



# Fit-City 3:

Promoting Physical Activity through Design  
From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



## Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice

Introduction to Report: Fredric Bell, FAIA, Executive Director of the AIA NY Chapter .....	1
Introductions to Fit City 3 Conference: Commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene Thomas R. Frieden, MD, MPH .....	2
and Commissioner of Design and Construction David Burney, FAIA.....	3
Opening Keynote Excerpt: Dr. James F. Sallis, PhD.....	3
 <i>Making Progress in New York City</i>	
Promoting Active Living through the Public Realm .....	5
Supporting Bicycling and Active Transportation.....	7
Establishing Healthy Lifestyle Opportunities for Our Children .....	9
Addressing Health Disparities Among Socioeconomic Groups.....	11
Meeting Private Market Demands for a Fit City.....	13
Closing Keynote Excerpt: Jan Gehl, Hon. FAIA .....	15
Resources .....	19
Credits.....	20

## *Introduction*

This report marks the third year of a rewarding partnership between the AIA New York Chapter and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The Fit City 3 conference in May 2008 featured not only public health officials and architects, but Commissioners from five City departments, urban planners, parks experts, bicycle advocates, real estate developers, and many others.

The goal of this year's conference was to take the lessons from previous Fit City dialogues and explore how scientific research on obesity and physical activity, and the design and planning principles that have been found to be effective interventions for better health, can become urban policy—both for City agencies, and in the standard practice of real estate developers and architects working in the private sector.

To be informed about Fit City programs at the Center for Architecture through our calendar and event mailing lists, and to see publications from previous years, please visit [www.aiany.org](http://www.aiany.org).

Sincerely,

*Fredric Bell, FAIA*  
Executive Director  
AIA NY Chapter



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#### NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE COMMISSIONER THOMAS R. FRIEDEN, MD, MPH:

Obesity is an epidemic, and it's gotten worse faster than any of us could have predicted. It's not because our genes have changed, or because we've gotten more gluttonous. It's because our environment has changed.

Collectively, New Yorkers gained 10 million pounds between 2002 and 2004. In those two years alone, an additional 170,000 New Yorkers were identified as obese. There were increases in obesity for almost all racial and ethnic groups. Globally, as well, we're seeing a big increase in obesity. We are exporting our successful model of unhealthy living. And obesity starts early. Only half of our young children are at a healthy weight.

From 2002 to 2004, an additional 70,000 New Yorkers were diagnosed with diabetes. In 2004, there were at least 700,000 New Yorkers with diabetes. In the past fifteen years, the number of people with diabetes has more than doubled, leaving this population with a very high risk of heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, blindness, and amputation. Anything that reduces our weight or improves our fitness is going to have a lot of positive impact. Even if there's no reduction in obesity, an increase in fitness reduces risk of cancer, heart disease, and high blood pressure.

Stair-climbing, particularly in a city as vertical as New York City, is something that has a lot of potential. It has been shown to raise good cholesterol and improve cardiovascular health. Two minutes of stair-climbing a day burns enough calories to eliminate more than a pound of adult weight gain per year.

Active design of buildings and land use can promote physical activity. Did anyone who's new to this building see the elevator when they walked in? No. So all of you either transported yourselves here magically or you took the stairs. And that is, in fact, the way we would like to see buildings designed. We would like stairs to be open, attractive, and pleasant, and we would like

elevators to be used less often, except of course by people with disabilities. Stair prompts at elevators and escalators can increase stair use significantly.

Thank you for your interest in this conference. I look forward to us all working together not just to create a fitter city, but to see the physical changes created by the concepts that we're discussing today.



NYC DOHMH/DCC Stair Prompt,  
launched at Fit City 3 Conference.

## NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION COMMISSIONER DAVID BURNEY, FAIA:

A couple of years ago, when Commissioner Frieden and the Department of Health first opened the discussion about health and active design, I was, as an architect, a bit skeptical. I thought, well, what can designers really do? But I must say over the last year or so, with these Fit City conferences and the work we're doing with the Department of Health, I've really changed my view of it. And I think now that it's an idea whose time has come. Health has started to cross and connect with all sorts of other different disciplines and fields of inquiry in architecture.

For example, as explained in the Mayor's PlaNYC, walking and biking support not only our health but also our air quality, reducing auto emissions and making the city's environment healthier. Recently we've been in discussions with the Department of Aging about the increasing numbers of seniors in our population. Sustaining the quality of life of those seniors is very much connected with mobility. Seniors who stay mobile, who walk, and who exercise, live healthier and longer lives. So that is another issue that fits in very well with the active design program.

