Rethinking Cities of Tomorrow
A Human-Centric Approach

WORLD GOVERNMENT SUMMIT 2019
in partnership with
“A city comes into being for the sake of life, but exists for the sake of living well.”
– Aristotle¹

¹ Photo credit: Varshesh Joshi
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Why Here, Why Now

The city is a space of promise and peril, community and individual. For much of human history, cities have been the nexus point for social, cultural, and economic trends. From ancient Athens to Ottoman Istanbul and contemporary San Francisco, cities have operated as a collective canvas where history, art, philosophy, and commerce collide to propel humanity forward.

As human civilization advances – now clearly visible in the realm of technological innovation – the study and design of cities is following in lock step. Never before has the humble and admittedly mundane field of urban planning and development been a fixture of mainstream debate in the way it is today. From mainstream newspapers to TED talks, people of all backgrounds and from various fields are fascinated by how the construction of their cities influences society and themselves. City authorities and urban planners have taken note and the result is a push towards human-centric urbanism.

Our cities don’t have to be constructed solely around defence or commerce, as they had been in the past. They can help us become happier and healthier people. As we all become more lonely staring into our smartphones, the urban landscape can offer residents a way to find community. Through subtle planning tricks to get people moving – like some of the fascinating bike share programs popping up in cities from Argentina to Denmark – the city can be our guide to happiness in an increasingly fast-paced and isolated world.

Cities are home to the majority of the world’s population, generate the majority of global gross domestic product (GDP), and are forecast by the United Nations to explode in growth over the next two decades. Over the next 14 years, there will be another billion urban dwellers globally. By the year 2050, two out of three people in the world will live in cities. With so many people moving to (and between) cities, urbanism as a field of study and realm of debate has taken on new immediacy.1
Despite advances in human civilization and technology, people in cities around the world are increasingly unhappy. Disunity is growing as urbanists still struggle with how best to balance the needs of the economy with individual wellbeing. This challenge is further compounded by the expansion of cities around the world.

Can urban planning, effective municipal management and the correct application of technological innovation enable cities to handle growing and increasingly unhappy populations? Through their informed imagination, can urbanists make society better, foster closer communities, and produce happier individuals? This report is the result of a thorough review of the current, multifaceted conversation around urbanism as expressed in mainstream publications and scholarly work. We found that the answer to the above questions depend on where you sit, but urbanists are increasingly convinced that a human-centric approach is the best way forward. By placing residents and their needs at the centre of urbanism, cities can improve society, make people happier, and organize human society in a more perfect manner.

This push towards human-centric urbanism is not confined solely to the West but is also taking root and gathering momentum in the emerging world. The definition of human-centric urbanism eludes one simple sentence. Human-centric urbanism places the relationship between the individual and the city at the centre of urban design and planning. By understanding the individual’s needs, urban planners can seek to build a better environment that encourages growth, community, health, and productivity.

From Medellin to Dubai and Taiwan, emerging cities are experimenting with revolutionary concepts to make cities more liveable, happy, and productive. While the field of urbanism was born in the West and Western cities continue to make invaluable contributions to the field, the emerging world is fast becoming the space of real innovation in human-centric urbanism.
Evolution of Human-Centric Urbanism

Before the Industrial Revolution, cities were hives of commerce organized to protect the economy. As people poured into urban areas from the countryside in the 19th century, disease and the health of residents became a grave concern for municipal authorities trying to keep the economy growing at full speed.5
While there was a much greater focus placed on defence in pre-modern cities, with commerce taking second place in the minds of urban planners, the Industrial Revolution was a watershed moment in the history of urbanism. As cities entered the age of modern capitalism, tension arose that pit urban sustainability against economic boom and bust cycles. In this context, sustainability has meant a host of measures related to the long-term health of cities being taken, including the protection of the natural environment, sufficient sewage systems equipped to handle large numbers of residents, lack of congestion, and ample infrastructure. But only recently has the notion of happiness for city dwellers emerged as a sustainable concern for city authorities.

Urban sustainability is expensive considering the nature of economic cycles and their periods of excess and poverty. Communist models, it should be noted, were less subservient to the boom and bust of capitalist societies, and placed much greater emphasis on utilitarian planning designed to maximize efficiency and uniformity for the working class. However, this style produced brutalist architecture and sterile urban landscapes that engender isolation rather than cure it. During boom cycles in capitalist frameworks, there are more resources are allocated to focus on sustainability, including planning for the happiness of individuals. However, during periods of contraction, economic growth takes precedence across society, including in urbanism. Given the relatively long period of economic growth over the last two decades (with full recognition of the 2008-09 economic downturn), urbanism as a field and discipline has found resources to focus on sustainability and human-centric design in wealthier countries. This is one reason why urbanism has become an intense topic of interest, even for non-professionals.

