

Planning for Sustainable Happiness: Harmonizing Our Internal and External Landscapes

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Abstract

While it is widely recognized that urban planning and public health are interrelated, the significance of 'happiness' for our health and well-being has not been taken up in the planning literature. Perspectives from positive psychology, which are demonstrating the links between health and happiness, have yet to influence transport and urban planning policy and practice. There is one notable exception – during his tenure as mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa, chose to 'plan for happiness'. He also focused on the needs of children. Meanwhile, research on children's health and transportation (O'Brien, 2001; Tranter and Malone, 2003) has examined the needs and aspirations of children in the context of urban planning. This research brings us full circle, back to happiness. Children's view of transportation (when walking to school) reminds us that transportation is not only about 'moving people and goods'. It is about wonder, discovery, joy and happiness. Opportunities for expanding our thinking around planning, happiness and sustainability are offered.

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1.0 Background

“One of the major patterns of change at the beginning of the 21st century is urbanisation” (Chawla, 2002, p.15). This pattern of urbanization means that more than ever, we need to accentuate efforts towards sustainable cities. Transport and urban planning are central to this. How might the concept of Gross National Happiness² contribute? Essentially, by raising the prospect that individual and public happiness deserve our attention in every aspect of policy and practice, not to mention daily living. Happiness is a concept that is not generally discussed in transportation planning literature. In fact, many adults might even see transportation and happiness as an oxymoron. Nevertheless, there are numerous incentives to consider how research on happiness may contribute to sustainable transportation and urban planning as well as more sustainable societies.

Positive psychology’s contribution to our understanding of happiness, health and well-being is influencing research and practice in many fields: happiness in the workplace (Gavin and Mason, 2004) positive organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), clinical psychology (Baker and Stauth, 2003; Holden, 1998), spiritual well-being and happiness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), and new indicators of well-being (Diener and Seligman, 2004). The recognition that public health and city planning are interdependent (Killingsworth and Schmid, 2001) means that as our understanding of health expands to include happiness,

² Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a concept that originated in Bhutan. The government of Bhutan states that GNH is more important than GNP. “Development should be understood as a process that seeks to maximize happiness rather than economic growth... it recognizes that the individual has material, spiritual and emotional needs” (Bhutan 2020).

we are challenged to consider its convergence with planning. We might even be challenged to ‘plan for happiness’.

This paper outlines the rationale behind planning for happiness and offers examples of existing initiatives. It also invites the reader to consider how our process of knowledge construction on this subject may be enhanced – enabling us to accelerate efforts towards sustainability.

1.1 Transportation, Health and Happiness

Being “truly happy in this world is a revolutionary act” according to Sharon Salzberg (2002, p. 17). Understanding happiness in the context of our daily travel and how we build our cities is indeed revolutionary. Conventional transportation planning views went something like this: ‘Transportation is about moving people and goods, as quickly as possible’. Embedded within this mindset was the assumption that if we take care of the transport needs of adults, (typically those using motorized transport), then the transport system is successful. Once the impact of transport on population health and the environment was more widely acknowledged, this paradigm began to shift. Somewhat more attention is now given to pedestrians, cyclists, the benefits of transit, and the opportunities for daily physical activity through transport, the relationship between land-use and transport planning, and the need to mitigate harmful environmental and health impacts of motorized transport (WHO, 2000). Active Living by Design³ in the United States is an example of this in practice.

³ See www.activelivingbydesign.org

Until recently, however, the needs and aspirations of children (including youth) were barely considered (O'Brien, 2003). This has meant that the harmful impacts of motorized transport for children's health and well-being were essentially overlooked. Our knowledge development towards sustainable transportation was incomplete. Meanwhile studies on children's health and transportation have been accumulating a disturbing body of evidence. There is now extensive documentation (Gilbert and O'Brien, 2005) regarding children's vulnerability to air pollution (WHO, 2004), the impact of transportation on obesity levels (Fox, 2003), the health risks of living near high traffic areas (Pearson, Wachtel and Ebi, 2000), exposure to invehicle pollution (Wargo, 2002), the effect of noise on reading levels and stress hormones (Evans, G., Lercher, P., Meis, M., Ising, H., and Kofler, W., 2001), and of course, the fact that traffic fatalities are the leading cause of injury death for children in many Western countries (OECD, 2004).

