Urgency and the transformative imperative: Another city is possible

METREX

The Network of
European Metropolitan
Regions and Areas

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METREX

METREX is an established network of over 50 metropolitan regions and areas in Europe. We contribute the metropolitan dimension to policies, programmes and projects on a European scale. The network is a partner of European institutions, the research community, governmental organisations and other networks. We hosts regular events and meetings for Members, either through Expert and Network Groups, our online METREXmonthly events, or bi-annual conference.

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Credits

I wish to thank Henk Bouwman, for initiating this essay, Stephen Gallagher for his support. Additionally, I thank those who were willing to be interviewed in alphabetical order: Peter Austin, Oslo; Thierry Baert, Lille; Kaarel Kose, Tallinn; Paul Lecroart, Paris; Fredrick Lindegren, Umea; Piotr Lorens, Gdansk; Kazimierz Karolczak, Katowice; Łukasz Medeksza, Wroclaw; Jürgen Neumüller, Berlin-Brandenburg; Guntars Ruskuls, Riga; Petr Šašinka, Brno; Iván Tosics, Budapest.

Towards implementing spatial strategies in continuously changing metropolitan areas – the theme of the Riga Conference

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Executive summary

This 'Urgency and the transformative imperative' discussion document has its origins in the autumn 2021 METREX conference in Riga where Central and Western European strategic planners took part. Subsequently it was decided to explore through an interview series 'what can we learn from Central Europe' and following on from that 'what can we learn from each other'. Given the richness of these feedbacks it became clear that there was a bigger agenda, namely: 'how can we re-direct our strategies for creating a different type of city in tune with the global agendas of our times?'.

The document is made of two parts. The first shorter part highlights mutual learning experiences and the second, longer one, seeks to encapsulate the newer thinking about cities and the priorities of future city-making always with an eye to the metro perspective. This concentrates on the urgencies facing all cities and the need to transform. This summary stands back and seeks to draw out the complex drivers that motivate people and organisations to change. These happen at different levels and are triggered in differing ways. It is presented rather like a multi-step agenda for action.

Urgency and crises are the first and can lead to a cognitive shock and is the strongest catalyst. We realise then viscerally that something is wrong. Think here of the causes of the pandemic or the collapsing climate and changing weather patterns with excessive temperatures and flooding. These are experienced by everyone directly. The war in Ukraine has added to our awareness of our vulnerabilities and is likely to have many implications, such as dealing with the refugee crisis or finding alternative energy supplies. These are ultimately all about planning issues.

Iconic facts can shift our understanding sharply. For instance, Earth Overshoot Day which marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. In 2000 it was the 23 September and in 2022 the 28 July, and in the USA it was the 14 March.

Encapsulating concepts, such as sustainability or resilience have helped create a framework to think through issues and policies, to assess priorities and provide a template for action. The newer concept of the circular economy highlights the need to move from a 'take, make and waste' model to one of 'reduce, reuse and recycle.' Other concepts will emerge in time.

Reframing issues can be an important way of solving problems and creating opportunities in new ways. For instance, to redefine our city-making task as placemaking has changed the conversation from the language of urban development and planning. This by definition breaks down silos and is an integrated approach to inspire people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces and more together, in doing so strengthening the connection between people and the places they live in. It is more than just promoting better urban design – it facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. It capitalises on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential.

Behaviour change becomes a priority as when the foundations of how we have thought, planned and acted are put into question this becomes a psychological and cultural issue. Shifting behaviour is not easy and this demands that policy makers respond to and understand cultural drivers and psychological insights, which so far has been a blindspot in city-making.

Mindscape shifts happen when such understandings are absorbed. Think here how eco-principles and consciousness are spreading to the broader population. This creates acceptance of policies and actions that for the individual or a company might have previously been seen as unacceptable.

Revaluing value is a consequence of the above as the realisation of conventional measures of success and failure, such as GDP are inadequate.

Here global institutions from the UN downwards are challenging governments and cities not to promote GDP growth through all possible means, which they are often doing regardless of the wider consequences for the planet and the distribution of rewards. Metro regions can be leaders in assessing their wellbeing differently.

Setting missions and moon shots has regained popularity, such as the EU's 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030, which sets a target within a paced and purposeful approach. Another implied by many strategies is the reshaping our cities that were designed for cars, which involves a massive retrofitting exercise and establishment of new mobility systems focused more on walking, cycling and micro mobility.

The participative imperative has risen up the agenda with the recognition that cities at their best give people a voice, so they are not just anybody but a somebody. By enabling people to have agency and to be empowered, helps connects people to place, to become an active citizen and to take responsibility for their evolving city.

Practical manifestations are key to provide people with the lived experience of a different perspective. The 15-Minute City notion popularised by Paris and inspired by Carlos Moreno, is a return to a local way of life. This urban concept is one in which most daily necessities can be accomplished by either walking or cycling from residents' homes. 15-minute cities are built from a series of 5-minute neighbourhoods, also known as complete communities or walkable neighbourhoods. An early example of implementing eco-districts and one of

the most famous is Vauban in Freiburg, Germany.

Making the invisible visible is crucial as many of the innovations that are solving our problems, such as energy saving devices, empowering people, intercultural dialogue, or new ways of organising, are invisible. Here, arts inspired projects can play an important role as they can broaden horizons and convey meaning with immediacy as well as depth; they can facilitate immediate and profound communication; symbolise complex ideas and emotions or encapsulate previously scattered messages.