Yet, planners have struggled to maximize the efficiency of the urban environment within these parameters. While the happiness of residents wasn’t the driving motivation of urban planning in the past, the rise of connected urbanism placed new emphasis on people, their health, and how urbanism can improve lives. With the technological innovations of the late 20th century in Western cities, these concerns have slowly but surely shifted the focus of urbanists around the world.

The popularity of private automobiles and America’s incredible post-WWII wealth led to another seismic change in how urbanists understood the cities of the 1950s. Infrastructure developments including freeways, strip malls, and housing projects (not to mention newly created suburbs) hollowed out many of America’s cities. Wealthier life was moved outside of the urban environment, which in turn was left to decay from lack of resources. The automobile meant that cities needed large road systems and parking lots that could service this new form of transportation. Collective city life, whether in the form of public transportation or city parks, suffered greatly during this period. While this transformation was uniquely American, it made waves throughout the world as other cities attempted to reconstruct themselves to make the use of cars more efficient.

These transformations were also met with some resistance. Jane Jacobs, the journalist and grassroots organizer in New York City, famously critiqued Robert Moses’ top-down and car-oriented approach to urban planning with a call for greater focus on communities and pedestrians. Jacobs wanted cities to remain diverse and committed to the principle of community. Destroying neighbourhoods to make way for highways served few needs, she vociferously argued. Their famous debate gave birth, in a small but significant manner, to the human-centric developments we see unfolding in urbanism today. Jacobs motivated the pioneering work of urbanists and architects such as William Whyte, Lewis Mumford, and Kevin Lynch.
It might seem simple to focus so intently on the automobile when discussing human-centric urbanism, but the role of the car continues to have an outsized impact on how cities are constructed. As urbanists turn their sights on human-centric plans, breaking down the automobile’s dominance in the urban environment has been a central focus. Take Barcelona’s super blocks as one of many examples of this principle in action. To cut down pollution, Barcelona has embarked on an ambitious plan to reduce the number of cars in the city while simultaneously using reclaimed streets for pedestrian walkways and markets. The result is more economic activity, more people walking, and happier residents. As Lewis Mumford wrote in The Highway and The City, “the right to have access to every building in the city by private motorcar in an age when everyone possesses such a vehicle is actually the right to destroy the city”.

Put in another way, the car is disruptive technology from a different time that we are still trying to tame. Today, there are a host of other technological innovations that will have similarly profound effects on urbanism. As cities exploded in population over the last decade and the internet’s promise to streamline human life by offering bespoke services on demand has positioned it at the centre of human existence, human-centric urbanism has adopted a new immediacy. The city will define the next chapter of human civilization, just as it has in the past.

In the last decade, human-centric urbanism has undergone a significant transformation, advanced by the rise of internet connectivity, artificial intelligence, and other technological innovations that have given planners the tools to create a city that encourages social growth and facilitates well-being.
While it is irresponsible to claim one single form of “Scandinavian urbanism”, taken as a whole, the approach to urban planning demonstrated by the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – constitutes a unified approach to human-centric urbanism that can be emulated in other cities around the world.

Scandinavia’s contribution to the human-centric urban pivot is straightforward: by investing in the needs of residents and devoting the necessary state resources to funding human-centric projects, cities can improve the lives of individuals and thereby make society more productive and happier.

Let’s begin with Copenhagen to see this model in action. In the late 1960s, the city of Copenhagen was poor and grappling with two very different options for urban redevelopment. One was to destroy existing infrastructure and housing stock to create massive roads for an automobile-focused city centre. The other option, which was dramatically cheaper, was to leave the existing infrastructure undisturbed while investing in bicycle infrastructure and other social projects. For a variety of reasons, not least the financial investment, Copenhagen took the second option. In doing so, the city laid the foundation for its current human-centric design.
Anyone who has visited Copenhagen understands the central role of the bicycle in the city. Complete with their own traffic lights and elevated ramps, bicycles dominate the landscape. Today more than 50% of Copenhagen residents travel the city by bike. On weekends, many areas of the city centre are closed to automobile traffic. The result is more people on the streets as families stroll the city and residents seem to “own” their urban space. This didn’t happen by accident; it is the result of smart and thoughtful planning that places resident-focused design at its core. Instead of cities designed around cars, Scandinavian cities such as Copenhagen are human focused.

