

# urbanistik

by JCDecaux

## TRANSFORMING PUBLIC SPACE TO PROMOTE HEALTH IN CITIES





## HEALTH IN URBAN LIFE...

Today, **4.4 billion people** live in cities according to the World Bank, representing **56% of the world's population**.

In 2050, **almost 7 out of 10 people** will live in urban areas.

This demographic pressure is generating numerous transitions. Cities are in the complex position of having to manage a combination of several types of transitions, some of them contradictory.

The subject of **well-being** and health appears more and more as a **cross-cutting theme** that allows the **various actors in the city's fabric** to work together and to address several underlying issues.

This note aims to explore how cities can address the issue of health for their citizens and within the development of their territories.

It will then focus on the roles of other urban stakeholders and their contributions to the ongoing improvement of public health.

### *Citizens' health in keys figures*

**1/4 of the global population was affected by a mental health disorder in 2020,** as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.  
Source – OMS, 2022

**80% of citizens' health depends on social determinants.**  
Source – APUR, 2018

**45% of adults are overweight,** and among them, **15% suffer from obesity, in France.**  
Source – DREES, 2022

**Only 50% of residents in priority neighborhoods report being in good or very good health, in France.**  
Source – Santé Publique France, 2022

Banks of the Seine - Paris  
© Ysebaux



# HOW DO CITIES ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF HEALTH?

## MULTIPLE HEALTH CHALLENGES TO MAINTAIN A POPULATION HEALTHY

The world's increasing urbanization brings with it a unique set of health challenges: chronic non-communicable and infectious diseases, mental health, air and noise pollution, access to water and sanitation, malnutrition, lack of physical activity, and resilience to health emergencies.

To meet those challenges, countries and cities **need to take ambitious measures to ensure health of their citizens.** According to Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, **a healthy population is essential if cities are to be economically competitive and not face exclusion issues.**

In France, only a little more than half of the inhabitants of the priority neighborhoods of the urban policy, report being in good or very good health. Citizens' health remains a priority issue for cities.

## THE CITY: A KEY PLAYER FOR CITIZENS' HEALTH

The **role of the city is essential in managing the health state of populations.** According to the APUR (Parisian Urbanism Studio), 80% of citizens' health depends on social determinants: environmental and socioeconomic conditions, lifestyles, etc.

**Cities therefore have a role to play in contributing to the improvement of health for all and everyone.**

Bringing health to cities is a vast challenge.

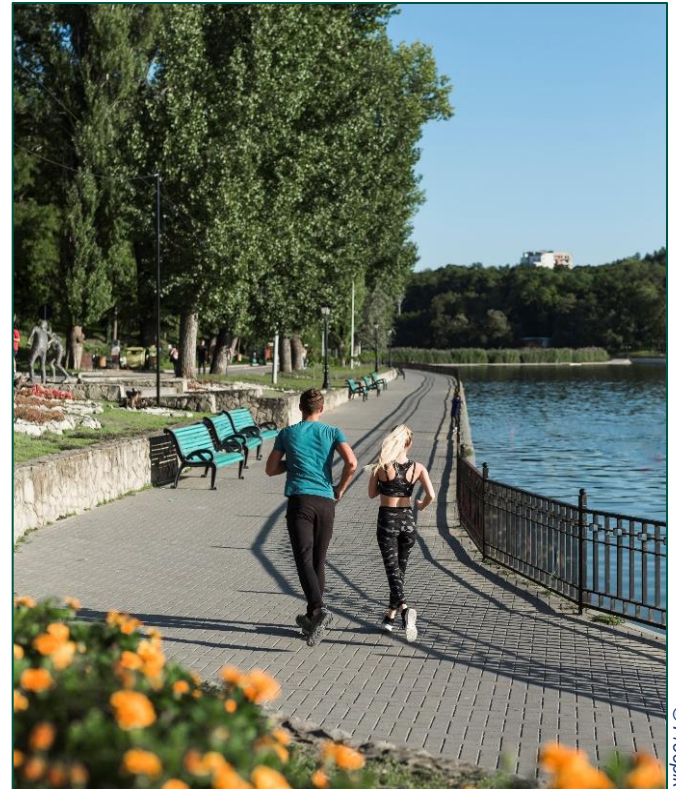
As a reminder, the framework for city action in terms of population health management in France is codified.

It can be summarized as the general protection of health and the environment by maintaining and/or improving the supply of health care services in the territory, a duty of prevention, awareness and alert, and finally the organization and financing of municipal disinfection services, municipal hygiene and health services.