Orchestration and storytelling is a vital skill in drawing the threads together in a manner that can be communicated to citizens and organisations so that they feel they can be a part of making, shaping and co-creating their city and where can see their roles. This requires good storytelling – a story that embeds and achievable aspiration and some inspiration.

Shifting the regulations and incentives regime to meet the challenges of our time is increasingly highlighted. As a consequence, over the last 15 years in particular there has been a public sector innovation ecosystem emerging – one not beholden to the 'new public management' logic. It remains largely fragmented made up of government and intergovernmental entities, living labs, some a part of a municipality and some independent, think tanks, specialist consultancies, university departments, public sector innovation networks. They are all seeing public sector innovation as both an imperative and an opportunity for governments at every level. They are experimenting and using new approaches, from policy design to service delivery to improve the performance and responsiveness of the public sector as well as engaging better with its communities of interest.

A final coda: **large-scale transformation is a cultural project** as it is about values, world views, changing attitudes, habits, hearts, minds, new skills and behaviour and so how people and places think, plan and act. It implies thinking afresh.

Setting the scene

'Urgency and the transformative imperative' falls into two parts, this because its initial starting point was an exploration of trying to answer a seemingly simple question: *'what can we learn from Central Europe'*. Why did we ask this question and what was the trigger? The autumn 2021 METREX conference in Riga gathered a wide group of speakers and participants especially from Central Europe. This provided an opportunity to hear a diversity of voices from across the region talking about their progress, success and also difficulties in establishing a metro perspective on their city development as well as city making as a whole. Several Western city strategists and planners were also present at the event so then it also became a joint discussion about collective experiences.

Thus, as our subsequent interviews mostly with cities from across Central Europe but also those from Western Europe unfolded it became increasingly clear that a broader question was on peoples' minds, namely: **'what can we learn from each other'**. This in turn broadened to another topic: **'how can we create a different type of city'** in tune with the issues that really matter to people and to the world as well as our current need to transform that is becoming more urgent. Crucially too: 'how does metro thinking relate to that'.

This might at first sight seem odd as if the two parts do not logically follow – but they follow the flow of conversation and revealing that is instructive

Learning from Central Europe: A perspective

Let's start by exploring the first before more extensively discussing the second and third questions. Some unfortunately may think that asking questions about learning from Central Europe is strange. The default position has mostly been that Central European countries merely have been playing catch up and learning from the West since the great transformations of the early 1990s. It might seem simplistic to perceive Central Europe, defined as those countries formerly part of the Soviet sphere excluding Russia, as a single unity since across the region their differing histories shaped who they are. Think here of those formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or Poland with its often-shifting borders, then those countries that had been influenced by the Ottoman Empire, and finally the Baltics. Nevertheless, this disparate grouping all shared being part of the post-war Soviet sphere. This created a **common experience.**

The transformations of the early 1990s meant they all shifted to a capitalist mode of thinking, which often was interpreted as a **'free for all'** and 'let it all rip' approach. This has had negative consequences even though Western planning is guided by robust frameworks, policies or tight legal structures and their subsequent regulatory and incentives regimes.

Yet, simply asking 'what can we learn' from this region can cause **all of us in Central and Western Europe to be self-reflective** and to think. Flipping and switching the focus can be valuable even if there are not many

From left:

Wroclaw Photo by Dawid Zawiła on Unsplash

Lille Photo by Geoffroy Hauwen on Unsplash

obvious learnings at first sight. It moves the thinking away from a 'master pupil relationship' between Western and Eastern countries. It then opens the door to discussions based on mutual respect.

One thing was clear, namely, that Central European countries can definitely learn from each other in spite of the deep cultural and historical differences, such as how developed their NGOs are or their levels of civic engagement in public affairs, or the strength of their collective bottom-up initiatives.

A central question for metro regions present was whether those entities exist as service providers for the interests of its component parts and whether they have the power, authority, mandate, or agency to act effectively. Clearly this impacts on the resources they might have available to guide development as a whole. This is a mixed story. On the one hand the early EU funded motorway building programmes initially connected places better and then later the EU's Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) programme encouraged a more extensive portfolio. Central European cities, regions and countries have used this programme effectively. But it was often the allure of funding that helped

overcome barriers, such as internal acceptance of the need to collaborate and only in a few selected places has collaboration become more embedded.

However, whatever the potential power conflicts within the cities forming part of a metro region the metro perspective has become increasingly relevant. The new dynamic unfolding since the pandemic has reinforced this where geography is flattening through space and hybrid working has become normalised.

Broader **common issues were identified**. These ranged from concerns of some central governments not to wish for larger, alternative centres of power to emerge as urban areas tend to be more liberal, or the reluctance of local mayors to give up power, or a lack of a history of collaboration. Clearly their histories created challenges. For instance, developing social capital was constrained, the organisational culture was more hierarchical. This meant shifting to greater community involvement and participative approaches to policy making, common in the West, was more difficult. Equally, notions of integrated thinking, planning and acting or interdepartmental collaboration have

been difficult to institute where silo thinking and working has been more dominant.

Yet, being seen as apparently not up to date or 'behind' by some Westerners in urban development ideas lacks a historical perspective. For instance, Camillo Sitte, the urbanist and author of 'City Planning According to Artistic Principles' (1889) was very influential in Central Europe. Thus, there was already an alternative model that was overtaken by the ultra-modernist, car-oriented city crafted by Le Corbusier and his fans - among them also people from Central Europe who are still wedded to that thinking as they are in Western Europe.