Danish urbanists serendipitously stumbled upon a revolutionary idea in the late 1960s. Jan Gehl, one of Denmark’s most famous urban planners, summed it up: “We had the notion that common space could pull people out of isolation.” It was the birth of “human city planning”, as Gehl likes to call it.

Why was Scandinavia successful in redefining human-centric urbanism at a time when major urban development centred around the automobile? The key concept here is pragmatism, and its principles are critical to the new wave of human-centric urbanism taking shape today.

The structure of Scandinavian governments, with their commitment to the welfare state, relatively small populations, and centralized planning, gives these countries a leg up in pursuing revolutionary urbanism. Their governments make nimble decisions about urban design and move quickly to implement changes.

The harsh climate of Northern Europe also played a significant role in Scandinavian urbanism. Ian McHarg’s 1969 landmark book Design with Nature set out fundamentals on the physical framing of nature in urbanism that found a special resonance in the Scandinavian approach. The book argued that urban planning should be completed without degrading the natural environment and that construction should be built in sync with nature as opposed to working against it. This approach flew in the face of prevailing currents in urbanism that thought the city should dominate the natural environment.

Following nature’s cues, investing in people over machines, and focusing on pragmatic urban plans are the core beliefs we can obtain from the Nordic approach to city planning. While they might seem radical, this simple set of urban ethics is critical to the emerging field of human-centric design far from Scandinavia’s borders.

Bikes vs cars: cost to society

Driving a car one kilometre costs society 89 cents – but cycling the same distance benefits society by 26 cents. Data from City of Copenhagen

Source: The Guardian
Large-scale infrastructure in cities such as roads, bridges, and tunnels have an obvious and immediate impact on how residents move around the urban landscape.

On a smaller scale, the built environment on the street level has an even greater impact. Think about how you interact with some of the great cities in the world. Would Paris or New York be as appealing to stroll around without their well-kept streets, public transportation systems, and benches?

The built environment can increase inclusion or promote exclusion. Park benches, bike racks, and rubbish bins are critical tools in the human-centric urbanist’s arsenal. As Oslo, for example, tries to make its city centre car free, the need for street furniture has exploded. By getting people out on the streets and in green places, Oslo is embracing a core tenet of the human-centric push in urbanism. Access to green and open space transforms the emotional and social lives of residents. It further reduces stress and leaves residents happier, more productive, and satisfied.

Inversely, some cities are using street furniture and other elements of the built environment to exert greater control over the movement of people in the city. As the homeless populations in major cities have exploded, some municipalities have taken extreme steps to design hostile urban landscapes. Park benches with dividers to prevent someone from lying down, or the use of gates and barriers to restrict access to building entrances, are two such examples of hostile architecture, an increasingly popular instrument against homelessness.

The built environment deeply influences resident’s lifestyle, habits, and even health. For a large portion of the 20th century, urban growth and development focused on low-density, car-dependent residential communities. The resultant urban sprawl had a clear impact on the health and happiness of urban communities, as researched by Howard Frumkin in his groundbreaking work Urban Sprawl and Public Health. Through a detailed analysis of the adverse effect of low-density sprawl on the health of residents in major American cities, Frumkin emerged as one of the leading advocates for the consideration of individual health in urban planning decisions.
The fast-growing cities of the Arabian Gulf are perfect laboratories to ascertain whether cities can combat lifestyle diseases. Diabetes and other ailments related to obesity are on the rise in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. As both of these countries invest in infrastructure projects to put their cities on the cutting edge of global developments, they are confronted with significant challenges in combating these diseases. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE have some of the world’s highest levels of obesity among adults—where between 27% and 40% of the population is being affected.23 In the UAE, one in three children are either obese or overweight. This is particularly concerning as childhood obesity can lead to health concerns later in life.

Given the scale of the problem, urbanists are considering steps to use the city to fight obesity. The urban landscape affects health in myriad ways including the nature of housing and transportation options, planning and zoning provisions, and the number of parks and amount of open space. Interaction with the natural environment in terms of the quality of air and water also bears heavily on our overall health. The World Health Organization also notes that social capital, wealth, and the availability of health services are major factors in the connection between urbanism and happiness.24

Lack of physical exercise is one of the primary reasons obesity and other lifestyle diseases are on the rise. The urbanist challenge in this regard is straightforward: get people moving. City designs that encourage walking between shops, schools, and parks through well-maintained sidewalks and bike lanes are a proven method. In the UAE, where the harsh summer climate discourages walking outside, initiatives to get people moving indoors have proven successful. From the construction of state-of-the-art indoor sporting facilities to 5-km runs inside shopping malls, creative initiatives are helping to get people moving.

