Liveable Cities: Ideas and Action

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Making Cities More Livable: Ideas and Action

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INTRODUCTION

Living in a crowded, polluted, noisy Asian city such as Dhaka, Bangkok, or Jakarta, one may easily believe that the defining characteristics of cities are that they are unpleasant places to live. Cities are often dirty, polluted, noisy, crowded, and unsafe, both in terms of crime and road accidents. Ironically, the very advantages which attract people to cities can become unattainable due to the efforts of so many people to reach them; in the course of profiting from a city’s various advantages, the city’s residents can destroy the fabric of the city. Even on better days, in Dhaka and many other cities, noise levels are dangerously high, and the air is toxic. Further problems, not limited to but common in cities, include problems with supply of water and electricity, and adequate drainage and sanitation systems.

Given all their problems, we may thus think of cities as places we are forced to live, in order to gain various opportunities while enduring an unpleasant environment. People living in the same apartment building for years may not know their neighbors; despite high density, we are often more separate from our neighbors in the city than in the far less populated countryside. In cities, opportunities to socialize are rare, especially for those of low income; outdoor recreation is limited and often unpleasant. In cities, unlike the countryside, children have few places to play; they thus spend much of their free time in front of the television or computer, interacting neither with other children nor with their own families.

Why then do so many people choose to live in cities? People come to cities for many reasons: to seek a good job, to send their children to better schools, to get health care, for recreation, to meet friends, and so on. Due to their concentrated populations, cities offer many advantages that cannot be replicated in the countryside: a similar quality and quantity of jobs, educational institutions, health care services, and recreational opportunities simply cannot exist in rural areas. Similarly, such diverse opportunities for meeting, mixing with, and learning from different people cannot, by definition, exist in less densely-populated areas.

It is thus difficult and unfair to attempt to stop migration to cities entirely, though certainly improving conditions in other parts of the country could help alleviate some of the rush on cities. At the same time, city life could be drastically improved not through attempting to stop migration, but rather through addressing the reasons that urban life is so problematic.

According to David Engwicht, an Australian writer and advocate, the city is “an invention to maximize exchange opportunities and to minimize travel.”\(^1\) That is, in cities we have access to

\(^1\) Engwicht 1999
ideas, goods, food, money, friendship, and hopes, without having to travel far to reach them. How then should cities be? Places where we can easily encounter many people and ideas; good schools and jobs; art, music, drama...in short, all the advantages one obtains from having many people and objects within a relatively small place. Cities should be pleasant, fun, and livable. A well-designed city, one that is meant for people, would be a city we could all love.

So why are so many of our cities such wretched places to live, if they could be so wonderful? What has gone wrong? In the words of Jan Gehl, famous Danish architect and professor, “Automobiles have invaded our cities and squeezed everyone else to the side.” By giving center space—and priority—to the car, we have forced people to the margins. It is not cities themselves that are the problem, but the fact that they are designed to suit cars, not people.

“We have been building cities more for the mobility of automobiles than the happiness of its inhabitants,” writes Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, a man who has done much to transform his city into a wonderful place. Despite what we have come to believe, cars are not inevitable. Cities are old inventions; for 5,000 years, all city streets were pedestrian. Cars have only invaded our cities recently, yet in the total transformation they have brought about, we have forgotten our 5,000 year history of living without them. That is, introducing cars into cities over the last one hundred years is a recent—and clearly flawed—experiment. We have not yet learned how to create cities that accommodate both cars and people—or have we? In many cities, by addressing the problems caused by cars and giving people top priority, quality of life has been restored to the residents.

We need to believe that we can make cities good places, which involves remembering or recognizing the positive attributes of cities. Related to this, we shouldn’t allow transport to destroy our quality of life. By focusing so much of our energy on ensuring that people can get from here to there, we forget about the rest of our lives, the time spent not in transport. If we destroy our city to enable people to travel long distances, we no longer have destinations worth arriving at. Our focus should be on creating a good city, where people can access places and things nearby; transport should serve our needs, rather than being the first priority in urban planning.

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2 Cited in Chan 2005
3 Peñalosa 2002
While this publication focuses mostly on Dhaka, the problems—and potential solutions—are common to many other cities around the world.

EXISTING CITIES

Big cities are home to many inter-related problems. Addressing some key issues will facilitate efforts to improve many aspects of cities, including aspects not covered in this publication. The following list, rather than being comprehensive, is meant to be illustrative of problems of many cities currently—problems often at the root of many other urban crises.

- Frequent traffic jams waste fuel and time, make travel difficult and unpleasant, make bus service inefficient, and add to noise and air pollution. Travel time can vary greatly from day to day and at different times of the day, making trip planning extremely difficult.

- Very few children, disabled, or elderly people can be seen moving independently in the streets. This leads to a series of problems: lack of independence and self-confidence for the young and elderly; a burden on those who must escort them; and limited ability for vulnerable groups to access education, income-earning opportunities, health care, and recreation.

- People live in fear of crime and accidents. People living in the same building rarely know their neighbors; social isolation leads to unhappiness. Crime increases when people do not know or interact with their neighbors, when streets are empty of people (albeit filled with motorized vehicles), and when alienation prevents people from looking out for or taking an interest in others. Serious accidents occur as a result of the weight and speed of vehicles; while it is almost impossible for a rickshaw or cyclist to kill someone, a fast-moving car or truck can easily do so. In Dhaka, 76% of traffic fatalities involve a pedestrian being hit by a fuel-dependent vehicle. Beyond the actual rate of crime and crashes, fear restricts people’s freedom of movement, and leads to anxiety and depression.

- While walking constitutes a major mode of travel, pedestrians experience many obstacles, include dumping of construction material and parking of cars on footpaths. Since walking is the main form of travel in Dhaka, this means that all activities that rely

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4 Bangladesh Ministry of Communication 2004
on physical access are hampered, from the bus system to factory and other occupational productivity to education and health care.

People who cycle, whether to save money, because it is the quickest way to get around, or for other reasons, do so in very unpleasant conditions at the risk of their lives.

People are disturbed day and night by noise pollution; the noise disrupts children’s study, adults’ work, and everyone’s sleep, leading to what may be a significant decline in productivity.5

Children have little or no opportunity to play outside, and few if any schools have playgrounds, meaning that children grow up with few physically active recreational opportunities and few chances to socialize with other children or with adults. Yet physical activity is essential for children’s intellectual as well as physical and social development,6 and interpersonal skills—often learned on the street—are critical for professional success and happiness7.

Youth and adults have few opportunities to enjoy outdoor, free recreation, and may utilize shopping malls as places to meet friends—a highly inefficient use of malls, and an unsatisfactory substitute for pleasant outdoor spaces.

As the above list suggests, and as a quick glance through our newspapers confirms, traffic in our cities is a major issue leading to poor quality of life, as well as disrupting commerce, education, and other activities. In our attempts to deal with traffic issues, we have simply made them worse, and created an unpleasant environment as well.

The key to the problem lies not simply in design or planning, but in our priorities. The most attractive parts of European cities are the ancient quarters which sprang up spontaneously, without planning. Planning has brought with it the range of problems listed above; planning will only solve our urban problems if we reconsider our most basic concepts about cities. At the core of the problem is the fact that, in cities, we have come to prioritize movement above all else, and in prioritizing movement, we have come to prioritize cars over all other transport.

This is not to say that travel is not important in cities. But when determining priorities, it is not sufficient simply to say that something is necessary. After all, many things are necessary in life: housing, jobs, education, health care, even recreation. Transport should only be one aspect of

5 Dey, Kabir, and Efroymson 2002
6 Bangkok Post 2007
7 Jacobs 1989, Goleman 1997
urban life, not the key one. Yet from discussions of urban problems in Dhaka newspapers, one would think that housing for cars is more important than housing for people, and that daily traffic jams are a bigger problem than unemployment, lack of access to water, and the malnutrition of roughly half of children.

Fortunately, by rearranging our priorities and learning from international experience about traffic, we can both improve other aspects of life and reduce our traffic problems. Hard to believe? Consider how much progress we have made in reducing traffic congestion, despite all the attention and sizeable funding the problem has received. International experience shows that building more roads encourages more driving, and thus creates more traffic congestion. By prioritizing quality of life over transport, and discouraging long-distance travel, we could reduce traffic jams, thereby creating a positive cycle in which more people walking and using other fuel-free transport leads to improvements which in turn further increase such non-polluting modes and the overall quality of life. The situation could then continue to improve, instead of, as at present, continuing to deteriorate.

CITIES FOR PEOPLE

Are cities by their nature polluted, unpleasant places to live? Or is it possible to design cities such that people can enjoy many of their advantages without suffering to the same degree as at present from their downsides?

