

URBAN EMPATHY

The Next Big Shift



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“As the UK emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic it would be a tragic mistake to attempt to re-establish the status quo that existed before”

Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review.

The Pandemic, Socioeconomic and Health Inequalities in England
December 2020

URBAN EMPATHY: The Next Big Shift

By Natasha Reid, Founder MATTER . SPACE . SOUL
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www.matterspacesoul.com

“Inside-out” Title image: Jovana Vojnovic

OUR SURROUNDINGS AFFECT US DEEPLY

There is no doubt that places have a significant impact on our happiness, wellbeing and health.

Yet when it comes to making the built worlds that are our habitats, the most crucial of questions - how a place will affect the people that spend time there, and what will be the impact on their lives – these really fundamental questions are actually rarely, if ever, asked.

What could our cities, neighbourhoods, homes, workplaces and community spaces be like if they were created based on people’s emotional, psychological and social needs? Could we shift to a new way of thinking about our surroundings, based on really understanding how they affect our innermost human workings?

Surely when it comes to making our own habitats, their suitability for people’s lives and happiness should be built into the very foundations of action. From the very first principles.

Turning our thinking inside-out

In this moment of disruption there is a chance to reflect; to question the structures that shape society but do not serve us well. We have a chance to not only look at using urban space differently but actually to reimagine the very basis of how we think about making places. In the aftershocks of this pandemic’s ever shifting “new normals”, let us make sure we create space for new and better patterns of life to emerge.

We need to turn our thinking inside-out. We need Urban Empathy.



Social Determinants of Health

Empathy is not at all a new idea in design, but in the mainstream narratives of development and regeneration it is a bold departure from the language of asset management. It still produces a “return on investment” but it requires a shift in the way that value is understood, in terms of impact on people’s lives, wellbeing and happiness, alongside economic capital.

We know that some places make us feel good whilst others make our hearts sink. But studies such as the government’s Marmot Review really drive home how critical our surroundings can be: “People living in the poorest neighbourhoods in England will on average die seven years earlier than people living in the richest neighbourhoods”.

Because the more extensive the housing deprivation, the more damaging the effects on people’s quality of life, health and, in fact, life chances. Our environments are part the “Social Determinants of Health” – in short, all the non-medical factors that shape health outcomes.

And when people are in a position of disadvantage, this will compound across many factors: Poor quality housing could affect a child’s ability to concentrate at school, impacting their mental health, affecting job prospects leading to increased stress and physical and mental health problems. It is an ongoing cycle, each hardship increasing the others. Making people worse and worse off.

The high risk of emotional isolation

Another example of why we need more Urban Empathy is loneliness – right now a really pivotal mental health issue. The format of homes and neighbourhoods have the power to either enable or disable interaction and sociability. These are fundamental human needs, particularly when it is known that emotional isolation is as high a risk factor for mortality as smoking.

Addressing complex challenges like these is really not about throwing in some “feel good” aesthetics at the end, or sprinkling in some green space into a development. As human beings, we need much more than functional shelters or superficial decoration to feel good and for meaningful quality of life.

The lived experience of places

Whether it is making everyday moments at home a little more joyful, enabling people to connect and be part of a community, creating work environments that can energise us and allow us to both focus and also collaborate, public space projects that create common identity amongst diverse people, or interventions that can empower a neighbourhood:

The things that matter the most to people - that actually have an effect of their lives - these are all non-physical things, non-built things. It is these “lived” experiences which need to be at the heart of built places.



THREE STEPS FOR DEEPER URBAN EMPATHY

1. WORKING WITH THE INVISIBLE

Our individual and collective needs are invisible and complex; it's certainly a challenge to understand how places really impact people. But to be able to create the physical, visible conditions that can enable people to grow and thrive, it is these invisible, hard-to-capture things that must be considered first, to be able to drive how places are made. Fundamentally, this requires more empathy – turning our thinking inside-out is to start with how places impact our internal workings and lived experience.

