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# Hedonistic Urbanism

Christopher Martin suggests ways to connect self-interest and societal good

**B**ehaviour change programmes have for some time been relied on to encourage people to do things that, rather obviously, they aren't currently doing. This is often a difficult task, as people 'normally' have reasons for behaving the way that they do; behaviours are, in essence, the result of an environment which has invited them to act in certain ways. This reflects the fact that places shape our behaviour, and that behaviour over time becomes culture: the way we do things.

Right now, globally in terms of cities, we are not in a good place. We have an inactivity crisis, where doing nothing is one of the biggest killers in society. We have growing urban loneliness and mental health crises. And, we have a climate emergency. The way we have shaped cities has played its role in the development of these crises, and the way we shape cities going forward holds the answer.

If we are to fight these crises and accommodate the forecast rapid urban growth, we need to use the space between buildings as a catalyst to solve them, rather than principally to serve the needs of a commodity, as we have done for most of the last century. As people have lived for a long time in places where the space between buildings has been formed to suit the needs of the car, their behaviours have been shaped accordingly, with the result that this way of life is now viewed by many as their culture. Changing behaviours is therefore a great deal more challenging, as people do not see improvements in urban design and transport schemes as making cities better and trying to tackle crises; they see them as an attack on their culture. For this reason, we need to rely more on design, and approach projects with the understanding that design and behaviour change aren't separate things. We need to compel people to change by making what's best for cities and for society, a far more attractive choice. In short, we need to marry self-interest and societal good.

How do we change behaviours through design and get people to choose the things that society needs them to choose? Human beings change their behaviour when they want to change their behaviour. This has been neatly highlighted over the last decade by the *Annual Copenhagen Bike Account* which shows overwhelmingly that people don't choose to cycle in Copenhagen because it is cheap, or because of the environment, or because it is healthy – they cycle because it is the easiest and quickest

thing to do. This comes down to human physiology: a 'law of least effort' applies to cognitive as well as physical exertion and asserts that if there are several ways of achieving the same goal, people will eventually gravitate to the least demanding. In the economy of action, effort is a cost, and the acquisition of skill is driven by the balance of benefit and costs. Laziness is built deep into our nature.

Our gift and responsibility as designers is to focus our attention and expertise on harnessing design to tackle the most pressing urban crises of the day and to harness the power of design to fight the crises that we are facing, such as the climate emergency. The UN gave us 12 years to take action against climate change, to keep global warming at a maximum of 1.5 degrees, beyond which the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat, and poverty for hundreds of millions of people will significantly worsen. This 12-year deadline is longer than the time it took Apple to get the concept of a smartphone in the hands of more than half the world's population. No legislators were needed to drive this meteoric rise, just the intense allure of compelling design that changed people's behaviour through making something desirable and enjoyable. Just as companies harness the power of design, we as urban designers should see the urban crises as the greatest design challenge in history.

An interesting example of using design to influence behaviour and solve urban crises comes from Stockholm. The city wanted people to drive slower, and we know the benefits of controlling vehicles' speeds in urban areas. To get people to do this, they didn't employ the usual techniques, such as speed bumps, other traditional methods of traffic engineering or promotional/advertising initiatives. Instead, they understood that they were not trying to slow down vehicles, but rather trying to get the people driving to do so more slowly. With this understanding, they were able to target human behaviour. The city installed radar cameras to measure the speed of vehicles, which is common enough. However, while drivers travelling above the speed limit were issued with an automatic fine, those below the speed limit were entered into a lottery for a chance to win a portion of the fines from the speeders (up to U\$3000). With this, average speeds fell from 32km/h to 25 km/h.

Before, people were clearly acting out of self-interest and driving at a speed they considered more beneficial to them, irrespective of the others around them. Following the scheme, it was in most people's personal interest to act in a way that was better for all, and consequently they did so. I would argue that this scheme is a great example of marrying self-interest and societal good. It is similar to the UK

1 Rotterdam: good quality, convenient and effortless cycle parking

scheme for charging for plastic bags. Five years ago, most people never thought about taking their own bag to the supermarket; now the true cost of our actions has been better connected to our choices, and has influenced our behaviour. Plastic bag usage in the UK has fallen by 86 per cent, which is quite effective!

We have to work more with the human condition if we want to compel people to change. I propose that we should be designing cities according to the principle of hedonistic urbanism. Hedonistic urbanism understands that people often act in their own self-interest, but it aims to marry self-interest with societal good by developing urban interventions that compel people to naturally choose what is best for the city, best for society, and best for them, by making what's best also the easiest, most enjoyable, and most fun option. This way, we don't get parallel behaviour change programmes, we get people queuing up to do good.

We need more people to walk, cycle, and take mass transit in cities. We need this because it is space efficient, beneficial to our health, good for air quality, good for the environment and climate, best for the economy, and because it is more convivial, social, and human. So how do we get to that point? I have 11 asks for how we design urban areas to get us there.

**1 MAKE IT INVITING**

Invite people to walk more, cycle more, and take mass transit more by making it far better than driving. And this means working hard to make it good as well as making driving totally dull. Walking down the street and spending time in cities should be an absolute ball. Key to this is that you have to give people things to walk to, and this is often a principal failing of many new developments, as shown in the recent *Place Alliance Housing Design Audit for England*.