However, efforts to leverage the built environment to combat obesity are often stymied by the omnipresence of technology. Technology is pervasive in society, for better or worse. Internet penetration in the GCC is among the highest in the world. Speaking with The National newspaper, Alaa Takidin, a clinical nutritionist, said that “even though parents are striving to find a healthy balance between technology, food intake, and overall lifestyle of their children, we still come across a lot of child obesity cases. This is mostly related to overuse of gadgets, lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating patterns. Technology is one of the main culprits behind the lack of physical activity, as kids find it more interesting to play games on smartphones rather than engage in outdoor activities.”25

While we might not think of the internet as part of the built environment, access to the web is a critical infrastructure of the modern city. Therefore, we can think about the use of technology in a similar way that we consider the built environment. The more we are consumed by looking at our screens, the harder it is to get outside or get moving towards a healthy lifestyle.26

The next question becomes, how to balance built infrastructure with the virtual infrastructure of the ascendant smart city? Are we at risk of losing our humanity in cities with the rise of machine technology designed to make our lives easier?
The influence of technology doesn’t have to manifest in unhealthy habits. In fact, personal technology when used in conjunction with the urban environment can help build a healthy society. Take fitness trackers.

These smart devices have advanced features that track and encourage healthy behaviour. When put in conjunction with medical aid schemes and city-wide initiatives to boost healthy living, the results can be profound. Insurance providers in South Africa, for example, have become large distributors of fitness trackers thanks to an initiative that subsidizes the cost of trackers if members reach a certain level of fitness. These programs have been wildly successful and demonstrate how technology can help get people moving instead of contributing to a sedentary lifestyle. Through co-operation between healthcare providers and city officials, such initiatives could have dramatic effects in a city like Dubai.

Little more than a decade ago, few would have thought that we would have the ability to hail a taxi, order food, buy electronics, and open our front door with a small device carried around in our pockets. In a remarkably short time, the smartphone has dramatically transformed how we interact with our environment and ourselves.

The contemporary appeal of urbanism as a topic of debate and interest is largely due to the rise of technology. The explosion of internet connectivity has made life remarkably easier for billions of people around the world. From sub-Saharan Africa to South-East Asia, people are able to connect, bank, live, and communicate in incredible new ways thanks to the rise of the internet.

Then there is the use of technology to improve the city. These trends have coalesced around the catch-all term “smart cities”, which conveys the drive to use data, automation, high-speed connectivity, and artificial intelligence to make cities more connected, liveable, and sustainable. While the term is thrown around urbanist and mainstream circles quite a bit these days, it is important to note there is not one agreed upon definition of the term.

Silicon Valley has embraced the ethos of smart cities with open arms. Through various challenges with city governments around the world and with their own smart projects, these companies see technology and more specifically data as the missing ingredient in creating healthier, more efficient urban environments.
From a city planning standpoint, the pivot towards smart cities has transformed the way authorities obtain information about residents and determine how best to allocate resources. For residents, access to cheap and fast internet is critical for participation in the city ecosystem as more services are moved online. Just as highways created spaces of exclusion for minorities, the placement of internet infrastructure can create pockets of digital exclusion.

This is a new field that is fraught with unknown challenges. Take India’s relationship to tech on the national level as an example. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s BJP party came to power in 2014, it promised to build 100 smart cities across the country to launch India into a new digital future. The problem was how to prepare millions of Indians for smart citizenship.

The link between smart city governance and human-centric urbanism is multifaceted and critical. Smart city platforms will increasingly dictate how resources are utilized in human-centric urban plans. As such, residents must “buy in” to these platforms to a degree in order to allow for human-centric urbanism to reach its full potential. India, in this case, is an important example of the progress taking place in this field.

While an increasing number of Indians are using smartphones, there are still huge numbers of people who have not embraced cashless payments and e-governance. Digital identification is a critical part of this challenge. If citizens and residents are not able to obtain digital forms of ID, they could be excluded from city services for everything from disaster response assistance to voting. Digital inclusion is about more than smartphone access.

The construction of 5G connectivity infrastructure is another example of how the push towards digital cities is creating pockets of exclusion. Where cities choose to create new internet infrastructure will have an enormous impact on who has access to the means of production in the modern economy. It is unlikely that cities will invest in significant infrastructure resources in low-income areas. As such, the patterns of exclusion that resulted in low-income areas in the first place are only set to continue in the digital city. Some cities are trying to fight these trends. New York City, for example, has been transforming old phone booths into free Wi-Fi hotspots in a bid to bring the internet to more residents. But ingrained patterns are difficult to break, even with the promise of smart cities.

