The meaning of the words ‘Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain’ (Psalm 127:1, RSV), has been broadened in understanding with a new public health interest in 'the built environment'. This interest is more than a reference to the already recognized Sick Building Syndrome, it embraces even the use of the space around buildings.

Dr Jonathan Samet and John Spengler, commenting on this new emphasis, say that it 'signals a timely recognition of the relevance to health and well-being of the indoor environments where people spend most of their time. Even in temperate climates ... people spend most of their time indoors: at home, at work, in transportation, and in many other public and private places. The quality of these environments affects well-being and productivity, and risks for diverse diseases are increased by indoor air pollutants, surface contamination with toxins and microbes and contact with people in these places'.

Dr Richard Jackson sums up the recent focus of the built environment: 'We now realize that how we design the built environment may hold tremendous potential for addressing many of the nation's greatest current public health concerns, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, injury, depression, violence, and social inequities'. Dr Wendy Perdue elaborates, 'Physical spaces can expose people to toxins or pollutants and influence lifestyles that contribute to diabetes, coronary vascular disease, and asthma'.

The siting of homes in relation to places of work; the location of libraries, hospitals, shops, and schools in themselves affect the health of communities. Public transport facilities (or their lack) and the safety of neighborhoods and roads all have a bearing on well-being. For example, the UK government recently stated that one in five vehicles on the roads at specific times are used for school runs. Since children are not walking to school, more children are becoming obese which, unless dealt with, will contribute to their future ill-health. The introduction of 'walking buses', where groups of children walk to school, has been suggested as one remedy for the problem.

As with many other health issues, prevention is the cure. Dr Perdue and her
colleagues say that we should all get engaged in the built environment solutions by:

- getting involved early in the Planning process
- making sure that all the relevant data is considered in Planning Meetings
- speaking out independently on environmental and aesthetic concerns (not leaving the debate to the official parties involved)
- promoting healthy activities for children of all ages
- speaking up for minorities and the under-represented
- encouraging government (local and national) to lead by example, not just by regulation

Not only is there ‘a time for building’ (Proverbs 3:3) but, it would seem, a right way of going about it for our health's sake, a time to turn a house into a healthy home.

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