



# Urban Well-being and Healthy Living: Reviewing the Social and Community Benefits of Physical Activity in Public Spaces

<sup>1</sup>M. Senthil, <sup>2</sup>S. Jayalakshmi

<sup>1</sup> Professor and Head, School of Architecture and Urban Design, CIET, Coimbatore.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, Meenakshi College of Engineering, Chennai.

Email - <sup>1</sup>[ar.senthilmani@gmail.com](mailto:ar.senthilmani@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[Jayalaxmi04@gmail.com](mailto:Jayalaxmi04@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Physical activity in public spaces is integral to promoting community health and well-being. Activities such as walking, jogging, cycling, and exercising in parks, sidewalks, and recreational areas offer numerous benefits, including improved cardiovascular health, mental well-being, social interaction, and a sense of community belonging. Designing public spaces to encourage physical activity involves considerations such as accessibility, safety, aesthetics, and amenities like benches, lighting, and greenery. A comprehensive literature review reveals the multifaceted impact of physical activity in public spaces. It highlights the health benefits, such as reduced risk of chronic diseases and improved mental health, associated with regular physical activity. Urban design plays a crucial role in promoting physical activity, with features like mixed land use, connectivity, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure positively influencing activity levels. Specific design elements of public spaces, including green spaces, seating, lighting, and safety features, also play a significant role in encouraging physical activity. Moreover, physical activity in public spaces offers social, economic, environmental, and spatial benefits. On social scale, it promotes social interaction, community engagement, and shared experiences. Economically, it leads to cost savings in healthcare, increased productivity, and tourism revenue. Environmentally, it reduces greenhouse gas emissions and promotes the preservation of natural spaces. Spatially, it activates public spaces, improves urban design, and enhances community well-being. This study highlights the benefits of physical activity in public spaces, creating healthier, more livable, and vibrant public spaces.

**Key Words:** physical activity, public spaces, vibrant communities, livable environment, social cohesion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

A review on physical activity in public spaces would typically explore various aspects related to this topic, including the health benefits of physical activity, the role of urban design in promoting physical activity, and the impact of public space design on community health and well-being. Here is a brief overview of what such a review might include:

**1. Health Benefits of Physical Activity:** A review would likely begin by summarizing the well-documented health benefits of regular physical activity, including reduced risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain cancers, as well as improved mental health and overall well-being.

**2. Urban Design and Physical Activity:** The review would then discuss how urban design, including the layout of streets, sidewalks, parks, and other public spaces, can influence physical activity levels. For example, features such as mixed land use, connectivity, access to public transportation, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure have been associated with higher levels of physical activity.

**3. Public Space Design and Physical Activity:** The review would also examine how specific design elements of public spaces, such as the presence of green spaces, recreational facilities, seating, lighting, and safety features, can impact the likelihood of people engaging in physical activity in those spaces.



**4. Social and Environmental Factors:** Additionally, the review might discuss how social and environmental factors, such as social norms, perceived safety, aesthetics, and air quality, can influence physical activity behaviour in public spaces.

**5. Interventions and Best Practices:** Finally, the review might highlight interventions and best practices for promoting physical activity in public spaces, such as the implementation of complete streets policies, the creation of active transportation networks, and the development of community-based programs and initiatives.

Overall, a literature review on physical activity in public spaces would aim to synthesize existing research findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic and identify gaps in the literature for future research.