The research group IHS identified 21 cities that met their smart city criteria in 2013, and predict that number will more than quadruple to 88 smart cities by 2025. But as cities of all sizes begin adapting smart technologies, more liberal estimates suggest the number of active smart city projects in 2017 approached 10 times that number. In their 2017 Smart City Tracker report, Navigant Research identified at least 250 smart city projects in 178 cities worldwide. The real number of smart city initiatives is likely higher still.

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In 2016, 36 cities from 12 European countries applied for the 2016 European Capital of Innovation Award, part of Horizon 2020, the EU’s research and innovation program. Amsterdam, Berlin, Eindhoven, Glasgow, Milan, Oxford, Paris, Turin, and Vienna were shortlisted – Barcelona won in 2015. European cities have consistently been ranked among the smartest in the world.

As part of this transformation, technology, good governance, and a willingness to embrace innovations in the field of urbanism have been used interchangeably to ensure a better quality of life in some places. Cities are manifestations of life that can reflect our best intentions, darkest fears, and unhealthiest habits. Like human beings, they can change and adapt with the right guidance. With a human-centric approach, contemporary urbanism can focus on modern challenges such as health, aging, and design solutions to overcome these challenges with intelligent use of advanced technologies.
As the connections between cities deepen through trade, internet connectivity, and aviation, so does their wealth. But despite this progress, people feel less happy than ever before. One reason is our increasingly fraught relationship to technology. Our concentration is collectively stolen by the very devices and technology that has led to our wealth creation. Around the world, people feel less focused, have less time, and feel more isolated. Instant gratification and the illusion of speed facilitated by the internet has left us without the ability to wander and let our minds drift. We have lost serendipity in so many aspects of our lives that people crave the ability to go ‘off the grid.’ We are starting to see the effects of excessive screen time on young peoples’ brain structure and function, which leads to moodiness, attention deficit and poor impulse control.30

We have mythologized the “city that never sleeps,” yet research shows that noise, lack of nature and light pollution increase stress levels, cause anxiety, fuel depression and bring on insomnia. The prevalence of anxiety and mood disorders is 19% higher among urban residents.31 At the same time, the disappearance of public spaces32 and the profusion of dense, vertical residential housing drive us inside and make us less likely to know our neighbours.33
Minority populations including the elderly and people with disabilities are particularly at risk from efficiency-driven, technocratic urbanism. Among senior citizens in Vancouver, Canada, 20% say they do not know their neighbours well enough to ask for help. To combat loneliness in cities, some senior citizens are turning to a life of crime. In Japan’s female prisons, 9 in 10 senior women are serving sentences for petty shoplifting. Prison is seen as a less stressful, more social environment.

Young children are also affected by our productivity-driven urban design decisions. Children are excluded from the physical space and the social networks of their neighbourhood. Public spaces for outdoor play have declined by 90% since the 1970s. For many children, the only “safe place” to play is inside – often in front of a digital screen.

Urbanists are keenly aware of the pernicious effects of technology and the built environment on individuals and society as a whole. The connection between unhappy, exhausted, and weary individuals and the urban environment is a fundamental concern of modern urban planning. The drive for more human-centric paradigms in urbanism is a response to our dire state of mind.

In Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design, Charles Montgomery highlights other elements of happiness such as having a sense of belonging and comfort. He argues that visionary urban planners, mayors, and engineers can engender happiness through urbanism. It is already happening, as he notes: “There have been victories in thousands of neighbourhoods where people have challenged the written and unwritten rules of how we move, live, and share space. Whether it’s hauling furniture onto the street, staging neighbourhood car-free days, tearing down the fences between their yards, turning metered parking stalls into miniature parks, or planting guerrilla gardens under cover of night, urban activists are taking design – and their future – into their own hands.”

This assessment might be an extreme attempt at reforming the urban environment to engender happiness, but the point is that the city affords residents, authorities, and planners the canvas from which we can create a happy place. Urbanism might not be the sole contributing factor for increasing levels of anxiety, isolation, and obesity but it can certainly help fight it.
Human-Centric Paradigm

How does a happy city come together? It means more than just proclaiming that everyone will be happy or even building new parks and pedestrian-friendly areas.

Wellbeing is fundamental. So is a conscious effort to promote forming social bonds. A newly balanced approach to technology will also be critical. Behind the scenes, city and national governments must work hard to streamline their processes. They can’t operate in silos, which lead to projects not being realised and complicated procedures for residents who wish to accomplish mundane bureaucratic tasks. The Scandinavians have mastered the art of getting disparate government offices out of their silos and working together on city projects. Effective government is the first line of defence.

