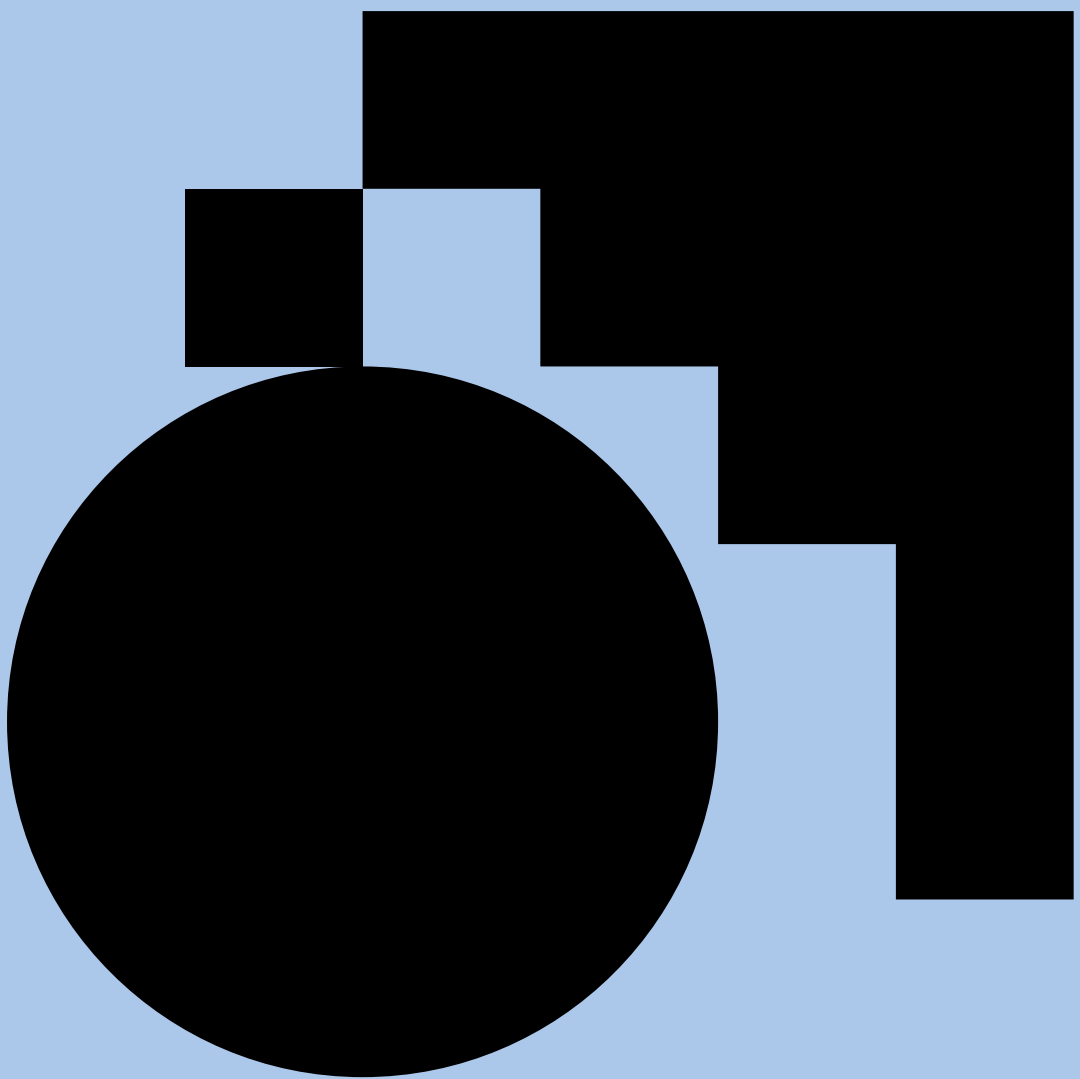
The Paradox of Proximity

Preventing Urban Loneliness



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The Paradox of Proximity

Preventing Urban Loneliness

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Printet on:
Munken Print White 15 115 g/m^2
Munken Polar Rough 300 g/m^2

Typeface:
Bloxhub Aeonik & Rhymes

Web link:
www.bloxhub.org
www.nikken.jp
www.citiesforbetterhealth.com

First edition, 2025

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Content

Introduction: The Paradox of Proximity

Urban areas are often celebrated for their energy and opportunities, yet many people living in cities feel surprisingly alone.
The Paradox of Proximity shows that stacking homes, offices, and cafés close together doesn't automatically create real connection. Instead, crowded streets and shared spaces can turn into backdrops for strangers passing by without a single word exchanged.

Urban loneliness can be approached from multiple angles: while mental health professionals focus on individual coping strategies and social networks, urban planners examine how the built environment itself shapes opportunities for connection. This publication brings together experts from diverse geographies and disciplines, each contributing insights on how urban design influences social well-being. It recognizes that in urban planning lies not just part of the problem, but also a promise - the capacity to shape places that nurture connection rather than erode it.

Executive Summary

Loneliness - defined as the painful feeling arising from a gap between desired and actual social connections - has reached epidemic proportions, affecting 16 percent of people globally. The proximity paradox describes how cities simultaneously bring millions within physical reach while often failing to foster meaningful connection, creating environments where people live surrounded by others yet feel profoundly isolated.

Purpose

This publication frames urban loneliness as a spatial challenge requiring urban design intervention rather than solely individual health treatment. Unlike public health approaches that focus on reconnecting isolated individuals after loneliness has developed, urban planning offers proactive prevention by creating social infrastructure—the physical spaces and organizational structures that enable community building. Where health professionals ask, “How can we help lonely people connect?”, urban designers ask, “How can we create environments where connection naturally occurs?” This represents a shift from reactive treatment to proactive place-based solutions that address loneliness as an environmental condition shaped by the built environment.

Deep-Dives:

The publication centers on five critical themes that illustrate how urban design can shape social well-being with perspectives from Canada, Japan, South Korea, Finland, Denmark, and France:

How informal and designed interactions shape city life

- **Jason Thorne** *(Chief Planner, City of Toronto)* shows that micro-scale interventions in streets and shops create conditions for everyday contact.
- **Prof. Kyosuke Sakakura** *(Oyamachi Living Lab, Tokyo)* embeds "creative error" to restore serendipity in optimized environments.
- **Dr. Kate Mulligan** *(University of Toronto)* demonstrates that active invitations and programming transform infrastructure into community, reducing loneliness by 49% through social prescribing.

How co-living and intergenerational sites can function as social infrastructure

- **Gil Penalosa** *(Founder, 8 80 Cities, Toronto)* highlights intergenerational design as a remedy for isolation.
- **Michelle Hoar** *(Project Director, Hey Neighbour Collective, Vancouver)* activates high-rise living as vertical communities via policy shifts yielding 40% higher resident participation.
- **Jack Renteria** *(Founder, Generation Global, Copenhagen)* positions co-living as a model for embedding belonging into housing markets.

How cities can foster both physical and mental health by building inclusive sports culture

- **Prof. Katja Pahkala** *(Paavo Nurmi Centre and Sports & Exercise Medicine, University of Turku)* & **Dr. André Heikius** *(The Wellbeing Services County of Southwest Finland)* explore how the City of Turku's new sport voucher reduces loneliness and strengthens resilience, enrolling 9,000 young people in hobbies within months.

How both policy interventions and grassroots community networks create invisible but essential social capital

- **Sujin Lee** & **Daniel Oh** *(Director, Seoul Loneliness Prevention Center & Korean Urbanist)* embeds social connection as a preventive infrastructure, utilizing data-driven system to identify at-risk residents before a crisis strikes.
- **Riku Natsui** *(Service Designer, Tokyo)* shows how Coffee & Cleanup Clubs produce sustainable social capital through simple, repeatable actions across 50 sites.

How future cities might measure emotional sustainability alongside economic productivity

- **Prof. Carlos Moreno** *(Sorbonne University, Paris)* calls for "sensitive cities" balancing technological and human intelligence to prioritize emotional experience alongside functional efficiency.
- **Pete Bombaci** *(Founder, GenWell Project, Canada)* stresses that collective action and small gestures are core to systemic change by reframing cities as amplifiers, not creators, of loneliness.

Recommendations for Connection-Centered Urban Development

1. **Intercept Before It Escalates**
   Make early investments in community networks—like Seoul's $327 million social-health initiative and Finland's free youth sports—to prevent loneliness from becoming a chronic crisis.

2. **Normalize Community Support**
   Design universally accessible programs - free weekend events, well-used communal rooms - so joining feels like participation in everyday city life, not admission to a remedial service.

3. **Empower Everyday Kindness**
   Counteract "stranger danger" norms with campaigns that celebrate simple neighborly acts - Seoul saw 10% more support for social programs, making small interactions a recognized civic virtue.

4. **Craft Environments That Invite Interaction**
   Treat loneliness as an environmental condition and use micro-scale design —such as bench placement, sightlines, and walkable links—to gently guide people toward spontaneous connection.

5. **Program Spaces Like You Build Roads**
   Budget ongoing, low-barrier activities - pop-up concerts, coffee-and-cleanup meetups - alongside infrastructure spending to ensure public spaces remain active and welcoming.

6. **Tailor Universality to Diversity**
   Build for Everyone, Not "One Size Fits All" - playgrounds for children, quiet gardens for seniors, accessible paths for all - layered within walking distance to authentically serve diverse populations.

7. **Reveal Isolation Through Data**
   Loneliness follows patterns that can be predicted. Use anonymized utility and emergency-call data - drops in water usage, irregular electricity patterns - to pinpoint isolated households and deploy timely outreach.

8. **Unite Sectors Around Shared Goals**
   Form collective-impact teams across housing, health, transit, and community organizations with joint budgets and metrics, shifting focus from departmental silos to community outcomes.

9. **Offer Paths, Not Prescriptions**
   Connection looks different for each individual. Provide "dual spaces" for being and doing—quiet observation zones and active volunteering areas—so residents choose how and where they connect.

10. **Measure Connection as a Core Metric**
    Track social-connection indicators—participation rates, neighbor familiarity, emotional well-being—on city dashboards alongside economic and environmental data to guide continuous improvement.

The cases and perspectives selected for this publication offer glimpses to confirm that urban loneliness is not only is a growing and shared human challenge which trancends cultures and geography. They also demonstrate that the particular kind of loneliness experienced in dense urban environments require further knowledge sharing and dialogue - to foster a new global community of practice to develop urban responses to prevent loneliness.

The Design of Loneliness: How Cities Divide and Connect

Urban loneliness has emerged as one of the defining challenges of contemporary city life, affecting millions worldwide. The World Health Organization's landmark 2025 Commission on Social Connection reveals that approximately one in six people globally - 16% of the population - now experience loneliness. This translates to more than 871,000 deaths annually.

The situation requires analysis of its underlying causes. The WHO defines loneliness as "the painful feeling that arises from a gap between desired and actual social connections," representing a subjective emotional state. In contrast, social isolation refers to "the objective lack of sufficient social connections." This distinction proves essential in urban contexts where physical proximity to millions of people doesn't guarantee meaningful connection. Yet, both aspects demand examination through an urban design lens that recognizes the built environment as both contributor and potential solution.

Can Urban Design be an Unsung Hero in Preventing Loneliness?

From an urban design perspective, loneliness emerges as a fundamentally different phenomenon than how public health professionals conceptualize it. While health approaches typically focus on individual risk factors, social networks, and clinical interventions, urban design views loneliness as a spatial and environmental challenge requiring systemic, place-based solutions. This distinction proves crucial because it shifts attention from treating loneliness as primarily a personal affliction to understanding it as a condition significantly shaped by the built environment.

The health sector traditionally addresses loneliness through individual-level interventions, such as social prescribing, community programs, and therapeutic approaches, that aim to reconnect isolated individuals with their existing social networks. Urban planning, by contrast, focuses on creating the physical and social infrastructure that makes connection possible in the first place. Where health professionals might ask, “How can we help lonely people connect?”, urban designers ask, “How can we create environments where connection naturally occurs?”

This represents a shift from reactive to proactive intervention. Rather than waiting for loneliness to develop and then treating it, urban design may seek to prevent loneliness by creating social infrastructure - the physical spaces and organizational structures that enable social interaction and community building. However, while the significance of public space design in addressing human connection appears straightforward, deeper consideration reveals the complexity of what forms of connection actually matter in this loneliness context.

Loneliness, as a subjective emotional experience, is fundamentally shaped by individual differences in attachment styles, social motivations, and personal definitions of what constitutes a meaningful connection. Research demonstrates that the quality of social ties matters more than quantity - individuals can feel profoundly lonely despite extensive social networks if those relationships lack emotional depth or authentic engagement. This creates a nuanced challenge for urban designers: creating spaces that not only facilitate encounters but also enable the specific types of connection that different individuals find psychologically satisfying.

The distinction between strong and weak ties proves particularly relevant here. While strong ties (close family and friends) traditionally receive attention in loneliness research, weak ties - casual acquaintances, neighbors, and familiar strangers - serve crucial functions in urban contexts. Active engagement with others, regardless of relationship strength, consistently reduces momentary feelings of loneliness more effectively than passive co-presence. This suggests that urban design must prioritize spaces that encourage active rather than passive forms of social engagement, recognizing that meaningful interaction can occur across the full spectrum of social relationships.

Individual motivations for social connection vary significantly. Some people seek frequent social stimulation, while others prefer selective, deep connections or even solitary experiences that provide restoration rather than isolation. Urban design must therefore accommodate differential social needs, creating environments that offer choice in the type and intensity of social experience available. This might mean designing spaces with both sociopetal arrangements that draw people together and refuges that allow for peaceful observation and voluntary engagement.

Trends Fueling Urban Loneliness

Three converging trends explain why urban loneliness has gained unprecedented attention recently.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated existing patterns of social isolation. Remote work, initially implemented as a public health measure, fundamentally altered urban social dynamics. Enforced remote work increased psychological strain, technology exhaustion, and feelings of both loneliness and social isolation, particularly among workers without previous remote experience. The proportion of people reporting frequent loneliness doubled during the pandemic's first wave.

Second, rapid urbanization outpaces social infrastructure development. As cities expand and technology reshapes human connection, traditional community structures have eroded without adequate replacement. The closure of "third places" locations outside home and work that facilitate social interaction has left communities without essential gathering spaces, increasing loneliness. Libraries, community centers, and informal meeting places that historically anchored neighborhood social life have systematically disappeared in many urban areas.

Third, digital connectivity paradoxically contributes to physical social isolation. While smart city technologies offer enhanced services and new forms of civic engagement, excessive technology use can substitute for face-to-face encounters in ways that ultimately weaken community bonds and increase loneliness. The pandemic intensified this trend, yet these digital interactions often lack the depth and emotional richness of in-person connections.

Urban loneliness has come into focus because its consequences have reached visible, measurable levels affecting economic productivity, healthcare systems, and social cohesion. The phenomenon represents a convergence of demographic shifts, technological change, urban planning failures, and global health crises that create environments where physical proximity coexists with both social isolation and profound loneliness.

Thematic
Deep Dives

Everyday Encounters: How Informal and Designed Interactions Shape City Life

When cities strive for sleek, data-driven precision, the subtle art of sparking everyday encounters emerges as both opportunity and conundrum: by weaving pop-up parklets and animated shopfronts into Toronto's streets, and by embedding "creative errors" in Tokyo's hyper-optimized plazas, planners reignite serendipity and challenge the prevailing demand for total control. This exploration matters because the health of urban communities is dependent not only on infrastructure efficiency but also on the unpredictable magic of chance meetings - and pursuing these hybrid interventions, dilemmas arise: How do we balance safety and spontaneity? At what point does design risk becoming a gimmick rather than a genuine connection? Can programming public spaces to reduce loneliness preserve the authenticity of social prescription without veering into paternalistic intrusion?

INTERVIEWS:

Jason Thorne: In Toronto, "Fine Grain Design" Grows into Planning Power
Kyosuke Sakakura: Tokyo's "Creative Error" Strategy: How Deliberate Inefficiency Fights Urban Loneliness
Kate Mulligan: Social Prescribing is Reshaping Canadian Cities

In Toronto, “Fine Grain Design” Grows into Planning Power

The Chief Planner for the City of Toronto’s approach to urban loneliness reveals the gap between planning knowledge and planning power. His work demonstrates how strategic use of limited regulatory tools can create conditions for community formation within North America’s restrictive development frameworks.

PROFILE:

Jason Thorne *is a* **Canadian urbanist and Toronto’s Chief City Planner**, *appointed in 2024 after a decade leading planning transformation in Hamilton, Ontario. During his Hamilton tenure, he oversaw the city’s evolution from 40% to 90% infill and intensification development, managing significant urban densification while preserving neighborhood character. Before entering municipal planning, Thorne worked as an environmental activist with organizations including the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment and Bay Area Restoration Council.*

Thorne holds professional planning credentials (MCIP, RPP) and has contributed to urban planning discourse through writing, including essays on planning for urban informality and spontaneity. His planning approach emphasizes what he terms “micro moves”—small-scale environmental interventions that create conditions for social connection through urban design.

Jason Thorne on:

The Paradox of Proximity

When faced with the stark revelation that Toronto ranks among Canada’s loneliest cities, Jason Thorne’s response reveals both the complexity of urban isolation and a planner’s measured understanding of their professional limitations. “It’s certainly consistent with other sort of like national studies in terms of a growing trend of loneliness,” Thorne acknowledges, his careful phrasing reflecting a broader uncertainty that haunts contemporary urbanism. The 2023 Toronto Foundation report[1] naming Toronto one of Canada’s most affected cities for loneliness doesn’t surprise him - but neither does it inspire simple solutions.

What emerges from Thorne’s analysis is a sophisticated understanding of what researchers term the paradox of proximity: the counterintuitive reality that cities designed for connection often generate isolation. “I don’t see it as primarily an urban design issue, but I certainly see it as an urban design issue,” he explains, threading a crucial distinction between causation and contribution. This nuanced perspective acknowledges that while planners cannot engineer social connection, they wield tools that can either facilitate or obstruct the “accidental interactions” that form the foundation of urban community.

The traditional focus on functional urbanism - preventing incompatible land uses, ensuring building safety, managing parking and density - is expanding to encompass what he calls the “finer grain issues” that directly impact how cities make people feel. This evolution reflects growing recognition among urban leaders that emotional sustainability must be measured alongside carbon neutrality, fundamentally redefining what it means for a city to be successful.

1 Toronto Foundation, 2023 Vital Signs Report: The Power of Us (Toronto: Toronto Foundation, 2023).

Designing Regulations That Build Belonging

The central challenge lies in what Thorne identifies as the fundamental mismatch between planning knowledge and planning authority within North American regulatory systems. “There is much less control around design in the North American context than there is from what I’ve seen in the European context, and certainly the Scandinavian context,” he observes, highlighting how current institutional frameworks limit planners’ ability to operationalize scientific insights about social connection through environmental design.

This regulatory reality creates what Thorne describes as a critical disconnect: while there’s growing understanding that “there’s very significant public interest in design issues,” the systematic tools to address these interests remain underdeveloped. The prevailing attitude that “design is kind of this frill” reflects deeper institutional priorities that compartmentalize community well-being as secondary to basic development approval processes.

The implications extend far beyond aesthetic concerns. In addressing loneliness - which requires precisely the kind of environmental nuance that creates opportunities for spontaneous social interaction - Thorne finds himself working within regulatory systems designed for broad-brush interventions rather than the sophisticated tools that emerging science suggests are necessary for fostering social connection.

This institutional reality shapes Thorne’s approach to what he terms “an emerging science” connecting urban design to “happiness, quality of life, mental health.” While research increasingly demonstrates these connections, planning practice remains constrained by regulatory frameworks that cannot operationalize scientific insights about the environmental conditions that foster social connection. The challenge becomes how to maximize impact within existing systemic limitations while building toward more sophisticated regulatory approaches.

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↑ Photo: Nic Lehoux, courtesy of The Bentway

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Micro-Scale Interventions: The Power of Fine-Grain Accumulation

Thorne's strategy centers on recognizing that social connection emerges through "the aggregation of all the little micro moves that happen in the city" rather than depending solely on landmark interventions. This philosophy acknowledges planning's capacity for systematic social infrastructure creation while maximizing opportunities for what he calls "accidental interaction."

"There's nothing I can do as a planner that forces someone to get out of their home and engage with the community," Thorne explains. "But there's a lot we can do to create the conditions that at least make that more likely." This approach operates through environmental modifications that influence behavior positively: "how we treat the corners, how development contributes to walkability, how we break down blocks through sort of pedestrian use and pedestrian connection."

The Bentway, Toronto's elevated linear park constructed beneath a highway overpass, exemplifies this philosophy in practice. Rather than creating conventional public space, the project transforms "one of those forgotten and often neglected nooks and crannies in your urban environment" into infrastructure that removes barriers "between the downtown and the waterfront." The intervention succeeds not by programming specific activities but by eliminating obstacles and creating possibilities for spontaneous use.

Yet Thorne recognizes that even celebrated projects like the Bentway represent only one dimension of effective intervention. "There's the big dramatic moves, but probably the more important one is the aggregation of all the little micro moves," he notes, describing a compound approach where numerous small environmental modifications create conditions more conducive to social interaction than any single signature project.

This micro-scale focus aligns with emerging research on urban emotional sustainability, which suggests that fine-grain environmental details can have disproportionate effects on social connection and mental well-being. By concentrating on pedestrian-level experiences, Thorne's approach anticipates future cities where biometric-responsive environments - spaces that use real-time physiological data to adjust environmental conditions like lighting, temperature, and acoustics to optimize collective emotional states - might operate at the same close-up level.

Dancing with Spontaneity

"I'm familiar with sort of all the design thinking you can bring to public space to address those kinds of issues. But I do believe it goes beyond just thinking about design and just thinking about traditional design techniques in public space"

Thorne's innovative opportunity involves what he describes as "a constant dance" between regulatory framework and the urban messiness that generates authentic vibrancy. His thinking on planning for informality explores this creative tension through observations of Asian urban environments where fine-grain commercial activity creates abundant street life through - rather than despite - thoughtful regulatory flexibility.

The opportunity manifests most clearly in his department's initiative to reintroduce neighborhood retail into Toronto's residential areas. "Historically, you have seen a lot of little cafes, little bakeries, little variety stores in those neighborhoods," Thorne explains, describing a commercial ecology that innovative zoning could restore. The proposal to reestablish "little neighborhood commercial spots where people, neighbors can bump into each other" represents precisely the kind of intervention that could address urban loneliness through environmental design.

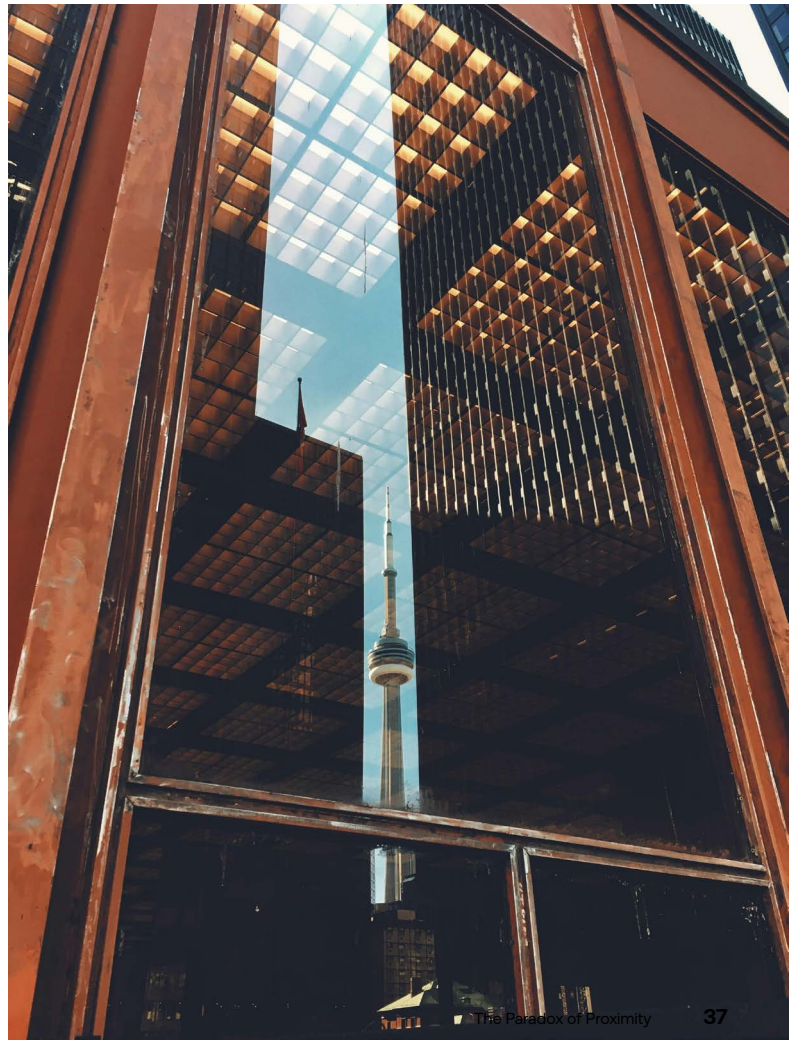
While the initiative initially faced "very significant resistance to the point where it was not accepted the first time it went to council," community concerns about "parking, litter and garbage, noise, crime" reveal opportunities for careful policy design that addresses resident needs while creating social infrastructure.

The challenge reveals opportunities for more sophisticated planning instruments. "Our planning tools are not surgical; they're not precise enough to be able to say coffee shop = ok, bar = not; retail shop = okay, cannabis shop = not. They kind of get lumped together," Thorne explains. This regulatory evolution could enable communities to achieve curated spontaneity - retail that enhances neighborhood character while supporting residential quality of life.

The tool development extends beyond use categories to design quality itself. "I've seen research around the importance of visual variety and texture and things like that at street level. We don't have a lot of tools that allow us to intervene on those types of things,"

Thorne notes. This gap between scientific understanding and regulatory capability represents a crucial opportunity for planning innovation that could address social isolation through environmental design.

This recognition leads Thorne to a transformative insight: "Perhaps our planning approach but also our planning tools have maybe not caught up with the science in terms of what really matters in building cities." This assessment identifies clear opportunities for institutional innovation that could align regulatory frameworks with emerging understanding of urban environments' effects on social connection and mental health.



↑ Photo: Wei Qi, courtesy of The Bentway

International Inspirations

Thorne’s international observations reveal promising approaches to achieving fine-grain urban control through different regulatory strategies. Tokyo particularly inspires him as a model where “they’re much more permissive from a use standpoint” while remaining “quite strict in terms of built form and heights and angular planes and all these sorts of things, but more flexible in terms of what you can do inside the boxes.”

This inverted approach, tight control of physical form combined with flexible use regulations, creates what Thorne observes as “a lot more micro retail, micro commercial opportunities, not just on your Main Street and clustered around your train stations, but kind of perforating into the neighborhoods.” The result demonstrates exactly the kind of social infrastructure that Toronto planners could adapt through abundant street life and spontaneous interaction opportunities.

Yet Thorne’s analysis reveals the sophisticated relationship between environmental design and social outcomes. Despite Tokyo’s vibrant street life, “my understanding is loneliness is probably even more pronounced in Japanese cities. So I don’t know how you kind of connect those dots.” This observation highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches that combine spatial interventions with cultural and social programming.

European cities offer different opportunities, particularly around public space activation. “There seems to be a much more permissive approach to what happens in public spaces and parks,” Thorne observes, noting the presence of “a little cafe, a little bar, that kind of thing inside a park” that could be adapted to North American contexts through innovative approaches to public-private partnerships.

