

# Built Environment and Public Health Council Student Group

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The way we design and build our communities has profound effects on our health, as well as on the sustainability of our environment. Walkable and bike-friendly cities with good food systems help us prevent and address chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity (Cannuscio and Glantz 2011; Sallis, Millstein, and Carlson 2011). They also decrease our dependence on oil and help us minimize the emission of greenhouse gases that lead to climate change. Oftentimes, the same populations that suffer from economic inequities are the first to be displaced from their homes when a neighborhood gentrifies, and these vulnerable populations also endure the worst health outcomes, thanks to both environmental factors and stress induced by these economic and social inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett 2006). The fields of urban planning and public health are inextricably intertwined, and finding solutions to many of our most vexing present-day challenges (like climate change, the obesity epidemic, and health inequity) requires knowledge and understanding of both fields. Innovative initiatives like complete streets (streets that enable safe access for users ranging from pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders for all ages and abilities (National Complete Streets Coalition 2015)); healthy, sustainable food systems; and a focus on the social determinants of health represent a new zeitgeist in the way we plan cities. The increasing adoption of health elements in General Plans by municipalities (e.g., the Los Angeles Department of City Planning's Plan for a Healthy LA 2015 and the Santa Clara County General Plan Health Element 2015) acknowledges the correlation of well-designed, livable cities and improved health outcomes. The growing movement of Vision Zero policies recognizes

that motorist, pedestrian, and bicyclist deaths can be prevented with automobile technology, well-planned roads, and safe human behavior.

Of course, this work in the built environment and health cannot be done without recognizing the inequities that are systematically perpetuated by policies and practices that have produced unequal outcomes for low-income people of color. This can be seen in the devastation and recovery of New Orleans, one decade after Hurricane Katrina (White 2015); in the social unrest following the multiple cases of African Americans being shot by the police (“Tracking the Events” 2014); in the drastic difference in average life expectancy between families living in neighboring wealthy and poor communities (“Unnatural Causes” 2009); and in the latest example of mass displacement of communities by the process of gentrification (Lin 2015). New policies and changes to the built environment must be comprehensive and interdisciplinary, and have a true understanding of the economic, social, cultural, and health impacts, or risk repeating mistakes of the past and perpetuating inequitable outcomes.

These are some of the challenges faced by young urban planners and public health professionals today as they become leaders of these increasingly interdisciplinary fields. Today’s most complex issues must be tackled with broad, multi-sector partnerships and intimate knowledge of the built environment and public health.

Entering its third year, the UCLA Built Environment and Public Health Council (BEPHC) emerged out of a need to merge urban planning and public health in practice and to prepare the next generation of leaders and professionals. Currently, the Council represents a diverse group of students, faculty, and staff who work to facilitate discussion and further develop members’ knowledge and their ability to address issues related to the built environment and health through programs, events, and leadership development. The Council recognizes the need to provide a space for conversation around issues of health equity and the built environment, and to advocate on behalf of students and organizations to increase the visibility of the research being done on health and the built environment. The role of the Built Environment and Public Health Council is to educate, put knowledge into action, develop leadership skills in its members, and play a part in helping make the dream of well designed, healthy, equitable, and just communities a reality.

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