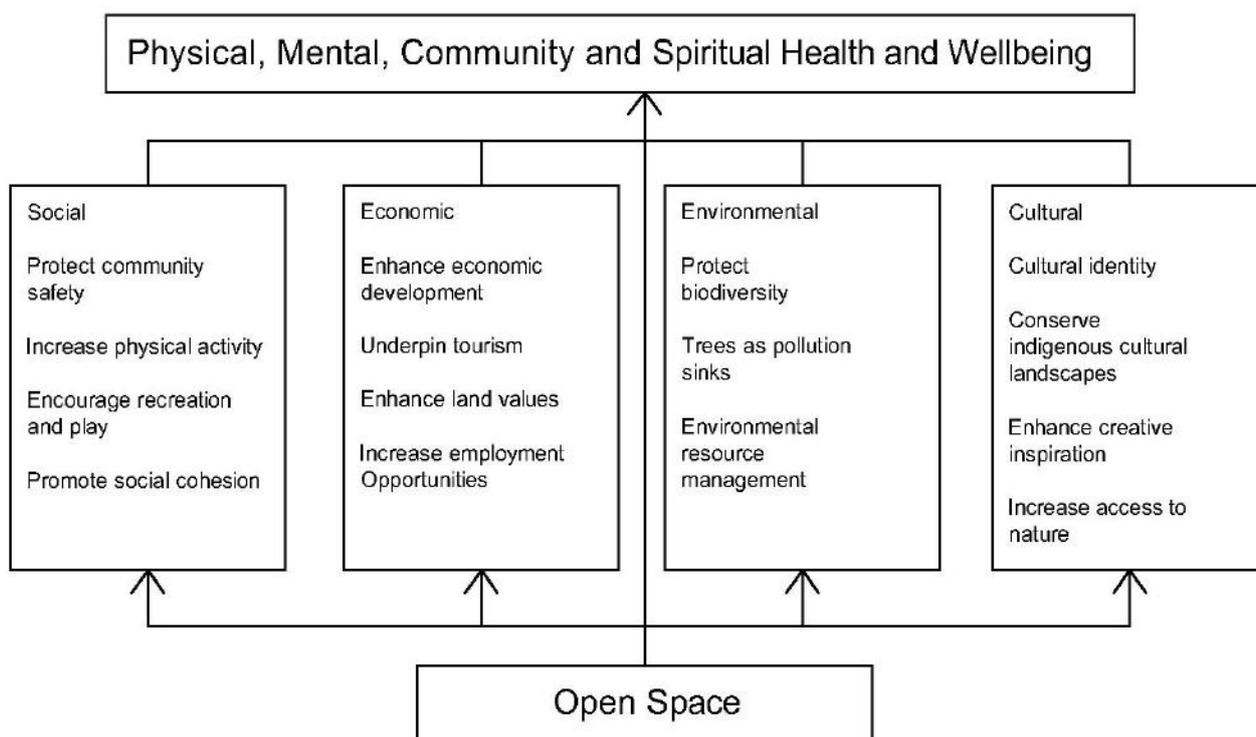


Fig. 1: Impact on wellbeing through social, economic, environmental and cultural factors ("Regional Public Health (2010): Healthy Open Spaces: A summary of the impact of open spaces on health and wellbeing," 2010).

### 1.1 SOCIAL BENEFITS:

Engaging in physical activity often involves interacting with others, whether through team sports, group fitness classes, or simply walking or jogging with friends. These interactions can help build social connections, strengthen relationships, and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities serve as gathering places where people from diverse backgrounds can come together, participate in activities, and build relationships. Participating in shared experiences strengthen bonds between individuals and within communities. Whether it's cheering on a team, completing a challenging hike, or participating in a group exercise class, these shared experiences can create lasting memories and friendships. Physical activity can help develop social skills such as teamwork, communication, and cooperation. Team sports, in particular, teach valuable lessons in leadership, sportsmanship, and collaboration. The social aspects of physical activity can have significant mental health benefits. Interacting with others can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, while also boosting mood and self-esteem. Regular physical activity can contribute to a sense of belonging and identity within a community. It can provide opportunities to connect with others who share similar interests and values. Overall, the social benefits of physical activity highlight its importance not only for physical health but also for building strong, connected, and resilient communities.



*Fig. 2: AI generated images showing Social benefits*

### **1.2 ECONOMIC BENEFITS:**

Regular physical activity can help prevent or manage chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. By reducing the prevalence of these conditions, physical activity can lead to lower healthcare costs for individuals, insurers, and governments. Physical activity has been shown to improve cognitive function, mood, and energy levels, which can lead to increased productivity at work. Employees who engage in regular physical activity are less likely to take sick days and more likely to be engaged and productive on the job. Encouraging physical activity through workplace wellness programs can lead to reduced absenteeism, lower turnover rates, and higher employee morale and satisfaction. Physical activity can be a significant driver of tourism and recreation-related economic activity. Cities and regions with well-developed recreational facilities and outdoor spaces can attract visitors and generate revenue from tourism-related activities. Investing in infrastructure that promotes physical activity, such as bike lanes, walking trails, and parks, can create jobs and stimulate economic growth. These investments not only benefit public health but also contribute to the local economy. Proximity to parks, recreational facilities, and other spaces that promote physical activity can increase property values. People are often willing to pay more to live in areas with access to such amenities, which can boost local property tax revenues. Overall, promoting physical activity can have wide-ranging economic benefits, including cost savings in healthcare, increased productivity, job creation, and enhanced quality of life for individuals and communities.