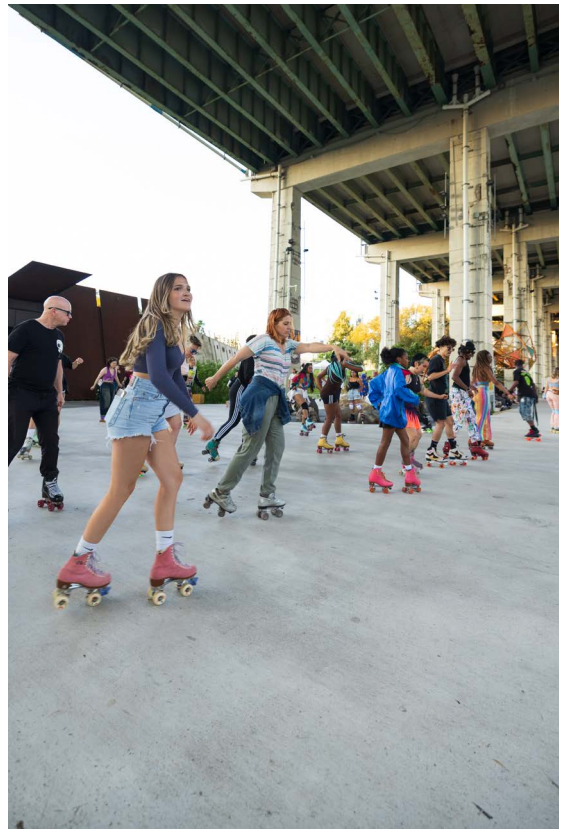
The contrast reveals opportunities for regulatory innovation. Toronto’s recent pilot project allowing alcohol consumption in parks—”we’ve only just as of last year started to allow people to bring their own alcohol into parks; that’s been prohibited for a very, very long time”—represents promising movement toward more flexible public space programming that could support the kind of informal social interaction that reduces isolation.

Can Developer Partnerships Deliver Market-driven Social Infrastructure?

Thorne's assessment of private sector engagement with social infrastructure reveals significant opportunities for partnership in planning for connection. "We have some very socially minded developers who think a lot about these things, and then we have some who don't think about it at all," he explains, describing a spectrum from innovation to profit focus that creates opportunities for policy that encourages community-supporting development.

The most progressive developers are "pushing the envelope against us and against our own standards and rules around public space and around innovation and design," creating promising dynamics where private interests advocate for more ambitious social infrastructure than current regulations require. This market-driven innovation suggests opportunities for public-private partnerships in creating community-supporting environments.

Developers focused on community create projects that exceed legal requirements while contributing significantly to neighborhood social fabric. As private development shapes increasing proportions of the urban environment where daily social interaction occurs, this developer commitment to community-building becomes a crucial asset in addressing urban loneliness.

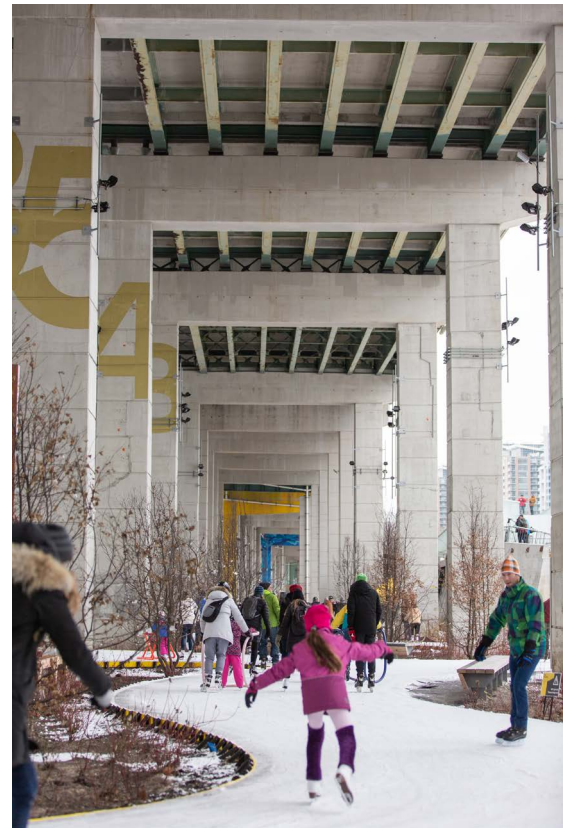


↑ Photo: Jonathan Gazze, courtesy of The Bentway

Amenity spaces in high-rise buildings exemplify both the innovation and potential of private social infrastructure. Thorne describes remarkable developments: "games rooms and wine bars and pet washing stations... a Lego room in one of the buildings, craft rooms, music studios where they have soundproof music studios and all sorts of instruments." These facilities represent genuine investment in resident community, responding to "a marketplace that is looking for those kinds of things."

While Thorne acknowledges questions about their effectiveness -"I don't know how well used those spaces are; do they actually contribute to connection amongst neighbors in those buildings, or are they all just kind of extensions of the private realm?"- these innovations provide valuable learning opportunities for optimizing community spaces within residential developments.

The scale of Toronto's vertical growth creates opportunities for innovation. "We're building 100-story buildings now. These are very significant projects, and I think what amenity looks like in buildings like that is sort of a bit of an evolving area," Thorne observes. As cities densify in response to climate pressures and housing needs, understanding how to create authentic community within massive residential structures becomes a priority opportunity for preventing large-scale social isolation.



↑ Photo: Andrew Williamson, courtesy of The Bentway

"We're building 100-story buildings now. These are very significant projects, and I think what amenity looks like in buildings like that is sort of a bit of an evolving area"

Designing for Trust and Safety

One of Thorne's most promising opportunities involves integrating social connection with public safety through innovative design approaches. "Public safety, antisocial behavior in public space is a very, very significant issue," he acknowledges, describing feedback from residents associations and business improvement areas that directly influences community space design priorities.

The opportunity manifests in community engagement around public space creation that addresses safety while promoting connection. While there are "instances where there's community concern about creating new public space because of what it may attract," this presents opportunities for collaborative design processes that address resident concerns while creating social infrastructure.

The safety focus reflects renewed attention to urban public space quality. "It's something that probably a few decades ago was a significant issue in North American cities. It's certainly coming back, and it's probably one of the top-of-mind issues in most of our neighborhoods right now," Thorne notes, identifying clear priorities for contemporary planning innovation.

Thorne's response combines design innovation with comprehensive approaches: "I'm familiar with sort of all the design thinking you can bring to public space to address those kinds of issues. But I do believe it goes beyond just thinking about design and just thinking about traditional design techniques in public space." This recognition suggests opportunities for coordination across multiple city systems, policing, social services, mental health support, that could operate synergistically with planning processes.

The safety-connection integration becomes particularly promising when considering future urban environments where residents who grew up online seek both security and authenticity in public spaces. However, emotionally responsive urbanism carries inherent potential for control that critical urban theory prompts us to examine carefully. The question of who defines "emotional well-being" and whose emotions are prioritized in urban design becomes crucial as cities develop more sophisticated tools for measuring and responding to collective emotional states. There exists a real need to guard against cities becoming instruments of biopolitical control, subtly shaping citizens' emotional lives in ways that may not always be equitable or liberating.

When Planning Moves Beyond Permits

Thorne's most transformative opportunity involves expanding planning's institutional scope and coordination mechanisms. "There's maybe a misalignment between the things we think are important in cities and the tools we have at our disposal to implement that," he explains, identifying structural opportunities that extend beyond individual project interventions.

The integration of city-building functions across multiple departments creates opportunities for comprehensive approaches to social infrastructure. "Parks are delivered through someone else in a different group. Transit is delivered through something else in a different group. Your culture and economic development people deal with some of the retail uses; your facilities people deal with the community facilities and the recreation centers and the libraries," Thorne notes, describing systems where elements that combine to create neighborhood social fabric could be coordinated more effectively.

Current planning practice, focused on "the doling out of development permissions on private land," could integrate these diverse elements more systematically. Thorne advocates for "broadening out what is meant by city planning" to encompass "how are we bringing together all of these disparate elements that contribute to great cities and great neighborhoods."

This institutional evolution becomes particularly promising as cities prepare for artificial intelligence integration and biometric-responsive environments - systems that use real-time physiological data such as heart rate, stress levels, and emotional states to dynamically adapt environmental conditions - that could coordinate multiple urban systems in real-time to optimize collective emotional states. The technical capacity for integrated urban management creates opportunities for more effective institutional frameworks.

While Thorne acknowledges he's "not saying the chief planner myself should have the say in authority over all of those areas, although sometimes I think that'd be lovely," his vision suggests promising opportunities for restructuring municipal governance around social outcomes rather than functional separation. "City building goes way beyond city planning," he observes, articulating opportunities that extend far beyond Toronto to cities worldwide.

The Joy Strategy

“To me, joyfulness feels like a more positive way to put it than simply saying my goal is to combat loneliness”

Thorne’s concept of the “joyful city” emerges as a strategic framework for Toronto’s housing production innovation. “We’re very focused right now, and rightfully so, on delivering a lot more housing. We do have a housing crisis here. We are growing extremely fast, and it is extremely challenging to keep up with that growth,” he acknowledges, recognizing opportunities to integrate quality and quantity in urban development.

His emphasis on joy represents strategic positioning for community-focused planning. “To me, joyfulness is maybe a bit more of a positive way to say - not the most inspiring statement to say in the media that my goal here is to combat loneliness,” he explains with characteristic candor. The reframing suggests successful approaches for building public support for quality-focused planning alongside rapid development.

The vision encompasses multiple scales of innovation, from public space programming to fundamental reconceptualization of urban infrastructure. “Part of it is around public space. Part of it is around the design of streets and what is a street?” Thorne explains, describing his collaboration with Danish nature-based design firm SLA on waterfront public realm design that will explore “this blurring of lines between the private and the public space”.

This blurring concept represents sophisticated opportunities for hybrid physical-digital environments that may characterize future cities. As artificial intelligence reshapes work patterns and residents seek authentic offline connection, public spaces that seamlessly integrate private and public functions may become critical infrastructure for social cohesion and emotional sustainability.

The joyful city framework also positions Toronto to attract and retain residents who have multiple location choices in an increasingly mobile knowledge economy. “Making sure that we are delivering housing in a way that’s actually creating really great neighborhoods and creating really great quality of life and being a city where people want to be because it’s a beautiful, joyful place” becomes essential economic development strategy alongside social policy.

This approach acknowledges that future cities will be shaped by residents who grew up online but crave authentic offline connection, requiring urban environments that can bridge digital and physical experiences while maintaining the spontaneous, unprogrammed interactions that generate genuine community. The opportunity involves creating systematic approaches to joy and connection while preserving the messiness and unpredictability that make urban life authentic and vital.

Tokyo's "Creative Error" Strategy: How Deliberate Inefficiency Fights Urban Loneliness

A Japanese professor's solution to city loneliness involves strategic detours and intentional mistakes. His research shows that in a hyperconnected world, the path to community runs through calculated disruption of our optimized routines.

PROFILE:

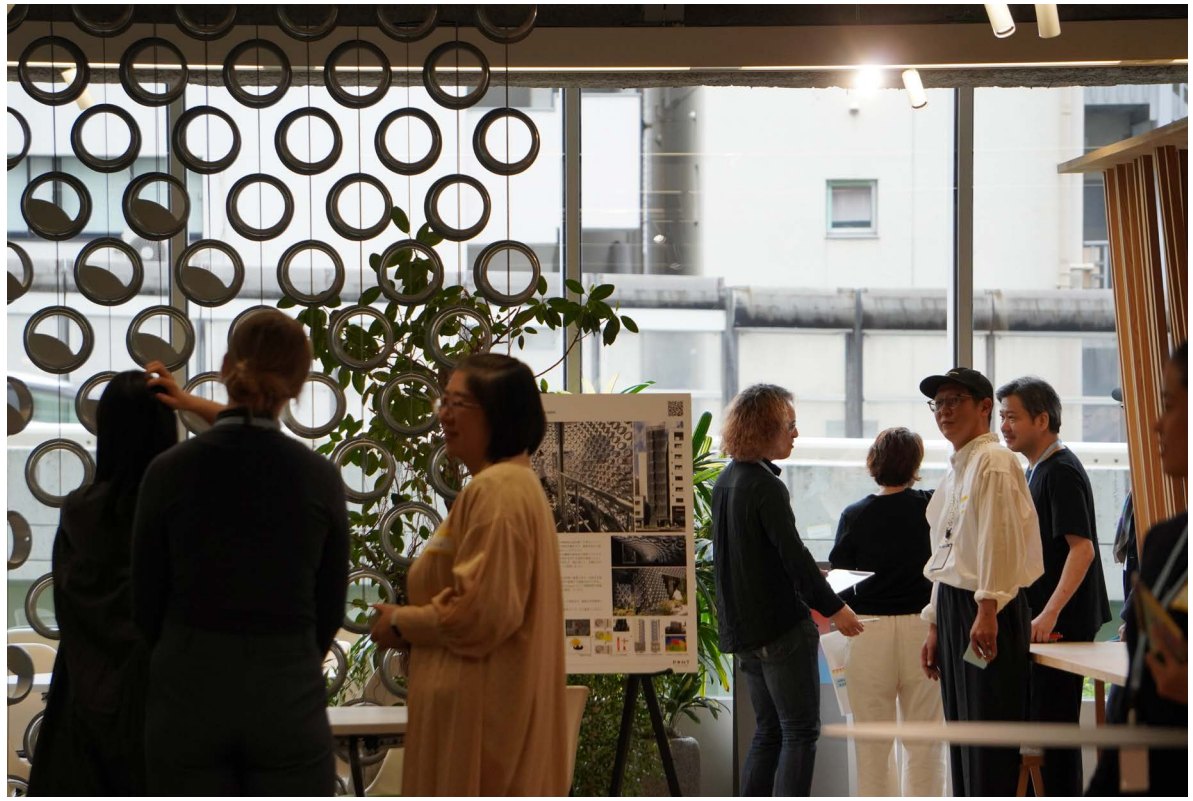
Kyosuke Sakakura *is* **Professor of Urban Planning at Tokyo City University**, *where he has spent over two decades developing innovative approaches to urban loneliness through community building, small-scale interventions and participatory research. Based in Tokyo's Setagaya ward, his work bridges multiple disciplines, environmental psychology, urban sociology, community economics, and spatial design, while maintaining focus on practical solutions that residents can implement themselves.*

Kyosuke Sakakura on:

The Paradox of Proximity

Standing in his Oyamachi Living Lab above a bustling Tokyo shopping district, professor Kyosuke Sakakura watches thousands of residents navigate their daily routines below, each choosing "the shortest route to the station, the optimal route to their workplace, the most efficient way to go about what they have to do." The result, he argues, is the central paradox of modern urban life: "People in urban areas reside in their cities, but they do not live there."

His solution is deliberately counterintuitive: "creative error." By "pitching tents in shopping districts" and hosting impromptu street seminars, Sakakura engineers what he calls "detours away from the correct, efficient living routine, which leads you, for the first time, to new encounters." This strategic inefficiency, he contends, is the antidote to urban loneliness, forcing residents off their optimized paths and into the unscripted interactions where genuine community forms.



Creative Error: Disrupting Urban Efficiency for Human Connection

Setagaya, Tokyo's most populous ward with nearly one million residents, represents a distinctive urban environment where Sakakura tests his theories. Unlike the gleaming towers of central Tokyo's business districts, Setagaya combines traditional residential neighborhoods with modern infrastructure, tree-lined streets dotted with family homes, local universities, vibrant shopping districts, and community centers. This human-scale density should foster connection, yet Sakakura's research reveals how even in this seemingly ideal urban setting, loneliness persists as residents optimize their movements and minimize unplanned encounters.

Sakakura's concept of "creative error" represents a challenge to contemporary urban design philosophy. In city contexts where efficiency metrics dominate planning decisions, e.g. optimized traffic flows, minimized travel times, maximized throughput, creative error deliberately introduces what planners typically try to eliminate: friction, delay, and unpredictability.

Recent research from MIT's Senseable City Lab validates what Sakakura observes in Tokyo's streets, documenting that American city dwellers now walk 15 percent faster than they did three decades ago, spend half as much time lingering, and connect with fewer strangers. While cultural contexts differ between Tokyo and American cities, both societies experience similar economic pressures. Urban economist Yichen Su from the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas has demonstrated how rising wages make each minute more economically valuable, leading to what sociologists like Judy Wajcman from Australian National University term "time intensification", the phenomenon where residents optimize many aspects of their daily routines for maximum productivity.

The approach of creative error lies in its voluntary nature. Unlike traffic accidents or infrastructure failures that create unwanted delays, Sakakura's interventions invite participation while preserving choice. "It's not just the physical way that you move from A to B, but also a mental way that you open up," he elaborates. This dual transformation - spatial and psychological - distinguishes creative error from conventional urban programming or street activation.

The mental opening occurs through several mechanisms that Sakakura has observed in his experiments. When residents encounter a tent pitched unexpectedly in their familiar shopping district, they shift from autopilot navigation to curious observation. A street seminar transforms anonymous passersby into potential participants, breaking the social script that discourages interaction with strangers. These interruptions create what he calls "permission structures", moments where normal urban etiquette relaxes and people feel entitled to linger, ask questions, or initiate conversations that would seem inappropriate in purely functional spaces.

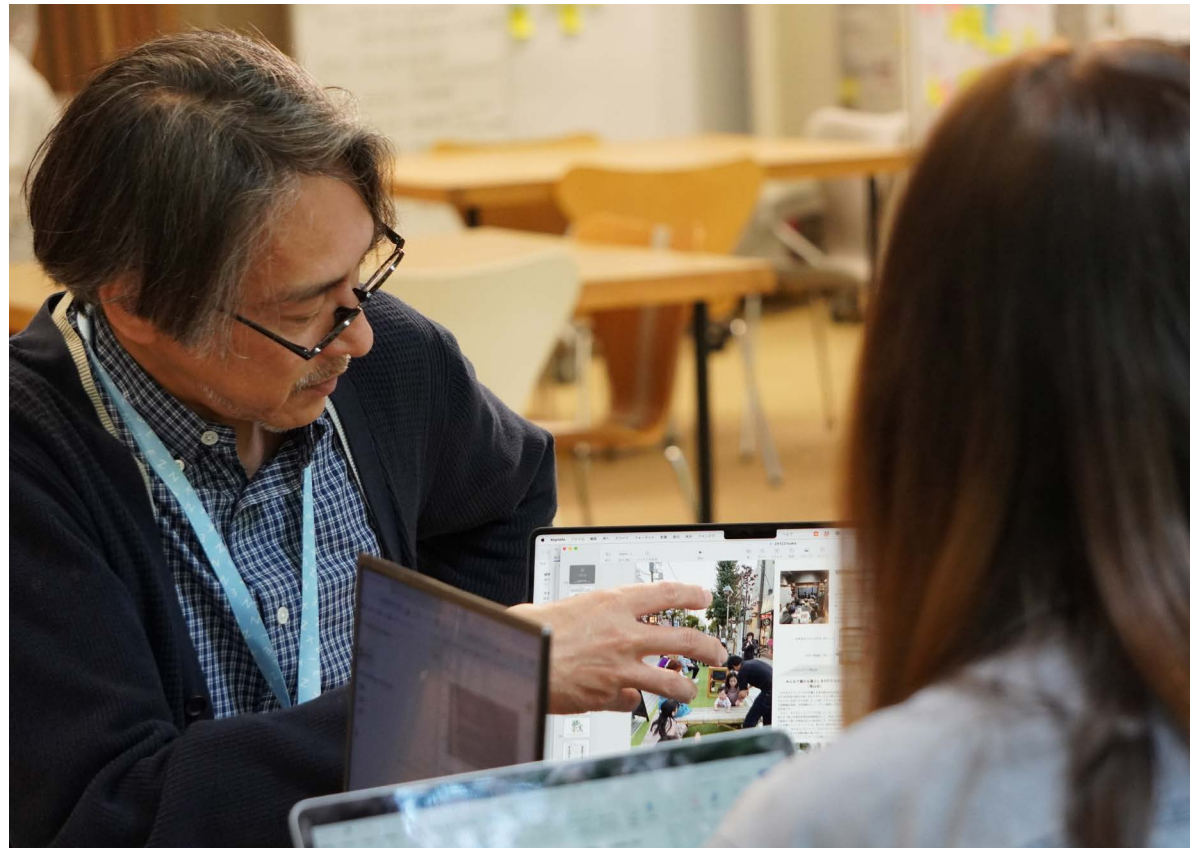
The effect cascades beyond the immediate intervention. Participants report increased likelihood of making eye contact with neighbors, stopping to examine street art they previously ignored, or choosing longer routes that offer opportunities for serendipitous encounters. "If you step into that detour, you meet new people," Sakakura notes, but the deeper transformation involves residents becoming more receptive to spontaneous social possibilities throughout their daily routines. The creative error thus functions as social learning—teaching urban dwellers that their city can accommodate human connection alongside economic efficiency.

The Gray Zone:
Ambiguity as Urban Necessity

One of Sakakura's most compelling ideas is the 'gray zone' of human interaction: the ambiguous space where relationships grow through subtle gestures rather than clear-cut choices. "In real, face-to-face relationships, what matters is the gray area," he explains. "Digital technologies and AI tend to divide things into right and wrong, black and white. But in our personal interactions, it's not about being strictly right or wrong. What truly matters is this space in between and learning how to navigate it well."

This analysis becomes particularly relevant as cities increasingly integrate algorithmic decision-making into urban management. Smart city technologies, AI-powered traffic optimization, and algorithmic urban services all operate through binary logic - categorizing, sorting, and directing urban flows with mathematical precision. While such systems enhance efficiency, they systematically eliminate the ambiguous spaces where human connection flourishes.

Sakakura's interventions deliberately create "spaces of uncertainty", gatherings where purposes remain open, events where roles stay undefined, interactions where outcomes remain unscripted. At Oyamachi Living Lab, street seminars might evolve into informal markets, community meetings, or impromptu festivals depending on participant interest. Temporary installations in shopping districts serve multiple functions simultaneously: seating, art display, conversation starter and performance space without a predetermined hierarchy.



↑ Kyosuke Sakakura

The gray zone operates as an antidote to urban loneliness precisely because it resists the efficiency that characterizes most city experiences. Research by environmental psychologist Roger Barker demonstrates that spaces permitting both activity and inactivity create optimal conditions for diverse personality types to find their social rhythm.

These gray zones enable the gradual calibration of response that builds intimate connection through sustained ambiguous interaction. Urban environments that eliminate ambiguity through over-programming or algorithmic control inadvertently eliminate opportunities for such attunement to develop.

"In real, face-to-face relationships, what matters is the gray are. Digital technologies and AI tend to divide things into right and wrong, black and white. But in our personal interactions, it's not about being strictly right or wrong. What truly matters is this space in between and learning how to navigate it well"

“We started getting organizational participants, such as clinics and schools, and not just individuals”

When Schools and Hospitals Are Not Enough

Sakakura’s ideas extend beyond individual behavior to institutional structures, arguing that specialized organizations, schools, hospitals, clinics, cannot address contemporary urban loneliness in isolation. “Today, it’s no longer possible to gain all the education you need for life just by sitting in a classroom at school,” he argues, extending the same logic to healthcare and social services.

This critique targets the assumption underlying modern urban organization: that specialized institutions can address human needs through functional efficiency.
“For example, you can’t meet all preventive and follow-up care needs within the hospital alone; just as there are other issues that cannot be solved solely by schools,” he observes.

Sakakura proposes what he calls “leveling up” - transforming individual problems into community problems that diverse stakeholders address collaboratively. “By exporting these unresolvable issues to the community - given that these communities are comprised of a variety of stakeholders - they have various interactions within one another that they solve together as external stakeholders,” he explains.

His Oyamachi Living Lab attracts not just residents but institutions seeking collaborative solutions to problems that exceed organizational boundaries. “We started getting organizational participants, such as clinics and schools, and not just individuals,” he notes. Rather than replacing existing institutions, this approach creates connective tissue enabling different sectors to address shared challenges through community integration.

“Experts pretty much all agree that these can be solved through collaboration with the community,” Sakakura observes. This collaboration transforms isolated institutional pressure into collective community capacity, addressing loneliness not through therapeutic intervention but through meaningful participation in solving shared urban challenges.

Generational Wisdom and Urban Social Learning

“Older generations found the social constraints of traditional communities challenging, so many moved to urban areas. Now, in their later years, they often lack strong social ties and are more vulnerable to loneliness”

Sakakura identifies a critical dimension of urban loneliness that transcends individual psychology: the intergenerational loss of social knowledge. “Older generations found the social constraints of traditional communities challenging, so many moved to urban areas. Now, in their later years, they often lack strong social ties and are more vulnerable to loneliness,” he observes.

This migration from rural constraint to urban freedom created unintended consequences. “Many younger people have grown up without experiencing close-knit community ties. As they enter their 20s, 30s, and 40s and begin to need that sense of connection, especially when raising children, they often find themselves unsure of how to build it,” he continues.

Sakakura’s insight suggests that urban loneliness stems partly from collective amnesia - communities rich in individual resources but poor in social knowledge about relationship building. Traditional rural communities, despite their constraints, transmitted social skills through daily practice and intergenerational observation. Urban environments, optimized for individual efficiency, often lack mechanisms for such transmission.

His interventions represent attempts to reconstruct community wisdom through contemporary urban design. The Oyamachi Living Lab functions partly as social education, where participants observe and practice community building through guided experience. “Through my research, I discovered that two elements are essential: self-realization and forming a sense of community or togetherness with others,” he explains regarding how people develop social capacity.

The progression he documents - from individual presence to collective belonging to community contribution - suggests pathways for rebuilding social knowledge that families and rural communities once transmitted naturally. Japan’s specific challenges, including approximately 300,000 people experiencing social withdrawal and thousands of lonely deaths annually, illustrate the consequences of social knowledge loss at scale.

The Cost of Constant Renewal

Japan's construction industry operates on notably short building lifecycles compared to North American cities. The average lifespan of Japanese residential buildings is approximately 30 years, compared to 75 years in Canada and similar timeframes across North America. Even South Korea, with rapid development patterns similar to Japan, maintains building lifecycles of 40-50 years, while many European cities preserve structures for over 100 years. This "scrap and build" tradition stems from factors including earthquake risk, building codes, tax incentives favoring new construction and cultural preferences for fresh starts over historical preservation.

Sakakura argues this rapid turnover creates implications for urban belonging. "There's a lot less ability to feel connections to the land, to history, to nature, to the ecosystem," he observes, linking spatial disruption to psychological instability. "Looking at this from a well-being perspective, the priority is clearly on the economy and immediate profits - what we can see right in front of us in the short term," he notes about constant reconstruction in his Minato City neighborhood.

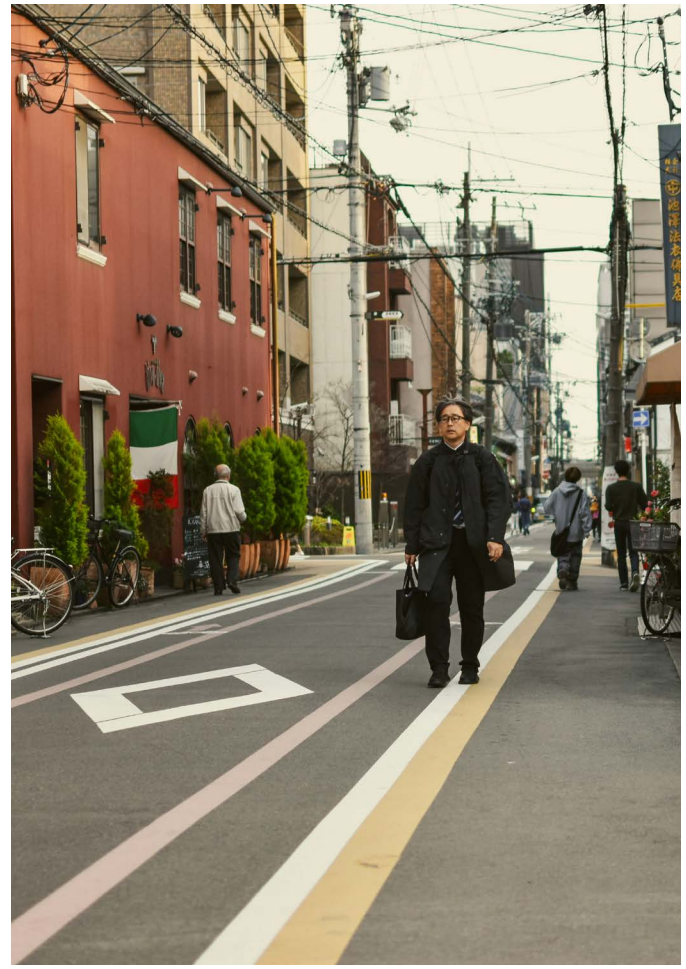
The psychological impact extends beyond nostalgia to questions of place attachment. When buildings, streets, and neighborhoods change rapidly, residents lose the environmental cues that support long-term social relationships and community memory. "I believe that being exposed to history and nature helps restore our sense of balance and brings us back to ourselves," Sakakura explains.

