Health Assessment Lens

Overview

The *Health Assessment Lens* is designed to inform designers, planners, and decision-makers of health conditions prior to beginning a project, plan process, or program. The purpose is to identify issues related to health and the built environment in order to inform a health-based approach to design, planning, and decision-making. It continues to be a resource for comprehensive evaluation through the development of a plan or project, and into implementation. This tool is organized around eight health categories.


Equity and Justice


Human Well-Being


Harmony with Nature


Education and Wellness


Economic Resiliency


Healthy Homes and Buildings


Healthy Community


Healthy Connections

Each section begins with a brief introduction of the health conditions and then contains a series of more detailed questions. The *Lens* is designed to provide the user with a way to easily identify gaps and positive aspects of health. It has application for scoping out a plan, project, or program. It can also be used to assess existing plans or programs and inform work to better integrate health into decisions and actions.

The *Lens* is designed as a comprehensive checklist for addressing various health aspects within communities and their built environments. In addition, space is provided for users who may want to track and list their sources of information for each question. The simple design of the *Lens* enables it to be used by category or in its entirety. Also, the questions may be considered points-of-departure for addressing a health issue. It is appropriate to tailor the *Lens* to add more detail or specificity around particular topics or issues addressed.

Optional scoring system: For those who may want to use the *Lens* for communicating cumulative health implications, a simple scoring system can be applied. A space is provided for applying a score of “0” or “1” for each question. Each category area then includes a reference for total possible score for that section. There are 62 primary questions in the Tool.

Weighting responses: As designed, the *Lens* does not weigh the importance of one category or issue over another; however, users may want to adapt the scoring system to place emphasis on certain points or factors.

CATEGORY I. EQUITY AND JUSTICE (Total Possible Score: 6)

Achieving social equity and environmental justice are critical to creating healthy places for all people. Social equity refers to fairness and justice for all people, including disadvantaged populations. It entails the assurance of a safe and healthy environment, along with access to goods and services. Environmental justice refers to responding to damage that has been done in disadvantaged communities, and ensuring that new developments result in tangible benefits for these communities.

It is important to understand an area's past and current conditions to accurately address equity and justice. Architects, designers, and planners should know about environmental, social, and economic damage in areas in which they are working. Any new project, plan, or program should provide opportunities to repair damage and introduce new benefits into these communities.

a. Is there minimal or no damage (social, environmental, or other) in the area as a result of past activities or projects (such as nuisances, incompatible land uses, or sources of pollution)? _____

Source: _____

b. Are members of the community who are most vulnerable to negative health impacts engaged in project planning and decision-making? _____

Source: _____

c. Are there opportunities to repair past damage? _____

Source: _____

d. Are there opportunities to introduce new benefits to the area? _____

Source: _____

e. Are there initiatives that aim to mitigate any negative impacts of past and future decisions? _____

Source: _____

f. Are there local social justice advocate groups in the area? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY II. HUMAN WELL-BEING (Total Possible Score: 6)

Environmental psychology tells us that healthy living is not simply a result of the presence of resources and absence of threats. Human well-being must be approached holistically.

Architects, designers, and planners should be informed about existing health conditions in the area in which they are working, as well as existing health policies or provisions that could be applied to their work. Physical, mental, and social wellness should be factored into any project from the outset.

a. Is there a health policy framework in place to guide design, planning, and decision-making? _____

Source: _____

If yes, is it comprehensive in addressing all topic and issue areas related to health and built environment? _____

Source: _____

b. Is there information on the existing health conditions of populations in the area, both physical and mental, including stress? _____

Source: _____

c. Is there access to services for the community, including facilities and programs for health and wellness? _____

Source: _____

d. Is there consistent access to local healthy and affordable food? _____

Source: _____

e. Are there opportunities, or are they missing, for physical activity, such as walking and biking, or access to recreation? _____

Source: _____

Are these opportunities being utilized by residents? _____

Source: _____

f. Is there information on safety, crime, and/or violence in the area (including injuries and accidents? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY III. HARMONY WITH NATURE (Total Possible Score: 16)

Architects, designers, and planners should know about the condition of the natural environment in which they are working, including contaminated soils, water pollution, and air toxins. Projects, plans, and programs should contribute to restoring damaged ecosystems to a more functional state.

a. Is there information on the existing environmental conditions of the overall ecosystem of the area, including land, water, air, climate, flora, and fauna? _____

Source: _____

b. Is an ecosystem approach in place for designing, planning, and decision-making? _____

Source: _____

c. Is there, or has there been, an effort to connect the built environment with the surrounding natural environment, including addressing vulnerable ecosystems? _____

Source: _____

d. Is there information on soil quality and the conditions of land in the area? _____

Source: _____

e. Are superfund sites absent from the area? _____

Source: _____

If no, are there plans to remediate sites and/or mitigate soil toxins? _____

Source: _____

f. Are there resource lands or critical areas, including environmentally sensitive zones, in the area? _____

Source: _____

If yes, are there existing standards or regulations in place for resource lands or critical areas? _____

Source: _____

g. Are there unique landscapes in the area? _____

Source: _____

h. Are watersheds in a healthy, functional state for aquatic life and human health? _____

Source: _____

i. Are there adequate facilities for clean water delivery? _____

Source: _____

j. Are there adequate facilities for water treatment and discharge? _____

Source: _____

k. Is there information on air quality in the area? _____

Source: _____

If substandard, are there efforts in place to bring air quality to levels that meet or are better than local, state, and federal standards? _____

Source: _____

l. Is there information on climate conditions in the area, including heat island conditions, tree canopy, and more? _____

Source: _____

m. Are there efforts in place to mitigate and reduce human impacts on the climate? _____

Source: _____

n. Are there efforts in place to adapt to changing climate conditions? _____

Source: _____

o. Is noise at or better than standards for human health? _____

Source: _____

p. Are invasive species absent from the area? _____

Source: _____

If no, are there efforts to protect and restore vegetation and habitat areas for native species? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY IV. EDUCATION AND WELLNESS (Total Possible Score: 4)

Education impacts the health and wellness of all people. This includes physical accessibility to educational facilities, as well as opportunities for residents to have the means and opportunities for education.