## THE PARTICIPATION OF URBAN PLANNERS IN MANAGING CITIZENS' HEALTH

Beyond public policies, many responses can be brought by cities to protect or even improve citizens' health.

In France, the city is defined as a local authority, but also as a living and urbanization space. Hence, **all the actors of the territory can play a role by contributing to the maintenance and the improvement of the health state of the population.**



### The Low Emission Zones

**The Low Emission Zones (LEZs)** are new measures put in place by Governments to fight against air pollution.

The introduction of LEZs is a response to the European obligation to ensure "good air quality" on its territory to protect the health of Europeans. Within the LEZs, the circulation of vehicles is restricted according to their emissions of air pollutants (represented by Crit'Air stickers in France).

**In France, the objective of these LEZs is to reduce urban air pollution by 40% by 2025.** 42 LEZs are to be created in agglomerations of more than 150,000 inhabitants by 2025.

The LEZs must be established and regulated by the mayor or the president of the EPCI (Public Institutions of Inter-municipal Cooperation). This competence of cities becomes a real lever for action to reduce air pollution in cities and thus to improve the health of citizens.

However, despite the expected benefits of LEZ in terms of air quality improvement, they are still criticized for their controversial overall environmental impact, and for the difficulty for low-income households to replace their old vehicle.

these reasons, the deployment of certain LEZs is complex and delayed.



# HOW DO CITIES TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CITIZENS' HEALTH IN THEIR DEVELOPEMENT?

Today, it is important to use the broad framework of cities' actions to manage the health status of citizens. In the pursuit of this objective, the World Health Organization (WHO) has created a network of Healthy Cities.

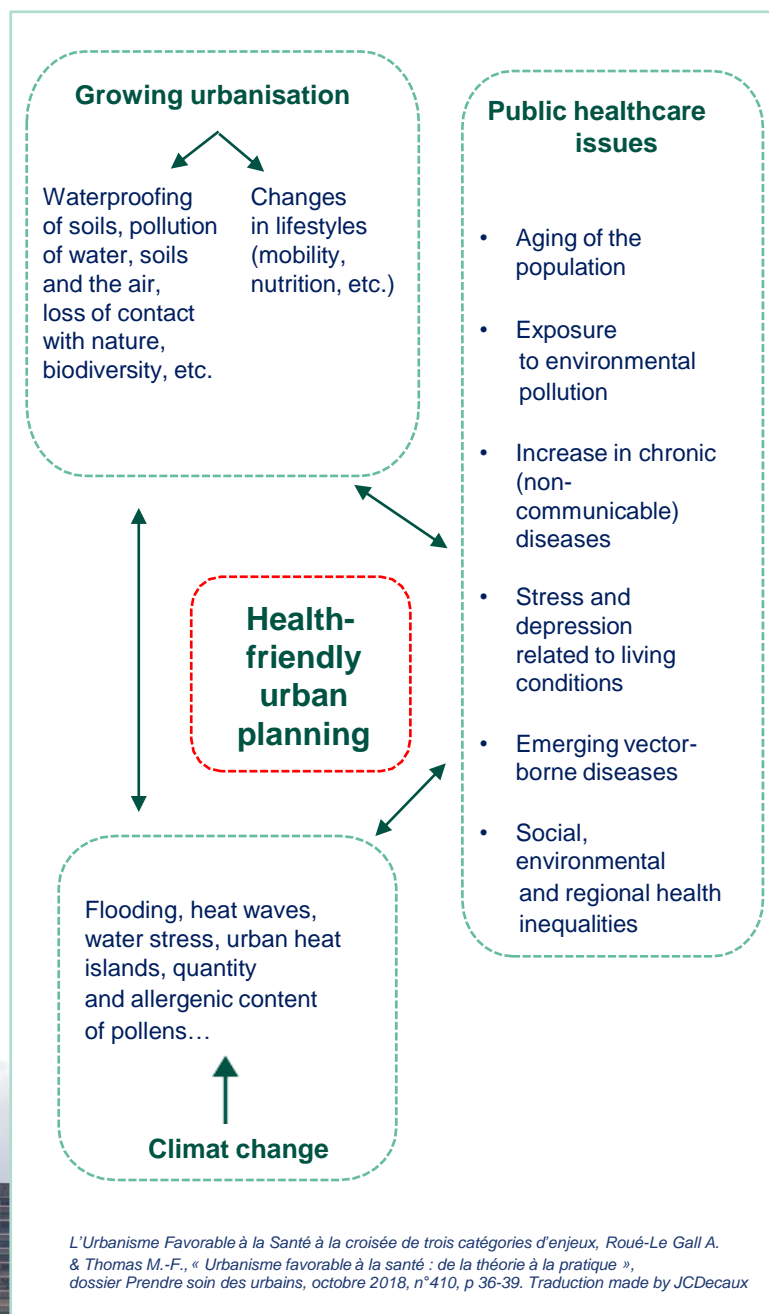
This network considers **cities as "living organisms"**. It encourages the use of concerted and partnership-based approaches to improving the health of cities and their inhabitants, considering the environment as a fundamental resource to be protected and enhanced.