The wide variety of cities around the world demonstrates both what often goes wrong, and what can go right, with cities. While we need to learn from the mistakes of cities that have become unpleasant, polluted, crime-ridden, and isolating places to live, and avoid their mistakes, we also need to learn from the cities that have gotten things right. Cities that have fewer traffic problems, cleaner air, less noise, less crime, and more opportunities for outdoor socializing and recreation share certain points in common. In such cities, it is clear that basic mobility is a right, and can be ensured for all by providing good conditions for walking, cycling, and public transport. In such cities, planners realize that cars give mobility to the few in return for destroying it for the many, and thus conflict with urban quality of life.

As Peñalosa says, a good city is a place where people can walk or ride bicycles and feel safe doing it. Not just safe, but find pleasure in the activity. Rather than feeling we are spending or wasting time getting around the city, we can get our exercise and our recreation while transporting ourselves. Instead of sitting in traffic, movement by foot, cycle or rickshaw could be pleasurable—and, given current traffic conditions, movement would be little or no slower than if traveling by car.
Consider that in addition to transport, people need recreation and socializing—not just with friends and family indoors, but outdoors, where they can watch and sometimes interact with strangers, thus tightening social connections within the city. In Dhaka, people gather on footpaths, at Dhaka University’s Teacher-Student Center (TSC), and in other open spaces, but for many, the chief gathering place is in shopping malls. The outdoor environment isn’t conducive to meeting; almost nowhere are places set aside for people, and buffered from the noise, fumes, and danger of motorized vehicles. Yet according to Peñalosa, “When a shopping mall replaces public space as a meeting place for people, it tends to be a symptom that the city’s ill. There are a lot of ill cities in the United States and all over the world.”

In pleasant, livable cities, cities for people, housing is designed for people, not cars; the entrance to buildings is through doors, not parking lots, and the ground floor is used for people (via shops, cafés, and housing), not parked cars. High density is no longer a dirty word; the streets echo with the sounds of people, but gone are the screeching of horns and the roar of engines. Places taken back from cars are converted into outdoor play spaces, markets, gardens, and small parks. Further to reducing the need for transport, some city streets can be turned into beaches, by dumping sand on streets along the river and encouraging temporary cafés, as is done in cities such as Paris and Budapest in the summer, giving busy city workers with no chance to travel to the beach the chance to have a beach holiday right in the city.

In livable cities, public transport is the main way to travel long distances, while bicycles and rickshaws are preferred, along with walking, for short to medium distances. Walking can becomes the main form of transport, with pedestrians having priority on the streets, as they do in such cities as Geneva, Zurich, and Stockholm. Cars wait for pedestrians, not vice versa; cars rise up to the level of the crosswalk, rather than pedestrians “invading” the street.

Cities around the world have introduced pedestrianized centers, in part or full, including Cartagena, Colombia; Guangzhou, China; Copenhagen, Denmark; Bologna, Italy; Lübeck and Nuremberg, Germany; York, England; Budapest, Hungary; and Geneva and Zürich, Switzerland. Other cities and towns have no cars at all, including Venice, Italy and Zermatt, Switzerland.

What happens when streets become pedestrianized, banning all other forms of transport or allowing only bicycles? First, they become hugely popular, with shops and restaurants doing a roaring business, as people flock to their attractive environments. Sidewalk cafés flourish, children run and play, people gather on stairways and benches; humanity and civilization thrive. Such areas quickly become the heart of the city, the most popular place to be. The

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* Cited in McCall, “Living in a city without cars”
experiment in turning a main downtown street in Copenhagen, Denmark into a pedestrian area was so successful that it has been rapidly expanded over the years, as neighboring business owners pleaded to have their areas also pedestrianized so they could experience a similar rise in profits.

Thus, and perhaps contrary to expectations, in high-income cities around the world, walking is respected. City governments consciously create quality walking environments. Walking isn’t just for the poor; downtown business workers, government officials, and shop owners all enjoy their pleasant, social walk to work in beautiful environments. Cars, not pedestrians, are treated as unwanted visitors; rather than erecting cement blockades and barbed wire fences to prevent pedestrians from entering zones meant for cars, cars are kept out of areas that allow pedestrians—that is, people—to thrive. Markets can spring up, vendors peddle their wares, people stand around and talk, and children have space to run, skip, laugh, and be children.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Before going into further detail about what we could do to make our cities better, it is important to consider what we shouldn’t do. These points will sound familiar, because they are precisely what is happening in many cities around the world today. Specifically, we shouldn’t build more roads, we shouldn’t add more cars, and we shouldn’t ban or hinder fuel-free transport (rickshaws, rickshaw vans, and bicycles).

Why not? How are people to get around without abundant roads and cars? We’ve all heard that fuel-free transport is slow and gets in the way of those needing to travel far and fast. Cities are about energy, movement, and life; they shouldn’t be designed for those wishing to move at a crawl, protest the planners.

But what happens when we widen existing roads and build new ones? First, we have to knock down many destinations to do so. In the process, people have to travel farther, which increases travel demand, thus canceling out whatever benefits we gained from building more roads. Further, as cars continue to increase without any controls on their number, they overwhelm new road systems just as they did old ones. It is impossible to keep pace in road expansion or road building with an uncontrolled increase of cars. Moreover, the more cars we have on the roads, the less pleasant and safe environment there is for other modes; more people are thus
motivated to switch to driving rather than walking or using other non-polluting modes, and again traffic jams increase.

Although cars and motorbikes potentially can move faster than fuel-free vehicles, they also take up far more road space, and both size and speed are relevant in considering congestion. In addition to the space they occupy when moving is the space they occupy when parked. Since average traffic speeds in many Asian cities are no faster than what one could easily reach on a bicycle, speed is no advantage for fuel-dependent vehicles. With a car occupying 2.5 times as much space as a rickshaw, it is cars, not fuel-free transport, that create traffic jams.\(^9\)

**REDUCING TRAFFIC THE EFFECTIVE WAY**

Reduction of traffic congestion would dramatically improve quality of life and reduce costs. Yet around the world, it has become clear that by building more roads, one simply attracts more traffic.

“Experience suggests that traffic tends to expand to fill available road space. This process also works in reverse. As road space is reduced, traffic shrinks so the overall level of service is roughly unchanged. This process is termed ‘traffic evaporation’. One of the most effective ways of avoiding traffic growth is simply not to provide for it. Further transfer from car to public transport can occur if the latter is allowed access to large areas denied to car traffic. Pedestrianisation also increases the retail turnover of town centres, contrary to popular belief.”\(^11\)

As someone once said, “Curing congestion by building more roads is like curing obesity by buying bigger pants.” Or, in the words of Peñalosa, “International experience has made it clear that trying to solve traffic problems [by] building more roads is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline.”\(^12\) That is, the problems caused by congestion aren’t simply traffic jams, but all the resulting noise, vehicle fumes, and the space that can’t be put to better use. Expanding our roads only worsens all those problems.

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\(^9\) STP 2005  
\(^10\) Bari and Efroymson Dec. 2005  
\(^11\) [http://www.ace.mmu.ac.uk/Resources/Fact_Sheets/Key_Stage_4/Air_Pollution/29.html](http://www.ace.mmu.ac.uk/Resources/Fact_Sheets/Key_Stage_4/Air_Pollution/29.html)  
\(^12\) Peñalosa 2002.
What does work to decrease traffic jams, as shown in cities throughout the world which have experimented both with increasing and decreasing road space? Strange as it sounds, giving less space to cars leads to less congestion. The process of traffic evaporation occurs, in which a reduction in road space actually leads to a reduction in traffic. With road space for cars declining, people realize that driving is the slowest and most inconvenient way to get somewhere, or that other modes are more convenient and pleasant. People thus choose to go to closer rather than farther locations, choose more space-saving means of transport, and avoid unnecessary travel. As a result, traffic volume declines, often significantly. For example, a 1998 study in London of the impact of reducing highway capacity at several locations found that within the areas where capacity was reduced, traffic declined from 16% to 25%.

Traffic evaporation can be induced first by not building more road space or providing greater facilities for cars; then by converting some existing road space into provisions for bicycles and rickshaws, by improving public transit, by widening footpaths and planting more trees along roads.

Of course if we want traffic jams, incessant noise, and air that is difficult to breathe, cities of cement without proper drainage, cities with few trees or parks, where children have no place to play outdoors and people without cars feel they are risking their lives to go anywhere, then we should continue just as we are doing. If our goal is to create unpleasant, unlivable, polluted cities and to increase deaths from traffic accidents, pollution, and obesity, we could not have done better than to design cities as we have been doing.

THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING AND MIXED-USE ENVIRONMENTS

Traditionally, urban planning mandates that different uses should all be separated—workplaces, homes, and commercial areas all in their own, separate zone. Whatever the intended benefits of such a set-up, the reality is that such arrangements require people to travel more. Every morning, a sea of people leave their residential area, and every evening, they return en masse, while during the day, women and children are abandoned there, often trapped in their homes due to the lack of pleasant outdoor environments. The surge of movement naturally leads to traffic congestion; getting to required destinations requires both time and money.

