

HOW TO: make a city that works

By Andrew Tuck

Preface

Green space, good transport and clean streets all contribute to a city's appeal, but it's the simple, indefinable things that make it feel like home.



What are the ingredients that turn a city into a great place to call home? What's the fairy dust that transforms a jumble of skyscrapers and a network of asphalted roads into somewhere that inspires entrepreneurs, writers and musicians? Where is the sweet spot between urban efficiency and a sexier grit that makes a city feel right for you? In short, what makes a city work?

If you are on the hunt for the best city you can run an annual survey – as MONOCLE does – selecting the metrics that will best reveal how a city ticks along: can you cycle to work; are you likely to be mugged on a Friday night; if you call an ambulance will it come in time to save your life? You can even measure some of the softer sides of the city: can you get the go-ahead to build an interesting house; is the corner store going to be a chain or a family-run affair; how many cinema screens are there?

But we all know there are other factors coming into play that no researcher will be able to sniff out (so we also publish a secondary survey of cities that don't take the big prizes but we love anyway). It's these mysterious elements that intervene to make a city exciting – because the best-run cities can, in their pursuit of perfection, lose the instinct to strip off and dive in the lake, or turn up the volume every now and then. Rich cities can be boring.

That's not to say that poor cities are always fun but you do need a bit of edge every now and then. Take Beirut. On metrics this is a city that would win few prizes: there's almost no public transport, basic services are shaky, pavements go unrepaired for years. Oh, and there are bullet holes in a lot of apartment blocks and too many posters of divisive politicians with insincere smiles. But, you know what, from the valet parking (even at Dunkin' Donuts) to the impeccable beach clubs such as Edde Sands and Lazy B, it works in its own haphazard way.

Beirut falls into a very small but alluring category of cities that have seen better times and which, like some wayward starlet, are always on the cusp of a big comeback (think Buenos Aires or Naples). The Beirut of the 1960s, when the glamorous and the badly behaved haunted the St George hotel, still has a hold over this city for many people.

Those days are gone, swept away by a civil war that destroyed much of the city and a contemporary dose of Middle Eastern politics. But even now a swagger survives in Beirut that surprises virgin visitors. People in this town know how to make the most of a night out and how to get things done no matter what the odds.

At the other end of the urban spectrum are cities such as Zürich, Munich and Copenhagen that lead the way in everything from keeping the streets clean to educating their citizens (and we should say at this point, we are not advocates of the belief that Swiss equals dull). Dinner at the Kronenhalle, a day at one of the lakeside swimming clubs, a gallery tour: all reveal that there's a very nice life to be had in Zürich. As for people in Munich, they have it good too. But these are not places that you move to for thrills and in Zürich your neighbours will complain if you shower late at night or incorrectly tie your stack of newspapers destined for recycling (no, really).

Getting that balance right is vital because failing cities can soon ebb and shrink (hello fighting but struggling Detroit), while the best in class pull in more people, capital, jobs and opportunities. That's why mayors today look at everything from the health of their people (Mayor Mick Cornett put Oklahoma City on a collective diet when he discovered he was running one of the most obese metropolises in the US) to how many trees they see on their streets (Tokyo is among many capitals that's gone on a planting spree). Civic leaders know that the brightest and best can choose where they want to live. When a city's appeal fades, we are off to date another urban stunner. We've become promiscuous with our city bed-hopping.

It means that even buoyant cities can feel threatened when they lose control of growth. The burghers of Istanbul, Jakarta and Bangkok know the snarling traffic hardly wins over visiting investors but they just hope that all the chances they offer to make some money will get them off the hook for now. But all you need is a neighbour with a better airport or safer places to live and they can steal your thunder – perhaps permanently. Cities at their best also provide us with the kind of stimulation

and excitement that no life up a valley can ever match. They allow us to be surrounded by people from all around the globe. They offer chances to learn and earn. At their best they are places to grow old in – you have better medical care and are less likely to find yourself isolated and lost. They let you be discovered or vanish. Stay put long enough and a city can become part of you.