France has 99 Healthy Cities that are increasingly integrating the notion of health linked to the environment in their territory under the impetus of the 5 French pilot cities of the program (Dunkerque, Grasse, Nancy, Nantes, and Rennes) which are testing new concepts and methodological tools on the subject. For nearly ten years, the concept of Health-Friendly Urban Planning (HUP) has been developing in France. Environmental changes caused by human activities are a growing concern for cities, posing a threat to citizens' health and ecosystems.

The HUP seeks to systematically consider the consequences of an urban development project on the quality of life and on the environment.

**This methodology allows to encourage choices that minimize the impact on the environment and maximize health benefits.**

It is therefore essential to change the paradigm and to **support the evolution of the practices** of all actors involved in urban decisions towards **an approach combining public health and the environment.**





## SEVERAL TOOLS AND APPROACHES FOR APPLYING THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF HEALTH-FRIENDLY URBAN PLANNING

To make this paradigm shift, French cities have several tools and approaches at their disposal, allowing them to apply the main principles of Health-Friendly Urban Planning. Among all the existing solutions, three of them stand out.

### The ISadOrA Guide

The ISadOrA guide (Integration of Health in Urban Development Operations) has been developed under the direction of EHESP (Advanced Studies in Public Health School) and a'urba (Bordeaux urban planning agency) in 2020.

It is an operational tool to respond to health and environmental issues in urban planning.

This guide will help project owners and workers to better take these issues into account. It works through **a systemic approach to take into consideration co-benefits and to facilitate decision-making.**

The objective is to **enable urban planning actors to become public health actors.**

### Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

Health Impact Assessment is an evaluation approach from the Healthy Cities Program of the WHO. This approach is presented as an aid to decision-making.

It allows to **reinforce the positive aspects of a project and not only to reduce its negative impacts.**

Its operation relies on the involvement of all the actors concerned by the project (political, institutional, private, non-profits, and citizens).

This makes it an effective **tool for ordering priorities and highlighting recommendations to promote health** through a project.

### The City Health Workshop (CHW)

The City Health Workshop developed by the "Interministerial Committee for Towns" in 1999 in France is part of the law on public health policy of August 9, 2004.

It is a local territorial animation approach. The workshop's mission is to carry out a territorial health diagnosis. This diagnosis allows to identify the specific needs as well as the social, environmental, and individual factors influencing the state of the health status (living conditions, obstacles to access to health-care, risk behaviors) of the populations living in priority districts.

It makes it possible to **develop methods and tools that facilitate cooperation between the various urban actors.**



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### DO CITIES HAVE THE ABILITY TO IMPACT CITIZENS' HEALTH?

Through urban planning, cities can have an impact on the health status of their citizens. **This improvement cannot be achieved without an environmental improvement of the ecosystem.**

The notions of **health and environment** are thus **becoming inseparable** in the making of the city. They are being addressed jointly in an increasing number of urban planning projects.

Moreover, this vision is strongly supported at the international level, thanks to the World Health Organization.

For nearly 20 years, France has been conducting this approach, notably through the implementation of four "National Environmental Health Plans".

# HOW CAN URBAN PLANNERS CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF CITIZENS IN PUBLIC SPACES?

From the perspective of public space and urban furniture, it is interesting to look at how urban planners can have a positive impact on the health of citizens. **Four main areas of action emerge** for these actors to contribute maintaining or even improving the health of the population: **encouraging physical exercise, improving mental health, making a healthy and varied diet available, and, finally, reducing levels of pollution.**

It is important to remember the plurality of users of public space. To promote and improve health for all and thus to reduce inequalities, urban planners must take each one of them into consideration.

