# Community Through Urban Design

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# Contents

**To achieve social change in a more participatory and collaborative direction, modern cities need to be radically transformed. This can be done through altering urban design and establishing direct democratic institutions which will encourage citizenship and strengthen communitarian relationships.**

Social change is a complex thing. It pressuposes radical alteration of the basic social institutions and imaginary significations. The achievement of this goal has many alternative strategical approaches: some have expressed the opinion that it has to be done through the state and thus the main challenge is who will be sitting in the seats of power. Others are advocating for negative resistance, i.e. destruction of present structures in order for the good nature of men to start anew.

But there is also the opinion that for comprehensive emancipatory social change to take place there is a need for holistic alteration of all spheres of human life. That implies the introductions of new politics, economic and social relations, culture and even things like architecture, that were neglected by traditional revolutionary movements.

The *status quo* reproduces itself on many fronts. The representative politics at the heart of it are designed to maintain the same patterns of thinking, no matter what the final electoral result is. The same goes for the capitalist economic relations, the bureaucracy etc. The very cities, in which nowadays most of humanity lives are designed according to the domminant values and perceptions. They are disperced, their inhabitants live in isolated private condominiums, distanced away from workplaces and market districts, getting around alone in their private cars. This model of urban sprawling is rapidly spreading all over the world. The cities are organized in such ways that human contact is greatly reduced. Thus, achieving social change in more participatory and collaborative direction, would be an overwhelmingly difficult task it we don't have this in our mind.

## Community by design

For society's organization to be reorganized on the basis of direct democracy, amongst the many preconditions that seem to be required, is the breaking of alienation and establishment of communitarian relationships. A city that would encourage and strenghten community feeling would represent a mixture of housing, public, workplace, shopping, green and other spaces, all of which will be within walking distance or reachable by public transportation, in contrast with the modern mainstream way of urban design, based on positioning of fixed zones across vast distances.

A mixed architecture consisting of medium-sized housing cooperatives, with adjoined gardens, within a walking distance from schools, public squares, markets and green spaces will allow for the experience of random interactions between neighbors. The walking element could build feeling of belonging to the city, with citizens developing strong links with their local, social and urban environment. It will also, as author Jay Walljasper notes, contribute to greater economic equality by allowing everyone the right to freely move across the city, without the need of car.

The shift towards walkable cities would imply the radical rethinking and remaking of roads and streets, today designed mainly as high-speed arteries connecting housing districts with office areas, encouraging driving over walking. As Donald Appleyard's famous 1972 study demon-

strates[1], the heavier the car traffic on a street is, the fewer are the walkers and the everyday communal experiences. This, in addition to the obvious effects on human health (leading to obesity, heart deseases etc.), contributes to the already high levels of alienation in urban areas.

An approach that could alter this alienating effect, encouraging instead people to walk on the streets and potentially to produce community feeling is the narrowing of streets in urban areas, expansion of pedestrian spaces, introduction of wider bicycle alleys etc. As the city planner and author Jeff Speck explains, *people drive faster when they have less fear of veering off track, so wider lanes invite higher speeds*. This, in mixture with vast network of free urban public transportation, will allow for daily social interactions on them by pedestrians and passangers. The daily social experiences like noddings, smiles and random chatting with co-citizens could potentially make us feel more comfortable on our streets.

This in turn would bring with it other positive effects as well, like drastic reduction of the health problems mentioned earlier, but also reduction of car speed, responsible for the death of huge numbers of people around the world, as well as reduction of the air pollution of the contemporary private car-dominated metropolises.

Green spaces are another key aspect of the urban environment. According to Bob Lalasz, they tend to make people happier. Furthermore, green spaces bring people closer together. Thus in a community-promoting urban project, nature should be essential an part of the urban landscape. The gardens, part of housing cooperatives, will allow for the experience of gardening time by neighbours, bonding them together. It will also potentially encourage the developement of communal/solidarity economy by neighbours producing their own food and exchanging or sharing it with other urban gardeners.

In addition, parks and public gardens should be shuffled across the mixed urban architecture. There is a certain trend in modern metropolitan cities for large scale parks to be zoned away from housing districts and office areas, making human interaction with nature a rare opportunity. Contrary to that logic, the mixed city, as described here, could comprise green spaces located in various locations across the city. As Charles Montgomery suggests[2], this does not exclude the existence of large scale parks, but the urban green space will not be limited to them. This will imply that people will have the opportunity to get in contact with tiny gardens and parks on their way to work for example, as well as to experience the feeling of being "into the wild" by entering the huge local parks.

Public squares play a key role in a city that encourages communitarian culture and citizenry, since they act as spaces for social interactions as well as forums for expression of civic opinions. Thus they should be made freely available for popular interventions, unlike today, where bureaucrats decide who, when and for what reason they should be used.