Wouldn’t it be more efficient to move things closer, rather than force people to travel farther? In a mixed-use area, the flow of people would be in different directions, not mostly in and out of certain areas. In addition, with people traveling shorter distances, they would be moving for

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13 http://www.ealingfoe.org.uk/papersitems/TramDispTraffic.html
less time, and thus occupying road or footpath space for less time. As a result, there would be less congestion. Since different groups of people keep different schedules, areas would be lively at all times of the day and evening; residential areas would not empty out, at least of men, during the day; other zones would not be empty at night. As a result, crime would decrease, as all parts of the city remained lively but—due to reduced car traffic—less noisy than currently.

The focus could then be on access, not mobility. Rather than concentrating on how to move people about among the various zones, we could focus on ensuring that every part of the city contains a healthy mix of uses. If people can access what they need—workplace, school, shops, health care, restaurants, recreational venues—within a short distance of their residence, then many of the problems we take for granted in cities will be greatly reduced. This means that important facilities must be available in all parts of the city, not concentrated in certain zones. When most health and educational facilities are located in one part of town, most offices in another, and residential areas in other areas, travel is an inevitable part of life, and various parts of the city are subject to periodic heavy movements of people. The ability to access much of what one needs within a short distance greatly reduces the need to travel, and thus the need to provide infrastructure (roads and vehicles) for people to move about.

Our traffic problems can never be reduced without reducing the need for travel, but beyond that, our quality of life depends greatly on reduced travel and increased convenience—a convenience that can only occur when more of what we need becomes available within walking distance. And let us always remember that people need not only jobs, schools, health care and homes, but also recreation, the chance to sit outdoors and watch and interact with others.

What if we were to set out building the kind of environment that encourages fuel-free transport and friendliness? What would a typical building in our mixed-use neighborhood contain? Of course polluting factories would be relegated to the outskirts, if allowed at all, but otherwise a mix of uses would be encouraged. In a typical building, the basement, formerly allocated to car parking, could become a storage area, cinema, or common TV room. On the ground floor, easily accessible to passersby, there would be shops. On the remaining floors would be a mix of housing, offices, school, library, health care services, banks, and so on. Rooftops, decorated with fragrant plants, would house cafés and restaurants. This is already the case in many lovely cities such as Copenhagen, and to some extent in parts of many Asian cities as well.
What happens in cities that get it right—places like the older parts of European cities, or new areas designed on principles of supporting and encouraging human interaction?

Neighborhoods are again friendly; people know not only the other residents of their building, but others on their street, as well. There are quality outdoor social spaces, where people can socialize for free, meeting and interacting with—or simply observing—many kinds of people. The mixing of different people in cities is absolutely essential for the kind of understanding, tolerance, and harmony that allows a large number of people to co-exist in a small space. In terms of traffic priority, pedestrians, the disabled, bicycles, rickshaws, and public transit gain priority, in that order; cars come last. After accommodating all other modes and people, if space is left for cars, so be it; if no space remains, then car drivers must learn to get around the way the majority does. After all, they will have little reason to complain, since all the advantages of a friendly, healthy environment will accrue to everyone. Owning a car is a privilege, not a right; when the car is seen as a deadly weapon, killing human and animal life and destroying the environment, it is easy to see why they cannot always be tolerated, especially in the high density environment of cities.

In cities that get it right, there is less need for travel. After all, reducing travel demand is really the only way to reduce traffic congestion; fewer people trying to travel long distances automatically results in less congestion, without having to build anything. People should be encouraged to live close to work and school, as the first major step in reducing traffic jams. To accomplish this, work, shopping, recreation and housing are in close proximity, mixed together in each neighborhood. Urban planning includes planning for recreation, where people of all classes mix freely outdoors, in public plazas, courtyards, parks, and attractive riversides. Small
and dead-end streets can be converted into playgrounds, for several hours a week or permanently, allowing children to play literally in their front yard (the street), and others to relax on the quiet safe footpaths in front of their homes.

Why is the format of the city so important, in terms of creating a friendly and less polluted environment? Because how we behave towards others, what form of transport we use, how sociable and happy we are, all depend on our environment. People like to say that Bangladeshis don’t like to walk, but the actual question is, how encouraging is our environment for walking? People naturally don’t want to walk when the footpaths are broken or blocked by parked cars, when there is nothing interesting to look at as one walks, when the streets are nearly impossible to cross, and when one is constantly subjected to the blaring of horns and the fumes of fuel-dependent vehicles. Only when people have a good environment in which to do so, does walking become pleasurable. The same goes for outdoor socializing: Bangladeshis are obviously an extremely friendly people, willing to brave unpleasant environments in order to socialize outdoors. The few places that are pleasant for public gatherings, like Dhanmondi lake, are packed with people. Obviously there is a large, unmet need for quality outdoor environments for recreation; by meeting those needs, urban life will improve dramatically.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE—CHANGING OUR PRIORITIES

Improving our cities will not be possible through piecemeal measures. Rather, an entire reorientation in our thinking and priorities is essential. We need to realize what we have been treating as our highest priority, and whether a change in priority might result in significant benefits in economy, health, environment, equity, and livability.

Prioritizing children, not cars

There is no question that transport is important. People need to access various destinations. Even when most destinations are close enough to be accessible by foot, decent situations for walking are needed, and some infrastructure will be required for occasional longer-distance trips.

But the question is, what are our current priorities, and what should they be? After all, one cannot prioritize everything. That is, we often must make difficult choices. Take the demand for electricity. If we prioritize the supply of sufficient electricity to meet everyone’s wishes, we will not be able to prioritize concern for the environment or, in some cases, for the rights of indigenous groups who happen to live on or near mineral resources. Some demands are necessarily in conflict with others. Individuals face these problems on a daily level: Do we relax in front of the TV or help our child with homework? Do we stay late at work or go visit a
sick relative? Such choices are not always easy, but trying to deny that we are making them is not a solution. Rather, we should be honest about the choices we making, and attempt to choose wisely.

**Facilitating children’s play: cycling in Dhanmondi**

Every Thursday and Saturday afternoon, for just two hours in the afternoon, a street in Dhanmondi fills with happy children. Some are learning to cycle; others are already expert, and enjoy going up and down the street with their new friends. They benefit in many ways—a chance to exercise, to make new friends, to interact with people of different ages and income groups, and to learn and practice a new skill. Adults enjoy watching the children, and perhaps reminiscing about their own childhood play. The street begins to feel like a human place.

What is common among all the children is that this is their only opportunity to cycle relatively safely, and to play outdoors with other children. By closing off one side of the street with a temporary barrier, children are given the opportunity to cycle, while cars can still easily pass.

Many other organizations have begun similar programs, though generally on fields, not streets. The popularity of these programs, and the rarity of them, indicates our misplaced priorities and the need to expand children’s outdoor play opportunities.

If asked whether we consider cars or children more important, most people would either say it is a ridiculous question, or reply that of course children are more important. Yet when we consider the decisions we make in our investments and other areas, our priorities appear less clear. How do our budgets for building roads and flyovers compare to our budgets for enhancing various aspects of children’s physical and emotional well-being? Do we think that children should play outdoors, or that cars should move in the streets at whatever speed their drivers choose? Do we believe in preserving parks for children’s play, or do we allow them to become parking lots?

So while it is certainly true that transport is important, we must question whether meeting people’s unlimited desire for endless transport, and for possession and use of private cars, is more important than various basic rights of children. For instance, is the right of children to study in school without interruption more or less important than the right of a driver to honk in front of a school? What about a baby’s right to sleep versus a driver’s right to honk in front of the gate of an apartment? What about the right of a child to cross a street, or ride a bike, versus the right of a driver to speed?

We have, unconsciously, allowed our concern for mobility, and beyond that, for the “rights” of people to own cars and use them where, how, and whenever they wish, to take precedence over the rights of children to a quiet environment, independent mobility, and recreation. It is time to question those priorities and consider whether a reordering is not in order.

What would be some of the qualities of a city that prioritized children, not cars? First, strict and very low speed limits would be established in residential areas (that is, areas with a
medium to high concentration of homes, no matter what other services are also present), so that children could move about and play freely without fear of traffic danger. Second, the use of open spaces (fields, parks, empty lots) would be set aside for children’s play rather than vehicle parking. Third, there would be strictly enforced bans throughout the city on honking of horns except in emergencies, as is the case in crowded cities such as New York City and Hong Kong. Fourth, streets would be closed to vehicular traffic at different times of the day or days of the week to allow children outdoor play opportunities near their homes. Finally, there would be permanent pedestrian areas in major shopping and recreational areas to allow children the opportunity to move about freely and without danger, and to encourage family recreation.

**Livable environments, not just transport**

Ironically, in the course of trying to make every part of our cities accessible, we destroy the quality of the very places that people seek to access. While it may be convenient to be able to drive right up to one’s door, the quality of life of people within an apartment building is seriously harmed when drivers frequently honk, and when the movement of cars makes it unsafe or inconvenient for people—especially but not only children and the elderly—to move about on the streets and even the footpaths.

