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Urban experimentalist Charles Montgomery is the award-winning author of *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*, in which he explores the link between the ways we design our cities and how we think, feel and act, referencing psychology, neuroscience and behavioural economics

# BUILDING HAPPINESS

CITIES SHOULD MAKE US HAPPY BY FOSTERING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT DESIGN AND CREATING CLOSELY CONNECTED COMMUNITIES, WITH THE BENEFITS SHARED BY EVERYONE

BY CHARLES MONTGOMERY

“Whatever creates or increases happiness, or some part of happiness, we ought to do; whatever destroys or hampers happiness, or gives rise to its opposite, we ought not to do,” said Aristotle. So what is a city for?

I believe the answer is straightforward: the highest purpose of every city is to help residents achieve happiness. After all, happiness lies at the core of every decision most people make. As Freud said, we strive to become happy and remain so as long as possible.

Of course, our desire for happiness does not, in itself, make it a worthy policy goal. But the fact is that happy feelings are both good both for individuals and good for society. People who say they are happy with their lives tend to have more activity in the pleasure centres of their brains and less stress hormones in their blood. They tend to get sick less often, live longer, sleep better, report fewer psychological problems and are more productive at work.

There should be no question that happiness should be a worthy goal for city-builders.

But what makes people happy in cities? Is it the sum total of pleasure minus pain? Is it wealth? Safety and security? Good health? Or meaningful work?

In fact, it is influenced by all these things, though as I explain in *Happy City*, one urban attribute trumps them all. The economist John Helliwell learned this when he examined surveys comparing social trust and life satisfaction in Canadian cities. The geography of well-being was clear: people reported being happiest in cities where they expressed the highest levels of trust for their neighbours.

Interestingly, Canada’s big, rich cities – Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary – fell near the bottom in both trust and life satisfaction. Social trust is much more powerful even than wealth for building happiness. It’s no coincidence that citizens of the country where people trust their neighbours, strangers and even their government the most – Denmark – consistently comes out on or near the top of happiness polls.

There is no more crucial ingredient for human happiness than strong, positive social

connections. Connected communities are happier, more resilient in hard times and better equipped to handle economic challenges. Geographers have found a direct correlation between a city’s ability to create face-to-face encounters and entrepreneurial creativity: places with more potential for social interaction actually produce more patent applications.

If we care about happiness, we must build cities that help facilitate these positive social connections. This is both an art and a science. Architecture, urban design, public spaces and transportation systems together alter the way we think, feel and treat other people in ways most of us never realise.

The bad news is that many cities have spent the past half-century designing social connections out of our lives with cities planned entirely around private cars, where homes, workplaces, shops and recreation areas are segregated into distinct zones.

No nation has spent more building these kinds of places than the US, and Americans are now paying the social cost. Those who live in car-dependent developments outside of urban centres report feeling much less trust for their neighbours than people who live in walkable neighbourhoods where housing is mixed with shops, services and places to work. They are much less likely to even know their neighbours. Meanwhile, the more time that people in any given neighbourhood spend commuting, the less likely they are to play team sports, hang out with friends, go to community events or get involved in social groups.

Long commutes take a toll on home life, too. A Swedish study found that people who endure more than a 45-minute commute were 40 per cent more likely to divorce.

Nor is all well in the super-dense, vertical neighbourhoods that dominate Hong Kong, Manhattan, Dubai and downtown Vancouver. The one residential environment where people report lower levels of trust than the exurban fringe is in the residential tower. For decades, people in towers have complained about feeling both lonely and crowded at the very same time. Even in Vancouver, where a shining forest of

“Our cities, like society itself, are shared projects: their success depends on the willingness of residents to make choices that benefit complete strangers”



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high-status, condominium towers has won accolades for liveability, those who dwell in the sky still express lower trust for their neighbours than people living on the ground. The tower, at least in its current form, has not proved a nimble machine for building social relations.

So we are faced with a special challenge. The realities of resource scarcity, population growth and climate change demand we embrace denser city living. How can we build more sociability, and thus more happiness, into the central city of the future?

We must start by paying attention to how design influences how we feel. In 2011, I joined the BMW Guggenheim Lab, a pop-up urban laboratory in an empty lot in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Working with scientists and citizens, we conducted a series of playful, participatory experiments to shed light on the emotional city.

In one, participants were asked to enter a specially constructed “subway” car, in which their personal space was reduced by gradually squeezing the walls together. With each new squeeze, participants became more tense, made uncomfortable by the forced proximity.

Humans evolved in small groups of hunter-gatherers, and most of us still feel a deep need to control our exposure to people outside our core family or social group. We benefit from social contact, but we need to feel the ability to control these interactions, or we retreat.

