

Healthy urban planning: taking action for health, the environment and social equality

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Although public health played a major role in the establishment of urban planning practices, starting in the 19th century (hygienic urbanism) and continuing until the first half of the 20th century (functional urbanism) [1], the two disciplines tended to drift apart in the second half of the 20th century, giving way to an approach that was more focused on sustainable development in the early 2000s. However, by analysing the interrelationships between the issues faced by public authorities in the 21st Century [2], in terms of both public health and environmental changes, it emerges that urban planning and regional development represent pivotal action points (see Figure 1). For example, among the significant environmental challenges resulting from human activities, climate change and the increasing urbanization of territories are major issues, the effects of which constitute

an immediate threat to health and human well-being, aggravating health inequity [3-5] via escalations in extreme climatic events, soil sealing, increased air pollution or even lifestyle factors such as mobility and diet. In fact, climate change and growing urbanization are exacerbating the pathologies and health problems of populations by causing chronic diseases or accentuating them (cardiovascular diseases, tumours, diabetes, asthma, mental health disorders, etc.). They also have an amplifying effect on vector-borne diseases and the risk of infection, as well as social isolation. These risks, be they new or increased, partly result from erroneous choices in development, urban planning and urban management as endorsed by previous public policies. They can now be corrected, to a certain extent, by the implementation of healthy urban planning.

Healthy urban planning: a concept that repositions development and urban planning choices as pivotal action points for well-being, health and the environment

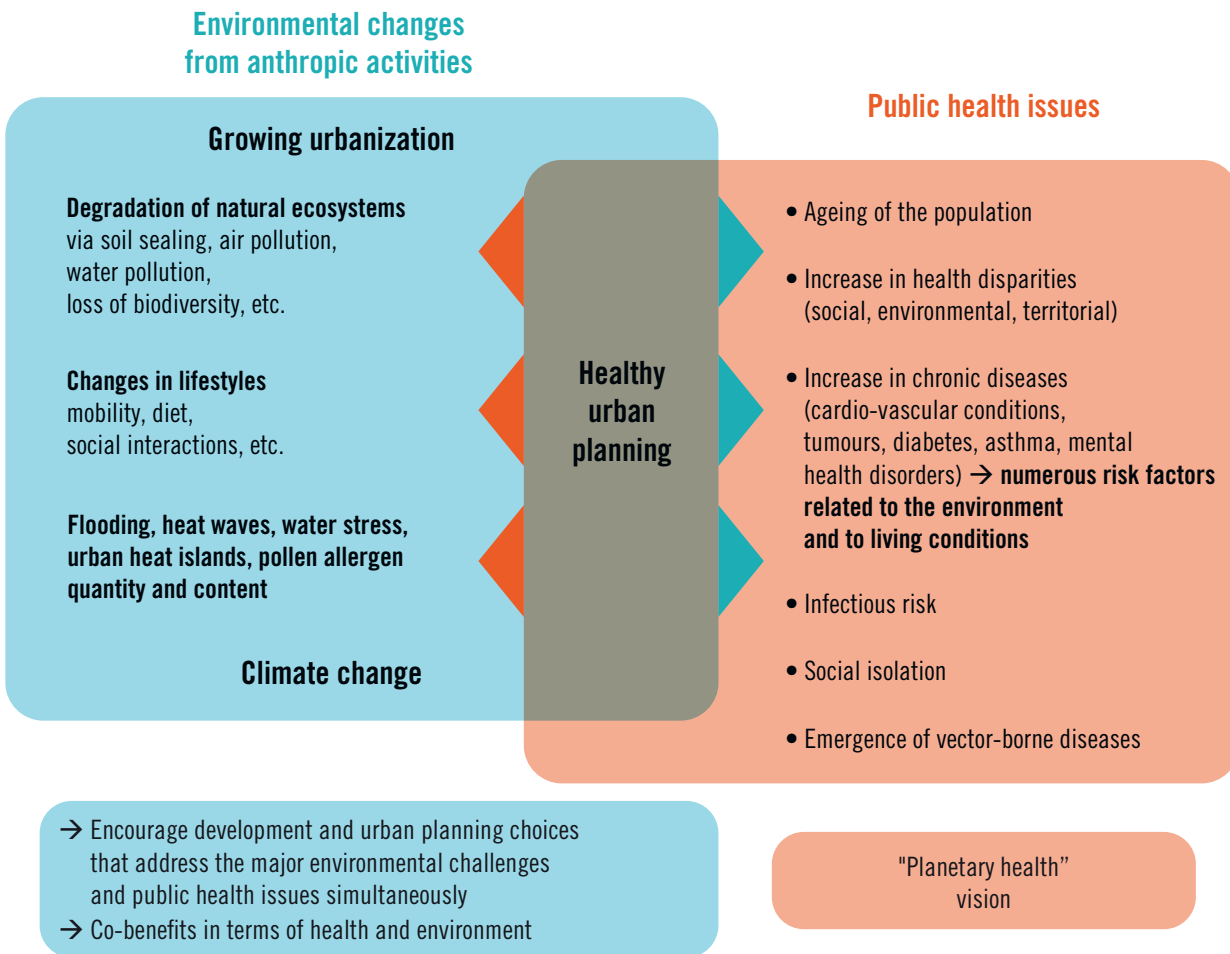
Faced with this analysis, we can no longer consider health and environmental issues separately: we must instead adopt practices that are less compartmentalized and use public action to propose integrated solutions. This is consistent with the concept of *Planetary Health*, initiated in 2010, which offers promising prospects for public health and the environment through a shift from individual objectives towards integrated approaches [7].

