

Hellbeing or Wellbeing

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Mæ

In the next four decades all of the world's population growth is expected to take place in urban areas. ⁽¹⁾

Hellbeing:

Cities are polluted, noisy and congested, city inhabitants have poor access to nature and suffer from higher crime rates and isolation.



Seven dials in London, 1872 - www.bbc.co.uk

Wellbeing:

Cities provide jobs, services, facilities and access to art and culture which create opportunities for chance encounters, diversity, social inclusion, and creativity.



Green rooftop in central London

How can good place-making and quality of life be compatible with high densities?

Are cities inherently unhealthy places?

Are cities exclusive environments?

How can cities contribute to de-carbonisation of our society, to civic life and wellbeing?

These are the questions Mæ put to an expert panel of designers, academics and sustainability professionals at the Green Sky Thinking Week 2016. They brought out varying interpretations of this subject, with the different disciplines offering diverse insights on wellbeing and density.

Despite this potentially polarizing topic, areas of common ground were found. Ideas focused upon two main areas; firstly that of designing new urban environments at higher densities and engaging with existing high density places, secondly that quantifying wellbeing or designing to criteria are shown to improve it.



Wellbeing in Urban Environments: Room for Interaction and Ecology

Panellists debated the opportunities for wellbeing when designing new dense urban environments, as well as dealing with the problems of existing ones.

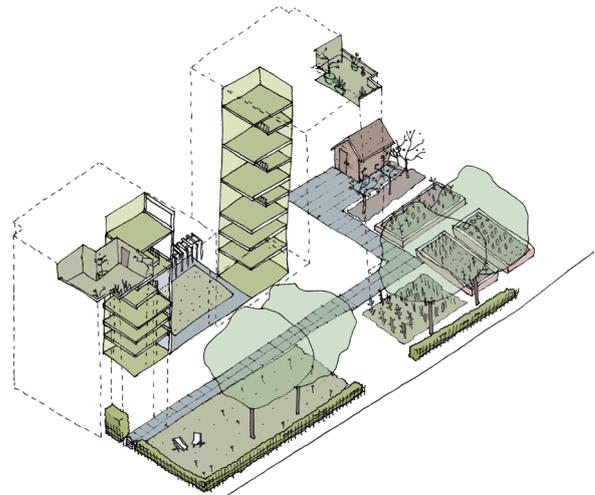
Oliver Bulleid discussed various models for addressing the UK's current housing delivery shortfall, through appealing for carefully managed mid and high density approach to our cities. By drawing a comparison between urban design and crowds he advocated leaving some looseness or 'elbow room' for interaction and exchange. He described a range of approaches, Mæ's MyHouse project is a custom build scheme which uses a high quality prefabricated system that buyers can adapt to their individual needs, as well as adapting them over time if their needs change. Somerleyton Road is an inner city scheme where elderly housing is integrated into a wider housing scheme, and has a range of communal green spaces at its heart, where residents can meet and socialise. Building threshold spaces such as public entrances, windows and balconies overlooking communal space are carefully positioned. Such schemes could help meet our need for housing at a mid to high density scale.

Ed Lister advocated de-cluttering our urban realm in order that we might create flexible places where communities can adopt urban spaces, encouraging ownership, stewardship and pride, he also demonstrated that there is a direct correlation between the sustained health of our city trees and vegetation and the health and longevity of our city inhabitants.

He advocated a Green, Lean, and Clean approach:

- Green - Trees and ecology can enhance our emotional and physical wellbeing, reduce urban heat island effect and improve biodiversity and air quality.
- Lean - Modest, durable and flexible interventions in large, potentially gentrified schemes can lead to community stewardship and adoption.
- Clean - decluttering our urban fabric makes for more flexible and walk-able places, keeping them efficient will allow for sustainable growth of our cities.

Claire McAndrew discussed the rise of 'non-places' - functional spaces such as motorways, shopping malls or train stations, with little cue



Mæ's Somerleyton Road, diagram showing the various communal gardens



Mæ's Somerleyton Road scheme ground floor communal garden



Planit-IE, landscape interventions can provide space for interaction

'Cultures and climates differ all over the world, but people are the same. They'll gather in public if you give them a good place to do it.'

- Jan Gehl

for interaction. Contrast this with place, which is space that creates opportunities for social connections. While place contributes to wellbeing, non- place arguably detracts from it. Herman Herzberger describes that the design of spaces can enable activities based on human interaction and social connections, which promotes wellbeing.

