

# Happy City

**TRANSFORMING  
OUR LIVES  
THROUGH  
URBAN DESIGN**

**CHARLES MONTGOMERY**

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## 1. The Mayor of Happy

There is a myth, sometimes widespread, that a person need only do inner work, in order to be alive like this; that a man is entirely responsible for his own problems; and that to cure himself, he need only change himself . . . The fact is, a person is so far formed by his surroundings, that his state of harmony depends entirely on his harmony with his surroundings.

—Christopher Alexander,  
*The Timeless Way of Building*

I chased the politician through the bowels of a dull cement office block on the edge of a twelve-lane freeway. Everything about him suggested urgency. He hollered with the hurried fervor of a preacher. He wore the kind of close-trimmed beard favored by men who don't like to waste time shaving. He jogged through the building's basement parking deck in a long-legged canter, like a center forward charging for a long pass.

Two bodyguards trotted behind him, their pistols jostling in holsters. There was nothing remarkable about that, given his profession—and his locale. Enrique Peñalosa was a perennial politician on yet another campaign, and this was Bogotá, a city with a spectacular reputation for kidnappings and assassination. What was unusual was this: Peñalosa didn't climb into the armored SUV typical of most public figures in Colombia. Instead, he hopped on a knobby-tired mountain bike and quickly cranked his way up a ramp into the searing Andean sunlight. Then he was off, jumping curbs and potholes, riding one-handed, weaving across the pavement, and barking into

his cell phone while his pin-striped trousers flapped in the breeze. His bodyguards, a photographer, and I all pedaled madly behind, like a throng of teenagers in the wake of a rock star.

A few years earlier, this ride would have been a radical and—in the opinion of many Bogotanos—suicidal act. If you wanted to be assaulted, asphyxiated by exhaust, or run over, Bogotá's streets were the place to be. But now it was 2007, and Peñalosa insisted that things had changed. We would be safe. The city had gotten happier, thanks to his plan. *Happier*—that was the word he used over and over again, as though he owned it.

Young women giggled as he passed. Overall-clad laborers waved.

"Mayor! Mayor!" a few of them shouted in Spanish, though it had been six years since Peñalosa had held that job, and his campaign to regain it had barely begun. He waved back with his phone hand.

"*Buenos días, hermosa!*" he said to the girls.

"*¿Cómo le va?*" he answered the men.

"*Hola, amigo!*" he offered to anyone who looked his way.

"We're living an experiment," he finally yelled back at me as he pocketed his cell phone. "We might not be able to fix the economy. We might not be able to make everyone as rich as Americans. But we can design the city to give people dignity, to make them *feel* rich. The city can make them happier."

There it was, the declaration I have seen bring tears to so many eyes with its promise of urban revolution and redemption.

It's been six years since my ride with the Mayor of Happy, but the memory has remained with me, as vivid as the Andean sun. That was the day the journey began.

You may never have heard of Enrique Peñalosa. You may not have been among the crowds that gave him a hero's welcome in New York, Los Angeles, Singapore, Lagos, or Mexico City over the last decade. You may never have seen him raise his arms like an evangelist or holler his philosophy over the noise of a hundred idling car engines. But his grand experiment and his even grander rhetoric inspire an urbanist fervor wherever he goes. Peñalosa has become one of the central figures in a movement that is changing the structure and soul of cities around the world.

I first saw Peñalosa work his rhetorical magic back in the spring of 2006. The United Nations had just announced that some day in the following months, one more child would be born in an urban hospital or a migrant would stumble into a metropolitan shantytown, and from that moment on, more than half the world's people would be living in cities. Hundreds of millions more were on their way. By 2030 almost five billion of us will be urban. That spring, Habitat, the UN's agency for human settlements, called thousands of mayors, engineers, bureaucrats, and do-gooders together for the World Urban Forum. The delegates met in a harborside convention center in Vancouver to figure out how to save the world's exploding cities from disaster.

