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Let's Not Forget the Role of Environmental Psychology in our Quest for Healthier Cities

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Every day, around the world, city dwellers experience the enticements, innovations, and complexities native to the urban form. Cities naturally afford a sense of vibrancy, social connection, cultural immersion, and community. They also serve as places for augmenting relationships and affiliations, accessing resources and technology, as well as economic gain. But, for many, cities are also rife with hardship and uncertainty, social injustice, and unsustainable systems—systems that benefit some while entrenching inequity for others. Arguably, governments, organizations, and individuals alike have needed to prioritize transdisciplinary knowledge about people-place relations for decades as they work to predict and improve resilience and public health. Urgent human and planetary health demands in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the midst of climate change, exist. This means that developing strategies for urban planners and practitioners to use as they facilitate change quickly is prudent. In response, our primary aim for this special issue of *Cities & Health* titled “Planning for People and Health: Environmental Psychology in the City” is to communicate interdisciplinary research and commentary at the intersection of urban planning, social science, and public health.

Creating (and then maintaining) opportunities for city inhabitants to foster their quality of life and wellbeing, while learning from different cultures and contexts, requires researchers, planners, and decision-makers to have a clearer understanding of human psychological processes in relation to the built and natural settings that surround them. As a professional environmental psychologist, and a research practitioner specializing in place-based community wellbeing and health innovation, co-guest editing this special issue fulfilled our joint aspiration to bring together academic and field work that references theories found in environmental psychology—a

discipline centred on studying transactions between people and place (Gifford, 2014). Our overarching objective was to publish existing (and stimulate new) investigations about urban psychology, health, and sustainable behaviours from around the globe. The special issue succeeds in showcasing empirical, conceptual, and methodological contributions written for a broad audience. And, as with all issues of *Cities & Health*, many papers are accompanied by a “City Know How” submission that allows authors to summarize the applied aspects of their work in a format that practitioners, planners, and academics can use quickly and easily, ‘on the ground.’

The various types of papers, book reviews, and city shorts reveal an evolving evidence base that can be used to address a variety of challenges related to urban life. Generally, the contributions in this special issue employ mixed-methods research approaches to study how the quality of urban infrastructure can affect human wellbeing (e.g., studying apartment building defects in relation to mental health, Foster et al., 2022). The association between affect and exposure to high-rise buildings is also examined (Mazumder et al., 2020), as is the therapeutic value of blue space on psychological outcomes for urban residents (Satariano, 2021). Research on nature place-making in the city, and some of the strategies that can improve evaluations of social connection and community wellbeing is also included (Benjumea et al., 2022; Lach et al., 2022; Sones et al., 2021). The extent to which the built environment can contribute to loneliness in cities (Jamalishahni et al., in press), how open outdoor areas positively relate to health (Ajayi & Amole, 2022), and the impacts of urban walking on psychophysical wellbeing during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic are other topics explored in the special issue (Neale et al., 2022). Taken together, these works express the nuanced and complex nature of city settings, along with ideas about how preventative, health-focused planning methods can be implemented

so that the principles of environmental psychology can play a role in bolstering residents' quality of life.

Common themes among some of the papers in the issue is the value of social cohesion and forging a connection with nature for positive city living, and the effectiveness of environmental interventions on specific social determinants of health. Cultivating wellbeing and place-making are presented as mechanisms for fostering pro-environmental behaviour and environmental sustainability. Findings concerning the duration of, and engagement with, pro-environmental programmes (and the extent to which these programmes are correlated with social values, self-esteem, and self-efficacy) are reported (e.g., Benjumea et al., 2022). The role of facilitators in community-based interventions to support nature connectedness is also highlighted in the special issue, demonstrating the value of community-led initiatives in urban planning and in the public health sector.

Many of the research methods used in the issue's set of papers offer cogent direction for planners who wish to promote strategies that prioritize public health by quantifying physiological and psychological outcomes. Some methods support procedural change at the community level, demonstrating that the development of healthy, safe, and sustainable urban environments is a process that rests on engaged (and shared) societal involvement (e.g., Lach et al., 2022). Through the measurement and discussion of factors such as neurodiversity, social cohesion, and sense of place, the argument that a greater understanding of behaviour science is needed to create tailored population health strategies that account for environmental quality and equitable access to resources is reinforced (see Galway et al., in press; Ng et al., 2021). Indeed, the special issue justifies further research on sustainable health strategies by addressing topics to do with social housing and the importance of walkability in urban areas (and access to green spaces in cities in

general) during a prolonged pandemic era (e.g., Brydges et al, 2022; Neale et al., 2022). Overall, the issue challenges and facilitates change at the level of the system, the community, and the individual via its a range of traditional and virtual research methods that afford a clearer understanding of how physical urban landscapes can affect individuals and communities.

To us, the special issue emphasizes the need to continue researching people-place transactions in city spaces to improve both mental and environmental health, as well as to integrate human psychological processes into public health measures and planning frameworks. We are aware that research on these connections must be done in many places, and in many contexts—and that studying wellbeing outcomes as a result of innovative, resource-rich interventions is only part of what is needed to form a holistic body of literature about what resilient cities can yield for inhabitants worldwide. We understand that this issue presents work undertaken predominantly in highly-urbanized, high-income economies. Additional studies on the psychosocial results of planning strategies used in developing countries, and with Indigenous communities, would undoubtedly steer discussions that merge local perspectives and social norms with globally-informed knowledge and, in turn, offer more people a voice in the research process to produce equitable planning models. A greater understanding of the environmental psychology of urban settings in diverse socio-cultural contexts will be important for researchers and planners going forward as they widen the lens through which effective urban designs, and interventions for greater wellbeing, are considered.

The development of this special issue occurred as the United Nations declared that access to a healthy environment is a human right (United Nations, 2022). This declaration serves as a platform for change and raises a sense of urgency to align planning and public health policies with what people need from urban places to lead healthy and productive lives. As we see in

McCunn et al. (2021), these kinds of statements and intentions are echoed by many professional associations, such as the Canadian Psychological Association. Similarly, the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) intends to focus on implementation strategies to meet global agreements to mitigate climate change at the COP27 event in 2022 (Presidency of CoP 26, 2022). We hope that this special issue can also provide an avenue for implementation as countries, governments, scholars, and practitioners work to meet global goals for human welfare in co-existence with natural ecosystems and green urban areas.

The field of environmental psychology continues to evolve in its focus, its methods, and its connections with disciplines inside and outside social science. Undoubtedly, communicating the many links between environmental psychology, city planning, and public health through this special issue can inspire new ideas and networks among researchers and practitioners around the world. We thank each of the authors who contributed to this issue for their insights on, and efforts toward, healthy urban systems—now and for years to come.

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