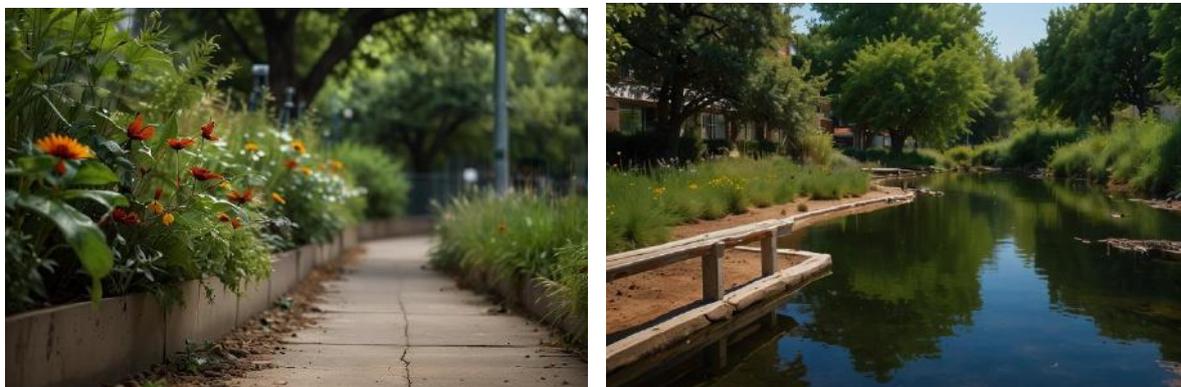
*Fig. 3: AI generated images showing Economic benefits*

### **1.3 ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS:**

Physical activity offers several environmental benefits, both directly and indirectly. Choosing active modes of transportation such as walking, cycling, or using public transit instead of driving can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. This helps mitigate climate change and improves air quality, benefiting both the environment and public health. Encouraging physical activity in outdoor environments, such as parks, trails, and natural areas, can promote the preservation and conservation of these spaces. People who engage with nature through physical activity are more likely to value and support efforts to protect natural habitats. Designing cities and communities to accessible green



spaces can enhance environmental sustainability. Encouraging physical activity in natural areas can help raise awareness of biodiversity conservation and the importance of protecting wildlife habitats. It can also support efforts to restore and maintain biodiversity in urban and natural environments. Overall, promoting physical activity can have positive environmental impacts by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, preserving natural spaces, promoting sustainable urban design, and raising awareness of environmental conservation issues.



*Fig. 4: AI generated images showing Environmental benefits*

#### **1.4 CULTURAL BENEFITS:**

Physical activity can provide various cultural benefits by connecting people with their cultural heritage, traditions, and community. Physical activities such as traditional dances, martial arts, and sports can be deeply rooted in cultural practices and traditions. Participating in these activities can help preserve and celebrate cultural heritage. Community-based sports events, festivals, and gatherings centered around physical activity can strengthen social ties and build a sense of identity and pride. Participating in physical activities with people from different cultural backgrounds can promote cultural exchange and understanding. It can help break down cultural barriers, stereotypes, and prejudices, fostering a more inclusive and diverse society. Physical activity can be a platform for promoting cultural diversity by showcasing a variety of traditional sports, games, and activities from different cultures. This can help preserve and promote cultural diversity within communities. Overall, physical activity can play a significant role in preserving, promoting, and celebrating cultural heritage, fostering community cohesion, and promoting cultural exchange and understanding.



*Fig. 5: AI generated images showing Cultural benefits*

#### **2. ACTIVATING PUBLIC SPACES:**

Activating Physical Activity in Public Spaces refers to the intentional design and planning of public spaces to encourage and facilitate physical activity. This concept involves creating environments that motivate individuals to engage in various forms of physical activity, such as walking, jogging, cycling, and exercising. Public spaces can be designed to promote physical activity by incorporating features such as well-connected sidewalks, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, bike lanes, and accessible parks and recreational facilities. These design elements can encourage people to be more

