

Happy City Workshop

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Building happiness into BC communities

Urban systems influence the way we feel, behave and interact with each other in ways that many of us fail to realize. In a world of conflicting goals and complex systems, it can be easy to overlook the urban design/well-being connection. But policymakers around the world are embracing wellbeing as a legitimate and necessary goal. Jurisdictions from Bhutan to France to the United Nations have adopted happiness indices to help guide urban development and economic policy. Cities need to catch up.

In March, 2015, elected municipal officials from around the Province of British Columbia took up the challenge at the Centre for Civic Governance High Ground conference. With help from the Happy City team, they explored how to use emerging evidence from public health, psychology and other fields to design more wellbeing into communities. Then they focused their attention on a case study: a neighborhood in transition in the District of North Vancouver. Here is what they learned:

Elements of Wellbeing



Urban Happiness and Sociability

How can we build more happiness into neighborhoods and cities? The first step is to identify the elements of physical and psychological wellbeing. Then, we must consider how urban design, architecture, planning and systems can influence these elements.

After core needs are met, the most powerful driver of human wellbeing is social connectedness. People with strong, positive relationships with family and friends are happier, healthier, and live longer than people who are socially isolated. Cities and societies in which people express high levels of trust in

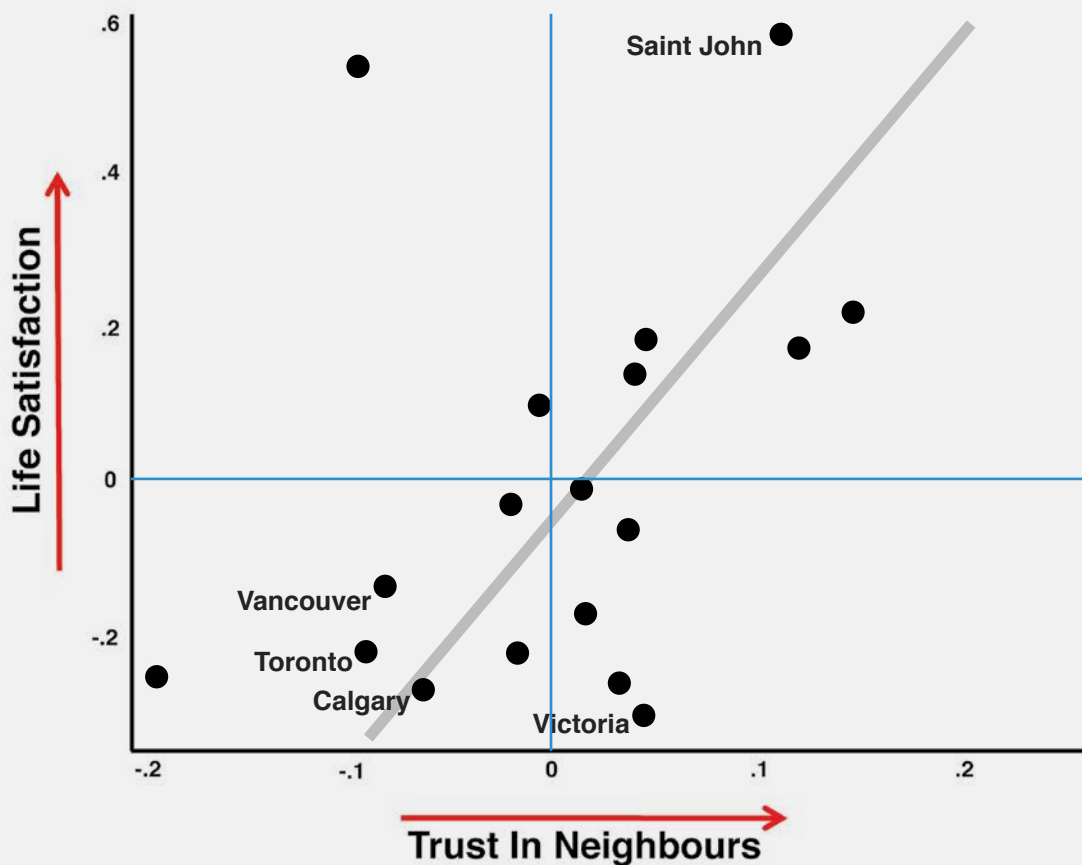
neighbours and strangers are both happier and more productive. So we focussed on this essential element of wellbeing, and asked:

How can we design urban environments that foster trusting relationships and/or encourage trust-building encounters?

How can we create environments and systems that enable people to spend more time with family, friends and community?

How can we use design to help people to feel more control over their social interactions by enabling them to advance or retreat as they wish?

Trusting Cities = Happier Cities



Courtesy of John F. Helliwell

Image 1.
Group member sharing their Design Principle with other participants.



Boosting sociability: Shared Principles

After considering evidence on the relationship between design and social connections, participants were challenged to create their own principles for social design. Working in teams, they established the following shared principles:

1. The city should design spaces that encourage inclusion of people of different age, culture and abilities.
2. The city should encourage space for spontaneous gatherings, big and small.
3. The city should intertwine nature into the everyday experience in a way that inspires sociability.
4. The city should build spaces that allow people to interact through arts and culture.
5. The city should design transportation networks so to increase access to social interaction for all people by limiting the need for automobiles.

Image 2.
 Case Study site: North Vancouver, Mountain hwy.
 Fern st. and Hunter St.
 Taken from Lower Lynn Town Centre proposed
 development concept map.



