

Public Health Gets a Place at the Design Table

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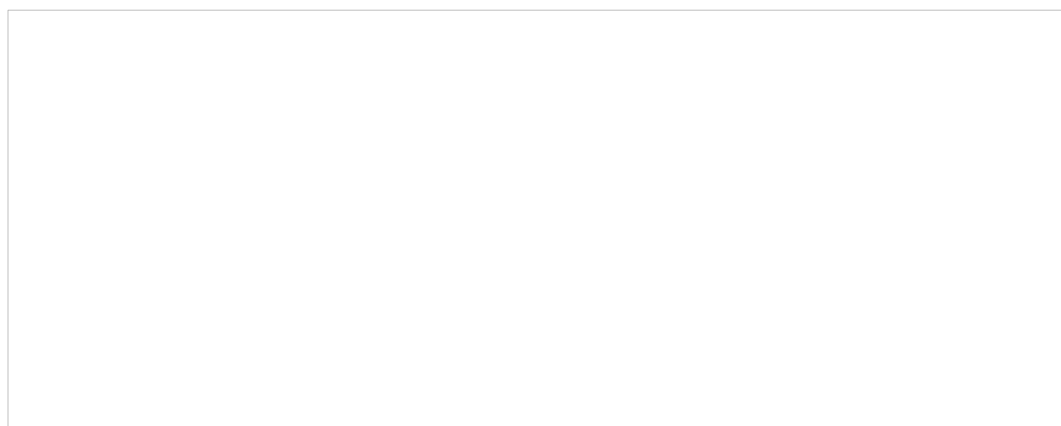


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Imagine a world in which buildings and communities clearly and definitively help to prevent some of our most widespread illnesses, improve our mental health, and strengthen our overall wellbeing. We are now one step closer to this place after this week's Summit on Green Buildings & Human Health, hosted by the US Green Building Council. If there's one thing that I took away, it's the enormous potential of public health professionals joining forces with the green building community to significantly improve human health and wellbeing. We've always cared about the basics, of course, like low emitting indoor materials and letting people control their own environments, but this movement can bring our work to a whole new level.

The event was chaired by [Dr. Howard Frumkin](#), head of the [School of Public Health at the University of Washington](#), USGBC Board member, and longtime supporter of the [links between green building and human health](#). Having attended dozens of USGBC events over many years, I am used to seeing the "usual suspects" from the AEC community – so I was shocked to discover that although I knew about half the attendees personally or by name, the other half were complete strangers, and architects made up only about 10% of the total. At HOK we've had a longstanding relationship with Janine Benyus and [Biomimicry 3.8](#), with a focus on bringing biologists to the design table. Based on what I saw this week I definitely hope that we can extend the table to make room for the public health expert.

Not only can we better design to improve human health, but we might also be able to help health practitioners improve the health of their patients. [Rick Fedrizzi](#) opened the event with a telling anecdote that has often been told by the late [Ole Fanger](#), an indoor air quality specialist: the first thing that Americans do when they find out that they're expecting is paint the baby's room and add new carpet, a [cushy chair](#), and plastic toys (all of which contain [toxic chemicals](#)). The otherwise loving parents have successfully created a gas chamber for their tiny infant. Now step back and picture a world in which OB/GYNs are trained to explain healthy building practices to expecting mothers. Something tells me that our nurseries might look (and smell!) a little different – and that baby would likely have a higher IQ and lower risk for cancer, asthma, and other diseases.

There's clearly a fundamental need for our two professions to collaborate more. One of the public health participants casually spouted off the top causes of death and illness, how buildings/cities might positively and negatively impact each, and suggested a matrix to spell out those relationships. What a great tool this could be in communicating with design teams and clients! In the same conversation, another public health expert displayed shock and delight to learn of a "magic" gizmo that automatically increased air flow when more people were in the room – a [standard device](#) in most green buildings. We quickly realized that something obvious to the public health world is less so in green building, and vice versa, and that the sum of our work together would be greater than each of our individual parts.

I'm thrilled to witness this issue rapidly develop into a new critical phase in the evolution of sustainability, and can't wait to see where it brings us! Kudos to USGBC and their partners for supporting this initiative.

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