

# THE HAPPY CITY

**From Paris to Bogotá, urban spaces are undergoing a radical transformation with one thing in mind: your well-being.**

**By Charles Montgomery**

**Illustrations by Hort**

It is rush hour in central Paris. Late July. Michelle Ueberschlag, a Swiss-born fashion designer, has stripped down to her bikini and settled into her deck chair, smack dab in the middle of the Pompidou expressway.

She squints out past the guardrail at the Seine. With its churning grey eddies, the river is certainly no substitute for the Mediterranean. Why spend the afternoon here?

“Life is easier,” she says with a chuckle.

This is a perfectly reasonable answer, especially right here, near the centre line of a freeway that, at this moment, is not a freeway in a city that has changed its mind about what streets are for.

For one thing, Parisians have buried the Pompidou with sand, pricked it with parasols and rendered it utterly undrivable with beer gardens, bocce ball courts and potted palm trees. This is not a road anymore, at least not during the summer. It’s a beach playground, all the way from the Louvre to the cast iron arches of the Pont de Sully. They call it Paris Plage.

The fashion designer is right. Life is easier here on the beach. But her assessment might just as well be made of most of central Paris. All through the city, pavement has been wrested away from private cars and converted into sandboxes, plazas, dance floors and bike paths. Paris has joined a global movement that seeks to change not just streets but the very soul of urban spaces. Its adherents believe that cities can become engines not just of economic growth. But of happiness.

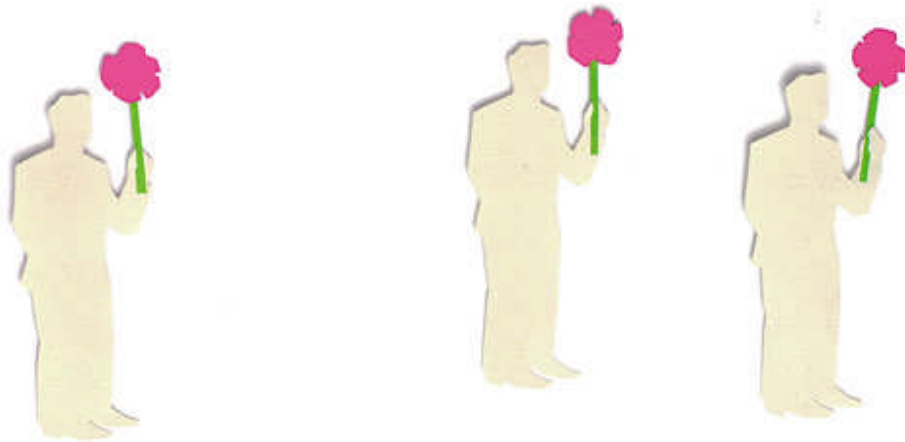
The charge is being led by some of the world's toughest towns, places like Bogotá, where happiness theory led one mayor to transform roads into parks and pedestrian "freeways," and Mexico City, whose mayor is investing in urban beaches and bikeways in order to change the citizens' gloomy outlook. Now the movement is spilling over to wealthier cities too. Seoul has ripped out a downtown freeway to make room for parks and streams. London has put the squeeze on cars with its now famous congestion charge.

These measures are often sold as emergency actions to tackle global warming. In fact, changing the way we design and use public space can change the way we move, the way we treat other people and ultimately the way we feel. Now you might think that Paris had long ago figured out the art of urban joy. But in recent years, residents have become so sick of noise, pollution and congestion that they have thrown their support behind a radical plan by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë to reclaim their streets. By 2012, suburban cars will be banned entirely from the city's core.

I have come to test the psychological effects of the latest of the mayor's schemes. Last year, Delanoë flooded the city core with more than 20,000 bikes, all virtually free to borrow. I swipe my card into a metallic kiosk, silently unlocking one of a dozen bicycles stationed alongside it. This *vélo libre* (free bike) – Vélib' for short – will be my personal metro. I can drop it off at any of more than a thousand kiosks around the city core.

I toss my briefcase into the front basket, then commit what would once have been a suicidal act: I roll out into the Paris traffic. Taxis bounce past me along Rue de Rivoli like go-karts. Delivery trucks and motorbikes jostle frenetically. Bus engines suck at the warm air. I have steeled myself for the pathological aggression of Paris' drivers. But I soon realize that there are other cyclists in this stream, dozens of us, in fact. Our collective mass has a calming effect on the traffic. I feel intensely awake but not in danger. In this chaos, we are all looking to each other for clues. We make eye contact.

This is just one example of the alchemy occurring on Paris' streets, explains sociologist Bruno Marzloff when I meet him in the 8e arrondissement. "We are learning a new way of sharing the city," Marzloff tells me as we wander the back streets. Sockless in loafers, he moves through the throngs with studied precision. "Look at what happens on a crowded sidewalk; everyone must be aware or we smash into each other. We must choreograph our movements. The result is a kind of dance."



Marzloff and I encounter four empty Vélib' stations in half an hour. "We're just at the beginning," Marzloff tells me. "What will happen when we have 200,000 people using Vélib' every day?"

Parisians are indeed moving differently, but this new dance is only one symptom of a more fundamental transformation. Changing the way we use city streets may make us happier. That's because such changes tinker with psychology that has guided us since the Stone Age.