In her project sPins, a interactive sculptures were placed into Euston Square Gardens, which invited interaction with sculptures as well as other people, this explored the idea that a non-place could be turned into a place for social interaction through small, playful interventions, thereby promoting wellbeing in civic space.

Quantifying and Designing for Wellbeing

Panellists discussed how we might measure or predict what factors may effect people's wellbeing, in design and use of buildings and places.

Henry Pelly set out key issues where there is evidence that design can influence wellbeing, these included privacy, nature, comfort, and the legibility of space. He also discussed that we can have too much of a good thing, and that there comes a tipping point where quality of life falls with over-consumption, for example life expectancy tends to rise with national GDP per capita, but then falls again once a tipping point is passed.

Alex Whilley discussed how the idea of a happiness quotient as a means of gauging how sustainable communities are in order to build and maintain sustainable places to live.

She is interested in how good placemaking can contribute to de-carbonisation, and led on Affinity Sutton's FutureFit program, which worked with residents delivering combinations of low carbon refurbishment works and energy lifestyle advice, which has helped them formulate a policy to provide energy efficiency to existing homes, understanding what savings can actually be achieved for different levels of investment.

Affinity Sutton wish to ensure that they provide thriving and sustainable communities for residents, and that investment is carried out according to a well-formulated policy on energy efficiency in existing homes. Evidence presented quantified wellbeing by revealing how culture and sport make people as happy as being given a £1,600 pay rise.

Apply this to the **city...**



Green

Trees and vegetation are a barometer of life in our cities



Lean

Money alone can't create and sustain communities



Clean

Detoxing our urban environments will make room for more

'Dull, inert cities contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else... lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.'

- Jane Jacobs



'In Mumbai, India, the cost to treat health problems caused by air pollution forms a sizable proportion of people's annual income, particularly in poor households.' ⁽²⁾

Conclusion

As architects we have a wider responsibility to design cities that provide socially inclusive, healthy environments that promote people's wellbeing, and work to avoid congested, polluted non-places that suffer from high crime rates and isolation.

There is substantial shortfall in the number of new homes built every year, and a predicted rise in urban population growth. We must make physical space for interaction with nature and other people within the design of dense urban schemes which have the potential to meet the housing shortfall and avoid suburban sprawl.

Space for ecology and social interaction can be provided at a range of scales in buildings and in the landscape, and this can have a significant impact on city dwellers wellbeing; providing room for exchange of ideas, chance encounters, social inclusion and creativity. Carefully considered interventions can promote wellbeing in existing as well as proposed public spaces.

Addressing existing homes is necessary to decarbonize our housing stock in line with our sustainability targets, and Affinity Sutton's work shows that there is an opportunity to improve the performance of dwellings whilst also promoting sustainable lifestyle choices, being conscious of how we design for and measure occupants wellbeing. We must use existing research to ensure that we design places that positively promote wellbeing.

We want to provide successful, dense urban environments which promote wellbeing, social and environmental sustainability, and there are challenges as well as opportunities when doing so. We look forward to continuing this debate in future talks and events and in our practice.

Our guest panel included:

Henry Pelly, Sustainability Consultant at Max Fordham

Claire McAndrew, Research Associate at The Bartlett UCL

Alex Willey, Head of Sustainability at Affinity Sutton

Oliver Bulleid, Associate Director at Mæ
Ed Lister, Managing Partner at Planit-IE

Should you wish to hear about Mæ's upcoming talks or to simply get in touch, subscribe to our newsletter here <http://eepurl.com/bC-BxP> or follow us on twitter @maearchitects



Mæ's MyHouse project, homes are flexible and adaptable to future change

The higher the level of species richness that visitors to urban green spaces believe they are surrounded by, the higher the visitors' level of perceived well-being. ⁽³⁾



Planit-IE, ecology in cities can have a significant positive effect

- (1) UN-DESA Population Distribution, Urbanization, Internal Migration and Development: An International Perspective. 378 (New York, 2011)
- (2) Patankar, A. M. & Trivedi, P. L. Monetary burden of health impacts of air pollution in Mumbai, India: Implications for public health policy. Public Health 125, 157–164 (2011).
- (3) Dallimer, M. et al. Biodiversity and the Feel-Good Factor : Understanding Associations between Self-Reported Human Well-being and Species Richness. 62, 47–55