On a civil society level, professionals from fields as diverse as art, psychology, engineering, and urbanism need to find common ground and work together on human-centric plans. Urbanism as an umbrella field needs to balance practical and esoteric concerns to create the right conditions for human-centric design. The happy city, in short, is the result of all sectors of society working together towards common human-centric city goals.
An equally important but much less discussed issue facing the future of urbanism concerns aging and disabled populations. Cities are growing and that growth includes a significant number of older people as well as people with disabilities. On the surface, this should not present many new problems, but aging populations are more susceptible to social isolation as the result of urban designs. A recent UN report on the subject found that “the development of cities has long been centred on car use, prioritizing vehicular traffic, and discouraging the use of streets and public spaces. This restricts older people’s participation in community life, contributing to social isolation, making street-based, informal work unsafe, and leading to unhealthy, sedentary lifestyles.”

Naturally, the report encourages more walkable urban environments. “To make cities more inclusive and supportive” the authors argue, “there needs to be a shift towards reduced car use and lowered traffic speeds, and the promotion of cycling, walking, and public transport.” The remedy for many of our urban challenges may be as simple as getting people to walk.

But there is something more to walking when considered from an age perspective. Walking encourages thought and cultivates relationships with those around us. Relationships at any stage of life are important but late in life are critical. In fact, a 75-year-old Harvard study on aging and happiness came to a remarkably simple conclusion: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.

Those with disabilities face similar but slightly different challenges as elderly people in the urban environment. In many ways, city authorities have adapted to the needs of the disabled in a more progressive way compared with the elderly. The creation of ramps and other special needs projects in cities demonstrates how the urban landscape can be designed in such a way as to encourage inclusion for all residents. However, accessibility features are not universally available, and poorly designed features can cause more harm. Community engagement is the holy grail of human-centric urbanism, and should be available to every resident, regardless of his or her specific needs. Such a solution is possible in the hands of the right urbanist.

Reviewing the Harvard study in 2017, INC magazine came to some additional conclusions. "The biggest predictor of your happiness and fulfillment overall in life is, basically, love. Specifically, the [Harvard] study demonstrates that having someone to rely on helps your nervous system relax, helps your brain stay healthier for longer, and reduces both emotional as well as physical pain. The data is also very clear that those who feel lonely are more likely to see their physical health decline earlier and die younger."

A walkable city with a vibrant community life centred around shops, cafés, and restaurants with ample open space is the perfect canvas to create loving relationships and community appreciation. Designing such a city while remaining cognizant of the particularities of each community is the ultimate expression of human-centric urbanism.
Can the built environment influence individual happiness? Research seems to say yes. In one study, more than 80% of city residents in Brisbane, Australia, said they felt happier in built environments full of natural light, compared to 0% who were happy with artificial light. In another study, researchers found that residents who felt safe walking at night in their city were also more likely to be happy.

Pioneering urban planners are working alongside policy-makers from Bogota to Bangalore to convert abandoned lots into public parks; make it easier and safer for people to walk or cycle; and design for cohesive communities.

As more people have realized that urbanists wield power to improve our daily lives, surveys about quality of life in cities have become a subject of intense discussion. From upmarket lifestyle magazines to mainstream daily newspapers, everywhere one looks there are rankings of which city has the best quality of life.

Most quality of life metrics include a city’s walkability, the prevalence of local shops, and good city governance. Naturally, western cities (and especially those in Nordic countries and Switzerland) rank high in these regards. After all, they have perfected the art of quality living for decades and have the resources to provide for their residents. As technology rapidly transforms our lives, emerging cities such as Bangkok, Dubai, and even large cities like Mumbai have a unique opportunity to leapfrog in an important quality of life metric: information detox.
If city leaders can marry technology and mindfulness through campaigns to get people to unplug, enjoy their community, and look up from the smartphone screen then they can succeed in one of humanity’s most important quality of life metrics. It might sound odd to think of the city as a vehicle for tech detox but smart human-centric urban planning can do wonders for our collective ability to unplug and experience life through living.

This is precisely where emerging market cities can weave safeguards against information overload into their DNA. If we can pay for parking tickets and handle other municipal services via smartphones in Dubai, for example, then the municipality should also be able to encourage us to unplug through gentle reminders and city-wide initiatives. Effective mitigation of information overload will be one of the most important quality of life metrics in the next 50 years as more and more people live in cities and regularly use smartphones. As described earlier, too much screen time (and the subsequent information overload) can inhibit desire to exercise and lead a healthy life.
We are constantly aware of our interactions with technology and smart devices. While the smartphone might feel like an extension of our hands for many, the reality is that it is a device that doesn’t necessarily fall into the background; it creates disruption in our lives.

