

# HOPE FOR A BETTER CITY

## A utopian calling

In this manifesto, I will discuss the importance of green spaces in our cities. As a species that emerged from the natural environment, today, 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050.<sup>1</sup> However, in the recent pandemic, a time of great crisis, we witnessed a movement of many city dwellers toward the countryside.<sup>2</sup> This change shows that the system of safety and health care promised within cities by our governments is not so certain, and now more apparently so, in the verge of collapse. Citizens moved closer to nature in search for better quality of life and health standards.

In a culture abundant with rituals, the Japanese recognised Shirin-yoku “breathing in the forest air” as a vital part of a preventative healthcare routine. This ritual claims that a full immersion in nature is vital for good health. In the western world, neurourbanism is defined as a newly interdisciplinary field of research focusing on the relationships between city life and mental wellbeing. Either with ancient rituals or modern scientific studies, we are discovering the importance of this connection with the natural environment; With all of this in mind, why is it that we don't radically change our cities, for the better of our health and well-being?

This essay will explore different ways in which to morph our cities, and how these shifts might benefit the health and well being of its citizens. I will also call upon the importance of “re-naturing” and connecting the human being back to its roots. Currently, there is overwhelming pollution and mortality rates caused by cars, over production and lack of respect for vital ecosystems. I urge for change in a time of crisis. The climate emergency is happening today, and I believe that architecture can play a big role in advocating for change.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>

<sup>2</sup> Topos n°115 2021

Corbusier always had an interest in developing urban schemes to improve social conditions. He believed that tailored strategies could be applied to design and organisation of urban spaces to improve quality of life for lower classes. In his book, *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning* (1929) Corbusier offers an urban planning based on use zoning, designating specific areas of the city. He imagines placing high density transportation systems, with space for traffic and pedestrian circulation, away from a large portion dedicated to green spaces. He concluded that city planners must incorporate nature rather than overtake it.<sup>3</sup> Similar to this, Sir Ebenezer Howard wrote *The Garden City* (1898). Garden city was intended to be planned, self contained communities surrounded by 'green belts', containing proportionate areas of residence, industry, and agriculture. Culminating in a self-sustainable city housing 32,000 people. These utopian proposals were never built, but it is said that have been key plans in informing modern cities.

Over time, engined by the industrial revolution, people became more focused on growing industry and the economy and forgot the important basics for a healthy city. In March 1968, philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre wrote *Le Droit a La Ville*, in which he "Understood the push for urbanisation as being a consequence of industrialisation."<sup>4</sup> He examined how a "crisis of the city" could occur through a high density of cars, the demolition of urban buildings for "centres of consumption" and high density housing. The sociologist predicted what is unfortunately currently the case. He, however, did not lose hope in the potential urban spaces provide, and argued that this could be achieved though public areas for "encounters, confrontation with differences, mutual knowledge and recognition of different ways of life"<sup>5</sup> I argue that the perfect space for this type of encounter is an integrated green space. Bringing together the ancient tradition of Shirin-yoku, green spaces provide the perfect environment for city dwellers to spill out onto from their city blocks for a work break or an afternoon encounter. We all feel safe in nature, it is our primary habitat, and so everyone would feel comfortable to roam it alone or accompanied. The increase of almost wild, green areas within our cities would solve a practical problem - by solving rain absorption and provide habitats for other species - as well as a social one.

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<sup>3</sup> The city of Tomorrow le Corbusier

<sup>4</sup>The right to the city - TOPOS n°115 2021, Crisis as opportunity (Page 018)

<sup>5</sup> Le droit a la ville by Lefebvre

When we step outside our home, we are usually faced with pavement followed by tarmac (designed almost exclusively for motor vehicles) and repeated pavement before the next row of houses. We have gotten used to the noise of loud trucks flying by, as well as the honking during rush hours. We constantly need to get out of our way to find a safe walkway to cross the road.. and yet, when having arrived at a park for a picnic on a sunny day, we have to pass a physical threshold, a gate within a perimeter of fence, to step into the green. Why is it that we have developed such an intimate relationship with cars and such a distant one with nature? We have evolved into a distanced reality from our roots, now looking at nature and seeing it as a landscape rather than a part of our natural environment. We must close this gap.

