

IMPROVING BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND MENTAL WELLBEING THOUGH DESIGN. CASE STUDY: RIVER SIDE, NORTHEN TIRANA, ALBANIA

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Abstract

There is a very close connection between built environment and mental well-being. The first one can promote or prevent the second one. As per Tirana reality, there are a lot of negative factors that strongly affect citizens' daily life, their behavior in the community and their mental health. On the other hand, there are a lot of strong elements that can improve the inhabitant welfare. The proposed strategy considers as very important the health of both environment and community. The main objective of the proposal is the promotion of social communities which are strongly connected with the condition of the neighborhood. The increase of desirable neighborhoods, of green and open spaces, way finding techniques, walkability or other physical activities will surely decrease mental health problems such as stress, depression, mental fatigue that cause violence and aggression. In this way by finding right design way and proper settings to improve the life quality, society will live in a healthy environment with a strong mental well-being. The proposal would be first helpful for the society and then for environment, without devaluated none of them. The suggested healthy environment strategies can serve for the present as well as for the future. In addition, it will help to understand the effects that a built environment causes on mental well-being, because the last one should be not considered a luxury. Having a pleasant neighborhood makes inhabitants happier and spiritually strongly connected with their living place. Improving life quality creates a better mental health and increases the levels of well-being. Thereby the need for a change is essential. Finding the proper tools to make it possible, by including also all the social and financial costs even for its maintenance, is really worthy.

Keywords: *built environment, mental well-being, design, desirable neighborhoods, sustainable communities*

Introduction

Riverside area is located in north of Tirana and it is under the governance of Tirana Municipality and Paskuqan Municipality. The area is full of strong and weak elements, but it provides a lot of opportunities for architectural and economic development, regardless of all the threats that can be faced.

This settlement is rich of blue, green and gray strong elements such as:

- Tirana River, Paskuqan lake, Dajti mountain, Tirana Hills, the Multimodal station (proposed by GrimshawMasterplan) etc.
- Proximity with the center
- Empty and unoccupied areas

- Beautiful landscape etc.

Before 1990, the relevant area had industrial and agricultural functions, but nowadays the situation has totally changed. Unfortunately, the present situation is full of weaknesses, which should be treated carefully. Some of them are:

- Informal buildings
- Lack of social infrastructure
- Not urban planning strategies etc.

The area of a 140 Ha surface is populated with inhabitants from all over Albania (especially from Nord) and from gypsies that live near the Tirana River. After a careful analysis of the area, can be easily detected a clear diversity noticed in population, mentality, buildings and nature. Inhabitants are heterogenic, because of their very different origin. Moreover, their dissimilar genealogy and their low education affect in the area mentality and in how they treat their homes, how they treat the environment exc. Different types of livings' structures can be noticed in the settlement, such as gypsy houses near the river and other houses built after '90. Houses bad conditions, building without a plan, everywhere waste materials, land degradation has caused this nature diversity. It is clear what a big contrast exists between what nature offers in the area, a beautiful view of the landscape and what has happened when people started to populate it.

Aim of study/research

As per the site analysis, there are many negative factors, present on the area that really have impact on the life quality of the settlement population. As mentioned above, the lack of such important needs for a normal living has caused an unsatisfactory lifestyle. There is a bad life quality and lifestyle on the area because of the bad infrastructure. Some data used when analyzing the area shows that inhabitants feel insecure, under pressure, anxious because of such insufficient infrastructure.

Due to existing opportunities and strong elements that exist in the area, it could be possible to find the proper settings to create an enjoyable lifestyle. According to some studies, what has a strong effect in a good life quality is a good mental wellbeing. But first, it is necessary to understand that there is a very close connection between built environment and humanity mental health. The built mentality can promote or prevent the second one.

On the other hand, it is sure that stress, depression, mental fatigue, aggression and violence are also caused by the absence of social infrastructure. Thereby the aim of the study is finding the right design and the proper settings to improve life quality, thus ensuring both mental and physical wellbeing by considering important the health of both environment and community.

Research topics

First of all, it is necessary to undersatnd some definitions which are strongly related with the study. From the below description, can be easily understood the most important research topics when the research began.

- What does built environment mean?

The built environment includes all the spaces, buildings and products that are created or modified by people. It impact indoor and outdoor physical environment, as well as social environments our health and life quality. (Health Canadian Definition)

- What does the environmental health mean?

