

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN & PLANNING

You are here: Home / News & Events

NEWS

Liveable cities: who decides what that means and how we achieve it?

29 October 2015

Foundation essay: *The Conversation* has appointed a cities and policy editor to lead our coverage of the myriad issues affecting the urban centres where nine out of ten Australians live. This article sets the scene for exploring the many challenges facing cities today, as well as presenting solutions to the problems and highlighting the opportunities of life in the modern city.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has created a new ministry for cities and the built environment. Announcing his decision last month, he said:

Liveable, vibrant cities are absolutely critical to our prosperity. (They are) where the bulk of our economic growth can be found ... (and they are) economic assets. (M)aking sure that Australia is a wonderful place to live in, that our cities and indeed our regional centres are wonderful places to live, is an absolutely key priority of every level of government. Because the most valuable capital in the world today is not financial capital ... (it's) human capital.

While the question of what is a "liveable city" inspires endless debate, less thought has been given to making urban planning a more democratic process.

Natural evolution and the birth of urban planning

In the 18th century, one of London's pioneer police magistrates, Henry Fielding, strove to keep the streets of the city clear of crime and vice. But in the course of his work Fielding also went out of his way to help prostitutes and petty criminals. He understood that the city was made up of all sorts of people with different values and cultures.

Fielding was living in a period when London was experiencing a population boom, going from just over 500,000 in 1700 to 900,000 in the 1801 census.

Today, 54% of the world's population lives in cities, which have historically drawn people from myriad economic, social and cultural backgrounds. Cities have always been places of integration, intense population pressures, migration flows, cultural interactions and variations in socioeconomic positioning and values.

Fielding was interested in making London a liveable city, although the term would have been anachronistic to him. Yet it appears almost ubiquitous in contemporary policymaking, urban planning and in the public imagination. A liveable city has become the highest form of praise we can give to a city space.

But liveable for whom? The implication is that ordinary people should be able to inhabit cities. Yet how governments generate affordable housing, and even who is allowed to have a say in the planning and development of a city, is often badly developed.

Where does democracy fit in?

Is a liveable city a democratic city? Who gets to participate in the process of governing and shaping a city?

In the early 20th century, modern cities were thought to evolve according to "natural" processes, combining migration, growth and the urban form. Urban sociologists from the Chicago School outlined how cities evolved like living social organisms balancing conflict and co-operation, density, heterogeneity and tolerance. Ernest Burgess even suggested that the very form of the modern city developed in predictable fashion as a set of "concentric rings", with production and workers' cottages in a singular inner centre and more affluent suburbs at the extremities.



A failure to plan contributes to urban sprawl as cities spread along major highways. [Wikimedia Commons/Remi Jouan](#). CC BY-SA

Such ideas have given way to a more complex depiction of post-modern cities, incorporating multiple (or no) centres, historical communities, development interests and urban planning. Urban planning is seen as an essential technical science. A failure to plan is associated with dystopian images of suburban sprawl, of the "exopolis" without facilities or a civic centre, or of "edge cities" growing like lichen along the intersections of major highways.

Appropriate planning is aimed at building the best cities to enhance quality of life and attract the elite of the global workforce. We strive to find a formula for the most liveable city and potentially top the EIU's Global Liveability Ranking (which Melbourne achieved in 2015).

Urban planners explore how cities can be sustainable and how a continuous food and water supply can be ensured, but they also deal with concerns about over-population, migration and what happens when poverty is concentrated in certain areas, which can increase the potential for crime.

Cities as economic sites or liveable places

Soon after his appointment, the new cities minister, Jamie Briggs, conveyed his vision of cities as economic sites:

Cities are one of the great drivers of our economy. Most Australians live in our cities and the majority of businesses are based in or around them. They are the engine room of commerce, infrastructure, innovation, the arts, science and development.



Cities are drivers of the economy, as Jamie Briggs says, but they are much more than that and a holistic approach is vital. AAP/Lukas Coch

While it's true that historically people have been drawn to cities because of the economic opportunities they offered, such claims disguise both the difficulties for urban migrants and environments that economic opportunities have created, as well as the negative implications for those remaining in rural areas.