Yet he observes an emerging counter-trend as "there is an increasing number of people who prefer older buildings because they're easier, because they have a greater level of familiarity, or they're more comfortable," Sakakura explains, especially for those looking to feel more at home in their surroundings. This isn't just nostalgia, people of all ages are looking for places that feel stable and enduring.

Sakakura's interventions attempt to create temporal anchors within landscapes of change. The cobblestone street project, the Oyamachi Living Lab continuity, and Shibanoya's consistent presence provide what he calls "environmental memory" that supports psychological stability even amid urban transformation.

“The reason Japanese people use the word ibasho so often is because where they live is not an ibasho”

Ibasho and Debang: Dual Functions of Urban Space



Sakakura’s vision for urban planning centers on providing both ibasho (places for being) and debang (places for action), supporting individual well-being while enabling collective contribution. “We need spaces where people can simply be themselves, and we also need environments that make it easy to take action and get involved when they’re ready. It’s just as important to have the chance to contribute as it is to feel welcome,” he argues.

Ibasho represents spaces of acceptance where residents feel “good to be there” without performance expectations or participation requirements. These spaces address loneliness through unconditional belonging, the psychological safety that enables authentic self-expression and gradual social engagement.

Debang provides a complementary function, stages for agency and contribution where residents can “realize motivations, bring into reality what you want to do and to speak honestly.” Unlike programmed activity spaces, debang offers platforms for resident-initiated projects while respecting individual choice about participation level.

The integration of these functions challenges conventional urban planning categories that separate passive and active spaces, residential and civic functions, individual and collective needs. Successful urban environments, Sakakura argues, must honor both dimensions simultaneously, creating what he calls “structured flexibility” where social purpose remains clear but usage possibilities stay open-ended.

“The reason Japanese people use the word ibasho so often is because where they live is not an ibasho,” Sakakura observes. This widespread usage reflects not cultural sophistication but social need - collective yearning for places that nurture both individual well-being and community connection. As cities worldwide grapple with rising loneliness, this dual approach offers a practical framework for urban design that serves both efficiency and human flourishing.

CASES:

The Cobblestone Street: Circular Economics in Practice

Sakakura's cobblestone street project demonstrates how alternative economic models can address urban loneliness through shared investment and collective care.
The cobblestone pavement in Setagaya's shopping district, originally installed to create pedestrian-friendly commercial areas, faced replacement with standard asphalt when maintenance costs exceeded the combined budgets of the shopping district association and city government.

"Until recently, the only stakeholders involved with this cobblestone pavement were the shopping district and the city of Setagaya. But now, many more groups play a role in its upkeep and use," Sakakura explains. The preservation project expanded participation to include residents, local businesses, community organizations and even visitors who valued the street's aesthetic and social qualities.

The economic model operates through small-scale digital contributions coordinated via online platforms. Rather than relying on large institutional funding, the system enables many stakeholders to contribute modest amounts, some financial, others through labor, maintenance, or promotional activities.

This circular approach creates multiple benefits beyond cost distribution. Contributors develop ownership stakes in public space, transforming passive users into active stewards. The platform facilitates communication among stakeholders, building social networks that extend beyond the immediate project. Most importantly, the process demonstrates community capacity for collective problem-solving, creating confidence for addressing future challenges collaboratively.

"Bringing more stakeholders into the project sparks new ideas and approaches for making it successful," Sakakura notes.

Shibanoie: A Space for Unconditional Presence

Shibanoie represents one of Sakakura's most nuanced experiments in addressing urban loneliness through unconditional acceptance. This community space operates as what he calls an ibasho - a place where people can simply be present without any obligation to participate in organized activities. Located in Tokyo's residential neighborhoods, Shibanoie functions as an informal gathering place that welcomes visitors to sit, observe, read or quietly interact with others at their own pace.

"Shibanoie is an ibasho, a place of belonging that does not require you to be active. You're allowed to spend your time there whenever you would like. However, as a result, there are many people who are quite active," Sakakura observes. The space provides comfortable seating, refreshments, and an atmosphere that prioritizes psychological safety over programmed engagement.

His longitudinal research reveals a consistent progression among regular visitors:

from passive presence to active belonging to meaningful contribution. “You start by simply being there among others and feeling comfortable as yourself. With time, that presence grows into a sense of belonging to the place, which naturally leads to feeling connected with the people around you,” Sakakura reveals.

Sakakura identifies two psychological drivers behind this transformation: self-realization emerging from security, and communality fostering collective investment. “This sense of belonging makes you want to contribute to others and help shape the place itself. Over time, that inspiration can lead you to start your own initiatives or ideas,” he explains.

This progression challenges dominant approaches to community building that emphasize activity and programming. Shibanoie’s success lies in honoring what Sakakura calls “individual desires” while creating conditions for collective emergence. The space demonstrates that meaningful social connection can develop when people feel accepted without conditions or expectations.

The Oyamachi Living Lab: Engineering Serendipity

The Oyamachi Living Lab, now in its 17th year as a collaboration between Minato City and Keio University, operates as a “small living research lab” positioned strategically between the university and train station. From this second-floor perch in Setagaya’s residential shopping district, Sakakura observes and intervenes in the daily patterns that shape urban social life.

His approach centers on the Japanese concept of ibasho, a place where one feels accepted while retaining agency to act authentically. “One precondition is that the place allows you to feel that it’s okay to be there, that you feel accepted, that you feel at ease being yourself,” Sakakura explains.

The Living Lab’s interventions deliberately disrupt efficiency through creative error. Street seminars interrupt shopping routines, temporary installations transform mundane corners into gathering spaces, and pop-up events create unexpected social encounters.

These interventions operate both physically and cognitively, redirecting movement while shifting mental states toward openness and curiosity.

Sakakura’s work demonstrates that addressing urban loneliness requires deliberate intervention to transform potential community into actual belonging. His experiments suggest that cities can foster connection without sacrificing efficiency, but only through conscious attention to the social dimensions of urban design that honor both individual autonomy and collective well-being.

↑ Kyosuke Sakakura

Social Prescribing is Reshaping Canadian Cities

A public health professor's approach to social prescribing is demonstrating that systematic connections between healthcare and community spaces can transform urban loneliness - and it's scaling across North America.

PROFILE:

Kate Mulligan *is* **Associate Professor of Social and Behavioural Health Sciences at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, and Scientific Director at The Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing.** *As a health geographer whose career bridges municipal government, healthcare policy, and community development, she launched Canada's first social prescribing pilot program across Ontario communities, results that have since led to nationwide implementation across every Canadian province. Mulligan approaches urban loneliness through the principle that "our bodies happen in relationships" - viewing spatial design and social infrastructure as essential determinants of public health.*

Kate Mulligan on:

The Paradox of Proximity

When Kate Mulligan speaks about the paradox of proximity, she delivers a diagnosis that resonates across global cities experiencing record levels of urban loneliness. "We are put near one another, but we're not really encouraged to actually spend a lot of time together," she observes, cutting to the heart of a phenomenon that affects millions. For this social prescribing advocate, the problem isn't density - it's the absence of meaningful invitation in urban spaces.

The paradox manifests, she explains, because "we have more people, so we feel less personally responsible for the people around us". Cities create what she calls "pathways for mobility, not places to stay," while simultaneously dismantling traditional structures of belonging without replacing them with anything substantive. "We haven't replaced them with anything. So there's no social call to participation. There's no meaningful invitation".

→ Photo: Samuel Engelking, courtesy of The Bentway

The Doctor Will See You Now: At the Library, Park, and Community Center

"People do feel more connected in spaces that are intentionally designed for that"

Mulligan's central argument represents a paradigmatic shift in how urban planners might approach community wellness. "Urban planners have a big role to play in really recognising that they can create conditions that support our health in specific ways," she argues, positioning social health as equally important as physical infrastructure. This isn't merely aspirational - her research at Toronto's The Bentway demonstrates measurable outcomes from intentional design choices.

Through surveys and behavioral observations at the public space beneath the Gardiner Expressway, Mulligan found that "people do feel more connected in spaces that are intentionally designed for that." The space features year-round programming, comfortable seating, environmental elements including a rock garden water filtration system, and crucially, the elimination of hostile architecture. The results were clear: visitors reported feeling healthier and more willing to participate in community activities.

"The simplicity of what our needs are again illustrates how far we've strayed from what humans need," she reflects. "How can we miss out on some of the really simple stuff - a place to sit, somebody to talk to, an invitation to stay".

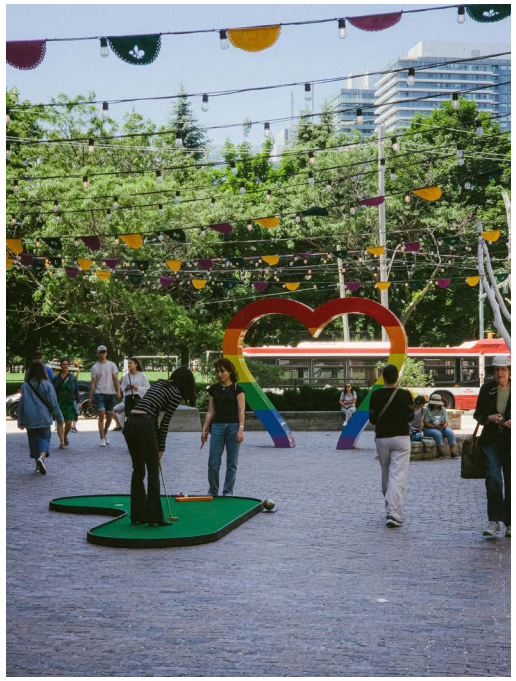
The Matter of Mattering

Central to Mulligan's framework is the concept of "mattering" - the fundamental human need to feel noticed, needed, and significant. "In almost all big bureaucratic systems and large institutions, we very rarely get the message that we matter," she observes. This insight drives her approach to both healthcare and spatial design, where traditional approaches focus on deficits rather than assets.

The contrast becomes stark when she describes healthcare's typical approach: "the emphasis is on what's the matter with you. And then we try to fix that. We don't start with you matter, you belong. You're noticed, you're needed here. Your voice is important, your experience. You've got something that no one else has".

For urban spaces, this translates into design principles that move beyond mere functionality. "It's literally like a place to sit that you're invited to stay, not just sort of rush through," she explains. "So not just pathways for mobility, but places to stay". This requires eliminating "hostile architecture that's designed to deter people from staying - barriers and barricades and bumpy surfaces and all those kinds of things".

Social Prescribing as Urban Policy



“There’s no meaningful direct connection between healthcare systems and other systems. They just coexist in the same areas, but they’re not meaningfully connected”

Mulligan’s most significant contribution to combating urban loneliness lies in social prescribing - a systematic approach that challenges the artificial boundaries between healthcare and community development. “Up to 80% of our health is actually determined outside of clinical medicine,” she explains. “It’s in our environment, it’s in our communities, it’s with our housing, our income, our food - all those things that planners know well”.

Yet these systems operate in isolation. “There’s no meaningful direct connection between healthcare systems and other systems. They just coexist in the same areas, but they’re not meaningfully connected”. Social prescribing bridges this gap through systematic referrals that honor participant autonomy. Rather than prescriptive interventions, the approach asks “what matters to you?” and enables individuals to “co-create their social prescription”.

Social prescribing operates as a bridge between healthcare and community resources, enabling individuals to address health-related social needs through personalized, non-clinical interventions funded primarily through public healthcare systems. Rather than traditional medical prescriptions, it might involve connecting someone to a choir for social engagement, facilitating volunteer opportunities that allow people to “give back,” or helping restore family relationships before tackling other health challenges. Community link workers ask “what matters to you?” and enable participants to “co-create their social prescription” based on their own values and circumstances

The results provide compelling evidence for treating loneliness as a public health issue. In Mulligan’s initial 2018-2019 pilot across 11 Ontario communities, “people self-reported loneliness went down by 49%” while “their use of health services decreased, their health outcomes improved, and the costs went down by about 20%”. The approach has since expanded to every Canadian province, with British Columbia scaling from 20 to 100 link workers based on demonstrated effectiveness.

What People Want, Not What Planners Assume

Mulligan’s approach to community consultation represents a fundamental departure from traditional planning practice. “We need to ask people because the answers will not necessarily be the ones that we’re anticipating,” she warns, citing an example from Northern Ontario where elderly residents needed pet-sitting services to attend healthcare appointments - a barrier no planner would have predicted.

This requires “starting much further upstream, asking people what matters to you, what would enliven your community? What do you want here? And really starting from that, even if the answers are surprising to you”.

The approach demands genuine discovery rather than validation of predetermined solutions, accepting that “we might have really different languages and evidence standards that are important to us”.

For programming, this translates into active invitation rather than passive provision. At the Bentway, “they invite people in by having all kinds of different activities...roller skating nights, yoga events, arts programming amd dinners. All sorts of interesting things happening there to invite people to be there”. The key insight: programming must provide “real invitations” to participate, not merely activities that exist.

The Four Pillars of Connection

Mulligan's framework for preventing loneliness rests on four components of self-determination that can inform both individual interventions and spatial design:

Autonomy: The ability to make meaningful choices about participation. "You can't be referred to gardening if you hate gardening," she notes. Spaces must offer multiple ways to engage rather than prescriptive participation.

Competence: Building confidence through meaningful participation that reminds people "you do have more control than you think" over daily life and community affairs.

Belonging: Creating genuine relatedness and a sense of mattering within community spaces - the feeling that one's presence and participation are noticed and valued.

Beneficence: Perhaps most importantly, enabling people to give back. "Giving back is probably the biggest health boost," Mulligan observes, as people transition from seeing themselves as "a drain on society" to "someone with something to offer".

Scaling Without Bureaucratization

One of Mulligan's most nuanced insights concerns the challenge of scaling community-driven solutions without destroying their effectiveness. Her analysis of UK social prescribing implementation reveals crucial lessons: "They started social prescribing and just told many healthcare practices you're doing this now. And those who already had good cultures of working together succeeded. But those who didn't really struggled".

The Canadian approach prioritizes organic, locally-driven expansion. "Rather than trying to start by changing paradigms and big institutions, we're just starting small and demonstrating through practice," she explains. This involves giving healthcare providers simple tools that make their work easier while building evidence for broader systemic change - an approach that has enabled expansion from Ontario pilots to nationwide implementation.

Community organizations lack evaluation and monitoring capacity, making systematic integration difficult. As Mulligan notes, participatory evaluation is "hard for community organisations because they don't have a lot of capacity". Healthcare providers worry that social prescribing will add to their workload, though pilots show it actually "made their days easier because they were moving people to more appropriate services".

Organizations often "feel like we can't have volunteers because they must fill out a giant waiver and we must worry about liability concerns," Mulligan observes.

"We've overdone it with a lot of that institutionalising". This creates barriers to community-based approaches that rely on trusted local connectors rather than credentialed professionals. The emphasis on formal qualifications can exclude community members who "might have a formal credential from another country that isn't recognised" but possess valuable cultural knowledge and trust within their communities.

The lesson for urban planning: successful community-building infrastructure requires existing social capital to be effective. Investments should prioritize communities with demonstrated collaborative capacity while building that capacity elsewhere through smaller interventions first.

"Rather than trying to start by changing paradigms and big institutions, we're just starting small and demonstrating through practice"

Technology, Relationships, and Human Agency

While acknowledging AI's potential for improving referral systems and data tracking, Mulligan firmly rejects technology-first approaches to relationship building. "I very much resist the AI first approach in the relationship," she states, noting that chatbots create "transactional" rather than "deeply and truly reciprocal" connections.

Her stance reflects broader concerns about maintaining human agency in an increasingly digital world. For social prescribing, AI can improve infrastructure - "help us build better technology and systems for data tracking, evaluation, monitoring, feedback" - but cannot substitute for human connection. This has significant implications for smart city initiatives that attempt to solve social problems through technological solutions rather than creating conditions for human interaction.

The Policy Landscape and Future Directions

Mulligan expresses cautious optimism about institutionalizing belonging-centered approaches in Canada's evolving healthcare infrastructure. The federal promise of "$4 billion for community healthcare infrastructure" represents an opportunity to fund "libraries, parks, public spaces" rather than just clinical facilities. "It will become a mainstream part of our health system within the next decade," she predicts.

Her vision involves treating belonging as a design parameter through participatory evaluation involving "policy and decision makers and funders alongside the practitioners and the community members" in ongoing assessment. This requires accepting "plurality of approaches" where stakeholders "might have really different languages and evidence standards" while maintaining focus on shared outcomes.

The key insight for implementation: "Give this tool to as many people as possible, fool around and find out. Just try it". Progress comes through organic, locally-driven practice rather than mandated systemic change.

> "Our bodies happen in relationships. We won't be healthy as people in societies unless we recognise this and accommodate for it"

Personal Experience as Professional Insight

Mulligan's conviction stems partly from lived experience that illuminates the gap between institutional and community-based care. When her daughter required extended hospitalization for a severe brain infection, she witnessed the difference between purely clinical treatment and environments designed for holistic wellbeing. The rehabilitation hospital provided family support, pet visits, gardens, in-hospital schooling, and "a whiteboard on her wall that asked directly what matters to me" - elements that "made life worth living again".

The challenge emerged upon discharge: "When she left that hospital and came back home, we had trouble again trying to get all those services in the community. They just don't exist in the community in the same way". This experience reinforced her commitment to making community-based connection resources as accessible as clinical care - a goal that requires fundamental changes in how cities approach social infrastructure.

A Call for Relational Urbanism

Mulligan's final message challenges fundamental assumptions about urban development and human health: "Our bodies happen in relationships. We won't be healthy as people in societies unless we recognise this and accommodate for it". Her call to action asks individuals, planners, and policymakers to identify "what does that mean for you? What matters to you in your community and how can you help act on that?"

Her work represents more than incremental reform - it's a fundamental reconceptualization of urban planning that treats social connection as essential infrastructure. By demonstrating that loneliness has measurable health and economic impacts, and that spatial interventions can produce measurable improvements in community wellbeing, Mulligan provides urban planners with both the rationale and the methodology for designing cities that don't merely house people efficiently, but actively cultivate the relationships that make urban life meaningful.

In an era when cities worldwide grapple with rising mental health challenges and social fragmentation, Mulligan's framework offers a path forward that honors both individual agency and collective well-being. Her message is both simple and profound: the future of healthy cities lies not in choosing between proximity and connection, but in designing spaces that transform proximity into genuine belonging.

↓ Photo: Droneography, The Bentway, courtesy of The Bentway

Housing & Belonging: New Living Models as Social Infrastructure

Modern housing markets excel at delivering square meters but sometimes fail at fostering connection - leaving residents with places to sleep but not communities to call home. In Copenhagen, Jack Renteria embeds belonging directly into housing design through co-living developments where micro-units cluster around vibrant communal spaces, and community managers spark the relationships that transform strangers into neighbors. Vancouver's Michelle Hoar activates existing high-rise towers as "vertical communities," using policy interventions that boost resident participation by 40 percent. Meanwhile, Toronto's Gil Penalosa champions intergenerational public spaces designed equally for eight-year-olds and eighty-year-olds, proving that connection flourishes when cities intentionally weave different generations together. Yet these approaches raise competing visions: Should cities prioritize programming community through professional management and organized activities, or create the conditions for organic relationships to emerge naturally? What balance between designed interaction and authentic spontaneity will actually help urban dwellers find their tribe?

INTERVIEWS:

Gil Penalosa: When Cities Separate Generations, More Gets Lonely
Michelle Hoar: Building a Vertical Community Floor by Floor
Jack Renteria: Co-Living, Intergenerational Sites and Instant Friends

When Cities Separate Generations, More Gets Lonely

The Colombian-Canadian urbanist behind 8 80 Cities, a design philosophy ensuring that if urban spaces work for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old, they work for everyone, reveals why intergenerational design is the key to addressing urban loneliness.

PROFILE:

Gil Guillermo Penalosa *has spent over three decades proving that cities can be transformed through human-centered design principles that prioritize social connection over economic efficiency. Born in Colombia, he served as Parks Commissioner for Bogotá during the late 1990s and early 2000s, pioneering changes to the city's public spaces and creating the world-renowned Ciclovía program, 121 kilometers of car-free streets that attract 1.5 million participants every Sunday. Now based in Toronto, Canada, Penalosa founded 8 80 Cities, a non-profit organization that has consulted with over 300 cities across six continents, promoting his signature philosophy that cities working for 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds work for everyone.*

Gil Penalosa on:

The Paradox of Proximity

One of the most powerful insights from Penalosa's decades of urban transformation work emerges in his explanation of how cities create loneliness despite density: "Many people who are dying of heart attack, it's not because of heart attack - it was because of loneliness" he observes, fundamentally reframing how he as an urban professional understands responsibility for community wellbeing.

This paradox, feeling isolated while surrounded by millions, demands intergenerational solutions. "If you design for the most vulnerable, children and the elderly, you create cities that work for everyone. When generations are separated, everyone suffers," Penalosa explains, articulating his core philosophy that age-inclusive design serves as the antidote to urban loneliness.

Research validates this core insight: loneliness increases mortality risk by 26-29% -comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes daily - according to Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad's landmark 2010 meta-analysis of 148 studies involving over 300,000 participants[1].

The solution, according to Penalosa, lies in systematic integration rather than age-specific programming. "When you design a bench, think about the eight-year-old whose legs don't reach the ground and the eighty-year-old who needs back support. When you design a pathway, think about the child learning to walk and the elder using a walker. When both can use the space comfortably, everyone benefits," Penalosa explains, articulating how intergenerational design serves universal needs.

1 Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10(2), 227-237

How Cities Manufacture Loneliness

“When someone says they’re lonely, don’t look at them - look at their neighborhood. Look at whether there are places to sit, places to meet, reasons to be outside. The problem isn’t personal, it’s spatial”

When Gil Penalosa asks city officials to consider their public spaces through the lens of an eight-year-old or an eighty-year-old, the response often reveals profound disconnection from community needs.
“We must stop building cities as if everyone is 30 years old,” he frequently tells planning departments worldwide, challenging the assumption that vibrant urban life emerges automatically from economic development.
But who exactly is making these decisions that prioritize the needs of working-age adults while systematically excluding children and elderly residents from urban design considerations?

Penalosa’s approach recognizes loneliness as a systemic consequence of spatial decisions rather than an individual condition
“When someone says they’re lonely, don’t look at them - look at their neighborhood. Look at whether there are places to sit, places to meet, reasons to be outside. The problem isn’t personal, it’s spatial,” he emphasizes.
It shows that satisfaction with dwelling quality, neighborhood amenities, and the usability of the built environment significantly reduces loneliness, while poor housing conditions and inadequate public spaces and infrastructure intensify feelings of loneliness.

Programs, Programs, Programs

Penalosa’s most insistent message to cities worldwide centers on a simple refrain: “Programs, programs, programs.”
This emphasis addresses what he identifies as the fundamental gap in contemporary urban development; cities invest billions in physical infrastructure while neglecting the social programming necessary to activate spaces.

“Cities build amazing infrastructure, buildings, paths, parks, but then wonder why people don’t use them. You need programs to bring infrastructure to life,” Penalosa explains, highlighting the critical distinction between hardware and software in urban development.
His transformation of Bogotá’s Ciclovía exemplifies this philosophy: every Sunday, 1.5 million residents participate in walking, cycling, and socializing along 121 kilometers of car-free streets.

Penalosa’s distinction between physical infrastructure (hardware) and social programming (software) addresses a critical gap in contemporary urban development practice. “ We invest in hardware but forget the software. It’s like buying a computer and never installing any programs - technically functional but practically useless,” he emphasizes, challenging conventional project approaches that focus on completion rather than activation.

The programming approach proves particularly crucial for intergenerational connection. “When you program a space for children only, you get children. When you

program it for seniors only, you get seniors. But when you create programming that brings generations together - gardening, storytelling, skill-sharing - you get community," he observes.

His approach emphasizes continuity over intensity. "It's not about big events once a year. It's about small activities happening regularly, consistently, creating reasons for people to encounter each other week after week, month after month," he observes, recognizing that sustainable social change emerges from accumulated small improvements rather than dramatic interventions.

"When you program a space for children only, you get children. When you program it for seniors only, you get seniors. But when you create programming that brings generations together - gardening, storytelling, skill-sharing - you get community"

↓ Photo: Rasmus Hjortshøj, Visit Copenhagen

What Makes Generations Connect?

Yet the push for intergenerational design faces complex realities that resist simple solutions. Consider Toronto's innovative Parkdale Community Hub[1], which attempted to blend senior programming with youth activities under one roof. While successful in many ways, staff discovered that different generations often preferred different music volumes, temperature settings, and activity schedules - creating tensions that required careful mediation rather than natural harmony.

These examples illuminate the nuanced challenges facing planners who embrace Penalosa's vision. Dr. Ruth Finkelstein[2], director of Columbia University's Age-friendly NYC initiative, notes that "proximity doesn't automatically create connection." Her research on successful intergenerational programs identifies specific conditions necessary for meaningful cross-age relationships: shared goals, complementary skills, and structured interaction opportunities that feel natural rather than forced.

Contemporary research reveals additional complexity in intergenerational social infrastructure. A longitudinal study from the Netherlands[3] found that while intergenerational housing projects reduced loneliness among elderly residents, younger participants often reported feeling burdened by informal caregiving expectations that emerged organically within these communities. The study suggests that successful intergenerational design requires clear boundaries and expectations rather than assuming that positive outcomes emerge automatically from age mixing.

1 CultureLink Settlement and Community Services - Parkdale Community Information Connection. (2024). Program description. Toronto.

2 Finkelstein, R. (2022). "Boomer Cities" Can Work for Everyone. Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

3 De Jong Gierveld, J., et al. (2019). Senior Co-Housing in the Netherlands: Benefits and Drawbacks for Social Wellbeing. Health & Social Care in the Community.

How our Senses Shape Belonging

Penalosa's approach to intergenerational design implicitly recognizes what is now identified as crucial: successful parks and public spaces that encourage interaction across age groups must integrate design elements, landscapes, and programming that respond to the cultural needs of intended users through multisensory experiences. Meaningful community spaces depend on understanding the cultural layers each generation brings, since sounds, textures, scents, and visual patterns trigger different memories and preferences that must be balanced to avoid alienating anyone.

The multisensory approach proves particularly crucial in multicultural urban environments. Montreal's Parc Extension, one of Canada's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, struggled for years with underutilized public spaces despite significant investment in traditional playground and seating infrastructure. Success came only when the city partnered with local cultural associations to integrate sensory elements reflecting the area's South Asian, Caribbean, and North African communities: spice gardens whose scents evoke homeland memories for elderly immigrants, musical installations incorporating traditional instruments, and tactile play elements reflecting diverse cultural approaches to child development.

Yet this cultural responsiveness creates new challenges for Penalosa's universal 8-80 design philosophy. What works for eight-year-olds and eighty-year-olds in one cultural context may fail completely in another. Research from London's Tower Hamlets borough reveals how a single park can simultaneously succeed and fail at intergenerational connection depending on which cultural lens examines the outcomes. The park's water features and musical installations successfully brought together Bangladeshi families across generations, but remained largely unused by the area's growing Somali community, whose cultural practices around public space and intergenerational interaction differed significantly.

This complexity suggests that Penalosa's approach requires cultural adaptation rather than universal application. "The principle is universal - design for the most vulnerable," he explains, "but the expression must be local. What makes an eight-year-old or eighty-year-old feel welcome varies enormously based on their cultural background, their family structures, their relationship to public space."

The sensory dimension proves particularly important for addressing loneliness across cultural lines. A study of intergenerational programming in Melbourne's multicultural suburbs found that activities engaging multiple senses - cooking classes where participants prepare traditional foods, garden programs growing culturally significant plants, music programs incorporating traditional instruments - generated stronger cross-cultural connections than purely visual or activity-based programming.

