

PROLOGUE

WHY I CARE ABOUT THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

A few years ago I was on a morning walk with Steve and the four children. “This walk for the government? This walk for the government?” he said repeatedly. “Yes, I can hear of that. I am a physician, a pediatrician, and I get the corner of public health to make a difference, to overcome their challenges, not to control people, but to be aware conditions where people can be healthy.”

As a public health officer, I can very well then harvest of my training—Epidemiology, pediatrics, epidemiology, statistics, toxicology, and molecular—but the most important tool is communication, it is to share information that is technically competent but also compassionate and honest. How we use our words, our focus, is important. Doctors call the meaning of disease something, though that word has a very different meaning in the US. Development means a lot of things to pediatricians, but in the State Department it means nation building. So in this book I am communicating ideas, and I hope the words I use are tools of health.

The book is intended to communicate some of the public health challenges that arise from our built

environment, to help others see what I see, so we can all play a part in designing healthier communities for our children and grandchildren.

The built environment is everything we have made in order to live our lives. It is our homes, places of business, public spaces, and parks and recreational areas—of the built. Beyond it extend to electric transmission lines, waste disposal facilities, and travel pathways that keep us moving, communicating, and functioning. Every building and bridge and pipe and car and air line is a result of someone’s imagination and at some point a decision was made to build with a functional structure or one that functions with a purpose.

The Golden Gate Bridge, in my opinion the most beautiful large bridge in the United States, was built at about the same time as the Empire State Building in New York City. The Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River was open by the beginning of World War II, bringing the Northwest and bringing water and electrical power to new effects. The three have captured our culture in concrete. These iconic structures were created during an economic downturn, when labor and investment, including