Transportation also plays a role in children's emotional development and well-being. Heavy traffic may reduce opportunities for spontaneous play, reduce the range of children's play activities (Huttenmoser, 1995; Tranter and Doyle, 1996) and limit independent mobility (Tranter and Pawson, 2001). There is also evidence that children are taking more trips by car than children did ten or fifteen years ago (Gilbert and O'Brien, 2005; Morris, Wang, and Lilja, 2001). Indications are that many of children's car trips are replacing trips that were once taken by walking or cycling. This may affect both physical and emotional well-being. A comprehensive discussion of children's health and transportation may be found in *Child- and Youth-Friendly Land-Use and Transport*

Planning Guidelines developed by Canada's Centre for Sustainable Transportation (Gilbert and O'Brien, 2005).

The severity of these health impacts provides significant reason for accelerating strategies towards more sustainable transport and land use planning, and indeed more child-friendly planning. Planners also recognize that congestion during peak travel periods is due, in part, to the increasing number of trips to school by car. This is prompting interest from travel demand managers to consider children's travel. In the United Kingdom, schools are given grants to develop School Travel plans⁴ to encourage active transportation and play their part in promoting sustainable transportation. In Canada⁵ and many other countries, children are learning about the benefits of walking and cycling to school through programs that also address the safety concerns of adults (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2003). This non-formal education has come through Safe Routes to School programs that promote Walking School Buses and Neighbourhood Safety Audits to determine the safest routes. The international Safe Routes to School⁶ movement has played a critical role in raising the profile of children in transport and land use planning.

UNESCO has also spearheaded efforts to create more child-friendly cities⁷, promoting the need to plan communities both for *and with* children (Driskell, 2002). Italy has taken a leadership role with its project 'Sustainable Cities for Girls and Boys' (Corsi, 2002). All

⁴ See www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk/index.php?f=travel_plans.htm

⁵ In Ontario see www.saferoutestoschool.ca. In British Columbia see www.waytogo.icbc.bc.ca

⁶ www.iwalktoschool.org

⁷ See www.childfriendlycities.org

of these efforts are beginning to shift our transport and urban planning paradigms to include the marginalized sectors of children and youth.

What do children want? Would they prefer to be chauffeured as car passengers or would they rather walk and cycle in their neighbourhood? The Ontario Walkability Study (O'Brien, 2001) surveyed more than 6,000 elementary students on International Walk to School Day 2001 (IWALK). The study found that *nearly 75% of Canadian children surveyed would prefer to walk or cycle to school regularly*. Quotes from children all over the world on IWALK portray a similarly fresh perspective on transportation. A five year old explains that, **"We walk to school because we can see a kitty or a pup and sing along with the birds"**⁸. As we begin to incorporate the needs and aspirations of children we are discovering that their views may even be transformative. Children's experience of transportation, while walking to school, is that of *wonder, discovery, adventure, connection and **happiness***.

It's easy to imagine the playful sense of adventure that children bring to walking trips. They are very much engaged in the journey. They are living in the moment, the very thing that we aim to achieve through the practice of mindfulness (now shown to be linked to positive emotions and physical well-being) (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). They are immersed in what Kabat Zinn calls the 'nowscape'. What about adults? Has transportation lost its joy? Is our daily commute so miserable that we have to divert ourselves from the fact that we

⁸ this quote and the one on the following page are from the IWALK web site: www.iwalktoschool.org/quotes/index.hsqr

are traveling? Individual travelers and urban planners may be feeling very much removed from the prospect that transportation can, or should, involve happiness. Yet many of us can think back to childhood days when we walked to school and home again. Those were often carefree trips, talking with friends, kicking pebbles along, negotiating snow banks, jumping in leaf piles or puddles. As adults, those sensory journeys seem like a nostalgic memory as ours daily trips focus on getting to our destinations as quickly as possible. And yet, our body is aware of the journeys we take and if they are stressful or dispiriting, this affects both our emotional and physical well-being, and possibly even our spiritual well-being (O'Brien, 2003).

