

A paved paradise

Mike Davis explores a vision of car-free, socially networked urban environments.

Happy City opens with a joyful adrenaline rush. Charles Montgomery is sweating at the pedals in a mountain-bike dash through the streets of Bogotá with the city's charismatic "Mayor of Happiness", Enrique Peñalosa. "Then he was off," Montgomery marvels, "jumping curbs ... and barking into his cell phone while his pin-striped trousers flapped in the breeze."

The image of hyperkinetic populist Peñalosa — who was mayor from 1998 to 2001 — rushing through barrios and urging his citizens to stop using cars and organize fiestas, may be romanticized. But he did divert the highway budget into building bike paths, pedestrian plazas and Bogotá's first rapid-transit system. In Montgomery's view, Peñalosa had "redesigned the experience of city living for millions of people".

The example of Bogotá provides an irresistible introduction to Montgomery's thesis that a growing global rebellion against private cars, exclusionary zoning and sprawl could be the dawn of a new urban world. From Milwaukee in Wisconsin to Seoul, Montgomery argues, the "battle for the shape and soul of cities ... is finally reaching a critical mass". After decades of ferment, neighbourhood activism is rapidly evolving from protest against individual grievances to an alternative politics of urban design. Montgomery exuberantly lists the changes: for example, shopping malls reclaimed as 'mini-villages'; towns recast for children's needs; and fenceless neighbourhoods. As he puts it, visionary urban designers and politicians "are reorganizing the systems that hold cities together and rewriting the rules that dictate the shapes and functions of our buildings".

None of this chimes with my own daily experience of southern California life as an 'ultra-commuter' (my job is 160 kilometres from home). Nor does it give me hope that some miracle will reverse the United States' national indifference, much of it ominously racial in origin, that tolerates the death of Detroit, Michigan. Once the centre of car manufacture and the Motown music industry, Detroit is now a bankrupt shell with barely 40% of its 1950 population.

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But Montgomery has no time for pessimists, writing that if Bogotá or Athens can be "reconfigured to boost happiness", these principles can heal richer cities around the world.

The 'happy city' thesis is a tough one to lift off the ground, and early parts of the book simply do not fly. For example, Montgomery sets up a contrast between the good city and the bad suburb that fails to sample anything like the average reality of metropolitan life. To illustrate urban happiness, he has a huge home-court advantage: he lives in Vancouver, Canada, the most well-planned and prosperous big city in North America. At the other extreme, he takes a bizarre bus trip with home bargain-hunters through a foreclosed and semi-abandoned suburb near Stockton, California — ground zero of the 2008 US mortgage apocalypse.

Most of Montgomery's critique of the emotional emptiness and environmental costs of suburban life is familiar sociological boilerplate that dates back to the 1950s. He understandably hurries through this to arrive at a more interesting subject: environmental psychology's view of human responses to the built environment. Numerous studies, such as the global World Values Survey, show that people are happier in densely social, architecturally complex, pedestrian-oriented, park-rich and culturally stimulating environments. When efficient alternatives are available, they will even cut the umbilical cords to their cars.

But Montgomery also cites uncomfortable research from sources including Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the University of Zurich in Switzerland. This shows that too many North Americans and Germans are socially programmed to choose status symbols such as supersized suburban homes at the end of nowhere over a connection with other people or a walk in a park.

None of this is Earth-shaking news. Bookshelves groan with glossy catalogues of urban invention and 'smart growth' — a genre that, too often, is simply a celebration of gentrification or an advertisement to move to Canada or Scandinavia. What redeems

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Montgomery's book from his own miscast exhilaration is the surprising richness and critical acuity of his case studies. Although



Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design

CHARLES MONTGOMERY
Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2013.

cherry-picked from such privileged laboratories as Vancouver and Copenhagen, he focuses on the wider applicability of urban-design innovations to generic places, even the suburban badlands of California and Texas.

A fascinating example is the reform of zoning restrictions in Vancouver's older 'streetcar' suburbs.

Most planners define

the essence of 'Vancouverism' as its downtown peninsula — a utopian mini-Manhattan with quiet high-rise neighbourhoods and almost no traffic congestion. Montgomery, however, rightly sees a more revolutionary step in the city's legalization of the conversion of alley garages into cottages and basements into apartments. This simple zoning reform has enabled "one of the biggest urban infill projects on the continent", allowing thousands of residents to find affordable housing in inner suburbs. Hopefully, planners and housing advocates in Los Angeles and other North American cities with shortages of affordable housing will recognize the ingenuity of this initiative and the part that decent mass transit plays in making it work. Montgomery offers other compelling examples showing the power of community imagination, or simply its common sense, when unleashed.

But it would be folly to ignore the special conditions that make the innovation of urban happiness possible in Montgomery's case-study cities. Without exception, these locations have had strong social-democratic or progressive governance. It is hard to imagine that market forces in sunbelt cities such as Phoenix, Arizona, would ever allow such communitarian design principles to sink deep roots. And, for most of the world's present and future urban population, from Lagos in Nigeria to Chengdu in China, the conversation first needs to take place at the more fundamental level of basic needs and human rights. ■

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