

Obituary: Elizabeth 'Libby' Burton



Professor Libby Burton, 1967–2014

Elizabeth 'Libby' Burton, Professor of Sustainable Building Design and Well-being at the University of Warwick, was a close friend and colleague of ours for many years. We worked with Libby as she established her academic career and set up the 'Well-being in Sustainable Environments' (WISE) research centre, first at Oxford Brookes University, and then at Warwick, and as she became a well-respected academic internationally through her research, books, design guides and papers. We were devastated when Libby died of cancer in November last year: it was far too soon, and she had so much more to offer.

Before Libby died, and knowing that her illness was terminal, she was determined to consolidate her academic legacy and set a path for future work among her community of peers. She did this out of a genuine passion for her subject: the relationship between the built environment, and physical and mental well-being. With a show of immense personal courage, Libby hosted an international symposium at Warwick in March 2014. She gathered together the key researchers in the field from around the world to take stock of the current knowledge base and to think about

the future. Delegates attended from Australia, the USA, China, the UK and the rest of Europe. Far from being a sombre occasion, the 'Space to Flourish' symposium proved to be a very poignant and productive 2 days (with some great food, nice wine and dancing too). One of the outcomes of the event was a collective Charter, which Libby drafted.

It is telling to note that the Charter starts with 'principles'. After years of producing carefully crafted empirical evidence, and with a calm yet tangible sense of urgency, Libby wanted to say what we should do. She wanted to say that people's well-being should be the central goal in creating and adapting built environments; that our actions should be evidence based; that built environments should help reduce inequalities; and that we should recognise how people's needs change throughout their lives, and design places that are responsive.

As evidenced by the Charter, Libby was not a detached academic but someone who really cared about what we design and build, and who felt that we could do it so much better than we do. Hence, Libby also drafted a plan for her peers, including to: carry out high-quality research; mainstream design for well-being in the built environment; grow our networks; educate built environment and public health professionals better; change building regulations and guidelines; standardise measures of the built environment related to well-being and lobby those in positions of power to make a difference. The Charter, including the plan, is a work in progress, and the delegates of the 'Space to Flourish' symposium are committed to developing and publishing it in the future.

As part of the symposium, Libby also recorded a film setting out her personal views on her life's work, as well as what she had learnt from living with her illness. The film can be seen on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzyPsgORoyU>) and makes very powerful viewing. In it, Libby explains where her professional convictions came from, and why we need to change our thinking.

Libby was academically brilliant from a young age, excelling through school and going on to study architecture at Cambridge. She was always good at maths and sciences, was very logical and understood the nature of evidence. Libby also held strong moral convictions about ethics, equity and social justice. She entered her architecture training with a clear vocation to design places for everyone. However, she soon developed a frustration with what she perceived as the lack of evidence-based enquiry and practice within architecture. She felt alienated by her courses, observing they were not interested in ordinary, everyday buildings, or in people's experience of place.

Although Libby worked as an architect, she rebelled against the elitism she saw in much of the architectural profession, and sought a way to understand places more holistically. For this, she turned to urban design training (at Oxford Brookes University), which she found offered far more scope to develop a deeper understanding of how places can affect well-being, and to explore questions of spatial ethics. Here, she found the freedom to explore her own research agenda. Her doctorate was about the relationship between urban form and social justice, and this was underpinned by a strong interest in fairness.

As Libby developed her career she chose a difficult path of research into 'health and place'. For example, she undertook major research on outdoor

environments for people with dementia, and on housing design and mental health. Libby had considerable grant and publishing successes, securing funding from, among others, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), National Health Service (NHS) Estates and the Wellcome Trust. However, time after time she came-up against methodological difficulties when trying to reconcile built environment and health research. This frequently led to knock-backs for her innovative and meticulous grant proposals. Yet, Libby persisted with a personal drive to advance her subject and develop new knowledge.

What characterised Libby's work was a care for the everyday. Her ground-breaking research on designing outdoor environments for people with dementia provided details of how street layouts and signage affect navigation and disorientation. Her paper in this volume provides evidence for the benefits of private patio space and greenery for older people. Her many doctoral students studied specific aspects of the built environment in relation to well-being outcomes, such as privacy and social interaction, always providing sound empirical evidence that helped to build our understanding of the impact that the built environment has on everyday lived experience. Libby's impact on her field is significant. Her work is widely cited and will continue to be so. She undertook some of the classic 'environment-well-being' studies of the last 20 years.

