

RENOWNED PLANNERS INSPIRE GOOD HEALTH IN BELFAST



Carol Ramsey, Chair, Regeneration and Healthy Urban Environments Group;
Jim Wells MLA, Minister for Health, Social Services & Public Safety; Nigel McMahon, Chair, Belfast Healthy Cities.

The urban design firm behind the project to reclaim green space in Times Square on behalf of New York's pedestrians was in Belfast on Friday to share its innovative ideas on improving the quality of life in cities. Riccardo Marini from Gehl Architects was joined by Health Minister Jim Wells MLA, senior representatives from the World Health Organization and planning officials from across Northern Ireland at a major conference examining the links between planning and the health of the citizens in a city.

The conference was hosted by the World Health Organization local body Belfast Healthy Cities and opened by Belfast Lord Mayor Nichola Mallon.

Chair of Belfast Healthy Cities Nigel McMahon explained the rationale for the event. "One of the core activities of Belfast Healthy Cities is the promotion of a 'Health in all Policies' approach to policy development. We believe that responsibility for addressing health inequality and promoting wellbeing goes well beyond the Department of Health and actually cuts across all policy areas, both in central and local Government.

"Today's event allowed us to share world leading expertise on how best to create cities for people and promote and to explore the economic benefits accrued by a city which is planned around the needs of its people. Among the attendees were planning officials from the new super councils, health officials and new visitors from GB, the Republic of Ireland and from Italy. We were delighted to have the quality and range of speakers in our city today to share their experience."

Riccardo Marini is a renowned town planner with Gehl Architects. He said, “Think of a ‘place’ you want to spend time in, apart from a sun drenched beach or an isolated mountain top, chances are its somewhere that was created before 1940. This is a staggering indictment of the failure of planners and architects to create cities that are fit for people! What we endeavour to do, from a basis of empiric knowledge, is put people central to planning and architecture to ensure that the places we are involved in creating or reclaiming are the kind of places you never want to leave.

Addressing the conference, Health Minister Jim Wells said:

“In recent years, there has been an increasing incidence of cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes, all of which are preventable and related to lifestyle behaviours, such as poor diet and lack of physical activity. We also have a high incidence of mental illness – one of the major causes of ill health and disability in Northern Ireland. “We know that people with poorer health often live in environments which support unhealthy lifestyles – where there is dereliction, lack of green space and limited access to environments for walking or cycling, or for children to play.

“The Executive’s strategic framework for public health ‘Making Life Better,’ recognises that building a healthier Northern Ireland will hinge largely on what is done collaboratively, through both policy and practice, to influence the wider economic, social and environmental factors, which impact on lives and choices.

“The framework focuses on the importance of joint working to integrate public health principles more systematically across all parts of society, influencing the shape of the places where we live to create healthy, safe, sustainable and thriving communities that will give children the best start in life, reduce health inequalities and enable more healthy lives.”

Other speakers at the conference included Lord Mayor Nichola Mallon, Gabriel Scally, Director, World Health Organization, Hugh Ellis, Town and Country Planning Association and Suzanne Wylie, CEO of Belfast City Council.

Further information from the event, including photographs, will be available at www.belfasthealthycities.com