active in their daily routines. Organizing programming and events in public spaces can further encourage physical activity. This can include fitness classes, sports leagues, walking groups, and community events that promote active living. Public spaces should be designed to be accessible to people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. This can involve ensuring that spaces are easily navigable, safe, and welcoming to diverse populations. Creating a safe and secure environment is essential for promoting physical activity in public spaces. This can include adequate lighting, clear signage, and measures to prevent crime and accidents. Engaging the community in the design and activation of public spaces can enhance their use and encourage physical activity. This can involve seeking input from residents, businesses, and community organizations to ensure that spaces meet the needs of the local population. Promoting the benefits of physical activity and the availability of public spaces for such activities can increase participation. This can include signage, marketing campaigns, and partnerships with local organizations. Continuously monitoring and evaluating the use of public spaces for physical activity can help identify areas for improvement and guide future design and programming efforts. Overall, activating physical activity in public spaces involves a holistic approach that considers design, programming, accessibility, safety, community engagement, promotion, and evaluation. By creating environments that support and encourage physical activity, cities can improve the health, well-being, and quality of life of their residents.



Fig. 6. Planned development of public spaces (Source:

[https://pxhere.com/en/photo/954068?utm\\_content=shareClip&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=pxhere](https://pxhere.com/en/photo/954068?utm_content=shareClip&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=pxhere))



Fig. 7. Physical activity in public spaces (Source:

[https://pxhere.com/en/photo/468297?utm\\_content=shareClip&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=pxhere](https://pxhere.com/en/photo/468297?utm_content=shareClip&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=pxhere))



**2.1 SPATIAL BENEFITS:**

Physical activity can help activate public spaces, making them more vibrant and inviting. Active spaces are more likely to be used by people, which can lead to a sense of ownership and stewardship, reducing the risk of neglect and deterioration. Designing public spaces to accommodate physical activity can improve overall urban design. Features such as well-connected sidewalks, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, and accessible parks and recreational facilities can enhance the aesthetic appeal and functionality of urban areas. Active public spaces tend to be safer, as they are more likely to be frequented by people, reducing the risk of crime and antisocial behavior. Design elements that promote physical activity, such as lighting, visibility, and clear sightlines, can contribute to a safer environment. Access to public spaces that encourage physical activity can lead to healthier communities. Public spaces that promote physical activity can enhance connectivity within communities. Physical activity in public spaces can contribute to a sense of place and identity within communities. Spaces that are designed to reflect local culture, history, and values can create a stronger sense of attachment and belonging among residents. Overall, promoting physical activity in public spaces can have significant spatial benefits, improving the quality of the built environment, enhancing community well-being, and creating more inclusive and sustainable urban areas.

**2.2 DESIGN GUIDELINES:**

Design guidelines for promoting physical activity in public spaces are crucial for creating environments that encourage active living. These guidelines should be based on evidence-based research and best practices to ensure their effectiveness. Here are some key design guidelines that can help promote physical activity in public spaces:

Table 1. Show design guidelines parameters

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Description</b>
Connectivity and Accessibility	Design public spaces that are easily accessible and well-connected to encourage walking and cycling. Create pedestrian-friendly streetscapes with wide sidewalks, bike lanes, and accessible paths.
Mixed Land Use	Incorporate mixed land use to create destinations within walking or cycling distance. This can include shops, restaurants, parks, and community centers that encourage people to walk or bike for daily errands and activities.
Green Spaces and Parks	Provide ample green spaces and parks that offer opportunities for various physical activities such as walking, jogging, yoga, and sports. Include amenities like walking trails, sports fields, playgrounds, and fitness stations.
Safety and Security	Ensure that public spaces are safe and secure to encourage people to be active. This includes proper lighting, clear signage, and measures to prevent crime and accidents.
Aesthetics and Comfort	Design public spaces to be visually appealing and comfortable. Use landscaping, public art, and seating areas to create inviting environments that encourage people to linger and be active.
Accessibility for All	Design public spaces to be inclusive and accessible to people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. This can include features such as ramps, elevators, and braille signage for people with disabilities.

