

# BACK TO BASICS

What makes cities humane environments and gives them a human scale? Which cities have succeeded in their regeneration efforts and which have failed? And what exactly does “liveable” mean, anyway?

DAVID TAYLOR

## LESSONS FOR LIVEABLE CITIES

An international panel of regeneration experts, including developers, architects, landscape designers, government officials, and thinkers, met in March to discuss questions of regeneration and liveability at a roundtable organised by the Urban Land Institute and Old Mutual Properties at the MIPIM real estate exhibition in Cannes, France.

“Our liveability agenda, as we call it, is about making places cleaner, safer, and greener, then connecting that with excellent design,” said Richard McCarthy, director general of sustainable communities in the U.K. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). “In its simple form, it’s about creating places where people want to live and work, both now and in the future.”

McCarthy’s role is to look at extending regeneration of the centre of England’s cities outwards, influencing the broader market to create appealing and practical places, with engaged, local government leadership acting as the glue in the effort. Towards that goal, the U.K. government in January produced People, Places, and Prosperity, a five-year plan aimed at creating a connection among the three elements named in the title, detailing the components it believes go together to make communities sustainable.

Others on the panel agreed that creating cities with a human scale is important in fostering the sense of a city as a liveable place. Guy Perry, managing director of Warsaw-based development strategy company INVI, suggested that human scale is key, especially given the lessons from the disastrous 1960s and 1970s, when overscaled, high-rise buildings dominated urban development. He works in eastern Europe with local developers, architects, authorities, and the public to create a sense of place specific to the city rather than

imitative of somewhere else. This approach was applauded by landscape designer Martha Schwartz, of Massachusetts-based Martha Schwartz Partners, who says her work attempts to establish what places are about. “I really believe every single place on this earth has its own story,” she said. “Everyone wants to feel unique and special. It’s important that they feel that they’re human beings.”

But the development community must recognise that the appropriate response to this quest for social interaction and human scale varies across the planet. Much of the development of Dubai, for example, is often criticised for its large scale and for attempting to be the “first this or biggest that,” said Ian Watt, executive director of Old Mutual Properties, a South Africa-based property developer and manager. Kohn Pedersen Fox president Lee Polisano pointed out that not only is there greater acceptance of high density in Asia than in other parts of the world, but also that the perception of human scale varies in relation to external spaces. In Dubai’s case, if developers were to create open space in developments to promote human scale, these spaces would simply be unusable because of the environmental conditions—notably, the unremitting heat.

“The issue of scale there—is it a product of somebody thinking, ‘Should I build this way out into the desert and keep doing that, or should I build . . . in a very small piece of our country because our country’s small anyway and leave the rest of it in its natural state?’ Somebody *may* have thought of that,” Polisano said.

▼ Richard McCarthy, ODPM; Bill Kistler, ULI Europe; and Ian Watt, Old Mutual.





◀ From far left: Ian Watt, Old Mutual; Martha Schwartz, Martha Schwartz Partners; Steven Smith, DEGW; Rick Rosan, ULI; and Paul Finch, Architectural Review.

Location is crucial to this concept of place. "Most of us have the opportunity to walk, we all breathe, we all touch, and we all smell," said Paul Finch, editor of *Architectural Review* and deputy chair of the U.K. Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. "If you're looking for an indication of why architecture might be different in different places, it's because it's a different climate, the ground under your feet feels differently, places smell differently, the things you touch are different."

He added that if one looks at the way a city does things and there is a disconnection between the people and the city's basic functions, then the city has a problem. An example of such a disconnection would be a freeway that physically divides a community, separating people from places that meet their basic needs—places they should be able to reach easily on foot—such as a school, a library, or a shop. This ability is among the ideals of new urbanism. "Those are universal rules," said Finch. "If you get those right, you can have development as big as you like."

Residents of city centres want much the same things as residents of other places, but with the advantages of city life. "It seems to me that people want contradictory things," said Steven Smith, director of urbanism at U.K. architecture firm DEGW. "It isn't that they want one thing or the other; they want both." They may want a small-scale, intimate environment next to a major airport allowing quick, convenient travel; or an absolutely safe environment that gives priority to pedestrians, plus allows easy access to a major highway; or a place that is authentic and different at the same time, says Smith. "We have contradictory requirements of scale and community and organisation."