I recently ran into a Department of Health initiative to address the current proliferation of these disposable water bottles, which are now filling landfills all over the country. And the Department of Health is firmly encouraging people to drink water instead of high-calorie beverages, and to use refillable bottles. We at DDC are now looking at putting bottle filling stations into public spaces. It all comes together into one effort towards active design. It gives us plenty of material to cover in the Active Design Guidelines that we're working on with the Department of Health. We're also introducing active design as an innovative portion of the LEED certification system. Soon, we'll be able to actually accredit buildings that have active design features.

I want to end by introducing our new stair prompt, which has been designed to encourage people to take the stairs, not the elevators. It's soon to be seen in a building near you, and you can get it for free by calling 311.

## OPENING KEYNOTE EXCERPT DR. JIM SALLIS, PHD:

"Across the world, about 2 million deaths a year are attributed to physical inactivity. And that's about 200,000 deaths per year in the United States. To put that in perspective, smoking is still the number one preventable cause of death with over 400,000. Physical inactivity is second with 200,000. And, third, is alcohol at about 100,000. So, in fact, physical inactivity is one of the leading health problems in the U.S. and internationally. We're not going to solve the obesity epidemic until people are more physically active."

Jim Sallis identified three ways of promoting physical activity which have been shown by Active Living Research to have tangible results:

- 1) Maximize opportunities for physical activity by maximizing the design and usability of stairs in buildings.
- 2) Promote active transport to encourage walking and bicycling by enhancing neighborhoods with mixed use and connected streets.
- 3) Promote active recreation and increase access to well-designed parks and playgrounds to encourage bicycling, walking, running and movement.

Throughout the report, there will be references to research on these and other design-based solutions to the obesity crisis.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



#### GOALS:

To encourage active living for city residents by shaping the public realm. To better welcome pedestrians to the built environment by minimizing sidewalk congestion, creating access to a closed-off waterfront, and making green more prevalent than pavement.

Active street in Hunter's Point  
redevelopment district.

"View of 55th Avenue."

Rendering by FXFOWLE Architects LLP,  
Tom Schaller

## MAKING PROGRESS IN NYC:

The quality of the built environment does impact the lifestyle choices of city residents. As Dr. James Sallis said in his keynote address, “there are more and more studies showing that having good sidewalks will get people out walking for recreation. The idea is that we have to design cities in a way to make it pleasant, to make it attractive, to make it desirable to be physically active.”

New York City’s network of public spaces—parks, sidewalk cafes, and open spaces—, as championed by Department of City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden, Hon. AIA NY, will encourage an active lifestyle among New Yorkers. “We’re creating a pedestrian-oriented city by creating inviting public spaces that are part of the everyday life of the old and the young, in winter and in summer, in the day and in the evening. It will be a truly democratic and a healthy city, which invites residents and workers and tourists alike out of doors and out of their cars.”

Alexandros Washburn, AIA, the Department’s Chief Urban Designer, described the zoning mechanisms that will build a fit city. Transit-oriented development zones will place more housing near public transit, so that cars become less and less a part of city life. Stairways will be re-prioritized with better amenity and visibility to encourage their use. Street tree and side yard regulations, passed last winter as part of PlaNYC 2030, will prevent the paving-over of green spaces and mandate tree planting, creating welcoming places for people to walk in every neighborhood in the five boroughs. And neighborhood rezonings, like Greenpoint/Williamsburg, and new projects like Hunters Point South, are also designed to help the Fit City cause: “the goal is active and walkable streets, light and air for everyone by controlling the bulk of the buildings that go up, and access to parks.”

Stephanie Gelb, AIA, Chief Architect of the Battery Park City Authority, noted that these sorts of characteristics are already part of our favorite New York neighborhoods. At Battery Park City, for example, ample parkland, safe streets, public facilities, and mixed uses all contribute to a community where people feel comfortable being outside and active. “This is just what you do when you’re building a successful neighborhood.”



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



#### GOAL:

To make bicycling in New York City safer and more common, and to promote as often as possible the use of alternative forms of transportation.

