

Beautiful urban architecture boosts health as much as green spaces

A stroll around St Paul's Cathedral could be just as beneficial to health as a walk in the countryside, say researchers at the University of Warwick



St Paul's Cathedral could be as beneficial to health as a walk in the woods

By Sarah Knapton, Science Editor

6:00AM GMT 28 Dec 2015

A brisk walk in the countryside or a stroll along the beach is a well-known mood booster and health experts have long recommended getting out of the city improve physical and mental wellbeing.

But a new study suggests that beautiful urban architecture, the sweep of docklands, or a gritty suburban river bank can have just as much impact on health and happiness levels.

Researchers at the University of Warwick say it is 'scenery' not just 'greenery' which is important when determining what makes a positive environment.

"The beauty of our everyday environment might have more practical importance than was previously believed"

Chanuki Seresinhe, Warwick Business School

So for Londoners gazing up at St Paul's Cathedral, viewing the cityscape of Canary Wharf, or enjoying the majestic sight of HMS Belfast berthed on The Thames, are just as beneficial as getting out into the wilds of Britain.

To find out what kind of landscapes made people feel healthier, academics asked people to rate the 'scenicness'

of more than 212,000 pictures of Britain.

They then compared those 1.5 million ratings to how residents in those areas felt about their health, as reported in the 2011 Census.

Crucially, the researchers found that areas rated as most scenic and uplifting were often not green areas.

The findings imply that it is the overall cohesion of architecture and design which boosts people's health and happiness, not just the number of parks and trees.



Gazing at HMS Belfast could be good for health

“This is a fascinating finding,” said Chanuki Seresinhe, a PhD student in the Data Science Lab at Warwick Business School.

“Just because a place is green does not compel us to feel better on its own. It seems to be that the beauty of the environment, as measured by scenicness, is of crucial importance.

“Our results suggest that the beauty of our everyday environment might have more practical importance than was previously believed.

“In order to ensure the wellbeing of local inhabitants urban planners and policymakers might find it valuable to consider the aesthetics of the environment when embarking upon large projects to build new parks, housing developments or highways. Our findings imply that simply introducing greenery, without considering the beauty of the resulting environment, might not be enough.”

Previous research has found living in green areas makes people live longer and feel happier. Leafy streets also encourage a lower crime rate and a more "civilised" atmosphere. The University of Illinois found that greenery was "essential to our physical, psychological and social well-being".

Research in Japan also found that older people lived for longer when their homes were within walking distance of a park or other green space

But the British team, found that the photographs rated the most scenic did not contain the highest proportion of the colour green. Instead, very scenic photos also tend to contain large proportions of grey, brown and blue.



JP Morgan bought the Riverside South site for £237m and planned a 1.9m sq ft two-tower development costing £1.5bn Photo: Alamy

“We know that some of the areas rated as very scenic, such as the Lake District, are also very green,” said Dr Suzy Moat, Associate Professor of Behavioural Science and co-director of Warwick Business School’s Data Science Lab.

“For this reason, we wanted to make sure that the relationship we were seeing between scenicness and health wasn’t simply reflecting beneficial effects of green spaces.

“Our analysis confirmed that people do report their health to be better in areas with more green land cover. Importantly, however, we find that across urban, suburban and rural areas, we can better explain differences in how healthy people report themselves to be if we also consider how scenic the area they live in is.

“Until recently, it would have been difficult to investigate the relationship between our health and the beauty of the environment we live in, due to the cost of running a survey to gather such large amounts of data on how scenic people considered different parts of the country to be.

“The internet offers a new solution to this problem, because it allows us to build games and services which provide incentives for citizens to submit these sorts of ratings.”

The team said the research showed how big data could be used to make important observations

about the health of the population, which might not be initially obvious.

Dr Tobias Preis, Associate Professor of Behavioural Science and Finance Science and co-director of Warwick Business School's Data Science Lab, said, "Our previous work has focused on analysing data from sources such as Google, Wikipedia, and Flickr to predict and measure human behaviour in the real world. These findings provide another example of how data from the internet can be used to measure behaviour, which previous approaches struggled to capture.

"The huge volumes of data we are now generating on an everyday basis are opening up intriguing new possibilities to quantify and test intuitions about the social world around us."

The study was published in the journal Scientific Reports.



How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2016