The world had little inkling of the great recession slouching on the horizon, yet the prognosis was bleak. The problem? On the one hand, cities were pumping out most of the world's pollution and 80 percent of humanity's greenhouse gas emissions. On the other, all predictions suggested that cities were going to be slammed by the effects of climate change, from heat waves and water scarcity to waves of migrants running from droughts, floods, and water wars. The experts agreed that cities would bear more than three-quarters of the cost of adapting to global warming. They would be short on energy, tax revenue, and jobs. There seemed to be no way they were going to be able to help citizens meet the goals of security and prosperity that urbanization had always seemed to promise. The gathering was sobering.

But the mood changed when Peñalosa took the podium. He told the mayors that there was hope, that the great migration was not a threat—no!—it was a tremendous opportunity to reinvent urban life. As poor cities doubled or tripled in size, they could avoid the mistakes that rich cities had made. They could offer their citizens lives that were better, stronger, freer, and more joyful than those offered by most cities of the day. But to accomplish this, they would have to completely rethink their beliefs about what cities are for. They would have to let go of a century of thought about city building. They would have to let go of some of their dreams.

To make his point, Peñalosa told a story.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Bogotá had become a truly horrible place to live—one of the very worst on earth. Overwhelmed with refugees; seared by a decades-old civil war and sporadic

terrorism in the form of grenades and firebombs (deadly “explosive potatoes” being the most common means of attack); and hobbled by traffic, pollution, poverty, and dysfunction, the Colombian capital was regarded both at home and abroad as a living hell.

When Peñalosa ran for the mayor’s seat back in 1997, he refused to make the promises doled out by so many politicians. He was not going to make everyone richer. Forget the dream of becoming as wealthy as Americans: it would take generations to catch up to the gringos, even if the urban economy caught fire and burned blue for a century. The dream of riches, Peñalosa complained, served only to make Bogotans feel bad.

“If we defined our success just in terms of income per capita, we would have to accept ourselves as second- or third-rate societies—as a bunch of *losers*,” he said. No, the city needed a new goal. Peñalosa promised neither a car in every garage nor a socialist revolution. His promise was simple. He was going to make Bogotans happier.

“And what are our needs for happiness?” he asked. “We need to walk, just as birds need to fly. We need to be around other people. We need beauty. We need contact with nature. And most of all, we need not to be excluded. We need to feel some sort of equality.”

Ironically, in giving up the chase for the American dream, Peñalosa was invoking a goal set out in the American Constitution: by pursuing a different kind of happiness, Bogotans, despite their relatively meager paychecks, really could beat the gringos.

These days, the world is not lacking for happiness gurus. Some insist that spiritual practice is the answer. Others tell us that we must simply ask the universe for prosperity, that we can get closer to God by getting richer, and get richer by inching closer to God. But Peñalosa did not call for mass counseling or religious indoctrination or state-funded courses in positive psychology. He did not preach the law of attraction or the tenets of transformative wealth. This was a gospel of transformative urbanism. The city itself could be a device for happiness. Life could be improved, even amid economic doldrums, by changing the shapes and systems that defined urban existence.

Peñalosa attributed an almost transcendent power to a certain kind of urbanity. “Most things that people buy in stores give them a lot of satisfaction the moment they buy them,” Peñalosa told me.

“But after a few days, that satisfaction decreases, and months later, it completely melts away. But great public space is a kind of magical good. It never ceases to yield happiness. It’s almost happiness itself.” The humble sidewalk, the park, the bike path, and the bus were suddenly elevated to the psycho-spiritual realm.

Peñalosa insisted that like most cities, Bogotá had been left deeply wounded by the twentieth century’s dual urban legacy: First, the city had been gradually reoriented around private automobiles. Second, public spaces and resources had largely been privatized. Cars and mobile vendors took over public plazas and sidewalks. People had walled or fenced in what were once public parks. In an age where even most of the poor had televisions, common civic space was disregarded and degraded.

