Designing For Happiness

*An urban-planning grocery list.*


Being raised in the city marks the brain. In 1965, epidemiologists began a tally in south London which was eventually used by psychologists to prove that people raised in cities are more prone to mental disorders than those raised in the countryside.

Even to the layman, the link between cities, stress and mental health appears to make sense. It seems a simple enough correlation: psychiatrists have proven that stress is a major trigger of mental disorders—and modern urban-living is widely perceived as stressful. Noise, a higher propensity of crime, a lack of spatial empathy, elbows in your ribcage, pollution, impossible demands in the workplace and the consequent need for overtime all contribute to a negative living environment in the city.

But the idea has not been widely tested. It is difficult to study whether something as complex as a 'city environment' has an impact on the brain. To make the parameters more complex, most growing cities include ever-burgeoning immigrant populations, which already have an increased risk of psychiatric disease associated with social isolation.

In Singapore, the tag of being the country with the highest concentration of millionaires does not come cheap—we have consistently ranked high in workplace stress and general unhappiness, and low on our ability to emote—though of course, surveys can be designed to reflect foregone conclusions, and rigour may often be lacking.

How might these “soft” findings, pertaining to the inhabitants of cities, be influenced by the “hard” physicality of our city environment? What are factors that can be considered in planning a better urban environment? Is it possible to design a happier city? We speak with Andres Sevtsuk of the City Form Lab at the Singapore University of Technology & Design in collaboration with the School of Architecture & Planning at MIT, which focuses on empirical studies of urban form.
Do you think there is a correlation between one's urban environment and happiness? Tenuous as the term happiness might be.

To build any causality between urban form and happiness is extremely slippery ground. But that said, I would say that diversity is one of the most important things to worry about in urban planning, because diversity can generate equality.

A lot of sources of unhappiness, it seems to me, are about people making comparisons. It's not about their absolute fate, but they make comparisons to others. If you generate huge inequalities in cities, then people are bound to be very unhappy. They will always look up to the better off. But if you think about putting the rich and the poor, and different races and different classes in the same environment, then people will be able to benefit from the same urban space, the same infrastructure and resources of the district. That would be one step towards greater happiness.

What types of diversity are we talking about?

It is dangerous to go down a path where city districts become mono-functional—meaning they would only contain, for instance, specific jobs, or a certain demographic of people or businesses.

Diversity could include, for example, scale diversity—sizes of buildings, a mixture of new ones and old ones, demographic diversity—people of different income brackets, and racial diversity.
What are some other factors that are important for “good” urban environments in the city?

I think dense urban environments in contemporary cities really need to cater to a pedestrian environment. One of the key values of density is that they put things very close to each other, so usually dense places automatically produce a lot of opportunity for commerce and businesses, with so many potential clients and patrons nearby.

In dense environments, people tend to walk from one place to another. Around the world, people walk around in dense parts of cities very much—for example in Manhattan, in Tokyo. From a planning perspective, it’s important to make that a high priority: to make the connections between streets amenable, designed for pedestrians as much as cars.

If you move on foot, the amount and type of information you can take in with your eyes is far more different that what you would take in from a car windshield. On foot—that’s the real scale and speed that builds impressions for people.

The basis of walkability is that it has to provide comfortable and safe walking environment. Connections have to be oriented towards pedestrians. It has to be easy to cross streets, pedestrian movement shouldn’t be restricted, routes should generally be direct. It also means that you need ‘activated edges’. It has been shown around the world that if you take the exact same walking distance, say 1 kilometre, and the walk is in line with a lot of interesting things in the city, versus if the walk is along an empty road, people will feel that the empty walk is very much longer.
Okay, let’s see, so far, we have diversity and walkability…

Also, adaptability.

Could you explain what adaptability might mean in an urban-planning context?

Adaptability, in this context, means places need to be designed in ways in which they can accommodate very different sorts of uses and activities than originally planned for, that they can adapt over time.

Alternatively, it can also mean designing something in a way that can house very different activities. There’s a whole set of strategies to do that—for example, to over-provide and make things a little bigger than what they need to be, or you separate the changeable and non-changeable components very clearly, so that you know what can be altered, and what can not.

One of the best examples of where this works really well in Singapore would be the big podium blocks of the ‘70s, like the Chinatown Complex or the Waterloo or Rochor Centre. These buildings—I mean—how many times have they changed tenants on the ground, and they’re still full. They are these frameworks, skeletons, for all kinds of activities, rather than designated, crafted buildings for one use only. There’s no clear answer as to what the contemporary version of that is, but its important that some of that thinking goes into designing in the here and now.
Could you speak a little about density?

Density always has both negative and positive aspects. Density can bring more congestion, with a large number of people and vehicles using the same amount of land, but it can also produce a lot of positive things—new businesses, new institutions, new culture, activities of all sorts. It is important for everyone to have access to these things, because then people don’t mind density. If you benefit from all the positive aspects of density, then you see the immediate gains, and you won’t mind it very much.