The environmental health includes not only the study of the direct pathological effects of various chemical, physical and biological agents, but also the effects on health of broad physical and social environment, which includes housing, urban development, land-use and transportation, industry and agriculture. (DHHS Healthy People 2010)

- What does mental wellbeing mean?

Mental health and wellbeing is the state in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (World Health Organization)

- What do the sustainable communities mean?

Sustainable communities are healthy communities where natural and historic resources are preserved, jobs are available, sprawl is contained, neighborhoods are secure, education is lifelong, transportation and health care are accessible and all the citizens have opportunities to improve their quality of life. It is suggested that diligent planning is needed an environment that is conducive to the mental and physical wellbeing of humans as well as the natural environment. (The President's Council 1993)

Generally, the connections between built environment and mental health have largely focused on housing, transportation and district characteristics. But this research is really focused on the creation of desirable neighborhoods where society can successfully evolve and grow up.

Scientific methods

The methodology used for the research begins on the relevant settlements and ends with some relevant conclusions. The process goes through some interviews, meetings on the site, consulting with the literature, analyzing the data collected etc.

- Site analysis, recognition of the case study, the area strong elements and problems and finally physical and spiritual dimension of it. After that is necessary to make a conceptual map. The conceptual map serves to understand the problems and impact caused by urban governance, urban living, urban environment and local resources. After that is easy to connect the ideas and to develop them.

- It is important to compare the ideas with reality in order to understand if they are near with the actuality of the study area. It will be possible by interviews, meetings with community for mentality recognition, surveys in elementary and high schools, kindergarten, workplaces, bars etc.

- Consulting the literature, other case and experimental studies, environmental policy, mental health and other important definitions is another important step to be undertaken.

- Analyzing all data collected is necessary in this stage of research. It is important to remember that not all data gathered are needed.

- Finding a methodology definition for a right improvement of mental wellbeing and built environment is necessary after all steps undertaken above. It would be important to be careful that the found methodology will positively affect in re expected results by achieving a large number of successes.

- Another important stage is the reconsidering of the research result. In this step is necessary to turn back in the relevant area and facing the conclusions with the community. It helps the final conclusion to be closer with the right approach of possible solution.

▪ It is clear that the research would have its own positive and negative benefits. If all the stages would be rigorously followed the probability for the positive ones would be surely bigger. In those circumstances risks and benefit analysis is totally necessary

▪ Final conclusion

▪ The sources and data types are different, but they are divided on primary and secondary one. Some case studies from other countries, interviews with citizens, diverse surveys and studies are some type research type and methods to be applied. On the other hand different books, articles, internet sites will be used as sources and data. Except of architecture and urban planning, some areas that will affect this research are medicine, philosophy and sociology.

Findings

As per the above definitions, there is not a good life quality in the relevant area, caused this by the below problems:

- Not secure places and districts
- Lack of organized open and meanwhile spaces
- Not a good and productive utilization of green areas
- Lack of places that encourage physical activities
- Land degradation
- Lack of way finding techniques, etc.

All this problems have a bad effect on mental wellbeing. According to some studies, neighborhoods deficiencies do not have a good consequence on mental wellbeing. Living in a problematic district causes:

- Social withdrawal
- Reduce social ties among neighbors
- Smaller social networks
- Diminished social and motor skills in children
- Distress
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Mental fatigue
- Aggression and violence grown

As a conclusion, what is important to be understood, is the strong connection between the built environment and mental wellbeing. The built environment can promote or prevent the second one.

The main objective: Creation of **DESIRABLE NEIGHBORHOODS** by:

▪ Designing GREEN and OPEN SPACES, as part of large-scale developments to promote different activities. According to some studies, higher levels of physic activities help to decrease stress, anxiety and mental fatigue.

- Locating buildings near open, public spaces to promote activities
- Aggregating the open spaces in one large area than into small ones, because in there, families can find different forms of recreations where they can spend a valuable time together and relax

