



## Conference Proceeding: Designing for Healthy and Happy Cities

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**Abstract:** Many developments have occurred in the Middle East/North African region since the call for greater wellbeing was made by governments, institutions, and the private sector alike. This includes the building, development, architectural and urban planning space. AESG have taken a lead in this direction. Regularly promoting topics of discussion and interest in the field, the current panel formed the content for the morning's talk on the need to identify the physical and mental health impacts of the built environment on city occupants, exploring alternative urban planning solutions for improving city health and well-being. A short presentation from AESG opened the event and was followed by a panel discussion.

**Keywords:** architecture; developers; urban planning; happiness; health; building; municipality regulations; standards; Middle East/North Africa

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AESG is a specialist consulting, engineering and advisory firm with licensed offices in Dubai, London, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Their core departments include Sustainability, Environment and Waste, Fire and Life Safety, Facades, Commissioning and Acoustic consulting. Their multi-disciplinary team of architects, engineers, scientists, modellers and commissioning managers work alongside clients to deliver effective solutions. They have worked on the region's most prestigious projects and have consistently delivered best in class solutions to some of the industry's most complex technical challenges.

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**Phillipa Grant**, AESG, was the moderator for the event and directed questions to the panel covering a range of topics, addressing social isolation; safety and security; environmental quality; active urban environments; climate change; and big data. A common theme that arose throughout



the discussion was the need for client engagement and buy-in as well as a strong business case for healthy urban design. Phillipa noted that, while clients cannot always be persuaded to invest further in sustainable design features that promote health and wellness, designing for healthier environments should become a fundamental principle for all future design projects. Thus, the key approaches to designing healthier spaces are embedded within the basis of design and there is no additional perceived cost to the client resulting in value engineering of design solutions.

Another common theme that arose throughout the discussion was the need for regulations and standards to promote healthy design of urban spaces. While many designers, engineers and planners will choose to incorporate design solutions for health and well-being in order to achieve best practice, mandating the consideration of healthy spaces in addition to current sustainable design requirements will ensure greater cohesion between communities and align minimum standards on a city and country wide scale.

**Shaun Killa**, Design Partner of Killa Architectural Design, Dubai, has worked on the Dubai Opera House and Museum of the Future among many regional projects. He responded to the query about why more designs around the city of Dubai and GCC region did not include elements of happiness and health. He responded; “In fact, many projects are designed with happiness and wellbeing in mind right at the onset; however, these elements are often engineered out in the final stages of proposals due to budget concerns or the perception that these are nice to have, but not necessarily essential to do. Pocket parks, landscaped walkways, public art shaded places of rest are essential requirements in “happy cities” and for Dubai to further improve its happiness index, the RTA right-of-way areas as an example, should consider further shaded landscape, resting areas and public art in the existing ROW sidewalks in and around the city. These are not just nice to have; they do make a difference to people’s city experience.” He further considered that the car and the resulting designs for the car are responsible for undermining much of the sociability and connectivity of neighbourhoods; however, he added, so was the mobile phone. Residents use public spaces well and spend time in them, but they end up using what are meant to be social spaces as places to spend time with their phones instead.

**Katherine Bruce**, Sustainability Consultant from AESG contributed in the panel discussion. She discussed the importance of relationships as a factor in well-being and how urban design can be used as a tool to strengthen social connections. Increasing the number of interactions with neighbours allows residents to build friendships, which is linked to improvements in happiness. She discussed the need for designers to create spaces that extend beyond large public areas to facilitate micro-interactions in small spaces such as in building common areas, lifts and stairwells. Another key topic was the discussion around biophilia as fundamental to the well-being of urban residents. In Dubai, residents often need to drive several kilometers to large parks to be exposed to green environments. As such, there are opportunities to incorporate landscaping and pocket parks at the community level enabling residents to be exposed to nature on a daily basis. Katherine also discussed the walkability factor of cities and how large highways (such as Sheikh Zayed Road) cut off communities from each other. Pedestrian connections and bridges are important components of infrastructure which can help improve the health of residents by making walking or cycling an easier choice than driving.