Intelligent, thoughtful city planning seeks to preserve the value of different parts of the city. It is far better to walk a short distance in order to reach an attractive environment than to be able to drive right up to a place that is not worth visiting. This is true of a range of destinations. Homes, schools, health care facilities, and recreational facilities should all offer safety from traffic as well as freedom from traffic noise. This is only possible when we focus on creating livable environments, not on making all places accessible to cars.

**Prioritizing short-distance travel**

Given that transport is not only a key part of cities, but a chief source of problems, transport and related issues must be a focus in urban design. But in order to address the issues, one must first ask oneself the question: what is the point of transport? Most travel is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end: being in one place, and wishing or needing to do or access something somewhere else. Obvious as this statement seems, it is often ignored by travel planners, who focus on moving people about, without asking whether all this travel is necessary or could possibly be reduced. That is, if people could attain what they need by
traveling short distances instead of long ones, then travel demand could be reduced. This would also be a far more efficient way to address travel needs than by creating infrastructure to help large numbers of people regularly move great distances—while ignoring the need of others to travel short distances.

There are many advantages to short-distance over long-distance trips. They require less or no fuel. They can be made while creating little or no noise and air pollution. They take less time. They cost less. Since they can easily be made by foot or bicycle, they can involve exercise and recreation. And they make far fewer demands on infrastructure, e.g. require fewer roads and vehicles.

When, on the contrary, it is easier to travel long distances than short ones, people will naturally choose to live far from jobs, schools, and other amenities, or to choose those amenities which are far from their home. If, for instance, it is easier to travel across town than across the street, people will have no incentive to meet most of their needs close by. The more people travel long distances, the more traffic jams there will be, regardless of how much road space we build. On the contrary, if people can travel a short distance more easily and comfortably than a long one, then they will have incentive to arrange their lives close to their residences, and traffic jams will decline.

As a result, not only will people’s lives improve due to less time wasted in traffic, but many other measures will improve as well. With more reliance on short-distance travel, fuel use and air and noise pollution will decline; needed services will be more accessible at less cost in terms of both money and time; recreational opportunities will increase, as less space is devoted to vehicles and more to people’s needs; the environment will improve and the city become more beautiful as planting of trees and maintenance of green spaces takes precedence over building of roads, flyovers, and parking lots; crime will decrease as more people are on the footpaths and moving slowly through the streets, and as neighbors come to know each other as they mix in their slower movements closer to home; and dangerous and fatal accidents will decline due to a shift to lighter and slower-moving vehicles.

**CONCRETE ACTIONS**

Fortunately, Dhaka and many other cities already have many of the aspects of a livable city, difficult though it can be to appreciate the fact given all their problems. For instance, Dhaka consists mostly of mixed areas; it is not uncommon to have shops on the ground floor and apartments above. In most parts of the city, basic necessities exist within walking distance of residences, though it may not be easy or possible to walk safely to access those necessities. Larger infrastructural problems do exist, such as the heavy concentration of universities and
hospitals in Dhanmondi, or the lack of residences and shopping in Motijheel, but overall, the city has the basic structure needed for quality urban life: high density, mixed areas, and space devoted to people, not cars.

In order to improve Dhaka, so that the advantages can be further enjoyed by its inhabitants, various steps should be taken; the same steps are needed to prevent smaller cities from suffering from the same problems as Dhaka.

**Transport planning**

As the successful experiments in traffic evaporation indicate, not all cities have followed the path of building ever more roads. Some have deliberately decreased road space for cars and expanded space and facilities for other transport, and for the qualities that make cities livable: green space, trees, public places where people can meet.

Various actions are needed to reduce reliance on the private car. As the number of cars on the streets of Dhaka multiply, so do the problems associated with their use, but strong measures could greatly reduce the use of cars, and thus the problems they cause. Such measures include instituting high fees for parking to reflect the actual value of the space used; higher taxes on the import of cars and spare parts; limits on the number of licenses issued (a system such as Singapore has could be useful, in which potential owners must bid for licenses, paying fees of about $50,000 in order to obtain permission to buy a car); and an end to fuel subsidies.

Simultaneously with reducing reliance on cars, the use of fuel-free transport must be promoted and encouraged in various ways. This can be done through creating safe, pleasant conditions for cycling and walking. This would include establishing a continuous system of bike lanes or routes throughout the city so that all areas can be reached safely and easily by bicycle; making footpaths wider; allowing vendors to sell on footpaths but within a limited amount of space; taking serious action to prevent blockage of footpaths by car parking and dumping of construction waste; planting more trees along footpaths and streets; and establishing more signals for safe street-level crossings (as it is difficult and time-consuming for pedestrians to climb overbridges, and such bridges hamper the movement of the elderly and the disabled). In addition, pedestrians prefer quieter and safer streets, so restrictions on cars are by nature pro-pedestrian measures.
Rickshaws continue to be a favored mode of transport for Dhaka dwellers (and are gaining in popularity internationally), despite bans on them in many streets, and the subsequent increase in time and rickshaw fare. Rickshaws in fact play an invaluable role in urban as well as rural transport, moving both people and goods without the use of fuel, without harming the environment, and while providing much-needed jobs to the most vulnerable. Rickshaws should be allowed on all streets, with lanes of sufficient width to allow rickshaws to move easily throughout the city, complementing the infrastructure for walking and cycling.

While the emphasis is on short-distance travel, long-distance travel cannot of course be avoided entirely. Wherever possible, such travel should occur by public transport rather than private car, since public transport is far more efficient in terms of road space and fuel use. The least expensive form of modern public transit is Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), which has been established in many cities. Short of an entire BRT system, bus priority measures could be instituted, as well as quality control for existing bus services. Measures to improve buses could include eliminating incentives to speed by paying bus drivers by the day, not by the number of trips they make, and providing shelters for bus passengers. Street-level light rail—that is, a tram system—would be another reasonably affordable way to improve public transit. Trams are often less intrusive and safer than buses, and often far more popular among potential passengers. Since people must be able to travel to and from bus stops, appropriate infrastructure for walking and rickshaws will further enhance public transit. As with walking, buses will benefit from car control, as the biggest problem with bus travel is the clogging of the roads by private cars. In fact, with no other improvement in bus service, simply increasing its frequency and reducing time spent stuck in traffic jams would mean a major improvement. (Interestingly, experience in Dhaka has shown that banning rickshaws failed to increase traffic speed; unfortunately, no similar “experiment” has occurred in terms of car control.)

Reducing cars

It is difficult to imagine an entire city without cars. The closest we have is Venice, Italy, which, not coincidentally, is also the most popular city in the world for tourists. Although it would be difficult to make other cities entirely car-free, it may be a useful mental exercise to consider the advantages of a city without cars, where transport is mainly by foot, bicycle, and rickshaw, supported by a tram system on major roads. The advantages would include greatly reduced noise and air pollution; greatly reduced use of fuel; far lower travel expenses; no need to use space and spend money creating facilities for parked cars; far fewer and far less dangerous accidents; far less crime and more social security; and pleasant, livable streets and a lively, social atmosphere throughout the city.
Without cars on the street, but with plenty of people moving about slowly, children could regain their independent mobility, and walk or bike to school. This would greatly enhance their sense of independence, give them much-needed physical activity and recreation, and free up the time of their parents who normally serve as their chauffeurs. The elderly and those with disabilities would similarly benefit. Children would also again be able to play on footpaths and even on small streets. Without cars blocking parks and fields, those too would be usable for recreational purposes for people of all ages.

With others also traveling mainly by foot, bicycle, and rickshaw, people would get more exercise and actually enjoy moving about the city rather than dreading it. No more space wasted for car parking would mean far more space available for movement; parking of bicycles and rickshaws requires minimal space. Traffic jams would decrease, as the most inefficient mode would be removed. Speed of travel would be less of a concern once travel became pleasant. Public transit service would vastly improve, and since travel time would be predictable, trip planning would not require large cushions of time—that is, while trips might overall take more time, since people could allocate just the right amount, and would not be stuck in traffic jams, they would not waste as much time as previously. Since people would be moving slower and more gradually via lighter vehicles, not only would there be fewer and less dangerous accidents, but people would have an opportunity to mix on the streets, neighbors would get to know each other, and the city would have a lively, friendly feel. Life might slow down a little—not much, given the slow speed of most vehicles on current city streets—but the rewards would be immense in terms of reduced pollution, greater safety, lower travel costs, and a friendlier environment.

Addressing car parking

It is commonly reported in newspapers that the main reason that cars present such a problem in Dhaka is not their excessive numbers, or that they are an inappropriate solution to transport problems in a city of 12 million occupants, but rather, the lack of sufficient parking facilities. The common argument about parking suggests that the reason that parked cars occupy so much space on our footpaths and roads is that developers have not provided sufficient parking spaces under or attached to buildings. If only sufficient spaces were available for parking, then parking would no longer be a problem.