- Making pedestrian and bicycle routes visible, safe, and providing facilities such as paths, running tracks, playgrounds, drinking fountains in parks and open spaces might be options
- Designing parks, open spaces and recreational facilities to fulfill the cultural and age preferences
- Creating partnerships with different organizations to sponsor the green infrastructure maintenance, which has a strong effect on mental health
- Designing PUBLIC PLAZAS that do not allow cars and promote safety walking, comfortable spaces to gather, to play or just to rest.
 - Creating attractive plaza spaces well maintained with trees, lighting, drinking fountains and sitting
 - Designing plazas with different functions, which can provide different cultural and physical activities for all its users. It is crucial for such plazas to be enjoyable in the variety of weather conditions, including sunny areas protected from the wind, for use in the colder seasons and shade areas for use in hot weather
- Designing SAFE PLACES that improve security.
 - Building lighted streets, with bicyclist and pedestrians pathways
 - Designing well-connected streets with sidewalks
 - Designing small blocks of buildings and when the block size is large, pedestrian paths through existing blocks should be provided (every 90-120m)
 - Avoiding the use of pedestrian over and underpasses (in case of a necessary one, trying to increase visibility in order to enhance the sense of safety).
- Promoting WALKING by traffic calming measures and by designing safe roads.
 - Creating narrow roads, with their minimum width, incorporate curb extensions, medians and speed reducers.
- Using a MIX LAND USE by provide for a mix of uses (residences, offices, schools, retail stores, cultural and community spaces and recreational facilities). In this way the social community, social contact and the place satisfaction would be increased.
- Improving additional elements of neighborhoods such as PATTERNS, LANDMARKS and PUBLIC BUILDINGS, which are strongly related with mental wellbeing and welfare. Well-maintained facades, good condition buildings, improved landscape etc. provide a sense of easy and comfort.
- Improving WAY-FINDING TECHNIQUES in order people to be orientated to avoid so the anxiety and frustration of being lost. The neighborhood should be “legible” by public building, cultural elements, streets etc.
- Designing PEDESTRIAN PATHWAYS and SIDEWALKS by separating pedestrians from moving vehicles
- Improving BICYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE by providing facilities for bicyclist to park, bicycle specific crossing and signals to organize the movement of pedestrians, cyclists and motorists on busy intersections.

Due to the connection between the built environment and mental wellbeing, all mentioned above, are really important on the creation of an enjoyable way of living. The same importance has also even the perception of the future neighborhood. On the Albanian reality, nothing regarding this field has been studied. In this point of view, the future means the future of the future. Above all, it is important to think about the NEIGHBORHOODS OF THE FUTURE by promoting healthy and sustainable districts and by reconsidering our design, planning, development approach and management of the built environment; which

means that the eager to find more and more developing techniques and the serious maintenance should be the most important issue on the future neighborhood behaves.

There are some problems in riverside area, which make the research main objective a challenge such as:

- A different mentality, caused by inhabitants' diversity that has a negative impact on community engagement. Thereby the research aim is to find methods that create a normal way of living and offer a better lifestyle.
- The difficulties on managing the informal development in the area. Building without a plan, creates a landscape that makes the goal achievement difficult.
- Lack of policies and rules
- Lack of funds

Finally, is important to be understood from the society and government that nowadays these kinds of intervention are necessary. A mental wellbeing is not considered a luxury anymore and the built environment does really affect it. Having a pleasant neighborhood makes inhabitants happier and spiritually strongly connected with their living place. Improving life quality creates a better mental health and increases the levels of wellbeing. Thereby the need for a change is essential. Finding the proper tools to make it possible, by including also all the social and financial costs even for its maintenance, is really worthy.

Conclusions

There would be an improved life quality in relevant informal areas. Considering as very important the health of both environment and community, there are many possible tools that would help to develop the settlement, community life conditions and social infrastructure. The increase of green desirable neighborhoods, way finding techniques, open spaces, walkability or other physical activities will surely decrease mental health problems such as stress, depression, mental fatigue that cause violence and aggression. In this way by finding right design way and proper settings to improve the life quality (mentioned on topic Objectives, pg.5), society will live in a healthy environment with a strong mental wellbeing.

The research would be first helpful for the human beings and then for environment, without devaluated none of them. The proposed healthy environment strategies can serve for the present as well as for the relevant area future. In addition, the research will help understand the effects that a built environment causes on mental wellbeing. It would improve some psychosocial needs that really effect on mental health such as:

- Life security and violence or aggression decrease
- Decrease of stress, anxiety, mental fatigue etc.
- Opportunities for cooperation
- An aesthetically pleasing and interesting environment
- Opportunities for creative and peaceful behavior
- Opportunities for recreation
- Variety in daily experience
- A sense of belonging, love etc.

As a conclusion, the achievement of the mentioned above objectives is important because of some accomplishments such as:

- The improvement of built environment
- The improvement of mental wellbeing

- The improvement of architectural, social and economic area development
- The simulation of social capital and partnership

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