Ninth Avenue Bicycle Lane.  
Photo by NYC DOT

## **MAKING PROGRESS IN NYC:**

Commissioner Janyne Sadik-Khan of the New York City Department of Transportation declared that “New York City has a natural advantage with our extensive public transportation system. It allows people to walk, to get on a bike, to get on a bus, or to get on a train. The question before all of us is: how do we maximize that natural advantage?” The Department is working to do just that by promoting biking as an active, green, and healthy form of transportation. They are on track to complete 200 miles of new bike lanes and paths between 2007 and 2009. Protected bike lanes, free helmets, and more and better designed bicycle racks

are also part of the Department’s effort. As Jim Sallis pointed out, a study in Portland, Oregon found that half of bicycle trips were taking place on bicycle lanes and paths. “Cyclists are seeking out the protected places, where they can feel safe,” Sallis observed.

Government agencies are not the only ones who have taken up this challenge. Through a future zoning modification, as well as building owner and employer initiatives, bicycle storage and racks will become more common in both public and private buildings. With all of these steps, bicycling will continue to gain stature as a convenient, safe, and healthy way to move around New York City.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



#### GOAL:

To encourage children to develop habits of active play and physical activity, helping to prevent childhood obesity and reverse current obesity trends.

South Oxford Park Ribbon Cutting.  
Photo by Malcolm Pinckney/Parks Department

## MAKING PROGRESS IN NYC:

As Assistant Commissioner Lynn Silver, MD, MPH, FAAP described, the obesity epidemic is affecting not only adults, but children all over the country. Children who are not physically active are at much greater risk for obesity and obesity-related diseases such as diabetes. There is a wealth of research to suggest that the mere presence of park and recreational space in a community will have an impact on the health of neighborhood children. New York City officials spoke of several creative strategies to maximize these types of facilities.

Commissioner Adrian Benepe of the Department of Parks and Recreation described his department's mandate through PlaNYC to improve public school yards so that they are accessible after school hours and on weekends as public playgrounds. The Parks Department has already started construction on many playgrounds, and by the end of the current administration, they will turn 290 schoolyards into active spaces where children can play. The Department is also striving to emphasize active park programming. "One of the things we need to do is anticipate the new recreational trends," said Benepe. "For example, we're building cricket fields to accommodate new immigrant groups, and soccer has taken over from football as the major fall sport. We are getting beyond the staff handing out a basketball or a knock-hockey set and calling it recreation."

This attention to type of activity is crucial to creating spaces that are actively used. Sallis observed that "having recreation facilities nearby is a very important policy, but we must also design them to maximize physical activity." Facilities like volleyball, basketball and tennis courts encourage high levels of energy (and calories) to be expended. In one study, Nilda Cosco found that young children respond with more active play to "compact playground areas" with a "mix of natural and manufactured elements." She found that the most active landscape was a "wide, curvy wheeled toy pathway" for kids to play on. Design is really crucial to the success of a park in promoting fitness and health.

In the practice of Robyne Kassen, Assoc. AIA, playful and active uses are incorporated into everyday structures such as benches and bicycle racks, giving children and adults alike the experience of an urban playscape. "We believe that movement and workouts are not isolated experiences to be partitioned off from our lives to the gym," she explained. "Instead, we view our daily lives and paths as opportunities to explode movement throughout our day, and we design for this movement." The Whistler Olympic Village will feature the work of Kassen and her Pedestrian Studio, in collaboration with their partner firm, Movement Engineering.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



#### GOAL:

To provide people of lower income as much access to parks, fitness facilities, and healthy food as have those who live in higher-income neighborhoods; to address disparities in obesity and health among different socioeconomic groups.

The Kalahari, Full Spectrum Development.  
GF55 Partners, LLP and  
Frederic Schwarz Architects.  
Photo by Bo Parker

## MAKING PROGRESS IN NYC

Low- and moderate-income neighborhoods are often less served by parks and fitness facilities, and more served by fast food chains, than are wealthy areas. Jim Sallis cited a study done in Austin, Texas, that also showed fewer pedestrian crosswalks, fewer street trees, and less well-maintained sidewalks in disadvantaged neighborhoods; the safety and aesthetics of the areas actually discouraged activities like walking or bicycling. It's no coincidence that rates of obesity and related chronic diseases like diabetes are much higher among economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. City agencies, architects, and developers are working to address this challenge.