There are a few main problems with this argument, which ignores some key realities:

- Parking is not free. The land used for parking has value, both in terms of actual and opportunity cost; that is, not only is land in Dhaka very expensive, but land used for

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14 This section draws heavily on Shoup 2005
Parking is land not used for more economically productive activities. In addition, underground parking is expensive to build and maintain, and as underground parking is generally free or extremely inexpensive for the driver, the cost of car parking is subsidized by other users of the buildings, even if they travel by other modes. This represents an inequitable, hidden subsidy to car users, encouraging car use while punishing those using more efficient, environmentally-friendly modes.

- **There will never be enough parking.** As long as car use continues to grow unchecked, so will the demand for parking. However much space is granted for parking initially, it will either be so excessive as to be a waste for a long period because it is mainly empty, or will soon prove inadequate, thereby returning to the original situation of cars parked on footpaths and streets.

- **Car parking encourages car use.** When it is free or very inexpensive to park, people have incentive to drive even short distances, and to park for many hours. As car use is encouraged, so the demand for car parking grows, a demand that will never be satisfied. On the contrary, if parking is limited and expensive, people have incentive to use other, less space-occupying modes, and existing parking spaces become sufficient.

In addition, the “right” of someone to park their vehicle wherever they wish should not interfere with the rights of others to walk on a footpath, or to move about on the streets. Nobody would be allowed to store a bed, or place a desk and chair, in the street, for their convenience for sleeping or working, yet cars—also private property—are stored in public space without cost to the owner. Such a system simply represents an unfair advantage to those already privileged in many other ways.

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15 Gehl and Gemzøe 2004

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Reducing car parking and increasing quality of life: learning from Copenhagen

In Copenhagen’s city center, over a period of twenty years, car parking was reduced each year by 2-3%. One might expect that the result was fewer people coming to the city, since parking was not available—and rates of car ownership are obviously far higher in Copenhagen than in Dhaka.

On the contrary, rather than a decline, there was a slight increase in the number of people coming into the center of the city. The main means for arriving in the city center is public transport (45%). While 17% of people arrive by car and just 1% by taxi, 19% arrive by bicycle and 14% on foot. Once in the city center, the numbers are even more surprising: only 5% travel by bus and 4% by car or taxi, but 14% move about on bicycle and a full 80% on foot.
As Gehl and Gemzøe explain, “The number of parking places has been reduced, and it is harder to come into the city center by car. In contrast, there is now more reason to come, as the city center has been made much more attractive.”

How have Danes responded to the changes? While 30% of people interviewed said that the biggest problem in the city is “cars and traffic pollution”, only 4% said that “lack of parking spaces” is a problem. Meanwhile, land formerly used for the movement of cars is now reclaimed as attractive—and exceedingly popular—public space. In fact, some of the “pre” photographs of Copenhagen, before some streets and many squares were turned back over to people, bear a strong resemblance to the current situation in Asian cities.

The problem with parking, then, is not that there are not enough spaces for parking, but that the spaces are free or under-priced. If car parking is charged by the time the car is parked (in 15-minute, 30-minute, or 60-minute intervals, depending on the level of demand), then drivers will park for less time, and those wanting to park all day will be likely to switch to other modes of travel. One parking space that formerly was used by one car for eight hours will now be available for eight or more cars during the day; without increasing the number of parking spaces, the number of cars accommodated will increase eight-fold or more. This is the only efficient, effective way to deal with the problem of parking. Ideally, fees collected for parking will be split between the costs of collecting the fees and for improving alternate transport: creating bus priority lanes, widening footpaths, building cycle or rickshaw lanes, and so on.

Rather than insisting on a certain number of parking spaces for buildings, the maximum number of spaces allowed should be stated, as is done in San Francisco and many European cities. Providing free or low-cost facilities for parking simply encourages use of private cars, which further increases traffic jams and the other problems caused by car use. On the contrary, when drivers must pay the full market cost of parking, they will quickly turn to other transport, which will benefit everyone and improve urban life.

**Improving conditions for pedestrians**
Walking is about a lot more than getting from here to there. Ideally, walking should be a celebration of one’s city. By moving slowly, one is able to observe far more than if one moved by faster means. It is on foot that one can really experience the city, explore its neighborhoods, and interact with the variety of people moving about in the streets.

Improving conditions for walking, in turn, is about far more than removing obstacles, though doing so is of course of great importance. After ensuring that footpaths are free of parked cars and construction waste, and that it is safe and easy to cross the streets, far more can be done to enhance walking.

Walking is far more pleasant in hot and rainy climates when there is shelter such as trees and awnings available to protect pedestrians from the sun and rain. Benches allow for opportunities to rest and socialize, and are particularly important for the elderly. For younger people, informal seating, such as low walls, steps, and even statues are welcome breaks from walking, and inviting places to stop and chat with friends.

The street along which one is walking also can have a significant effect on people’s willingness to walk. Walking along a busy street with impatient drivers blaring their horns, and the smell of exhaust, is far from pleasant, even if there are trees and awnings. Bicycle and rickshaw lanes can help serve as barriers between a busy street and the footpath, but it is also helpful to consider car control throughout the city as a way of improving the situation for pedestrians, in terms of safety, comfort, and overall walkability of a city.

Street art provides interest and stimulation to pedestrians. Street art needn’t be expensive or elaborate. Arches, small bridges, interesting architectural details such as elaborate door knockers, woodwork, colorful painting on buildings or walls, and so on, all provide interest to pedestrians, and details that would otherwise be missed if moving faster. Vendors themselves
form a sort of street art when selling pottery, flowers, and other products that are attractive to look at.

Walking involves effort, and people need incentives to walk. In addition to some degree of comfort, stimulation, and interest, they also need a sensation of safety and security. The presence of vendors on footpaths can provide both safety and interest to pedestrians, encouraging people to walk. Of course the space vendors occupy should be limited to ensure that there is adequate space for pedestrians, but on wider footpaths, and in areas where there is unused space between the footpath and adjacent buildings, there is no reason to ban vendors, and many reasons to allow them to continue.

The presence of people on the footpaths throughout the day and evening enhance security and safety—“eyes on the street” being the best form of safety (crime tends to happen in isolated or unpopulated areas). Low-income and disadvantaged groups have access to a steady form of financial support. Goods otherwise only available at higher cost are available cheaply and conveniently. Much shopping can be done close to home or office, reducing the need to travel to other locations to shop. Items not otherwise available, such as certain healthy local or traditional foods, are available that otherwise cannot be found in fast food outlets or other restaurants.

It is interesting to note that in different parts of Dhaka, a footpath with no vendors is often unused, while a footpath on the other side of the street, which has vendors, also has many pedestrians. Of course another reason for this phenomenon is that with the disappearance of vendors, footpaths easily are converted into urinals, making them unusable for other purposes. Following the eviction of vendors from many footpaths in Dhaka, people continue walking in the street, and some areas are no longer safe in the evening hours.

It is thus important to ensure adequate conditions and proper licensing for vendors, so that they can carry on their activities without fear of eviction or the necessity of paying bribes, and so that pedestrians and others can continue to benefit from their presence.

The greatest stimulation of all for pedestrians may, in the end, be other pedestrians. People enjoy being in lively places. Whatever attracts people to both walk and stop (sit, stand, lean against a wall, drink tea, chat with a friend) can serve as an attraction for other pedestrians. The presence of many other people also ensures safety, thereby further attracting people.

In the end, the simplest test of whether an environment is conducive to pedestrians is to see how many people are walking there. Observations in Dhaka and other cities make it clear that pedestrians seek far more than long, straight, smooth, unobstructed footpaths. The complete lack of obstruction, in fact, can serve as a deterrent in itself, if the absence of people indicates
the absence of security. Safety, comfort, stimulation and interest are all vital, and all will contribute to encouraging people to engage in healthy, fuel-free, non-polluting, space-saving movement.

**Inviting street patterns**

People may have the perception that a “modern” city involves long, straight, wide streets laid in a grid pattern. While it is true that ancient cities tend to have narrow, curved streets and a non-grid orientation, and that more recent city planning often follows a grid pattern, the problems with the new style of building have become readily apparent, leading to a change towards the former style. The most attractive parts of European cities are the old town centers, with their narrow, winding streets suddenly opening into attractive plazas; the most touristed city in the world is Venice, an entirely pedestrian city built to follow canals, not grids.

Long, straight streets are built for cars, not people. While it may be easy to drive on a straight street, it is extremely boring; as a result, drivers often speed, creating dangerous situations for residents, especially children. Moreover, the farther one can see ahead, the longer the route seems. Winding streets lend a sense of adventure for pedestrians, as people can only see a little way ahead; the question of “what is around the next corner” provides incentive to walk, and encourages pedestrians to travel farther on foot than they otherwise would. In addition, it is easier to cross narrower than wide streets.

Grid systems also contribute to sprawl. Wide streets mean that a large portion of urban space is devoted to streets; more land is thus needed for buildings, causing cities to sprawl far beyond their original boundaries. Compact, dense cities are easier to move around in quickly by foot and other fuel-free means, and occupy far less space, which can then be left to nature, agriculture, and recreation.

