

KAP



THE UNBEARABLE SOFTNESS OF CITIES

David Sim's most recent book "Soft City" deals with a simple thing: How to build cities for people. He focuses on the human scale. How does this actually work?

David, soft – you mentioned it before – could easily be confused with "weak". But you meant resilient or flexible ...

This could risk being a very long answer ...

... Well. So, what is a genuine "soft city"?

A soft city should have the human scale, the human pace and the human dimension. A soft city should gently invite its inhabitants to connect with the plant, place and people, meaning that environmental, economic and social sustainability are relevant to them in their everyday lives. A soft city will be lower, slower, simpler and smaller.

Is there anything like the "softest city" in the world?

I don't know if there is one "softest city". You can find soft city phenomena in many towns and cities. Of course, I have to say that Copenhagen does very well – and there are many references in the book.

I would also mention the Swiss capital, Bern which although it's not famous as a design or architecture city, is full of soft aspects which connect people better to planet, place and other people. Whether it's the arcades of the medieval city which allow you to walk about in all weathers or the concrete steps on the banks of the river Aare which allow you to wild swim in middle of the city, the tram network which transports you sedately at eye-level through streets and squares tantalisingly close to people and places or the buildings like Schwellenmätterli, with its crowed outdoor terrace hanging over the swooshing water of the falls.

However, for me the most surprisingly soft city is Tokyo, the biggest city in the world. Your image of Tokyo is perhaps skyscrapers and crowded metro trains. But the reality is that most of Tokyo is low-rise (I am told on average something just under three storeys) and it is basically a walking city. The softness comes from the human scale of small, low buildings – the ancient property laws mean that the city is divided into tiny pieces of land. These property fractals mean buildings stay naturally smaller and their independence means that the urban fabric remains naturally diverse. Of course, human ingenuity finds creative solutions to densify each little site (its relative size) and maximise its performance (what it does) creating an urban intensity at a human scale which makes it both very convenient and very satisfying to be walk about and live your life locally.

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Soft also implies human. Would you want your fellow city-planners to develop a different attitude towards space and size?

I think already many in planning are concerned with human scale but often developers, architects even politicians are not. For me, it's about creating a wider understanding of the value of softness – the environmental value, the social value and the economic value. Building more “softly”, or at the human scale can potential make more money, help the environment (while saving money, energy and resources), help solve many societal challenges as well as give opportunities for more architectural projects, with greater diversity.

You said, humans were small and soft.

After I had chosen the name “Soft City” Jan Gehl showed me the poem by Inger Christensen with the beautiful line “till some begin to build, a city soft like a body”. We have to remember the smallness of the human scale, the slowness of the human pace and the sensitivity of the human dimension. Human beings are sensory creatures – we live and thrive by using our senses. We have to think about how the human senses work. All of them.

Architecture and design is often rather graphic – reflecting the plans and images we create and publish in magazines and online. The visual, what things look like, is important, but it's not everything. Rather than only being concerned about the aesthetics, we need to think more holistically about sensory experiences: the acoustics of place, the tactile feeling of a place, the smells of a place – even the tastes.

Multi-sensory experiences are moments of intense connection with what's around us - for example having a meal outside in a busy but traffic-free public place is something which we really enjoy because all our senses get satisfied at the same time.

How about perfection? I got the idea that imperfection could turn out to be beautiful and really human.

Every aspect of the city should make us feel comfortable and welcome, there is room for us. So, I don't know if the word “imperfection” is the best way to describe it, but perhaps instead “incompleteness”. The idea is that there should always be room for growth and space for self-expression. The city can offer moments of completeness (or perfection) but only with human presence.

Something else about size? Eyelevel?

When we walk or cycle we are moving at speeds where we can absorb and process the information of the environment around us. We are connected to the forces of nature, to physical places and our fellow citizens, we are breathing the same air, hearing the same sounds and having the same collective experience.]??

Density is often connected with the maximization of profit. What makes density human – (could you give an example for maintaining the human scale)?

Density on its own has little value. I think the key is the balancing of density and diversity. I talk about this in the book – and in a way you could say it's the thesis of at least the first chapter about living locally. Density x diversity makes for proximity. The physical proximity to many different places, experiences, services and other people is why we live in cities and this what makes urban locations valuable. What we have to explain to developers wanting to maximise profit is that there is more profit in making more valuable places. And we have to demonstrate that it's not difficult to accommodate density and diversity. A big part of Soft City is about showing how surprisingly simple these things can be.

Cities like ...

Paris and Barcelona are very dense, but they are also very diverse. In every quarter, every street and even every building there is diversity.