Look at London. Now while this may be MONOCLE's HQ, it's hard to say there's nothing left to do here. Infrastructure projects take years to get off the ground, cyclists and cars fight for space and liveliness can turn to drunken violence. But when you live here long enough you can't help but merge with place. London, even for the people who know it well, can have a stony edge, but then without warning it will show you a side of itself that will stop you in your tracks. Crossing London Bridge on foot at sunset you see the antique summer sun turn the Thames into a crimson tide. You walk into a South Kensington street at dawn and cannot see a soul and then a fox saunters across your path: you and he have this place to yourselves. You are in Richmond and stop to take in a view of London that seems almost painterly in its stippled perfection.

These are the fleeting, secret, intimate moments that make you think of this vast capital as home; a place where you belong. It's the bit that cityphobes never get: sure cities can be lonely but they can make you feel safer and happier than some cute but pointless town.

Of course a Paris or a Fukuoka can do this to you too. But don't think of this as universal because not all cities have that ability to draw you in. The rush to urbanisation in China is happening at such a brutal pace that there is little time to consider the niceties of how people will get around or where they will find a spot to take their shoes off and rub their feet through the grass. It's unlikely that the worst examples will ever turn out good for anyone.

And it's important to keep some of the discussion at this simple, human level because much of the debate about the future of our cities is being hijacked by a small group of urban thinkers who are all too easily distracted from the everyday. They talk instead of the connected city as if some superfast wi-fi will solve all our social ills. They rush to embrace a digital future without reflecting that cities don't change overnight and that technology often delivers unpredictable outcomes (even though we could all work from home on a windswept farm, most of us choose to work in the big bad cities because we feel energised and stretched by having people around us – plus a sheep doesn't make a good listener when you need an after-work glass of wine). We need to make sure that everything from park benches to nightclubs feature on urbanist agendas.

Cities are where it's at. In recent years they have shrugged off their reputations as the work of the devil and have been recast as places that, when done well, are energy efficient, welcoming of the ambitious and the frail, surprisingly harmonious

and even good for your health. As people continue to head for the cities we need to get the urban recipe right, but the good thing is that there are actually some pretty fine examples, whether you need a city where the murder rate is just one or two a year (Helsinki awaits you) or you prefer a city where despite the hardships and disparities people unite on beach and street (your ticket to Rio is booked). Whether you want slick or grit, there's a city for you. Now excuse me while I watch the sun slink behind the London skyline.

Thoughts on the city

- 01 “Great cities exude a sense of generosity, a spirit of giving something back, a touch of the creative or artistic that has been let loose and some things that make no financial sense. These places are not conceived merely as a series of roads that join a collection of mediocre buildings.”
Charles Landry, URBAN STRATEGIST
- 02 “In today's world, the ranks of global nomads get to pick their place. And we are tired of the smooth, generic, flattened-out worlds, where cars, foods and fashions are the same in whatever bland global city you may be in. People blanch when another politician or pop star becomes the new face of another luxury brand. They're over it. They want real places – the unique and the authentic.”
Richard Florida, DIRECTOR OF MARTIN PROSPERITY INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
- 03 “Dr Shlomo Angel, or Solly, is a bearded, 70-year-old professor and author of *Planet of Cities* who is quite happy to upset the consensus. He has looked at the density of our cities and he's discovered an odd thing. Despite all our efforts, our cities are becoming less dense. All those minuscule flats and fearsome rules have done buggery all. Dr Angel looked at US cities and found that average tract densities, to use the correct terminology, have been in decline for a century. Even Manhattan, despite adding all those skyscrapers, is less densely populated now than in 1910.”
Andrew Tuck, MONOCLE'S EDITOR
- 04 “For all that we might claim to value quiet, privacy and acres of fenced-off space, one of the finest experiences of city life is to be squashed up against hordes of noisy strangers on a busy piece of asphalt. After too long in solitude or in the claustrophobia of the office, there are few more intense pleasures than to head out for a swim on one of the world's great thoroughfares, to take a dive into humanity on the Bahnhofstrasse, Madison Avenue or the Boulevard Saint-Germain – and for a time to gain relief from the narcissistic claims of the ego in an unimaginably diverse ocean of one's fellow human beings.”
Alain de Botton, PHILOSOPHER