1.2 Spiritual Well-Being and Transportation

If 'happiness' is on the fringe of transportation discussions, spiritual well-being and transportation is 'beyond the fringe'. Health research is demonstrating that physical, emotional and spiritual well-being are interrelated, influencing each other (Kass, 2000; Seligman, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Once again, as we explore the relationship between health and urban planning, it is an oversight to ignore this aspect of health. One report has ventured to rectify this. A Public Health Advisory Committee in New Zealand (2003) incorporated spiritual well-being in its understanding of health and chose the following definition in its report regarding the Impact of Transport on Health: spiritual well-being is "the experience of mutually rewarding encounters between people, a sense of communion with the environment, access to heritage and cultural integrity" (p.3). If we place this

perspective alongside the quotes from children it appears that their words resound with expressions of spiritual well-being as the following examples illustrate:

Child Walking to School

“Walking and talking with my dad was the best bit. We saw two slugs with no homes, but they still had their aerials, and someone had dropped their apple from their packed lunch. I wish my dad could walk with me all the time.”

Spiritual Well-Being

“the experience of mutually rewarding encounters between people, a sense of communion with the environment, access to heritage and cultural integrity”

Perhaps the cultural integrity that children are accessing is the culture of childhood. A more venturesome view would be to see this as accessing a culture of joy.

Kass (1998; 2000) has demonstrated the link between spiritual well-being and emotional resilience. His view of spirituality revolves around the benefit of feeling a connection with the sacredness of life. This connection may be with another person, with nature or with an experience of divinity. How this might unfold with respect to transportation is reflected in the words of an adult who chose to give up his car and use a bicycle as his main mode of transport.

What surprised me was the sheer joy of biking. Giving up ‘stuff’ is supposed to be good for your soul but a drag to go through, but getting down to one car has been surprisingly easy... When I ride my bicycle, the wind sweeps past me, awakening my body to the fact that I am moving someplace within this world. I am part of my world and community, not removed from it (Trabue, 2003).

It would seem that through turning our attention to happiness, spiritual well-being and children we may discover that transport and urban planning have more profound

significance in our lives – and potentially more benefit than will be realized if we persist in viewing them solely through the lens of engineering or economics.

2.0 Planning for Happiness

Gross National Happiness prompts us to explore the many ways that emotional and spiritual well-being could be incorporated into policy and practice. Urban planning is no exception. How might cities and towns look if we adopted the notion of Gross National Happiness in our urban planning - perhaps even going so far as to honour the sacredness of individuals and nature? Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia (population 7 million) has provided remarkable leadership in this direction. Peñalosa initiated the first car-free day in Bogotá. During his tenure he created urban infrastructure and public space that gave priority to children and to those who don't own an automobile. His motivation? HAPPINESS!

We had to build a city not for businesses or automobiles, but for children and thus for people. Instead of building highways, we restricted car use. ... We invested in high-quality sidewalks, pedestrian streets, parks, bicycle paths, libraries; we got rid of thousands of cluttering commercial signs and planted trees. ... All our everyday efforts have one objective: **HAPPINESS** (conversation with Peñalosa in Ives, 2002).

We might characterize his approach as 'Planning for Happiness'. Part of planning for happiness, involves planning with respect.

All this pedestrian infrastructure shows respect for human dignity. We're telling people, "You are important—not because you're rich or because you have a Ph.D., but because you are human." If people are treated as special, as sacred even, they behave that way. This creates a different kind of society" (conversation with Peñalosa in Ives, 2002).

For the past year, Peñalosa has been a visiting scholar at New York University and a highly sought-after speaker around the world. During a recent interview he talked about his belief that we should strive to create ‘Cities of Joy’. He writes about cities of the ‘Third World’ but those of us in ‘developed’ countries could also ponder the relevance of his words.

