

As you know, I love to travel, and when I travel I go to mixed use, walkable areas. They are usually the 'old towns' of any historical cities. Narrow streets, few cars, shopping and bars everywhere with residences above, and patios that break the barrier between inside and outside. These areas evolved long before urban planning existed as a career, and long before municipal bureaucracies came in to make things more 'efficient'. They have become gatekeepers against community, focused more on keeping 'the other' out rather than welcoming everyone in.

One of our big challenges in addressing climate change through a good built environment is to think in systems that serve community rather than capital. This means that the public realm returns to the domain of the public. Public ownership and development of the public realm is necessary to ensure that the design and function serve the public rather than being a tick-box for the private developer who will endeavour to spend as little as possible and serve only those who pay for the privilege.

Having more and better public spaces means that our private spaces could be reduced (there will need to be a change of culture to go alongside that). We wouldn't need private yards if parks were close by, safe, and friendly. We wouldn't need massive living rooms if cafes were on every street corner. We wouldn't need walk in pantries if the grocery store was the next block over. We wouldn't need three car garages if we took transit or walked everywhere. We wouldn't want to drive everywhere if our sidewalks were wide and safe and enjoyable to spend time on.

All this means mixed use density as a default, building vibrant communities that have everything right out the door. Just like we used to do it. I feel like so often we come up with this cool new idea, and we come to find out that societies somewhere else on the globe have been doing it that way for centuries. Ideas aren't worth considering until an over-educated white man says it, then it gains traction. It also feels like so many of these ideas can't proceed until there is a way to capitalize or monetize it.

In many ways, technology is secondary to what we want for our society and communities, who gets to benefit, and how we execute on our vision. Approaching societal change under the premise that public goods must be privatized, that public investment is always wasteful, and that value is determined in dollars will see us following down the same path we have been taking for the past many decades. How do we create an equitable society when the foundation of its sense of self is that some are more worthy than others. Because that is what we are saying when we enclose the public realm - condo owners get access to the green space on their roof, and no one else. That isn't a slight on private property rights or the need for physical security. Rather it is a criticism of the system that rewards private investment over public service provision.

After much rambling, I think the trajectory of our next 50+ years will be determined less by newfangled gadgets, and more by our culture and capacity to change. Do we trust our public institutions to serve the public, and if so, will we let them act? Will we let them act in service of all of us, or just a few of us? Are we willing to put our money where our mouth is, and fund the kind of society we want to live in?

In closing, #NoWarButClassWar

Thank you, Dr. Mandy Hansen, Principal, Insight Specialty Consulting