KEY POINTS

Based on the “Health in All Policies” approach promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO), the concept of healthy urban planning aims to systematically and simultaneously consider the health implications and environmental consequences of any urban planning project. This involves encouraging development and urban planning choices that minimize the population's exposure to risk factors such as air pollution, noise pollution and social isolation, while maximizing health protection and promotion factors such as physical activity, access to care or green spaces, all with a view to reducing social inequalities in health.

It is precisely within this vision that the concept of healthy urban planning finds its place. Present in France since early 2010, the main objective is to push development and urban planning practices towards better consideration for public health and environmental issues. Although the links between urban planning, health and the environment are now widely recognized and documented by the scientific community [8-11], it remains complicated for the various territorial actors to assimilate them into planning documents and development projects, where they are still only marginally considered. Here again, the highly sectoral organization of institutions combined with the complex governance system behind

Figure 1. Healthy urban planning: at the crossroads between environmental and public health issues



Source: adapted from internal productions of the EHESP – UrbASET group (Urbanisme Aménagement Santé Environnements Territoires)

local public policies [12] has led many territorial stakeholders to operate in silos. Opportunities to work together are often limited, despite their shared goals: health, quality of life and protection of the environment.

In this respect, better integration of health and environmental issues on different territorial scales requires improving collaboration between all stakeholders (especially professionals in the fields of planning, urban development and public health), as well as a shift towards approaches that are more fully integrated in terms of public health and the environment.

Healthy urban planning: origins, definition and key principles

Healthy urban planning is part of an approach to promote the health and well-being of all, while seeking co-benefits in terms of environmental health.

Based on the Health in All Policies approach, promoted by WHO since the Ottawa Charter (1986) [13] and more explicitly since the Adelaide Statement (2010) [14] and the Shanghai Declaration (signed in 2016) [15], healthy urban planning aims to systematically and simultaneously take into account the health and environmental consequences of any urban planning project (planning and operational). This involves encouraging development and urban planning choices that minimize the exposure of populations to risk factors such as air pollution, noise pollution, social isolation, etc., while maximizing their exposure to health prevention and promotion opportunities such as exercise, access to care or green spaces, etc., all with a view to reducing social inequalities in health.

