HAPPINESS

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.

Charles Montgomery

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 the country where people trust their neighbours, strangers and even their government the most – Denmark – consistently wins out over their neighbours, strangers and even their communities. The geography of well-being was clear: people reported being happiest in cities where they expressed the highest levels of trust for 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.

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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.

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. Not all is 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 fringes is 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
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Projects. Their success depends on the willingness of residents to make choices that benefit strangers. Yet modern cities can conspire to trust and goodwill. Surveys have shown, for example, that people who live in an auto-dependent city 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 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 compact urban spaces, we are investing in the altruistic city. That’s because each trust-building encounter begets more. Neuronomists find that positive, trusting interactions prime our brains to trust people with good feel-good chemicals 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 too urgent not to pursue for those that care about social impacts. Gehl’s experiments to shed light on the emotional city.

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 more, were more sociable, helped each other, and they carried that behaviour with them into other parts of their lives.

The lesson here is that we can 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 urban spaces in Denmark and Canada behove in their front yards, Danish architect Jan Gehl found that residents that chat with passers-by when yards are shallow enough to allow for conversation, but deep enough to prevent mowing. The perfect yard for conviviality? Exactly 3.25 metres deep. Planners interested in building happily places should stop mandating Lawns, and give us small, deep yards.

In New York, we conducted experiments through communities 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 façade 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 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 energetic, and more sociable, healthier and happier, and they carry that behaviour with them into other parts of their lives.

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