This was illustrated by a study of university students given two different living arrangements. In the first, the 34 students lived in double bedrooms along a corridor, with a shared lounge and bathroom. The second dorm was just as dense, but students lived in double rooms clustered in pods of three around semi-private lounges. Students in the corridor residences reported feeling crowded and stressed out and retreated from each other. But students in the pod residences actually made friends. They were more sociable, helpful and empathic, and they carried that behaviour with them into other parts of their lives.

The lesson? We may be able to nurture more supportive relationships simply by limiting the number of people in any particular residential

cluster. That may mean limiting the number of apartment units sharing a particular elevator bank, or building more rowhouses, townhouses and courtyard apartments rather than towers.

It is also crucial to pay attention to the soft zones between public and private space. When he studied the way people in Denmark and Canada behave in their front yards, Danish architect Jan Gehl found that residents chat the most with passers-by when yards are shallow enough to allow for conversation, but deep enough to allow for retreat. The perfect yard for conviviality? Exactly 3.25 metres deep. Planners interested in building happier places should stop mandating deep setbacks for suburban homes.

In New York, we conducted experiments through walking tours of the Lower East Side and discovered that even small infusions of nature, such as trees and shrubs, cheered people up. The shape of buildings mattered, too: along the busy thoroughfare East Houston Street, people reported feeling much happier on the sidewalk of a messy old tenement block of small shops and bars than they did outside the sleek glass facade of a supermarket.

This phenomenon in turn is also likely to change people’s behaviour. Through extensive observation in cities around the world, Gehl found that busy, permeable facades cause people to walk more slowly and pause more often, turning empty spaces into social places. With more pedestrians, streets become safer, too. But social streets almost never happen by accident – they are designed.

In recent years, public health experts have warned of the health dangers of the sedentary car-dependent lifestyle. But city builders also need to pay attention to the feel-good factor that comes from walking or cycling to work. In the Netherlands, people who cycle to work report feeling more joy and less fear, rage and sadness than drivers or transit users.

The ways we commute also influence how we treat other people. In Vancouver, commuters reported experiencing more rudeness and incivility while driving than with any other mode of transport, including public transport. A simple reason is that we tend to be kinder

when we can read each others’ faces. We communicate with our eyes and our expressions, often without even realising it.

If walking and cycling feel so good, why do only a small minority of commuters in most cities do it? The answer is simple: our cities design walking into or out of our lives. Auto-loving planners have pushed most destinations beyond the pedestrian or cyclist’s reach, and aesthetics and geometry change our behaviour even when destinations are within reach. Most people tend to walk farther when streets feel safe and interesting. People who live in central New York or London typically walk between a third to a half mile to go shopping. That’s a four- to 10-minute stroll. But dump us in a vast parking lot surrounded by big-box outlets and our inclination to walk evaporates. Even when people are equipped with shopping carts, they tend not to endure so much as the three-minute stroll between big box retailers.

Cities that care about health and sociability need to do more than encourage denser, mixed-use development. They must promote active, interesting, permeable street edges and stop the proliferation of big, blank walls in central cities. Fortunately, New York, Melbourne and Copenhagen have actually taken steps to ban long, blank facades on some streets.

Our cities, like society itself, are shared

one psychologist has labelled “pedestrian rage”.

Urban design can help lead us back to the notion of the shared city. Environments that feel comfortable and safe may actually prime our brains for trust.

When we build convivial public spaces, we are investing in the altruistic city. That’s because each trust-building encounter begets more. Neuroscientists find that positive, trusting interactions prompt our brains to shower us with feel-good hormones such as oxytocin, which prompt us to trust people more and behave better.

What kinds of choices would we make in real life if we felt more trust and empathy towards our fellow city dwellers? Would we vote, spend, live and move as though our cities really are a shared project?

It’s too urgent a question not to pursue. Even though it is now easier than ever for individuals to retreat from neighbours and strangers, the greatest of human satisfactions lies in working and playing cooperatively with other people.

We simply must pay attention to the ways that our buildings, public spaces and mobility systems influence our social lives. The evidence will help us undo the damage done to cities over the past half-century. It will help us build cities that acknowledge the truth: that the social city, the sustainable city and the happy city are the

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projects. Their success depends on the willingness of residents to make choices that benefit strangers. Yet modern cities can corrode trust and goodwill. Surveys have shown, for example, that people who live in an auto-dependent sprawl are not just less likely to volunteer for social causes or vote, but also express less willingness to pay taxes than people in more connected communities. Meanwhile, severe crowding on downtown sidewalks has been found to trigger antisocial thoughts that

01 In Manhattan, lack of personal space and forced proximity to others can impact happiness

02 Copenhagen reports high levels of trust between people, which results in a healthier population