Today, a staggering surface area is used up for car parks and highways; if this area were changed to green, the absorption of CO<sub>2</sub> would be a driving factor in the reversal of global warming. In London, new plans are being developed by the Mayor, Sadiq Khan and TFL to make it "one of the largest car-free zones in any capital city in the world"<sup>6</sup>. The plan is to increase pedestrian and cycling lanes to reduce toxic air pollution, making the city more sustainable. Khan says "If we want to make transport in London safe, and keep London globally competitive, then we have no choice but to rapidly repurpose London's streets for people."<sup>7</sup>

All in all, it is of vital importance to reduce traffic within cities, allowing for better pedestrian circulation and lower levels of mortality rates due to cars. All parking lots should be converted to underground facilities, reducing visual pollution and increasing the possibility for planting. As Chloé Zirnstein writes in *Dream a little dream of green*, contemplating a future city, "In the fields, irrigation systems are hardly needed any more. Due to the sharp decline in in car traffic more living space could be regained. Numerous rivers and brook beds that had been buried underground due to the scarcity of space could be converted back into nature."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.climateaction.org/news/large-areas-of-london-to-be-made-car-free>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.climateaction.org/news/large-areas-of-london-to-be-made-car-free>

<sup>8</sup> TOPOS n°107 2019 Page 83

Cities have grown organically over the years, often in a radial form offsetting by zones from the historic centre. This almost day-to-day growth has very little room for large scale urban planning. On the other hand, in cities like Barcelona, Shanghai, Helsinki, Hamburg<sup>9</sup>.. amongst others, *Superblocks* are being planned, “where everything you need – offices, stores, kindergartens and parks – can all be reached on foot within fifteen minutes.”<sup>10</sup> These city arrangements allow for a planning of both existing and new cities; allowing for pedestrian access to essential goods and removing the need for cars at every doorstep. This new car reduced reality creates space for landscaping, benefitting from the natural cleansing properties of trees and grass as well as streams of water. Superblocks might be the answer to living more sustainably due to their scale and arrangement, allowing for hobbies like vegetable planting to become the norm. Virtual reality has become a tool in research and development of these Superblocks, allowing city residents to transform their city through voting.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, it is believed that if cities were designed for children, they would be more welcoming and safe. Tirana Mayor, Erion Veliaj, comments “to design and build a children-oriented urban space means both to improve the life of all citizens and to make urban space accessible for all”. Cities designed for children include pedestrian urban areas with integrated green, encouraging cars to slow down or not access at all. Adhering to this, in the article *Biophilia for Healthy Cities*, architect Herbert Dreiseitl reinforces the importance of this natural landscaping in cities “BGI (blue green initiative) has a significant effect on microclimate. In the absence of blue and green, there is no filtration of air, no holding back of micro particles. As a result, there are higher dust concentrations, which contribute to conditions that are unhealthy.”

The importance of urban planning is becoming more increasingly evident. As cities grow, it is important to scale them down in order to allow for sustainability to exist. The example of superblocks is an important one as it exemplifies how a city can be built at human scale, with everything at walking distance. This new way of living is more calm, and therefore more fit for children, and allows room for BGI. Superblocks resemble the typical Italian centres, where life expectancy, standards of living and sustainability levels are high.

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<sup>9</sup>The right to the city - TOPOS n°115 2021, Crisis as opportunity (Page 018)

<sup>10</sup><sup>10</sup>The right to the city - TOPOS n°115 2021, Crisis as opportunity (Page 019)

<sup>11</sup> The right to the city - TOPOS n°115 2021, Crisis as opportunity (Page 019)

As mentioned previously, virtual reality can be used to gather information to be used in the development of superblocks. Information technologist Francesca Bria has been a pioneer in the digital implementation of urban development in Barcelona.<sup>12</sup> She was asked to “Rethink social services from a technological (nor technocratic) point of view, but starting from citizens’ needs”<sup>13</sup>, and used technology to do so.