There is increasing evidence in the sciences showing how the overall make-up and also the very small details of our surroundings have profound consequences on the way the way we feel, how we relate to one another, even our capacity to grow in our lives. More and more, we're seeing crossovers between place-makers and scientists (neuroscience, psychology, behaviour science and more), to create new ways of making more human-centred and socially conscious cities.

2. ECOLOGIES OF EXPERIENCES

And we need these new ways, because happiness and flourishing is not something you associate with static, physical construction. To create conditions that enable growth and thriving in individuals, groups, communities and neighbourhoods – shouldn't we be thinking more in terms of "ecology" – which is about looking at the interaction of living things and their environment? Thinking in terms of relationships and ecosystems that affect one another – and not just in stuff?

So rather than seeing places and buildings as a collection of fixed things, what if we could instead see them as systems of dynamic and invisible experiences that a person will move through? Through the day. Through their week. And also across their whole life. What if places can adapt to different and changing needs – bringing time and resilience into the equation? Acknowledging the many unknowns we may face as a society going forwards.



3. BEING MORE HUMAN

By asking different questions, we could find the ways to new answers. No longer; how can the efficiency of this site be maximised, but instead how to build resilience, empowerment, understanding, connection and interaction through this place?

How to build possibility and opportunity for people? Can we even think about how this place can affect and improve people life chances?

At this strange time, why don't we get closer to the things that make us human? Lean into the intricacy and messiness. Open ourselves up to the complexity. Because alongside the health crisis, there will need to be emotional healing in way, and on a global scale, never seen before.

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“There is an urgent need to do things differently, to build a society that functions to meet the needs of its members; to build a well-being economy that puts achievement of health and well-being at the heart of government strategy, rather than narrow economic goals; to build a society that responds to the climate crisis at the same time as achieving greater health equity.”

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BACKGROUND

URBAN EMPATHY is a call to action for urgent change; to address health and wellbeing in depth through new human-centred, science-informed and socially-conscious approaches, in order to tackle the pressing issues of today.

The manifesto builds on the discussions of the Conscious Cities London 2020 festival where, as co-chair, we brought together leading multidisciplinary experts covering topics including neuroscience, social value, healthy urbanism and more. The videos from the 3 days are all **available online here.**

The URBAN EMPATHY concept is part an ongoing thread of research and development, starting with **Intimate Infrastructure** - a proposal based on human-scale development that won an international competition for ideas to solve the housing crisis in 2015. More recent journal articles and frameworks includes **Compassionate Places** – published by international think-tank, the Centre for Conscious Design in 2019.

RESOURCES

Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review, December 2020
Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Jessica Allen, Peter Goldblatt, Eleanor Herd, Joana Morrison, Institute of Health Equity, 2020

Homes, health and COVID-19. How poor-quality homes have contributed to the pandemic. Centre for Better Ageing, 2020

Building Better Systems - A Green Paper on System Innovation,
Charlie Leadbeater and Jennie Winhall, 2020.

How Neuroscience could shape a more Empathetic Built Environment,
Pam Alexander OBE, Connected Places Catapult, 2020

The London Recipe: How Systems and Empathy Make the City,
Charles Leadbeater, Centre for London 2014

Systemic design: examples of evolving and current practice,
Cat Drew, Design Council 2019

From Design Thinking to Systems Change. How to invest in innovation for social impact, Rowan Conway, Jeff Masters, Jake Thorold. RSA, 2017

Quality of Life Foundation framework and research, 2020



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha Reid is founder of MATTER . SPACE . SOUL, an architectural consultancy specialising in shaping places for wellbeing.

Chosen as 1 of 10 “Ground Breakers” for 2021 by international design authority Wallpaper* Magazine, she is a passionate advocate for the power of design to create change that matters. Her consultancy focuses on the social, psychological and emotional impacts of the built environment, to create joyful, meaningful, enriching places and experiences and catalyse step change in the industry. Natasha is a Fellow of international think tank the Centre for Conscious Design, co-chairing the London chapter of the Conscious Cities movement. She is a member of the Loneliness Lab, a network of changemakers. She regularly speaks at industry events on forward-thinking solutions to pressing issues, human-centred and socially-conscious approaches

Contact details:
natashareid@matterspacesoul.com
www.matterspacesoul.com

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