Initiated by the WHO Healthy Cities network in 1987, the healthy urban planning concept has been

reinstated in France since the early 2010s, first by public health professionals, then more recently by those in development and urban planning [16]. On a national scale, the deployment of healthy urban planning is based on three key principles: first of all, a globally proactive and positive approach to health, which is considered a result of cumulative exposure to a large panel of environmental, socio-economic and individual determinants of health that can have a positive or negative influence on it; then, an integrated approach to public health and environmental issues which aims to promote the health and environmental co-benefits of development and urban planning choices; finally, a "system" approach that considers any territory of life¹ as a dynamic, complex system and thus takes into account all interactions between the components of this territory, the determinants of health

and health [17-19]. Figure 2 shows the conceptual model that illustrates these principles, providing a glimpse of the complex territories of life, and touching on total exposures that have an impact on health and health equity.

Implementation of healthy urban planning: coordinating a multitude of action strategies and stakeholders to achieve more integrated and collaborative practices

The challenge of implementing healthy urban planning is, on one hand, to encourage and support a change in practices that places health and the environment at the heart of planning and policies and, on the other hand, to succeed in making these policies into drivers

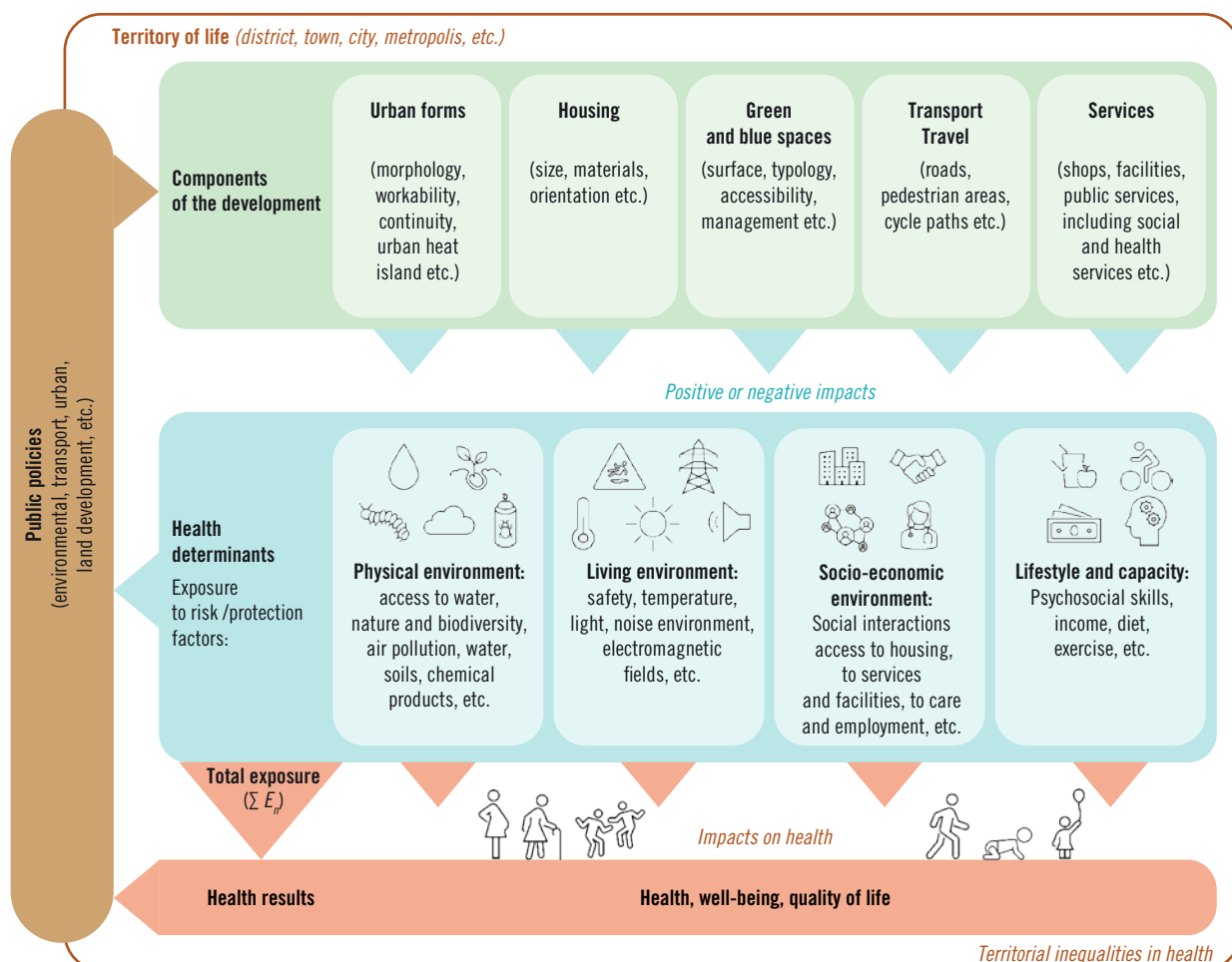
for improving health and reducing health inequalities. This ambitious mission is not the result of a single action, but above all of the coordination of a set of actions and stakeholders at different scales within a territory. The theoretical framework developed to organize these actions is based on three major strategies to be implemented simultaneously [16] (Figure 3).