However, the multisensory approach also risks cultural tokenism if implemented superficially. Toronto's attempt to create "multicultural sensory gardens" in several parks initially failed when planners selected plants and design elements based on stereotypical assumptions about different ethnic communities rather than genuine community engagement. Success came only after extensive consultation revealed that many community members, particularly younger generations, preferred hybrid approaches that acknowledged their multicultural identities rather than essentializing their cultural backgrounds.

This nuanced understanding of cultural responsiveness in intergenerational design suggests that Penalosa's philosophy requires constant adaptation to local contexts. The 8-80 principle provides a framework, but successful implementation demands deep community engagement to understand how different cultural groups across generations experience and use public space. As urban populations become increasingly diverse, this cultural competency in intergenerational design becomes not just beneficial but essential for creating truly inclusive communities that address loneliness across cultural and generational lines.

"The principle is universal - design for the most vulnerable," he explains, "but the expression must be local. What makes an eight-year-old or eighty-year-old feel welcome varies enormously based on their cultural background, their family structures, their relationship to public space"

Why Cheap Solutions Often Work Best

Penalosa advocates for solutions that are "often cheap" but require political courage to implement systematically. "Opening schools on weekends for intergenerational programming, improving pedestrian infrastructure that serves all ages, creating public spaces that bring generations together - these cost much less than traditional infrastructure projects but generate superior social outcomes," he explains, challenging conventional thinking that equates expensive interventions with effective outcomes.

This emphasis on low-cost, high-impact interventions reflects deeper understanding of how social infrastructure operates differently from traditional urban development. While cities sometimes routinely approve multi-million euro highway expansions or convention center projects, they often hesitate at modest investments in community programming that could transform existing facilities into vibrant intergenerational gathering places.

The counterintuitive economics of social connection reveal why expensive infrastructure alone rarely addresses loneliness effectively. A €50 million community center sitting empty most evenings generates less social capital than a €50,000 programming budget that activates existing school gymnasiums, libraries, and parks with regular intergenerational activities. The hardware exists in most neighborhoods - what's missing is the relatively inexpensive software that brings people together across age lines.

Research supports Penalosa's emphasis on modest, sustained investments over spectacular one-time projects. The Toronto example of weekend school programming demonstrates this principle: a $30,000 annual investment in staffing and materials can transform an underutilized building into a community hub serving hundreds of residents across generations.

The economic argument becomes more compelling when cities calculate the healthcare cost savings generated by reduced loneliness and increased social connection. Emergency room visits, mental health services, and chronic disease management costs decrease measurably in neighborhoods with strong intergenerational programming, often exceeding the modest programming investments within two to three years. However, these savings accrue to different budget lines than the departments making programming decisions, creating institutional barriers to adopting cost-effective approaches.

The Power is in the Microinteractions

Penalosa's understanding of community wellbeing emphasizes everyday social encounters - brief conversations between neighbors, spontaneous play between children and adults, intergenerational assistance with daily tasks. "It's the small daily interactions that build community resilience," he observes, recognizing that these "microinteractions" accumulate over time to create social fabric while requiring minimal institutional support.

"People think community building requires big programs and major events. But really, it's about creating conditions where a grandmother can naturally help a young mother, where children can play while elderly residents watch and interact, where neighbors meet while walking to the store," he explains, emphasizing the importance of designing for spontaneous social connection.

Urban design professionals possess significant power to shape these microinteraction opportunities through practical interventions. "Wide sidewalks, good lighting, comfortable benches positioned for conversation - these simple changes create the conditions for spontaneous social connection," Penalosa explains, emphasizing the relationship between physical design and social outcomes.

The challenge involves balancing different generational needs within shared spaces through incremental improvements rather than comprehensive redesign projects. "You don't need to rebuild everything. You need to adjust, to fine-tune, to create small opportunities for connection that accumulate over time into stronger community bonds," Penalosa advises.

"People think community building requires big programs and major events. But really, it's about creating conditions where a grandmother can naturally help a young mother, where children can play while elderly residents watch and interact, where neighbors meet while walking to the store"

The Politics of Walking and Cycling

When mayors model healthy behavior, cities follow - but institutional change requires more than personal example.

Penalosa's emphasis on political leadership reflects understanding that successful urban health interventions require committed leadership willing to prioritize intergenerational community well-being over conventional development metrics.

"Leadership isn't about policies and proclamations. It's about behavior. When a mayor walks to work, cycles to meetings, spends time in public spaces, citizens see that these activities matter. When leaders model community engagement, communities respond," he explains, recognizing the powerful influence of visible leadership on community norms.

Also, the "cheap" urban design solutions Penalosa advocates require something often more scarce than money: sustained political commitment. Cutting ribbon on new buildings generates media coverage and voter recognition, while quietly funding ongoing programming lacks visual impact despite superior social outcomes. This political challenge explains why many cities continue investing in expensive infrastructure while neglecting the programming necessary to activate existing spaces for intergenerational connection, according to Penalosa.

"I love bottom up. But the reality is that you need some top down to make it happen," Penalosa observes, emphasizing that sustainable change emerges from coordinated efforts across community and institutional levels. Grassroots initiatives require institutional support, while institutional changes require community engagement to succeed and sustain over time.

Consider the contrasting approaches of Copenhagen and Amsterdam to cycling infrastructure development. Both cities now boast world-class cycling networks, but their paths differed significantly. Copenhagen's transformation relied heavily on consistent political leadership across multiple administrations, with mayors and city councils maintaining cycling priorities through changing political coalitions. Amsterdam's approach involved more grassroots activism and citizen pressure, with political leaders responding to rather than leading community demands for cycling infrastructure.

"So we need to talk with the leaders, we need to change the mind of the leaders," Penalosa emphasizes, recognizing that institutional transformation requires cultural shifts beginning with visible leadership commitment to community values.

Building a Vertical Community
Floor by Floor

A Canadian Project Director champions "vertical community" over anonymous towers - transforming multi-unit housing policy to prioritize neighborly connection in cities where people live close but remain strangers.

PROFILE:

Michelle Hoar *serves as* **Project Director of the Hey Neighbour Collective and Fellow at Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.** *Her background as co-founder of The Tyee, one of Canada's leading independent media organizations, informs her systems-focused approach to complex urban challenges. She regularly presents her work at international conferences on housing policy, community development, and urban resilience.*

Michelle Hoar on:

The Paradox of Proximity

The phone calls started coming to City Hall around 2018. Housing developers wondered why their new towers sat partially vacant. Health officials noticed upticks in emergency calls from high-rise buildings. Community center directors reported declining participation despite growing populations. Few connected these dots until Michelle Hoar and her colleagues began convening the unlikely conversations that would change how Vancouver thinks about urban living.

Traditional urban governance operates through institutional silos that fragment responses to complex, interconnected challenges. "The Hey Neighbour Collective is what's called a collective impact project," Hoar explains from her workspace, pointing to whiteboards covered in policy flowcharts and resident feedback loops. It's a framework that brings housing providers, health authorities, researchers, and residents into sustained partnerships around shared outcomes rather than departmental mandates.

The approach emerged from recognizing that loneliness in multi-unit housing requires coordinated intervention across sectors that rarely talk to each other. Housing departments focus on unit counts. Health agencies track disease patterns. Community groups plan programming. None were equipped to address the growing epidemic of neighbors who live inches apart but remain strangers.

The analytical significance extends far beyond loneliness prevention. As cities confront climate adaptation, demographic transition, and economic volatility, challenges increasingly span traditional governance boundaries. Hey Neighbour's methods demonstrate how sustained cross-sector coordination can produce systemic change impossible through isolated interventions.

Six years later, the evidence speaks clearly. Pilot buildings implementing social connection programming report 40% higher resident participation in community activities and measurably stronger social support networks - outcomes with implications that ripple through everything from emergency response capacity to civic engagement levels.

Who's in Your Emergency Toolkit

Michelle frames Hey Neighbour Collective's methodology around a deceptively simple revelation, borrowed from partner organization Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: "It's more about who's in your emergency toolkit, not what's in your emergency toolkit." This philosophy underpins what she describes as collective impact - bringing together organizations that came together six years ago now out of a concern about loneliness. Hey Neighbour Collective operates not as a traditional organization but as what Michelle calls "an initiative" that creates spaces for housing providers, health authorities, researchers, and residents to collaborate around shared outcomes. "We create spaces where people can step away from their desks and daily tasks to engage directly with colleagues in other departments or across cities" she explains, identifying bureaucratic silos as the primary obstacle to addressing urban loneliness systematically.

Partner programs like "Connect and Prepare" exemplify this philosophy - bringing neighbors together around emergency preparedness that focuses less on supplies than on relationships: "getting to know your neighbours better and planning together for crises." When the west coast of Canada and the US experienced a heat dome emergency, buildings with active social programming reported significantly better outcomes, with residents checking on vulnerable neighbors and coordinating cooling resources organically.

"We create spaces where people can step away from their desks and daily tasks to engage directly with colleagues in other departments or across cities"

Vertical Communities

The numbers tell a striking story about urban Canada's future: multi-unit housing now accommodates the majority of new households, transforming cities from collections of single-family homes into forests of apartment towers. But Michelle argues we're building this vertical future without understanding how to make it optimally livable.

"We're moving into this reality where multi-unit housing is becoming the dominant form for many - if not most - households," she observes, describing a demographic shift that urban planners are struggling to address. The transition isn't just about housing supply; it's about fundamentally reimagining what community looks like when hundreds of families share a single building address.

Michelle identifies the core challenge: "Proximity does not equal sociability." Traditional neighborhood planning assumed that people living close together would naturally form connections through front porches, shared yards, and casual street encounters. Vertical housing eliminates these organic connection points, replacing them with anonymous elevators and sterile corridors that discourage rather than enable social interaction.

The psychological impact proves profound. Research Michelle cites shows that "weak ties"—those familiar neighbors whose names you might not know but who make you feel "seen"—are "really important for our social well-being because they make us feel welcome, they make us feel like we belong." But apartment living often prevents these ties from forming through what she calls "forced proximity" in elevators and hallways where "people feel awkward" because "they're not choosing that proximity."

Hey Neighbour's vertical community vision addresses this disconnect through intentional design and programming. "We make it very hard to do the natural thing, but multi-unit housing isn't inherently isolating" she notes, describing how simple design changes - wider hallways, comfortable seating areas, well-lit mail rooms - can transform anonymous buildings into welcoming, functioning neighborhoods. The goal isn't forcing interaction but creating choices: spaces where residents can engage socially when they want to while maintaining privacy when they need it.

Early results from pilot buildings in British Columbia, Canada demonstrate the potential. Multi-unit housing communities implementing community building principles report higher resident retention, lower management conflicts, and stronger emergency response networks. During the pandemic, socially connected buildings showed dramatically better outcomes, with neighbors organizing grocery delivery, childcare support, and wellness checks without formal coordination.

"For people to feel safe to engage socially, they have to feel like they're choosing it. They can't feel like they're being forced into it"

Casual Encounters as Infrastructure

Hey Neighbour's approach to urban planning operates on a fundamental insight: "Everything in a building can be designed to work better with our neurobiology." This philosophy extends far beyond traditional "amenity spaces" to encompass what she calls the building's "social system" - treating connection infrastructure with the same systematic attention cities give to energy or ventilation systems.

Building on years of partnership work with consultancy Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour's specific recommendations for planners challenge conventional practice at every level. For building circulation, Michelle advocates for "wider hallways that are well lit" with "light at the end of a hallway" and "landing spaces with seating" that create "transition moments and transition spaces" between private and social zones. "You wouldn't want to leave your apartment and immediately be in a social space," she explains, "but a wide hallway with light - you might not host a party there, but you're gonna feel more safe and welcome to talk to your neighbour for a few minutes."

The mail room becomes a case study in missed opportunities. Instead of "dark, dangerous corners," Michelle recommends locating mail areas with visual connections to welcoming lobby spaces, ensuring residents feel safe while creating natural gathering points where "you might say hello to people and feel safe."

For common spaces, her guidance is specific: locate amenities where residents will naturally encounter them, not "in the least marketable part of the building" with doors "locked most of the time" requiring fees to access. "If you're walking into a building, instead of going straight to the elevator in a very pristine but not inviting or welcoming lounge," she suggests creating spaces with "a reason to stop, comfortable places to sit, good lighting" that connect visually to other building functions.

Michelle emphasizes co-location as a design principle: "locate different functions of a building together so that you're maximising the potential" for encounter. This might mean positioning community rooms near building entrances, connecting laundry facilities to social spaces, or ensuring children's play areas are visible to create opportunities for parent interaction.

Her recommendations extend to outdoor spaces as well. Community gardens become not just sources of food but "regular gathering points." Children's play areas should be "positioned to encourage parent interaction." Seating arrangements should "create opportunities for casual conversation without forcing unwanted social engagement."

The overarching principle is choice and safety: "For people to feel safe to engage socially, they have to feel like they're choosing it. They can't feel like they're being forced into it." This means creating what she calls "transition moments" that help people move gradually from private to social spaces, always providing options for privacy and retreat.

Designing Belonging Into the Rulebook

One of Hey Neighbour Collective's contributions is a systematic approach to changing how cities regulate and incentivize social connection through policy. "We're trying to work with local governments to shift their policies so that they are guiding and incentivizing this kind of design," she explains, describing a coordinated effort to embed social outcomes into the mechanical systems of municipal governance.

Policy recommendations operate at multiple scales. For instance, she advocates for requirements that go beyond traditional "amenity space" mandates to specify location, accessibility, and programming potential. "Planners don't really say much about what that party room needs to be like, or where it needs to be in the building," she notes, describing how developers often satisfy requirements by placing community spaces "in the least marketable part of the building" where they remain underused.

Instead, Michelle recommends design guidance and/or incentives that require community spaces to be easily accessible, well-lit, and connected to other building functions. Fee structures put in place by property managers should make spaces affordable to use, and programming should be encouraged through ongoing operations requirements, not just construction mandates.

For development incentives, possible policy approaches can be very specific: offer density bonuses and FSR exemptions for buildings that include measurable social infrastructure. But rather than generic "community space" requirements, she advocates for guidelines that specify design principles supporting social connection: sight lines that create safety, circulation patterns that encourage encounter, and outdoor spaces designed for informal gathering.

Michelle also emphasizes the need for cross-departmental policy coordination. "If you try to tell the Ministry of Health to fund a programme in housing, they tell you it's housing. If you tell the Ministry of Housing to fund a programme that's going to help people's well-being, they tell you that's health," she describes, identifying bureaucratic silos as obstacles to comprehensive policy innovation.

Her solution involves creating formal mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration: joint funding streams, shared evaluation criteria, and coordinated policy development processes that treat social connection as infrastructure requiring systematic government attention rather than departmental afterthought.

> "If you keep moving through a community without putting down roots or building relationships, you never develop a sense of belonging—or agency"

"Security of Tenure" as Social Infrastructure

Behind Vancouver's gleaming towers lies a hidden dilemma that Michelle identifies as the fundamental barrier to community formation: housing insecurity. British Columbia's status as "the eviction capital of Canada" systematically prevents the relationship-building that makes vertical communities possible.

"The foundational piece is actually affordability and security," she emphasizes, describing how practices like "renovictions" and "demo evictions" scatter communities faster than programming can rebuild them. When residents face constant displacement, "you don't have time to put down the roots and build those weak ties or those serendipitous encounters that make you feel like you belong."

Michelle links housing stability directly to civic engagement: " If you keep moving through a community without putting down roots or building relationships, you never develop a sense of belonging—or agency. You don't vote in local elections because you hardly know what's happening, and you assume you'll be leaving again within a year"

Her policy recommendations begin with tenant protection: stronger eviction controls, security of tenure guarantees, and affordable housing preservation that prevents displacement-driven community fragmentation. "Without security of tenure, it doesn't really matter if the building is perfectly designed," she argues, identifying housing stability as prerequisite to social connection.

Designing for Human Biology

Hoar emphasizes that our built environments should ease the brain's natural wiring for safety, social engagement, and comfort. Neurobiological research shows that exposure to natural light regulates circadian rhythms and releases serotonin, helping residents feel more alert and positive when they encounter one another. Bright, well-lit hallways punctuated with occasional benches give people subtle cues that it's safe to pause and exchange a greeting, activating the brain's reward circuits through small social interactions.

Similarly, locating mail areas within sightlines of active lobby spaces taps into our instinct for visual monitoring: when we can see and be seen, the amygdala's threat response diminishes, lowering anxiety and making casual conversation feel less intimidating. Positioning common rooms where foot traffic is heaviest - rather than tucked behind locked doors - leverages the brain's mirror neuron systems, which respond to others' presence and purpose. Watching someone else use a lounge or kitchen space triggers our own motivation to join in.

Outdoor community gardens and play areas are equally powerful. Studies of biophilia reveal that engaging with green spaces reduces cortisol and fosters restorative attention - so parents lingering by a garden or playground not only relax but remain open to spontaneous neighborly chat. Hey Neighbour Collective's guidelines – developed through a multi-year partnership with Happy Cities - translate these insights into architecture: by designing spaces that align with our neurobiology, buildings themselves become social tools that gently guide residents toward connection.

Michelle draws on the ideas about "weak ties" - the familiar neighbors whose names you might not know but who "make us feel seen." These connections are "really important for our social well-being because they make us feel welcome, they make us feel like we belong," even though "it's not a person you're gonna call in a crisis."

This insight drives her focus on what creates belonging versus mere fitting in. "All of these little connections make you feel like you belong in a community," she explains, "and feeling belonging is deeply important for our nervous system and for our sensibility because it makes you feel safe."

The neurobiological foundation influences design decisions: spaces need to feel safe before they can foster connection. "There's all sorts of research around what makes us feel

safe," Michelle notes, "but we don't use much of that knowledge in residential building design."

Her approach integrates safety research into community building - lighting that creates visibility without harshness, sight lines that allow people to see and be seen, and gathering spaces that feel protected rather than isolated. The result is environments where residents' nervous systems can relax to engage socially.

Challenging the Independence Culture

"Humans are not independent—we are interdependent. Our healthiest state comes from being connected: having trusted relationships we can turn to for help, and being trusted enough that others turn to us in return"

Perhaps Michelle's most insightful address is the cultural foundations of urban loneliness. She identifies "this deep, deep mindset and myth that actually our greatest goal as humans is independence."

She challenges this fundamental assumption"Humans are not independent—we are interdependent. Our healthiest state comes from being connected: having trusted relationships we can turn to for help, and being trusted enough that others turn to us in return"

In much of Western culture, independence is often celebrated as a sign of strength and maturity. Yet this emphasis can sometimes overshadow our equally important need for connection and trust, which are just as essential to human well-being.

Despite the weight of systemic obstacles, Michelle's outlook remains rooted in optimism. For her, hope emerges through practice: doing the work itself, and witnessing how people respond when given genuine opportunities to collaborate. She observes that many want to contribute positively, yet often struggle against entrenched systems and mindsets that make progress difficult. What sustains her approach is the belief that even serious challenges can be met with joy and authenticity. In Hey Neighbour gatherings, she and her colleagues deliberately create space for people to show up as full human beings, not only as professionals—making connection, trust, and shared experience central to the process.

Looking ahead, she sees growing possibilities for transformation. Existing policies and systems may not yet fully support the vision, but she notes that the cracks are widening and light is beginning to break through.

Co-Living, Intergenerational Sites, and Instant Friends

When real estate professional Jack Renteria moved to Denmark to live, he suddenly experienced what a life with little social contact was like. More than a decade later, he is one of Europe's leading proponents for reorienting housing towards a model that can address urban loneliness right at home.

PROFILE:

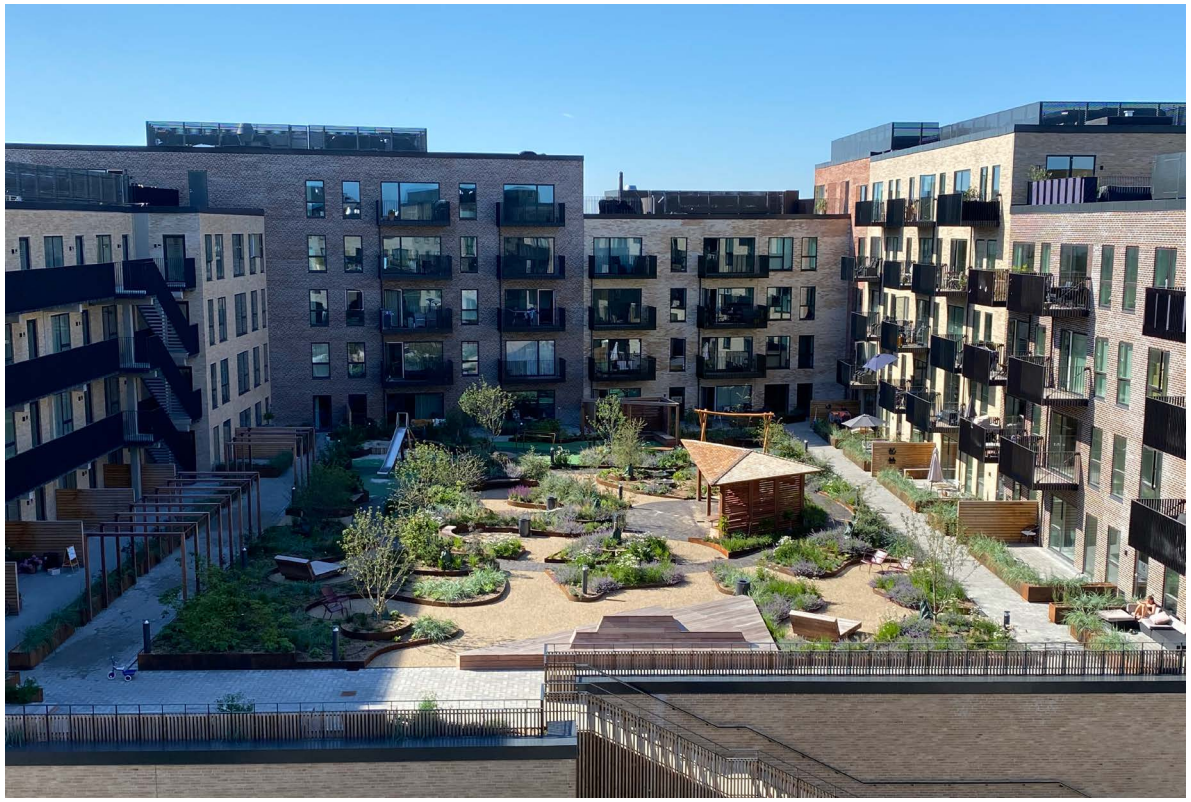
Jack Renteria *is a* **Canadian-Danish real-estate leader and innovator**, *currently serving as Chair of ULI Denmark and is a Board member of BLOXHUB. He is also the co-founder and former Co-Chair of the ULI Europe New Living Concepts Product Council. He leads his own consultancy, Generation Global, focusing on new living concepts, sustainability, and international development. He is formerly Director of Living Concepts at ALFA Development, where he led the "Living by ALFA" brand — a serviced, intergenerational build-to-rent housing concept expanding through Denmark (and beyond). Before that, Jack spent 11 years at the architecture practice 3XN as Partner & Director of Business Development, helping the firm enter global markets and negotiate major projects. Jack holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Waterloo and a Master's in International Business from the Norwegian School of Economics.*

Jack Renteria on:

The Paradox of Proximity

Behind Copenhagen's charming brick facades and cozy courtyards, where millions live within arm's reach of each other, Jack Renteria sees the paradox of modern isolation playing out. "Some of the loneliest people are actually in cities," he reflects, recognizing that proximity alone has never guaranteed connection – and that our conception of home has become diminished. What was once understood as the foundation of belonging has now sometimes been reduced to mere shelter, leaving urban dwellers surrounded by potential community yet profoundly alone.

Renteria's reimagining of home emerges from witnessing transformation in the spaces between isolation and belonging. For him, the challenge is to redefine home itself – not merely as private retreat but also as intentional emotional architecture where loneliness dissolves into connection. His solution points to the deliberate cultivation of community as a way to restore belonging.



The Solitude of a Mobile Generation

Relocating to a distant location on your own can be a supremely lonely experience for anyone. Far from family, childhood friends, networks and familiar culture, the paradox of proximity becomes acutely present for the sole expat or immigrant.

This experience inspired Canadian national Jack Renteria to realign his career and focus on a growing trend in housing — co-living — after hearing about the concept at a conference in 2017:

"it was basically, housing, micro housing, for young professionals. It wasn't for students, it was for others, and I instinctively thought of it as young professionals. And it was characterized by smaller units, but with common spaces, services, amenities. And from that moment I started really thinking about how important that would have been for me when I moved to Denmark 16 years ago".

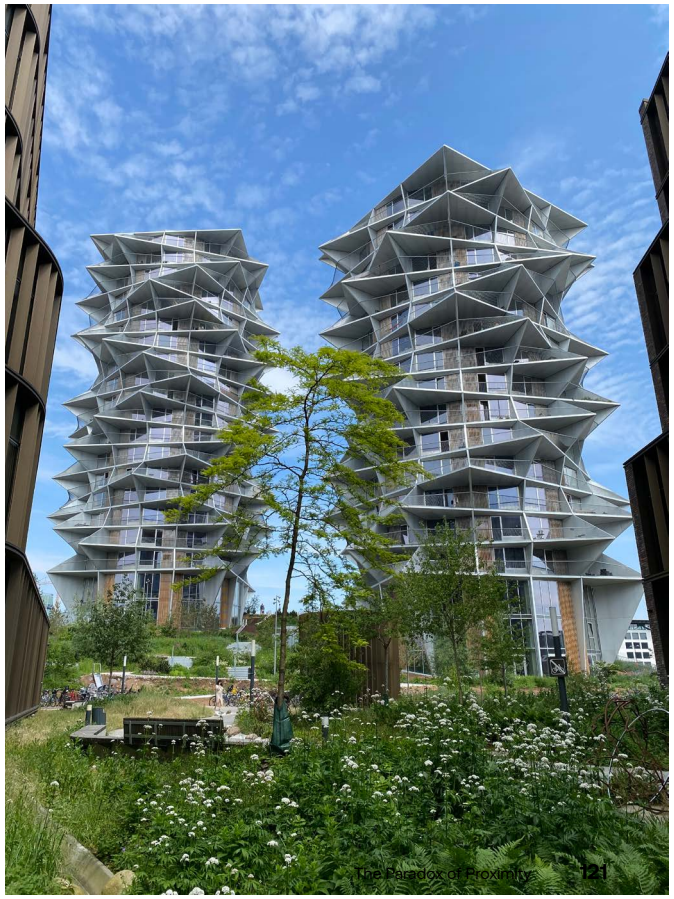
As the global workforce has become more mobile in recent decades, the social structures of major cities have shifted. Copenhagen, for example, has seen a significant increase in foreign residents. Between 2012 and 2022, the number of foreign workers in the city more than doubled, to about 107,000. This created a market for alternatives to existing housing options for Internationals, which had largely been limited to expensive single rooms in private homes or costly rental apartments requiring hefty deposits.

Demand in the Nordic countries for new living concepts is also driven by demographic factors: people live longer, stay young longer, and start families later. Affordability challenges make it difficult for younger residents to find housing in major cities, and the share of single-person households is growing — in Copenhagen, 44% of households are single-resident. Younger generations are also less focused on ownership. As Renteria observes: "They're looking for a rental situation which is affordable, which is flexible..."