**Quality outdoor recreation**

When people’s basic needs for decent housing, sanitation, water, and electricity are not met, it may seem premature to plan for recreation. Yet people require recreation, just as they require their basic needs to be met. Further, recreation is one area in which equity can easily be guaranteed for all citizens. It is vital to include in a city sufficient green spaces (parks, fields, tree-lined paths) and public spaces for people of all ages, incomes, and both sexes to gather and enjoy. Since small children are not able to travel far from home, it is often better to provide many small parks than a few large playing fields; where other recreation cannot be ensured,
minor streets can be closed to traffic at certain times of the day or days of the week to allow children to play and adults to socialize outdoors. Certain basic conditions are needed for parks and other play areas: sufficient lighting, clean-up services, and proximity to and visibility from homes and office buildings, to ensure safety. Safety can also be increased by encouraging vendors to operate, as their presence prevents crime.

**Parks and playgrounds**

Children and youth need places to run around and play sports; adults need pleasant places for recreation and exercise. Parks and playgrounds should serve these purposes to some extent, though it is important to note that even in wealthy countries with pleasant parks, children often prefer playing on the lively streets than in quieter parks or playgrounds.

The essential problem with parks, playgrounds, and playing fields comes when, by being available to everyone, they are owned by no one. Lack of ownership means lack of maintenance; they can quickly become dirty and dangerous, inhabited only by people with nowhere better to go and avoided by most of the area’s residents. Public areas do not thrive without some sort of maintenance and security: clean-up and lighting are critical. So is placement of such areas: they need to be visible from surrounding buildings, and placed such that people will readily and easily access them, even without prior intention. That is, a small park through which people naturally pass on their way to and from surrounding buildings will be far safer than a larger but more out-of-the-way park.

Playgrounds attached to schools have the obvious advantage of clear ownership: it is the school’s responsibility to maintain the cleanliness and safety of the playground. Small neighborhood parks that give the neighbors a sense of ownership can operate in the same way, by adding benches or low walls for seating, and encouraging the presence of vendors, to attract adults as well as children.
Another obvious fact: it is a tremendous waste of open space to use it for car parking. Obviously the recreational needs of children and youth, and fitness needs of adults, should take precedence over a few individual’s desire to store their private vehicle for free in public space. The related problems of overweight, obesity, and lack of physical activity have reached epidemic proportions around the world, causing the WHO to issue guidelines\(^\text{16}\) on how governments can change infrastructure to emphasize active travel and better, free recreational opportunities for all. One playing field can be used over the course of several hours by hundreds of people, or serve a handful of people as car parking. In a city that gives priority to children and that supports public health through active travel and recreation, parks will never be used as parking lots.

**Public spaces**

A city functions best when people of different ages, income groups, beliefs, and cultures have opportunities to mix, meet, and simply observe each other in public areas. Only through such interactions do people learn about people different from themselves, and thus gain tolerance and appreciation for different ways of life and modes of thought. A society strongly divided along lines of class, skin color, or religion, is an unhealthy society.

People’s fondness for their city also depends on the quality of public spaces. When people have the opportunity to recreate enjoyably and without expense in attractive places free from the noise, fumes, and danger of vehicles, they are, simply, happier. In many cities, the high point of the week is a family bike ride on a street closed to traffic for part of the weekend; up to two million people come out, on bicycle, skates, or foot, to enjoy such an event every Sunday in Bogotá.

Some of the qualities of good public spaces are that they are easy to access by foot, bicycle, and rickshaw; large enough to accommodate many people, but not so large or empty as to be intimidating or feel unfriendly; provide plenty of places to sit, including benches, steps, low walls, and even statues, flower pots, and other “unconventional” seating; offer things to look at, buy, and things to do; and are located safely distant from the noise, fumes, and danger of traffic.

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\(^\text{16}\) World Health Organization; Edwards and Tsouros 2006
Public areas of different sizes and descriptions should exist throughout the city, giving people natural places to gather and socialize at different times of the day. In Dhaka, Dhanmondi Lake serves well in that respect; many people gather at TSC, which would be much better without the car traffic. Other places intended for recreation have failed to be used as such, with many parks going unused, and fields converted into parking lots. It is important to look at the elements of quality public places when designing them; simply writing empty spaces into a design is not sufficient if there are not qualities that draw people to the area.

**Provisions for nature and agriculture**

Cities needn’t be all buildings and roads. Trees play a vital part in urban life, offering visual delight, the sense of contact with nature, and relief from heat and flooding. But if cities are mixed use and high density, what happens to the trees? When people describe Dhanmondi before all the development happened, it is as a sea of green—single family houses surrounded by trees. When the multi-story apartment buildings go up, down come the trees, so that the city of greenery becomes a city of concrete.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Ideally, as more people occupy less land in a compact, high-density city, more space will become available for trees. The problem in many cities isn’t high density *per se*, but the way that the high-density areas are planned and built. With uses separated, the assumption is that everyone will travel by car; it is the wide roads, not the tall buildings, that leave little room for greenery. Unattractive boxes are plopped down by wide roads, with a few malnourished trees as a gesture towards the environment and aesthetics. But what if the buildings contained workplaces and schools as well as housing? What if the roads were narrower, the footpaths wider, and more trees were planted? Just as high density doesn’t necessarily mean more noise and can mean less, so high density can actually mean *more* trees.
More trees and water bodies also means more place for nature’s creatures—fish, birds, even small animals, which are all key to the ecosystem.

In addition to trees, it is important to include agricultural areas in or close to cities. These provide a key advantage, in that they make freshly grown food more easily and cheaply available, requiring far less time for transport to local markets. Given the use of rickshaw vans, such produce can even be transported without the use of fuel, so that increases in fuel prices will not necessarily lead to an increase in the price of fresh fruit and vegetables. Gardens are also havens of peace, cool and green in the city. Cities around the world, including Beijing, Vancouver, and Kampala, Uganda, devote considerable urban space to gardening\textsuperscript{17}, thereby providing fresh produce at low cost to urban dwellers and creating welcome pockets of green in cities.

Given those advantages, it makes sense to build more compact, densely-populated cities, leaving areas that are open but not barren. While some open spaces should be used for gathering and play spaces, others can be used as pockets of nature and for gardening and small-scale agriculture.

Water bodies

Water bodies within a city—be they canals, lakes, ponds or rivers—serve multiple purposes. They can serve to collect water during heavy rains, thus reducing flooding. They can be a source of recreation or transport. They also can serve as an attraction, a place where people gather and enjoy the calm that viewing and hearing water creates.

\textsuperscript{17} IDRC
Water can be integrated into cities in many ways, thereby enhancing the beauty and pleasure of living in that city. Even in entirely paved areas, fountains and tiny channels of water running in the middle of a pedestrian street—as they famously do in Freiburg, Germany—can serve as attractions to passersby and sources of play for children.

Preservation of canals, lakes, and ponds is also vitally important. A visit to Dhanmondi lake makes clear how popular a recreational area it is, and what an important function it serves in city life. In the morning, it is a vital gathering place for exercise, shopping, and socializing; during the day, people continue to walk around the lake, to sit and enjoy the surroundings, and to talk to friends. Many vendors earn their living there, and various shops and restaurants do good business. Lakes can thus be a vital part of the city’s economy as well as social life, but again, proper infrastructure is required: Dhanmondi lake began to be preserved once an attractive path was built around it, while Gulshan lake, lacking such a path, continues to be encroached upon.

**Equity**

Those with a high income have advantages over those with low incomes in a variety of areas, including in housing, transport, education, health care, and recreation. Money may not buy happiness, but it can purchase better food and clothing, more security from crime, some relief from pollution, and access to just the services that are needed to ensure the continuation of wealth.

If urban planners cannot address most aspects of inequity, they can act to avoid further increasing the gap between rich and poor, and to increase equity in at least some areas. These include increasing the possibility of safe movement not only for the rich; improving the access of people of all income groups to needed goods and services; improving conditions for low-cost and free transport; avoiding curtailing the ability of the poor to earn a living; and enhancing access to quality, free recreation for all groups.

In terms of safe movement and access, consider the “right” of a wealthy person to drive a car as opposed to the right of anyone, regardless of income, to travel safely by other means, or simply to cross the street. Given the ease with which one can, in a large motorized vehicle, maim or kill a pedestrian, the onus should be on the driver of the vehicle, not on the pedestrian, to ensure safety. That is, nobody has the right to drive, at fast speeds, a vehicle weighing one ton or more, when that right could easily prove fatal to others. When one’s “right” to drive interferes with the rights of others to move about by non-polluting modes, the “right” to drive must further be questioned. While equity may not exist in other areas, we can institute it in our transport system, by ensuring nearly equal access for all to needed goods and services, and safety for all in moving about the city. As Enrique Peñalosa says, “If you have a right to
mobility, the right to move from one place to another without getting killed, it cannot be exclusive to those who own a motor vehicle.”18 That is, owning a car is a privilege, not a right; if your owning a car conflicts with the ability of others to move freely, then that privilege can be revoked.

