

ACCELERATING THE SHIFT TOWARD MORE SUSTAINABLE CITIES: SOME THOUGHTS FROM URBAN AGE INSTITUTE

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Easier than you Think

The principles of sustainable urban design are, for the most part, already on the shelf – and especially so in cities where travel distances can be reduced. Although these principles can be improved upon and deepened, there is much that cities can do today, as Mayor Bloomberg's plan so well illustrates for New York City.

The “Meeting of the Minds” has been designed to assemble and review these plans and indicate where the deepening can take place.

Urban sustainability challenges might seem daunting, but they are no more far-fetched than traffic calming was twenty years ago. A growing consensus seems to be emerging amongst city leaders, architects, planners, engineers, transport system designers, and developers: city-level environmental challenges can be addressed head-on during the coming years. Smart efforts are underway to discover the principles of sustainable urban design, to rebuild our cities to make them more sustainable ecologically, and to create communities that are renewable in all sense of that word.

What can become of the broad goals of a smarter urban design strategy? It must enhance the well-being of inhabitants of cities; strengthen community; improve social and physical health; and increase civic engagement by reshaping the built environment of our cities and suburbs.

Achieving these goals requires, first and foremost, a well-functioning public realm -- meetings, encounters, dialogue among people young and old with a diversity of backgrounds, acquaintances, friends and strangers.

To be effective public interactions must exist within an urban fabric that weaves different communities together into a coherent whole. For this reason, and others, designers of sustainable urban spaces are now adopting some time-tested principles: appropriate human scale architecture; mixed-use shops/houses; and a compact urban fabric of blocks, streets and squares. Outdoor cafes and restaurants, farmers markets, and community festivals are also being used to enliven the public realm.

The principles of sustainable urban design help to create a ["city of short distances"](#) where balanced transportation planning makes possible some smart commuting options: use of pedestrian networks, bicycle networks, traffic calmed streets and public transportation. Regional planning for controlled growth, focused economic development and an integrated transportation system – these are all essential elements of sustainable urban design.

Sustainable urban design respects each city's unique identity, its "[DNA](#)". In fact, such design considers the city as a work of art.

The principles of sustainable urban design, when practiced, help to generate cities that are ecologically sustainable (by reducing energy consumption, emphasizing infill and reconstruction, eschewing greenfield development), and also socially sustainable (by promoting the individual's social, mental and physical health and the community's cultural, economic and social well-being).

Cities on the Rise

This is the urban century. The world's cities, particularly those in the developing world, are growing at an inexorable pace. Three billion people live in cities, and that number is growing each and every day. Some estimates suggest that by 2025 that number will reach five billion, or nearly 70 percent of the world's population. A majority of this growth will occur in the cities of the developing world.

Cities are now becoming markets in their own right. As their populations have exploded during the last fifteen years, their national governments have granted them greater political and fiscal decentralization.

From Bilbao and Barcelona, Singapore and Hong Kong, London and Vancouver, Paris and Rotterdam, Seattle and Sydney: these cities have developed increasing autonomy from their national governments; setting, collecting and spending their own taxes and trading internationally; developing their reputations as aggressive entrepôts. What is more surprising is that hundreds of lesser known cities -- from Ahmedabad, India to Cebu City in the Philippines -- have now proved credit-worthy enough to warrant their own international bond ratings.

Successful big-city mayors carry a lot more clout than they used to -- especially when running for national office. Jacques Chirac was mayor of Paris before becoming president of France. Ying-Jeou Ma, was the mayor of Taipei before ascending to the presidency of Taiwan. In Central and Latin America, the office of mayor is increasingly the stepping-stone to national prominence. Examples include Honduras, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile.

Mayors today have high aspirations for public service, and are actively seeking tools to aid them in their quest. They need to be well informed and media savvy, possess a global network of business partners and investors and remain firmly connected to both their cities and the wider urban world.

Learning Cities

Civic leadership in cities is essential for cities to learn. Cities are learning organizations, and some cities are clearly better at this than others. How can cities harness the learning process in order to accelerate their move towards greater sustainability? Curitiba, for instance, is celebrated as an environmentally sound city, but few realize that the key to

her success was establishing a rigorous system for learning which, over many years, impacted that city's planning decisions, transport decisions, and even financial decisions. (For a fuller exploration, please see Tim Campbell's essay and background research, sponsored by The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation: <http://www.urbanage.org/usi>)

As a result, city leaders must now operate in a completely new global context. Beyond the familiar challenges of waste management, paving the streets, providing safe housing, schools and transportation, they must now deal with increased political and fiscal autonomy, environmental hazards and natural disasters, refugee immigration, infrastructure financing, employing the unemployed, protecting citizen security, and information management.

Efficient service delivery is no longer enough. Risk management will be the by-word for the decades to come. City administrations are expected to effectively manage growth while enhancing the competitiveness and livability of their cities. It is crucial to nearly two thirds of the world's population that they do their job well so that cities can thrive.

This is precisely where “smart city” initiatives come into play. Without them, big cities will lack the sources of innovation that make them both engines of efficiency and welcome hosts to the private sector partners which can generate economic opportunities for the poor, the emerging middle class and everyone else.

In this context, what are the central goals of a smarter and more sustainable urban design?

- Rebuild community by replacing sprawl with compact, human scale urban fabric
- Recognize and combat the negative impact of our built environment on physical, social and mental health
- Adopt planning and urban design decisions that will make our cities more livable for children and the elderly
- Emphasize environmentally sustainable land use patterns which will also help to reduce extreme economic disparities
- Strengthen compact urban neighborhoods to maintain diversity of ethnic and cultural identity
- Build multifunctional cities which regenerate civic engagement and democratic participation.

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