However, we also hear critiques about the over-crowdedness of modern cities, leading to further alienation and withdrawal into passivity. If this is true, should we abandon city life altogether and return to village life? According to psychologist Andrew Baum's study[3], the feeling of over-crowdedness is being fed by urban design that does not allow people to control the intensity of spontaneous social interactions. Baum compared the behavior of residents of two very differ-

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[1] Donald Appleyard and Mark Lintell. "The environmental quality of streets (1972): the resident's view point" in *Journal of the American Planning Association*. pp. 84–101

[2] Charles Montgomery (2013). *Happy City*, Penguin Books. p.110

[3] Stuar Valins and Andrew Baum (1973). "Residential Group Size, Social Interaction, and Crowding", in *Environment and Behavior*.

ent college dormitories. He concluded that students whose environment was allowing them to control their social interactions experienced less stress and built more friendships than students who lived along long and crowded corridors.

Therefore an answer to the problem of "over-crowdedness" could be found in the creation of semi-public/communal spaces, which represent a middle ground between the private and the public. This would imply the abandonment of the gigantic housing projects in which large numbers of people live together (like the socialist-era gigantic worker "barracks"), never feeling quite alone. Instead, a space could be given to medium-sized housing cooperatives with common spaces in disposal of all the neighbors. In this way, three layers of social spheres would be created — private, communal and public — allowing citizens to regulate their social interaction, thus giving them sence of comfort and encouraging egalitarianism.

## Urban design and direct democracy

Many things can be done through urban design to encourage communal feeling across citizens. But there is also a need for the establishment of institutions of public deliberation which would enable co-inhabitants to collectively determine the destiny of their cities as well as of themselves. It is difficult to imagine what else could bring people more close as a community than the feeling of shared responsibility for their city.

Thus, a city should always strive to manage itself through direct democracy. This will require the establishment of public spaces, suitable for the accommodation of direct-democratic institutions, such as general assemblies. Such spaces, like public squares, halls or amphitheatres, should most likely be equipped with sound systems, allowing a speaker to be heard amongst gatherings of several thousand citizens, as well as being live-streamed so that the rest of the community could be able to observe the assembly from a distance.

Murray Bookchin points to the cities of the past, before the emergence of the so-called state-craft. In them the citizens were actively involved in shaping their cities, deeply and morally committed to them. But with the emergence of parliamentarism and capitalism, citizens were replaced by passive consumers, simply passing through their urban environment, without any commitment to it.

Such steps towards reframing the city's role as encourager of community and citizenry is, in a sense, rediscovering the logic of the *polis,* as understood by the ancient Athenians. Of course the city-sizes of their times and our own are incomparable, but the logic on which their city was built could be used as "germ" by us today, as suggested by Cornelius Castoriadis[4]. Ancient Athens was encouraging community feeling as well as an active citizenry, which gave birth to one of the most influential periods of human creativity to this day. At the heart of the Athenian urban life were situated the agora and the general assembly (ekklesia). The agora was a market place, positioned in an accessible and central part of the city, where the Athenians spent a great deal of their time exchanging goods, information and opinions, or in other words – socializing — while in the assembly they were bonding with each other as well as with their city by sharing responsibility for its destiny.

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[4] Castoriadis, Cornelius (1983): *The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy* (1983)

## Social movements for the city

During the last years we have been witnessing a rising interest among social movements in the urban question. More and more people are starting to notice the effect our cities have on us. Different movements, focused on the urban question, are emerging, some focused on municipal elections, others on urban planning. However, it seems most of them do not view this matter in holistic political manner.

On the one hand, the introduction of changes, no matter how great, in the way local elections are being held, won't give cities back to their citizens. This can be done only by introducing new deliberative institutions, such as those described earlier in this text, which would allow each and every citizen to participate directly in the determination of their city's destiny. The role of existing local authorities should be reduced to supervision and enforcement of the decisions already taken by these new institutions, and thus be subjected to them through means such as revocability, sortition, and rotation.

On the other hand, social movements dealing with city issues often tend to limit their activities to narrow urban designing, waiting for local authorities to implement their proposals. Their work remains half-way done, since a city does not consist of buildings, roads and squares only, but also of people, and thus, of social relations and forms of organization. As Henri Lefebvre suggests[5]: *The right to the city cannot be conceived of as simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life.*

Thus the approach should be focused on linking urban design with politics and decision-making in particular. As we saw above, radical change in one is hardly imaginable without such radical change also occuring in the other. But what seems a very good start, is the fact that more people are paying attention to the role that our urban environment is playing on us, our social relationships and our political projects in general.

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[5] Henri Lefebvre (1996): *Writings on Cities*. Blackwell, p.158