Full Spectrum, a company based in Harlem, New York City, builds green, diverse projects in "urban and emerging markets." Director of Development Brandon Mitchell described the ethos behind these projects: "to enhance the

community. Most of our retail is locally owned. We will not lease to fast food restaurants, and we will not lease to liquor stores," he said. Active spaces are also a priority. The Kalahari project has a green roof, 'to provide open space and an opportunity for residents to really get to know each other,' as well as a free fitness center for building occupants.

Related Companies, a leading development firm with over \$15 billion worth of real estate assets nationwide, also pursues projects in densely populated urban areas near public transportation hubs. "By increasing both the density and the diversity of housing types near transit and encouraging fitness activities, we can help to increase daily mobility among city residents of all incomes," said Executive Vice President of Design and Planning Vishaan Chakrabarti, AIA. "We apply these principles as much as we can to both our affordable housing developments, as well as to our market rate developments."



## Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



### GOAL:

To foster private market demand for healthy living, and to encourage developers to include health as a factor in design excellence.

Time Warner Center, Related Companies.  
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.  
Photo by Scott Frances

## MAKING PROGRESS IN NYC:

As Joyce Lee, AIA, LEED AP, founding chair of AIA NY's Committee on the Environment and Chief Architect at the City's Office of Management and Budget, observed, "in order for Fit City to be well integrated in the urban fabric, the city's major landlords, the developers and builders, have great potential to take a leadership position to help guide the designing and the programming of projects."

Related Companies purchased Equinox Fitness Clubs, a national chain of full-service facilities. Vishaan Chakrabarti explained that they have "made fitness space a very significant part of our developments. Nearly all of our buildings include gyms and different fitness facilities, but not just your run-of-the-mill work-out equipment placed in a room, but great facilities that are inviting to people and help them achieve their fitness goals." This commitment helps to attract clients and tenants, who now widely expect amenities geared towards a healthy lifestyle.

In the South Bronx, where Full Spectrum is building a mixed-use, mixed-income project called Thessalonica, the rates of diabetes and asthma are astronomical, for the reasons described on preceding pages. Thessalonica will include a composting area, a green roof, blackwater recycling, and a bike/kayak room, promoting an environmentally and physically healthy environment for its residents. Its stairs are designed to be prominent, visible, and pleasant so that they will be regularly used by those who are able. The project site is also located near playgrounds and educational facilities, so that resident children will have access to active play spaces and be able to walk to school.

For both companies, projects located near transit hubs, such as Related's Time Warner Center and the Kalahari in Harlem for Full Spectrum, are crucial to developing their healthy portfolio. By giving people of all incomes the ability to live and work in areas served by transit, these projects encourage New Yorkers to live more actively (walking up and down subway stairs, for example) and decrease the number of cars on the street.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



Copenhagen.  
Photo by Gehl Architects

**JAN GEHL, HON. FAIA**  
**EXCERPTS FROM THE CLOSING KEYNOTE ADDRESS:**

What is really wanted now is a lively and attractive city. We've become tired of the motor-inundated cities we've had now for 50 years, which are not very people friendly. We want cities which are safe at all times of the day and night. We want sustainable cities that address climate challenges. And more and more we are realizing that we want healthy cities.

Throughout the history of cities, public space has had three major purposes. It's been the meeting place of people; it's been the marketplace; and it's been the connection space, which links together the various things in the city. The purpose of us coming together in cities in the first place was to meet each other and to develop our culture together. The meeting place function was always the number one thing.

The traditional city has been around forever. It's a city where meeting, market, and moving about is happening in the same spaces. It's happening while you are on your feet. It's all integrated and well-balanced – no function dominates the other function or makes another one impossible. You buy an apple, you look at the girls, and you talk with your friends. You can do everything in harmony. In economically less developed countries we see exactly this model: everybody is out on the streets because they have to be, and they're experiencing the meetings, the market, and the moving on their feet.