Transport costs can require a significant portion of income for the poor. Taking a bus is unaffordable to many; cycling and walking are the least expensive options, but conditions are often atrocious. Equity, as well as other considerations, demand that moving about by foot and cycle be easy, pleasant, and safe. As for jobs, it is clear that transport policy can have a significant—and negative—impact on the ability of the poor to earn a living.19 In order to prevent further inequity, planners should avoid banning or curtailing economic activities by the poor—such as pedaling of rickshaws or vending on or near footpaths.

Finally, while the rich have access to a variety of clubs, restaurants, and other venues for recreation, the poor have little more than footpaths. Quality outdoor recreation should be available throughout the city, be free, and be welcoming to people of both sexes, all ages, and all income groups. There is no reason why people with low incomes should face deprivation on all fronts, and recreation is one area in which equity is easy to achieve, and would benefit all groups. After all, civilization is contingent in part on the mixing of different social and income groups, so that people can learn about each other and counter their prejudices. Both the poor and the rich need to discover that the other is human; this mixing of the social classes is one of the highest aims of democracy, and should be a key goal in a livable city.

**Changing our dream**

Think about the ads we see everyday for new buildings and residential areas, which always show a wide street with just one or two cars—and no people. How long will those streets stay empty, when people need to travel to access everything—jobs, schools, shops, health care and recreation? In fact the vision in those ads, unrealistic as it is, is of the absence of traffic jams, not the presence of a pleasant neighborhood. We must learn to dream a different dream, a dream of creating cities for people, not cars.

Zoning requirements should be used to create mixed-use areas, rather than to separate uses. Any building project which will increase the need for medium- and long-distance travel—such

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18 McCall 2005
19 Efroymson and Rahman 2005
as a large housing project with no shops, schools, workplaces, or similar services—should not be allowed to be built. Anti-sprawl measures are critical to preserve the quality of urban life.

Imagine the results: vibrant neighborhoods full of people on foot, streets flowing with bicycles and rickshaws; children playing on footpaths and minor streets; tall mixed-use buildings converging on courtyards; the sound of children’s laughter and the calls of birds. Not just a dream, but a reality—if we only dream, and then set to work building it.

**Details**

After establishing the basic precepts of a livable city, one can look at details that will further enhance quality of life in the city:

- Include courtyards and other small open spaces that are attached to a cluster of buildings, allowing small children play opportunities immediately adjacent to their homes, and places for adults to gather and socialize. Consider housing colonies, with their small fields for playing and talking, and land for gardening. People in colonies are far more likely to know their neighbors and have a sense of community than those living in more “modern”, expensive apartments.

- Encourage people to stop and stay outdoors, by placing benches or low walls at the entrance of buildings, adding benches regularly on footpaths, and creating quality outdoor environments with plenty of primary and secondary seating (primary seating meaning benches; secondary seating can include steps, low walls, pedestals of statues, etc.).

- To increase walkability, encourage narrow shopfronts, with larger buildings being placed behind; try to avoid long walls and other blank façades, as people are far more likely to walk if there are things to see; the problem can also be overcome by licensing vendors, giving them a limited amount of footpath space so that pedestrians gain safety and attraction, while still having space to move;
Consider adding arches to make different neighborhoods distinct; such arches can give people a sense of community identity and belonging;

Create pedestrian streets and other pedestrian areas, particularly in commercial areas where far more people will be able to move around and visit shops and restaurants than if cars were allowed;

Celebrate street life by encouraging street festivals and entertainers, so that people will enjoy being outdoors and have the opportunity to socialize with others;

While this should not be a high-budget item, include street art to reward those moving slowly by foot and bicycle by giving them attractive details to enjoy;

Provide adequate lighting, for safety as well as attractiveness (many kinds of lights are available that are more attractive than typical street lights).

ECONOMIC ISSUES: CURRENT

The current situation is expensive and wasteful, yet the results are unsatisfactory: despite high expenses for transport, traffic in Dhaka and countless other car-oriented cities is a disaster. High costs come in many forms. First, there are the costs of traffic congestion. These include fuel wasted by idling vehicles; time spent in traffic jams that could be spent at work; productivity losses due both to lost time and delays; time spent transporting children and the elderly who could otherwise transport themselves; difficulties accessing education and health care for both children and adults, which affects current and future productivity; and delays in moving freight and goods. Traffic congestion also means inefficient bus service, with buses caught in traffic jams. Hence a large number of buses is needed to serve a limited number of
passengers, whereas with fewer traffic jams, fewer buses would be needed, as they could reach their destination and then run the trip again sooner.

Other costs include the higher price of goods due to use of fuel to transport them instead of relying on fuel-free transport (rickshaw vans); heavy subsidies for fuel, as well as political costs when the government attempts to reduce such unaffordable subsidies; foreign exchange for vehicles, parts, and fuel; and high individual travel costs.

Car parking also involves considerable costs. Consider the value of space used: space currently being used for car parking could improve the mobility of others, or be used for economically-productive activities (ground floor of buildings used for shops or housing, roadside space used in part for vendors) that would generate employment, increase income, and possibly decrease crime.

There is also the cost of the infrastructure for parking: large investments are needed to build underground parking. There are the infrastructure costs to accommodate cars, in terms of construction of flyovers and roads. And there are many indirect costs from heavy reliance on fuel-dependent transport: environmental pollution (air, noise, water); “accidents”—costs in terms of lost life and limb, hospitalization, repair of damaged vehicles; and contribution to global warming/climate change.

While those costs may seem inevitable in a “modern” society, many city governments have come to realize that such costs are neither acceptable nor affordable. Once alternatives are recognized and considered, the inevitability of such high costs can be questioned. In fact, there is nothing inevitable about a system based mostly on fuel-dependent transport. While such a system benefits a tiny segment of the population—mostly car dealerships, as even car owners suffer due to the heavy congestion, environmental damage, and other costs—alternatives can make life better for virtually everyone, and thus prove extremely popular, as Bogotá (Colombia), Copenhagen (Denmark), Curitiba (Brazil), Freiburg (Germany), Portland (Oregon, USA), Venice (Italy), Zurich (Switzerland), and other cities have proven.

ECONOMIC ISSUES: FUTURE

What then should the future look like? As mentioned above, well-designed, enlightened, modern “cities of the future” will be high-density cities, in which every zone is mixed use, thereby greatly reducing the need for travel. Modern cities will focus on access rather than mobility. As a result, much of the wasted expenditures cited above will be greatly reduced, while in return, people will gain more livable environments.
Specifically, savings will occur on a number of fronts. Dense, mixed use areas that do not focus on the space-wasting car will utilize most of their space for productive purposes. Rather than devoting significant amounts of road and other space to cars, space will be used for the movement of the masses, for income generation through transport (rickshaw and van pulling, repair of bicycles and rickshaws) and footpath vendors; and for recreational uses. All of the high costs generated by fuel-dependent transport will involve a proportionate savings, when reliance on fuel-dependent transport is replaced by reliance on fuel-free transport. Further savings will occur as travel between cities, for both passengers and freight, occurs mostly by rail rather than road. Trains are more economical (in terms of ticket costs, fuel use, use of space, and infrastructure investments), are better for the environment, and are far safer than buses.20

QUALITY OF LIFE/HAPPINESS

What matters most in life? Of course people need to meet their basic needs; beyond that, people enjoy accessing various comforts and luxuries. But is the most important thing in life income and what one can buy? Can money in fact purchase happiness? Is money even more important than happiness?

Countries around the world keep track of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Product (GNP), on the assumption that such measures will give an indication of the livelihood of the country’s people. But how accurate or helpful are such measures? Since economic measures only take into account certain things while ignoring many others—such as the state of the environment, or the country’s natural resources, or people’s free time, recreation, and enjoyment—they are of limited use in measuring what they are established to measure.21 Thus Bhutan has instead begun to look at “Gross National Happiness” or GNH—whether or not the population is becoming happier over time. This is particularly important given that research suggests that becoming wealthy does little to improve happiness, as people compare themselves to those who are better off than they are. Research suggests that advertising to children can make them more unhappy: “Children that are more brand aware, are more consumerist, came across as less satisfied in other parts of their lives - were unhappier”.22

What does make people happy? Happiness is closely linked to “social capital”—that is, “the sum of all our connections and trust in other people, our personal family ties, our friends, and

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20 Dey, Iqbal, and Sabuj 2006
21 Waring 1998
22 Easton 2006
our acquaintances”; interestingly, it is also linked to a smaller income gap between rich and poor.\textsuperscript{23} In the words of Enrique Peñalosa, “If you base progress on per capita income, then the developing world will not catch up with rich countries for the next three or four hundred years. The difference between our incomes is growing all the time. So we can’t define our progress in terms of income, because that will guarantee our failure. We need to find another measure of success.” The measure he suggests is happiness…and how can that be achieved? “…what are our needs for happiness? We need to walk, just as birds need to fly. We need to be around other people. We need beauty. We need contact with nature. And most of all, we need not to be excluded. We need to feel some sort of equality.”\textsuperscript{24}

That is, if we changed our focus away from income and towards happiness—after, of course, considering people’s basic needs—we could achieve a far more pleasant urban environment, and attain something far more important than material wealth.