**2 PUT WHAT WE NEED FIRST**

Human beings like it when they are put first. If we prioritise people doing what is good, we will inspire more people to do it. So things like a simple side street: stop breaking up the journey of people walking to wait for cars when crossing a side street; change the relationship and make vehicles wait to cross the pedestrian space when exiting a side street.

**3 MAKE IT EFFORTLESS**

If we need people to do something, make that the most effortless and make what we need people to stop doing, a pain in the neck. So be sure to put pedestrian crossings right where people want to cross and not 30 metres down a side street to improve conditions for vehicles, where pedestrians won't use them. Equally, if it snows or if it's icy, grit and clear the pavements and cycle tracks first, before car lanes. Then, if people need to get somewhere, they'll pick the one you prioritised. We have historically gone to extraordinary measures to make life easy for cars in cities, invariably undoing the very joy of cities. Imagine what kind of places we'd achieve if we went to the same lengths to make life easier for people walking up a hill to a metro station.

**4 MAKE IT GREEN**

We have to soften streets for environmental reasons as well as shade, shelter and relaxation. And when we create green space we have to connect people with it. It is not an object to just look at! Nature is something that has to surround us and draw us in. And through greening we have to manage surface water in a far more sophisticated and mutually beneficial way, understanding that the sea starts on our streets, so we need SuDS to attenuate water, slow down its progress to the sewer and clean it along the way.

**5 JOIN IT UP**

We have to think about whole journeys: the way of travelling that is the most advantageous for society and places as a whole, must be the most seamless! So, bike parking has to be treated in the



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way that car parking has been treated for the last 50 years, with decent buildings, repair stations and valets, all accessed by cycle in ramps. Alongside this, make the quality of car parks the same as most cycle parking areas today, tucked away in a ridiculous corner, where the chances of your car being there when you get back are about 50 per cent.

**6 MAKE IT GOOD FOR CHILDREN**

Only if we make serious invitations to all ages and all abilities will we get everyone feeling comfortable doing something. It is common to hear that people are not walking, cycling, taking public transport or relaxing in public spaces, because they have children.

We must design out the excuses by making it the best thing to do with kids.

2 Camden, London: a brilliant reminder that what you end up swimming in is what we put on the streets

3 Bilbao square: make it good for children to enjoy

4 Inactivity crisis

Plan and design cities so that children can walk by themselves safely from their home to the local shops, buy a popsicle and get back home before it melts. This is the idea of the Popsicle City.

### 7 MAKE IT DIVERSE

If it taught us anything, the Habsburg Lip created from too much inbreeding within a gene pool, taught us why diversity is important. It is healthy and it makes places more interesting. Let us create diverse places which means working with local people from the get go. Speaking with communities, before deciding what to do in order to learn and to co-create, will shape cities that reflect their complexity and beauty.

### 8 MAKE IT EQUITABLE

When we think about the Equal City, we have to think about access inequality, climate inequality, shade inequality, opportunity inequality, income inequality, age inequality, health inequality, mental health inequality, and so on. But the complexity with equality means that no single issue reigns above others.

### 9 MAKE IT SUSTAINABLE

There is a well-known quote that sustainability is like teenage sex: 'lots of people say they're doing it; few are doing it and those that are doing it aren't doing it very well'. We know what sustainability is. We know what is sustainable. We just need to start, and want to start doing it, and well.

### 10 MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

Think about that word: enjoyable. Whatever you're designing, put yourself in the place you're designing, at the exact point your mouse is hovering over, and think 'am I going to genuinely enjoy being there?' 'Might I end up proposing to the love of my life there?' If planning a seating area, what could you do to make it that little bit more appealing, interesting or compelling? For public transport, reimagine bus stops as useful and enjoyable moments in people's day, places to pick up a new book, buy a coffee, collect dry-cleaning, or buy fruit and veg.



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### 11 MAKE. IT. FUN.

Human beings do so much because it is fun, even if they sometimes regret it. Harness this and invite people to have fun doing good. Take everyday objects and invite play. Make walking, cycling, and public transport the most FUN way to get about. If you don't mark out a 100m sprint on the pavement people won't have a race. Mark it out and they might. Waiting for a 'green man' can be fun and sociable. Why not install interactive games at pedestrian crossings that make it just that?

If cities need people to walk, cycle, and take mass transit more, make it fun. Make it a pleasure. ●

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5 Rotterdam: Invite people to have a little fun going about their daily lives. All images by Cristopher Martin

# Urban Design and Climate Change

Judith Ryser evaluates three London areas for climate change mitigation

**W**hat can urban design contribute to climate change and under what conditions? The many pledges at the UN Climate Change Conference COP25 Paris Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050 give urban design the opportunity to advance its own options. For some time, urban design has incorporated sustainability and ecological principles in its approach and focused on climate change as the next logical step. This encompasses how human activities affect climate change, how mobility and the built environment contribute to pollution, notwithstanding the moral responsibility of confining ecological footprints. Data on the effect that the devastating Coronavirus pandemic will have on pollution levels will provide invaluable information about the actions needed to achieve the 2050 target.



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