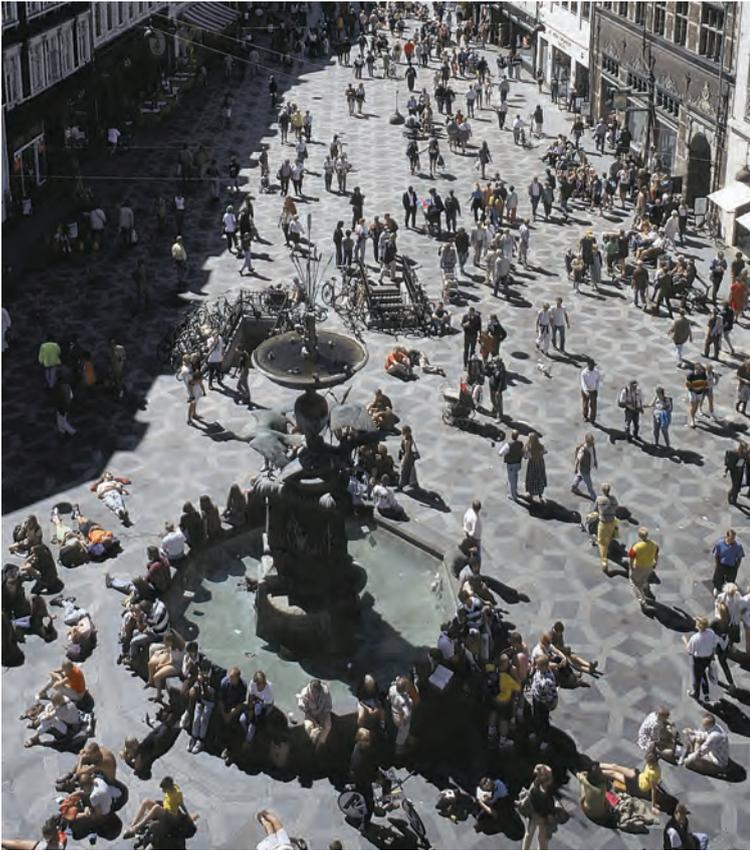
But in the past century, we've seen what I call the car invasion. In Europe it started about ten years after the Second World War, when cars really started to pour into the communities. And soon they filled up every nook and cranny in our cities. Whatever was given to them, they took. And the first thing that happened was that all the people who got a car rushed down to the main streets of the cities to show the other people that they'd gotten a car.

This was fifty years ago, and it is my opinion that at that point we started to panic. We started to think that the major purpose of cities was to find more capacity for more cars. And everything has been devoted to accommodating the cars ever since. Many of the decisions which have been made for cities actually came from this single purpose – to have more capacity for more cars.

So we have the invaded cities from the mid 1950s, when the kids started to have to run faster and faster to get across the streets, but that was only healthy for them if they happened to get across. And there was gradually a deterioration of the quality of cities. We got used to bad air, to too much noise, to less space, to crowded sidewalks, and we started to define this as a good life. And gradually over the years, more and more undignified things happened to people walking about in cities. We had to maneuver, we had to do all kinds of slaloming between the mufflers and the bumpers, and we forgot about why we had the cities. We were just lucky to get through without getting killed.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice



Copenhagen.  
Photo by Gehl Architects

This deterioration happened over the last fifty years of cheap petroleum. And we had, after a period of time, the next phase of city planning, when people gave up. Then we had the abandoned cities. Especially in the United States, and you can see them also in various Australian and Canadian locations – but in these places the environment for moving about, for walking was so bad that people completely gave up, they went home and stayed there, and did everything from their car.

We've seen the result of all this combined with lifestyle changes and changes in economy: obesity. We've seen it, we've heard about it, and there have appeared gimmicks about how to get people into exercise, whether they want to or not. But we've also seen lately the re-conquered cities. Those are the cities where somebody has put down his or her foot and said, "Hey, why did we come together in cities? So that we could find as much space for driving and parking as possible? Or were there other reasons for coming together?" And of course, these cities have started to demand a better balance between meeting, market and motoring. They have found a better balance between vehicular traffic and other needs of the city.

We have also started to study very carefully the importance of public life and what it means to a society and to a democratic nation. In public spaces, we can meet our fellow citizens, and we can see what society we're a part of. Regardless of what we see on television about this group or that group, when we go into the streets we see that most of the other guys are absolutely all right and great guys. We need this feeling of community in an open city and in a democratic society.

These cities have been striving to be lively, attractive, safe, sustainable and healthy cities. And most of them have done it by celebrating the pedestrians and celebrating bicycling. In Copenhagen we've decided to look at bicycling as a type of street life. It's just a little bit faster than walking. It's the same speed as running. And a street full of bicycles is not empty of life. A street full of cars is full of metal – but a street full of bicycles is full of people who are just moving slightly faster.

