THE QUESTION

Lifespan & healthspan

Is there an architectural response?
Adam Pressley

Longevity alone is no longer an adequate measure of success.

We are living longer, but gains in healthy life expectancy are not keeping pace. The Lancet Public Health study using GBD 2023 estimates found widening morbidity gaps in 203 of 204 locations. [1]

13.9 years

Australia's estimated gap between lifespan and healthy lifespan in 2023, the second largest nationally. These lost healthy years accumulate across life, rather than simply at its end. [1]

If we are living longer, should architecture simply accommodate the effects of ageing and disability, or can we also design to support healthier lives?

Compared with around 2000, architects face broader access obligations and more demanding design details. New livable housing requirements extend basic accessibility into ordinary homes where adopted. Implementation remains uneven. [2]

Thermal performance also needs a health lens. As homes become better sealed, ventilation requires deliberate design. Inadequate ventilation can allow moisture and pollutants to accumulate. [3]

We've become extraordinarily good at treating illness. Have we become equally good at creating the conditions for health?

THE EVIDENCE

The morbidity gap

Life expectancy minus healthy life expectancy. Estimates for 2023, in years.

Top 20 morbidity gaps, in years, out of 204 countries, estimated from 2023 data

Rank	Country	Morbidity Gap
1	USA	14
2	Australia	13.9
3	Canada	13.7
4	New Zealand	13.1
5	The Netherlands	12.9
6	San Marino	12.9
7	Switzerland	12.8
8	Lebanon	12.8
9	United Kingdom	12.7
10	Puerto Rico	12.7
11	Mexico	12.6
12	Syria	12.6
13	France	12.5
14	Costa Rica	12.5
15	Iran	12.5
16	Brazil	12.5
17	Norway	12.4
18	Sweden	12.4
19	Kuwait	12.4
20	Slovenia	12.3

Table supplied by the speaker, based on the Lancet Public Health GBD 2023 study. [1] Rankings reflect point estimates; uncertainty intervals are not shown. The study covers 204 countries and territories.

These are equivalent years of health lost across life, rather than a prediction of consecutive years of illness at its end.

ARCHITECTURE IN PRACTICE

Make healthy living easier

Alongside designing for illness and changing abilities, we can design places that support movement, connection and independence.

01 **Support intergenerational living.**

Bring generations closer while giving each household privacy, independence and room for changing needs.

02 **Make room for strength and fitness.**

Include a home gym or flexible space for cardio, weight training, balance and mobility. Consider daylight, ventilation, floor loading, impact noise and equipment storage. A corner, garage bay or covered terrace may be enough.

03 **Make stairs an invitation.**

Give them daylight, comfortable proportions and a prominent position, alongside convenient lifts and accessible routes.

04 **Make walking and cycling convenient.**

Provide direct pedestrian entrances, secure bicycle storage and easy connections to shops, parks and public transport.

05 **Create places for incidental conversation.**

A seat beside an entrance, a shared courtyard or a generous landing can create opportunities to meet without organised social activities.

06 **Use level access to connect indoors and outdoors.**

Make gardens, courtyards and terraces a natural extension of everyday living, with careful drainage and weather protection.

07 **Make outdoor spaces comfortable enough to use.**

Include shade, shelter, seating with backs and armrests, and space for stretching, play or gardening.

ARCHITECTURE IN PRACTICE

A home that supports health

Fresh air, rest, sunlight and food preparation deserve an explicit place in the brief. [3, 4, 5]

08 **Design for fresh air.**

Include a deliberate ventilation strategy. Air conditioning alone does not necessarily introduce outdoor air.

09 **Duct kitchen exhaust outside.**

Capture cooking fumes at their source. Make exhaust systems and ventilation filters accessible for maintenance.

10 **Make outdoor cooking easy.**

Provide sheltered, convenient spaces, with smoke directed away from indoor areas and neighbours.

11 **Let sunlight in and give occupants control.**

Fully retractable external louvre systems can admit winter sun and daylight while providing shade when needed.

12 **Treat bedrooms as places for recovery.**

Protect them from traffic, plant and household noise. Provide effective shading, controllable darkness and comfortable overnight temperatures.

13 **Choose materials for the air people breathe.**

Specify paints, adhesives, flooring and joinery with verified low emissions.

14 **Design kitchens around preparing food.**

Provide generous preparation space, accessible ingredients and equipment, and somewhere comfortable to sit while cooking. Make cooking together possible.

15 **Give food growing a practical place.**

Consider sunny garden beds, accessible planters, water nearby and tool storage. Shared gardens need a clear maintenance arrangement.

BEYOND ARCHITECTURE

Bring it home to the kitchen

These decisions can make it easier to cook, move, gather and spend time outside as part of an ordinary day. Beyond architecture, we can also be advocates for healthy living.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
Have we turned that around?
A doctor a day keeps the apple away.

Medicine has given us extraordinary gains. But treatment attracts investment and attention. How much attention do we give to the everyday conditions that support health?

Meet "iloccorB". Dr Michael Greger tells a story about introducing his medical students to an impressive new therapeutic. Then comes the reveal: the name is broccoli backwards. [6]

Dr Michael Greger and NutritionFacts.org
Greger is a physician whose work explores food, chronic disease and healthy ageing. He advocates a diet centred on whole plant foods. NutritionFacts.org presents published research through short videos and articles, with references to the underlying studies.

The resource is free and supported by individual donors. The organisation says it accepts no advertising or corporate sponsorship and does not sell supplements. We do not have to agree with every interpretation to engage seriously with the evidence. [7]

Take a look when you get home. Choose a subject that matters to you, explore the research and consider what might be useful in your everyday meals.

We can design places that support healthier lives.
And take that same intention home to the kitchen.

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[1] Lancet Public Health, 2026. GBD 2023 morbidity gap study.
[2] ABCB. NCC 2022 access and livable housing provisions.
[3] Your Home. Indoor air quality.
[4] NSW Health. Healthy Built Environment Checklist.
[5] WHO. Housing and health guidelines, 2018.
[6] Greger. Second Strategy to Cooking Broccoli, 2014.
[7] NutritionFacts.org. About and Our Values.

nutritionfacts.org | Video: youtube.com/watch?v=wsN8x0BWcyE

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