**3. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES :**

Physical activity in public spaces plays a pivotal role in promoting community health, well-being, and social cohesion. The benefits extend beyond individual health to encompass economic, environmental, and cultural aspects, enhancing the overall livability of communities. By designing public spaces that encourage physical activity and social interaction, urban planners and policymakers can create environments that support physical and mental health while fostering a sense of community belonging. Moving forward, there are several perspectives to consider. Firstly, there is a need for continued research and evaluation of the impact of public space design on physical activity levels and community health outcomes. This can help identify best practices and inform future urban planning and design strategies. Secondly, efforts should be made to ensure equitable access to public spaces and physical activity opportunities for all members of the community. This includes addressing barriers such as cost, safety, and accessibility, particularly in underserved neighbourhoods. Thirdly, community engagement and participation are key to the success of initiatives aimed at promoting physical activity in public spaces. By involving community members in the planning and design process,



urban planners can create spaces that truly reflect the needs and preferences of the local population. In conclusion, physical activity in public spaces has the potential to transform communities, improving health, well-being, and social connections. By prioritizing the design and accessibility of public spaces that encourage physical activity, cities can create environments that support the health and happiness of their residents for generations to come.

## REFERENCES:

- 1 Anderson, J., Ruggeri, K., Steemers, K., & Huppert, F. (2017). Lively Social Space, Well-Being Activity, and Urban Design: Findings From a Low-Cost Community-Led Public Space Intervention. *Environment and Behavior*, 49(6), 685–716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916516659108>
- 2 Brown, C., & Grant, M. (2005). Biodiversity and human health: What role for nature in healthy urban planning. *Built Environment*, 31(4), 326–338. <https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.2005.31.4.326>
- 3 Bruce Douglass, & Moustakas, C. (1986). from the SAGE Social Science Collections . Rights Reserved . *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 503(1), 122–136.
- 4 Fillion, M., Mergler, D., José, C., Passos, S., Larribe, F., Lemire, M., Rémy, J., & Guimarães, D. (2006). Environmental Health : A Global A preliminary study of mercury exposure and blood pressure in the Brazilian Amazon. *Blood Pressure*, 9, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1476-069X-5-Received>
- 5 Gaubatz, P. (2008). New Public Space in Urban China. *China Perspectives*, 2008(4), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.4743>
- 6 Jabbar, M., Yusoff, M. M., & Shafie, A. (2022). Assessing the role of urban green spaces for human well-being: a systematic review. *GeoJournal*, 87(5), 4405–4423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-021-10474-7>
- 7 Jennings, V., & Bamkole, O. (2019). The relationship between social cohesion and urban green space: An avenue for health promotion. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16030452>
- 8 Kafy, A.- Al, Faisal, A.-A.-, & Ferdous, L. (2018). A Participatory Assessment to Identify the Causes and Impacts of Open Space Reduction in Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) Area, Bangladesh. *International Journal of Environmental Planning and Development*, 4(2), 16–28. <https://doi.org/10.37628/jepd.v4i2.365>
- 9 Kent, J. L., & Thompson, S. (2014). The Three Domains of Urban Planning for Health and Well-being. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 29(3), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412214520712>
- 10 Kostrzewska, M. (2017). Activating Public Space: How to Promote Physical Activity in Urban Environment. *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, 245(5). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/245/5/052074>
- 11 Krefis, A., Augustin, M., Schlünzen, K., Oßenbrügge, J., & Augustin, J. (2018). How Does the Urban Environment Affect Health and Well-Being? A Systematic Review. *Urban Science*, 2(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci2010021>
- 12 Lee, A. C. K., Jordan, H. C., & Horsley, J. (2015). Value of urban green spaces in promoting healthy living and wellbeing: Prospects for planning. *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 8, 131–137. <https://doi.org/10.2147/RMHP.S61654>
- 13 Lee, A. C. K., & Maheswaran, R. (2011). The health benefits of urban green spaces: A review of the evidence. *Journal of Public Health*, 33(2), 212–222. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdq068>
- 14 Niti Aayog. (2023). *Best Practices in Social Sector : A Compedium 2023*. <https://niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-05/Best-Practices.pdf>
- 15 Selanon, P., & Chuangchai, W. (2023). The Importance of Urban Green Spaces in Enhancing Holistic Health and Sustainable Well-Being for People with Disabilities: A Narrative Review. *Buildings*, 13(8). <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings13082100>
- 16 Shamsuddin, S., & Ujang, N. (2008). Making places: The role of attachment in creating the sense of place for traditional streets in Malaysia. *Habitat International*, 32(3), 399–409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2008.01.004>
- 17 Sugiyama, T., Carver, A., Koohsari, M. J., & Veitch, J. (2018). Advantages of public green spaces in enhancing population health. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 178(May), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2018.05.019>
- 18 Whyte, W. (1980). *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Project for Public Space.