Book Review

Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design

by Charles Montgomery, Doubleday Canada, 2013, $29.95, Hardcover

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At the risk of hyperbole, I think Charles Montgomery’s Happy City is the most important book on urban planning in the last decade. Another pioneer, Richard Register, founder of the international EcoCity movement, is known for his ‘ecocity insight’ – that ecological health at a variety of scales is dependent on how the built environment is structured. We know that sprawl contributes to energy consumption and production of greenhouse gases, a point that Montgomery also echoes numerous times. But Montgomery also drives home that sprawl makes people sick, unhappy, and broke!

Montgomery’s ‘happy city insight’ stresses that “urban design [is] powerful enough to make or break [human] happiness” (p. 8). This stands in contrast with high modernist planning and architecture that humans are infinitely adaptable – promoting an indifference to the quality of the built environment that reflected and reinforced what Michael Benedikt (2002, p. 21) called “environmental stoicism and place machismo.” Even Prince Charles got into trouble with architects a few years ago for chiding them about their lack of acknowledgement that humans have ‘souls.

What makes Montgomery’s book so compelling is that it combines the latest insights from psychology, behavioural science, and architecture with vivid stories from the front lines of cities whose leaders and activists have the courage to imagine a superior way of life.

It’s not coincidental that he starts his book by profiling the ‘Mayor of Happy,’ Enrique Penalosa, who turned the city of Bogotá’s (Colombia) priorities on their head in his brief 3-year term in office (1998-2001). Some of Penalosa’s measures were inspired, in part, by the revolutionary work of Curitiba in Brazil. And Bogotá, in turn, helped inspire the turnaround of Medellín, once considered one of the foulest hellholes on earth.

As Montgomery sees it, happiness is actionable as a major policy goal and can achieve public support, with a host of collateral benefits such as reduced greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution, lowered energy consumption, and reduced infrastructure costs.
He cites numerous examples from Copenhagen and Paris to Manhattan and the aforementioned examples from Latin America.

Another key point is both philosophical and practical. While Penalosa’s policies had numerous environmental benefits, his main objectives were fairness and social justice. Rather than putting billions into more infrastructure for cars, as was recommended by a Japanese international aid agency, he put the money into massive improvements in transit and bike infrastructure, making it ‘cool’ to be a transit user, and pleasant to ride one’s bike. He also greatly expanded the park system, and built new community centres and architectural landmark libraries in poor neighbourhoods. The message was that poor people counted, that their needs were important. His goal was to build a city for people, not cars. There was definitely some pushback from the rich and privileged, but he got away with it.

Montgomery emphasizes that sustainability won’t be sold on the basis of ‘saving the world’ or fiscal responsibility, but on the basis of demonstrable improvement in people’s quality of life; he calls his approach “hedonic sustainability.” At the same time, he emphasizes that sustainability has to benefit all people; hence the emphasis on fairness and social justice. This may be a tougher sell in North America than in Latin America, where many of his examples come from. Thanks to the progress made by neo-liberalism in recent decades, there are stronger tendencies for the middle and upper classes in North America – even in Canada – to think only of their own interests, no matter how self-defeating this may be in the long run.

Part of the pushback here may be in response to a desire to curb sprawl, but, as Montgomery points out, suburbs are here to stay. Not only will they likely remain the environment of choice for many North Americans, but the central cities will not be sufficient to accommodate the waves of expected future immigrants. However, existing suburbs must be retrofitted to make them more functional, and new suburbs must be built right – with mixed use at greater densities, possessing more common spaces, and being much less auto-dependent.

Happy City is a richly illustrated book, and the footnotes citing his research sources have wisely been pushed to the back to avoid disrupting its narrative flow. It is one weakness is the lack of an index. I wanted to look up an obscure technical term used at one point, and it was impossible to find. Buy this book and put it on your shelf for summer reading! You won’t be disappointed.