We were lucky enough to work with Libby on numerous research projects, conferences, books and events over the years. We supervised students and developed taught courses together. We enjoyed the kind of close friendships that come through a shared history of PhD study and student flats, viva days and PhD parties, editing deadlines and book launches, conference travels and grant successes and failures.

Libby was charismatic, vibrant, intelligent, strong-willed, and both serious and great fun. She was the perfect companion on a journey through academic life. No one can replace Libby, but we can continue to honour her legacy through the research we choose to pursue and by upholding the values that she so clearly set out. The irony that a life spent trying to improve health, well-being and happiness for others was cut so tragically short is not lost on any of us. However, we have to thank Libby for her beautiful and enduring spirit, her immense contribution to our field and for her Charter: it is deceptive in its simplicity, and provides us with a way forward.

Appendix

Space to Flourish Charter

This Charter was developed by participants of an international symposium on design for well-being in the built environment entitled, 'Space for Thought: Looking Back to Move Forward', which met at the University of Warwick on 9/10 March 2014. The symposium was organised by Professor Libby Burton.

Principles

We believe people's well-being should be the central goal in creating and adapting built environments.

By 'built environment' we mean buildings, homes, streets and footways, squares, parks, urban infrastructure – all indoor and outdoor spaces and structures/constructions created by people.

To design for well-being means to design spaces and structures that help people to flourish. People who are flourishing feel happy and satisfied with life much of the time, have good relationships and live rich, fulfilled lives.

We 'advocate' the use of research evidence in designing the built environment to optimise well-being.

We 'recognise' that design for well-being must be balanced against other objectives such as energy efficiency.

We 'envisage' a built environment that, in optimising people's well-being, reduces inequality – that is the gap between the least and best off.

We 'acknowledge' that there are many other influences on well-being: the built environment is the only one possible source for improving people's lives.

We 'recognise' that people have varying needs at different times of their lives, so designing for well-being in the built environment requires a range of solutions.

We believe that optimising well-being through the built environment requires a multi-disciplinary, multi-professional approach.

The problem

Environments are created and adapted all the time but often with little thought for the people who inhabit them.

Even when people's needs are considered, design of the built environment can fail if it does not draw on evidence of what works and what does not. It is not enough to have good ideas.

Plan of action

The role people can play in optimising well-being through the built environment will vary, depending on their expertise and profession. In signing this Charter, participants commit to one or more of the following courses of action.

- Carrying out high-quality research on well-being and the built environment – research that leads to evidence-based design guidance.
- Mainstreaming design for well-being in the built environment.
- Securing funding routes/programmes for the field.
- Disseminating research findings on design for well-being.
- Establishing and growing a network of people and organisations that support this Charter.
- Reviewing research/literature to inform design of the built environment.
- Educating built environment and public health academics and professionals.
- Establishing a new expertise/profession in this field (e.g. the BUDD (building and urban design doctor)) with its own accreditation system.
- Ensuring well-being is included in existing regulations and guidelines for the built environment (e.g. UK Building Regulations).
- Creating a design for well-being rating system or kitemark.
- Encouraging developers and designers to follow design for well-being principles and submit buildings/housing for well-being rating/kitemark assessment.
- Creating tools for personal use to identify types of environments which will optimise individuals' well-being.
- Lobbying government to recognise the importance of design for well-being in the built environment and the value of environmental interventions to achieve well-being and health objectives.
- Standardising measures of the built environment and related aspects of well-being.
- Utilising large-scale developments/built environment changes as 'natural experiments' to further research in the field.

Well-being objectives

To design for well-being means to design spaces and structures that help people to flourish. People who are flourishing feel happy and satisfied with life much of the time, have good relationships and live rich, fulfilled lives.

More specifically, the following objectives should be pursued

- reduce stress
- promote positive mood/emotions and enjoyment of life
- facilitate good relationships (adequate privacy as well as opportunities for social interaction)
- enable people to concentrate and be productive when working
- help make people feel safe from crime
- help people with dementia cope with their symptoms
- reduce symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism
- foster a sense of belonging and attachment
- maximise people's satisfaction with life/quality of life
- facilitate successful childhood development, with minimal stressors and plenty of space to work and play
- enable independence in older age
- reduce inequalities between people
- promote physical activity and healthy diet
- combat respiratory illnesses and allergies
- reduce spread of infection
- reduce the likelihood of injuries, within the home and on the street
- mitigate the health impacts of climate change (e.g. heat waves and cold waves, natural disasters)
- help people to cope with pain, especially chronic pain
- maximise physical comfort.

Katie Williams and Lynne Mitchell