My suggestion for a simple healthy city policy is to say: in this city we will do everything we can to invite people to walk and bicycle as much as possible in the course of their daily doings. That is by far the simplest thing to do, and the most efficient. You don't have to set a certain time to go to the fitness center or go to the park – you just walk and bike in the course of your day. The word "invite" is crucial, because biking or walking shouldn't be something that you will survive or is simply possible. You really must show that people are invited. People are welcome. We're waiting for people to do it.

I'll talk a little bit about why we walk. I take a much wider view on walking. To me, walking is certainly not only a means of transportation, or about getting from A to B. There is much more to walking than walking. There's much more attached to you being on your feet among your fellow citizens. I would say that any city could have many people on the sidewalks. New York is an example. But that's not the mark of a good city. A good city you can always recognize from the fact that many people have stopped walking and started to enjoy, because the places they come by are so attractive that they cannot resist stopping, and sitting, and enjoying, and listening, and talking. And then they can go on walking. So whenever you see a city where many people are walking and then not walking, stopping to enjoy, that's a city of very good quality. But of course, we should also be able to get from A to B.



### Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice

You can walk and talk, you can walk and watch, and you can be watched. Watching people is the number one attraction in any city, and it has always been. There is nothing more interesting in our life than other people. By being sweet to pedestrians in the city, and being sweet to people walking, you open up for them doing all the sweet things which are associated with living. So be on your feet in the city as much as possible – that’s good for the livability of cities, the attractiveness of cities, and by the way, for your health.

What is good about bicycling? Some cities would say, “we can’t bicycle here because it’s too cold, or it’s too hot, or it’s too hilly.” Well, in Trondheim, Norway, they have escalators for bicyclists to get up the mountains. Bicyclists can also put more clothes on. Bicycling we consider part of city life. Bicyclists move slowly enough so you can see they are people, they can talk and they can look at each other, and they can easily become pedestrians by just jumping off. So they are close to pedestrians.

And, by the way, one automobile parking spot will provide you with 10 bicycle parking spots. Earlier on I heard someone say there was not enough bicycle parking here in New York – why don’t you take 100 car parking spaces and turn them into 1,000 bicycle parking spaces? In New York you have a lot of space in your streets. You have just used it impractically for a period of time. On a bicycle lane you can have four times as many people as you can have in a car lane. Bicycling is very energy-efficient. It supports a very good environment, since bicycles produce no noise. It’s also very cheap, by the way, to bicycle compared to other modes of transportation. From the case study of Denmark we know that bicyclists live longer. Actually, if you do 30 minutes on a bike everyday, you gain seven extra years on your life.

So it’s a good idea to bike, it’s a good idea to walk, and it’s a good idea to take the stairs. But it’s not enough that we simply take the stairs. We must also go out and make healthy cities again. We must be friendly to bicycles and friendly to pedestrians, in order to make a people oriented city.

Active Living Research  
<http://www.activelivingresearch.org/alr/>

Department of City Planning  
<http://www.nyc.gov/dcp/>

Department of Design and Construction  
<http://www.nyc.gov/ddc>

Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
<http://www.nyc.gov/health>

Department of Parks and Recreation  
<http://www.nycgovparks.org/>

Department of Transportation  
<http://www.nyc.gov/dot>

Full Spectrum Development  
<http://www.fullspectrumny.com/>

Fit City 1 Report  
[http://www.aiany.org/chapter/statements/FITCITY\\_PREPRESS.pdf](http://www.aiany.org/chapter/statements/FITCITY_PREPRESS.pdf)

Fit City 2 Report  
[http://www.aiany.org/chapter/statements/FitCity2\\_Publication\\_Final.pdf](http://www.aiany.org/chapter/statements/FitCity2_Publication_Final.pdf)

Office of Management and Budget  
<http://www.nyc.gov/omb>

Pedestrian Studio  
<http://www.pedestrianstudio.com/>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
Guide to Community Preventive Services, Recommendations for Physical Activity  
<http://www.thecommunityguide.org/pa>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) StairWELL to Better Health  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/hwi/toolkits/stairwell/index.htm>



## Fit City 3: Promoting Physical Activity through Design From Research and Case Studies to Policy and Practice

### Fit Cit report prepared by the American Institute of Architects, New York Chapter.

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### Acknowledgements:

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

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Mary Bassett, MD, MPH, Deputy Commissioner,  
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### 2008 Speakers (in alphabetical order):

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James Sallis, PhD, Director, Active Living Research

Lynn Silver, MD, MPH, FAAP, Assistant Commissioner,  
NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

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