This reorganization was both unfair—only one in five families even owned a car—and cruel. Urban residents had been denied the opportunity to enjoy the city’s simplest daily pleasures: walking on convivial streets; sitting around in public; talking; gazing at grass, water, falling leaves, and other people. And playing: children had largely disappeared from Bogotá’s streets—not because of the fear of gunfire or abduction, but because the streets had been rendered dangerous by sheer speed. When any parent shouted, “Watch out!” everyone in Bogotá knew that a child was in danger of being run over. So Peñalosa’s first and most defining act as mayor was to declare war: not on crime or drugs or poverty, but on private cars.

“A city can be friendly to people or it can be friendly to cars, but it can’t be both,” he announced.

He then threw out the city’s ambitious highway expansion plan and instead poured his budget into hundreds of miles of bike paths; a vast new chain of parks and pedestrian plazas; and a network of new libraries, schools, and day-care centers. He built the city’s first rapid transit system, using buses instead of trains. He hiked gas taxes and banned drivers from commuting by car more than three times a week. I’ll discuss the details later, but the thing to understand here is that this program redesigned the experience of city living for millions of people, and it was an utter rejection of the philosophies that have guided city builders around the world for more than half a century. It was the opposite of the city that North American laws, habits, the real estate industry, financing arrangements, and development

ideologies have favored. In particular, it was the opposite of the vision that millions of middle-class people around the world have chased to suburbia.

In the third year of his term Peñalosa challenged Bogotans to participate in an experiment, a *día sin carro*. As of dawn on February 24, 2000, all private cars were banned from city streets for the day. More than eight hundred thousand vehicles sat still that Thursday. Buses were jam-packed and taxis hard to come by, but hundreds of thousands of people followed Peñalosa's example and hit the streets under their own steam, walking, cycling, skating to work and school.

It was the first day in four years that nobody was killed in traffic. Hospital admissions fell by almost a third. The toxic haze over the city thinned. People still got to work, and schools reported normal attendance. Bogotans enjoyed the day so much that they voted to make it a yearly affair, and to ban all private cars during rush hour *every day* by 2015. People told pollsters that they were more optimistic about city life than they had been in years.

Peñalosa recounts this story with all the fervor of Martin Luther King on the Washington Mall, and with similar effect. I saw three thousand people at the World Urban Forum leap up from their chairs and cheer in response. UN statisticians brought their hands together despite themselves. Indian economists beamed and loosened their ties. Senegalese delegates shook and danced in their carnival-colored wraps. Mexican architects whistled. My heart beat faster, too. Peñalosa seemed to be affirming what so many urban thinkers are sure of, but very rarely have the guts or the audacity to say. The city is a means to a way of life. It can be a reflection of all our best selves. It can be whatever we want it to be.

It can change, and change dramatically.

### **The Movement**

Is urban design really powerful enough to make or break happiness? The question deserves consideration because the happy city message is taking root around the world. Since Peñalosa's three-year term in office—consecutive terms are illegal in Colombia—delegations from dozens of cities have landed in Bogotá to study its transformation.

Peñalosa and his younger brother, Guillermo, the city's former parks manager, were called to advise cities on every continent. While the elder proselytized from Shanghai to Jakarta to Lagos, the younger hit Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Toronto. While Guillermo whipped up hundreds of activists in Portland, Enrique was urging planners in Los Angeles to let traffic become so unbearable that drivers simply abandoned their cars. In 2006 Enrique Peñalosa was the talk of Manhattan after he announced to crowds of gridlock-obsessed New Yorkers they should ban vehicles entirely from Broadway. Three years later, the impossible vision began to come to life around Times Square. The happy city had gone global.

