

# Quebec: for a healthy urban environment

## Sophie Paquin,

Urban Planner, Professor,  
Department of Urban and Tourism  
Studies, University of Quebec, Quebec.

Since the end of the 2000s, public health agencies in Quebec have adopted what is known as the “healthy environments” approach, as defined by the Ottawa Charter of the World Health Organization in 1986. Quebec public health has prioritized strategies to establish public policies that facilitate healthy choices and discourage unhealthy ones, to create healthy living environments, and to strengthen collective action and participation from civil society.

In 2011, the Ministry of Health and Social Services of Quebec (MSSS) published its strategic vision on “environments conducive to healthy eating, a physically active lifestyle and the prevention of weight-related problems” [1]. This analytical framework was developed in collaboration with the non-governmental organization Québec en Forme and the National Public Health Institute of Quebec (INSPQ). The document specifies the physical, economic, social and political dimensions of living environments conducive to healthy lifestyles.

## Diversified strategies for healthy environments

Healthy environment strategies have the potential to reach the whole population and to mobilize a variety of public institutions and civil society organizations. The theory of healthy environments constitutes a driving force for the integration of health promotion in various local projects or regional approaches, as well as in the creation of intersectoral networks. The Government, its regional

public health agencies and Québec en Forme have devoted significant resources to developing actions through a wide array of channels (municipalities; schools; associations with active interests in the environment, nutrition, physical activity and active transportation, etc.). Consequently, several fundamental strategies have taken root since the end of the 2000s. These include the creation of training programmes on all aspects of healthy environments, the constitution of 19 national or regional consultation platforms as well as 162 local groups [2], the financing of numerous interventions carried out by associations, and the evaluation of demonstration projects. Networks have formed around environments favourable to an active lifestyle and healthy eating, made up of public, professional, associative or territorial organizations that are less familiar with collaborating on planned complementary actions. The result is a dynamic ecosystem of health promotion in Quebec.

## A public health vision that mobilizes territorial organizations

The healthy environments approach focuses on how the conditions of the built environment can facilitate healthy choices. The “Taking care of our world” approach [3] was deployed in order to encourage cities to implement actions that have a direct influence on the health of the population. Health is now part of the municipal agenda because the healthy environments concept has expanded into a more general notion of health, with conferences and training programmes offered to staff and elected officials in several cities across Quebec. Incorporating new knowledge into the development of

## THE KEY POINTS

▶ Quebec has launched a strategy for developing “healthy lifestyle environments”. A framework document sets out practical measures in a number of areas: environment, nutrition, physical activity, soft mobility, etc. Sophie Paquin emphasizes that cities possess the means to create healthy environments, but that they cannot act without the political will of elected officials or the support of civil society concerning matters that transform their living environment. Scientific perspective from Quebec.

urban planning measures is facilitated through documentation produced by the Public Health Expertise and Reference Centre [4] and the multimedia platform 100° [5], which features multiple examples of healthy urban planning projects.

The associations that have carried out projects financed by the Québec en Forme fund have also encouraged territorial organizations to transform the built environment, for example by giving greater importance to active transportation infrastructures and agricultural projects. The Green Neighbourhoods network managed by the urban ecology centre of Montréal (CEUM) [6] provides an eloquent example of concerted action achieved through the local authorities working in consultation with citizens. This approach helped to identify the most functional and user-friendly routes for soft modes of transport, to recognize mobility barriers and to develop safer solutions for vulnerable users at intersections: all according to the point of view of the users.

Feature  
Urban planning dedicated to health

## Public policy instruments for healthy urban planning

Cities have several means of creating environments favourable to a physically active lifestyle and healthy eating [7]. The zoning regulations adopted by Gatineau and Brossard define quotas for the number of fast food (junk food) restaurants implanted around schools, allowing the cities to create “school and health” zones [8]. Cities can adopt sustainable mobility policies (see the article “Quebec: Sherbrooke assesses the impact of city-centre revitalization on health inequalities”), healthy food access policies like in the city of Rimouski [9], or a master plan for sports and urban outdoor facilities, like that in the city of Montreal [10]. Participatory budgeting within local authorities often provides funding for health-promoting projects [11]. These public policy instruments contain the principles, planning criteria and measures to create and consolidate healthy urban environments [12]. Cities can also support citizens’ initiatives. The “Promenade des Saveurs” in the Centre-Sud district of Montreal, known as the longest “all-edible” street in Canada, is a project initiated by an association of local residents that includes several developments for urban agriculture installed on the public right-of-way. For this project, the municipal authorities worked on road safety measures and helped to set up an irrigation system for the plantations [13].

### Health impact assessments

In Quebec, the government’s health prevention policy [14] recommends carrying out a health impact assessment (HIA) for structuring urban projects. The use of HIAs in the development of public policies often remains limited. Health impact assessments provide a solid basis on

which territorial organizations can base their decisions [15], as was the case when planning for the redevelopment of several neighbourhoods in the city of Gatineau [16] or for the regional health centre in the city of Saint-Jérôme [17].

### Conclusion

Cities have several means of creating favourable environments, but they cannot act without the political

will of elected officials or the social acceptability of civil society regarding actions that transform their living environment. Sharing a common vision of the concern, concerted action by the various organizations and adequate funding are important dimensions of transformation to achieve healthy environments in Quebec’s cities. ■

Contact: [paquin.sophie@uqam.ca](mailto:paquin.sophie@uqam.ca)

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