But what we can also learn from cities like Paris and Barcelona is that they can soften the feeling of density. Both cities avoid tall buildings, so they maintain, the “big sky”. Apart from giving a huge sense of space, everything feels smaller in relation to a big sky.

Also, what these cities do well as taking care of what’s going on at on the ground floor – at human eye-level. This means the things going closest to me as I walk around are taken care of, I am supported, comforted, served and entertained.

WALKING THE CITY

Talking about walking ...

I think the human scale can also be applied at a somewhat larger scale, in a practical way, in terms of the possibility of living locally. Popularly referred to as the 15 minute city, cities which have everything you need for your everyday life within walking distance, make for a more comfortable and convenient life. When the dense and diverse offer is relevant to your daily existence, I think you could also say that it human.

And beyond, different activities and services, the physical fabric of the city should offer a diversity in terms of choices of spaces responding to my needs at a given moment in time; busier or calmer, noisier or quieter, warmer or cooler, brighter or shadier. These ever-changing are also rather human.

You got a lovely equation in your book: “density x diversity = proximity”. But this could be read differently. The answer could also be “tension”. How would you counter this argument?

This is a very good point. There is a huge risk that density x diversity could make things much worse. And that’s exactly why you need softness. Soft materials perform better under tension- they move, they flex, they bend, they deform, they twist and turn without losing their strength – while hard, brittle materials fracture, crack and break. My point is that the soft can absorb the tension.

In the case of soft city, it might be the shutters softening the extremes of the weather; the small front garden buffering the household inside from the public life of the street; the attic, basement and outbuildings giving room for growth, or the cycle path protecting the pavement from the car traffic. The diverse range of conflicting but necessary urban phenomena can co-exist if there are soft interfaces in-between.

You also said, global warming, congestion and segregation and rapid urbanization were the biggest challenges we are currently facing – in what order would you address these problems as a city-planner?

It’s hard to put them in order – I suspect that you have to juggle them all at the same time. To make a good piece of city, you can be strategic. I would say that you can start with any of these themes and then bring in the others, since they are all interconnected.

Cities don’t grow up in a vacuum. I think as an urbanist, you have to be able to be able to start a project from any angle. The starting point might be a major piece of infrastructural development, an economic crisis, a natural disaster or even a global pandemic.

I often joke that you have to be friends with the traffic engineers first. They have the biggest budgets, and are often the most respected because of their data-driven approach. It is possible to start with mobility/accessibility, and use these to leverage better environmental, social and development outcomes.

Unlike an architect, an urbanist is more like an orchestra conductor. You have to be able to work with a whole range of different performers each with very different expertises and instruments, and get them all to play well together. A city isn’t just the product of designers. Politicians, entrepreneurs, investors and developers, countless stakeholders and the citizens themselves; partnership and cooperation are vital wherever you start.



Especially the ground floor seems to be a real problem.

The ground floor is where the building meets the public, the street and spatial infrastructure and everything else which is the rest of the city. This is the part of the building which can potentially do most to help the city work better as a whole – but also if not done well – can potentially do the most damage.

The ground floor is the threshold between inside and out, between private and public. The ground floor is the most flexible part of the building, because you can (potentially) see right in and walk right in. Almost any kind of activity can take place on the ground floor – with considered design. Therefore successful performance of the ground floor is vital.

Soft edges, meaning transparency, multiple access points and usable outdoor edge zones, as well as well-considered programming and curatorship can allow the ground floor to realise its full potential.

THE “GERMAN” CITY

You’ve mentioned Freiburg and the idea of Baugruppen – this model needs constant attention and demands huge workloads of architects. What would advise them to do once they started such a project?

I think more work for architects is a good thing and spending more time in process can influence a better result in terms of product. The better in tune the design is with the lives and aspirations of the clients, the more likely the outcome will be better, because the future inhabitants will feel more (care, pride, passion, love) for their buildings.

It is important that the architects budget time for this process work and choose the right staff for these roles which are possibly more about communication than design. There are many different roles an architect can play.

Looking at Germany in general: What would you like to change, as far as city-planning and architecture are concerned?