## 1 - ENCOURAGING PHYSICAL EXERCISE

45% of adults are overweight and 15% of them suffer from obesity, according to the report "The health status of the population in France" published by the DREES (Department for Research, Studies, Evaluation and Statistics).

**Insufficient daily physical activity** is one of the main factors. Therefore, encouraging and facilitating the practice of sports activities in public spaces appears to be a way of improving the health of populations.

### Promoting « active design »

The study "Sport in the city" made public by the CNVAS (National Committee of Active and Sporting Cities) shows that **81% of French people would like to be provided with more sports facilities in their cities.**

To contribute to this objective, street furniture could, for example, be transformed into sports equipment.

This is called "active design", an urban planning concept that consists in **encouraging physical exercise in cities through urban design.** The goal of active design is to facilitate the practice of sports activity **by using existing urban furniture or spaces with a minimum of transformation.**

This trend is increasingly being observed in urban development, amplified by the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee with the "Terre de Jeux 2024" label.

The example of the city of Saint-Dizier in France, shows the possibilities for experimentation between territories and private companies, to develop active design systems within the city.



Climbing wall installed by Polygones on a wall of the city of Saint-Dizier  
© Saint-Dizier



Smile in the Light, Nantes, 2024 - © Smile in the Light

### Gamify physical activity

Other new trends to encourage physical activity in the city are emerging, particularly around the "gamification" of physical activity and the "move to earn" trends.

Encouraging physical exercise in urban spaces through games and rewards can transform the way citizens consider sport, making it more attractive and even useful. Several web 2 (like WeWard) or web 3 (like Sweatcoin) startups offer to earn rewards while walking.

The startup Smile in the Light is experimenting with physical exercise through games, thus enhancing the waiting time in bus shelters, for example.



## 2 - IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH (1/2)

Mental health has emerged as a priority issue for several years. According to the WHO, in 2020, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, **a quarter of the population will have been affected by a mental disorder**. Regarding this type of health disorder, the city is sometimes pointed at, and its responsibility put forward, given the proven correlation between anxiety, stress, depression, and urban life.

### Encouraging social proximity among citizens

For example, city life can contribute to the isolation of a part of the population and lead to depression. **Spatial proximity is not necessarily linked with social proximity**.

Cities do not always have spaces that allow the creation of social relationships. It is therefore important to **recreate areas of social interaction and cohesion**.

New concepts of furniture are appearing to facilitate this connection between citizens. One of them is Nacelles, a project by the company Comm1possible.



Urban furniture "Nacelles" by Comm1possible - © Comm1possible



© StreetCo

### Adapting public spaces and facilitating mobility

To reduce isolation and to promote social relations, public space must be made accessible to all. According to an IFOP (opinion and marketing research institute) study, 67% of people with disabilities encounter difficulties when traveling in public spaces.

The adaptation of public space is now essential, in particular by optimizing it for each user and by proposing solutions to facilitate travel. This is StreetCo's purpose, a collaborative GPS for people with reduced mobility.

### Enhancing the sense of security

Making cities more pleasant helps improve mental health and reduce stress. It also involves **reducing citizens' feeling of insecurity**. According to INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies), in 2019, **21% of people said they felt unsafe in their neighborhood**. This feeling is heightened in urban units of more than 100,000 inhabitants.

To help reinforce the feeling of safety in cities, street furniture can be used to support innovations. For example, the city of Nice has integrated bollards on public space poles with emergency call points connected to the local police force.

Some digital solutions can also contribute to reinforcing the perception of safety, such as the geolocation application App-Elles, which has won several awards. Developed by the non-profit Resonantes, it allows people to quickly and easily alert relatives in case of emergency or danger.



Emergency terminals installed in the street of Nice, 2019  
© Ville de Nice



## 2 - IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH (2/2)

### Offering resting areas in public space

Public spaces can also be transformed into environments **that support mental health**, particularly by providing spaces for breaks and disconnection directly on the streets.

This is what La Parenthèse Enchantée in Nantes experiments: a simple and tangible space that encourages people to disconnect and take time for themselves. Along the path, colorful murals decorated with phrases inspire daydreaming, while poetic installations awaken the senses. It serves as a resting area, offering a break from all the city's stimuli.



