to improve accessibility have also meant people get less exercise, but Mr Townshend suggests you can easily cater for everyone’s needs if you design well.

Green spaces and street trees encourage more walking whereas graffiti and litter and poorly maintained areas deter pedestrians. “We need to provide more green spaces - how many new parks do we build? Obesity is the biggest social and health problem we face and it will take a holistic approach to create new, healthier neighbourhoods with health professionals working alongside planners, designers and policy makers,” he said.

Co-editor Dr Amelia Lake, Northumbria University, supports this approach. “Our research shows that it is as much the responsibility of an urban designer as it is a nutritionist to reverse the obesity trend.

“It’s not just down to individual choices - society has to create an environment where people have healthier alternatives. The current situation is that the unhealthy option is the easy one. We need to reverse that and create environments where healthy food is the easier, affordable and most accessible option.”

The researchers suggest that this important issue reflects many of the things already being talked about in terms of sustainability, such as reducing car use, creating local food networks and being more active through cycling and walking.

“In many ways it’s a win-win situation as we’re not talking about costly new ways of going about how we develop towns and cities in the future,” said Mr Townshend. “Planners already have the power to make a difference. For example, there is a special planning category for fast food restaurants so you can avoid having a street full of them, or resist placing them near schools or leisure centres. It just takes a bit of thought at the beginning of the planning process.”

One of the concerns is that when local authorities are already stretched and having to make cutbacks, they can be more desperate to approve unsuitable housing developments.

“Developers don’t like providing services such as shops or schools because they’re complicated and the returns aren’t as high as they can get from housing alone,” he said. “Local developers need to work with planners to provide sustainable, healthier local solutions rather than simply rolling out housing developments which look like they’re off the same production line wherever you are in the country.”

*Foresight (2007) Tackling Obesities: Future Choices - Project report. London: Government Office for Science, 2nd edition.

www.foresight.gov.uk

More information: Obesogenic Environments - complexities, perceptions and objective measures edited by Amelia A Lake, Tim G Townshend & Seraphim Alvanides. ISBN: 9781405182638 (Wiley-Blackwell) 31 July 2010

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Planners have the power to help us lose weight (2010, July 29) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-planners-power-weight.html>

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