The push towards AI-powered voice assistants reflects Silicon Valley’s desire to make our technology “invisible” and have it blend into the background of our daily lives.

Similar points have been raised in relation to smart, human-centric urbanism. The idea follows that being able to “see” technology creates interaction, which in turn creates distraction. Reporting on the trend, Quartz highlighted how the city of Detroit is using “invisible” technology to help fight crime.50 “Last fall, Detroit’s city officials partnered with a telecom provider to expand the area’s Project Green Light program, which allows businesses to install cameras that police can use to monitor crimes (and solve them) in real time. The program’s expansion led to a 50% drop in violent crime at convenience stores and gas stations. Thanks to the technology—which was by no means a distraction to Detroit’s residents—the city is safer, and business is better.”

Quartz went on to offer prescriptions for how cities should emulate this model. “Keep your city’s technology autonomous and discrete, and take advantage of the Internet of Things and AI to help you do it,” the publication recommended. “Once the idea of “invisible” tech is embraced, leaders must communicate it back to appropriate government and civic bodies; then, collaboration among the parties can begin, and a smart city can be born.”

Not only does this principle apply to smart cities but it is core to the notion of human-centric urbanism as well. If technology is able to operate in the background and improve the functions of cities, then urbanists and residents alike are freed up to focus on ways of making the city more inclusive and human-centric. Such an application of invisible tech, if done correctly, could have a transformative effect.
Critical decisions such as the amount of resources earmarked for parks and open spaces should be taken with the human in mind. To cut down on social isolation, cities should encourage civic participation through pedestrian-only streets and open areas. The private car increases isolation and requires resources that disincentivize human-centric urbanism.

While the contours of these plans might be straightforward, getting government on all levels to work together is a much more difficult puzzle to solve. This is especially true in cities in the emerging world that often share sustainable budgets with national-level governments. As such, a major challenge to practical human-centric urbanism is getting various city and national government offices to work together. It is time to break down silos.

Cities also have to demonstrate a commitment to reviewing, assessing and replacing outdated policies, design guidelines and codes that contradict the goal of achieving human-centric urbanism. This might be the most difficult challenge as needs are constantly changing and evolving.45

A city is not stagnant. It is in constant flux. As a result, new challenges emerge and must be reviewed by nimble authorities if a commitment to human-centric urbanism is going to be upheld. One solution to this constant process of review is the use of smart city platforms that collect large amounts of data and allow city planners and authorities to make quick and informed decisions.46 India’s relationship to smart city platforms and governance mentioned previously highlights the promise of these platforms and the work it will take to implement them.
According to some estimates, more than 100 cities will have populations larger than 5.5 million people in the next 35 years. Moreover, global population numbers will shift from the West to Asia and Africa as only 14 of the largest 101 cities will be in the western world in the next 50 years. If we look at the management issues of rising megacities, it is clear that government siloing—the challenge of various branches of city and national government to work together—is not only a roadblock to efficient human-centric urbanism but efficient governance full stop.

The city of Johannesburg, one of Africa’s hubs of economic activity, is a good example of municipal government trying to break down the siloing effect. Given the city’s history of unequal governance stemming from South Africa’s decades of minority rule known as Apartheid, Johannesburg has had to push through an aggressive form of inclusive urbanism but efficient governance full stop.

With regards to the process of breaking down silos, the “Joziz@Work” program is of particular interest. According to the former mayor of Johannesburg, Parks Tau, “the Joziz@Work programme was designed to create an opportunity for citizens and communities to partner with the City of Johannesburg to deliver municipal services in their own neighbourhoods. In addition, it was aimed at shifting the prevailing mindset of seeking employment instead of generating employment; that is, turning job-seekers into job-creators. By the end of our term in 2016, we could confidently report that we had empowered, on average, over 1,000 cooperatives and community-based companies to co-deliver municipal services.”

Even in a city as contested as Johannesburg, creative urban plans were able to break down bureaucratic barriers to ensure the proper delivery of municipal services. This is the foundation of government acting as one and a precursor to actual human-centric delivery on a large-scale regardless of the city.

The explosive growth of cities around the world has put the problems of miscommunication and misappropriation of resources into sharp focus.
As noted above, human-centric urbanism is only as good as the cities that can deliver results in practice. As such, collaborative urbanism is critical for any realisation of human-centric ideas. While this has always been a challenge in cities in the past, the size and rapid growth of cities today presses the issue.