To Schwartz, this is a design problem, and it cannot be solved through a linear process. Successful master plans involve constant give-and-take between small and large scales. The work of visual people like artists can help both developers and the public to synthesise these elements and sort through issues. "We will present all sorts of ideas and then let people react," said Schwartz.

Because people are more mobile today, they migrate to cities that are more liveable or where the conditions are better in various ways, says Watt. Cities and towns that do not address this population surge are taking a huge risk, he said. That risk is most evident in the largest

cities like London and New York City, said ULI president Rick Rosan. They risk being overpopulated, caught without the necessary infrastructure to succeed. The real crisis comes from the fact that the private sector will not build this infrastructure and the public sector is unwilling to spend the money needed. "We're not investing back; it's just unbelievable," Rosan said. With the number of automobiles being driven in the United States jumping more than 25 percent since 1996, infrastructure improvements are badly needed. "There's not a city in the U.S. that isn't absolutely cluttered up with automobiles," said Rosan.

Oussama Kabbani, chief executive of Saudi developer Rikaz, believes working in the Middle East has taught him principles that apply throughout the world. "Basic human requirements are universal," he said. "At the end of the day, a human being is a human being. In the last 15 years, I have been involved in questions over downtowns. Wherever I go, it's an issue of centrality. How do we reinvent the centre to make it more interesting?"

In the late 1990s, Kabbani found himself in Beirut working for Solidere, the Lebanese government-empowered private development corporation charged with redeveloping the city's central district. He described Beirut as a "destroyed city without a heart" after the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. "The moment we [reconstructed central Beirut], by default, people came back," he said. The area that succeeded best, he added, was the zone created during the French mandate—1920 to 1943—which was based on traditional urban design. "Nice stone buildings, good scale, arcades, good high streets. We don't claim we created anything; all we did was restore it."

In less than two years, the reconstructed central area was a "phenomenal success," he said, which prompted other cities to come knocking at his door seeking similar results. "Every single city in the Middle East was asking how they can re-create life," Kabbani said. "What's common is urban design where people can walk, eat, enjoy the basics." Everything else is an experiment, he said. "For me, it's about tradition, and it's what makes it so simple."

Perry highlighted the importance of the edge-of-city and suburban zones. "The key is that when these cities get to a certain size—we can talk about Atlanta or Warsaw—how do you create effective

▼ From left: Lee Polisano, Kohn Pedersen Fox; Guy Perry, INVI; and Bill Hanway, EDAW.



subcentres, because the centre is no longer going to work for a metropolitan area of 4 million or 5 million people," he said. "Unless people can do 70 to 80 percent of what they have to do on foot in a city, you will never catch up in terms of infrastructure in an expanding city." In the United States, 90 percent of future development will have to be at the edge of urbanised areas because there simply is no other room left, Rosan said.

For EDAW managing principal Bill Hanway, who is working on London's bid to be host of the 2012 Summer Olympics, the goal is to repair both the physical and social infrastructure of the centre city, and to deliver a good balance between jobs and homes, alongside schools, hospitals, and the other elements that create safe and solid communities. Barcelona is an example of a place where this has been accomplished, he said. But political leadership with foresight beyond the next election is the real key to creating better urban environments, according to Hanway.

Certain U.S. cities will have to almost "implode" before they can change, said Rosan. This highlights the importance of planning in

the effort to mitigate sprawl. "If I were in America, I'd just ban sprawl until you can work the densification out in the cities," said McCarthy. "I don't care what the theory is; I would just say 'ring it' and work [developers] hard."

Panelists also raised the issue of developers being allowed to build—unchallenged—environments that are sterile, despite all the evidence that mixed-use development could be more profitable than single-use schemes. But Finch provided a thoughtful summary: "What we have to avoid is that brilliant old postmodernist phrase—that what you end up with is the same difference everywhere. If we can get a *different* difference everywhere, for the right reasons, then we will have, I think, human cities."

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