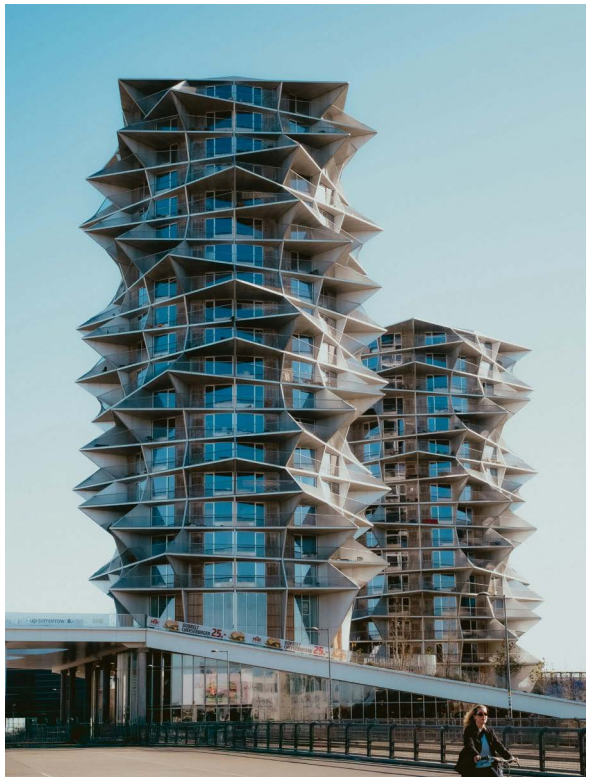
But the most compelling driver of these new living models may be urban loneliness, which Renteria sees as exacerbated by technology and social media:

"When I moved here in 2009, I rented a 67-square-meter apartment in Frederiksberg from a friend. I worked long hours, came home, and often didn't have weekend plans. That was a kind of loneliness, but I stayed busy. Today, people can silo themselves even more — with Netflix, with their phones — and live very isolated lives.

"Today, people can silo themselves even more — with Netflix, with their phones — and live very isolated lives"



Redefining the Concept of Home



The central tenet of co-living is “sleep in the room — live in the building.” Instead of the familiar family-sized apartment typologies with all amenities inside the private home, co-living units are small, offering privacy and comfort but placing kitchens, exercise rooms, and recreational spaces in shared, communal areas.

This layout is not entirely new and resembles many student housing models. But the relevant demographic groups have expanded, and co-living has become more sophisticated. In recent years, residents outside the traditional student age group have turned to co-living, not least for the social value it provides in cities where social connectedness is scarce. Real estate companies have also taken notice, recognizing a market opportunity in building not just housing, but community.

Co-living allows residents to move into more than just a building — they move into a social network. Renteria has witnessed firsthand how this process can transform lives. He recalls one elderly woman who moved into his co-living development:

“I remember an elderly woman moving into one of our projects, supported by her two kids as she entered her new apartment. A few weeks later, I saw her heading to the lounge with a backpack and a new friend: ‘Hi, we’re just going for a walk.’ She found purpose and meaning again — things to do in her day. That was dramatic.”

Supporting a Community with Human Care and Technology

Developing a successful co-living project for multiple demographic groups requires innovative architecture and interior design. Micro living needs to be both comfortable and ensure that human needs of privacy are supported, to be able to compete with regular rental apartments. At the same time, the communal spaces must be designed to be attractive and inviting for the residents. Not just to use individually, but also together with other residents - or visiting friends.

Developing a successful co-living project for multiple demographic groups requires innovative architecture and interior design. Micro-units must be comfortable and provide sufficient privacy to compete with conventional apartments, while communal spaces must be attractive and inviting — not just for individual use but for shared experiences and visiting friends.

Physical design alone, however, is not enough. Social “programming” is equally critical. An effective community manager has a central role in onboarding all new residents, learning about their interests, and organizing shared activities. Renteria observed in his project at Kaktus Towers that many residents were naturally shy or hesitant:

“When there was an activity — a dance, for example — residents would just poke their head in. The community manager was excellent at encouraging them: ‘Come on — you’re part of this.’ That small nudge made all the difference.”

One of the key lessons from these projects is that community-building cannot be one-size-fits-all. Each development must be tailored to its residents, based on careful analysis of their needs and expectations. In fact, the conceptual development should be based on the characteristics of the residents who will live there. As Renteria puts it:

“We try to design programming that creates a healthy environment for the people who live there. And the first step is deciding who we want to live in the building. It has to start with the residents.”

This approach stands in contrast to much of Europe's investor-driven real estate development, which often prioritizes financial returns over resident experience. Co-living repositions housing as a service offering, putting residents at the center — much like the hotel industry — and emphasizing amenities, operations, and social value. Therefore, co-living is also part of a larger trend sometimes labelled the 'hotelization' of real estate, in which developers and real estate companies offer 'living as a service' by including operating services such as a community manager as part of the value proposition.

Technology, though often blamed for increasing isolation, is also a crucial enabler of co-living. Intuitive apps that allow residents to organize events, share resources, and communicate can act as a virtual backbone for the community. The goal, however, is to facilitate in-person relationships rather than replace them.

The Building and the City - Scaling the Community Model

Expanding co-living beyond student housing shows great potential for addressing urban challenges such as loneliness, affordability, and sustainability. But can it become a mainstream housing typology rather than an exotic niche solution for expats?

Renteria acknowledges that most families with children will still prefer the privacy and space of traditional housing. Co-living tends to attract people in transition such as expats and young professionals, and in fact co-living redefines the concept of home as something more impermanent and transitional. At the same time the projects he has been part of such as "Living by Alfa' have been intergenerational and included a diverse group of residents.

One group also experiencing transition is what Renteria calls "downsizing seniors," who may be grieving the loss of a spouse or the family home but are open to making new friends, despite having lived a whole life with networks, family and friends in Denmark.

"Some downsizing seniors were deeply lonely. Some had nothing, no one. Co-living gave them the chance to make new friends, even after a lifetime surrounded by networks and family." he recalls.

Co-living developed exclusively for seniors is a distinct housing concept which is increasingly popular, underlining the potential of co-living to support the population groups most vulnerable to social isolation. Another significant demographic group living through disrupting transition are the newly divorced. In Denmark, where the divorce rate fluctuates between 40% and 50%, divorces often lead to both acute housing needs and rupture of personal networks. Several co-living models are currently being developed throughout Europe, with joint custody and family transitions in mind, as well as for other relevant target groups. The innovation of new tailored models will be determining for the housing type to scale out more broadly.

Finally, co-living is not just a real estate topic confined to the building scale — it is also a question of urban planning and city policy. Many cities are already pursuing strategies that aim for more efficient use of space, denser urban cores, and reduced energy and material consumption, and co-living is well aligned with these goals. But unlocking its full potential requires regulatory and political support. In Copenhagen, for instance, minimum unit size requirements have created barriers to developing this housing typology, making it difficult to develop smaller, flexible homes. Political recognition of co-living's potential — and close collaboration between developers, policymakers, and urban planning departments — is therefore essential.

Because housing needs are increasingly differentiated, co-living cannot only exist as an isolated experiment. It must be integrated into larger master plans that consider the full spectrum of residents, from students and young professionals to seniors and families in transition. By taking a granular view of how populations will evolve over the coming years, cities can ensure that co-living is positioned not as an exception, but as a complementary part of a diverse, resilient urban housing ecosystem.

↓ Jack Renteria

Movement & Mental Health: Streets, Activity, and Emotional Well-being

Every evening, Maria wonders what to do – keep scrolling through social media or go out and get the blood flowing? When easy access to guided activities and group exercise is available, the choice becomes much easier. From Finland, Professor Katja Pahkala and Dr. André Heikius share insights how the city of Turku's hobby voucher reform and new free opportunities for sports and hobbies are doing more than raising heart rates – they are reducing loneliness and strengthening mental well-being. In just a few months, 9,000 young people have joined in. As cities and communities look for ways to rebuild bonds fractured by screens and isolation, the question is: what kind of movement environments will help everyone find their place – not just to survive, but to thrive?

INTERVIEW:

Professor Katja Pahkala & Dr. André Heikius: How Movement, Data, and Dignity Reframe Loneliness in Turku

How Movement, Data, and Dignity Reframe Loneliness in Turku

Two Finnish medical experts are examining how City of Turku is tackling urban isolation through universal access and data-driven approaches to belonging. They believe life-enhanging connection arises when both visible and invisible barriers to participation are systematically removed.

PROFILE:

Professor **Katja Pahkala** *is* **Head of the Paavo Nurmi Centre**, *a centre of expertise in sports and exercise medicine at the University of Turku, a position she assumed in 2024. She also serves as vice-director of the Research Centre of Applied and Preventive Cardiovascular Medicine and sits on the executive committee of the Centre for Population Health Research, a joint initiative of the University of Turku and Varha. Her work examines how early-life factors—such as diet, physical activity, and lifestyle habits—influence lifelong heart and metabolic health.*

Dr. André Heikius *is an* **expert physician (MD, M.Sci.) at the Wellbeing Services County of Southwest Finland** *(Varha), where he works in the Strategic Management Unit focused on wellbeing and health promotion. Beyond his role in public health policy, he is an obesity strategist, healthcare entrepreneur, and founder and Medical Director of Painoklinikka, a Finnish medical center specializing in evidence-based weight management through remote consultations. He also serves as Chief Medical Officer and founder of Mehiläinen NEO Weight Loss Clinic in Turku, Executive Director of the Finnish Association for Obesity Medicine, and works as a senior medical advisor for global healthcare companies.*

The Paradox of Proximity

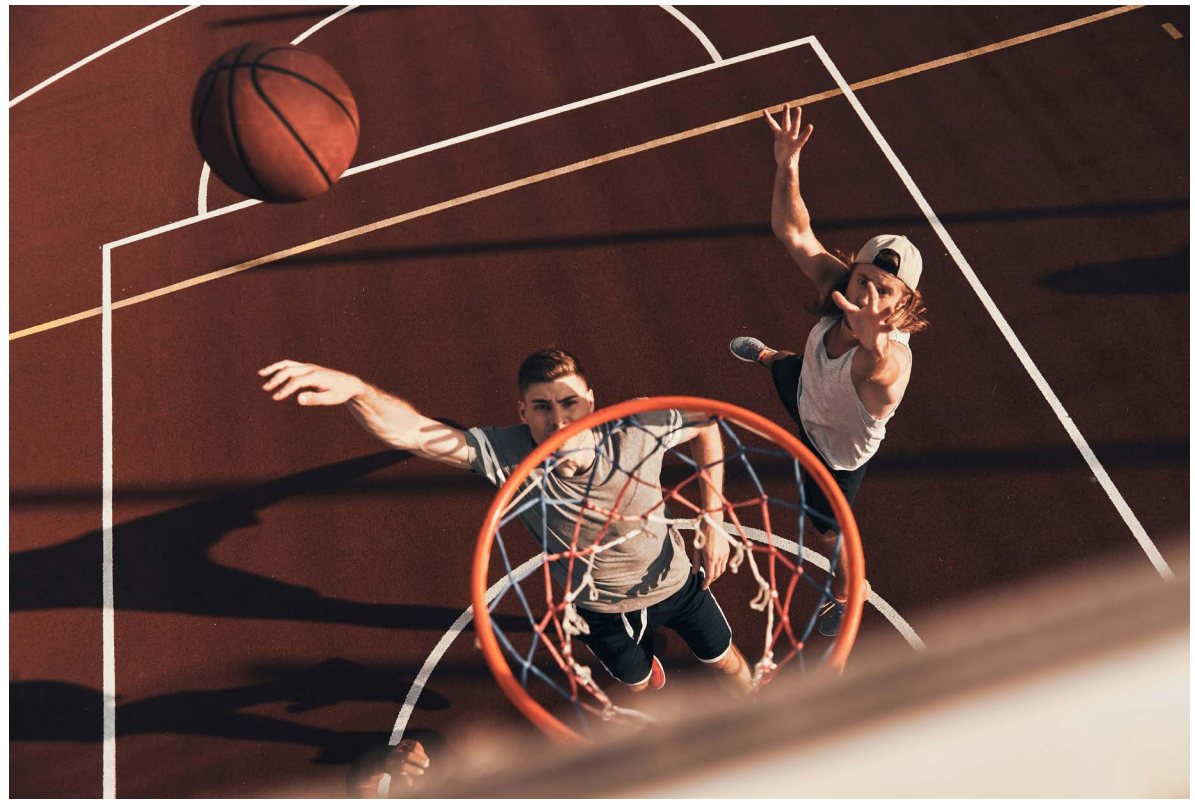
In the heart of Finland's sixth largest city, Turku is quietly transforming how cities support youth development and social connection through inclusive hobby and sports culture. Since the beginning of 2025, every 7–19-year-old citizen has had the opportunity to choose a hobby they enjoy through the city's "Boostii" hobby voucher. Professor Katja Pahkala and Dr. André Heikius represent a new generation of practitioners who see physical activity not merely as individual fitness but as a potent antidote to urban loneliness.

Working with the Cities for Better Health Turku (CBH) network, they are rethinking how cities can foster wellbeing through inclusive, data-driven approaches that enable broader access to sports and nutritious food. Together, they are developing interventions such as new easy-access sport groups and hobby days, enabling families to discover a wide range of local opportunities for participation.

Yet their approach to loneliness diverges from conventional wisdom that views it primarily as an individual psychological condition. Rather than treating loneliness as a personal failing, Pahkala sees this challenge through the lens of preventive medicine: "I think that participation to group-based and hobby-oriented physical activities can combat urban loneliness by transforming proximity into genuine connection," she explains, emphasizing how intentional spaces for movement become venues also for lasting relationships.

Heikius approaches the same phenomenon from a public health perspective, viewing social isolation as a systemic challenge requiring systemic responses rather than individual therapy. "Belonging itself is therapeutic," he argues, positioning social connection as both a health outcome and a pathway to individual wellness. This perspective reframes loneliness not as emotional deficiency but as environmental deprivation - a condition of place rather than person. "When a child finds a hobby group where they feel safe, included, and seen, the mental health benefit is as real as the physical fitness effect."

Exercise Against Loneliness



Professor Katja Pahkala invites us to reconsider the role of physical activity—not merely as a means of individual health improvement, but as a social infrastructure that actively counters urban loneliness. Yet this understanding challenges prevailing assumptions about both exercise and social connection. According to Pahkala, participation in group activities create spaces where genuine connection can also flourish, but crucially, without the pressure of forced interaction that often characterizes traditional interventions.

"For instance, in cities, group physical activities - like running clubs, dance classes, or recreational sports - create intentional spaces where people come together not just to move, but to connect," she explains. This approach recognizes that meaningful relationships often develop through shared activity rather than direct pursuit of friendship, addressing what researchers call "social prescribing" more naturally than formal programs.

> "In cities, group physical activities - like running clubs, dance classes, or recreational sports - create intentional spaces where people come together not just to move, but to connect"

The therapeutic potential extends beyond individual wellness but requires careful calibration. "Hobby-oriented formats, for one, bring people together around a common passion," Pahkala notes. "Whether it's hiking, martial arts, or group yoga, these activities foster natural conversation, collaboration, and camaraderie, helping relationships form organically." This organic development becomes crucial for addressing loneliness authentically - forced community-building often backfires by highlighting social deficits rather than building on existing interests.

"Exercise is also a proven mood booster," Pahkala continues. "When done in groups, it may add a layer of social support, reducing stress and anxiety while reinforcing a sense of belonging - key ingredients in fighting loneliness." However, she acknowledges that this formula isn't universally effective - some individuals may experience group exercise as intimidating rather than welcoming, necessitating varied approaches to entry points.

"Group activities can happen in local parks, gyms, or community centers, helping people reconnect with their surroundings and build ties with others who live nearby," Pahkala observes, highlighting the geographic dimension of social connection. Yet this proximity-based approach recognizes that neighborhood-level interventions can feel intrusive if not carefully designed with local input and cultural sensitivity.

Loneliness as a Predictable Pattern

Pahkala's research groups' longitudinal research has focused on how early life factors link with various health aspects later in life - an approach that is applied also in the context of the Boostii hobby voucher. "Indeed, longitudinal study design allows us to forecast the future by learning from the past," she explains, "this makes them uniquely important for both future insights and preventive action. This predictive capacity suggests that participation follows patterns that can be interrupted through environmental changes rather than only personal intervention.

Looking toward 2033, her team tracks indicators beyond physical activity to understand participation as a complex system outcome. "It would be extremely important and interesting to explore how urban environment serves as a platform for health, well-being, equity and inclusion," Pahkala reflects. This comprehensive approach acknowledges that participation may manifest differently across cultures and contexts, requiring locally-specific rather than universal solutions.

The research implications extend far beyond academic inquiry, positioning participation as a population health priority. "This is an extremely important issue and an obvious possibility for preventive actions," Pahkala emphasizes when discussing the links between physical activity, health and mental well-being in youth populations. However, she recognizes that prevention efforts must balance intervention with respect for individual privacy and choice- not all loneliness requires correction, and some solitude serves important developmental functions.

"It would be extremely important and interesting to explore how urban environment serves as a platform for health, well-being, equity and inclusion"

Designing Systems of Belonging

Dr. Heikius's demonstrates how comprehensive urban wellness systems can address root causes of loneliness, but his approach acknowledges the complexity of participation as both personal experience and social condition. "In Varha we approach nutrition and movement as two mutually reinforcing 'equalizers,'" he explains, describing how seemingly simple interventions like City of Turku's free summer park meals can create "predictable, stigma-free touchpoints in public spaces" that combat isolation without labeling participants as lonely.

The program's design reflects sophisticated understanding of how participation intersects with shame and social stigma. "Expanding free summer park meals provides a nutritious daily anchor when schools are closed and creates predictable, stigma-free touchpoints in public spaces," Heikius notes. "The program encourages outdoor time and social interaction, and its 2025 expansion follows a successful 2024 pilot serving ~50–60 children daily." This approach recognizes that interventions can paradoxically increase isolation by marking participants as socially deficient.

This systematic thinking extends to addressing underlying inequalities that create conditions for loneliness. "The need is underscored by Varha's 2023 finding that about one-third of 8th–9th graders report moderate or worse household finances," Heikius explains. "These actions support belonging, reduce loneliness, and buffer rising living costs." Yet he acknowledges that economic interventions alone cannot solve social isolation - material security creates conditions for connection but doesn't guarantee it.

Preventing Loneliness Through Dignity

By introducing the hobby voucher, Turku demonstrates its dedication to making participation accessible for all and to ensuring that every child and young person's dignity is respected. "Financial strain is not just about the inability to pay fees - it erodes confidence, limits choices, and can stigmatize families when their children are excluded from the same opportunities their peers enjoy," he observes. This understanding positions economic exclusion as a pathway to loneliness, but avoids the assumption that all economically disadvantaged youth are lonely.

"Boostii was designed to directly counter these dynamics," Heikius explains, describing how the program addresses loneliness indirectly by removing barriers to participation. The program's universal structure serves multiple purposes beyond loneliness prevention. "It is universal for all 7–19-year-olds, which avoids labeling or singling out children based on family income," Heikius explains. "This universality is a dignity-preserving design: every child receives the same right to choose, and parents do not have to go through humiliating means-testing processes."

Personal agency becomes central to loneliness prevention, challenging therapeutic models that treat isolation as something done to rather than with individuals. "Agency is restored because families themselves decide which activity, provider, and format is most suitable," Heikius continues.

“For some it might be a traditional sports club, for others dance, martial arts, or neighbourhood hobby groups. The choice architecture matters - we move away from ‘take what you are given’ towards ‘you decide what fits your child.’” This approach recognizes that forced community participation can increase rather than decrease feelings of isolation.

The program’s early success validates dignity-preserving approaches to participation, though Heikius acknowledges that uptake doesn’t automatically translate to reduced isolation. “The program is continuously evaluated: by September 2025, after just over half a year, €1,7 million had already been directed to the hobbie fees of over 9,000 children and adolescents, showing both demand and acceptance across social groups,” he reports. Yet participation metrics alone cannot capture the quality of social connections formed or sustained.

“The choice architecture matters - we move away from ‘take what you are given’ towards ‘you decide what fits your child’”

Addressing Invisible Barriers of Participation

Both researchers recognize that non-participation often stems from invisible rather than visible barriers, requiring interventions that address psychological and social rather than only material obstacles. Heikius particularly emphasizes how internal barriers can be more isolating than external ones: “Findings from the City of Turku’s hobby surveys highlight psychosocial hurdles - fear/anxiety, lack of friends, excessive goal-orientation - alongside more concrete barriers (e.g. high costs, few appealing options nearby).”

The response requires nuanced intervention design that acknowledges isolation as both cause and consequence of social anxiety. “ For example, as part of the Cities for Better Health Turku collaboration, we are tackling these barriers by introducing beginner-friendly formats and organising Boostii hobby day events in local neighbourhoods, where children and their families can discover and try new sporting opportunities close to home. These initiatives are designed to make participation more accessible and welcoming, especially for those who may feel hesitant or lack previous experience, Heikius explains.

Addressing these barriers requires coordinated messaging that normalizes rather than pathologizes social difficulties. “Communication across schools/clinics/clubs emphasizes joy of movement and respectful body talk, which helps convert intention into sustained participation,” Heikius notes. This approach acknowledges that interventions can backfire if they highlight social deficits rather than building on existing strengths and interests.

Heikius describes their comprehensive approach to invisible barriers: “Based on this, we can match them with beginner-friendly groups, buddy programs, or hobby-day tasters also in the health care sector.” This ensures that the voucher is not just symbolic, but genuinely usable.

Where Environments Heal as Much as Medicine

Heikius's medical background informs his prevention-focused philosophy, but also his understanding of participation as requiring environmental rather than only individual intervention. "As an expert physician in obesity and prevention, I see every day how difficult it is to treat conditions once they are established," he explains. "Pharmacological and surgical options will help, but they cannot substitute for environments that promote activity, healthy eating, and meaningful social ties from early childhood."

This understanding shapes Heikius' systemic approach to loneliness as an environmental condition rather than a personal pathology. "This is why in Varha we are deliberately shifting the narrative: well-being is not only the absence of disease, but the presence of belonging," Heikius states. Yet this shift requires careful navigation- positioning loneliness as environmental can reduce stigma but may also minimize the real psychological pain individuals experience.

The paradigm shift operates across multiple dimensions while acknowledging the limits of environmental intervention. "From downstream to upstream: Instead of waiting until children enter healthcare with obesity-related complications, we act upstream through schools, parks, and hobby programs," Heikius explains. "From individual responsibility to shared systems: Obesity and inactivity are not just 'individual lifestyle choices.' They are system outcomes." However, he recognizes that environmental changes cannot address all forms of loneliness— some isolation stems from factors beyond community programming.

The therapeutic potential of belonging becomes central to intervention design but requires realistic expectations about what community connection can accomplish. "From treatment to participation: Belonging itself is therapeutic," Heikius emphasizes. "When a child finds a hobby group where they feel safe, included, and seen, the mental health benefit is as real as the physical fitness effect. We are eager to continue to track how our local LIITU and Move! data and physical activity and sports club participation can correlate with better well-being." Yet correlation doesn't guarantee causation - some individuals may remain lonely despite active participation in community programs.

Why Social Connection Matters for Public Health

The urgency of prevention becomes clear when examining local data, though Heikius acknowledges that measuring loneliness, at population scale presents methodological challenges. “The scale of the problem is real,” he notes. “In Turku, 19% of children aged 2–6 and 22% of those aged 7–16 live with overweight or obesity. Functional capacity tests (Move! 2024) show 37% of 5th-graders and 45% of 8th-graders below recommended levels, worse than the national average for 8th grade. These are early warning signs that without prevention, treatment burdens will only grow.”

While physical health metrics don’t directly measure loneliness, Heikius argues they indicate social disconnection from activities that typically involve peer interaction. This evidence base informs comprehensive intervention strategies but acknowledges the complexity of causation. “Thus, ‘prevention and belonging’ means reframing obesity care within the urban system,” Heikius explains, describing how “integrating nutrition (park meals, healthy snacks at hobby days) with activation (beginner-friendly sport groups, vouchers) and targeting by neighbourhood where participation is lowest, is important to ensure equity”

However, their systematic approach recognizes that neighborhood-level targeting can inadvertently stigmatize communities as “outcast” or “disconnected,” requiring careful communication about program goals and benefits. The challenge lies in addressing geographic patterns of isolation without reinforcing negative stereotypes about specific areas or populations.

Participation as Shared Responsibility

The City of Turku's collaborative model extends beyond traditional boundaries but acknowledges that institutional coordination alone cannot solve individual isolation. Pahkala emphasizes the importance of shared governance structures, advising other cities to "Seat a cross-sector table (city, health, schools, university, clubs, NGOs, funders) that owns a common dashboard."

Data-driven targeting becomes essential for equity outcomes while respecting individual privacy and avoiding surveillance. "Map who is missing out by layering functional capacity, club participation, and socioeconomic indicators to target neighbourhoods/age bands with the steepest drop-offs," Pahkala recommends. Yet this mapping process must balance population-level insights with respect for individual privacy and choice about participation in loneliness prevention programs.

The integration requires coordinated evaluation across multiple domains while acknowledging that loneliness may be unmeasurable through conventional metrics. "We build longitudinal evaluation into the system: following outcomes not just in BMI or fitness, but in mental health, participation, and use of health services up to 2033 in the CBH collaboration," Heikius explains. However, he recognizes that meaningful connection may not translate into measurable outcomes, and that some forms of belonging resist quantification.

Designing Urban Health Systems for Connection

Heikius's vision for urban health extends beyond traditional medical models while acknowledging the limits of environmental intervention for complex emotional experiences like loneliness. "For me as a physician, this shift matters because it acknowledges a truth: medical treatment alone cannot carry the weight of an obesogenic environment," he reflects. "To make well-being sustainable, we must build environments where the healthy choice is also the easy and enjoyable one - and where children and families feel they belong. That is the philosophy guiding Varha's work."

This philosophy shapes practical recommendations for other cities while recognizing cultural and contextual variations in how loneliness manifests and responds to intervention. "Start without waiting for perfection- build shared governance, shared data, and quick wins," Heikius advises, emphasizing that implementation should begin with available resources while building toward comprehensive systems.

The dignity-preservation principle guides Turku's program design across contexts while acknowledging that dignity means different things in different communities. "From a health equity perspective, dignity and agency are protected when support is: Universal in access (no stigma, everyone included), Individually tailored in use (real freedom of choice, proactive barrier removal), and Transparent in governance (data openly tracked and fed back to communities)," Heikius explains.

The ultimate goal transcends traditional health outcomes while maintaining realistic expectations about what community programming can accomplish for individual loneliness. "This combination addresses both material inequality and the subtle psychosocial harms of exclusion," Heikius notes. "For many families struggling with financial hardship, Boostii is not 'just a subsidy' but a way of regaining equal footing with their neighbours and peers. It signals to children: your participation is valued, your interest's matter, and you belong here."

Yet Heikius acknowledges that belonging cannot be programmed—it emerges from authentic relationships that may or may not develop through structured interventions. The Turku model represents a significant evolution in urban youth development—one that positions belonging as both pathway and outcome, treats prevention as investment rather than cost, and recognizes that combating metropolitan loneliness requires systematic removal of barriers to connection while respecting individual autonomy and the complex, sometimes contradictory nature of human social needs.

Community Networks: How Policy and Grassroots Action Create Social Capital

City streets bustle with activity, yet behind the facades of skyscrapers and crowded sidewalks lies an unseen struggle: how to weave the threads of human connection before they unravel into isolation. In Seoul, Sujin Lee has turned social bonding into a form of public infrastructure, deploying a several-million-Euro, data-driven early-warning system that spots residents at risk of loneliness and nudges them toward community before crisis hits. Across the sea in Tokyo, Riku Natsui's Coffee & Cleanup Clubs prove that sustainable social capital needn't be grand or complicated, just fifty simple, repeatable gatherings where neighbors share lattes and sweep sidewalks together. These interventions promise safer, more resilient cities - but do they also risk reducing genuine relationships to checklists and data points?
What will it truly take to cultivate neighborhoods where connections flourish organically, rather than on demand?

INTERVIEWS:

Sujin Lee & Daniel Oh: How Seoul turns Hardware into Heartware
Riku Natsui: Togetherness in Japan begins with a cup and a broom

How Seoul turns Hardware into Heartware

Sujin Lee reimagines Seoul's physical infrastructure as social scaffolding to prevent Loneliness. Daniel Oh highlights how generational divides and contested public spaces deepen the city's loneliness paradox. Together, they guide Seoul's shift from density to genuine connection.