The first strategy emphasises the importance of considering any project or policy related to urban development and management by adopting an ecosystem approach to health, that is to say by taking into account the multiple links between a large panel of health determinants (environmental, socio-economic and individual) and the project.

This way of considering projects or policies, as well as the elements that prove links between town planning and health, must be shared by a maximum of territorial stakeholders, which leads to a second strategic area: establishing a common culture for healthy urban planning and its advocacy. This includes encouraging multi-stakeholder exchanges by promoting meetings, shared training and all forms of multi-partner arrangements to facilitate acculturation to healthy urban planning principles and stimulate initiatives in the territory.

Finally, local authorities and any stakeholder wishing to engage in a healthy urban planning initiative must possess the appropriate tools and methodologies for making health a tangible element, and to help them

Figure 2. Conceptual model to touch on the complexity of the relations between the various components of a territory of life, total exposure to different health determinants, and health according to a system approach



Source: adapted from internal publications by the EHESP – UrbASET Group and French Network of Healthy Cities (RFVS), 2022.

translate this into their development and urban planning practices. This third strategy brings together a series of procedures, tools and approaches to choose from according to the initiative undertaken. Indeed, there are multiple complementary steps that favour the implementation of a healthy urban planning concept. The various tools developed and released in recent years, such as the guide *Agir pour un urbanisme favorable à la santé* [20; 21] and *Le Guide ISad-OrA* [22] published in 2020, can help structure the support for healthy urban planning that is offered within a territory. Other approaches can also be used, such as the procedure for environmental assessments of town planning documents and development projects (impact studies), for which the opinion of the regional health

