The Guru Next Door

The truly health-obsessed don't just want to eat right and get some exercise. They want to live in a new kind of "wellness community." *by Sandra Ballentine. Illustrations by Andria Mongia*

FACED WITH EVER more transient wellness trends (diets, detoxes, workouts, healers, supplements, superfoods, spas, and sleep apps—oh my!), it's easy to experience wellness fatigue, or to feel like you're being wellness-washed. But as growing populations around the world compete for resources and struggle with real issues like sickness and soaring medical costs, there's one health-related trend that might stick around—and it literally hits you where you live.

"Wellness-lifestyle real estate" may not sound sexy, but it's an increasingly hot topic among architects, developers, public health advocates, and governments. Despite the moniker, it doesn't mean monster mansions overlooking the ninth hole or marble-clad condos with "luxury spa amenities," although sports and spas definitely factor in. Instead, buildings and communities are being purpose-built or renovated expressly with human health and happiness in mind.

Recent studies indicate that genetics may account for just 10 to 15 percent of our health outcomes, while lifestyle and environmental factors can account for the rest. Health-conscious home buyers and renters, especially millennials, are increasingly moving into walkable communities with access to green space, farmers' markets, clean food and air, spaces for socializing and coworking, and myriad indoor and outdoor fitness options. "If the culture of a place is healthier, you will be healthier, period," says Katherine Johnston, a senior research fellow at the Global Wellness Institute in Miami, who, along with fellow researcher Ophelia Yeung, just completed a five-year study of the nascent phenomenon.

Community is the linchpin of the best wellness developments, according to Johnston and Yeung. Despite a global trend toward urbanization, says Yeung, "people want to feel like they

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live in a village and be part of a community." Community is more than a bunch of pretty houses clustered into a leafy cul-de-sac, however. "It's intangible. You can only feel it," she says. But it's good for your mental, emotional, and social wellness—not to mention security: You feel safe, like your neighbors have your back. And people are willing to pay a premium for it.

"Based on our observations, the trend of wellness real estate is coming like a tsunami," says Yeung. It could be a profitable wave. Consumers around the world already spend $3.7 trillion (or 5 percent of global GDP in 2015) on various forms of wellness, from yoga, meditation apps, spin classes, and sleep monitors to juicers, vitamins, organic food, athletic wear, and more. Since wellness real estate is valued globally at around $134 billion, there's clearly room for growth.

WHEN HOW *NOT* to design wellness communities is discussed, the typical American suburb is usually offered up as Exhibit A. The kind of car-centric planning that became popular in the 1950s and '60s effectively separates people's homes from jobs, shops, and schools, forcing them to drive everywhere. Attached garages with automatic door openers serve as moats, so it's not unusual for next-door neighbors to be complete strangers. And more often than not, there are no sidewalks and scant public space in which to take in fresh air, exercise, and engage with other people. Several studies show that superficial encounters are vital to everyday mental health. And they're not referring to Tinder. A lack of social engagement and eroded social trust can lead to alienation and loneliness.

"The idea of a smart house in a dumb neighborhood makes no sense at all," says James Ehrlich, a senior technologist and entrepreneur in residence at Stanford University. And we can't all live in the cities. Instead, says Ehrlich, we need to be creating whole neighborhoods in rural and peri-urban areas that are not only sustainable but also regenerative. Regenerative communities produce their own healthy food and renewable energy, recycle their own water, and practice sophisticated waste-to-resource management that turns waste into tangible assets. "The future—and new measure of wealth—will be about resiliency and self-reliance," says Ehrlich. To this end, the New York native is spearheading the development of ReGen Villages, an innovative, off-the-grid residential concept with a pilot community set to break ground next spring in Almere, Netherlands, about 25 minutes east of Amsterdam.

In Almere, 203 energy-positive homes will be constructed of "healthy" materials, including wood and glass, and will provide easy access to pedestrian walkways, bike trails, and water for canoeing and kayaking, as well as yoga studios. A Village Operating System will gather data that houses will use to learn residents' habits, providing them with things like gradual amber lighting in the morning and intuitive ambient floor heating. Autonomous vehicles will eliminate the need for garages and driveways, with traditional cars kept on the outskirts of the development. ReGen's master plan, replete with central plazas, community centers, and gardens and orchards, is meant to encourage community involvement across generational divides, which studies show improves long-term health outcomes. "The idea is that you will see someone with a walker and maybe someone with a stroller having a wonderful conversation," says Ehrlich. "Just one of the very simple, very pure, and very beautiful concepts that somehow we've lost along the way."

"It's the way we should be living," agrees Steve Nygren, a pioneering cofounder in 2004 of Serenbe, a highly successful, biophilic-designed wellness community in Chattahoochee Hills, near Atlanta. "We've gotten so far away from simple, basic things, from architecture to how we heat and cool our homes to what we plant outside them," says Nygren. Set amid 1,200 acres of preserved forests and meadows, with miles of walking, biking, and riding trails and a sizable organic farm, Serenbe was a leader in what's known as the "agrihood" movement, or housing that connects to a working farm. The community is made up of three picturesque hamlets, with two more in the works. The first two, Selbourne and Grange, have Arts and Agriculture as their respective themes, while the newest one, Mado, centers around Health and Wellness and includes a resort destination spa, a community pool, a fitness center, medicinal gardens, and an integrative health and wellness center.