PROFILE:

Sujin Lee *serves as* **Director of Seoul's Isolation Prevention Center**, *overseeing the city's transition from addressing elderly isolation to comprehensive loneliness prevention across all demographics. With extensive experience at the Seoul Welfare Foundation, Lee has witnessed and helped orchestrate the transformation of urban welfare policy from targeting economically disadvantaged populations to addressing universal urban challenges like social isolation.*

Daniel Oh *is an* **urban designer, certified planner, and educator** *whose work bridges global practice and academic research. With over two decades of experience leading major urban projects across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the United States, he now directs urban design and planning at SquareMMKM and serves as research committee chair at the Urban Design Institute of Korea. His career centers on creating resilient, socially engaging, and health-oriented urban environments. At Korea University, where he taught for more than a decade, he developed innovative programs linking urban design with smart city technologies, immersive media, and community participation.*

Sujin Lee & Daniel Oh on:

The Paradox of Proximity

Sujin Lee and Daniel Oh believes the paradox of proximity requires systematic intervention rather than hoping density alone will foster connection. "Seoul City knows it cannot manufacture meaningful connections," Lee explains. "What we can do is build the scaffolding. We can give people options for what to do when they realize they're struggling."

Lee's approach centers on what Seoul terms "Heartware"- converting physical infrastructure into social infrastructure through strategic design and data-driven identification of at-risk individuals. "Instead of holding on to the problem, we tried to prevent that from happening altogether," Lee notes. "That's why the center has 'prevention' in it, rather than trying to address and solve the problem." This philosophy recognizes that urban density without intentional community-building mechanisms creates what Lee describes as "very, very loose" social ties where residents don't "feel like they belong there."

When Everyone Is a Neighbor, No One Is

In Seoul's densely packed Silim-dong district, where micro-apartments once housed aspiring civil servants, a soup kitchen became something unexpected - the catalyst for an entire street's social revival. Middle-aged residents, squeezed into spaces so small they share bathrooms and lack proper kitchens, found themselves gravitating toward what started as a simple meal service. Today, the street buzzes with informal conversations, spontaneous gatherings, and the kind of organic community formation that city planners dream about but is sometimes hard to achieve.

This transformation offers a window into Seoul's ambitious $327 million effort to combat urban loneliness and into the mind of the woman helping to architect it.

Seoul's paradox of proximity plays out in countless individual stories across the megacity. Take the Garden Prescription program, where socially secluded youth and infertile couples find themselves tending plants together in forest settings - strangers who live blocks apart but had never spoken until they met in Seoul's green spaces. Or consider the 15-Minute Outside Home Prescription, designed for citizens who have retreated so completely from social contact that even a

"South Korea recorded 3,661 "godoksa"—lonely deaths— in 2023, up from 3,378 in 2021"

quarter-hour walk feels monumental. These aren't abstract policy interventions but responses to real people: the recently retired man whose children moved away, the middle-aged woman caring alone for an ill spouse, the young adult who secured his first job but had no one to share the celebration with.

"Seoul is very dense, but at the same time, most people living in Seoul are there because of jobs or for survival," explains Sujin Lee, Director of Seoul's Isolation Prevention Center.

Lee's observation highlights the core of the proximity paradox affecting megacities worldwide. In Seoul, where nearly 40% of households are single-person and 62.1% of solo residents often feel lonely, physical closeness has become a harsh illusion of connection. The city's 9.7 million residents live crowded in tall apartments, yet 13.6% say they have no one to turn to in times of real need[1].

The Seoul Connection Prescription exemplifies how the city addresses this contradiction. After initial counseling and assessment, isolated individuals receive customized interventions ranging from nature-based programs to peer counseling sessions with people who've overcome similar isolation. The Life Cycle Prescription recognizes that reclusion affects multiple generations - grandparents aging alone, parents overwhelmed by caregiving duties, young adults struggling with employment transitions.

"I think Seoul City is trying to see how you could create situations where they could establish those networks," Lee says. "Loneliness affects every stage of the life cycle. It's not only common among the elderly but also impacts young adults trying to survive and find employment, as well as seniors who are cut off from traditional family support structures".

The numbers tell a stark story. South Korea recorded 3,661 "godoksa" - lonely deaths - in 2023, up from 3,378 in 2021. Men account for 84 percent of these cases, with more than half occurring among people in their 50s and 60s[2].

1 Seoul Institute. "Seoul City Single-Person Households: Reality of Loneliness & Social Isolation and Response Strategies" (Report No. 2021-OR-19), 2022. Authors: Seong-ah Kim, Min-jin Park, and Jeong-ah Kim.

2 Ibid.

The Generation Gap

“For instance, in public spaces, respect is often demanded. Many neighborhood parks, older generations disapprove of activities like basketball and kids shouting in playgrounds because of noise, creating generational conflict”

But Lee’s mission faces a complex challenge that extends beyond individual isolation: Seoul’s generational divides that fragment public space itself. Daniel Oh, Associate Professor at Korea University, studies how these tensions complicate efforts to build genuine community.

Deeply influenced by Confucian values, Korean society often expects people to behave in specific ways as they age, which can lead to tension,” Oh explains. “For instance, in public spaces, respect is often demanded. Many neighborhood parks, older generations disapprove of activities like basketball and kids shouting in playgrounds because of noise, creating generational conflict.” This stratification, he notes, stems from Seoul’s rapid urban growth, creating invisible boundaries that turn shared spaces into contested territory.

Meanwhile, Seoul’s youth increasingly retreat indoors. “As kids spend a lot more time indoors and on personal devices, their ability to form healthy personal relationships with peers and parents are under threat.” Oh has delved into research that sees rising rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders linked to social media use, while bullying has become such a crisis that new laws classify it as a crime in schools. Oh points to widely implemented approaches like retrofitting schools to encourage meaningful peer interactions while eliminating “hidden corners where bullying can occur” using Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles.

The same methodology has been widely exercised in making alleyways feel safer at night. Moreover, there are dedicated alleys paired with app-based services and volunteers provided by local governments to make returning home safe for women and elderly late night.

Seoul has begun transforming playgrounds into senior activity grounds, recognizing that public spaces must serve multiple generations. The city provides AI-powered robots for elderly conversation and delivers breakfast to seniors with strict eating habits - technological solutions that Oh sees as both promising and limited.

However, Oh views reliance on technology and physical environment upgrades as both promising and limited. Many of the modern social issues outlined above arise from a mix of factors, most notably the fear of living among ‘unacquainted neighbors’—strangers. At their core, many of these issues could be alleviated if residents felt a genuine sense of community. A shared perception of safety and belonging can often break down barriers and significantly improve quality of life, particularly in densely populated neighborhoods such as those in Seoul.

From Welfare to Well-Being

Lee's journey mirrors Seoul's own evolution in understanding loneliness. Having worked at the Seoul Welfare Foundation for many years, she witnessed what she describes as a profound shift in how cities conceptualize social isolation.

"This project was meaningful to me because it broadened the idea of welfare beyond just the socially and economically vulnerable," Lee reflects. "By focusing on loneliness, it became something I could truly relate to—I could even see how it might benefit my own family".

This transformation, from treating loneliness as individual pathology to recognizing it as systemic urban challenge, required extensive research to reshape public perception. When Seoul surveyed residents about government intervention on loneliness in 2018 versus five years later, they found a 10% increase in public support for official action. "That really creates an environment where people can start to recognize loneliness as a serious issue," Lee observes.

The city's approach deliberately avoids targeting specific demographics to prevent stigmatization. "Anyone can feel lonely at some point," Lee emphasizes. "As long as people understand it is a phase, there should be opportunities to seek support from these organizations."

This philosophy manifests in programs like the Seoul Mind Investment Program for All Citizens, which expanded from serving only mental health risk groups to the entire population.[9] The Seoul Metropolitan Psychological Support Center and the private therapy center partnerships represent this universal approach to mental health support.

Seoul's Heartware

Central to Lee's strategy is what Seoul terms "Heartware"—the systematic conversion of physical infrastructure into social infrastructure. It's more than urban planning buzzwords; it's a data-driven approach to fostering human connection through strategic space design.

According to Lee, Seoul will use the Spatial Attractiveness Index to assess neighborhood connectivity. This index evaluates how easily residents can access essential needs such as housing, daily work, and entertainment. The findings will then inform urban development plans, ensuring that future projects strengthen connectivity and improve quality of life across neighborhoods.

Lee's team currently operates four "Seoul Mind Convenience Stores," with plans to expand to 25 by 2026. These aren't typical retail spaces but carefully designed social nodes where residents can access donated instant noodles and snacks while engaging in conversation with trained volunteers, many of whom have navigated their own experiences with social isolation.

The stores represent Seoul's commitment to creating what Lee calls "open spaces where lonely citizens can visit and engage in conversation while enjoying Seoul Ramyeon." The instant noodles come through donations from corporate partnerships, as the city has signed MOUs with instant noodle companies and snack companies, while the real value lies in the human connections fostered by staff who have recovered from social reclusion and isolation themselves.

This scaffolding extends to programs like the Healthy Dining initiative for middle-aged single-person households, who often neglect proper nutrition while living alone. Through social dining programs, the city addresses both physical and mental health by fostering social networks around shared meals. By 2030, over 100 Wellness & Longevity Centers will provide comprehensive care for approximately 300,000 older adults, regardless of their current health conditions.

When Data Meets Humanity

Lee's prevention-focused approach relies heavily on sophisticated analysis to identify at-risk individuals before complete isolation sets in. Her team utilizes diverse administrative data and 46 types of emergency information, including patterns in gas and electricity usage, to proactively identify isolated families. Convenience stores and laundromats - spaces frequently visited by socially withdrawn individuals - serve as informal detection points.

Recognizing that single-person households often rely heavily on food delivery services, Seoul has implemented pop-up windows on delivery apps to assess users' isolation risk. Seoul also distributes offline discount coupons through delivery platforms, anticipating these incentives will encourage people to venture outside.

For those who may be unwilling to apply for programs or reject support outright, alternative channels - phone calls, apps, and websites - allow family members or neighbors to reach out on their behalf. The city actively utilizes systems to identify at-risk families through outreach programs in partnership with private organizations.

At the heart of this system is Seoul's 24-hour loneliness counseling service, the "Loneliness Hello 120 Call Center" which provides services that exceed expectations. Initially projected to receive 3,000 calls by year's end, the service had already handled 13,000 calls within three months of operation. By July 2025, monthly call volume had increased 1.7-fold to nearly 4,000 calls, with the hotline now receiving about 100 calls daily. The platform includes not just phone counseling but also a KakaoTalk AI counseling program for those who prefer not to make voice calls. The 120 call center for relieving loneliness, which operates every day of the year and directs users to dedicated counselors after basic screening.

"At first, I assumed there would be stigma attached to admitting or expressing loneliness," Lee admits. "But I've realized that society has changed, a lot of people feel cornered and are eager to speak about their struggles."

The Unexpected Callers

The demographics of loneliness in Seoul defy conventional assumptions about social isolation being primarily an issue for the economically disadvantaged. Lee describes the typical callers "Most are in their late fifties or sixties - recently retired, with children who have grown up and moved out, or with a spouse who is ill and requires long-term care. They feel exhausted, and they are carrying this burden alone."

These aren't people with severe mental health crises, Lee clarifies, but individuals seeking someone to share their frustrations, vulnerabilities, and daily struggles. One case particularly struck her: a young man in his twenties who, after months of unemployment, finally secured a job but had no one with whom to share the good news. His decision to call the loneliness hotline to share his achievement illustrated the profound social isolation that can exist even during positive life events.

"That is, of course, not healthy," Lee acknowledges. "But the fact that they're picking up the phone call and wanting to talk to someone is at least a step in the right direction."

Another revelation: phone calls lower barriers to disclosure that might not exist in face-to-face interactions. "Talking to a neighbor about your loneliness feels like an entirely different step, almost another dimension," Lee notes. "Making a phone call, however, is a bit easier."

The service extends beyond individual callers to their families, friends, and neighbors who can also seek guidance about supporting someone experiencing loneliness. This community-centered approach recognizes that isolation affects not just individuals but entire social networks.

From Seoul to the Nation:
Policy Innovation in Real Time

Lee's work is attracting attention far beyond Seoul's boundaries. The city's traditional role as South Korea's policy laboratory means national adoption often follows municipal innovation. "Seoul has always been at the forefront of developing policies and programs," Lee explains. "The national government tends to follow, so Seoul is setting the standard and the model for addressing loneliness."

This scaling represents more than bureaucratic expansion. It's validation of Lee's core insight that loneliness requires systematic, preventive intervention rather than reactive crisis management.

The Seoul 365 Challenge Program exemplifies this preventive approach. Linked to the city's famous events like the Care-Free Jamsu Bridge (Ddoo Ddoo Festival), Healing Outgoing in Nature, sports activities, and the Outdoor Library, these challenges offer citizens opportunities to earn activity points while gaining accomplishment and social interaction. The gamification element encourages continued participation while combating feelings of loneliness through structured community engagement.

The Global Laboratory

Seoul's initiative has attracted international attention as cities worldwide grapple with loneliness epidemics. Lee notes the city's cooperation with major urban centers like London and Tokyo, recognizing loneliness as "an inevitable problem found in numerous modern societies."

Oh calls for more fundamental change: "We need a new kind of urban experiences - one where social experiences take center stage. It should promote diverse forms of engagement, an integrated social and spatial experience. The experience should leave a lasting impression which will create a layer of positive sentiment towards local community and neighborhood." He argues for reinventing the core of the neighborhoods to suit the modern-day lifestyle to foster "a sense of ownership, a sense of belonging through redefining the future of public space."

The approach offers lessons for other megacities facing the proximity paradox. By treating loneliness as public health infrastructure rather than individual pathology, Seoul acknowledges that meaningful communities require intentional policy intervention, not just market-driven development.

Seoul emphasizes its commitment to playing a leading role in fostering collective responses from the international community, according to the city's official statements. The Week Without Loneliness campaign, featuring events like the talk concert "Let's

Talk Loneliness" with prominent influencers who have faced isolation issues, represents this international consciousness-raising effort. Oh sees promise in Seoul's efforts while maintaining realistic expectations: "Case by case, there's more awareness among residents. The government is doing a lot, especially for senior citizens. But participant levels are low. We need to reinvent the nucleus of the neighborhood."

The program, The Self-Reliance Prescription, focuses on supporting independence for those recovering from isolation while building care communities within local society to prevent re-isolation. This dual focus on individual recovery and community building represents Seoul's understanding that sustainable solutions require both personal healing and systemic change.

From viewing loneliness as personal failure to recognizing it as shared human experience, Seoul is attempting nothing less than rewiring the social operating system of modern urban life.

Togetherness in Japan Begins with a Cup and a Broom

A Tokyo service designer combats urban loneliness with his Cleanup Coffee Club, hosting monthly cleanup-and-coffee events in 50 cities. By interrupting efficiency-driven routines with low-threshold communal rituals, CCC turns neglected streets and parks into social infrastructure.

PROFILE:

Riku Natsui *is* **founder and representative director of the Cleanup & Coffee Club**, *a pioneering community-building initiative that has scaled to 50 sites across Japan. A service design professional at a major Japanese technology corporation, Natsui applies systematic design methodology to grassroots community organizing, bridging corporate innovation frameworks with authentic social engagement. Based in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district, he specializes in collaborative stakeholder engagement and area management projects with railway companies, bringing a unique hybrid perspective that combines professional design expertise with hands-on community organizing experience. His work demonstrates how corporate service design methodology can be adapted for social infrastructure development, creating scalable models for community building that maintain authenticity while achieving systematic impact.*

Riku Natsui on:

The Paradox of Proximity

In Japan's densely populated cities, Riku Natsui has discovered something profound: the solution to urban loneliness isn't more connection - it's better connection. His Cleanup Coffee Club (CCC), now spanning 50 sites across Japan from Aomori to Kagoshima, represents a masterclass in what he calls "being over doing," a philosophy that challenges conventional approaches to community building in hyperconnected urban environments.
When Natsui addresses the paradox of proximity, his response cuts to the structural heart of the problem. "When life is reduced to rational efficiency, a subtle solitude emerges - because every action is calibrated to the individual, rather than to the web of relationships that gives it meaning", he explains.
His analysis identifies how urban efficiency systems, from homogeneous convenience store food to optimized housing infrastructure, create "social overload" followed by withdrawal.

This insight diverges from technological solutions that dominate contemporary discussions. Rather than viewing loneliness as a connectivity problem requiring more digital bridges, he recognizes it as an intimacy deficit requiring intentional design for authentic human encounter. "CCC is unnatural. It is deliberately created," he acknowledges, positioning his intervention as a necessary corrective to urban systems that accidentally engineer isolation.

Temporary Urbanism

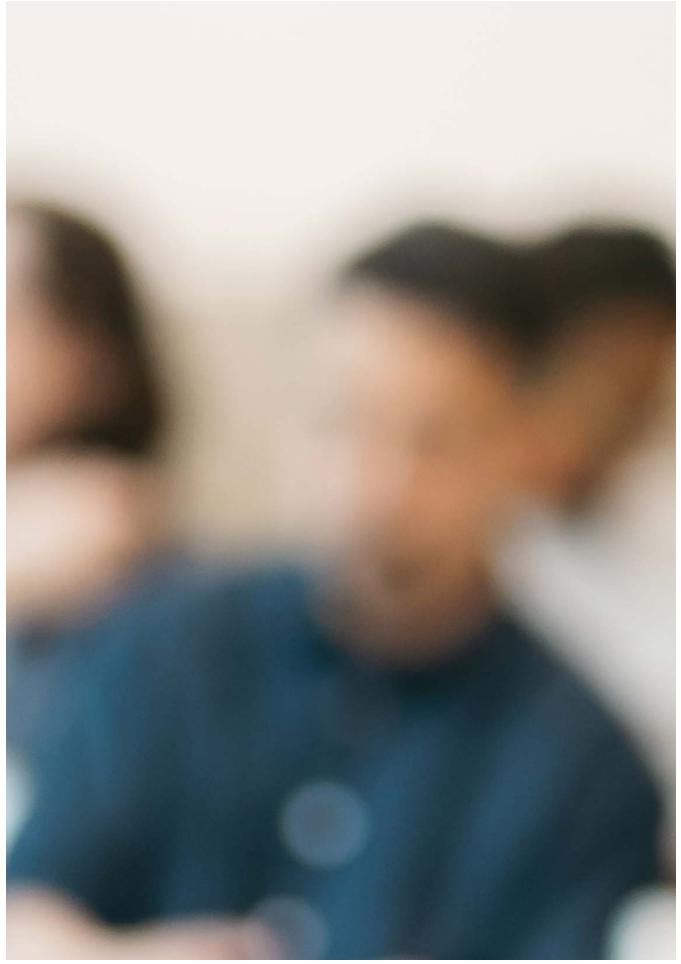
Natsui's genius lies in creating what urban sociologists call "weak social ties" - connections that don't demand emotional investment but provide psychological scaffolding for deeper relationships. The cleanup activity serves as what he terms a "filter," naturally selecting participants "with a high level of consciousness for social contribution" who are "very considerate and compassionate". This filtering mechanism addresses a fundamental challenge in urban community building: how to gather strangers who share compatible values without explicit vetting processes.

The format deliberately accommodates social anxiety and cultural barriers that often exclude vulnerable populations from traditional community activities. "You can feel at ease even without conversation," Natsui explains, recognizing that conventional community programming often excludes those who struggle with verbal communication, language barriers, or disabilities. By centering activity rather than conversation, CCC creates "parallel social engagement" - being together without the pressure of performance.

This approach aligns with emerging theories in tactical urbanism that emphasize "lighter, quicker, cheaper" interventions to transform urban spaces. Unlike permanent infrastructure changes that require extensive bureaucratic processes, CCC operates through what urban planners call "temporary urbanism" - interventions that can be rapidly deployed, tested, and modified based on community response.

The choice of cleanup emerged from practical constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic but reveals sophisticated understanding of social psychology and urban design principles. "If you're just hanging around outside, people might look at you with suspicious eyes. But if you're cleaning up the street, they'll say, 'Hey, nice work!" Natsui recalls. This observation illuminates how public perception shapes community formation - activities must be legible as socially beneficial to avoid stigma in Japan's highly regulated public spaces.

More significantly, the cleanup provides what Natsui calls "treasure hunting" for children and satisfaction from visible impact for adults. Unlike abstract volunteer work, picking up trash offers immediate feedback loops that generate "helper's high" - the mood boost from concrete prosocial action. This understanding reflects what urban design scholars call "place-based social infrastructure", namely physical activities that generate social capital through shared purpose.



Ibasho Design

Central to Natsui's approach is the Japanese concept of ibasho, "A place of comfort where you can simply be yourself—without the need to perform, achieve, or prove your skills". This concept challenges Western community-building models that often emphasize achievement, networking, or shared interests. Instead, ibasho prioritizes unconditional acceptance and the freedom to exist without performance.

"A place of comfort where you can simply be yourself—without the need to perform, achieve, or prove your skills"

Natsui's understanding of ibasho reflects broader Japanese social challenges that urban planning research has identified as spreading to contemporary metropolitan environments. "In urban areas, it can be very difficult to build communities because people often show little interest in one another. In rural areas, by contrast, people do take an interest - but their conservatism can translate into watchful, sometimes judgmental eyes", he observes. CCC threads this needle by providing urban anonymity with rural attention - structured interactions that feel spontaneous.

This balance addresses what urban sociologists call the "privacy gradient"—the need for urban dwellers to control their level of social engagement. Tokyo's commercial districts have traditionally managed this through architectural design that creates "permeable boundaries" between public and private space. CCC applies similar principles to social programming, allowing participants to engage at their comfort level while remaining part of the collective activity.

The CCC model's expansion across Japan demonstrates how simplicity enables scalability in urban social infrastructure. Each site operates with minimal infrastructure: monthly one-hour events, volunteer coordination, and basic supplies (trash bags and coffee). This stripped-down approach contrasts sharply with complex community programs that require extensive funding, training, or facilities—what urban planners call "hard social infrastructure."

Natsui's distribution of a Japanese manual to operators reflects understanding that successful community models require cultural translation rather than direct replication. The manual likely contains what urban planning theorists call "pattern language"—repeatable design principles that can adapt to local contexts while maintaining core functionality. This approach mirrors successful tactical urbanism projects like Milan's Piazze Aperte program, which used standardized intervention protocols to create 38 different public plazas adapted to local conditions.

From New Arrivals to Single Mothers to Men in Midlife

Natsui's compelling stories center on three demographically distinct groups experiencing "urban social isolation syndrome" - the particular form of loneliness that emerges from density without intimacy. Young people who "originally lived in rural areas but came to Tokyo to be employed at a company or for school who felt lonely" represent urban transplants", individuals whose traditional support networks don't transfer to city environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this isolation by disrupting the informal social infrastructure that typically helps newcomers integrate into urban communities. CCC participants who "couldn't make or meet with any friends" but found community through cleanup activities represent a particular success in what urban planners call "newcomer integration". This demographic shift reflects broader challenges identified in Japanese urban planning research, where traditional community structures like neighborhood associations (chokai) have weakened without adequate replacement.

Single mothers, particularly those whose "husband was dispatched overseas for work," represent another vulnerable population that urban social infrastructure typically fails to serve. Natsui notes how one participant found that "she was able to have her child looked after by everyone" and subsequently became a site operator herself. This progression from participant to leader demonstrates how effective community interventions create sustainable leadership pipelines rather than dependent relationships—a principle urban planning researchers call "community capacity building."

The child-care dimension reveals how CCC functions as "informal social infrastructure", a community networks that provide essential services through social relationships rather than institutional programs. In Japan's expensive childcare landscape, this peer support system addresses what urban planners identify as a critical gap in social infrastructure for working parents.

Middle-aged men, traditionally the most isolated demographic in Japanese society, also feature prominently in Natsui's accounts. These participants, many in their 40s and 50s, represent what economists call "the lost generation" - individuals whose career trajectories were disrupted by economic downturns and who struggle to rebuild social connections. Japanese urban planning research has identified this demographic as particularly vulnerable to social isolation because traditional masculine social networks centered on workplace relationships.

Perhaps most significantly, many participants "they try to create their own place - a space where they truly belong without relying on us", according to Natsui. This progression suggests that CCC functions as a "starter community", providing initial social skills and confidence that participants transfer to other contexts. The "after CCC" phenomenon, where participants naturally extend social interactions beyond structured activities, indicates successful community design that builds social competency rather than dependency.

Policy Implications and Urban Design Theory

Natsui's vision for ideal cities centers on accessibility that challenges conventional urban planning paradigms: "A city that enables you to easily try out what you want to try out" with systems that "root for that and support it, for example, monetarily". His critique of existing public funding mechanisms, "terribly inaccessible" requiring "a whole bunch of documents" and limited to "short term such as day-long events", reveals how bureaucratic complexity undermines grassroots community formation.

This analysis aligns with urban planning research on "bureaucratic barriers to social innovation." Studies of Japanese municipal governance have identified how rigid administrative categories often prevent the kind of flexible, responsive programming that effective community building requires. Natsui's experience reflects broader challenges in collaborative governance, the coordination between formal institutions and informal community networks.
His recommendation for three-year funding cycles reflects understanding that authentic community development requires sustained investment rather than project-based support. This timeline enables communities to progress through the stages of group formation: forming, storming, norming, and performing, demonstrating that most successful community interventions require at least 18 months to establish stable participation patterns and 36 months to develop indigenous leadership.

Natsui's reference to historical Japanese community forms like kou - Buddhist chanting circles and Mount Fuji observation groups - positions CCC within longer traditions of public ritual that "created local communities in Japan since the Edo era". However, his deliberate removal of religious elements reflects strategic secularization designed to maximize inclusion in contemporary multicultural urban environments.

This historical awareness suggests that effective urban community interventions must balance cultural continuity with contemporary accessibility. Traditional forms provide tested social architectures, but modern implementations require adaptation to diverse populations and secular contexts in a cultural translation in urban space.

The Economics of Volunteer Sustainability

CCC's volunteer-based model raises questions about long-term sustainability that illuminate broader challenges in social infrastructure financing. "It's pretty much all on a volunteer basis. We don't make money across barely any of our spots," Natsui acknowledges, while noting "in most cases we don't need money". This approach reflects "gift economy" principles, a value exchange based on social rather than monetary transactions.

However, Natsui's ongoing search for appropriate funding models suggests recognition that purely volunteer systems face limitations. The challenge lies in introducing financial support without corrupting the organic social dynamics that make CCC effective, the "monetization paradox" in community development.

This tension reflects broader debates in urban planning about the appropriate role of market mechanisms in social infrastructure provision. Japanese research on social infrastructure has identified how over-reliance on volunteer labor can lead to "community exhaustion," while excessive professionalization can undermine the authentic relationships that make community programs effective.

The scalability of CCC's volunteer model may depend on social infrastructure ecosystems - networks of formal and informal organizations that can provide different types of support without any single organization bearing the full burden. Natsui's corporate background in service design provides him with professional skills that many community organizers lack, suggesting that successful scaling might require hybrid leadership models.

From Efficiency to Encounter

↑ Riku Natsui

His insight that isolation results from systemic optimization rather than individual failure reframes community building as an urban design challenge rather than social service provision.

Natsui's work contributes to emerging theories in urban planning that challenge the efficiency paradigm that has dominated metropolitan development since the mid-20th century. His observation that "everything becomes optimized to the individual" identifies what urban theorists call "hyper-individualization" - the systematic design of urban systems to minimize friction and interaction.

This critique aligns with research in urban social psychology showing that efficiency-optimized environments can paradoxically reduce quality of life by eliminating opportunities for what sociologist Mark Granovetter calls "weak social ties", casual acquaintanceships that provide social support and community resilience. Tokyo's urban design, while highly functional for movement and consumption, has been identified as creating "social infrastructure deficits".

CCC's approach represents "encounter design", intentional creation of opportunities for meaningful but low-commitment social interaction. This approach differs from traditional community programming that assumes people want deep relationships, recognizing instead that many urban dwellers prefer "sociable solitude", the ability to be around others without obligation.

The cleanup activity functions as a "social catalyst", a shared activity that creates natural opportunities for interaction without forcing it. This principle has been applied in successful urban interventions worldwide, from Detroit's community gardens to Seoul's pedestrian-only streets, demonstrating universal applicability despite cultural specificity.