In 2014, Barcelona was faced with serious air pollution problems, consistently failing to meet the EU’s air quality targets, ultimately causing 3500 premature deaths every year (as well as noise and visual pollution). Their urban mobility plan changed this with key moves. The plan consisted of enclosing nine city blocks to car access, allowing only for the access of public transport at reduced velocity. Curb-side parking was replaced by underground parking, allowing room for activity without fear of cars. Northwest of Barcelona, in a city called Vitoria-Gasteiz, these superblocks have been implemented since 2008, resulting in 45%-74% increase in pedestrian room, a noise drop of 66.5dBA to 61dBA, a 42% drop in nitrogen emission and a 38% reduction in particle pollution. Fortunately, it is becoming evident that this sort of human oriented urban planning is working. Lefèbre was right. If more people are allowed to walk at slower paces and interact, business actually goes up, benefitting the city’s economic model. An increase in tourism also stems from this, as pedestrian cities are often more welcoming.

Barcelona must be used as a worldwide example. The idea is to raise awareness of the importance of pedestrian and nature oriented cities. Using the benefits of mother nature to help the community will teach us that if barriers are removed, it will heal, and quite quickly. If natural patches are re-established, by scraping down areas of pavement, the earth will be allowed to breathe. If then, citizens are actively involved in bettering these areas, and actively plant, they will gain responsibility and awareness. QUOTE?

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.domusweb.it/en/sustainable-cities/2021/03/24/digital-sovereignty-and-smart-cities-what-does-the-future-hold.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ufficiostampa.provincia.tn.it/Comunicati/Planning-Smart-Cities-of-the-future-the-Milan-and-Barcelona-experience>

Due to historical events, dating back to the era of colonisation and slavery, humans have gotten caught up in separating themselves by ethnicity, colour, beliefs and education, ultimately forgetting that we all stem from the same source: nature. By focusing our cities in a more organic formation, also growing “active” green communal spaces within highly populated areas, I believe communities would come together.

We live in an era of Contemporary Globalisation. The impact of growing industries and foreign direct investment in developing countries has boomed urbanisation. With low income rates and high population density, cities have become hubs for infection and low sanitation. Additionally, the increase in cropped natural environments for a growth in the cattle industry has led to a major disruption in ecosystems. “In this disruption, pathogens that used to be held in check by forest ecologies, are now increasingly breaking free and crossing over into human in a process known as ‘zoonic spillover’”. We must reestablish ecosystems and introduce cohabitations of humans into a naturally controlled environment.

In Portugal, one can go to the beach in the middle of a busy day for some peace. Even alone, at the beach, one feels accompanied and part of something else: connected to nature and the community. What if we could recreate that feeling in geographically interior cities? If urban places were safer, holistic and active, citizens would not have to be rich to be happy, they could be happy living in smaller homes if they were provided with reinvigorating urban spaces. After experiencing the pandemic, we are aware that open public spaces can be safer and more malleable than closed ones. Effective urban developments prove to be successful when they put an end to dangerous, abandoned areas and turn them into lit ones, ending the broken window effect.

Since the industrial revolution, science has evolved hand in hand with staggering pollution rates, a number that keeps increasing. We don’t seem to be taking the necessary steps to lower pollution in a time of environmental crises. We must use our technological advancements to build smarter rather than over produce low quality high carbon goods. The evolution of virtual reality is a controversial one, but if used wisely, it can be a driving factor in the development of new cities, guiding us to more sustainable lives. Barcelona is a great example of this.

*How will we live together?*<sup>14</sup> A question that addresses all sorts of directions, from time, to materiality, to social connection and equality, to opportunity looking forward. We have come to exist in multi cultural cities, co-existing closely with people or groups that not only look different but think different. What can be done to bring us all together? With no titles or physical separations, without placing citizens into boxes defining their economic and social status, we all come together in the mesh of our cities, outside the door of our homes that enclose us from the rest. Urban spaces are the equivalent of the open sea, where different species co-exist at times in search for food or migration routes.

If nature is integrated to our urban realm, it will be the perfect place to interact whilst maintaining the health of our cities and its citizens. Neuro-urbanism research has shown that the risk of developing depression (...) is 20% higher in urban dwellers than those who live outside the city (...) the risk of developing psychosis (...) is 77% higher in urban than rural dwellers and the risk of developing generalised anxiety disorder (...) is also 21% higher in urban than rural dwellers.<sup>15</sup> However, it is in cities that we all come together to exchange information, develop research and find large scale sanitation and electricity. We cannot all move back in mass to the countryside. We must find a way to remain in the city while nurturing it at the same time. "Parks of the future will be more open and better integrated with the community," says Meyer of New York's City Hall. "To do so, urban planners there will redesign where parks meet pavement, lower fences, and open sight lines. Former industrial sites and more waterfront will be transformed into spaces like the High Line, an accessible urban park embraced by the public. Additionally, Meyer, points out, increased tree canopy will help prevent the urban heat island effect."<sup>16</sup>