Sitte's ideas still resonate or should resonate since he argued that the aesthetic experience of urban spaces should be the leading concern in urban planning. He emphasised the value of irregularity in the urban form and challenged the growing tendency towards rigid symmetry in city making. These ideas are coming back with force by those who reject modernist urbanism.

Not going with modernist trends can also have an ideological reasoning, such as the wish to provide public services such as public transport systems and especially trams in Central Europe. These were not demolished, whereas many Western places had to recreate – think of Manchester here. Yet, **the catching up process** mostly meant a desire and status to have a car and all the consequences that follow which shaped post 1990s urban patterns and led to suburbanisation and the creation of places with little sense of urbanity.

One catalyst to guide development has historically been the ownership of public land and here again the drive to privatisation unfortunately has meant that **this historic asset evaporated**. And this precisely at the moment when many cities realised the need to bend market forces to bigger public interest purposes. Here to be a credible partner requires negotiating resources, such as land. This process has also happened in Western Europe.

The abrupt changes Central Europe went through could **in principle have been a possibility** to think completely afresh. This was clearly difficult given their urgent problems, such as the stress of transforming to a capitalist system or the lack of resources. An exception is Estonia and what it has achieved with its digital development. Also in the former East there were so many old structures that could be rethought and repurposed for the new economy. Although this happened extensively in the West there are interesting examples such as Katowice's Muzeum Śląskie (Silesian Museum) complex or Lodz's Manufaktura or Budapest's courtyard entertainment centres such as Gozsdu Courtyard.

One lesson for all of us has been the **speed of adaptation** Central European countries have needed to go through, such as retrofitting polluting industries or rethinking industrial processes in circular economy terms. This is something Western Europe has not had to face to the same degree.

The latter was admired by Western colleagues, who felt professionals in the East were **mostly cultivated, openminded**, keen to do the best for

their cities and country, committed and proud of their cities, keenly aware of what is happening elsewhere and, crucially, not bored by the challenges ahead.

An important lesson for Westerners interacting with Central Europe was that it challenged their own perceptions and **potential complacency**. They admired their flexibility in adjusting and even shifting their mindset if mistakes were made. This includes not thinking through the implications of encouraging urban sprawl or allowing shopping centres at motorway junctions that drain the lifeblood of the city itself. They admired too the willingness to learn rapidly, to be honest, to admit mistakes, to be humble about what has been achieved, to try to readjust and the ability in often unstable political contexts to remain fluid in adapting to circumstances. They respected too their technical competences even though new techniques and technologies could update systems, such as AR, AI or in visualisation.

The experience of the culture of management in Central Europe with its more dominant siloed thinking and hierarchical approaches in fact made Westerners ask themselves 'how actually advanced are we ourselves' and 'are our hierarchies just more hidden'.

This is the power of international exchange – **by looking outwards you look inwards to yourself**. You reassess. This self-reflective process makes you alert. This is similar to the experience of travel.

Co-creating a new type of city across Europe

The rapidly unfolding global metro dynamic is inextricably interwoven with discussions, ideas and practices about what makes cities and their surrounding regions successful and function well in the future. It highlights what urban agendas and actions can foster this. In practically all world regions, the share of metropolitan area residents has grown at escalating speed, especially since 2000. This focused initially, for instance in West European countries and cities, on how to manage and develop these conurbations in a more effective way. City-region collaboration is, of course, the raison d'etre of METREX. The aims have included to explore joint ventures, to save resources, to avoid duplication, to become more competitive as a region.

But now **wider questions are emerging** as strategic planners think more in integrated eco-system terms. Driving this are often labels that seek to guide urban developments. Each of these embed strategic ideas. Think here of the knowledge, creative, innovative, green, smart, human, resilient, liveable city ideas and associated labels. All highlight slightly different priorities and should be seen together as a whole.

Those labels collectively also present ethical stances, **underlying principles and political priorities**. These include providing people with agency – the empowerment and participation agenda – or by developing a culture of creativity to unleash the collective imagination, talents and skills of a city. Equally they focus on fostering one
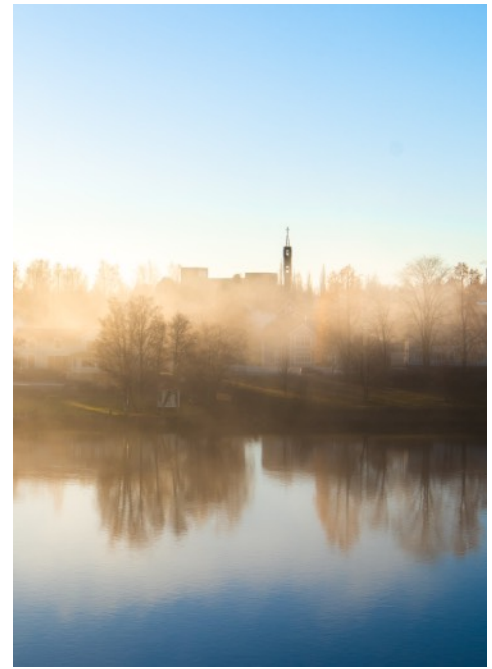
planet living and so encouraging changing lifestyles. Additionally, by emphasising the perspective on the lived life experience of human beings we ask ourselves what is a liveable place that generates health and wellbeing. All of this means rethinking systems, infrastructures and activity programmes - all of which are planning issues. Seen together, notions of city-region innovation eco-systems are coming into play, whereby innovations can also be social or cultural and not only economic. METREX can become the leader in this debate.

