

Active Living Research and the Urban Design, Planning, and Transportation Disciplines

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This supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reflects the challenging scope of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living Research (ALR) program. The program itself emanates from decade-long efforts to reverse increasing levels of physical inactivity in the population and their negative health effects. For the design and planning disciplines, the program's focus on the environmental roots of physical inactivity signals an unexpected and welcome rebirth of concern for environment-behavior relations.

Environment-behavior relations emerged as a field in the early 1960s, borrowing at the time from remarkable advances in both environmental and social psychology.¹ The field took the label of environmental design, and bridged architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and urban planning.²⁻⁴ The influence of environmental design on these disciplines and professions reached a peak in the 1980s, with substantive areas of knowledge added in environments for older adults,⁵ perception, image, and meaning of the built environment,⁶ new housing and new towns,⁷ and individual and collective defensibility of space.⁸ These areas of knowledge were integrated into curricula for architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and planners, with many new faculty hired in these subfields. By the 1990s, however, the influence of environmental design in these professions had waned nearly to disappearance, ostensibly due to the paucity of research support at the federal level and from private foundations. Debates about the divorce between architecture and the social sciences raged for only a short while,^{9,10} and most designers of the built environment retreated into a creative arts approach focusing on formal and aesthetic considerations. Remaining active offshoots of this era are few,¹¹ but include Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design,¹² funded by a variety of entities concerned with public safety.

In urban planning, interest in consideration of behavioral issues rekindled in the early 1990s with an extensive program of research on understanding the associations between land use and development pat-

terns and travel behavior in metropolitan regions. The program was fueled by new legislation (the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act), and assembled distinguished researchers into a recognized field of study.¹³

This supplement and the ALR program in general benefit from these earlier advances in environment-behavior relations. They bring back together several of the scholars and researchers who started their career in environment-behavior or who continued the tradition within the land use-travel behavior research stream. This continuity renews one's faith in the lasting powers of sound values and good research. At the same time, it is invigorating to see the direction of research being changed, and, as shown in this supplement, quite radically so.

From the urban design and planning perspective, the salient novelty of the ALR program is its integrative quality. Grounded in public health, the program aggressively reaches out not only to heretofore fractionalized design and planning disciplines, but also to jurisdictions with policy-enabling and implementation powers. It asks urban planning, parks and recreation, schools, and transportation sectors to jointly share responsibility for and leadership in making environments that support active living. It calls for the convergence of concerns for the urban environment as a whole—its design, planning, development, and regulatory dimensions—a convergence that was at the core of environmental design more than 2 decades ago.

Public health research protocols are eye-openers for environmental designers and urban and transportation planners. First, they stand out for their common use of primary data that provide targeted and high-quality information tailored to answer specific research questions. The power of such data to illuminate issues is in stark contrast with the limitations of the secondary data that urban and transportation planners are typically constrained to use in their research, including the U.S. Census, the National Personal Transportation Survey, and National Household Transportation Survey, which are the equivalent of surveillance data in public health. Further, public health studies rigorously consider randomness in the sample populations and use tested or validated instruments for data collection.

Second, public health disaggregated approaches to analysis rest on a broad range of psychosocial con-

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founders derived from multiple and complex theoretical frameworks that guide research on behavior and behavior change.¹⁴ The prevailing use of social ecologic models specifically addresses multiple levels of influences on behavior. Transdisciplinary constructs emphasize shared, integrative approaches to public health. These add significantly to urban and transportation planning research, which has traditionally been focused on economics, and where location theory,¹⁵ consumer choice, and random utility theory¹⁶ have dominated as explicitly stated research frameworks.

Third, enhanced theories and methods in public health have provided a natural link between research findings and educational programs promoting public awareness of the health benefits of physical activity, as well as its social and psychological rewards at the personal and community levels. The planning and design professions can learn from them how to dynamically link research to policy and implementation, that is, how research can ground advocacy and promotion of policies.

In order to successfully identify physical environmental variables associated with physical activity, it is important at this point to match the highly developed scope of social environmental theoretical frameworks with similarly sophisticated and rigorous constructs of the physical environment. Stokols¹⁷ and Sallis and Owen¹⁸ called for future research to consider explicitly community-based, physical environmental influences on physical activity. King et al.¹⁹ proposed to place theoretical perspectives along a continuum of personal choice—including the cognitive and behavioral factors affecting physical activity—and, on the other end of the spectrum, activity-related choice, which is shaped by physical environments and related policies. This supplemental issue shows that important steps have been taken in these directions. Future collaborative research between public health and urban design and planning

will continue to assemble the new theoretical frameworks needed to conceptualize and measure physical environments comprehensively.

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