© La Parenthèse Enchantée



Urban greening of the place Catalogne, Paris - © Guillaume Bontemps / Ville de Paris

### Greening Public Spaces

Revegetating cities can play an important role in addressing mental health. Individuals who frequent green spaces **are less prone to mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, or stress**. It has been shown that a vegetation cover of more than 20% in a neighborhood can contribute to an 11% decrease in the number of people showing symptoms of depression.

A coverage rate of more than 30% can reduce the number of cases of stress and anxiety by 25%.

Many cities are taking the initiative to revegetate their city centers, such as Paris, which has already planted one-third of the 170,000 new trees planned by 2026.

Green street furniture can also contribute. In addition to the **very tangible benefits in urban ecosystems** (air filtration, fighting urban heat islands), they bring aesthetic to public space, making it more pleasant for citizens.

## 3 – MAKING HEALTHY AND VARIED DIETS ACCESSIBLE

### When Agriculture Meets Public Spaces...

While accessing safe drinking water and sanitation is at the heart of public health, nutrition is another important factor in the health of citizens.

The obesity rate in France mentioned previously (45% of adults are overweight and 15% of them suffer from obesity) is strongly correlated to the socio-economic level of the population. This demonstrates the difficulty of accessing a healthy, varied, and balanced diet.

Urban agriculture is presented as a way for citizens to reconnect with food and the way it is produced.

The objective is to encourage a healthier and more varied diet. Today, urban agriculture in public spaces is only just emerging. Numerous local initiatives are being developed in cities.

“The Incredible Edibles” movement seeks to promote participatory urban agriculture, by inviting citizens to plant wherever possible and to share the harvest.

© Les Incroyables Comestibles





## 4 - REDUCING POLLUTION

**Pollution** is defined as the **degradation of an ecosystem**. In cities, pollution appears in **many forms**. Two of them, however, are particularly harmful to the health of citizens: **air pollution and noise pollution**. In France, outdoor air pollution is responsible for 48,000 premature deaths per year, 9% of all deaths.

According to Nadya Herbelot, head of the air quality department at ADEME (Environmental and Energy Management Agency), local authorities **can activate effective levers to improve air quality**, particularly in the context of planning and development of urban spaces.



© Atmotrack

### Mapping air quality and improving urban planning

For cities, it is important to map the air quality of their territory, to make better decisions regarding the city's development.

To obtain such maps, there are many sensors, such as those of Atmotrack, which provide data on air quality, hyperlocal and in real-time.

These sensors can also be used to provide services to raise awareness and limit citizens' exposure to air pollution. This was tested in an experiment in Nantes, by proposing alternative routes for bicycles, according to the air quality of the streets, in real-time.

Since cars account for 50 to 60% of air pollution in large urban areas, it is essential to **promote and protect pedestrians and users of soft mobility**.

### Purifying the city's air

**Revegetating** urban spaces in the city **to capture emissions of fine particles** is important. Indeed, a tree can capture up to 100g in one year.

When the available soil does not allow planting trees on a large scale, other solutions exist.

For example, Aérophiltre is an urban furniture system developed by the company Aérophile, that purifies large volumes of outdoor air. Seven of these units have been installed in the athletes' village in Saint-Denis during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.



Aérophiltre furniture installed in the athletes' village in Saint-Denis for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games  
© Aérophile

### Reducing noise pollution

**Health** is also **strongly impacted** by **noise pollution**, as explained by the WHO.

In 2018, it represented **the second most damaging environmental factor in Europe** (sleep disturbances, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes...). Working **to reorganize cities and encourage soft mobility** can help reduce the nuisance generated by urban traffic.

The use of vegetation also helps to avoid noise reverberation.

Finally, new forms of materials are used to absorb sound waves, such as Metabsorber.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Improving citizens' health means first and foremost improving health in the city.**

**4 majors themes** enable to tackle this issue in countries similar to France, in to accessing safe drinking water and sanitation facilities:

- Encourage physical exercise
- Improve mental health
- Make healthy and varied diets accessible
- Reduce pollution

These major themes **are interconnected and produce co-benefits** for each of them. It is therefore essential to adopt a **systemic vision** of the subject of health in the city, **to maximize the impact** on the citizens' health **for each action carried out**.

**Actions, but also actors...**

**Cities** are a **key player in health**. But it should not be the only one to take this issue into account. Health-friendly urban planning requires the **collaboration** and the **involvement** of all **urban development actors**. Collaboration between the public and private sectors makes it possible to think of the city as a whole and to provide planning solutions that are conducive to its transformation, **to contribute to the improvement of citizens' health**.



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