

Sabrina L Frey

Abstract: Subjective well-being and the built environment: An international evaluation.

The topic of people's overall health and happiness has been gaining increased attention and press in recent years. Evidence that 'happy people live longer' has been given by many studies that investigate the contributions of subjective well-being (SWB) to health and longevity. Some studies have explored areas that may contribute to SWB such as health care systems, eating habits, and physical attributes among other factors. As one of a designer's primary responsibilities is to promote the welfare of their clients, it is reasonable to assume that it is also a designers' responsibility to investigate and add useful information to the body of knowledge about SWB and its potential connections to the built environment. As advocates for healthier environments it seems logical to research the living environments of societies that report an elevated state of SWB to evaluate how their values are expressed in their living environments. Further, could the manifestations of those expressions be a contributor to their elevated sense of well-being?

Global-scope surveys of SWB consistently identify residents of the Nordic countries as the happiest and healthiest in the world. These elusive societies are often noted as the most progressive in areas such as technology and education; however, little is published about how they live. This thesis reveals findings from exploratory research into Nordic peoples' traditions and habits that are related to their welfare and elevated SWB. The research specifically evaluates how these traditions and habits are expressed in their living environments. In so doing, the study identifies residential elements that contribute to the perceptions of elevated SWB. The literary findings coupled with the qualitative research findings may add to the interior designer's body of knowledge regarding improved welfare, an important but also sometimes neglected element of the health-safety-welfare paradigm.

The intent of this study was to discover the main cultural values of Nordic society and explore the physical manifestation of those values with-in the built environment to understand how they relate to residents' elevated levels of SWB. The researcher chose residential homes as a starting point for a series of studies which will include the exploration of SWB in regards to other built environments such as commercial buildings. Future studies will also include comparative analysis with other countries. Chapter 4 showcases living environment features and norms gathered from extensive interviews. The interviews with Nordic residents and the photographic documentation provided in answer to the research questions can be used by design educators to teach their students about global populations and the contributors to an elevated state of well-being. The examples and conclusions from the study may also help designers and educators expand their understanding of SWB and the living environment.