To make matters more complicated (and perhaps more interesting), collaborative urbanism is not confined solely to the realm of city government and urban design. Truly collaborative urbanism must involve disparate fields including but not limited to art, culture, psychology, fitness, and education. After all, one reason urbanism is a hot topic is because the city necessarily includes all of humanity. The city is the ultimate canvas for human expression. Thus, truly collaborative urbanism designs for all facets of humanity as they exist in cities.

Technologists and futurists have done an excellent job in recent years making themselves the pivot for these conversations. The better futurists among us place themselves at the inflection point between art, culture, commerce, politics and technology in order to explain the present while thinking about the future. Urbanism needs its own futurists in this regard.
In most cases, western countries have the resources, the desire, and the ability to implement sweeping changes to push forward human-centric designs. What these cities don’t have in nearly the same quantity as emerging market cities is enthusiasm. From Dakar to Sao Paulo and Bogota, the emerging world (defined for our purposes as the 85 percent of the world’s population that lives outside of North America and Europe) is home to the fastest growing and youngest cities on the planet.

In these dynamic urban environments innovation is taking place on a grassroots level. Not because it is trendy or exciting but rather out of necessity. These cities are also home to growing middle classes that are eager to travel and engage the way their western counterparts have for decades. Just as the West had its locus of points—cities that embraced the mantle of being global role models such as Paris, London, and New York—so too does the emerging world. Lagos, Singapore, and Dubai form the new locus for this age. And it is Dubai that is watching closely the debates and innovations taking place around human-centric urbanism and putting them into action.

The dusty pearling outpost that rose into one of the world’s most dynamic urban centres that is home to more than 200 nationalities is a narrative about Dubai that is well-known around the world. Indeed, the city has transformed itself in a remarkably short amount of time to become one of the primary focal points of the emerging world. Given the reach of Dubai’s aviation prowess, millions of people from the far corners of the globe use it as a major transit hub. Add to that its financial weight, and businesses throughout the emerging world are gravitating to Dubai. If you are an East African entrepreneur, Dubai is the most logical place to do business and access the rest of the world. The same can be said about Central and South Asia and the Middle East.

Dubai’s emergence didn’t happen overnight and is not a result of hydrocarbon reserves or geographic location. It is the result of clear, long-term planning and investment into the infrastructure of what makes economies and cities function well. When it comes to the urban environment, Dubai has demonstrated a willingness to embrace trends designed to put the human first. That is why the city is focused on being socially inclusive and engaging while embracing the shared identities of residents to create a sense of place. This will help Dubai remain economically vibrant and further expand its liveable, walkable and transit-friendly neighbourhoods. By learning from other cities across the world, Dubai can create its own affordable, accessible and equitable communities that promote healthy living and well-being.

From happiness campaigns spearheaded by the Dubai government to the creation of public transport infrastructure and open areas to the city’s myriad efforts for the elderly, disabled and children, Dubai has been on the forefront of the human-centric trend. Perhaps more important however are the decisions about the efficiency of city government that are not in the public eye in the same way as infrastructure projects. Effectively managing and collectively governing the human-centric city of the future that Dubai is building today require the efficient and responsible use of vital resources with the ability to continuously learn and innovate as needed.
Throughout this report, we have discussed what intellectual scaffolding is necessary to implement human-centric urbanism. We have shown how human-centric urbanism benefits the health of residents of all ages and how intelligent urban planning can help combat the nefarious effects of information overload. Through a look at the development of cities over time, we have seen specific examples of human-centric design in practice.

With all of this knowledge in mind, what would large-scale human-centric design look like if a city put it into practice? As part of its commitment to a form of urbanism that works for everyone, Dubai is putting one such plan in place. Reviewing the tenants of the plan highlights how the urbanist paradigm is shifting before our eyes. From socially inclusive planning to affordable and accessible urban designs, Dubai is pushing on all aspects of human-centric urbanism in the city.

The city has a commitment to continuously learn and innovate while fostering social cohesion and sense of place. Well-planned, natural, liveable, walkable, and transit-friendly neighbourhoods are a cornerstone of the urban roadmap. Undergirding all of this is the government’s commitment to use AI and other technologies such as blockchain to make the city run smoothly. Using these technologies will ensure that planning decisions are carried out effectively with all arms of government on the same page.

Human-centric urbanism is as old as urbanism itself. The challenge has always been to get all parties to work effectively, and as one, to implement sensible urban designs and plans. Throughout history, it has been the ability of government to carry out the will of the people that has been one of the major indicators of truly innovative cities. Given its nimble response time and commitment to innovation, Dubai is the global city that will take human-centric design into the next century.
Dubai Municipality

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