From Service Design to Social Design

Natsui's background as a corporate service designer at a major Japanese technology corporation provides him with methodological frameworks that most community organizers lack. Service design methodology emphasizes user research, prototype testing, and iterative improvement, approaches that Natsui has adapted for community building rather than commercial applications.

His systematic approach to replication through standardized manuals reflects "social technology transfer", the adaptation of successful community interventions to new contexts. Unlike many grassroots community efforts that remain localized due to dependence on charismatic leadership, CCC has developed institutional infrastructure that enables expansion.

The integration of corporate methodology with grassroots organizing represents "hybrid innovation models." Research on successful community interventions has shown that the most scalable programs combine professional expertise with authentic community engagement, avoiding both technocratic solutions that ignore local context and purely grassroots approaches that lack systematic methodology.

Riku Natsui's Coffee and Cleanup Club represents more than a response to urban loneliness, it's a social technology for manufacturing serendipitous connection in environments designed to prevent it. His insight that isolation results from systemic optimization rather than individual failure

reframes community building as an urban design challenge rather than social service provision.

The CCC model's success suggests that effective interventions must be simultaneously simple enough for volunteer implementation and sophisticated enough to address complex social dynamics. By creating structured informality - predictable opportunities for unpredictable connection - Natsui has developed what might be called "engineered spontaneity" for urban environments that have accidentally optimized human interaction out of daily life.

His ultimate aspiration - "a world without CCC" - reveals the deepest insight: successful community interventions should work themselves out of necessity by rebuilding social competencies and connection opportunities that urban systems have eroded. In a world increasingly characterized by the paradox of proximity, Natsui's approach offers a blueprint for intentional community design that honors both human social needs and urban realities, demonstrating how tactical urbanism principles can be applied to social infrastructure with transformative results.

Futures Thinking: Emotional Resilience and the City Ahead

Every morning, urban planners wrestle with a dilemma: how can a skyline glitter with economic success yet leave its residents feeling hollow? In Paris, Prof. Carlos Moreno envisions “sensitive cities” where sensors gauge the warmth of a park bench conversation as seriously as they tally traffic flow, marrying AI-driven efficiency with moments of human connection. Meanwhile in Vancouver, small “kindness kiosks” inspired by Pete Bombaci’s GenWell Project invite strangers to share a smile or a helping hand, turning fleeting gestures into data points of communal resilience. But as we chart these new metrics - emotional humidity, empathy indexes - do we risk reducing joy to another bureaucratic quota, or can these measurements finally reveal what it takes for a city to feel alive?

INTERVIEWS:

Carlos Moreno: Urban Proximity Is More Than a Short Walk —It’s Connecting
Pete Bombaci: Cities Don’t Create Loneliness, They Concentrate It

Urban Proximity Is More Than a Short Walk—It's Connecting

The urbanist behind the 15-minute city now champions "sensitive cities" that prioritize emotional experience over pure efficiency - designing neighborhoods that make people feel, not just function.

PROFILE:

Carlos Moreno *is* **Professor at IAE Paris-Sorbonne University and Scientific Director of the ETI Chair "Entrepreneurship-Territory-Innovation."** *A Franco-Colombian urbanist, he has advised cities worldwide on proximity-based planning and is the creator of the 15-minute city concept. His work spans urban innovation, smart cities, and human-centric urban development. He is a co-founder of the Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities, and he is widely recognised as one of the most influential contemporary voices in sustainable urbanism, with his books and ideas translated into more than 13 languages. Moreno has received multiple international awards, including the Obel Award (2021), and regularly speaks at global forums and leading academic and policy conferences.*

Carlos Moreno on:

The Paradox of Proximity

When asked to comment on "The Paradox of Proximity", the phenomenon where millions live within arm's reach yet report feeling profoundly alone, Carlos Moreno sees it as the defining contradiction of modern urban life: cities designed to concentrate human activity have become laboratories for isolation.

"We have packed people into cities through rapid urbanization. We have more and more big cities. We have built more and more developments, but without focusing on residents' quality of life," explains Moreno, the Franco-Colombian urbanist and professor at the Sorbonne whose 15-minute city concept has reshaped global urban policy from Seoul to Copenhagen. "The problem is that quality of life isn't considered in a complete way, we don't look at the whole picture of what makes life good."

Moreno has spent decades studying this fundamental paradox of proximity, why physical closeness fails to generate social connection. His response centers on what he calls a "dual intelligence" approach to city planning, harnessing both cutting-edge technology and ancient wisdom about human community.

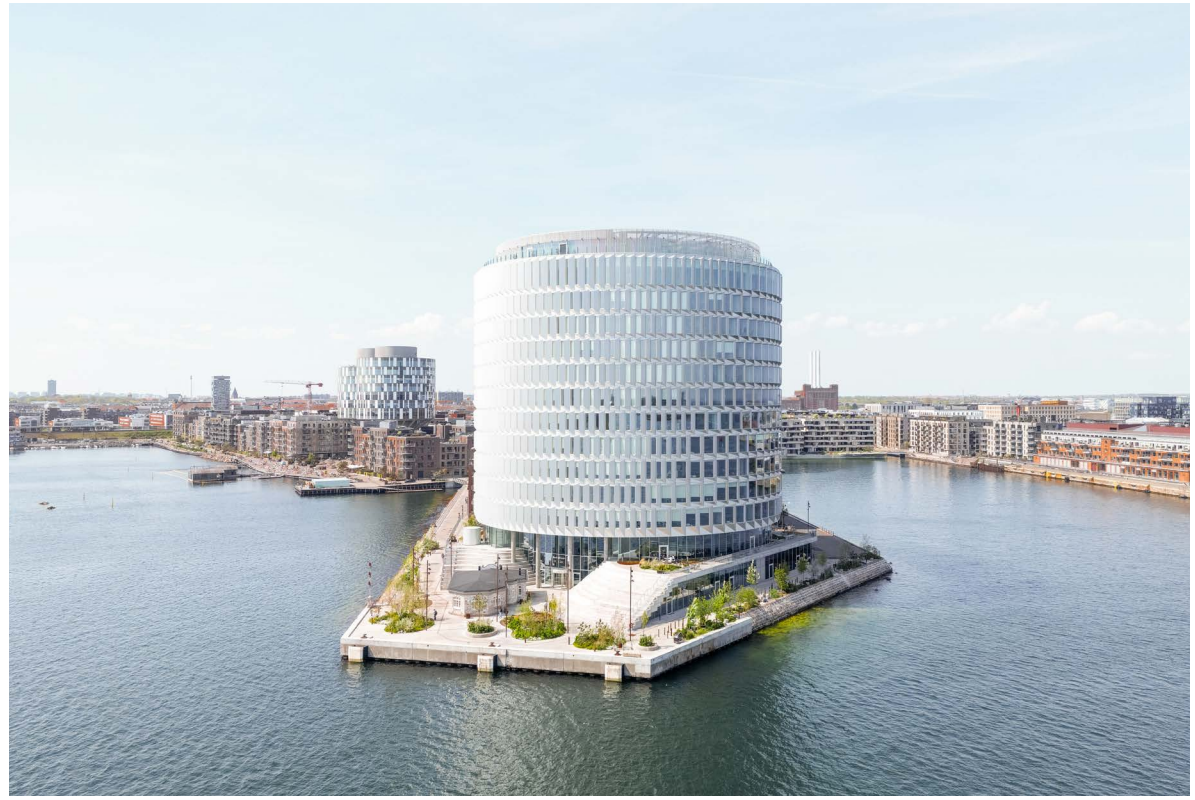
Two AIs: Artificial vs. Ancestral Intelligence

The conversation around smart cities often defaults to technological solutions. But for Moreno, the future of urban planning lies not in choosing between digital innovation and traditional community wisdom, but in orchestrating both toward genuinely livable neighborhoods.

His concept of dual intelligence emerged from observing how cities struggle to balance efficiency with emotional sustainability. Artificial intelligence, in Moreno's framework, enables what he calls "flat organizations" and flexible work arrangements that can breathe life back into neighborhoods. "Today we have artificial intelligence that can create more flexible organizations, reducing the need to be physically present in centralized offices while building new local economies," he explains. This means using technology not to isolate people further, but to enable them to work and connect locally through neighborhood co-working spaces, digital platforms that connect local freelancers with nearby clients, or apps that facilitate community resource-sharing.

But technology alone, Moreno argues, risks amplifying the very isolation it promises to solve. Cities also need what he terms "ancestral intelligence", the accumulated wisdom of human-scale community building that sustained societies for millennia.
"We need another kind of AI for our cities: ancestral intelligence that roots our economy in ancient wisdom traditions, using local materials and regenerating local jobs."

This isn't nostalgic romanticism but practical policy. Ancestral intelligence means reviving economic patterns that naturally foster social connection: local craftspeople creating furniture from regional materials, neighborhood markets anchored in local agriculture, residents learning traditional skills that become sources of both livelihood and community identity. These activities create what sociologists call "social capital", the networks of relationships that make communities resilient and individuals feel they belong.



↑ The tip of Nordø, Copehagen.
Foto: Cobe Architects

The tension between these two approaches reflects a broader challenge in contemporary urbanism. Digital technology offers unprecedented capabilities for distributed work and flexible social organization, yet its implementation often fragments communities rather than strengthening them. Moreno points to what he calls the "false bubbles" of digital platforms that substitute technological connection for genuine social interaction.

The dual intelligence framework attempts to resolve this tension by grounding technological innovation in practices proven to build lasting community bonds. Rather than choosing between digital efficiency and human connection, Moreno envisions their convergence in service of what he calls "emotionally sustainable" urban environments, places where high-tech capabilities serve fundamentally human needs rather than replacing them.

"We need another kind of AI for our cities: ancestral intelligence that roots our economy in ancient wisdom traditions, using local materials and regenerating local jobs"

Tackling Urban Loneliness Systemically

Rather than asking lonely individuals to solve isolation on their own, Moreno's framework is fundamentally about redesigning urban systems so that genuine connection becomes a natural outcome of everyday life. The focus shifts from personal responsibility toward the built environment itself.

For Moreno, the responsibility for addressing urban loneliness cannot rest solely on individual shoulders. He challenges the dominant narrative that treats isolation as a personal failing to be overcome through better social skills or more positive thinking. Instead, he argues that loneliness often stems from structural exclusion, when urban environments fail to accommodate the full spectrum of human experience and needs.

"There's a risk with technology and social networks that we keep isolating people, especially young people," Moreno observes. "Young people today are completely caught up in technological networks. We call them social networks, but they're not really social networks. They're technological networks because the social connections in these technical networks aren't real." This critique extends beyond individual usage patterns to question how cities have organized themselves around systems that prioritize efficiency over emotional well-being.

Moreno's approach involves creating cities where workspaces, markets, and social venues are accessible within walking distance, where streets and plazas encourage lingering and conversation, where local commerce and services are embedded in neighborhoods to facilitate intergenerational encounters, and where urban spaces adapt to serve diverse populations from seniors to young adults.

The goal is weaving these elements together so that neighborhoods aren't just places to live, but places where relationships grow by design. Physical proximity should create conditions for authentic social proximity through daily encounters, shared rituals, and mutual support. By changing the structure of city life, urban loneliness gets addressed at its roots rather than being left as a personal burden.

Yet the pandemic revealed both the potential and the political obstacles to this systemic approach. "Many people discovered during COVID what it means to belong to a family, to have neighbors, to have a real neighborhood," Moreno notes. This natural experiment demonstrated how neighborhood quality directly impacts mental health and social resilience.

"The difference is that a habitat is a house, yes, but it also means having access to shops, local businesses, healthcare for mental and physical health."

↓ Papirøen, CPH.
Photo: Cobe Architects

However, rather than learning from this insight, many governments responded with policies that further fragmented social cohesion. Instead of investing in community infrastructure, public spaces, and local economic development, political responses often emphasized individual responsibility, competition for scarce resources, and divisions between different groups. This fragmentation undermines the very social fabric that cities need to address loneliness effectively.

Moreno's analysis suggests that curing urban loneliness requires acknowledging it as a collective challenge requiring collective solutions. This means public investment in social infrastructure, participatory planning processes that center community voices, and economic policies that support local businesses and distributed employment. It also demands measuring urban success not just through economic metrics but through indicators of social cohesion and community well-being.

↑ Århusgadekvarteret, CPH.
Photo: Cobe Architects

How Housing Became Habitat-Free

The roots of urban loneliness, according to Moreno, lie in a fundamental confusion between providing shelter and creating habitat. Modern urban development has become obsessed with housing, "just a roof and four walls for people, built taller and taller," while systematically dismantling the broader ecosystem of services and connections that transform mere residence into genuine community.

The distinction matters more than semantics suggest. "We have two different worlds: having a house versus living well," Moreno observes, drawing on the United Nations' concept of habitat versus mere shelter. "The difference is that a habitat is a house, yes, but it also means having access to shops, local businesses, healthcare for mental and physical health."

This holistic understanding of urban habitat extends beyond basic services to encompass what Moreno sees as the full spectrum of human needs: "access to education and culture, to leisure services, to green spaces, to public spaces, to places that support gender equality and care for elderly people, children, and vulnerable groups."

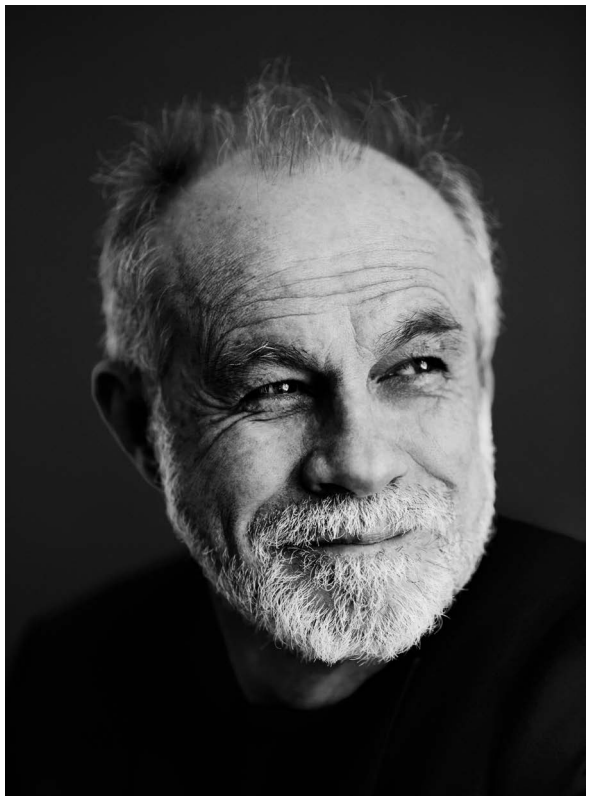
The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unexpected laboratory for testing these ideas about proximity and connection, revealing stark differences between neighborhoods designed as mere housing clusters and those functioning as genuine habitats. "Many people discovered during COVID what it means to belong to a family, to have neighbors, to have a real neighborhood," Moreno notes. Those confined to areas rich in social infrastructure weathered isolation far better than residents trapped in housing-focused developments designed around the assumption that meaningful life happened elsewhere.

Why Cities Must Build for “Everyone,” Not “All”

Central to Moreno’s philosophy lies a distinction so carefully drawn it might seem academic, yet it reveals everything about why so many well-intentioned urban planning initiatives fail to address loneliness systematically. “The question isn’t to build a city for all. The question is to build a city for everyone,” he emphasizes, articulating what amounts to a fundamental reimagining of urban inclusion.

This distinction cuts to the heart of how cities can combat loneliness at its systemic roots rather than treating it as an individual problem requiring individual solutions. A city “for all” implies a universal approach, one set of solutions, amenities, and services designed around an imagined average citizen. It’s the kind of thinking that produces standardized public spaces, identical chain stores, and housing developments that could be transplanted anywhere, serving no particular population especially well while claiming to serve everyone equally.

The problem with this approach extends beyond mere inefficiency. It actively creates the conditions for systemic loneliness. When cities are designed for a generalized “all,” they inevitably privilege certain experiences while marginalizing others, creating urban



↑ Carlos Moreno

“Multiple urban voices help shape solutions tailored to real needs rather than generic averages.”

environments that work reasonably well for those who fit the assumed norm while systematically excluding those whose needs diverge from this fictional average.

“People living in a city don’t all have the same needs,” Moreno explains with characteristic precision. “The social needs, physical needs, and emotional needs are different for a young person, a man, a woman, a pregnant woman, a single mother, elderly people, sick people, and disabled people.”

Building a city “for everyone” requires what Moreno calls a “tapestry of services,” an approach that recognizes urban diversity not as a complication to be managed but as a fundamental design principle. This means creating neighborhoods where different populations can find what they need without having to compromise their specific requirements to fit into generic solutions.

The practical implications become starkly clear through Moreno’s concrete examples: “When we ask elderly people what they need nearby, they say a doctor, an eye doctor, a dentist. Ask the same question to a young person: they want a bar, they want a club.” A city designed “for all” might provide both healthcare and nightlife but probably not in configurations that truly serve either population well. A city designed “for everyone” creates overlapping service ecosystems where elderly residents can access medical care in calm, accessible environments while young adults find vibrant social spaces, both within their respective neighborhoods’ walking distance.

This differentiated approach addresses loneliness at its systemic roots by recognizing that isolation often stems from structural exclusion rather than individual failings or personality defects. A pregnant woman struggling to navigate public transport to distant prenatal appointments, an elderly person cut off from social spaces by mobility barriers, or a young adult priced out of venues for social connection all experience loneliness as a direct consequence of cities designed for someone else’s definition of normal.

The systemic solution requires cities to become what Moreno envisions as adaptive mosaics, responsive urban environments where each neighborhood offers distinct but interconnected service tapestries shaped by their particular communities. This demands genuine participatory planning processes where “multiple urban voices help shape solutions tailored to real needs rather than generic averages.”

Social Infrastructure Replaces Physical Infrastructure

Moreno's most significant policy proposition involves what he calls the essential transformation from physical infrastructure to "social infrastructure," a concept that fundamentally redefines what cities should prioritize and how urban success should be measured in relation to combating loneliness.

"Our cities need to switch from physical infrastructure designed by engineers to new social infrastructure," Moreno argues, crediting American sociologist Eric Klinenberg with developing this crucial concept. This shift represents more than adding community programs to existing urban frameworks. It requires reconceptualizing infrastructure itself.

"Social infrastructure is infrastructure designed for social interactions, for people, to promote cultural activities, educational activities, and develop shared community life," Moreno explains. Social infrastructure treats human connection not as a byproduct of good urban design, but as its primary objective, demanding spaces that are explicitly designed to facilitate encounters, relationships, and community bonds that make urban life meaningful.

This transformation challenges the engineering-dominated approach that has shaped cities since World War II, where traditional physical infrastructure prioritizes efficiency, capacity, and technical performance, metrics that often work against the spontaneous interactions and organic community development that combat loneliness. Social infrastructure, by contrast, must function as "infrastructure for multiple users, different users, with more imagination."

Social infrastructure also demands rethinking what Moreno calls the economic geography of cities. Instead of concentrating economic activity in centralized business districts that require long commutes, he advocates for "transforming these sprawling cities into more distributed cities." This includes fostering local commerce, supporting short supply chains, and what he calls "recovering traditional skills" through re-skilling programs that ground economic activity in local materials and traditional crafts.

This shift toward distributed economic activity serves multiple purposes. It reduces the time spent in isolated commuting while increasing opportunities for local interaction and community investment. When people work closer to where they live, they become more invested in their neighborhoods and more likely to form relationships with neighbors. Local businesses create gathering places and employment opportunities that strengthen community bonds.

The transformation requires more than policy changes. It demands rethinking how urban success is measured and valued. Traditional metrics focus on aggregate economic indicators, such as GDP growth, employment rates, and property values. While these remain important, they fail to capture the quality of social connections, community resilience, or individual well-being that determine whether cities actually improve people's lives.

Moreno argues for developing new measurement frameworks that include indicators of social cohesion, community participation, and emotional sustainability. This might involve tracking the number of local businesses per neighborhood, the frequency of community events, the accessibility of public spaces, or residents' reported sense of belonging and social connection. Such metrics would help policymakers understand whether their interventions actually address urban loneliness or merely shuffle it around.

↑ Papirøen, CPH. Photo: Cobe Architects

The “Sensitive City” Prioritizes Experience Over Function

“We need to offer sensitive experiences through happy proximity, and this connects to the new economic geography of happy proximity”

Building on his proximity framework, Moreno introduces perhaps his most forward-looking concept: the “sensitive city.” “Our cities need this concept of the sensitive city for promoting the importance of physical and emotional connections,” he explains.

This concept represents a profound departure from the functional urbanism that has dominated city planning for decades. Where functional planning prioritizes efficiency and service delivery, the sensitive city acknowledges that urban residents seek environments that nourish their emotional and sensorial well-being, recognizing that isolation often stems from cities that serve practical needs while starving the human spirit.

“We need to recreate happy proximity. This is one of the goals of the 15-minute city: social connections, emotional connections,” Moreno emphasizes, positioning emotional connection as an explicit goal of urban planning rather than a hoped-for side effect.

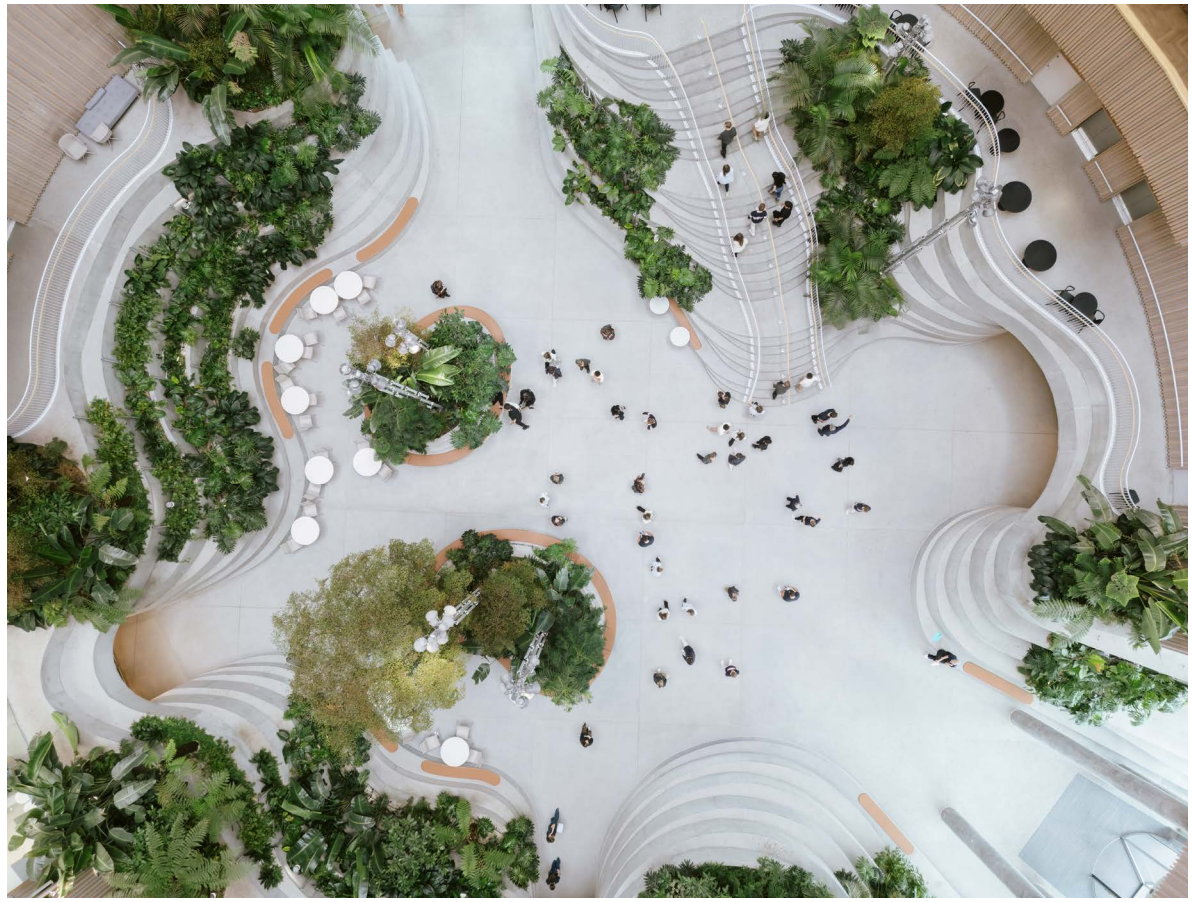
The sensitive city must offer what Moreno calls fundamentally different types of urban experiences. “In English, we have two different words: sensitive experiences and sensible experiences. Sensible experiences are more about zoning. Sensitive experiences are more about sensory experiences.” This linguistic distinction reveals a crucial conceptual difference: between cities that make rational sense and cities that engage the full range of human sensation and emotion.

Sensible experiences, the domain of traditional zoning and functional planning, organize cities around logical categories: residential zones, commercial districts, industrial areas. Sensitive experiences, by contrast, recognize that meaningful urban life emerges from the interplay of sensory, emotional, and social encounters that can’t be easily categorized or zoned.

“We need to offer sensitive experiences through happy proximity, and this connects to the new economic geography of happy proximity,” Moreno explains. The sensitive city demands “relocating our experiences” so that meaningful cultural, aesthetic, and social encounters become integrated into daily neighborhood life rather than concentrated in distant entertainment or cultural districts.

This approach represents what Moreno calls the shift “from functional urbanism to experience-based urban planning.” The transformation requires cities to prioritize the quality and character of everyday experiences over the mere provision of services. A sensitive city doesn’t just provide access to culture, it integrates cultural experiences into the rhythm of daily life. It doesn’t just offer recreational facilities, it creates environments where recreation, socialization, and community building happen organically.

The concept extends beyond individual experiences to encompass collective emotional sustainability. “We need to develop this sensitive city based on happy proximity to create good experiences in our cities,” Moreno argues. Cities must become places that actively nurture positive emotions, foster meaningful encounters, and cultivate a sense of belonging that combats urban loneliness.



The 15-Minute City Goes Global With Local Variations

← Nordhavn, CPH.
Photo: Cobe Architects

Moreno's 15-minute city concept has evolved far beyond its original formulation as a response to urban efficiency challenges. What began as a framework for ensuring residents could access essential services within a short walk or bike ride has transformed into a comprehensive reimagining of urban life that prioritizes experience, emotion, and community connection over pure logistics.

"There's the 10-minute city, 20-minute city, 20-minute territory, 10-minute territory. In Copenhagen, they have 5-minute districts. They're creating complete neighborhoods, green and thriving neighborhoods," Moreno explains, describing how the concept has adapted to diverse urban contexts while maintaining its core commitment to human-scale community building.

This evolution reflects the framework's maturation from a technical solution to a social philosophy. Early implementations focused on reducing commute times and improving service accessibility, laudable goals that nonetheless treated proximity as primarily a matter of urban efficiency. The next generation of proximity-based planning, informed by the lessons of the pandemic and growing awareness of urban loneliness, explicitly prioritizes social connection and emotional well-being alongside practical accessibility.

Through the Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities, created in partnership with UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments, Moreno has helped coordinate these diverse experiments in proximity-based planning across continents and cultures. "We've created this worldwide movement to share best practices and continue deepening this concept," he notes, with growing national interest from Spain, Scotland, and South Korea.

The global adoption represents what Moreno sees as "real fundamental change" rather than a passing planning trend driven by pandemic-era concerns. "I think we're at the same scale as the functionalism after World War II that was implemented globally. Today, nine decades later, we've created a global movement for developing happy proximity under different names."

But this new movement differs fundamentally from mid-century functionalism in its priorities and methods. Where functionalist planning prioritized industrial efficiency and standardized solutions that could be applied universally, proximity-based planning prioritizes human experience and differentiated responses to local needs and cultures. "We've started this movement, and it's not a passing trend. This is real fundamental transformation," Moreno emphasizes.

A Movement Beyond Planning Fads

Moreno positions his work within a broader historical transformation in urban planning that he sees as comparable in scope and significance to the functionalist movement that reshaped cities after World War II. Through global city networks, the movement has achieved unprecedented policy traction for proximity-based approaches that prioritize human experience alongside efficiency.

