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## Brighter – and healthier – days ahead for Sun Valley

CAP project aims to infuse design strategies that promote healthier, more active lives in Denver's poorest neighborhood

Belying its bucolic name, Denver's Sun Valley neighborhood is largely industrial and economically challenged. Bicycle lanes are lacking and often don't connect to the city's bike-route network. Healthy food options are scarce. Sidewalks are crumbling or nonexistent. Needless to say, the area is ripe for an infusion of forward-thinking design that promotes healthier and more active lives for its residents.

Enter the [College of Architecture and Planning](#) at the [University of Colorado Denver](#) and the Colorado Health Foundation.

CAP recently was awarded a \$430,000 grant from the Foundation to lead a three-year project – “Creating Healthy Places Through Transformational Education and Design” – to transform the west Denver neighborhood by using the best principles of healthy community design and planning. Co-principal investigators are [Michael Jenson](#), PhD, associate dean and professor, architecture, and assistant vice chancellor of research and creative activities, and [Austin Troy](#), PhD, chair and professor, urban and regional planning.



Sun Valley is one of the more neglected of Denver neighborhoods. That's changing with redevelopment efforts that include the “Creating Healthy Places” project being led by CU Denver's College of Architecture and Planning. Photo by Eric Peterson, Confluence.

“Denver has a very high interest in redeveloping the neighborhood, and doing it the right way,” Jenson said. “This project will kick off a larger west Denver metro development plan. We’re using Sun Valley as a test case for innovative health and design ideas, which is why the Colorado Health Foundation is interested.”

Through research and studio classes, CU Denver students will get hands-on experience in the heart of the city. They will eventually engage community leaders and partners on how to integrate best practices in health and wellness into future developments across the Mile High City and region.

The goal is to catalyze Sun Valley: implement the best practices in healthy designs to change the community ethos from isolated, worn and sedentary to connected, vibrant and healthy.

## Far-reaching goals

While the effort focuses on Sun Valley, its goals are much more far-reaching.

In addition to educating cohorts of architects, planners and health care professionals in healthy design principles, the project will create an exportable pedagogical model that will be “scalable” – applicable to communities ranging from dense urban areas to small rural towns. Healthy environments are a critical global issue as, by 2030, chronic diseases will cause 52 million deaths per year, nearly five times the number from communicable diseases, according to the Urban Land Institute (ULI).

“In many communities across the state, the healthy choice is not the easy choice and the built environment has a profound impact on the health outcomes,” said Christopher Smith, senior program officer, the Colorado Health Foundation. “The Foundation is encouraging development practices that promote health and wellness and is actively supporting groups like ULI and CAP to foster creative design.”

Currently, many Sun Valley buildings and outdoor spaces tend to impede healthy lifestyles. Redevelopment offers an opportunity to practice the “nudge theory” of community design, according to Jenson. “We’re looking to build infrastructural nudges that help people make healthy choices,” he said.

## Some examples:

- Staircases built toward the front of buildings to encourage people to take the stairs instead of elevators;
- Safe bike lanes that connect to the wider network;
- Community gardens for residents to grow their own food; and
- Other healthy food and recreation options, such as markets brimming with fresh produce and new greenspaces.

The project team will explore how elements of ULI’s Building Healthy Places Toolkit: Strategies for Enhancing Health in the Built Environment could rejuvenate Sun Valley, which sits just west of Interstate 25 and extends from Sports Authority Field on the north to Sixth Avenue on the south. The team will also collaborate with the Denver Housing Authority (DHA) and CityCraft Ventures, a partner organization in the master planning process.

## Interdisciplinary approach



CAP  
will  
take  
the  
lead  
on

Creating more bike paths, and connecting them to the city bicycle-route network, is among the goals of the “Creating Healthy Places” project in Sun Valley. Photo by Eric Peterson, Confluence.

project, but the [Colorado School of Public Health](#), [College of Engineering and Applied Science](#), and [School of Public Affairs](#) will join on various phases of the project. Synergies from the interdisciplinary approach are expected to create a pipeline of ideas and proposals as well as ample student opportunities to research healthy environment design, according to Jenson.

While energy sustainability (efficiencies in lighting, heating, etc.) has dominated innovative architectural planning and design for years, the trend is now shifting toward health and wellness. “It’s a natural progression: designers are starting to do ‘well-building’ initiatives that fill in the things LEED certifications have missed,” he said. “This kind of work is being done at different levels, but nobody has really connected the dots. We’re going to try to connect more of the dots.”

Because developers generally don’t have time to sift through the data about building for healthy environments, CAP students and faculty – working with community partners and taking cues from ULI’s toolkit – will provide an invaluable clearinghouse of best practices, Jenson said.

‘Creating Healthy Places’ is a three-year project:

**Year 1:** Lecture series and interdisciplinary studios that engage students from various degree programs across campus, as well as community organizations.

**Year 2:** Workshops and building a communication network – website, social media campaign, etc. Students and faculty will collect data on Sun Valley – biophysical measurements, stakeholder surveys and other assessments – to evaluate the project’s progress toward its goals.

**Year 3:** Culminating symposium, best-practices manual, and launch of a health and design certificate that utilizes new and existing courses from across CU Denver.

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