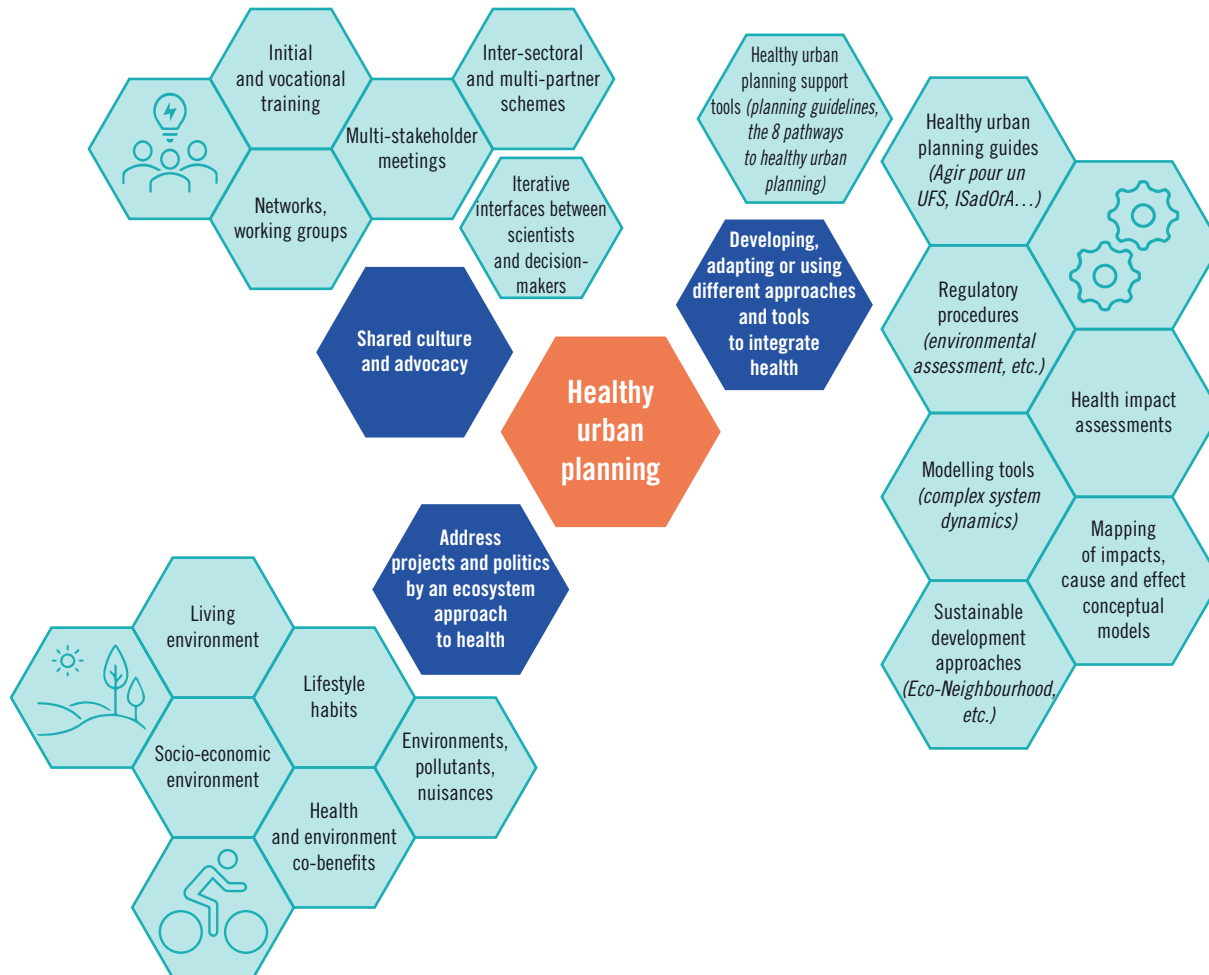
agencies (ARS) is required since regulatory changes in 2011, thus affirming the legitimacy of ARS as key players in promoting healthy urban planning [23]. In parallel, numerous health impact assessment (HIA) approaches to urban planning projects have been deployed since 2010 [24; 25] (editor's note: *see the article "Health impact assessment: a tool for healthy urban planning"*). A veritable methodology to aid decision-making, this non-regulatory approach, framed during the Gothenburg consensus in 1999, aims to anticipate the health consequences of policies, programmes or projects before their implementation and to suggest readjustments with a view to limiting negative impacts and reinforcing positive impacts. Depending on the health determinants investigated, HIA can mobilize different

types of assessment tools, such as the quantitative health impact assessment (QHIA) for air pollution [26].

Encouraging initiatives at local level, although challenges remain

These tools, approaches and methodologies have facilitated the deployment of healthy urban planning at different levels across the country. The multiplication of initiatives testifies to the fact that a growing number of stakeholders are interested in taking action in terms of public health issues and major environmental issues. These initiatives can take different forms and relate, for example, to more or less ambitious development projects: neighbourhood development, urban renewal or public spaces, transport

Figure 3. Theoretical framework of action strategies for the implementation of healthy urban planning



Feature
Urban planning dedicated to health

infrastructure, leisure, green spaces etc.; urban planning documents: local development plans (PLUi), regional cohesion schemes (SCoT), etc.; or planning documents: territorial climate-air-energy plans (PCAET), urban transport plans (PDU), etc.