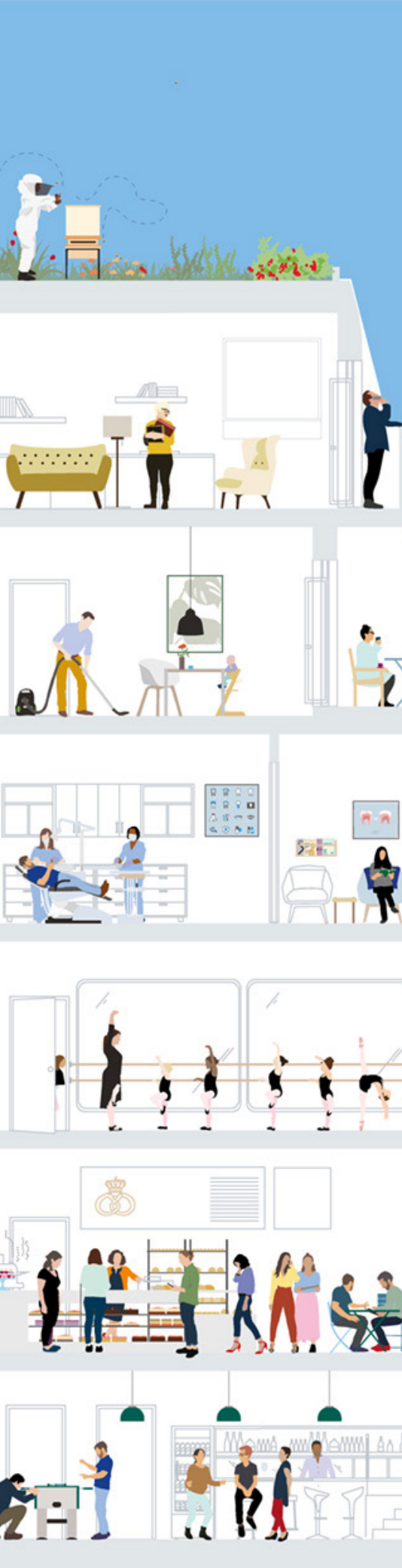
I would start by saying what’s great about Germany. The Federal system means that there is no one overly dominant major/capital city – as for example, London dominates the UK. Instead there are 5 or 6 major cities, then a whole range of attractive second tier and third tier cities. Additionally, the rail network of DB ensures that highspeed, intercity rail travel is fairly equally well spread throughout the country – again unlike the UK. On top of this many smaller German cities have a very high standard of local and regional public transport, with trams, metro and S-trains, normally only found in major cities in other countries. All of this makes for a very good foundation for live quality throughout the country.

There are also many good examples of dense, medium-rise development of modest but high-quality buildings, not just in Berlin but many other cities.

How about Baugruppen?

Rather specific, but the Baugruppen model is extremely interesting as a more affordable and sustainable development model, which could be relevant all over the world, where general delivery models housing are becoming both unaffordable and unsatisfactory.

Worry tendencies include a renewed interest in high-rise, with cities developing “high-rise buildings strategies”. High-rise buildings are environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable. It’s that simple. I would therefore recommend the strategy to be not having high-rise buildings.



And transportation?

As a car-producing nation there is a lot of space given to cars in German cities and a lot of focus given to car technology, perhaps seen as part of societal progress. At the moment there is a huge amount of attention given to electric cars. I would instead put a major focus on bicycles (including electric bicycles) as a serious form of transport for everyday trips. Developing cycling infrastructure is rather cheap, but delivers benefits such as better health and environmental outcomes, as well as solving everyday transport challenges.

THE FUTURE OF CITY PLANNING

You've shown the effective transformation of neighbourhoods and entire communities. What is the next step for your bureau – in terms of technology, methodology and general goals?

We will continue to work with doing quantitative and qualitative surveys to build up a better understanding of what is going on in cities. The Covid 19 pandemic was great opportunity to observe dramatic changes in the ways our cities are used. Many of these newly acquired behaviours such as living more locally and relying on soft mobility in everyday life are likely to continue after the pandemic.

We are embracing new technology and by plugging into big data there is a huge potential to leverage better knowledge of city life and behaviours to achieve more sustainable outcomes.

When I joined Gehl we were just four people, now we are eighty. I'm sure the company will continue to grow, but if we want to see better liveability in cities across the world, we will need more collaboration, more knowledge-sharing, more inter-disciplinary cooperation, between public and private sectors, locally, nationally and internationally.

On a personal level, I am hoping Soft City might get translated to German and in a modest way help contribute to the many inspiring activities of the greater urbanist community and movement towards better everyday lives for the many who live in cities.

David Sim is Creative Director at Gehl. For more than ten years David has been focusing on Masterplanning Frameworks and urban design, collaborating with other professionals in the planning and building process, applying Jan Gehl's theories to large-scale projects. David is also renowned as an inspiring educator and lecturer, and has taught at architecture and design schools all over the world.