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Book Review

The Geography of Bliss: One Grump’s Search for the Happiest Places in the World

Eric Weiner, Twelve/ Hachette Book Group, 2009, $15.50 Cdn in paperback

by Don Alexander, MCIP, Vancouver Island University

The Geography of Bliss is a funny, yet insightful look at why some people and nations are happier than others. The author, a journalist for National Public Radio in the U.S., visited ten countries where people are particularly happy or unhappy, or whose traditions shed light on the relevant issues, and also interviewed experts in the emerging ‘science of happiness.’ Written by a self-described ‘grump,’ the book is peppered with self-deprecating anecdotes and wry observations about the people and cultures he visited.

Weiner (pronounced ‘whiner’) is a journalist, not a planner, and thus lacks the lens to mine insights from his chosen subject matter to apply them to planning. Nonetheless, there is much that can be inferred from the book that is very relevant to what we do as planners. Here are some of his findings with some thoughts on their application to planning work.

Abundance of Arts and Culture: A strong arts and culture, more than wealth, contribute to a nation’s happiness. Iceland, a tiny island nation, has a quite contented population despite its cold and dark weather, because its arts scene is so rich and its government provides abundant support for artists and writers seeking to make a living. Quatar, by contrast, at the summit of the world’s wealth pyramid, has virtually no culture, and has been reduced to trying to buy one holus-bolus.

In recent years, planners and politicians have come to the realization of just how important culture is—in terms of attracting more members of the ‘creative class,’ in terms of its multiplier effects, and as a factor that can contribute to the regeneration of troubled neighbourhoods like Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. This has helped give birth to the ‘Creative City’ movement.

Family and Community Ties: Another strong feature making for happiness is strong family and neighbourhood ties. As we proceed to densify cities, we need to make sure they work for families and people of all ages, not just young and middle-aged singles. They should also have abundant public spaces. Some housing forms are likely to promote community more than others. The co-op in which I live has a strong sense of community—not only because it is self-managed, but also because most of the units are townhouses with adjacent entrances which results in frequent random encounters with one’s neighbours. Also, many communities like Vancouver are beginning to experiment with road closures and street festivals which provide residents of a neighbourhood or single block with the opportunity to mingle, to listen to music, and be exposed to alternative products and environmental causes. Though not involving street closures, farmers’ markets share these same characteristics. In general having a strong and stable small business sector also adds considerably to the general conviviality of neighbourhoods.

Fun: In countries like Thailand, there is an ethos that if it’s not fun it’s not worth doing (this includes at work). There have been numerous debates about what creating the ‘fun city’ entails. Certainly, having numerous festivals and free cultural events helps. Some cities, such as Berlin, hold late night cultural bacchanalia where residents and visitors can go to a number of major galleries and museums for a low fixed price—kind of like a cultural pub crawl.

Abundant parks: ranging in formatting from passive enjoyment of nature to active sports fields—and provision of adequate community recreation facilities for people of all ages and backgrounds, are also essential. The Roundhouse in Vancouver is a good example. On any given day, one can find Chinese seniors playing Mahjong, dance or Nia courses in
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progress, workshops on a variety of topics taking place, and arts and crafts activities for children. Making cities work for pedestrians is a crucial element, as exemplified by the work and commentary of Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogota, Colombia, who pioneered the concept of ciclovia—a temporary closing of designated streets to motorized traffic to allow bikes, pedestrians, and rollerbladers unimpeded access. Vancouver is trying out the concept on an experimental basis.

Heritage and Identity: Happier people, like the Swiss, have a strong sense of their own history and identity, whereas unhappy ones like Moldova and, to a certain degree, Qatar, are lacking in these areas. Some cities, like Vancouver, have undertaken creative efforts to make their citizens more aware of the history of diverse groups and cultures, through walking trails, in-street mosaic projects, and cell phone tours of important precincts like Chinatown. These efforts are supplemented through Heritage Vancouver and Think City through their various heritage and urban awareness walks.

Nature: Although not emphasized much in the book, except parenthetically in the discussion of England, nature is an important factor in people’s happiness—through pets, gardens, and greenery of all kinds. Despite having the highest urban population density in the world, a full 50% of Singapore has been reserved as green space. Green space can take many forms—wild or manicured, functional (as with community gardens) and ornamental. Having good quality, diverse green space should be a sine qua non of all enlightened urban policy, especially in an era when we seek a greater densification of our urban fabric.

Power: People like the Swiss, who are in more control of their destinies, tend to be happier than those who are politically disenfranchised. Of course, this is a double-edged sword. At a time when massive changes are demanded in the way we build our cities, citizen activism too often betrays the siege mentality of those who want no change whatsoever, especially at the neighbourhood level. Perhaps the antidote to parochialism is to fully involve people in decision-making, as is done with the budget deliberations in Port Alegre, Brazil, and to a lesser degree in Seattle and Portland.

Safety/ Sufficiency of Means: The richest people are often not the happiest. Many nations whose citizens are relatively poor score much happier on most measures than their developed counterparts. Amongst developed countries, those with strong safety nets tend to be the happiest. Iceland, in particular, has a strong tradition of people daring to change careers because they know they won’t fall into penury and homelessness if they initially fail. Social programs are mainly a federal responsibility, but some cities—like Saskatoon and, to a lesser degree, Vancouver—are finding innovative ways to provide more affordable housing. Having a secure home, after all, is the bedrock of well-being and security.

Tolerance: A critical attribute of more happy societies is tolerance for diversity, as has been modeled for decades by countries like The Netherlands. Tolerant cities are also much more attractive to members of the ‘creative class,’ and thus are better able to attract knowledge sector firms and employees.

Trust: Trust has been proven to be an absolutely essential ingredient, both of social capital and of happiness. Moldova, which has the unfortunate distinction of being the unhappiest country on Earth, is characterized by a ‘beggar thy neighbour’ philosophy and high levels of distrust and fear. Trust—and its correlates, responsibility and reciprocity—encompasses everything from friendliness and helpfulness when one encounters someone who is lost or in distress to the inviolability of one’s person and property. It also extends to a wider sense of responsibility for one’s community and to considering the consequences of one’s actions. Vancouver, under the former City Council, experimented with having a commissioner in charge of what it called Project Civil Society. However, it didn’t seem to have taken hold at the grassroots and was criticized for encouraging harassment against the poor and homeless.

Unpredictability: Finally, unpredictability is a factor in at least some people’s happiness. According to a few of Weiner’s informants, many Indian immigrants return home from North America and elsewhere, where they were earning good money, because they miss the unpredictability of life in India. Even if one doesn’t seek to embrace the chaos of Indian cities, the charm of places like Barcelona, Paris, and Amsterdam lies in the fact that one can wander their streets and constantly encounter the unexpected. This quality makes them memorable, stimulating places to visit or live in. This unpredictability is lacking in many suburban neighbourhoods.

Ultimately, the implicit message of this book is that happiness, not economic growth, should be the ultimate measure of a jurisdiction’s success. In one of the case studies, Wiener explores the experience of Bhutan whose king and other officials have pioneered the concept of Gross National Happiness, suggesting that every decision made by the government should seek to enhance happiness first and foremost. Would that it were so here in BC! ☞

For more information about Don, check out his web site http://web.viu.ca/alexander2