The Peñalosa brothers are far from alone in the happy city crusade. The movement has its roots in the antimodernist foment of the 1960s and has gradually drawn architects, neighborhood activists, public health experts, transportation engineers, network theorists, and politicians into a battle for the shape and soul of cities—a confrontation that is finally reaching critical mass. They have torn down freeways in Seoul and San Francisco and Milwaukee. They have experimented with the height, shape, and facades of buildings. They have turned the black top of suburban shopping malls into mini-villages. They have reconfigured entire towns to better suit children. They have torn down backyard fences and reclaimed neighborhood intersections. They are reorganizing the systems that hold cities together and rewriting the rules that dictate the shapes and functions of our buildings. Some of these people aren't even aware that they are part of the same movement, but together they are aiming a wrecking ball at many of the places we have spent the last half century building.

Peñalosa insists that the unhappiest cities in the world, the ones perfectly calibrated to turn wealth into hardship, are not the seething metropolises of Africa or South America. "The most dynamic economies of the twentieth century produced the most miserable cities of all," Peñalosa told me over the roar of traffic in Bogotá. "I'm talking about the U.S., of course—Atlanta, Phoenix, Miami, cities totally dominated by private cars."

For most Americans, the claim that prosperity and the cherished automobile propelled wealthy cities away from happiness is practically heresy. It is one thing for a Colombian politician to offer advice

to the world's poor, but it is quite another for him to suggest that the world's most powerful nation should be taking design criticism born on the potholed byways of South America. If Peñalosa is right, then not only have generations of planners, engineers, politicians, and land developers been mistaken, but millions of us have taken a wrong turn on the road to the good life.

But then again, over the last few decades, prosperity and well-being in America have followed completely different trajectories.

### The Happiness Paradox

If one was to judge by sheer wealth, the last half century should have been an ecstatically happy time for people in the United States and other rich nations such as Canada, Japan, and Great Britain. Riches were piled upon riches. By the turn of the century, Americans traveled more, ate more, bought more, used more space, and threw away more stuff than ever before. More people than ever got to live the dream of having their own detached home. The stock of cars—and bedrooms and toilets—far surpassed the number of humans who used them.\* It was an age of unprecedented bounty and growth, at least until the great recession of 2008 stuck a needle into the balloon of optimism and easy credit.

And yet the boom decades of the late twentieth century were not accompanied by a boom in happiness. Surveys show that people's assessment of their own well-being in the United States pretty much flatlined during that time. It was the same with citizens in Japan and the United Kingdom. Canada fared only slightly better. China, the new star of supercharged GDP growth, is providing yet more evidence of a paradox. Between 1999 and 2010, a decade in which average pur-

\*Americans used to get by with one bathroom. Now half of households have two or more. In 1950 there was one car for every three Americans. By 2011 there were almost enough motor vehicles to put every man, woman, and drooling baby behind a wheel. In 2010 Americans racked up more than double the highway miles than in 1960. They flew ten times as far in airplanes. Their new homes offered more than three times as much square footage for each inhabitant. The wealth explosion was even reflected in landfills: in 2010 the average person produced nearly four and a half pounds of garbage every day—a 60 percent jump from 1960.

chasing power in China grew more than threefold, people's ratings of their own life satisfaction stalled, according to Gallup polls (although urbanized Chinese were happier than their rural cousins).

In the final decades of the last century, Americans increasingly complained of personal problems. By 2005 clinical depression was three to ten times as common as it was two generations ago. By 2010, one in ten Americans reported that they suffered from depression. Six to eight times as many college students experienced depression in 2007 as they did in 1938. Although this may be partly due to cultural factors—it's now more acceptable to talk about depression—objective mental health statistics are not encouraging. High school and college students—the easiest group to survey—climbed higher and higher on what mental health researchers cheerily call the Paranoia, Hysteria, Hypochondriasis, and Depression scales. One in ten Americans is taking antidepressants.

Analysis from free-market think tanks such as the Cato Institute assures us that “high levels of economic freedom and high average incomes are among the strongest correlates of subjective well-being,” which is to say that being rich and free should make us happier. So why wasn't the half-century surge in wealth accompanied by a surge in happiness? What was counteracting the effect of all that money?

