

A growing body of research in cognitive science illuminates the physical and mental toll that bland cityscapes exact on residents.

Generally, these researchers argue that humans are healthier when they live among variety — a healthy mix of bars, cafes, and corner shops — or work in well-designed, unique spaces, rather than unattractive, generic ones.

Researchers recently studied the effects of a large chain supermarket (called Whole Foods) located in New York City.

When participants passed by the long, feature-less walls of the building, they reported being bored and stressed. In their descriptions of this particular place, they used words like bland, monotonous, and passionless.

In contrast, one block east of the Whole Foods on East Houston, at the other test site — a “lively sea of restaurants with lots of open doors and windows” — people listed words like lively, busy, and socializing. “The holy grail in urban design is to produce some kind of novelty or change every few seconds,” Ellard said. “Otherwise, we become disengaged.”

The Whole Foods may have gentrified the neighborhood with more high-quality organic groceries, but the building itself stifled people. Its architectural “blah-ness” made their minds and bodies go meh.

Studies show that feeling “meh” can be more than a passing nuisance. For instance, psychologists Colleen Merrifield and James Danckert’s work suggests that even small doses of boredom can generate stress.

Boredom, surprisingly, increased people’s heart rate and cortisol level more than sadness. Now take their findings and imagine the cumulative effects of living or working in the same oppressively dull environs day after day, said Ellard.

It’s important to note, however, that architectural boredom isn’t about how pristine a street is. People often confuse successful architecture with whether an area looks pleasant. On the contrary, when it comes to city buildings, people often focus too narrowly on aesthetics, said Charles Montgomery, author of *Happy City: Transforming Our Through Urban Design*.

But good design is really is about “shaping emotional infrastructure.” Some of the happiest blocks in New York City, he argues, are “kind of ugly and messy.” For instance, Ellard’s “happier” East Houston block is a “jumbled-up, social one”— the Whole Foods stretch, in comparison, is newer and more manicured. Sometimes what’s best for us, Montgomery explained, just isn’t that pretty.

His research also shows noisy city blocks may make people kinder to each other. In 2014, Montgomery’s Happy City lab conducted a Seattle experiment in which he found a strong correlation between messier blocks and pro-social behavior. Montgomery sent researchers, posing as lost tourists, to places he coded as either “active façades” — with a high level of visual interest — or “inactive façades” (like long warehouse blocks). Pedestrians at active sites were nearly five times more likely to offer help than at inactive ones. Of those who helped, seven times as many at the active site offered use of their phone; four times as many offered to lead the “lost tourist” to their destination.