More about self-care than about saving the planet or pushing the tech envelope, Amrit Ocean Resort and Residences, just north of Palm Beach, boasts a site plan and amenities inspired by what developer Dilip Barot calls the five pillars of wellness: nutrition, fitness, mindfulness, sleep, and relaxation. Located on 300 linear feet of beachfront on Singer Island, the two towers (one is named P, for Peace, the other H, for Happiness) are set to open toward the end of 2019. Amrit will have a 100,000-square-foot indoor-outdoor spa and wellness program, as well as a meditation garden, a fitness center, yoga studios, a hydrotherapy suite, and a "wellness zone" with holistic health specialists. Apartment options include posture-supportive heat-reflexology floors, automatic aromatherapy diffusers, circadian lighting, and sound blocking. In what could be a category first, each resident will be assigned a wellness coach, who will devise a "health road map," and a personal wellness assistant, who will help the resident follow it.

Perhaps the most civic-minded wellness-led initiative under way in the U.S. is Destination Medical Center, an ambitious 20-year plan to reinvigorate the entire downtown of Rochester,

Minnesota. A public/private partnership between the Mayo Clinic, which employs roughly 34,000 of the city's 111,000 residents, and state, county, city, and private investors, DMC will feature high-tech, health-enhancing apartments, offices, and hotels and a vibrant, active community for patients, visitors, and residents. "We want to be able to attract the best and the brightest in the way of talent," says Lisa Clarke, executive director of Destination Medical Center Economic Development Agency. "Much of that talent is looking for healthy downtown living, meaning we have to have grocery stores near where they live, plenty of green space, and a walkable and bikeable environment."

Joanna Frank, president and CEO of the nonprofit Center for Active Design (CfAD) in New York, which advances healthy design and development practices, echoes Clarke's assessment. "Although we are still in the early-adopter stage, we've seen a shift in the market, with 78 percent of millennials in the workforce valuing the design and location of their workplace as much as any financial benefit," she says. "That isn't necessarily known as a statistic by businesses, but they're feeling it."

As with any business, emerging players in wellness real estate are looking for profit metrics, transparency, and universal standards to apply to individual projects and portfolios. To this end, CfAD oversees Fitwel, a sophisticated, evidence-based certification system intended to measure the impact that design and architecture have on health and well-being. It is quickly becoming a new standard for the fledgling industry.

The first Fitwel-certified apartment building in the world, the Pearl is a stylish new rental property in Silver Spring, Maryland (steps away from verdant Rock Creek Park and a 25-minute Metro ride from the White House). It's also the centerpiece of a $750 million reimagining of the Blairs, a mixed-use development built in 1959. "When we envisioned this whole thing, we didn't know it was called wellness," says Jeffrey Abramson of Rockville, Maryland–based Tower Companies, which is overseeing the project. "I was only doing what I would want for myself." Abramson likens the Blairs to an oasis in a very urban environment. "When we designed it, we tried to protect that experience," he says. The airy, light-filled Pearl is surrounded by tons of green space and green views; has design elements that encourage stair use, walking, and biking; and comes with a two-story gym with free fitness classes, an entertainment kitchen with healthy-cooking demonstrations, and a 5,000-square-foot urban farm that provides fresh produce for residents. Smokers need not apply—the Blairs is a tobacco-free community.

Fitwel isn't the only guideline. Two closely watched new wellness communities—Grow, on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle, and Zibi, in Ottawa—follow the One Planet Living principles: a ten-point "common sense" sustainability framework for developers and governments that was devised by Pooran Desai, a cofounder of Bioregional, a London-based development firm and sustainability pioneer.

In the One Planet Living model, sustainability and well-being are inextricably linked. "Clean air, water, earth, and access to nature are integral to good health," says Jeff Westeinde, president of Zibi. "So is social interaction and knowing as many of your neighbors' names as possible." (You can Google his TED Talk on the subject.) Like other One Planet Living communities, Zibi and Grow aim to be zero waste and zero carbon and are designed so residents can walk, bike, or take mass transit for all of their needs. They also feature shared amenities and spaces that facilitate chance and planned encounters with neighbors and colleagues. Zibi even has a *woonerf,* or "living street," where pedestrians and bicyclists take precedence over cars and trucks. "It's pretty clear that the way we've been designing our cities and our neighborhoods has created some pretty severe health impacts, contributing to obesity, diabetes, depression, and lung disorders," says Marja Williams, development manager of Grow. "We're just beginning to look at how we can do it differently. If you make it comfortable and easy for people to walk to schools, shops, and transit, they will."