The convergence of models, from 5-minute districts to 30-minute territories, reflects local adaptation of core proximity principles that prioritize serving everyone's diverse needs rather than maximizing aggregate efficiency or conforming to universal standards. "It's good news to see projects worldwide creating this new local network for better quality of life through happy proximity."

What distinguishes this movement from previous urban planning trends is its explicit focus on addressing the social and emotional dimensions of city life that have been largely ignored by technical approaches to urban development. Rather than treating loneliness as an unfortunate side effect of urban growth, proximity-based planning treats social connection as a primary goal worthy of systematic attention and public investment.

> "It's good news to see projects worldwide creating this new local network for better quality of life through happy proximity"

Cities That Remember What Human Means

↑ Nordhavn, CPH.
Photo: Cobe Architects

Moreno's comprehensive vision offers more than policy prescriptions. It represents a fundamental rethinking of what cities are for and how urban success should be defined. By integrating dual intelligence, differentiated inclusion, and experience-led planning, cities can transform from environments that inadvertently foster isolation into spaces that actively cultivate connection for everyone.

The balance between artificial and ancestral intelligence suggests that the future of urban planning lies not in choosing between technological innovation and human connection, but in orchestrating both to create truly livable cities. This integration of proximity, experience, and emotional sustainability, designed specifically for everyone rather than all, represents one of the most essential urban planning challenges of our time.

In an era when cities house more than half the world's population, the stakes of this transformation extend far beyond urban planning to encompass the fundamental question of how human societies can thrive in an increasingly urbanized world. Moreno's vision suggests that the answer lies not in abandoning cities but in finally fulfilling their deepest promise: that physical proximity, thoughtfully designed and carefully nurtured, can become the foundation for the kinds of communities that make life meaningful.

The revolution, as Moreno sees it, isn't about building smarter cities or more efficient cities. It's about building cities that remember what it means to be human.

Cities Don’t Create Loneliness, They Concentrate It

How the founder and CEO of GenWell, Canada’s Human Connection Movement, a registered Canadian charity, is teaching us to see loneliness as an educational emergency, not a crisis.

PROFILE:

Pete Bombaci *is the* **founder and director of GenWell, Canada’s Human Connection Movement dedicated to advancing social connection and social health.**
Before launching GenWell, Bombaci built a successful career in business and marketing, including senior leadership roles at Molson Coors and as the Executive Director of Movember Canada, where he helped grow the campaign into one of the country’s most recognized men’s health initiatives. Drawing on this experience, he now applies brand-building and behavioral insights to public health, showing how simple acts of human connection can combat loneliness and strengthen communities. He is now a sought after thought leader and speaker on the topic of social health and the benefits of human connection.

Pete Bombaci on:

The Paradox of Proximity

When Pete Bombaci surveys dense urban landscapes filled with lonely residents, he doesn’t see a failure of city planning - he sees the inevitable endpoint of decades of cultural miseducation about human connection.

“The biggest problem is that we don’t understand loneliness,” argues the founder of Canada’s GenWell, whose analysis of urban isolation has caught the attention of the World Health Organization. Rather than blaming proximity itself, Bombaci positions cities as amplifiers of pre-existing social disconnection: “We grew up in the most hyper-competitive, individualistic, capitalistic society in which we started to think that we didn’t need each other.”

This reframing transforms the proximity paradox from a spatial design challenge into what Bombaci calls an “educational emergency.” Cities don’t manufacture loneliness, they concentrate and expose social health deficits that were already festering in the broader culture. The Covid pandemic, he notes, simply “it took us being ripped apart from each other for two years for people to recognize, Oh my gosh, we can’t get through this thing called life alone.”

Loneliness is not a Crisis

What makes Bombaci's approach fundamentally different from traditional urban loneliness interventions is his belief that the problem starts with how we conceptualize loneliness itself. His movement's foundation rests on what he identifies as two critical misunderstandings that have shaped decades of failed policy.

"We've already started to do a disservice to the conversation around loneliness because we've already started to call it a crisis. We've already started to label it as something that we should fear," Bombaci explains. "Instead of explaining to people that loneliness is really no different than being thirsty or hungry, it's a natural response to feeling disconnected from people."

This reframing has profound implications for how cities approach loneliness. Rather than treating loneliness as pathological - something requiring emergency intervention - Bombaci positions it as a natural human signal comparable to physical needs. "We fear it instead of embracing it just like we do when feeling thirsty or hungry. And we understand that we are all susceptible to feeling lonely and are part of the solution to each other's disconnection."

The second fundamental problem, according to Bombaci, is an unprecedented knowledge gap in public health education. "In Canada, we've had eating guidelines since 1942. We've had exercise guidelines since 1941. If I say to anybody that they should exercise every day or eat a balanced meal, nobody would blink an eye."

But when it comes to social connection, Canadians - and by extension, urban residents globally - operate in an information vacuum. "If I try to explain to them that social connections and relationships that result from them are the single greatest contributor to your health and happiness, reduce anxiety and depression, increase empathy, compassion, resilience, strengthen your immune system, strengthen your self-confidence, increase your chances of living longer, are the single greatest preventative action to avoid depression...they ask, well, why didn't anybody ever tell me how important social connection was?"

This knowledge deficit, Bombaci argues, explains why urban density often fails to translate into social connection.

Cities Need Social Scaffolding to Survive

Bombaci's analysis draws on evolutionary psychology to explain why loneliness feels so acutely damaging. "As a social species, connection has always been vital. Back in caveman times, if you left the cave on your own, you wouldn't survive. And to be cast out of the cave—that was the harshest punishment of all."

This biological imperative helps explain why modern urban design sometimes fails when it overlooks the importance of social scaffolding - the everyday structures, cues, and spaces that hold our connections in place. Scaffolding can be physical, like benches that invite conversation, or institutional, like community centers and libraries. It can also be cultural, embedded in rituals, traditions, and shared rhythms of daily life. When such scaffolding is missing, cities risk becoming efficient but isolating; when it is present, they nurture belonging, inclusion, community, and resilience.

Bombaci's research on collaborative behavior reveals why individualistic urban cultures make social challenges seem insurmountable. "Research shows that when you stand at the bottom of a hill, it looks far steeper if you face it alone. With a friend beside you, the climb suddenly feels less daunting."

This finding has direct implications for urban policy. Cities that fail to provide social scaffolding essentially make every challenge - from navigating bureaucracy to finding employment - feel more difficult than necessary.

The GenWell Model: Rewiring Cities Through an Outsider's Lens

What makes Pete Bombaci's approach to urban loneliness particularly provocative is precisely what traditional planners might consider his greatest weakness: he's not an urban planner at all. This outsider perspective, combined with his systematic approach to behavior change, offers cities a fundamentally different methodology for addressing urban loneliness.

"I can't force 41 million Canadians to start listening to me today," Bombaci acknowledges about his grassroots approach, "but I can go to the community, business, healthcare and school leaders who say, please come and educate my community on this information because I see what you're trying to do."

This institutional multiplier strategy reflects a business executive's understanding of scale and influence that differs markedly from traditional urban planning methodologies. Where planners typically focus on physical interventions - parks, plazas, transportation networks - Bombaci approaches urban connection as a behavior change challenge requiring the same systematic methodology that built successful consumer brands. And he has a three-set plan.

First Pillar: Education

Bombaci's first pillar - education - treats social connection knowledge as urban infrastructure comparable to water or electricity systems. His corporate experience shows in how he frames this gap: "Do I need to explain to you that we're supposed to exercise 20 minutes a day and that exercise can be walking or running or bike riding? No. But were you born with that knowledge? No. But you had it beaten into you... in school, at work, health programs, it was everywhere."

This systematic approach to information dissemination reflects brand management principles applied to public health. "Even brands - when you think about Nike and Reebok and Lululemon - have built their brands on these basic fundamental human needs. Just do it, go for it... Well, the problem is that nobody ever did this for social connection."

The insight offers urban governments a framework that transcends traditional planning approaches. Rather than assuming residents understand why community spaces exist, Bombaci advocates for explicit messaging about social health benefits — treating connection awareness as a municipal utility requiring active delivery.

This perspective suggests that social connection could benefit from the same strategic clarity that fitness brands apply to exercise or lifestyle. Just as Nike's "Just do it" distilled physical activity into a cultural imperative, cities could frame belonging as a shared value with tangible rewards. Messaging alone cannot replace physical infrastructure, but it can normalize the idea that seeking and sustaining human connection is not optional — it is as essential as clean water or safe streets. In this sense, public communication becomes a form of social infrastructure itself, shaping expectations, behaviors, and the invisible scaffolding that allows communities to thrive.

“Canadian research suggests that people who talk to strangers just once a week are up to three times happier than those who don’t. Yet in Canada we’ve spent fifty years telling people not to talk to strangers. The irony is that research shows these simple encounters boost happiness, optimism, trust, community, belonging, inclusion - virtually every quality people seek throughout life.”

Second Pillar: Empowerment

Bombaci’s second pillar addresses what urban planners often miss: cultural barriers to using designed spaces. His “stranger danger” analysis reveals how decades of safety messaging actively inhibited the social behaviors that community infrastructure was meant to facilitate.

“If we’ve told you for 50 years not to do something, guess what? Every person believes it by now,” he explains. “So what we need to do now is provide them the truth.” This requires what he calls “empowerment” - giving residents evidence-based permission to engage in socially beneficial behaviors their cultural conditioning discourages.

The research backing this approach is striking: “Canadian research suggests that people who talk to strangers just once a week are up to three times happier than those who don’t. Yet in Canada we’ve spent fifty years telling people not to talk to strangers. The irony is that research shows these simple encounters boost happiness, optimism, trust, community, belonging, inclusion - virtually every quality people seek throughout life.”

His approach here demonstrates how non-planner thinking can illuminate planning blind spots. Traditional urban design assumes that attractive, accessible public spaces will naturally generate social interaction. Bombaci’s business background taught him that consumer behavior requires both opportunity and explicit encouragement - insights that explain why well-designed community spaces often remain underutilized.

The workplace dimension of this insight proves particularly relevant for urban employment centers. Canadian studies show that “workplace relationships can have a combined greater impact on happiness and reduced loneliness than our own family and friends,” yet 65% of pre-pandemic office workers found relationship-building “difficult” in traditional office environments. This suggests that urban employment density - like residential density - requires intentional social programming to achieve connection outcomes.

Third Pillar:
Catalyze

The third pillar reflects Bombaci's understanding of how successful product launches require both education and structured activation opportunities. GenWell's five annual campaigns function as "catalytic occasions that are intended to give people a reminder, excuse and permission to do something that society told you not to do for far too long."

"Talk to a Stranger Week" exemplifies how marketing campaign methodology can address urban social challenges. Rather than building new infrastructure, the intervention provides temporal permission for behaviors that existing infrastructure could support - if residents felt culturally authorized to engage.

"All change begins with a small shift in behavior. First comes the spark of understanding, then the surprise of curiosity. And when you finally try, you find it is never as frightening as you were told."

This campaign approach offers cities cost-effective tools for activating underused community spaces while addressing the fundamental challenge that "the people who naturally come out are not always the people who need the support."

This last point reveals the paradox at the heart of community activation: the very individuals most in need of connection are often the least likely to show up.
It underscores the limits of one-off campaigns and highlights the importance of layered strategies — combining catalytic events with long-term scaffolding that lowers barriers for the hesitant and the isolated. True social infrastructure requires not only occasions that invite participation, but also environments that normalize it over time, so that inclusion does not depend solely on the already confident.

Permission Architecture

Bombaci's outsider perspective becomes particularly valuable in his analysis of why traditional urban interventions consistently miss their targets. His business background trained him to identify system-level failures that spatial solutions can't address.

"When I first spoke with municipalities, they dismissed our work, saying: We already do barbecues, skating parties, open streets. My response was simple: We've been doing that for 25 years — and how's it working? The crises keep growing, and yet it's often the same people who show up."

Bombaci's concept of "permission architecture" addresses a fundamental challenge that traditional urban planning overlooks: residents need explicit cultural authorization to engage in socially beneficial behaviors that decades of conditioning have discouraged. "The word permission is so critically important," he explains, noting that even well-designed community spaces fail when people don't feel authorized or welcome to use them for connection.

This framework offers cities a low-cost intervention that can activate underutilized community spaces without major capital investment. Rather than assuming residents will naturally engage in social behaviors, permission architecture provides systematic cultural scaffolding that makes connection feel socially sanctioned rather than socially risky.

This insight - that community events often serve people who already have social resources - reflects the kind of user segmentation analysis common in business but often absent from urban planning. His population-level thinking demonstrates how corporate strategy can inform social policy. "We look at society through a population lens. The Chatty Kathys and Talkative Toms are already heroes for the connections they spark. At the far end, there will always be skeptics who resist change. But in the middle — the 60 to 70 percent — lies our greatest potential. This is the group that, once nudged, can shift the culture for everyone."

The Behavioral Infrastructure Approach

"We've been designing spaces and places for decades, yet the mental health crisis and broader social challenges keep growing. Clearly, simply providing physical spaces is not the answer. We need to go upstream - to help people understand why we build a park, why we create a plaza, why we design places meant for connection?"

What distinguishes Bombaci's methodology from traditional urban planning is his focus on behavioral infrastructure rather than physical infrastructure. His corporate background taught him that successful products require both attractive design and systematic user education - lessons directly applicable to community space activation.

"We've been designing spaces and places for decades, yet the mental health crisis and broader social challenges keep growing. Clearly, simply providing physical spaces is not the answer. We need to go upstream - to help people understand why we build a park, why we create a plaza, why we design places meant for connection?"

This upstream approach offers cities a framework for evaluating community infrastructure effectiveness beyond utilization metrics. "Right now, I believe most people either dismiss it or assume it's only for the Chatty Kathys and Talkative Toms. They don't see that it's for them too. Instead, they think it's just another KPI, or the city wasting money — rather than recognizing the clear link between green spaces, opportunities to connect, and better mental and physical wellbeing for everyone."

Three Suggestions How Cities Can Build Social Health

Distilling Bombaci's insights into actionable strategies, urban planners can implement his social health approach through three key interventions that transcend traditional spatial solutions:

- **Couple design interventions with mass education campaigns explaining the "why" of spaces and programs.** Traditional planning assumes residents intuitively understand community space purposes. Bombaci's approach requires explicit communication about social health benefits. "What we need to do is ensure that everybody understands what the benefit is for them so that when you do all these things as a municipality, as a school, as a workplace, that they understand that, oh my God, this is about me."

- **Program recurring catalytic events aligned to local culture to normalize participation beyond the "already connected."** GenWell's campaign methodology demonstrates how structured occasions can provide cultural permission for socially beneficial behaviors. Cities need programming that specifically targets populations who don't naturally participate in community events, rather than serving existing social networks.

- **Measure reach into underconnected populations, not just attendance totals.** Bombaci's business background reveals how traditional metrics miss the target demographic. Success should be measured by engagement among socially isolated residents rather than overall participation numbers, which typically reflect engagement among people who already have social resources.

The GenWell approach also highlights the limitations of crisis-response frameworks that dominate urban social services. "We don't have healthcare. We have sick care," Bombaci argues, advocating for preventive approaches that maintain social health rather than treating loneliness after it becomes chronic. This perspective suggests opportunities for cities to integrate social health considerations into planning, transportation, housing, and economic development decisions.

The genius of Bombaci's approach lies in recognizing that urban loneliness requires solutions that match the complexity of modern city life - solutions that transcend the spatial focus of traditional planning and embrace the behavioral, cultural, and institutional dimensions that actually determine whether people connect. As he puts it: "Rather than waiting until people are sick or in crisis, before we try to help them, how about we swim upstream and try to help them stay happy and healthy?"

Fixing the Paradox of Proximity: What Can Cities Actually Do

The evidence from eleven distinct urban interventions across four continents converges on a startling conclusion: the paradox of proximity is not inevitable. Cities experiencing epidemic loneliness despite unprecedented density represent blind spots, not a natural consequence of urban life. From Vancouver's vertical communities to Seoul's heartware transformation, from Tokyo's creative error strategy to Toronto's fine-grain design, successful interventions demonstrate that urban environments can actively cultivate connection rather than accidentally engineering isolation.

This represents a shift in how urban leaders can conceptualize their responsibility. Cities don't create loneliness - they concentrate it, amplifying social disconnection that stems from decades of cultural miseducation about human connection and urban systems optimized for individual efficiency over collective well-being. The solution requires what researchers call "dual intelligence" - harnessing both cutting-edge technology and ancient wisdom about human community to create "sensitive cities" that prioritize emotional experience alongside functional efficiency.

Ten Principles for Connection-Centered Urban Development

1. Prevention Over Treatment: Upstream Investment in Social Health

Seoul's $327 million prevention-focused system demonstrates the economic logic of addressing loneliness before it becomes chronic. Rather than treating isolation as an individual pathology requiring therapeutic intervention, successful cities invest in "social infrastructure"—systematic connections between healthcare, community spaces, and programming that addresses 80% of health determined outside clinical medicine.

Implementation:
Establish cross-sector tables (city, health, schools, university, clubs, NGOs, funders) that own common dashboards tracking social connection metrics alongside traditional health outcomes. Finland's Boostii program exemplifies this approach through universal access for all 7-19-year-olds, removing economic barriers to hobby participation while avoiding stigmatizing means-testing.

2. Dignity Preservation: Universal Access Without Stigmatization

Effective interventions avoid marking participants as socially deficient. Research demonstrates that deficit-focused approaches can increase isolation by highlighting social inadequacy rather than building on existing strengths. The framing of loneliness as "crisis" creates additional barriers to engagement by suggesting personal failure rather than systemic challenges requiring environmental solutions.

Implementation:
Design programs with "dignity-preserving architecture"—universal eligibility that allows families to decide which activities suit their children, rather than accepting assigned interventions. Vancouver's model demonstrates how regulatory incentives can embed social outcomes into development without additional taxpayer burden through density bonuses for community-focused buildings.

3. Cultural Authorization: Permission Architecture for Social Behavior

Cities must provide explicit authorization for socially beneficial behaviors that cultural conditioning discourages. The concept of "permission architecture" addresses how fifty years of stranger danger messaging actively inhibits the social interactions that community infrastructure was designed to facilitate. Research shows Canadians who talk to strangers once weekly are three times happier than those who don't, yet cultural programming discourages such encounters.

Implementation:
Complement physical infrastructure with systematic communication about social health benefits. Seoul's 10% increase in public support for loneliness intervention following sustained public education demonstrates how cities can reshape cultural attitudes about community engagement and mutual support.

4. Environmental Design: Spatial Solutions to Social Challenges

Treat loneliness as environmental condition requiring spatial intervention rather than individual therapy. Planning research reveals that while planners cannot force community engagement, cities can create conditions that make connection significantly more likely through environmental behavior modification that operates below the level of conscious decision-making.

Implementation:
Focus on what urban designers call "the aggregation of all the little micro moves"—pedestrian-level environmental modifications that influence behavior: comfortable seating positioned for conversation, sight lines connecting indoor and outdoor activity, elimination of hostile architecture, walkable access to diverse services and social venues.

5. Programming as Infrastructure: Social Software Equals Physical Hardware

Cities invest billions in physical infrastructure while neglecting the social programming necessary to activate spaces.
The fundamental gap occurs where cities build amazing infrastructure, buildings, paths, and parks, but then wonder why people don't use them. Programming represents the "software that brings infrastructure to life" and requires systematic investment comparable to capital projects.

Implementation:
Integrate programming budgets into capital infrastructure projects from conception rather than treating social activation as optional add-on. Tokyo's Coffee and Cleanup Club demonstrates how monthly one-hour events with minimal infrastructure can create sustained community when programming provides consistent opportunities for low-commitment social engagement.

6. Universal But Differentiated: Design for Everyone's Diverse Needs

Move beyond "cities for all" toward "cities for everyone". This distinction recognizes that universal approaches often privilege certain experiences while marginalizing others, creating urban environments that work reasonably well for assumed norms while systematically excluding divergent needs. Effective proximity planning requires acknowledging diverse relationship to space, mobility, and social engagement.

Implementation:
Create what researchers call "tapestry of services" acknowledging that elderly residents need accessible healthcare while young adults seek vibrant social spaces—both within walking distance but in configurations serving each population authentically. This requires genuine participatory planning processes where diverse community voices shape intervention development.

7. Data-Driven Targeting: Predictive Analytics Respecting Privacy and Choice

Loneliness follows predictable patterns that can be interrupted through environmental changes. Seoul's sophisticated analysis utilizing 46 types of emergency information, including gas and electricity usage patterns enables proactive identification of at-risk individuals, while Finland's longitudinal research reveals social isolation as systematic rather than random phenomenon.

Implementation:
Develop early warning systems that balance population-level insights with individual privacy protection. Map who is missing out by layering functional capacity, club participation, and socioeconomic indicators to target neighborhoods with steepest participation drop-offs while maintaining universal program eligibility.

8. Cross-Sector Coordination: Collective Impact Approaches

Urban challenges increasingly span traditional governance boundaries, requiring sustained collaboration across sectors that rarely coordinate. Successful approaches require "collective impact projects" that achieve shared outcomes impossible through isolated interventions by bringing together housing providers, health authorities, researchers, and residents around common metrics.

Implementation:
Establish "sustained partnership around shared outcomes rather than departmental mandates". This requires institutional evolution beyond traditional planning focused on "doling out development permissions on private land" toward comprehensive city-building that coordinates parks, transit, culture, economic development, and community facilities.

9. Agency and Autonomy: Honor Individual Choice While Creating Conditions

Successful interventions preserve individual choice about participation level while creating multiple pathways for connection. Social prescribing approaches ask "what matters to you?" and enable participants to "co-create their social prescription" based on personal values and circumstances rather than prescribed activities, honoring individual autonomy while addressing systemic isolation.

Implementation:
Provide what Tokyo researchers call dual spaces: ibasho (places for being) and debang (places for action), supporting individual well-being while enabling collective contribution. This requires structured flexibility where social purpose remains clear but usage possibilities stay open-ended.

10. Measured Outcomes: Track Social Connection Alongside Traditional Metrics

Develop measurement frameworks that include indicators of social cohesion, community participation, and emotional sustainability. Traditional metrics focusing on aggregate economic indicators fail to capture quality of social connections, community resilience, or individual well-being that determine whether cities actually improve lives rather than merely house people efficiently.

Implementation:
Track what researchers call "longitudinal evaluation following outcomes not just in BMI or fitness, but in mental health, school participation, and social connectedness". Vancouver's pilots demonstrate 40% higher resident participation in community activities and measurably stronger social support networks through systematic documentation of social infrastructure effectiveness.

The Economic Case: Social Connection as Urban Competitiveness

Cities exist fundamentally to create conditions where human beings can thrive, not merely to generate economic output.

This isn't just social policy, it's comprehensive urban governance recognizing that economic success depends on social health. Connected communities demonstrate measurable returns on public investment: reduced emergency service demands, higher civic engagement rates, enhanced crisis resilience, and decreased healthcare costs. Vancouver's emergency services report 30% fewer wellness checks in buildings with active social programming. Toronto's connected neighborhoods show faster emergency response through neighbor reporting and lower crime rates. Seoul's prevention approach has already exceeded projected demand by 300%, indicating profound unmet need that traditional urban services have failed to address.

This positions social infrastructure as economic development strategy alongside social policy, but within a framework that prioritizes human well-being as the ultimate measure of urban success. Cities must be a place where people want to be because it's a joyful place to attract and retain residents who have multiple location choices in an increasingly mobile knowledge economy. But the goal isn't just competitive advantage - it's creating urban environments where economic prosperity serves human flourishing rather than the reverse.

Investment in social connection infrastructure represents competitive advantage in the global competition for talent and innovation, while simultaneously honoring cities' deeper purpose: enabling the kinds of communities that make life meaningful. This dual focus - economic competitiveness and human thriving - reflects what is called the evolution toward "sensitive cities" that measure success by residents' emotional experience alongside traditional economic indicators.

The Path Forward: Turning Urban Density Into Community Wealth

The future of healthy cities lies in designing environments that actively cultivate the relationships that make urban life meaningful. This requires acknowledging the fundamental insight that “our bodies happen in relationships” - viewing spatial design and social infrastructure as essential determinants of public health rather than optional amenities.

For urban leaders worldwide, the evidence is clear: cities can become places that don’t merely house people efficiently, but actively nurture the connections that transform proximity into community. Thankfully, the tools exist, the models are proven, and the economic case is compelling.

The revolution isn’t about building smarter cities or more efficient cities. It’s about building cities that fulfill their deepest promise: that physical proximity, thoughtfully designed and carefully nurtured, can become the foundation for the kinds of communities that make life meaningful.

Quick Guide:
10 Ways to Tackle the Paradox of Proximity

1. Stop the Bleeding Before Treating the Wound
Think prevention, not emergency response. Seoul spent $327 million to catch loneliness before it becomes chronic depression. Finland gives every kid ages 7-19 free access to clubs and sports. It's cheaper than fixing broken people later.

What to do: Get your health department, schools, parks, and housing folks in the same room. Track social connection like you track crime stats. Fund programming before you fund therapy.

2. Make Help Feel Normal, Not Shameful
Nobody wants to join the "lonely people club." The best programs feel like regular community life, not social services. Universal access means everyone's invited, not just people who admit they're struggling.

What to do: Design programs that appeal to everyone. Density bonuses for developers who build community rooms that actually get used. Free weekend programming in schools. Make it about fun, not fixing people.

3. Give People Permission to Be Neighborly
Many years of "stranger danger" killed our social instincts. Cities need to actively encourage the interactions that make communities work. Research shows people who chat with strangers once a week are three times happier. But our culture says don't talk to strangers.

What to do: Launch campaigns about social health benefits. Seoul increased public support for loneliness programs by 10% through education. Make being social feel smart, not risky.

4. Design Spaces That Nudge Connection
Your built environment is either pushing people together or pulling them apart. Small changes—where you put benches, how sidewalks connect, whether people can see each other—make huge differences in whether neighbors actually meet.

What to do: Audit your public spaces for "micro-moves" that encourage interaction. Comfortable seating positioned for conversation, not just individual use. Sight lines between indoor and outdoor activities. Walkable access to diverse hangout spots.

5. Programming Is Infrastructure, Not Optional Add-On
Beautiful empty spaces don't build community. Cities spend millions on parks and wonder why they're unused. The secret sauce is programming—regular activities that give people reasons to show up and connect.

What to do: Budget programming from day one of capital projects. Monthly community events with minimal infrastructure can build lasting relationships. Hire community managers like you hire maintenance staff.

6. Everyone Means Everyone, Not "One Size Fits All"
Universal doesn't mean identical. A good 15-minute neighborhood serves 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds, recent immigrants and longtime residents, people who walk and people who use wheelchairs. Different needs, same neighborhood.

What to do: Layer services within walking distance. Healthcare for seniors, nightlife for young adults, playgrounds for families—all accessible but designed for their primary users.

7. Use Data to Find Who's Missing
Loneliness isn't random - it follows patterns. Seoul tracks utility usage to identify at-risk residents. Finland maps which kids aren't participating in activities. You can predict and prevent isolation if you know where to look.

What to do: Layer participation data with demographics. Where are the biggest drop-offs in community engagement? Target those neighborhoods with universal (not stigmatizing) programming.

8. Break Down Government Silos
Loneliness doesn't fit in one department. It spans housing, health, parks, economic development, and transportation. The best solutions require collaboration across sectors that usually don't talk to each other.
What to do: Create cross-sector teams with shared budgets and shared success metrics. Stop organizing around departmental mandates, start organizing around community outcomes.

9. Let People Choose Their Own Adventure
Force-feeding connection backfires. The best programs offer multiple entry points and let people decide their level of involvement. Some want quiet spaces to just be around others. Some want active volunteering. Both matter.

What to do: Create what Tokyo calls "dual spaces"—places for being and places for doing. Clear purpose, flexible participation. Ask people what matters to them, then help them find it.

10. Measure What Matters
Track social connection like you track economic indicators. How many people know their neighbors? How many have someone to call in an emergency? How many participate in community activities? These predict city success better than GDP.

What to do: Add social metrics to your city dashboard. Vancouver shows 40% higher community participation in buildings with social programming. Measure it, manage it, improve it.

The Paradox of Proximity