

Collaborating to Create Healthier and Safer Cities



Winston Churchill once said: "We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us." Given that high level of impact, buildings and cities need to be planned and developed in ways that contribute not just physical value, but social value too. Inclusion, safety and health all can be advanced through the built environment, work that has become all the more urgent given the rapid growth of many cities.



"Incorporating social goals into city building goes back decades in cities around the world," says Lena H  k, senior vice president of sustainability at Skanska Group. "In recent years, such



efforts have become more structured and integrated, and cities are prioritizing social factors more to support the achievement of larger sustainability goals. Designing for social impact is important [to Skanska's sustainability work](#) and to how we create long-term value for customers, communities and our business."

Around the world, municipalities are increasingly requiring that new areas be designed with social considerations. Stockholm City, for instance, wants all city planning projects to create social value. Such efforts support the World Health Organization's call to in one generation [close the gap](#) in the quality of people's mental and physical health between those in different areas and groups. Feeling safe and included, and being able to access housing, nature

and transportation, are important considerations.

Assessments of the social impacts of planned development projects are "  powerful ways of lifting projects to achieve greater benefits for local society," says Emma F  rje Jones, development manager in social sustainability with Skanska Sweden.

Emma F  rje Jones, development manager in social sustainability with Skanska Sweden, works daily to help integrate remedies for social challenges into plans for building projects. A former city planner, she's involved with creating public spaces where people of all ages and genders feel welcome and secure. Working with city officials, local residents and Skanska colleagues, her work can involve advocating for adjusting the placement of building windows so those going home late at night can feel seen; mixing homes with schools, shops and sports facilities to create new opportunities; and narrowing roads around schools to lower traffic speeds.

Here, Emma reflects on creating city districts that are better for people.

What makes a successful urban place?

"I like places where you see different types of people, including older people, people my own age and women. Diversity is important for public spaces.

“Part of that comes from people having a reason to come to a square or other public space. Maybe they come because the city has blocked traffic and set up sun chairs for people to relax and socialize. Or maybe there are performance spaces and historical markers. It’s exciting to see many cities focusing on creating great public spaces.”

How do public spaces help cities?

“They’re meeting places, where people see people other than those they see in their local neighborhood. A meeting place can be a school, a square, a bus – the forum can be anything. People tend to have prejudices against the unfamiliar, even perhaps being afraid of those they don’t know. That we meet – we don’t even have to speak to each other – is one step in taking down biases.”

□ Speaking with a nearby school was important to designing this temporary recreation area for children in Stockholm.

How are municipalities connecting social issues with buildings?

“Social value analysis – also called social impact assessment, among other terms – is one approach to considering social impacts when planning urban environments. So is CityLab, a broad Swedish framework that links to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

“Last year I became certified in working with CityLab, which helps add value to projects of all sizes. Social impact assessments require conversations with diverse groups of people, engagement with a broad range of stakeholders and scrutiny of designs. They are powerful ways of lifting projects to achieve greater benefits for local society. Often social values are seen by many as being “softer,” more based on people’s opinions. That makes it important to have systematic approaches like these for assessing impacts.

“Based on those frameworks, Skanska Sweden developed our own streamlined social impact assessment tool. Also, we set a target for our development projects to use social impact tools to help drive the tools’ use across our business. This is helping Skanska Sweden address and integrate social considerations of importance to municipalities into our Project Development activities from planning and design. Our aim is to be customers’ preferred partner for developing areas into more healthy, cohesive and safer cities for all.

“The business case for this work is getting stronger as social sustainability is increasingly a factor when municipalities seek partners for developing land. Skanska needs to continue demonstrating that we are committed to our projects contributing long-term benefits that further municipal goals for a better society. This way we futureproof our project developments.”

□ Optimizing the interior design of UK schools helped reduce cases of bullying while students’ grades improved.

What value comes from local perspectives?

“We believe in participation and dialogue with residents and others near our projects to really understand challenges and solutions from a local perspective. This is where the work to create social value really begins. Skanska also looks at whether the municipality has set goals for social sustainability that the project should strive for.

“In Stockholm, Skanska recently held a workshop together with ninth-graders at Hjulstaskolan to get tips and ideas about how a square would be designed to feel safe. We received many good suggestions, including about lighting, trees, benches and stores. At another Stockholm location, to create a temporary recreation area for children we spoke with the nearby school to develop the design. The just opened area includes a basketball court, a pink floorball rink and a skate park – with more to come!

“Technology can also be useful to reach different local target groups and get their input. In Gothenburg, for instance, Skanska used a digital tool to enable residents to choose activities for a temporary recreation space during construction in the area.

“There’s real democratic value in enabling local residents to participate in the development of their area. It creates trust in the developers and the local knowledge enhances the value of the urban planning.”

Can the built environment improve safety?

“There’s a strong connection there. For instance, if you’re waiting for the bus, from where you’re standing you want to have an overview of what’s happening around you. You want to know that no one can come up from behind and to have lighting that eliminates dark places. Even in Sweden, known as a relatively safe country, 36 percent of women feel unsafe when walking outside when it’s dark. That’s compared to 19 percent of men, [according to a 2018 study](#) by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. Also, a recent survey by Skanska Sweden found that safety is the top issue for young people in choosing a neighborhood in which to live.

“In another example, Skanska optimized the interior design of schools in Bristol, UK, to enhance passive supervision of students. This included improving lines of sight for greater visibility throughout the school. Following such steps and upon completion of the project, reported cases of bullying fell and students’ grades improved. And in Oslo, Norway, Skanska created a pedestrian bridge to provide a new connection between a neighborhood with a school and a riverfront park. Having many more people passing through the park improves safety for everyone.

“Improved feelings of safety make an area more attractive for people to be, which creates a greater willingness for public and

private investment. This lays the foundation for the area's long-term positive development."

□ **During this workshop, ninth-graders provided valuable tips and ideas for how a Stockholm square could be designed to feel safer.**

What's the purpose of safety walks?

"The construction phase of projects can take years, so during that time it's important that we are a good neighbor. To help with that, last year in Sweden Skanska began to undertake structured walks around our construction sites with the purpose of examining how members of the public passing by likely perceive security and safety. While project sites can help improve safety during the day when they are operating, during evenings and nights when the workplaces are deserted people can feel insecure walking past long stretches of fencing along site perimeters.

"Often taking place at dusk for maximum effectiveness, these safety walks are based on a tool for increasing security through physical design that was developed by Skanska and the Safer Sweden Foundation. More and more, our customers and local government staff members join too. And importantly, I've seen that the walks help men understand concerns women can have about safety. It's super that we are helping each other broaden our perspectives of the world."

"I go to work every day believing that I make a difference. Although I need to be patient, because creating new city areas takes time."

This article was written and published by Skanska, one of the world's leading project development and construction groups. The original version can be found [here](#).

<https://www.gim-international.com/content/article/collaborating-to-create-healthier-and-safer-cities>
