

Oiling the cogs of a slicker city

Global

Preface

It's not just the movers and shakers making calls and hosting meetings – palpable urban evolution involves everyone from street sweepers to shopkeepers. Meet six of the key figures making cities better places to live.



02
Morning radio host

While newspapers and television are wholly capable of telling the stories we care about, there's a special intrigue behind the men and women whose voices mark our days through stories told on radio. Of course, while these voices become so familiar, there's the bizarre circumstance whereby we rarely have a clue what these people look like.

Morning radio has long been a battleground among broadcasters, whether in small-town Mississippi or the urban heart of Rio de Janeiro. Broadcasting at a moment of almost universal activity – whether this means humdrum teeth brushing or slashing through a wad of emails – morning radio has the ability to penetrate and entertain, all while setting the agenda for the conversations that shape our actual, real-world lives.

It all seems quite simple, slugging into a studio at the crack of dawn to talk for an hour or two. But beyond banal news headlines and the odd commentary, there's always a distinct personality, an intelligent voice tasked with combining a touch of humour and a unique sound with an air of general likeability.

Faceless but nonetheless celebrated, these are figures who we love (or despise) and briefly allow into our lives – if only to offset the tedium of yet another otherwise-boring morning commute. In a changing, teched-up media world, it is commendable that radio has been able to maintain both its charm and its potency. — (M)

Best practice:

Neukölln needn't be as sparkling clean as Mitte. There's a certain type that's attracted to unpolished pockets of cities – students and start-ups among them.



03
The planning commissioner

A small notch down the pecking order from the role of mayor, the responsibility of any city's planning commissioner will inevitably be one of the most complex chores inside City Hall. It's not simply a case of determining building heights but encompasses a wholesale understanding of how the public interacts with the built environment and how intelligently planned urban areas can help provide for better public health, greater fiscal sustainability and more attractive places to live and work.

An appreciation of contextual zoning – the approach requiring new builds to maintain the historic style and elevation of their surroundings – is essential, though many an overzealous planner has strangled the economic lifeline of developing urban districts. And while there's value in careful deliberation, a planner with an understanding of the adage that “time is money” is of value, especially at a time when so many bold ideas suffocate behind cobwebs of mindless bureaucracy.

A good planner's ears should always be attuned to the successes (and failures) of their global counterparts, whether that means Detroit's commissioner taking a line from Medellín on blight reduction or a New Yorker learning the virtues of the pavement café from Paris. In short, every city needs a strong-willed planning commissioner able to juggle preservation with progress, well-reasoned codes with sensible allowances and an honest vision with what their city represents. — (M)

Best practice:

City planning is as much about charisma as good project management. Whoever holds the post should be a public face who knows how to get things done.



04
The corner-shop owner

A good corner shop deserves as much retail respect as the most rarefied of urban boutiques. Little wonder then that the corner-shop owner needs to have a highly attuned set of skills to perform his or her duties. First and foremost is an almost miraculous knack for space management. Shelves should at once be heaving and reassuringly presentable. From pretzels to prunes, yoghurts to yams, batteries to bresaola – everything has its logical home and requires barely a glance to locate. Italy's classic *alimentari* is a good model to follow: behind the bead curtain should lie all manner of dried and refrigerated goodies.

Mr or Mrs Shopkeeper is also at the centre of the street's sense of community, which means good social skills are essential. In addition, the corner shop depends on a trusty pair of hands behind the counter. Be it split-second childcare or knowledgeable local advice, the shopkeeper's remit is as broad as that of the *Süddeutsche* or *Le Monde* they put out dutifully on the rack every morning.

Add to this something of the soft efficiency of the shopkeepers at Japan's Lawsons with a bit of the tradesman's dedication of your typical Turkish grocer and you're somewhere near perfecting the role. Whether you are a couple of limes short of a mojito or a splash of milk away from an English breakfast, the ting-ting at the shop door should mean congeniality as much as it means convenience. — (M)

Best practice:

The best corner shops mix mass market with niche; your afternoon snack may mean a Diet Coke and some yoghurt-flavoured Morinaga Hi-Chews.



05
The property developer

Certain cities seem to fall victim to cash-grabbing property developers more than others. Toronto's waterfront is a jungle of gleaming glass towers but soulless at street level; in Hong Kong property costs make it tricky for small businesses to take root. However, that's not to suggest that all developers are just out to take advantage of the market: smart ones know they need to build neighbourhoods, too. The investment may be longer-term but taking the time to cultivate a community rather than simply throwing up a mixed-used tower or two and hoping they'll take off is a business model that will ultimately meet with success.

London's Howard de Walden Estates is a prime example of how to do things properly. Owning the majority of the west-central patch of Marylebone, they've kept its high street small-scale and diverse. Entrepreneurs that add charm, amenity and character also have the happy knack of adding value, whether it's an independent butcher, the city's best cheese shop or a great place to get second-hand books. Renting out your retail spaces to the highest bidder isn't a clear-cut way to boost your bottom line.

More should be done to support developers who have the city's quality of life at heart. We should also stop the rhetoric that stigmatises property developers and pits them against the local council and residents. If they're good they'll have your best interests at heart. — (M)

Best practice:

City Hall isn't always best at keeping neighbourhoods afloat, let alone steaming forward. Property developers can be your city's best stewards.



06
Transport CEO

No mega-city transport boss should have an easy ride. From Manila to Mexico City, mayors, officials and their advisers are tearing their hair out while sweating over unfurled maps on boardroom tables. Boom times and investment aren't always quick fixes, so how can one person possibly crack the urban-transport riddle?

Politics plays a big part and clean hands are needed to tidy up the tangle of vested interests and murky tenders. An ideal transport CEO should have ambition and not be scared to show some creative flare and sound acumen.

As inspiration, the exec can look to the seamless ZVV tram network in Zürich and add some of Tokyo metro's mass-transit muscle. Stockholm's stunning *tunnelbana* and its cavernous stations are also hard to beat, while the UK's Crossrail project is the biggest piece of transport infrastructure to be built in Europe for decades. In China, meanwhile, scores of similar-sized projects seem to be announced on an almost daily basis, be it airports or high-speed rail.

If boring tunnels and pouring some serious concrete isn't a budgetary option, a transport boss needs to be able to think outside the box and come up with some adaptable solutions. Cable cars are calmly gliding across skies from Medellín to Rio thanks to transport visionaries who knew how to be realistic with their reals and productive with their pesos. — (M)

Best practice:

Transport infrastructure should connect and be affordable. Neighbourhoods shouldn't be left off the map and fares should amount to pocket change.