Case Study: North Vancouver

Armed with their guiding principles, participants assessed their case study site: a neighborhood in transition in the District of North Vancouver. The site, proposed by DNV city councillor Matthew Bond, consisted of several blocks of Mountain Highway between the designated new town centre of Lower Lynn, and Seylynn Park. (See Image 2)

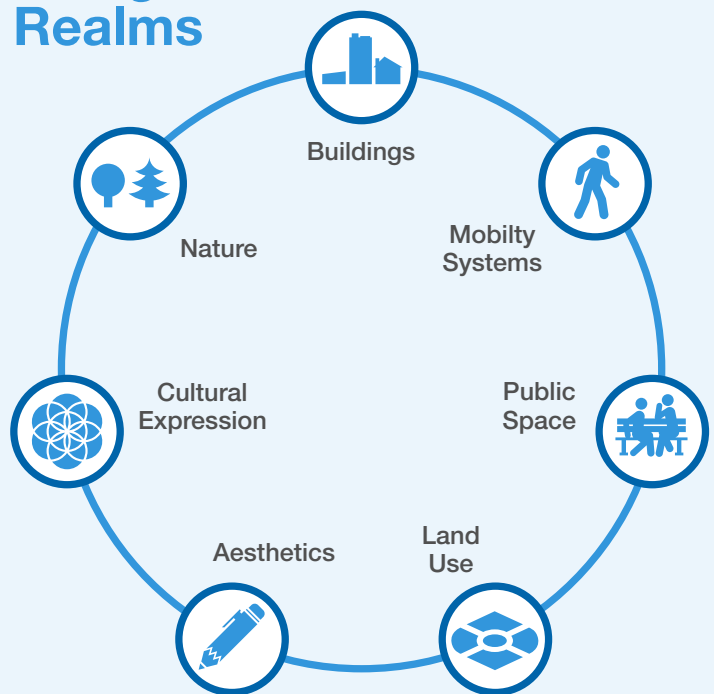
Participants were invited to imagine design interventions. These design interventions used the principles generated earlier.

Each team focused on a specific realm of design: buildings, public space, land use, mobility systems, and nature.

They worked with two goals:

- 1) Assess to what extent our design principles were embodied in existing urban architecture, spaces and systems.
- 2) Devise policy, design or other interventions to foster happiness by supporting sociability.

Design Realms



Case Study: North Vancouver

Participants made the following observations and recommendations, responding to existing conditions, rather than the DNV's master plan for the area:

Team 1: Building

Design Principle:

The city should weave nature into everyday experience in a way that inspires sociability.

Observations:

The current state of housing in the area is very poor. The new tower development may contradict our design principles no matter how beautiful their design.

Recommendations:

- Repurpose existing community centre into a community garden and day-care.
- Create mixed-use development and mixed housing options.

Team 2: Land-Use

Design Principle

The city should offer spaces that encourage spontaneous gatherings, big and small.

Observations

Current zoning of commercial residential mixed use that should be utilized more efficiently.

Recommendations

- Mountain Hwy should take on the characteristics of a boulevard.
- Create space for public art and a Farmers Market near community centre.
- Zone for commercial space between Fern St. and Hunter St.
- Blend the single-family homes into medium/moderate infill density residential.
- Replace current parking lots with ones further away from housing.
- Light industry on the outskirts of the development.

Team 3: Mobility Systems

Design Principle

The city should design transportation networks that foster social interaction for all people by limiting the need for automobiles.

Observations

Cycling is an important part of many North Vancouverites' lives. Therefore safety of cyclists should be maximized. Streets require places to stop and rest or socialize.

Recommendations

- Build corner bulges in order to calm traffic and increase safety.
- Implement a green spine along Mountain Highway and in between Orwell St. and Mountain Hwy.
- The mobility systems must incorporate a sense of inclusivity along with connectivity by giving multiple options for mobility (i.e. cycle, walk, transit, drive).
- Implement bike lanes and improve pedestrian paths in order to connect people from home to bus-stops.
- Condense street to 2 lanes.



Image 3. Participants discussing potential Design Interventions.

Team 4: Public Spaces

Design Principle

The city should offer spaces that encourage inclusion of people of different age, culture and abilities.

Observations

There may not be need for two baseball diamonds and their current position seems unsafe since they are close to a busy road. The existing community centre appears underused and unsightly.

Recommendations

- Pedestrian Activated cross walks.
- Sidewalks should have berms and benches.
- Move baseball diamond and replace it with elevated green space
- Redesign existing Community Centre.
- Build a natural amphitheater and outdoor playground.
- Encourage mobile food vendors to operate in the area.

Team 5: Nature

Design Principle

The city should weave nature into everyday experience in a way that inspires sociability.

Observations

Since there are riparian areas nearby, it's a great opportunity to educate people on their ecology. Changing park dimensions may create a more natural aesthetic.

Recommendations

- Create an extensive, accessible trail network through the park.
- Remodel existing community centre into a ecological interpretive centre and day-care.
- Create a picnic/BBQ shelter.

Overcoming challenges to healthy, happy design

Psychologists have found that individuals are not necessarily good at making decisions that maximize wellbeing in the long run. This applies to policymakers, too. We all have a tendency to oversimplify complex problems. We put too much emphasis on things we can see, and not enough on the sometimes-invisible systems that influence our behaviour. We tend to value immediate payoffs more than future rewards. And we are too often guided by outdated ways of thinking that have become ingrained in our bylaws, our building practices and our daily habits.

But there is hope for urban happiness. In our brief workshop, for example, we found that participants—some with little or no design experience—were able to co-produce thoughtful, context-specific design interventions. Please keep in mind that these interventions were proposed after a short introduction to the site, and with very little knowledge of the District of North Vancouver's emerging plans for the area.

Still, their work confirmed our belief that clear principles informed by robust evidence on wellbeing can help all of us make better decisions around urban design and development. We encourage policymakers to invite their fellow citizens to join the collaborative process.