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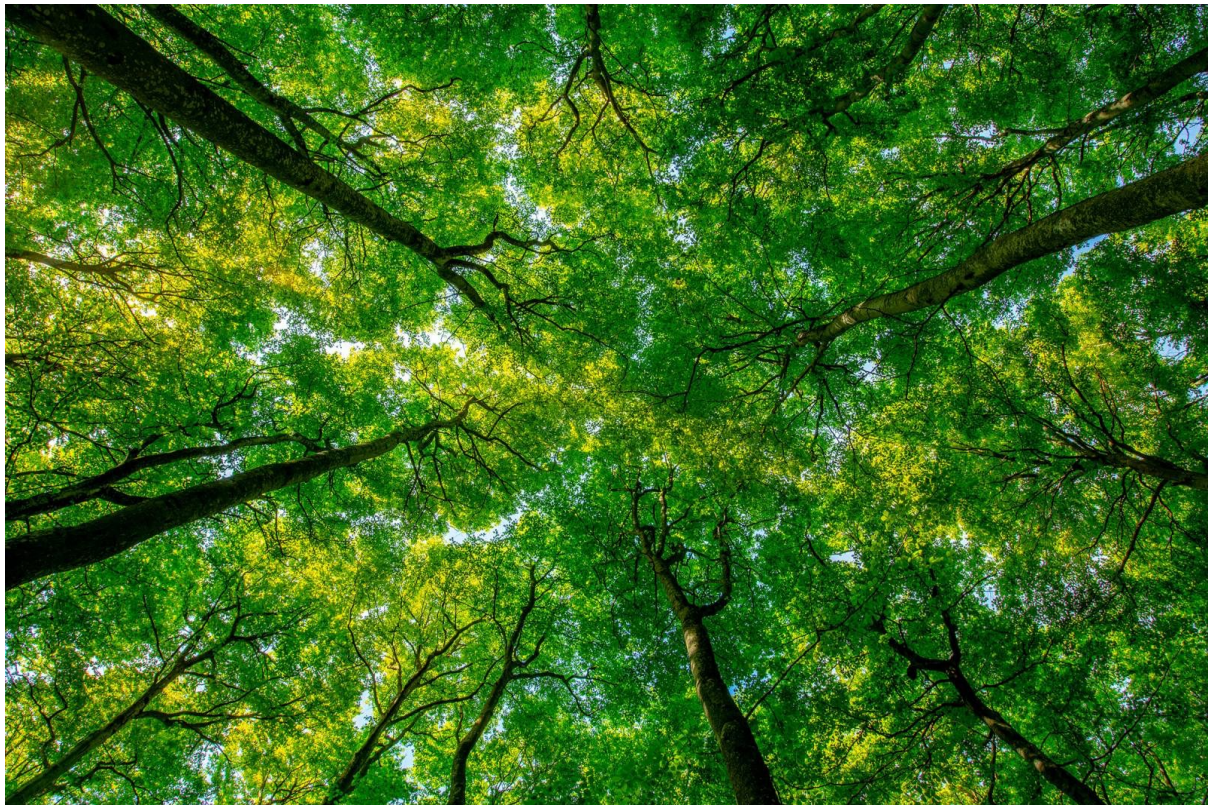
<sup>14</sup> Architecture biennale

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cities-increase-your-risk-of-depression-anxiety-and-psychosis-but-bring-mental-health-benefits-too>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/future-of-design-cities>



We live in a time of global emergency, so these steps to improve city health are not only beneficial but necessary. Educated by activists like Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough, we are all gaining awareness of this crisis, and must now start to implement it in our routine. Hopefully, with time, this knowledge will be transferred to all areas of expertise and integrated to practice. If nature is truly implemented in urban planning and architecture, it will change the way people experience the world, and it will only be with this reconnection with nature that one will gain respect. As architect Anthony Fieldman describes it, “The future is green and zen, and it all unfolds within 100 meters of your home.”



SHIRIN YOKU

BATHING IN THE FOREST AIR