Related to this issue is the question of time. For many people, a huge daily problem is lack of time, for one’s self, one’s family, one’s friends, and one’s community. Time stuck in traffic jams, time spent traveling to distant destinations, time chauffeuring children and the elderly, is all time taken away from more valuable pursuits. If one could shorten one’s commute, and most children and the elderly could travel unescorted, then far more time would be available for one’s self and others, time that would enhance one’s quality of life and one’s happiness.

A more livable city would thus mean less pollution, less crime, fewer dangerous accidents, and more recreation; more beauty, more socializing, more happiness. Who wouldn’t want such improvements over current city life?

**POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OR COUNTER-ARGUMENTS**

\begin{center}
\textbf{But what about people’s rights to own and drive their own car?}
\end{center}

Some argue that people have the “right” to buy, and use, a car. But what actually count as rights, and what should be labeled as privileges—that is, advantages which people may enjoy if they do not conflict with the rights of others, but which governments can revoke at any moment if they do interfere with others’ enjoyment of their rights? Certainly it is reasonable to say that people have the right to move about a city, or to walk. Other than a very small section of the society, everyone physically can walk; walking is the most basic way to get about, and is a basic right. But only a small minority of the population can buy a car, and if cars interfere

\textsuperscript{23} Easton 2006

\textsuperscript{24} Carbusters Issue 28, Sept.-Nov. 2006
with the rights of others to walk about, or to cycle safely, or to enjoy peace and quiet, then that “right” can be revoked.

In any case, there are plenty of cities in Bangladesh and around the world that allow people to drive, though many do place limitations on where they can do so and under what conditions (including banning parking in many places, forbidding unnecessary honking, and insisting on obeying traffic rules). For those who wish to drive, there will still be opportunities to do so; for those residing in a more livable city, other privileges and rights will be enjoyed!

*People don’t want to live or work in mixed-use areas.*

Some people think that it is better to separate different areas, with offices being in one part of town, residences in another, and shopping in yet another. People may perceive that residential areas will be quiet if office workers do not appear during the day, or that office work is made possible by the absence of teenagers playing music loudly. In fact, the main disruption to sleep, study, and work is noise from motorized vehicles, not other causes; if motorized vehicles are reduced, then it will be easier to sleep, study, and work.

Consider the case of returning home from work to discover that there is virtually no food in the home, or some important ingredient is missing. Nearby there is no restaurant, small hotel, or shop. Again one must brave the traffic, even for just a simple meal or small item. How much simpler if one could walk a few steps to a small neighborhood shop, or eat in a local restaurant.

Cities thrive when different areas remain lively at different hours—not lively with traffic and the honking of horns, but lively with the movement and conversation of people. In cities where short-distance travel is facilitated and motorized vehicles restricted, where all areas are mixed and thus people come and go at different hours, a lively environment can easily be maintained, encouraging sociability as well as ensuring safety. When people experience or realize these advantages, they will choose mixed areas.

*High density living causes many problems.*

People often associate high density with noise, dirt, and perhaps crime. Crowded dwellings can be dark, lack proper ventilation, and thus spread disease. Historically, it is for those reasons that city ordinances came into place limiting density. Now that we have had those ordinances for a long while, we have had plenty of opportunity to discover that mandating low density brings another set of problems: sprawl, wasted land, social isolation, high reliance on motorized vehicles and thus pollution, traffic jams, high travel expenses, many road crashes, and obesity.
Of course some limits on density are reasonable, but low density is as bad in its way as overly high density. High density does not have to be incompatible with light, ventilation, and cleanliness. If cars do not occupy living areas, then noise pollution can be drastically reduced. When high density areas include needed services, the need for travel is greatly reduced, further reducing traffic and traffic-related problems. When people move about on foot and have ample opportunity for outdoor recreation around their living areas, neighbors get to know each other, and social isolation and crime drop. Interestingly, the most expensive part of Paris is also the one with the highest density; people happily pay high rent for the chance to live in a lively neighborhood within easy walking distance of a range of shops, restaurants, theaters, art galleries, and so on.

Shouldn’t we just build more roads?

International experience has proven that it is impossible for road building to keep up with an unlimited increase in private vehicles; as a result, traffic congestion will never decline. Delhi, with twice the space given over to roads as Dhaka, still suffers from traffic jams. If 6% isn’t enough, and 12% isn’t enough, then how much is? And how practical (not to mention expensive) is it to continue increasing road space? It is also helpful to remember that to build roads, we must knock something else down, thereby further increasing the distance between destinations, and thus increasing the need for travel. As mentioned above, it is reducing road space that has been shown to reduce traffic; rather than trying to build more roads, we should make better use of existing ones by encouraging space-efficient modes (walking, bicycles, rickshaws, and public transit) and discouraging the space-consuming private car.

Will a livable city be economically viable?

First, how economically viable are our existing cities? Transport of goods, and of people to their workplaces, is continually hampered by serious traffic jams. Much money is wasted on fuel, including fuel spent while cars idle in traffic. Many businesses may choose not to move to Dhaka, because of the unpleasant living environment. In fact, a good environment for its employees is one of the main considerations for many large businesses in deciding where to settle, as it is far easier to recruit employees to live in a pleasant environment.

Transport without motors will not necessarily be any slower than it often is in Dhaka; after all, the average speed of buses in Dhaka (around 13.2 km/hour) could easily be achieved by bicycle, and is slightly less than the average rickshaw speed of 13.4 km/hour25. A better living

25 Ali 2006
environment will be conducive to attracting investment. Besides, it is important to remember that after meeting basic needs, the reason we seek more money is presumably to improve quality of life. But it is difficult to buy peace and quiet, and almost impossible to buy clean air and a friendly living environment. By achieving all those, even a lower level of income would translate into a far higher quality of life than is possible in many existing cities.

*Does any city resemble the livable city described here?*

Has any city succeeded in changing itself to resemble more the kind of humane, friendly, livable city described here, or is this just an impractical dream?

As the problems of urbanization and uncontrolled growth in cars become ever clearer, many cities around the world have responded with positive actions to create better living environments. Venice has no car traffic within the city whatsoever; many other cities ban cars from their central area or certain streets permanently, and many others have regular car-free events in which residents can safely recreate as families, enjoying walking, biking, and skating on car-free streets. Copenhagen, Denmark has undergone vast changes over the last few decades, dramatically reducing car parking and improving conditions for walking and cycling; Delft in the Netherlands and Freiburg in Germany encourage cycling and discourage car use, reaping the many benefits of such measures.

What is possible in wealthy countries is also possible in less wealthy cities that suffer from corruption and other problems as well as from poverty. Consider the case of Bogotá, whose visionary mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, set himself the goal of redesigning his city for children, not cars:

"Bogotá had lost itself in slums, chaos, violence, and traffic. During his three-year term, Peñalosa brought in initiatives that would seem impossible in most cities. He built more than a hundred nurseries for children. He built 50 new public schools and increased enrolment by 34%. He built a network of libraries. He created a highly-efficient bus highway transport system. He built or reconstructed hundreds of kilometers of sidewalks, more than 300 kilometres of bicycle paths, pedestrian streets, and more than 1,000 parks. He did it, in part, by declaring a war on private cars." 26

Not only have cities transformed themselves along the lines of a livable city, but neither great wealth nor perfect governance is essential to the process. Further, Peñalosa gained incredible popularity, so that his actions have been imitated by mayors through Latin America and the rest of the world. What is essential is the willingness to believe that urban life can be better than it is currently, and the readiness to work for change.

26 *Carbusters* 2006
CONCLUSION

It should come as no surprise that cities serve as a magnet. Cities provide opportunities that simply cannot be replicated in smaller towns or in the countryside. While the gathering of a large number of people in a small space can create many problems, it also gives rise to many opportunities that cannot be replicated in other ways. The types of work and educational opportunities, health care, leisure and socializing that occur in cities are by necessity unique to cities.

To improve our cities, we must separate the essential nature of a city—that is, the presence of many opportunities for exchange within a small space—from the problems which, while they often occur in cities, are not inevitable. Much of the pollution, traffic, noise, danger, and alienation in city life is an unnecessary, avoidable by-product of urban life, created not by cities themselves, but by lack of proper prioritization and thought towards urban existence.

By changing our priorities away from travel and cars, and towards access and people, we can greatly improve city life. By putting children first—in deed as well as in word—we can all benefit. We can maintain the many advantages of urban living while greatly reducing the problems. We can make our cities livable, and at the same time, reduce household and nationwide costs. We can improve the environment, sociability, and increase happiness. But to attain all this, we must be willing to examine with an open mind the actual conditions of our existing cities, and accept the possibility of something better.
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