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Introduction to urban environments and mental health

Part of the Urban Design and Mental Health series

A Ryder Alliance publication by Ryder Architecture

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Mental health and society

Mental health is a spectrum which includes everything from good mental health, a prominent factor in wellbeing, through to problems that make it difficult for people to live a normal life. Unfortunately, mental health problems are becoming increasingly common. More than 300 million people suffer from depression, which has been recognised as the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide.[1]

Given the prevalence of mental health problems globally, as an industry we must create places which support wellbeing for everyone and at all stages of life, including those living with mental health problems.

This article is the first in a series which explores how we can design for improved mental health in our neighbourhoods, towns and cities.

At Ryder, we believe that the more we can understand about the interaction between our environment and mental health, the more able we are to design places that proactively improve mental health.
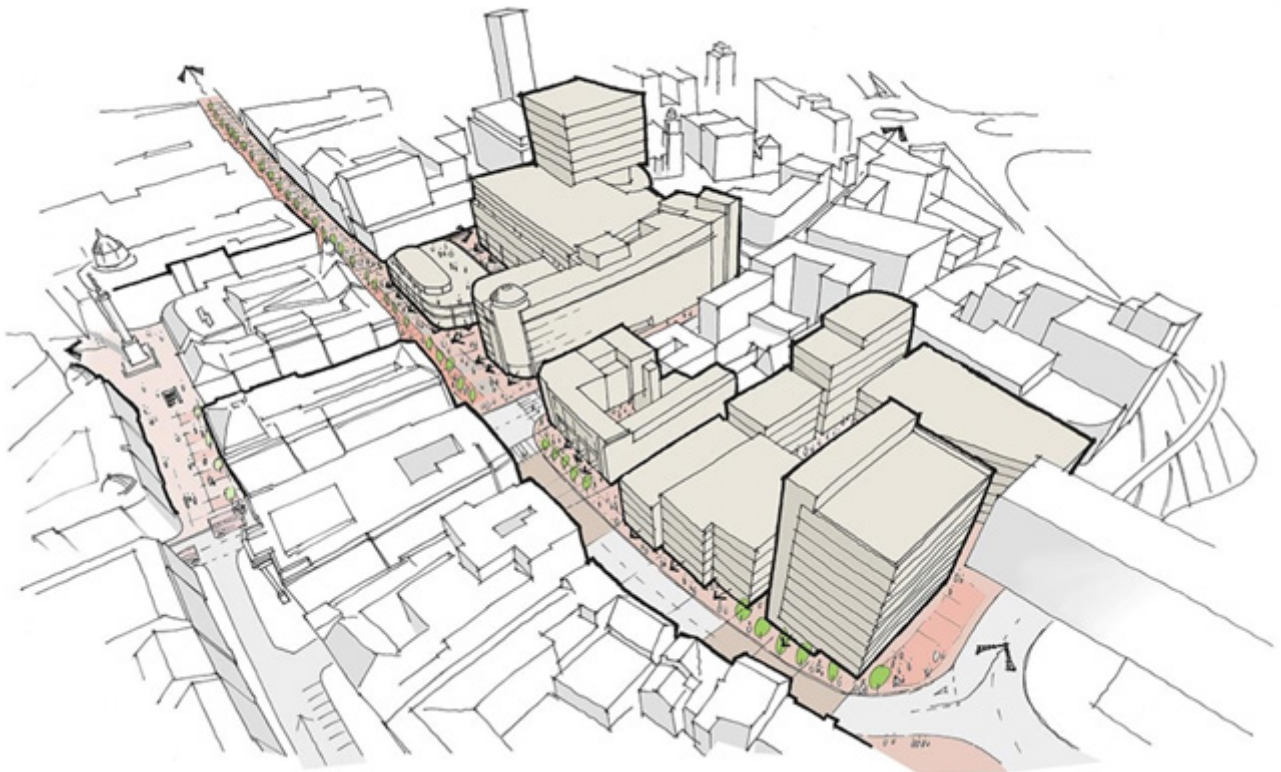
Effects of poor mental health

There are many types of mental health problems, which can last for varying periods of time and impact individuals in different ways. Conditions include bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and post traumatic stress disorder, as well as more common conditions such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress and sleep problems.[2] One in six people in England report experiencing a common mental health problem in any given week.[3] Levels of suicide are also linked with mental distress, with suicide now thought to be the most common cause of death for men aged 20-49 years in England and Wales.[4]

The impact of mental health problems on society are significant and increasing.

The effects of poor mental health are wide ranging, including the impact on an individual's self esteem, employment and relationships, and pose an escalating cost to society.

The wider costs of poor mental health in England are estimated at £105 billion a year, consisting of the cost of health and social care, loss of output, and an estimated cost for the reduction in people's quality of life.[5]

Increasing recognition

In recent years there has been increased recognition of the importance of mental health and strategies to manage and enhance it. The UK government's mental health outcomes strategy 'No Health Without Mental Health', launched in 2011, is one example.[6]

More recently, there has been a growing body of research exploring the links between our mental health and the environments in which we spend our lives.

Whilst we must acknowledge the different factors that contribute to mental health, including genetics, personal history, and economic and social situation, the effect that our environment has on our mental health is significant and worthy of further research, public interest and scrutiny.

Urban environments

Mental health problems disproportionately affect the urban population, and increased urbanisation is adding to this challenge. The United Nations predicts that by 2050, 68 percent of the world's population will live in urban environments.[7] The UK surpassed this figure over half a century ago and over 90 percent of our population were living in urban environments by 2010.[8] Compared to rural dwellers, urbanites have an almost 40 percent increased risk of developing depression, a 20 percent increased risk for anxiety and double the risk of developing schizophrenia.[9]

Why is this? Our urban areas, particularly cities, are full of social, cultural and employment opportunities as well as benefitting from increased connectivity. With these benefits come negative qualities which can impact on mental health, such as lack of green space, vehicle dominated and inhospitable streets, air and noise pollution, and a proliferation of stress inducing environments.

What are the key components that influence our mental health in urban environments and what design principles should we adopt to protect against negative effects and enhance wellbeing?

The topics discussed in Ryder's Urban Design and Mental Health series are:
- Stimulation and restoration
- Imageability, sensory perception and place attachment
- Social interaction and safety
- Green space and activity

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.

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