If all of these activities are encouraging, they nevertheless remain a minority at national scale. We do not possess an exhaustive inventory of ongoing initiatives. However, feedback reveals investment disparities between territories and, moreover, the many obstacles to overcome in order to make health and the environment real decision-making criteria: red tape, operational silos, different conceptual representations of health, appropriation of the new frameworks and tools for healthy urban planning, etc.

Much remains to be done to ensure continued support for these initiatives and to achieve a more systematic implementation across the country, so as not to aggravate territorial and social inequalities in health.

In this challenging context, let us underline the importance of engaging in opportunities for meetings,



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URBAN PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT: A FEW ELEMENTS OF DEFINITION

In France, urban spaces are controlled by development policies carried out at various scales, from national level (e.g. major transport infrastructures) to local level. Two major fields of action can be set apart.

A first field concerns planning:

- local housing programme: PLU (*programme local d'habitat*);
- urban transport plan: PDU (*plan de déplacements urbains*);
- regional planning, sustainable development and territorial equality plan: SRADDET (*schémas régionaux d'aménagement, de développement durable et d'égalité des territoires*);
- etc.

and regulatory urban planning:

- regional cohesion scheme: SCoT (*schéma de cohérence territoriale*);
- local development plan: PLU (*plan local d'urbanisme*);
- etc.

They aim to define a project for the territory in the medium-term. Urban planning documents (regulatory urban planning) aim in particular to regulate land use and to set the conditions for future development, for example by regulating urban sprawl, by organizing the functions of areas (e.g. commercial centres, green or natural spaces), by setting the conditions to be respected for future constructions, etc. All of these planning and urban development documents derive from a common strategy and are linked to various administrative procedures (authorization of a building permit, etc.) within a hierarchy of standards. Thus, the PLU is compatible with the provisions of the SCoT; it clarifies the details of the latter and lays down rules with which any future construction must comply. The second field concerns operational urban planning, construction projects and developments. Actions in this field therefore lead to tangible achievements in the relatively short-

term (from a few years to around ten years). Depending on their degree of complexity, the projects in question can be carried out within the framework of wider initiatives, for example the (re)development of an entire district or a tramway line. In such cases, operational urban planning tools come into play (e.g. mixed development zone – France: ZAC). Less complex developments are said to be carried out “individually” (e.g. the construction of a school, the redevelopment of a square, etc.). In addition, there are many policies and inter-sectoral projects that drive planning hand-in-hand with urban management: for example, policies to support active mobility or learning to cycle are complementary to infrastructure that facilitates a physical activity.

Thus, the area of urban planning and development is vast, technical and complex. It calls together many professionals and is carried out in connection with many other policies.

exchanges and partnerships between planning, environment and public health professionals that help to develop a common culture around these principles. The development of professional training in healthy urban planning, such as the Public Health and Territorial Development diploma (SPAT)² in France, or even the establishment of networks like the Brittany Urban Planning and Health Network (RBUS) are two examples that demonstrate how the fields of health and urban planning can be linked. The implementation of this inter-sectoral approach offers an opportunity to reflect on the integration of healthy urban planning principles into everyone's practices, in the fields of both urban planning and public health. In broader terms, the challenges related to the implementation of healthy urban planning cover the governance of development and urban planning projects as well as the philosophy that is instilled therein. Placing health at the heart of decisions: such must be the purpose of healthy urban planning.

Despite these interesting initiatives, there is an urgent need to accelerate the current movement, the health crisis we are going through reminds us of this and we must seize it as a game-changing opportunity. We can hope that this crisis boldly underlines the need to permanently and structurally include public health issues in urban planning concerns and on the agenda of local decision-makers. ■

1. By territory of life, we mean a territorial unit (or a system) of variable scales: living room, housing, district, city, region, etc., structured into different spatial and non-spatial components in which individuals evolve.

2. <https://formation-continue.ehesp.fr/formation/sante-publique-et-amenagement-des-territoires-vers-un-urbanisme-favorable-la-sante-spat/>

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