Before 1871, migrants from across France settled in Paris as a consequence of its economic opportunities and political importance. The social disconnection implicit in such movement became evident in Emile Durkheim's 1897 study of French suicide rates and the breakdown in traditional forms of social solidarity.

Migration also played out broader social inequalities across the nation in urban space. People grouped in neighbourhoods based on shared languages and dialects that related to their home regions. Within those districts, rich and poor shared the same buildings, their wealth demarcated by their positioning in the building.

Perhaps this was better for social integration than many modern environments, but a focus on the city as an economic space can lose sight of how cities are made liveable. Social relationships are key to central ideas of safety, belonging and ownership.

In 1903, Georg Simmel described the metropolis as a blasé, rationalised space that alienates people from people and feelings, in that:

... punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence.

Sixty years later, however, Jane Jacobs defended the city as a myriad of communities in that:

... the trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts.

What makes the ideal Australian city?



Liveable cities like Melbourne pay attention to the aesthetic and human qualities of urban space. AAP/David Crosling

Is it Canberra, which divides public opinion with its low density, its roundabouts and planned streets? Is it Sydney or Melbourne with their high-density cultural vibrancy? Or is it the small country towns, which often appear communal in ways larger cities do not?

We often think of the attachment we have towards cities in emotional terms; we love or hate a place, we feel comfortable or settled in some spaces but not in others. We instinctively speak about cities in terms of their emotional impact on our lives.

Even Wordsworth, renowned for his love of nature and solitude, spoke of his emotional attachment to the city. Reflecting on his first sight of London, he wrote:

A weight of ages did at once descend

Upon my heart - no thought embodied, no
Distinct remembrances, but weight and power,
Power growing with the weight...

For Wordsworth, as for others then and now, the city inspired a complex set of emotions.

What the new ministry needs to do

First, it needs to recognise the cultural, aesthetic and emotional elements of cities. It needs to acknowledge the importance of cultural activity ahead of the pursuit of commerce and the idea of cities as "economic assets".

The aesthetic qualities of space are crucial to the notion of a liveable city. These became important in the 18th century with a growing appreciation of the ways that environment shaped the self and emotional behaviours.

To produce "civilised" behaviours in their populace, urban planners laid out wide streets, introduced sewage and flowing water, added street lamps and began to police both the behaviour and cleanliness of the urban environment. This was not just about practical benefits to the population, but reflected a strong belief that surrounding yourself with beauty enabled people to be better versions of themselves.



The people of Copenhagen still benefit from the city's 18th-century reforms. AAP/Visit Denmark

Such ideas remain important to the present. Historians of emotions spend a lot of time thinking about how cities and spaces create emotions, historically but with implications for modern spaces. Urban planning (or its lack) can produce emotions in inhabitants, whether that is the disgust at poor sewage and disease that inspired reform in 18th-century Copenhagen or 20th-century Sydney, the anger and tensions caused by ghettoisation of minority groups, or the political unrest caused by poor housing and overcrowding.

Perhaps most famously, cities have provided "outcast" individuals, such as gay men and lesbians, with a space to create a community, to find affirmation of their feelings and to build pride and political identity. A narrow focus on the city as a driver of the economic, without an appreciation of how the urban shapes those who live within it can act as a challenge to social stability and personal wellbeing.

Historically, the use of space in cities has been a matter of pride, displaying important cultural and architectural landmarks, but also an issue of public health and safety, preventing the spread of diseases, fires and crime. Our historical knowledge of cities can be enormously helpful in informing current ideas about city planning by showing how people have reacted emotionally to city spaces in the past.

The answer to the question of what makes a city liveable is complex and constantly evolving. Because of this we should be insisting on answers about what will be happening to Australia's cities in the next few decades.

Published courtesy of The Conversation.

Contact: Mandy Campbell

Phone: 0481 012 742

Email: mandy.campbell@sydney.edu.au