



Charles Montgomery on happy cities and pleasure centres

By Michael Botur of NZ Planning Institute

“People who live in car-dependent neighbourhoods on the edge of big cities are the least likely to know and trust their neighbours, the least likely to volunteer or participate in sports, and the least likely to volunteer or vote.”

Charles Montgomery is opposed to antisocial planning. He’s impressed by old ladies taking back the streets of Mexico City, astounded by Aucklanders’ access to nature, and unimpressed by urban development like Sturges Road in Henderson.

The author of ‘Happy Cities’ is coming to NZ in April for the NZ Planning Institute’s national conference, slamming subdivisions and poor planning as he comes.

Montgomery’s an expert on ‘happiness science’ – something which needs a bit of explaining.

“I’m not interested in self-help. I’m interested in city-help. That means drawing lessons from psychology, neuroscience, behavioural economics and public health to determine how design influences all our happiness.”

But surely happiness is intangible – isn’t it?

“The simplest way to measure happiness is just to ask people. Brain imaging studies have shown that people’s self-reports on happiness correlate strongly with activity in the pleasure centres of their brains. People who say they are happy also have lower levels of stress hormones in their blood. They are healthier, more resilient, more productive, and live longer. What’s the most important ingredient of human happiness? It is the sum total of our positive social relationships. Cities whose residents report high levels of social trust almost always rate highest in happiness surveys. The happy city and the social city are the same place.”

So have some cities been depressed? Is depression the opposite of happiness?

“Evidence suggests that the most powerful ingredient of urban happiness is sociability. “Studies in the USA have found that the greatest factor limiting the ability for people to meet face-to-face in cities is the degree to which city functions are spread out. I’m talking about auto-oriented sprawl. People who live in car-dependent neighbourhoods on the edge of big cities are the least likely to know and trust their neighbours, the least likely to volunteer or participate in sports, and the least likely to volunteer or vote. They just have no time.”

Montgomery says Auckland’s setting “showers residents with happiness benefits.” That’s a pretty sweet endorsement. “Dozens of studies have confirmed that access to nature makes us healthier and more content. Recent research suggests that even brief exposure to nature causes people to be more kind to strangers. But it’s not enough to be surrounded by nature.



To really benefit from it, nature needs to be woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. That means parks through the city, in every size, from extra-large to teeny tiny. Even small doses of nature alter our mood.”

It’s surprising, then, that Montgomery’s favourite city “without a doubt,” is Mexico City – famed for being built on a swamp over 2000m up in the mountains and wallowing in congestion and smog.

“That city of more than 20 million people breaks so many of the rules of happy urbanism. It’s ruled by cars. The streets are congested. Many neighbourhoods are bereft of green space. And yet there is an irrepressible sociability and chaotic sense of possibility. Give defechos [residents] a blank concrete wall and a broken sidewalk and they will create a village of commerce and conviviality, where you can buy anything from a grilled pork taco to a new cell phone. Anything seems possible. Meanwhile, the city has begun to reclaim the streets of its ancient *centro historico* from cars. Those streets are being embraced by people. Just last month I came across a gaggle of elderly women who had plunked themselves down in the middle of Calle Regina to stage an embroidering class. And underneath this chaos runs one of the best subway systems in the world.”

So are there any ‘broken’ cities Montgomery would love to renovate/improve/fix?

“Eighty percent of suburbs built in the last 30 years are built in ways that make life more difficult for residents. Zoom in on the dispersal around Sturges Road outside of Henderson, a suburb of Auckland. Those seemingly-idyllic single-use communities force everyone to depend on the family car to get where they need to go. Such systems make families poorer, children sicker and more dependent, and economies less resilient. And they cost city governments more than twice as much to service than close-in communities.

“The solution? Start by investing in more mixed-use, walkable nodes within walking distance of great transit, like the train station in Henderson.”

Auckland is notorious for having overpriced, unaffordable housing and high rental prices – so what does it mean when a mere house is hugely valued?

“Auckland is facing the same issue as great cities all over the world. Part of the problem is that cities are seen as a safe place to park capital in an unstable world economy. But there is also an issue of supply. Most of your single-family homes sit on land whose value has not been realised. In other cities with supply issues—like Vancouver, my own town—owners of single-family homes have been given permission to both rent out basement suites and turn their back yard garages into rental cottages. Suddenly every property can support three households. My point is that cities need to find creative new ways to absorb population.”

In his keynote speech at Back To The Future 2015, Montgomery will illustrate how urban design influences the way we feel, move and treat other people. “I’ll be sharing stories of urban transformation from around the world. And I’ll tell stories from my own adventures in



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urban experimentalism, in which I work with allies from various disciplines to test the emotional effects of urban spaces.”

Bearing in mind that even small doses of nature alter a person’s mood, Montgomery has made plans to surf at Piha when he’s here.

There are [limited spaces available at Montgomery’s](#) Thursday April 16 workshop, at which planners are encouraged to bring real planning predicaments to share and solve. Plans can really bring happiness to housing. Find out how.