Architects, designers, and planners should be familiar with schooling and education opportunities in the area in which they are working. They should be mindful of cultural conditions, as cultural knowledge can trump formal education in certain places and situations.

a. Is there information on the educational conditions and accessibility in the area? _____

Source: _____

b. Are there a variety of educational opportunities available, including K-12 schools, higher education, and training programs? _____

Source: _____

c. Are there educational opportunities to learn about health? _____

Source: _____

d. Are there mechanisms for news and information-sharing in the area? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY V. ECONOMIC RESILIENCY (Total Possible Score: 5)

Economics play a role in human health. The built environment can support the creation of businesses and encourage economic opportunities, which can provide health benefits.

Architects, designers, and planners should know the economic and employment conditions in the area in which they are working. Projects, plans, and programs can bridge economic disparities and enhance opportunities for residents.

a. Is there information on the economic and employment conditions in the area, including information on existing businesses and job opportunities? _____

Source: _____

b. Is there a full range of businesses and job opportunities in the area? _____

Source: _____

c. Are there locally owned businesses in the area? _____

Source: _____

d. Is there an absence of vacant or underutilized lots? _____

Source: _____

e. Is there information on current property values and home values in the area? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY VI. HEALTHY HOMES AND BUILDINGS (Total Possible Score: 7)

Sound housing is essential to a person's ability to deal with every aspect of his or her life. Architects, designers and planners should assess existing conditions for siting and orienting structures to maximize health benefits. Building materials should be appropriate for the climate and context and meet health standards to prevent exposure to toxins. Home design should factor in universal design principles to ensure maximum accessibility and freedom from hazards.

a. Is there information on the current condition of the housing stock in the area, including information on whether homes are in a state of good repair? _____

Source: _____

b. Are individuals and families able to retain their existing homes and not experience displacement? _____

Source: _____

If no, are there programs and opportunities to help keep residents in place? _____

c. Is housing available for all sectors of the population (i.e., people of all ages, income levels, mobility levels, etc.)? _____

Source: _____

d. Are there mechanisms in place for affordable housing? _____

Source: _____

e. Do building materials address and promote health and sustainability? _____

Source: _____

f. Are there efforts for siting and orienting buildings to benefit the health of occupants? (For example: maximum access to light and fresh air, minimum exposure to noise and pollution, safe from health hazards such as high-intensity power lines) _____

Source: _____

g. Are health and safety addressed in the design and planning of housing? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY VII. HEALTHY COMMUNITY (Total Possible Score: 8)

A person's health can be influenced by the community in which he or she lives. Complete communities are those that meet the needs of all types of residents, regardless of factors such as age, income level, and cultural beliefs. A health community also offers protection from environmental hazards.

Architects, designers, and planners should develop projects, plans, and programs that contribute to the creation of complete communities. In addition, projects, plans, and programs should intentionally minimize exposure to hazards and potential disasters, such as steep slopes, flooding, and more.

a. Is there information on the existing community character of the area? _____

Source: _____

b. Is there information on cultural aspects and conditions in the area? _____

Source: _____

c. Is there a mix of uses in the area? _____

Source: _____

d. Are there civic spaces and public places in the area? _____

Source: _____

e. Are there "champions for health" in the area? _____

Source: _____

f. Is the area free from exposure to natural or environmental hazards, such as flooding, unstable soils, or landslides? _____

Source: _____

If no, is there a resiliency and mitigation plan? _____

Source: _____

g. Are there strategies in place for natural or human-caused disasters? _____

Source: _____

h. Are there adequate resources to respond to disasters? _____

Source: _____

CATEGORY VIII. HEALTHY CONNECTIONS (Total Possible Score: 10)

Mobility and accessibility can impact the physical and mental well-being of people in the area. Architects, designers, and planners should advance state-of-the-art solutions for healthy infrastructure and services. Attention should be given to maximize easy connections to sidewalks and bicycling facilities, as well as to transit stops and stations.

a. Is there information on the existing conditions of infrastructure in the area (i.e., utilities, stormwater systems, streets, alleys, sidewalks, and bikeways)? _____

Source: _____

b. Do utilities and infrastructure follow green principles? _____

Source: _____

c. Are low-impact development practices employed? _____

Source: _____

d. Is there information on the transportation use patterns of populations in the area? _____

Source: _____

e. Is the mobility and accessibility system complete? (For instance, there are no "incomplete streets," transit service deficiencies, or gaps in "first and last mile" connections to transit) _____

Source: _____

f. Are there opportunities to complete sidewalk and bikeway connections? _____

Source: _____

g. Are there opportunities to introduce complete streets and living streets? _____

Source: _____

h. Is there a parking management plan in the area? _____

Source: _____

i. Are there adequate connections to adjacent communities? _____

Source: _____

j. Is there information on the current conditions of social networks (e.g., family networks) for the populations in the area? _____

Source: _____

Using the scoring system

For users who opt to apply a scoring system, there are 62 primary questions in the Tool.

NOTES:

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