

# Creating Healthy Communities

An Article By:  
Taylor Rand

It is estimated that in 2008, over half the world population was living in a city. (Dugger 1) If this staggering statistic is indeed true than cities around the world, now more than ever, need to unite in order to build a healthy and stable place for everyone to live. With this being said, building a healthy community is not an easy thing. It takes time, money, effort and certainly lots of planning. Before communities can begin to build a healthy city, they need to define exactly what a healthy community is. While various ideas come to mind when considering a healthy city, the most important of these is the need for green spaces.

Although green spaces may not be the first thing that comes to mind when many city dwellers think of the most important aspect to a healthy city, they may not have taken the time to really think about how many aspects of their lives are affected positively by nature. For instance, some may say that cultural diversity is the most important element to a healthy city. Even one of urban planning's most famous critics, Jane Jacobs says that it is diversity that makes a great city. Jacob's is the creator of "Jane's Walk," which is the walk of an urban community in which everything from the number of bushes to the diversity of shops is observed and analyzed. Jacob's advocates that the walk should be a sort of ballet, and that urbanized communities have a lot more

to them than one would think. During an interview, Jacobs states: "There's a sameness—this is one of the things that's boring people. But this sameness has economic implications: you don't get new products and services out of sameness. This means that somehow there's no opportunity for these thousands of flowers to bloom anymore." (Jacobs)



**Jane Jacobs**

Diversity is a key aspect to a great city; however, this diversity is useless unless it mixes. This is where green spaces come in. Without parks, urban farms, or other green spaces the opportunity for diversity to affect a city would be severely minimized.

A great example of this is the urban farming that is taking place right now in Detroit, Michigan. Urban farming is farming on unused land within a city. Urban Farming began in 2005 and there are now over 600 urban farms around the world. The Urban Farming Association says that urban farms are a great way: "To eradicate hunger while increasing diversity, motivating youth and senior citizens and optimizing the production of unused land for food and alternative energy." (UFA Video) The diversity the UFA speaks about is not only racial diversity, which some may assume, but also ethnic, religious, economic, and political

diversity. For example, the UFA's video on urban farming portrays a range of people, including famous rappers, men in business suits, young Latino children, and a number of senior citizens. It was the creation of these Urban Farms that allowed this diverse group of people to come together and do something good for their community.



**An example of Urban Farming**

The UFA also advocates Urban Farming for its creation of food that can be donated to the poor. One important aspect of a healthy city is the actual physical health of its citizens. During WWII, 40% of the nation's produce was supplied by gardens. (UFA Video) Imagine if today Urban Farming produced 40% of the country's food. Not only would more jobs be created, but starvation would be practically wiped out. Some may think that American cities don't have enough space, however as of now there are 374 shrinking cities in the world. Detroit alone has 40 square miles of vacant land. (Building the Green City Video) This unused land could easily be turned into urban farms throughout the next couple of years.

In her book *Urban Place* editor Peggy Barlett states: "Destinations that are reasonably close, assessable, and well designed and that feature attractive scenery, maintained paths, good lighting, toilets and drinking water seem to predict physical activity." (Bartlett 262)

A great park is made up of many of the things just mentioned. Parks are scattered all over the country. Just as Urban Gardens, parks bring diverse people from all over the community together, as well as foster physical activity, which increases physical health.

Some skeptics of green spaces as the most important aspect of a healthy city may say that good quality parks are only built in the wealthiest parts of a city. However recently a push for parks in poor communities can be witnessed around the country. For instance, a bill was just passed in California for \$400 billion towards creating parks in the poorer parts of the city. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* states: "It is no accident that park-starved communities are the same ones that suffer from high crime, unemployment, poverty, obesity and asthma. Health studies show that providing people with green space and places to play has broad impact. Creating parks changes children's lives." (Roosevelt 1) The creation of parks in poorer neighborhoods will give children a chance to get away from some aspects of their lives that may create stress and lead them down the wrong path later on in life.



**Park in Los Angeles**

Not only will parks create spaces for children to play, they also increase

safety, which is another very important aspect of a healthy community. Unlike private properties, parks can be easily supervised. A simple surveillance around parks will encourage more people to go out and utilize them, which increases mental and spiritual health. Parks also encourage public art. With enough space, its unbelievable what the imagination can think up. For example, in the Urban Ecology in the West Ward the Lafayette Tech Clinic displays a picture of a “tree hugger” hugging a tree. This tree hugger is made of branches and small sticks. The creator of this environmentally friendly art had the resources to build his creation because of considerable amount of green space in Easton, Pennsylvania. (Lafayette Tech Clinic 28)

One day on a Jane’s Walk through Philadelphia Pennsylvania, I came across a park. The park had a number of teenagers using its drained fountain as a skateboard park.



**Skateboarders at LOVE Park**

Although one may think of a park as somewhere with lots of trees and nature, parks such as this one can be just as important to a community. Parks created

for certain uses are essential to a healthy city. This specific park allowed for a place for teenagers to skateboard instead of using streets and sidewalks are their park. The park increases safety because the sidewalks of the city are clear of skateboarders, and it decreases the number of skaters on the street that can potentially be hit by a car.

In his article, Healthy Cities journalist Joe Flower states: “Building a healthy community requires all the energy the community can muster, from everyone who can make a difference - but it can be done. There are ways to do it. This powerful idea has taken hold in over a thousand cities and towns around the world. This is how to build a world that works.” (Flower 1) Although at times changing the world seems like an impossible task, if taken one step at a time, its quite possible indeed, and the creation of green spaces is one of the best ways to accomplish this. One person planting the seeds of tomatoes plants could help feed a homeless boy. Instead of selling drugs, this boy may decide to go to school, eventually getting himself to college and from their he becomes the scientist to one day discover the cure to cancer. Although this is a far-fetched idea, similar events have happened before. The creation of green spaces can only lead to safer, happier, more intellectual citizens, and this is the ultimate achievement of a healthy community.