If we in the Third World measure our success or failure as a society in terms of income, we would have to classify ourselves as losers until the end of time. Given our limited resources, we have to invent other ways to measure success, and that could be in terms of happiness. It may be in how much time children spend with their grandparents, or the ways in which we are able to enjoy our friendships, or how many times people smile during the week. A city is successful not when it’s rich but when its people are happy (Peñalosa in Walljasper, 2004).

Peñalosa’s words are supported by Diener and Seligman (2004) who recommend that we recognize the limitations of measuring well-being through economic indicators. They too encourage us to view happiness (subjective well-being) as an indicator. Wagenaar (2005) writes that “cities symbolize the pursuit of public happiness” (p.15). If we are to embrace these views, it becomes vitally important to investigate individual and collective views of happiness because if our individual views of happiness are askew, we could easily find ourselves pursuing happiness in directions that are unsustainable. As many authors suggest, individuals in the West behave as if happiness=consumption (Anielski, 2004; Kasser, forthcoming). In the public realm, the consequence may be, that municipal planners strive to support the greatest public happiness even when this amplifies the consumption-based view of individual happiness. In fact, we can see this played out in our travel patterns and transport systems that are designed around the happiness of car owners and our misperceptions about saving time, with insufficient attention to

sustainability. Tranter (2004) demonstrates that car travel may actually take more of our time that most people realize with severe costs to public health and the environment. If we calculate all of the time related to owning a car (working to purchase it, maintain it, insure it, and the time spent driving), as well as the extensive external costs (economic, social and environmental), we discover that cycling and public transit may actually save us our highly valued time and contribute to a greater public good.

The concept of ‘effective speed’ should be seen as one (of many) ways in which to highlight the ineffectiveness of private motor vehicles as a form of mass transport, as well as highlighting the superiority of public transport (and cycling). ... Given that ‘speed’ is so highly valued in our society, if motorists can be shown just how slow they are ‘effectively’ moving, they may start to question their love affair with the car, and consider changing their transport behaviour in ways that will lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (p. 13).

As well, children and the environment are bearing the burden of our individual and collective transportation choices. And yet, adults behave as if our individual right to consume travel, has minimal impact on the world around us.

Positive psychology is affirming that once we meet our basic needs, the experience of authentic happiness has a great deal more to do with intrinsic factors such as self-acceptance, meaning, empathy and love (Holden, 1998; Seligman, 2002; Diener and Seligman, 2004). In the West, unless our individual understanding of happiness matures to include less materialistic, individualistic views of happiness, we will continue to create communities and cities that are unsustainable. In urban planning this means examining how we are responding to and compounding the faulty assumptions about individual happiness which are not aligned with sustainability. Therefore, as we play with new

possibilities around happiness, transportation and planning my recommendation is to consider how we might plan for *sustainable* happiness.

3.0 Sustainable Happiness

The new science of happiness is drawing our attention towards aspects of ourselves and organizations that are ‘positive’. It emphasizes optimism, personal strengths and virtues, and counsels us to discover what makes us truly, authentically happy. (Seligman, 2004; Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004). However, pursuing Seligman’s view of authentic happiness, even though it is more intrinsically oriented, may not lead to sustainable societies if we are unaware of how our pursuit of authentic happiness impacts other people, the environment and future generations. A simple example: I may take great pleasure in drinking my morning coffee, even be very mindful of living in that moment, and savouring the taste. My pleasure brings a feeling of satisfaction and happiness, but if I am not drinking fair trade coffee, this pursuit of happiness is not sustainable. At the corporate level, adopting positive organizational behaviour may contribute to the experience of well-being of employees and improve performance. However, if the corporation is not socially and environmentally responsible, positive organizational behaviour may lead to more efficient *but unsustainable practices*.

The notion of ‘sustainable happiness’ arises in the work of Lyubomirsky (2003) though this is from the perspective of *sustaining* happiness. Kasser (forthcoming) also suggests that authentically happy people may be more inclined to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours, are more likely to be altruistic, and may even have a lower

ecological footprint. The science of happiness is essentially untapped, however, in terms of its broader applications to sustainability. Conversely, the positive psychology literature would be tremendously enriched through greater integration with principles of sustainability.

