

PSYCHOLOGY OF URBAN CITIES

There are five ways to encourage happiness in the urban landscape, according to leading academic, Kevin Bennett.

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There's no doubt about it, people are continually enticed by big-city living. And, while there are countless benefits to living in cities, it's becoming more and more apparent that happiness and well-being are not always part of the picture.

Kevin Bennett, Associate Teaching Professor at Pennsylvania State University in the US, was lead author on a recent study in the *Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health* that looks at the link between mental health and the way a city is designed. "I'm really interested in the way that social and personality factors interact with urban design and how this is ultimately related to well-being and mental health issues," he says.

According to Bennett, while there are many wonderful aspects of living in a big city, such as economic and cultural benefits, there are increasing numbers of individuals who are feeling isolated. In highly populated areas you may expect there would be plenty of opportunities to interact with people; however, the opposite is true. "The more people around, the easier it is to just slip by without having meaningful face-to-face interactions with people," says Bennett. "The accumulative effect, psychologically, is that people report feeling isolated and lonely, and ultimately we're seeing higher rates of depression."

Through the study, Bennett and his colleagues offer five suggestions for city planning and architecture that would help combat these

problems and promote well-being and quality of life:

Design for optimal group size

Bennett says there is mounting evidence, mostly from anthropology and evolutionary biology, to suggest that our human brains are designed to fit within a group size of 150 people. "Obviously, we can be around more than 150 people, but to have meaningful emotional interactions with people, to be able to remember important events in individual lives, the number is around 150," he says. "Anytime you go greater than that, you lose some of the significance of those relationships." Bennett believes that if we could design elements of a city that encouraged that maximum level of group within one geographical space, the benefits would be enormous.

Design for face-to-face interaction

In today's digital landscape, we communicate so easily via text, Skype and the many social media platforms. We can order food, books or clothes online without having to talk to anyone. While this technology is fantastic, it also means increasingly less face-to-face interaction, which, according to Bennett, has a long-term effect on mental health and well-being. "We want to emphasise that modern environments and urban areas need to include spaces for face-to-



face interactions," he says. "It might be as simple as setting up chairs and tables in public spaces, so they actually face each other and you're forced to interact with people."

Design for the savanna

This category refers to the grasslands of Africa where Bennett believes much of our evolutionary challenges were faced. "We have cognitive, emotional and social systems that are adapted to that particular environment, as well as the basic preferences that we have for landscapes," he says. According to Bennett, studies reveal that the more greenery people have around them – such as plant life, flowers or grass – the happier and healthier they are. There are also studies on how quickly people heal in hospitals. "If they have a window with a view of a park or trees, or have a plant or flowers inside their hospital room, they actually heal faster than people who don't," says Bennett.

Design for mobility

Bennett considers this as one of the key features, as lack of mobility is why people feel so isolated in big cities. "You need mass transportation or other forms of infrastructure that allow you to transport yourself from one spot to another," he says. The study also involved looking at prisons, which revealed that lack of mobility was one of the greatest

frustrations for prisoners. "So, if you're not in prison and you live in a city, why would you want to feel like you are in prison?" says Bennett.

Design for city responsiveness

Much like the urban design movement known as 'Conscious Cities', this idea is about taking a city, an inanimate object made of non-living materials, and bringing it to life. According to the study, a 'responsive' city could react to our needs, offering things such as meaningful after-school play for kids or increasing opportunities for social interaction. For Bennett, an example of 'city responsiveness' is an art installation in Jerusalem's Valero Square called *Warde*. It consists of four inflatable flowers, each nine metres high, nine metres wide and fitted with a sensor. When someone passes a flower, it opens and provides temporary shade until the person moves on. "You almost feel like, even though there's no person there, the city itself is responding to you," says Bennett.

Overall, the study offers much food for thought and has attracted positive feedback, prompting even more ideas to address the isolation and increasing rates of depression that exist in these urban landscapes. "That's what I wanted from the paper," says Bennett. "I wanted to generate more conversation and more thought on this issue." ●