Embedded within those labels or notions are a number of deep drivers, such as harnessing the power of digitalisation. This represents a tectonic shift with an immense force. Its devices are changing society and social life, culture, levels of connectivity, the economy as well as cities. At its best it can make life more citizen centric, more local, more convenient or efficient and create smart solutions to curtail energy over-use or to craft ingenious ways to enable seamless connectivity. It can help visualise planning processes in motion and by filling the city with self-regulating sensors brings real time feedback loops and invigorate

democratic processes. At its worst there is the dark side of the digitalising world including: the ease with which fake news can spread, how people can coalesce into echo chambers that leads to a polarising world, how the watchful eye of the tech behemoths is constantly monitoring us and so substantive questions about privacy arise.

The last couple of years in particular have been a period of radical reckoning and they reinforced issues of change and transformation. The Covid pandemic was a time to think afresh. Momentarily seeing the skies clear and hearing the birds sing again was a wakeup call. This unforced experiment and expression of reducing carbon emissions gave us a glimpse of a possible other world. It reminded us that the world of 'more and more' cannot go on even though many still think of the old normal as our desirable and exotic destination.

It reminded all of us that we need to shift our economic order and way of life that is materially expansive, socially divisive and environmentally hostile. And doing that cannot be grasped by a business as usual approach as it takes a while for new

ethical stances or new ways of operating to take root or to establish a new and coherent world view and associated policy and action framework.

Iconic facts can shift our understanding sharply and one that **encapsulates the urgency** is Earth Overshoot Day. This marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. In 2000 it was the 23 September and in 2022 the 28 July, and in the USA it was the 14 March.

Our crises, often dark and gloomy, weigh heavily and can push us into passivity and resignation. Yet, **crises can be opportunities** and provide a gateway from one world to the next. Taking a helicopter view of the vast range of innovative initiatives happening, large and small, across Europe – East and West – to address the solutions to create a more human and nature centred world you see some positive patterns. Still for the moment fragmented and without sufficient power and traction big agendas are coming together in unprecedented ways.

Driving this change are many: activists, civil society, politicians, urban planners, researchers, inventors, artists, start-up entrepreneurs, business, writers and more. There is a mood and a movement emerging. We are seeing the possibility of creating a different world driven on other principles. **There is a Planet B in sight**, even though to get there we must get Planet A right. It is a compelling story.

Think how eco-principles are beginning to shape our mindscape and how that provides the frame and so courage to move towards a green transition where the circular economy notion plays a crucial part. Think too how newer concepts like resilience help us work through the tasks ahead, or how co-creation and the participatory imperative helps harness the collective imagination since urban transformation is a collective endeavour. Think here too of the notion that the city is **our joint commons**, where sharing power and encouraging active citizenship is seen to help create solutions. And not to forget the digitalising world that runs through systems like electricity in its inventiveness and with its immersive capacities. Yet, we always must be alert that we, rather than the technologies, are in control.

This raises the question '**what is mutual learning**' or 'what is exchange'. Here a vast topic is the ways cities are rethinking across the world and involved in a giant urban retrofitting exercise. This can be a joint endeavour and learning experience between East and West rather than one where learning only flows from one to the other. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse, one of the leading thinkers on the theory and practice of development, notes: Development is transformative and a collective learning experience.

Indeed, **a new kind of city is emerging** both in our minds, but importantly in practice, whose look, feel and operating dynamics are different from what went before. Metro collaboration crucially forms part of these agendas, but there is a bigger story too.

Katowice Photo by Martin Błaszkiewicz on Unsplash

Leaving aside the city labels noted above one thinks here too of **various emerging concepts** including placemaking, eco-districts, blue zones or the city of proximity. They are all related and are driven not only by the climate agenda but also concerns about wellbeing, peoples' happiness, community engagement or the ability to connect in convivial gathering places. It challenges the car-focused city making principles developed over the last 100 years (as well as the desire to separate housing and dirty industry) and its functional zoning and separations. The virtues of older forms of city making with their mixed uses

are increasingly seen as a template, such as buildings with three or more uses with street-level retail, second-level offices, and a third-level residential floor. They might be called 'traditionalist' or 'neo-medieval' but with a modern overlay and their conveniences. This can be seen across Europe and even China which has built many neighbourhoods or towns that imitate older European settlements.

Globally agreed frameworks, such as the UN **Strategic Development Goals, are another form of scaffolding** to set priorities such as the goals to reduce income inequalities or to foster gender equality as well as to make urban communities more sustainable. To advance these shifts the overall implication is that **the planning system needs to be reviewed** as well as organisational structures to meet the new agendas. Gender equality and diversity issues remind us of whose voices are being heard and who is involved in decision making. Or placemaking implies working cross-departmentally and across sectors in an integrated way, whereas in East and West in spite of the rhetoric silo working remains dominant.

To develop a place and to deal with multiple stakeholders reminds us that many disciplines need to be involved. Thus, the skillset of the 'classical planner' whose job it is to develop comprehensive plans, designs and functions for the use of space is insufficient. It involves **the art of mediation** both between the specialisms as well as the groups affected by plans. This requires the ability to deal with conflict and creative processes to reach alignment and agreement. This might mean people with good mediator's skills become the new planner. Aligning

interests will only work with a **combined jointly agreed vision** if, for instance, a completely redesigned movement or energy system or new economic sector are to be put in place.