It all comes down to trust. According to evolutionary psychology, our cave-dwelling ancestors fared much better against long-toothed beasts and other enemies when they worked together. Over the millennia, humans evolved mechanisms to push us toward trust. Researchers have found that our brains still release feel-good neurotransmitters when we co-operate with others – even with strangers.

Flash forward to rush hour: If you've fought gridlock in Paris or Sydney or Vancouver, you have likely experienced the animosity – and bursts of adrenalin – produced by driving. University of British Columbia professor emeritus John Helliwell, an economist who studies happiness and social connections, told me that this is but a tiny whiff of the anxiety our ancestors once felt when caught alone in the wilds. It's you, alone against the lions.

On the other hand, encounters we have on foot or by bike tend to build trust. It's in the eye contact we make as we choreograph our movements. When it works, we become just a little less fearful of each other. "Frequency of positive interaction is the key," insists Helliwell. So the more we meet outside of our cars, the kinder and gentler we're likely to become. Helliwell's data on Canadian cities has shown that our happiest neighbourhoods are those that report high levels of trust. As a bonus, those trusting, happy folks are more likely to volunteer, to vote and to return lost wallets to strangers.

This is more than academic psychobabble. Bogotá was mired in poverty, chaos, violence and crippling traffic when Enrique Peñalosa decided to redesign it using lessons from happiness theory nearly a decade ago. Armed with a stack of research on well-being, the then mayor vowed to turn his city into an engine for happiness.

His method? Like Delanoë, Peñalosa declared war on cars. He abandoned plans for suburban highways and instead used the money to build vast parks, hundreds of kilometres of bike paths and pedestrian “freeways.” He pushed cars off prime road space in order to make room for an efficient rapid bus system so that the city would feel more fair.



“What are our needs for happiness?” Peñalosa said in explaining his policies. “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.”

The first result of the mayor’s crusade was a campaign to impeach him. When that failed and the city began to assume its new shape, the number of road fatalities fell by a third. Traffic began moving faster as people switched to the mayor’s rapid bus system. Most remarkably, the shift in priorities had a psychological effect on the city. Polls found that optimism shot up. The murder rate fell by 40 percent. By the end of Peñalosa’s term, residents had voted to ban private cars from rush hour by 2015. Unfortunately, all the positive vibes didn’t result in his re-election.

Nevertheless, the happy cities movement is gaining momentum. Last year, John Helliwell was explaining his theories on trust and happiness to representatives of the world's leisure industry at a conference in Hangzhou (which is, according to surveys, one of the happiest cities in China). The more we get together, Helliwell assured them, the happier we will all be. At the end of his lecture, a Frenchman strode up, clasped his hand and enthused, "You have explained my life's work!"

It turns out that that man, Emmanuel Mongon, was the design and development director of Parc Astérix, the second biggest theme park in France. Mongon had found that the key to creating successful amusement parks was not the rate at which rides could spin visitors in circles; it was the way they created moments for people to share together.

"It's the same with cities," Mongon says when we meet for macaroons and coffee on the patio of Ladurée, a sumptuous tea room on the Champs-Élysées. Just as the best theme park rides always seat people together, so the best cities guide people into intersecting moments, Mongon says.

That's why the seats on Parisian café patios all face the street rather than each other. We may love to chat, but the real show is on the street. "What is the main attraction of the Champs-Élysées? It's not shopping. The purpose is for people to see each other!" Mongon declares, his green eyes darting along the sidewalk. "People – that's the magic of the city!"

There is a wondrous, stirring power to the Champs-Élysées. The street's lifeblood pulses along sidewalks that are cumulatively much wider than those famous six lanes of traffic. It exists between paving stones, newsstands and café tables, in the dripping of ice cream cones, in long legs and gusts of wind and in the electric possibility of a thousand simultaneous stolen glances.

The more time we spend on foot, on bikes or even on public transit, the more we slow down and the more we fuel this kind of social alchemy. Ironically, it may be the crisis of climate change – and the push for carbon austerity – that reinvigorates street life around the world.

As the sun falls over the silhouetted spike of the Eiffel Tower, I find a Vélib' and venture again onto the Champs-Élysées. The Arc de Triomphe is awash in incandescent light. It draws traffic toward it with the gravity of a sun. I join the flow, pedalling hard to keep up with the taxis and tour buses and Peugeot-loads of screaming young men. Soon there are cars on all sides of me, and we are all streaming into the Place Charles de Gaulle.

This is not the Paris of Mayor Delanoë's shared streets or Helliwell's happy place. The immense roundabout beneath the Arc de Triomphe is a spinning galaxy of headlights, and I am spinning with it, barely keeping pace with the traffic. I can't hear my breath above the roar. The Arc de Triomphe has brought together hundreds of people, but we are rendered anonymous by velocity. I spiral around the arch, once, twice, three times.

Traffic pulses in from each of 13 converging arteries. Then, between the tail lights of a tour bus, I spot a shadowy figure on two wheels.

It's a guy in a suit on another Vélip'. He's cruising along, one hand on the bar, radiating nonchalance. We orbit closer, close enough for us to catch each other's eyes. I feel an urge to holler at the guy, to tell him we are the future, to call him "*mon camarade!*" But there is only time for a nod of recognition before our trajectories begin to diverge. It lasts only a second, that encounter, but it carries the weight of an embrace. It makes me feel immensely good. I cannot contain my grin as I roll through the tail light sparks, pushed as though by centrifugal force away from the monument, across the landscape of happiness.