



Walkable cities, public space networks and river systems

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Cities are about people.

Cities are about people and people have dreams, aspirations, desires and needs. People make cities come alive: in streets, squares, piazzas, parks, and open spaces. Debates on urban development between architects and urban planners usually deal with houses and planning, possibly plotting. Debates on mobility and public transport usually deal with frequency, seamless transit, real-time information, transit hubs and/or customised tracks. However, architecture, urban planning and mobility share the same crucial needs for efficient land-use and urban integration.

For many years oil was cheap and readily available. Cities were built for cars. Wide streets, multiple lanes, urban motorways, along with this came traffic noise, pedestrian tunnels and bridges, immense esplanades that were associated with the cost of welfare and economic progress. This is no longer how it is perceived, nor is.

Too many cars generate sub-standard air quality which also impacts the quality of public health. For instance, in 2014, 92% of the world population was living in places where the WHO air quality guidelines levels were not met. Policies and investments were introduced supporting cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing, power generation, industry and better municipal waste management. Ample research has further demonstrated there is a strong correlation between car-dependency and obesity. In other words, in car dependent cities and countries you see the highest obesity rates. More attractively said: active mobility habits reduce your waistline and so support your health.

There is much we know and can do. The hardest could be becoming aware, embracing change and adopting new habits. With a 7.5 billion world population, fertile land no longer comes cheap. People have flocked to cities (and will continue to do so), yet rather than sprawling outwards, cities need planning to become more compact.





What about building more high rises in urban centres?

Most likely not, if no collateral planning, energy and transit measures are taken to free up public space. More high rises also imply more shadow, less natural light, increased energy usage and more pressure on the existing streets and mobility network.

Humans are social and emotional.

We like intimacy and enjoy community. We like to be on our own and with others, we like to meet and take pleasure in others' presence.

Quality of urban public space depends on its human scale, on the programming of the built environment, on the space that is left for chaos, on the margin that is left for creativity, on the interaction between what goes on inside the buildings as well as at street level, the dialogue between in and outside that influence our perception and behavior.



So where is the Human Scale?

Streets like boots are made for walking, parks, piazzas, and squares are meant to be seen, have random connections, play, discuss and debate. Through people, walkable cities are dynamic networks of big and small public spaces comparable to river systems. Disrupting a river system can cause severe droughts. A very dramatic illustration of this may well be the Aral Sea in Kazackstan. When in the early 1960s, the Soviet government decided the two main feeder rivers of the Aral Sea, the Amu Darya located in the south and the Syr Darya located in the east, would be diverted to irrigate the desert in an attempt to grow rice, melons, cereals, and cotton. Up until then it was the world's fourth largest saline lake, and contained 10grams of salt per liter.

Not only was all this water being diverted into canals at the expense of the Aral Sea supply, but the majority of it was even soaked up by the desert and obviously wasted (between 25% and 75% of it, depending on the time period). The consequences ranged from unexpected negative climate feedbacks to public health issues, affecting the lives of millions of people in and out of the region.

Likewise, it is easy to understand that disrupting human flows between squares causes isolation, segregation and insecurity but also jamming. Integration of both small and large squares encourages people to walk, promotes exchange, cohesion, city dynamics, city life and diversity. In short, a walkable string of open public spaces promotes public health, urban resilience, climate change mitigation.

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Anne Leemans - YellowdesignFoundation/FID

“The EU and its Member States are committed to a **binding target of an at least 40% domestic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990**, to be fulfilled jointly, as set out in the conclusions by the European Council of October 2014.”,



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