How **urban visioning** is undertaken has therefore **inevitably changed** over time from being largely top-down and drawn up by public authorities through masterplans, which tend to see the city from the air and are often focused on maps. Here it is the planner, the architect and urban designer who take the leading role in imagining what a place could become rather than wider sources of input. Now cities increasingly seek to make planning more participative and open involving those directly touched by planning decisions and to draw on their inventiveness. Co-creation is the new watchword. This is for several reasons. First, there is the democratic impulse. Second, it is recognised that involving people in decisions makes plans more sustainable. Things are cared for more as people feel appreciated and so develop pride; projects are sustained and last longer because they reflect local knowledge.

The **age-old dilemma** of consulting widely remains. It can be time consuming or raise expectations of what is possible, yet the emerging consensus is that more is to be gained than lost. Do you a get a stronger, more imaginative vision from one person or a small leadership group, or from wider consultation or a mixed partnership of public, civic and private interests? Is vision from above better than that from below?

Within urban and metro visioning a different vocabulary has emerged, such as creating 'a high quality of life', 'fostering wellbeing', 'generating a vibrant urban life' or 'attracting and retaining talent'. None of these aims can be achieved within a narrow perspective as different skills are required to address these complex tasks.

The notion of being **strategically principled and tactically flexible** is important as it ensures that the higher goals of a metro city agenda are not side tracked. Those principles are non-negotiable, such as being determined to become sustainable, and so establish strong guidelines for action whilst maintaining the fluidity necessary to adapt to changing circumstances.

Visioning is essentially about storytelling - to oneself as well as to others. It is a powerful tool that puts the whole brain to work stimulating a desire to connect threads and narrate a causal sequence of events. It can drive motivation if those who hear it across population groups, divides and interests have a sense that they have a role and can be a participant in how it unfolds – be they a public servant, a civic activist or a business person.

Yet there is an increasing discussion about the **imagination crisis**. Too few it is said can 'think forward' and 'plan backwards' or imagine connections between differing issues, such as climate change and social justice or mobility as a driver of human development or an economy based on care.

Mission thinking can help drawing on the work of Mariana Mazzucato provides a good template. It is an

approach that encourages creating common value as well as collaboration between the public and private sectors. The Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose at UCL in London defines missions as an urgent strategic goal that requires transformative systems change, directed towards overcoming a 'wicked' collective problem. They set a specific target of ambitious but achievable progress towards a grand challenge facing our world. They should be bold and inspirational but realistic and have wider relevance, set a clear direction that is targeted, measurable, and time-bound, encourage cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral, and cross-actor innovation and involve multiple, bottom-up solutions.

To create an **eco-driven district** is an example that both East and West are trying to move from a 'take, make, waste' ideology to one of 'reuse, recycle, repair', which equally means shifting how places plan and operate. Done well they can build a pathway towards carbon neutrality and so foster resilience as cities are more able to withstand climate shocks and stresses. This involves both a vast number of **technical innovations** in creating ecological buildings and infrastructures that consume less energy and encourage better water and waste management to minimise reliance on resources. There is a focus too on efficient, ecological modes of

transport where design favours walkability, getting around on foot, by bicycle and public transport so as to limit the use of individual vehicles. Mobility is rethought with an increased emphasis on micro mobility. Here the **planning regime** has a determining role to shift the 'take, make and waste' paradigm built towards one based circular economy principles. If urban planning is to embed and integrate the objectives of sustainable development to reduce the ecological footprint of a neighbourhood or urban area as well as reintegrating nature into development, it requires stronger partnerships with the broader community as well as private actors to attract investments.

Whilst **systemic urban change** is increasingly on the agenda it might seem an impossible task for the individual urban strategist. Yet reimagining the parts and implementing these in real projects is possible, such as how parks, libraries, schools, transport, healthcare or suburbs can work and be managed in new ways. This can nurture the conditions that in time build up the readiness for the system to shift. In that process capabilities in communities and places are developed and harnessed.

Such visions imply and will only happen with **mindset change** – a pre-

condition to change our awareness and the behaviours we are used to, such as our addiction to consumerism. This is as important as technical innovations – which is also a **psychological challenge** for individuals, organisations and the city as a whole. Indeed, it is astonishing that psychology, the discipline that deals most closely with these issues, is almost absent from urban policy.

We perceive the city through our senses and so the city affects us. When it is deemed to be unattractive or awkward to navigate it draws us inwards and causes a loss of energy. This is why issues of aesthetics (even beauty) and seamless interaction are increasingly rising to the fore. Here we come back to Camillo Sitte and his focus on aesthetics or more recently as the Danish urbanist, Jan Gehl said: "it is ironic that we know more about the habitat of mountain gorillas than we do about the habitat of people". Psychology in all its varieties has a clear and distinct role to play in helping us understand more about how to create and inhabit cities that satisfy fundamental human needs.

Another blindspot is **cultural literacy**. Understanding the power of culture is vital. Culture is who we are thus the cultural perspective is a powerful and the most insightful lens through which to look at the world. It helps explain what drives us and our motivations and why our economic and social life is as it is. This focus draws attention to the distinctive, the unique and the special in any place. By exploring the grain of culture opportunities and resources emerge as well as what the blockages and obstacles are. Cultural literacy is a vital skill as important as numeracy, especially now that cities

are far more diverse and polarising narratives increasingly rife. It is the ability to read, understand, find significance in, evaluate, compare and decode the local cultures in a place.

In urban development and renewal creativity is crucial – it is **an endlessly renewable resource**, whilst heritage is not renewable, although it can be reinterpreted. In sum, culture is who we are and creativity shapes what we can become.