Some psychologists point to the phenomenon dubbed the “hedonic treadmill”: the natural human tendency to shift our expectations along with our changing fortunes. The treadmill theory suggests that the richer you get, the more you compare yourself to other rich people and the faster the wheel of desire spins beneath your feet, so that you end up feeling as though you haven't made any progress. Others blame the growing income gap, and the realization by millions of middle-class Americans that they were falling farther behind the richest members of society, especially during the last two decades. There is some explanatory truth in both of these theories, but economists have crunched the survey numbers and concluded that they only partially explain that widening gap between material and emotional wealth.

Consider this: The decades-long expansion in the American economy paralleled the migration of society from the country to cities, and from cities to the in-between world of sprawl. Since 1940, almost all urban growth has actually been *suburban*. In the decade

before the big bust of 2008, the economy was driven to a large extent by the boundless cul-de-sac-ing, tract housing, and big-box power centering of the landscape at the urban fringe. For a time, it was impossible to separate growth from suburbanization. They were the same thing. More people than ever got exactly what they thought they wanted. Everything we have come to believe about the good life would suggest that this suburban boom was good for happiness. Why didn't it work? And why was faith in this model so quick to evaporate? The urban shake-up that began with the mortgage crisis in 2008 hit the newest, shiniest, most sprawling parts of the American city the hardest.

Peñalosa's argument was that too many rich societies have used their wealth in ways that exacerbate urban problems rather than solve them. Could this help explain the happiness paradox?

It's certainly a good time to consider the idea, now that tens of thousands of freshly paved cul-de-sacs across the United States have passed six springs without sprouting new homes. From the United States to Ireland to Spain, communities on the edge of suburban sprawl, that most American of forms, have yet to regain their pre-crash value. The future of cities is uncertain.

We have reached a rare moment in history where societies and markets appear to be teetering between the status quo and a radical change in the way we live and the way we design our lives in cities. For the first time in nine decades, census data in 2010/2011 showed that major American cities experienced more growth than their suburbs. It's too early to tell if this is a complete turning of the tide of urban dispersal. Many forces are at play, from the lingering housing market slowdown and high unemployment to historically low population mobility. But other forces are systemic and powerful enough to permanently alter the course of urban history.

First is a reckoning on energy. It will probably never again be inexpensive to fill a gas tank. There is too little easy oil left in the ground, and there are too many people competing for it. The same goes for other nonrenewable forms of energy and raw materials. The sprawl city requires cheap energy, cheap land, and cheap materials, and the days of cheap are over. Another force is a truth acknowledged by every sober, informed observer: cities are contributing to the crisis of climate change. If we are going to avoid the cataclysmic effects of

global warming, we must find more efficient ways to build and live. Of course it is not at all certain that a rush back to urban density will produce better lives than did suburban dispersal.

But the happy city theory presents an alluring possibility.

If a poor and broken city such as Bogotá can be reconfigured to produce more joy, then surely it's possible to apply happy city principles to the wounds of wealthy places. And if more extravagant, private, polluting, and energy-hungry communities have failed to deliver on happiness, then the search for a happier city might well be expected to reveal a greener, more resilient city, a place that saves the world while saving our own lives. If there was a science behind it, presumably that science could also be used to show how all of us might renovate good feelings in our communities.

Of course, Peñalosa's rhetoric is not science; it raises as many questions as it answers. Its inspirational qualities do not constitute proof of the city's power to make or break happiness, any more than the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love" is proof that all you really do need is love. To test the idea, you would have to decide what you meant by happiness, and you would need a way to measure it. You would have to understand how a road, a bus, a park, or a building might contribute to good feelings. You would have to tabulate the psychological effects of driving in traffic, or catching the eye of a stranger on the sidewalk, or pausing in a pocket park, or of feeling crowded or lonely, or of the simple feeling that the city you live in is a good or bad place. You would have to go beyond politics and philosophy to find a map of the ingredients of happiness, if it exists at all.