Central to our thinking in sustainability discussions is our recognition that we are interdependent on this planet – across time and space. Our complete interdependence with the environment also means that the environment is not something that is only ‘out there’. *We* are the environment as well because every molecule in our body has come from a source ‘out there’. Once sustainability is linked to happiness we can begin to question the pursuit of happiness in terms of how we are impacting other people, the environment and future generations. Happiness ‘experts’ advise us to shift from a victim mentality and take accountability for our actions. (Foster and Hicks, 1999; Baker and Staught, 2003). Recognizing and acting on our choice is empowering and important for our emotional well-being. Foster and Hicks remind us that we can consciously *choose* happiness. *How remarkable and revolutionary it would be if we chose to pursue sustainable happiness*: if we recognized that our moment-to-moment, day-to-day actions and decisions have global impacts through both time and space; that our happiness is intertwined with the happiness of all life.

The profound optimism that I hold for integrating policy and practice regarding happiness and sustainability is based on my assumption that fostering sustainable happiness may lead to sustainable behaviour (including more sustainable policy-making) and contribute

to sustainable societies. This assumption may be incorrect. We know that values that are in line with sustainability do not always lead to sustainable behaviour. (McKenzie-Mohr and Smilth, 1999). It is possible, though, that sustainable happiness, once fully integrated, is such a powerful new worldview that it would influence *all* personal values *and* behaviour. We also know that the inverse is happening. The *pursuit of happiness which is not based on sustainability leads to unsustainable societies*. We have been camouflaging our pursuit of unsustainable happiness with the trappings of economic indicators (that often do not reflect full-cost accounting). I believe that one of the healthiest steps we could take as individuals and societies is to open ourselves to more provocative and penetrating discussions around happiness – examining and exploring how our current beliefs, values and actions about happiness are fostering or detracting from sustainability. And indeed, how our pursuit of unsustainable happiness is creating a great deal of unhappiness for ourselves and others. A conversation with Brazilian economist, Marcos Arruda, has raised a significant question in my mind. Is modern development actually winnowing joy out of our lives? Arruda, who has lived in both the North and the South, once told me that from his experience, “there are islands of joy in the North, and seas of joy in the South”.

Peñalosa brings this home in his exhortation to build cities of joy that support social interaction, equity, and honour the sacredness of people and the environment. If we are to adopt this view of planning for happiness we will also need to educate ourselves and the public about sustainable happiness. Typically, our individual and collective views of happiness are developed through informal learning (parents, the media, spiritual leaders,

social learning). There is surely great wisdom from some of these sources, and yet the prevailing culture has been that happiness is to be found through lifestyles and livelihoods that are unsustainable. We may need to consider a more deliberate education process for sustainable happiness. Otherwise the default message may be more like the following:

...not only do commercialization and consumerism color our social surround, they worm their way into our psyches, leading us to organize some portion of our lives around increasing our salaries and owning more stuff. To one degree or another, all of us adopt a materialistic or “extrinsic” value orientation (Kasser, 2002) in the belief that “the goods life” is the path to “the good life.” (Kasser, forthcoming)

Another way of viewing this is (paraphrasing Foster and Hicks, 1999):

If we don't truly intend to make sustainable happiness a conscious reality, we have unconsciously chosen something different (p.20).

4.0 Happiness and Sustainability: Harmonizing Our Internal and External Landscapes

This paper has presented ideas and information which thus far have not been part of conventional transportation and urban planning; 1) happiness, as a component of health and well-being, does not belong on the fringe of policy and planning; 2) we can contribute to sustainable cities through planning for happiness; and 3) we can take this a step further by considering how we may link sustainable happiness with sustainable societies. Sustainable happiness challenges us to recognize that sustainability cannot be understood solely in the context of our external world. It is also about finding greater harmony between our internal and external landscapes. There is a compelling logic in this. We know that creating sustainable societies requires participatory knowledge

development and the integration of knowledge from sectors that have been previously marginalized. In transport and urban planning, this marginalized sector has typically been non-motorists. As noted above, children in particular have been marginalized.