This is where the **capacity to communicate** comes in and the need for cities to drive a story in a compelling way that reflects deeper psychological, social and cultural needs. These include the desire to be closer to nature or the need to connect socially or to make people feel they have a part in shaping, making and co-creating their evolving city. It is part of creating a narrative shift by telling the story of the necessary transition in ways that mobilise and engage wider groups of people in order to push their motivation and will forward.

Here understanding the distinction between forms of communication—**especially the narrative and the iconic**. Narrative communication is concerned with creating arguments; it takes time and promotes reflection and is linked to critical thinking; we build understanding piece by piece. This is typically how strategy documents and plans are written largely devoid of any emotional resonance, which is why they attract a limited amount of professional readers.

Iconic communication by contrast **seeks to 'squash meaning'** and you grasp a message in one and immediately. It crisply encapsulates things in order to create high impact and to show what is being said feels significant. It can leapfrog learning and avoid lengthy explanatory narratives through the force of the ideas or projects and the symbolism they engender. Our communications challenge is to embed narrative qualities and deeper, principled understandings within projects which have iconic power. This is not merely a marketing task, but needs to be a cross-departmental initiative, also including outside stakeholders.

Eco-style districts, for instance, that **localise dramatically** capture some of these deeper desires. It is a trend accelerated by the pandemic and that chimed with existing ideas like the 15-minute city initially launched by Paris or the Barcelona Superblock. They have become movements and there is even the one-minute city promoted by the Swedish innovation agency Vinnova. This is part of creating rich and well-connected environments, with an emphasis on 'the local' as the mantra by seeking to place homes, businesses, offices, and public facilities – from schools to recreational spaces – all within a few hundred meters of one another, and so walkability is key. This rich local layering **reinforces place attachment and identity.**

One important shift in terms of the latter has been the **placemaking agenda** that has changed the conversation from the language of urban development and planning to placemaking. Launched initially by PPS in New York it states: It is both an overarching idea and a 'hands-on approach for improving a neighbourhood, city, or region inspiring people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces together as the heart of every community and so strengthening the connection between people and the places they live in'. It is more than just promoting better urban design and facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. It capitalises on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential.

Creative Placemaking elaborated by Artscape in Toronto is a further development which additionally 'leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community's interest while driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that also builds character and quality of place. It is a strategy to improve community well-being and prosperity while also fostering conditions for cities to define, draw attention to and distinguish themselves on a global scale.'

The success of both approaches and other issues highlighted is **dependent upon collaborations** between various civic stakeholders such as governments, private investment, not-for-profit organisations, artists and citizen groups. Partnerships and shared leadership are crucial to build momentum and achieve results. A significant implication is that traditional ways of working in more siloed and hierarchical structures does not work effectively to achieve good placemaking.

The pandemic has speeded up an acknowledgement of all these processes dramatically. It kickstarted a new spatial dynamic and helped create an opportunity out of the crisis since it normalised **hybrid working** which changed our relationship to space, place and time. Here we were challenged to ask again 'what is a great place'. This is a **game-changer** since if you only have to go to an office once, twice or three times a week and interact increasingly through Zoom or Teams, this impacts on the need for office space, especially in city centres.

It changes mobility patterns and it allows and forces us to rethink suburban areas and smaller places physically beyond which will want more urbanity. It is possible to live further away if long travel journeys are more occasional. This demands that outlying areas need to change to allow a more active urban life to unfold and it requires differing planning codes or laws that foster local hubs or collective office facilities with eating or drinking and entertainment opportunities to match.

The return to the local is being seen as a boon potentially increasing a sense of community and so these processes can **improve peoples' quality of life**. They might miss that cosmopolitan sophisticated city centre buzz that they now only on occasion can enjoy. This will drive their desire for many to recreate a version of it near where they live. On the other hand, the definition of buzz might shift – less crowded places might make human interaction in fact easier, the intensity of over-crowded places might in time feel like an aberration. Smaller towns or suburban settlements with some distinctiveness can become more interesting – even cool – as many interesting people who will not disappear downtown for the daily commute will be engaging more closely with their local scene. This can and is already revitalising many places across Europe. Stroud, for example, a town of some distinctiveness, very near where the author lives is suddenly voted by *The Times* as the best place to live in Britain.

What then becomes crucial are the connections between **urban cores and the outlying nodes** and so planning at the metro-scale rises in importance. To make the most of the novel conditions requires new infrastructures to connect the centre and peripheries even better. New mobility patterns and configurations are required and especially public transport in getting to city centres to avoid building clogged up road systems, such as driving to hubs – park and ride reinvented – and from there using new

mobility options, such as micro mobility to deal with the last mile. Micro mobility, from e-bikes to e-scooters are increasing dramatically. The jump in investments across the globe is witness of that confidence. Even though to date it is more used for leisure and by more educated groups.

There are positive **implications for climate emissions** here. This implies rethinking how roads are used, instigating new parking arrangements both in public space and in office complexes. Good examples are how Paris or Auckland have dealt with these complexities. Roads might be divided in new ways – perhaps according to speed zones. 5 km per hour, 15, 25 or more with segments for pedestrians, for bikes, for electric scooters, cars and public transport. The lever encouraging these new mobility formats are their flexibility and convenience as mostly these drive change rather than ethical priorities. People might act environmentally as it suits them in their daily life. Here not only climate related issues are highlighted and addressed but also the **wellbeing agenda** since the experience of the journey is vital.