The cheers in that Vancouver ballroom echoed in my ears for the five years I spent charting the intersection of urban design and the so-called science of happiness. The quest led me to some of the world's greatest and most miserable streets. It led me through the labyrinths of neuroscience and behavioral economics. I found clues in paving stones, on rail lines, and on roller coasters, in architecture, in the stories of strangers who shared their lives with me, and in my own urban experiments. I will share that search with you, and its hopeful message, in the rest of this book.

One memory from early in the journey has stuck with me, perhaps

because it carries both the sweetness and the subjective slipperiness of the happiness we sometimes find in cities.

It occurred on the afternoon that I chased Enrique Peñalosa through the streets of Bogotá. Just as he had insisted on that first ride, our cycle across what was once one of the most infamous of cities was a breeze. The streets were virtually empty of cars. Nearly a million of them had stayed home that morning. Yes, it was *el día sin carro*, the car-free experiment that had grown into a yearly ritual.

At first the streets felt slightly eerie, like landscapes from a post-apocalyptic *Twilight Zone* episode. All the rumble and roar of the city quieted. Gradually we expanded into the space left by the cars. I let go of my fear. It was as though an immense tension had been lifted from Bogotá, as though the city could finally shake out its exhaustion and breathe. The sky was a piercing blue. The air was clear.

Peñalosa, who was running for reelection, needed to be seen out on his bicycle that day. He stumped compulsively, hollering that same “*Cómo le va*” at anyone who appeared to recognize him. But this did not explain his haste or his quickening pace as we traversed the north end of the city toward the Andean foothills. He stopped answering his phone. He stopped answering my questions. He ignored the whimpers of the photographer who crashed his bicycle on the curb ahead of him. He gripped his handlebars with both hands, stood up, and muscled into his pedals. It was all I could do to keep up with him, block after block, until we arrived at a compound ringed by a high iron fence. Peñalosa dismounted, breathing hard.

Boys in crisp white shirts and matching uniforms poured through a gate. One of them, a bright-eyed ten-year-old, pushed a miniature version of Peñalosa’s own bicycle through the crowd. Peñalosa reached out, and suddenly I understood his haste. The guy had been rushing to pick up his son from school, as other parents were doing that very moment all up and down the time zone. Millions of minivans, motorbikes, hatchbacks, and buses were congregating outside schools from Toronto to Tampa at this very moment—the same ritual, the same drumming of steering wheels, the same stop and go, the same corralling and ferrying of children. Only here, in the heart of one of the meanest, poorest cities in the hemisphere, father and son would roll away from the school gate for a carefree ride across the metropolis. This was an unthinkable act in most modern cities. It



**The Mayor of Happy**

*Enrique Peñalosa in Bogotá, 2007* (Andrés Felipe Jara Moreno, Fundación por el País Que Queremos)

was also a demonstration of Peñalosa’s urban revolution, a terrific photo op for the happy city.

“Look,” he yelled to me, waving his cell phone toward the bicycles that flooded around us. “Can you imagine if we designed the entire city for children?”

We followed a wide avenue that had indeed filled with children, as well as suited businessmen, young ladies in short skirts, apron-clad ice-cream men pushing refrigerated tricycles, and vendors selling sweet arepas from pushcart ovens. They did seem happy. And Peñalosa’s son was safe—not because of those bodyguards, but because he could travel freely, even veer that bike wildly off course without fear of being struck by a speeding automobile. As the sun fell and the Andes caught fire, we arced our way along the wide-open avenues, then west along a highway built just for bicycles. The kid raced ahead. Peñalosa let go of his impulse to campaign. He followed his son, laughing, and the bodyguards huffed and pedaled hard to catch up, and Juan, the photographer, wobbled behind on his bent rims.

At that point I wasn’t sure about Peñalosa’s ideology. Who was to

say that one way of moving was better than another? How could anyone know enough about the needs of the human soul to prescribe the ideal city for happiness?

But for a moment I forgot my questions. I let my handlebars go, raised my arms in the air in the cooling breeze, and remembered my own childhood of country roads, afterschool wanderings, lazy rides, and pure freedom. I felt fine. The city was mine.