Sustainable happiness brings a new twist. In the arena of urban planning it challenges us to consider how our transportation and planning might change if we gave greater attention to the needs and aspirations of marginalized sectors *externally*, AND also those aspects of ourselves *internally*, that have been marginalized. It means exploring the relationship between individual happiness and public happiness. It means that psychosocial factors merit greater attention. For some, it means moving outside our comfort zone.

Initially, it may be challenging to get our minds around this link between happiness and urban planning. How does our inner world influence external behaviour? And how do these together influence the external environment we are creating? How does our external world interact with our internal landscape? Can the built environment contribute to sustainable happiness? This simply demonstrates the strength of the concept of sustainability – we are continually challenged to expand beyond our silos and to integrate knowledge across disciplines. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this in greater depth, but the following discussion is food for thought.

Dan Baker, a clinical psychologist, whose practice draws on positive psychology, and the science of happiness, writes that the greatest barrier to individual happiness is fear (Baker

and Stauth, 2003). From thirty years of therapeutic experience he has drawn the following conclusion: All of our individual fears, such as fear of loss (of our job, our spouse, a child, a relationship), fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of death and so on can be grouped into three basic fears: 1) Survival; 2) Fear of not Having Enough, and; 3) Fear of not Being Enough. As long as we are operating out of fear, rather than love, we will consistently pursue happiness in ways that are destructive for ourselves and others.

We can readily see that a great deal of unsustainable behaviour may be governed by fears of ‘not having enough’ or ‘not being enough’. Materialism is a shelter for hiding from these fears. Some people are convinced that their jobs and possessions are actually a matter of survival, stressing themselves with a ‘life or death’ need to hold onto them – even when their material wealth is well beyond their basic needs. “The most important message that the science of happiness tells us about money is, almost nobody thinks they have enough. In the dark recesses of our brains, free-floating fear tells us that we need more, more, more – or our very survival will be threatened”. (Baker, D. and Stauth, C. 2003, p.45).

The dark recesses of the brain that Baker refers to are the brain stem (reptilian brain) and amygdala where fear is triggered and resides, often unconsciously. Love, compassion, and happiness are experienced in the part of the brain that developed later in our evolution, the neocortex. “In every one of us there is a delicate and shifting balance between the power of the reptilian brain and the power of the neocortex. I call this

oscillating balance the dance of the spirit and the reptile” (p.30). Baker claims that the spirit must lead this dance because the spirit is the key to happiness.

Learning how to live more from our hearts, to let the spirit lead, and to understand our mutual interdependence is integral to sustainable happiness. In my view our efforts to create sustainable communities, sustainable cities and sustainable societies will make little significant headway until we mature towards this understanding of happiness. At heart, every one of us longs to experience sustained happiness. “Happiness is a shared desire of every human being. It is possibly the ultimate thing we want while other things are wanted only as a means to its increase” (Thinley, 1998). Few of us have understood how to experience *sustainable happiness*: Happiness that is achieved without the exploitation of other people, the depletion of non-renewable resources, and the well-being of future generations.

We can delude ourselves that transportation and urban planning have little to do with sustainable happiness: that it should concern itself only with external, ‘tangible’ reality. If we persist with this paradigm we will have missed an extraordinary and exciting opportunity – the opportunity to leave a legacy of sustainable happiness.

4.1 A Legacy of Sustainable Happiness

As we go forward, ‘rethinking development’ we have an inviting prospect to explore. Individually and collectively we can learn how to leave a ‘legacy of sustainable

happiness' throughout our lives. This will be through our moment-to-moment interactions within ourselves, and with the world around us. It means shifting our internal dialogue from fear to compassion, or as my 11 year-old daughter says, "being happiness". Every interaction becomes an opportunity to leave the legacy – how we interact with the cashier at the grocery store, our fellow employees, and our loved ones. The legacy is left through our lifestyle choices, through our livelihood and how we apply our choices within that work environment. If we are involved with city planning we can choose to leave the remarkable (and revolutionary) legacy of creating cities of joy.

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