That wellbeing agenda linked to local neighbourhoods is also embedded in **15 Minute City notions** as it incorporates also a vision of social equity with the aim of being accessible to all including housing affordability so as to allow a more socially, culturally, and generationally diverse and closer community to develop. **Applied to urban planning** is involves creating walkable environments, increased vertical density and mixed-use diversity, a mix of housing options to encourage a multi-generational living, local gathering places, parks,

and plazas and locally owned retail and hospitality, community gardens and community events.

These trends are part of a broader sphere of investigation led by pioneering urban thinkers, often with psychological and cultural insights, over the last 30 years, challenging more traditional approaches. For instance, there has been a focus on the overall **atmosphere and experience** of our neighbourhoods and cities. Not only physically but also in terms of how the characteristics of the people in a place affect us individually and how we in turn affect the city through our behaviour, our attitudes and our ideals. One aspect challenged was the economic focus and the idea that a place that could provide jobs and income alone, was one in which people would inevitably feel contented or even happy. That work enriched our understanding of what makes successful places socially, economically and culturally. It challenged physical planners not only to consider the hardware and in terms of that the quality of urban design and architecture but also its software elements including its atmosphere.

What then about city centres. As hybrid working took hold less office space was needed and is likely to stay and the shift to online retailing will be permanent. This provides vast opportunities to rethink leftover spaces or voids. It might act as a countervailing force to the shift to the local as prices might decline in the centre given potential over supply. Here it could be younger cohorts that begin to fill the voids as accommodation could become more affordable. So urban density might return based on city living which

Brno Photo by Edvinas Daugirdas on Unsplash

requires a diversity of shops from food to facilities.

City centres will survive but might change as the crucial social and networking aspect of work life can get lost with home working, yet in time companies will innovate to replicate that social togetherness. Often forgotten too, is that work undertaken elsewhere allows you to be someone else than you are in your private life. The dilemma remains since the more we can operate in cyberspace the more we hanker after human face to face interaction as the pandemic made clear. The yearning to touch, feel, bond, connect, meet, network, embrace or caress is endemic. The power of proximity is why the young are likely to drive change. They will want the **human interaction and closeness** that they have been lacking in the pandemic.

The primary value added of the city centre is that it is a **dense communications system** that is not easy to replicate in other settings. Thus the gravitational pull of city centres will remain as they are difficult to duplicate given their capacity to help exchange and transactions in business, learning and socialising where the hospitality offer or cultural activities and institutions in particular help establish a richer artistic life and vibrancy. The greater serendipity that is possible there makes city centres accelerators of opportunity. And not to forget the city centres' legacy assets, such as its stock of buildings and infrastructures, such as its transport links.

For these reasons city centres are better-placed to establish **innovation hubs or districts** whose importance and wider aim is to generate longer-term economic resilience. Here again the principles of proximity and multiple connections and synergies are overriding. These are places where companies or organisations cluster and connect with start-ups, business incubators and accelerators, importantly they tend to be anchored

by a cutting-edge institution such as a university or cultural facility more likely to be in the urban core.

Culturally driven creative/innovation quarters tend to provide a more textured experience than purely commercial innovation hubs focused on mainstream industries and mostly in campus like settings rarely provide. They have a high density of cultural activities, facilities and organisations both commercial and non-commercial and typically a strong hospitality sector. Webbed within them are co-working spaces, a variety of third places and good public space. The anchor institutions, a library or a cultural facility are often refurbished older buildings. Some districts are old and are organically happening and are easier to develop as they go with the grain of existing assets, but increasingly cities are attempting to create districts afresh and so are planned and managed.

In these innovation settings varieties of **public-private research partnerships are the norm** and crucial. They are mostly physically compact, walkable areas, with convenient transport, technically wired and focused on mixed-uses between housing, offices and retail. They tend to be tech driven combining sectors such as health, energy and education. Yet whilst anchor institutions and new buildings (and it is often heritage buildings that are most successful) can be important, it is the variety of types of space that facilitate interaction within the same district, from cafés and bars to parks that are crucial. As the World Economic Forum and Nesta have pointed out it is the **social network dimension** that provides the "glue" of innovation

systems. This is why those hubs built on greenfield sites in the past are increasingly seen as less effective. These priorities challenge planners to re-assesses their strategies and enabling guidelines.

Looking at issues from a metro perspective we see whatever the advantages of urban cores that it is **not all one way** as it is not impossible for some elements of this dynamic to be created in smaller places, especially in niche areas. So, it is necessary to challenge the widespread assumption that only city cores (or capital cities) are the ideal innovation hubs. There are some **benefits of innovating in small cities** or more rural areas even though many are still more parochial and inward looking. For example, there is less bureaucracy and competition in smaller localities. In smaller places communities tend to be more tight-knit where players can connect more easily across various social and business sectors and networks. Having multiple meetings on a day is easier as is access to decision makers and often, resources relevant for entrepreneurs concentrate within a few blocks leading to efficiencies of time and connections that may take much longer in bigger places.

Though bigger cities have more potential partners, networking opportunities and other assets there can be '**opportunity overload**' so new projects can also get off the ground faster in small cities if they have the spirit. Smaller communities can allow founders to concentrate and filter out the noise of core cities and benefit from a greater community feeling. Yet, they can have access to specialist resources of the core metro region if need be. What all of this requires is

*Berlin Photo by Moises
Gonzalez on Unsplash*

space'. Where the city finds itself as a whole in all its diversities. Here the strategic facilities, such as the being the location of local government or the presence of strategic bodies, headquarters or theatres or a central library play an important part.

