



Key Points:

- The architecture community is realizing more and more how our automobile-centric designed cities and suburbs have led to poor health and poor quality of life.
- There is a critical need for multidisciplinary work, including contractors, architects and allied professionals to combat this public health crisis.



Tamara E. L. Burns, AIA, is cofounder and principal of HopkinsBurns Design Studio. She has been active in the profession through the American Institute of Architects, serving as president of AIA Huron Valley and AIA Michigan.

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HEALTH IS NOT A BUILDING TYPE

Tamara E. L. Burns, AIA, LEED AP

When AIA Michigan created the Green Health Summit in the fall of 2014, some people thought the summit was about designing sustainable healthcare facilities. In fact, the topic of the summit was about something far broader, something that crosses into many disciplines: the intersection of Design with Public Health and the profound impact that the built environment has on both our physical and mental health. This topic is getting a great deal of focus worldwide. The architecture community is realizing more and more how our automobile-centric designed cities and suburbs have led to poor health and poor quality of life. Just two years ago for the first time in 25 years the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a decline in life expectancy.

Consider these statistics:

- Between 60 and 70 percent of Americans do not get the recommended daily 30 minutes of exercise. Nearly one-third of Americans are obese, and almost another third are overweight.
- Obesity is second only to smoking as a preventable cause of cancer.
- Only about one-third of children who live within a mile of their school walk or bike there, compared to 70 percent of their parents who walked or biked to school.
- Childhood obesity rates have more than doubled since the early 1970s.
- Unless current eating and exercise habits change, one-third of all children born in the U.S. in 2000 will become diabetic.

Here in Michigan, the obesity statistics and number of people with diabetes are especially high. There is a critical need for multidisciplinary work, including contractors, architects and allied professionals to combat this public health crisis. Collectively we need to raise the awareness that we can deliberately and thoughtfully create environments that engage our communities in routine activity resulting in fitness.

“Research shows when done on most days of the week, three 10-minute bursts of an activity, like climbing stairs throughout the day, provides as many health benefits as a single 30-minute aerobic workout,” according to Governor Snyder’s Stair Week Proclamation.



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There is more and more empirical data proving what many of us observe in our environments – that the way we design and build has a profound impact on our physical and mental health. Data can help get zoning codes and public policy changed. The data can help guide us to mandate and/or encourage design and construction to (re)design and (re)build our communities to be healthy places. Consider these studies on the subject:

- Mixed-use density may increase the physical activity of users, thus improving cardiovascular health. A University of California-Berkeley study found that kids living in a “smart growth” neighborhood had local activity levels 46 percent higher, gaining 10 more minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity than those in traditional postwar suburban neighborhoods.
- Well-integrated and designed staircases can increase physical activity and cardiovascular health. A Harvard study found that men who climbed at least 20 floors per week had a 20 percent lower risk of stroke or death from all causes.

Design can promote a healthier Michigan. This can be anything from placing stairs where they will be used in place of an elevator, maximizing daylight and natural ventilation, designing safe and enjoyable pedestrian and bicycle pathways that will be used instead of driving a car, to designing spaces that lift the spirit through color and form. For more information and current reports on Design and Health, visit AIA's Design and Health webpage www.aia.org/practicing/designhealth/.