

Preface

The present collection of articles seeks to highlight the diversity of viewpoints on what exactly influences the quality of life for city dwellers. As these editors firmly believe, diversity fosters creativity and we therefore took it as the key criterion in selecting contributions to this publication. Among the authors are academics, experienced and at the beginning of their career, coming from schools of economics, universities and institutes of technology, but also practitioners—men and women of various age, different backgrounds, from Poland and abroad, including politicians and decision-makers at the central and local level. This gives us a wide range of opinions which—in an attempt to grasp the quintessence of a “happy city”—are presented here along with examples of those already treading this path and with findings of research taken to identify the key ingredients of what people call the “quality of life”.

The city can be seen as a system of interacting elements (subsystems), which means that no such component should be analysed separately, but only in conjunction with the other ones. The elements listed most frequently include: transport, sewerage, power supply, heat generation, parks and green spaces, and street lighting/traffic signalisation. In an ideal contemporary city [1] the focus is on all aspects of sustainable development—economic, environmental and societal. As pointed out in the Global Compact report [2], happy cities take care of adequate living conditions for all residents, accepting their diversity and multiple requirements. Blueprints for such cities are being developed by people of a whole range of professions and occupations—to name economists, sociologists, engineers, architects and anthropologists—but if they are to deliver, this must surely be a collaborative effort.

A one-size-fits-all approach would not work here. Research findings demonstrate [3] that in different countries the happiness index is impacted by different factors—and per capita GDP is by no means the weightiest of them. These editors subscribe to the opinion that a key predictor of people’s satisfaction with life is social capital, based on relationships. According to the U.S. economist John Helliwell [4], the utmost psychological effect of urban living is reflected in its impact on people-to-people relations [5]. Social capital represents primarily an ability to

maintain and keep relations with people, those close to us and outsiders alike. It is correlated with trust which people have in government, businesses and in other people. And trust is conducive to civic attitudes, where residents seek to proactively contribute to their environment and local authorities seek to engage citizens with the decision-making process.

To these editors the notion of social capital brings to mind the image of a Japanese zen garden, where it is the space between rocks that counts, not the rocks themselves. With happy cities things are similar, and space again is of paramount importance—in the broad sense of the notion, involving relationships between buildings and parks, between people and buildings, between parks and people, and also the relationships between residents.

With different groups having their quality of life influenced by different factors—from which it would not be possible to extract a single set suiting all—it is crucial that the “golden mean” be sought and bridges built between these groups, to bring home how important it is to understand the needs of the other groups, not just one’s own.

Listening to the concerns of others is a first step towards raising social capital, and hence the significance of communicating—and respecting—these concerns. Next comes providing the space in which different groups will exchange opinions while showing themselves mutual respect. In successive stages, it is important to develop a culture of discussion that enables constructive conclusions and draws all stakeholders into the implementation of agreed projects. Obviously, a city’s progress to happiness is also impacted by finances. The pace of change tends to accelerate when European Union funds are available (as far as EU member states are concerned), an appropriate budget level is assured, and systems to finance city investments are transparent. But many elements improving the quality of life are not directly linked to the availability of funds.

Happy cities are usually governed along democratic lines, involving free access to urban space and equal (non-discriminatory) treatment of residents, whatever their differences. But as is quite frequently the case, the city space—full with pathways leading to it—happens to be controlled by varied vested interests. Meanwhile, access to this space and pathways is shown by research to exert considerable influence on the quality of life for inhabitants.

Another question that must be asked when discussing happy cities is about creativity. Is residents’ happiness linked to creativity? Smart city analyses usually highlight the opportunities provided by technology—from the Internet of Things (or, more broadly, the Internet of Everything) to Big Data to creative industries. According to Florida [5], the key driving force in the knowledge-based economy is precisely the creative capital, or capability to produce new ideas, processes, designs and culture creations, and turn them into valuable products and services. While physical capital is easy to measure, the creativity metrics are fairly complicated. Broadly speaking, creativity comprises three parts—talent, technology and tolerance—which, combined with social capital, add up to the concept of a smart, or happy, city. Talent means concentration of people with great competences and high creative potential; technology is concentration of R&D infrastructure; and tolerance

represents an open attitude to change and new ideas. Thus the winners are those cities which can attract the best educated, most innovative, and most enterprising people. Driven by creative energy, those individuals form the “creative class” that spearheads the contemporary knowledge-based economy. They include academics, designers, artists, engineers, programmers, film producers, publishers, script writers, movie directors and financial analysts, weaving a development-friendly fabric and thus adding a competitive edge to their cities. Creative intellectual ferment is an indispensable ingredient of development, and it is best stirred up by this very class.

The concept discussed in this collection defines the directions of urban development. It no longer suffices to provide physical infrastructure in order to make residents feel they experience a good quality of life. This must go hand in hand with an expansion of educational services, a richer leisure-time offer, an infrastructure for sports and games, etc.

This publication is an attempt to put the spotlight on diverse ideas that inform the notion of a happy city.

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