In considering the push and pull effects of the evolving urban geography, where spatial impacts and dynamics spread over a larger more widespread geography, it is necessary to **reconsider what a metro region is** and how to assess it. Here the notion of the **vortex effect** is important. Metro centres mostly exert a powerful pull. They act like a vacuum cleaner sucking up the ambitious, the determined, the resourceful, influential and hopeful into their orbit as well as the money or the new nomads and tourists from everywhere. Typically, the centres that attract have historic advantages as economic, political or cultural capitals as well as their heritage and a sophisticated urban texture and activity base to match. These magnetic places resonate with their soft power and trigger rich associations in the public imagination.

that the smaller conurbations generate a buzz and urbanity to nourish its active community members. These big and small city regional dynamics reinforce the notion of seeing the metro area as an integrated system.

One lasting advantage that city centres have and cannot be replicated in the surrounding settlements is their ability to be the place where all the parts of a metro area and their communities can come together in a kind of '**neutral**

Thus, whilst smaller places cannot replicate those assets they still form part of the wider connective tissue even though they might be 100 km away. People and organisations can relate to the big city by perhaps only being there one or two days a week.

Drawing the threads together

We see that crisis can be an opportunity to re-evaluate, to re-assess and to consider both new

notions and also 'blindspots' in the way we approach city making and management. Understanding these such as the psychological and cultural dimensions noted has radically reshaped our appreciation of deeper urban dynamics. It reminded us what an **enriching, liveable or positive environment** can be; this then compels us towards pro-social behaviour, building trust, community, belonging, anchorage, purpose. It reveals also the opposite namely how devastating the effects of negative, stressful environments can be leading to poor physical and mental health, reduced immunity, impaired brain functioning, societal division, fear, anxiety. This brings more strongly to the forefront issues of aesthetics and even beauty – contested as that term is.

All of the above has implications as to how municipalities and metro regions operate and the nature of their regulations and incentives regime. Consequently, over the last 15 years in particular there has been a **public sector innovation ecosystem emerging** – one that is not beholden to the 'new public management' logic, where you largely imitate the private sector.

It remains largely fragmented made up of government and intergovernmental entities, living labs, some a part of a municipality and some independent, think tanks, specialist consultancies, university departments, public sector innovation networks. They are all seeing public sector innovation as both an imperative and an opportunity for governments at every level. **They are experimenting and using new approaches**, from policy design to service delivery to improve the performance and responsiveness of

the public sector as well as engaging better with its communities of interest. Organizations of note include the OECD's Office of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI); the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) which has many Central European members; the various national innovation agencies such Sitra in Finland, Vinnova in Sweden and the Centre for Public-Private Innovation in Denmark; Apolitical, the global movement of 120,00 plus progressive public servants; the work of UCL's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP); new forms of public administration departments, such as the Office for Civic Imagination in Bologna or the Creative Bureaucracy Festival and its related movement.

Within that a special ethos can be detected focused on their central aim to **acknowledge the common good**. Yet also to embed ways of thinking, planning and acting that allow public institutions to operate in ways that enable governing entities to think, plan and act in more agile ways, to establish new relationships with the civic and business worlds on the basis of mutual respect and importantly to give public servants more authority to act. Here the notion of collective intelligence of the combined stakeholders has become key and within that, collaborative processes to find solutions especially to intractable problems.

The concept of **humble governance** promoted by the Finnish government has become important. This is defined as a form of policymaking based on experimentalist governance. In this context humility means that policymaking begins with an acknowledgement of the prevailing

uncertainty and is thus built as a continuously iterative process, in which actors are willing to (and allowed to) change their mind as new information arises. It demands a **different relationship between politicians and public administrators** and involves providing the conditions for civil servant to operate to their full capacities within administrative systems. These often suffer from legacy attitudes or approaches and old-fashioned leadership paradigms. In essence, they challenge simple top-down models of operating. The public sector then is interpreted as both the public administration itself as well as those considered allies, often civic entities, who deliver ideas or services and who are aligned with the public purposes of the city or region.

In sum, most of the **trends point towards the same direction**: Being more local, creating local buzz and global pipelines, bringing more urbanity to local life especially by focusing on distinctiveness, addressing affordability, creating the conditions for social interaction so as to encourage community building of various kinds be that as neighbours, professionals or simply casual encounters. A by-product here is to mitigate isolation. A pre-condition is proximity and clustering. At the same time the trends point to the importance of the metro perspective to make the most of opportunities. We see too new ways of describing what great liveable metro regions and their constituent parts can be, such as creating the conditions for creating places of 'anchorage and distinctiveness', 'communication and connections', 'ambition and opportunity', 'nurture and nourishment' and finally of 'inspiration and imagination'.

The relevance to METREX

METREX is in essence an advocacy organisation pushing forward an understanding of 'why' and 'how' a metropolitan perspective is beneficial in harnessing assets, resources and potential in order for metro regions to become more effective and successful. Its main lever is its convening power and its platform for shared learning.

Yet, it does not have the resources to directly influence all the agendas noted above nor the financial resources to help operationalise projects. Neither does it have funding to, for instance, encourage experiments and support initiatives that fall within its remit.

Whilst METREX, for instance, is acutely aware of housing and affordability issues it is not something that metropolitan entities have authority over as these are part of local government responsibilities. This means that it rarely addresses these. The same is true for promoting good placemaking whose aim is to create better cities for all – a key goal of METREX.

METREX does, however, have the capacity to set agendas and the intellectual and policy landscape to think ahead and to create a groundswell and mood as to how urban areas should and could develop.

This essay is one step in that direction.

METREX

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