That’s why if the subway breaks down on Manhattan, no one is going to make a big deal out of it, because they are not willing to move away to New Jersey or Long Island where the subway might work more efficiently (with a smaller load), because they see the positive effects of what they get back everyday, living in the heart of New York City.

Perhaps in Singapore, as a tiny city-state, we might not understand this on the same scale?

Yes, but even so, in Singapore, a lot of these positive effects of density are all clustered in the CBD, in the downtown area. It’s important to bring more of them out to the heartland—and I see some efforts now in building out Jurong and Tampines—but it should also the other way around, to bring more affordable housing into the downtown area.

Of course one could argue that there is a good network of roads and a pretty solid public transport network that connects all these places, so everyone can benefit via access through the subway, but that is maybe not enough—it’s different when people really live there, to mix things up.
But do you feel that from the urban-planning point of view, to have a public housing block, say, in Marina Bay, right next to these world-class attractions like Marina Bay Sands and the Gardens by the Bay, would be to dampen the tightly-curated experience of these places, which seem to be designed more for tourists in mind?

Think of Hyde Park in London, or Central Park in New York, it’s not for tourists—it’s for everyone. You can easily mix up foreigners and locals, the old and the young, etc. In fact, most tourists want to see the local life. It’s boring if you only see other tourists with their cameras and their Lonely Planet guide.

Also, besides, the tourists, for example in Europe and the US, it’s common to have zoning regulation—if you build a condo, you would need to provide 10 or 20% at affordable rent. So the owner of the condo has to rent them out at the rates of HDB blocks, essentially. These kinds of policies are important because they allow of people of all kinds to benefit not just from the property itself, but from the city infrastructure and the amenities being offered—and these are generally constructed from public funds anyway—like streets or waterfronts.

In some ways, the role of urban planning is to fix the things the market won’t produce automatically. If you only rely on market forces, you’re going to end up with many problems in cities. So it’s important for the public sector to come in and say this is important in the long term and we need to do it.
As humans, how much of our reaction to the built environment is intuitive? Subjective? How affected are we by city design, and on what level?

If you look at Nietzsche’s parameters of needs, the way cities arrange things and the way it affects users of these places is not critical, of course. The most primary human concerns that need to be fulfilled are that we need to have enough food and security; we should not die in cities or be diseased, etc. So at that level, the arrangement of cities does not have a critical influence.

But contemporary cities take these first needs for granted. In any city of the developed world, you expect not to die of cholera; you expect to not be run over; you expect to have enough food and even enough fun.

At the more subconscious level, I think it plays an enormous role. People don’t explicitly talk about it or think about it, but the way we use the city has a huge influence on our daily lives. What we encounter, who we encounter, and what we decide to do depends very much on what is available to us around where we live, work, or pass by.

City design has a profound influence on people’s perception of and attraction to the environment. City design is meant to cater all sorts of opportunities to you—how to get from A to B, where to meet up with friends, where to go jogging, etc. If they are there you will do them, if they are not there you won’t do them. So there’s a real effect that good and diverse environments can have on day-to-day human satisfaction and development.

There is a social aspect to this as well—if you encounter things in a neighbourhood that are not necessarily for you, but are meant for others, then you inevitably get exposed to their ways of life. For instance, I have certain very specific stores in my neighbourhood (Tiong Bahru) that I would never buy anything from, like this one selling Buddhist goods and paper lanterns. But I find it interesting to pass by them and see other people buying them, and I learn something about them along the way. Or you have different ethnic
restaurants and one day you decide to try Indian food—you didn’t ask for it or crave it, but the environment offers it to you, and you end up trying something new.

So you think this diversity of the environment can add to happiness?

Yes, I think it’s almost innate or biological: as humans, we are curious creatures who love discovering things. The fundamental reason why people prefer to live in cities rather than countrysides is that cities offer greater interaction.

Also perhaps there are varying degrees of the quality of interaction? In modern city life, “interaction” might just mean jostling with people at rush hour.

Maybe the type of interaction you get is mediated upon the difference between convenience and diversity in urban planning. Convenience means it is easy for you get the things that you need done with facilities in place—supermarkets, pubs, banks, taxi stations. That’s convenience; that still caters to one demographic. Diversity means that you get exposed to things that you didn’t ask for, and you encounter them. I think that’s what’s really important for a good urban environment, because ultimately that makes people more aware of each other.

In Paris, a lot of immigrant neighbourhoods were built outside the major ringed roads, the ‘nice’ areas, in public housing, and that eventually led to riots a few years ago, because the contrast was so strong. There was no integration between the two: one environment was so awful and the other was so beautiful—people get upset over that. They feel like it’s unfair—they’re all living in the same city after all. So the more people interact with one another, the more they see of each other on a daily basis, the more they understand one another—it’s essential.

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