



A FOOTPRINT OF DELIGHT

Exploring Sustainable Happiness

BY CATHERINE O'BRIEN, Ph.D.

During the summer of 2005, with the support and assistance of the National Center for Bicycling and Walking, I launched the Delightful Places Survey. It was distributed electronically to our networks around the world and the survey was closed down once we received just over 200 responses. The survey was a preliminary step toward integrating insights on happiness from positive psychology with urban planning. We were curious to learn more about what contributes to individual and public happiness in the natural and built environment. The natural environment was included in order to capture the experience of delight that these areas offer, whether or not they exist within an urban area.

The title for this article was inspired by McDonough and Braungart's book *Cradle to Cradle*¹. They pose the question, "what if humans designed products and systems that celebrate an abundance of



“Delightful places are best incorporated into routine experiences... Not once in a while places to enjoy. Relaxation in a city needs to be almost like routine treatments – once a year is helpful but not lasting. A little pleasantness almost every day starts to have a cumulative and positive effect.”

Respondent's comments,
2005 Delightful Places
Survey

Photo: John Williams



human creativity, culture and productivity? That are so intelligent and safe, our species leaves an ecological footprint to delight in, not lament?” Our survey suggests that delightful places may contribute to happier, healthier communities – creating a footprint of delight. This is linked to the concept of sustainable happiness that I have defined as “happiness that is derived without exploiting other people, the environment, or future generations.”²

While it is widely recognized that urban planning and public health are interrelated, the significance of happiness for our health and well-being is only just starting to make its way into the planning literature. Perspectives from positive psychology have yet to influence transport and urban planning policy and practice. There is one notable exception, Enrique Peñalosa's recommendation to create Cities of Joy³.

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Positive psychology's contribution to our understanding of happiness, health and well-being is influencing research and practice in many fields: happiness in the workplace⁴; positive organizational behaviour⁵; clinical psychology^{6, 7}; spiritual well-being and happiness⁸; new indicators of national well-being⁹; and cancer research¹⁰. There is evidence that genuinely happy people live longer, recover from illness more quickly, and are more likely to seek out and act on health information.¹¹ The recognition that public health and city planning are interdependent¹² means that as our

understanding of health expands to include happiness, we are challenged to consider its convergence with planning. Even, evaluating how we “plan for happiness.” To some extent, this is captured on the Active Living Resource web page¹³ that opens with the question, “how can I make my neighbourhood a more enjoyable place to be?”

Happiness is not topic that is generally discussed in transportation and planning meetings and yet it exists as the underlying motivation behind much of what we do, how we live, and the kinds of policies that are made. Remarkably, even though our lifelong pursuit of happiness is at the heart of who we are, its relevance to policy and practice has been overlooked.

PLANNING FOR HAPPINESS

Planning for happiness raises some questions. Do we know what kinds of communities, cities, and towns contribute to sustainable happiness? Are we aware of how current planning may be supporting unsustainable happiness in an effort to meet the public’s insatiable need to consume?

For example, happiness research suggests that many of us may need some course corrections on our quest. The social conditioning that we are exposed to in industrialized countries predisposes us to seek happiness outside of ourselves, most often through consumption.

...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.’¹⁴

The new science of happiness indicates that authentic happiness, the enduring happiness that causes us to feel satisfied with our lives, is found through less materialistic pursuits. It is grounded in intrinsic values¹⁵. It is found in our relationships, meaningful work, and a sense of purpose.

Wagenaar¹⁶ writes that “cities symbolize the pursuit of public happiness.” If this is indeed true, we might ask what underlying assumptions about happiness are currently influencing urban design? Is it possible that the lack of attention to happiness has permitted a less sustainable pursuit of happiness to become the norm? Do some urban planning styles contribute to sustainable happiness more effectively than others? I’d venture to say that advocates of walkable, livable communities have



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Photo: John Williams

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been shifting our perception of public happiness. They are reminding us of the value of walking our children to school, cycling to work, and strolling through our neighbourhood (de-conditioning the socialization that has adopted hyper mobility and hyper activity as an indicator of success).

The Delightful Places survey supports this vision. We learned, not surprisingly, that delightful places contribute to a sense of well-being. Most of our results are not astonishing. They confirm what many people know intuitively, even if this is not yet incorporated into planning policy and practice. A great deal of instructive information came from individual comments that reinforced the powerful ability delightful places have for helping us feel connected – to ourselves, to our environment, to other people, our community, or a sense of divinity. Research tell us that this experience of connection nurtures both emotional and physical well-being¹⁷⁻¹⁸.

Here's what we learned...

SURVEY RESULTS

More women responded than men; 61% were women and 39% were men. Their ages fell between 20-60 with four respondents 70 years of age or older, and eight under twenty.

More than 60% of the delightful places that people described were located in an urban area, anywhere from Seattle, to Bogotá, to Montreal, and Melbourne, Australia. The majority of respondents were from the United States and Canada and named locations in one of these two countries. More specifically, natural environments, trails, paths and parks were the sites of most

delightful places. We asked people to check a list of descriptors that apply to their delightful place. The top ten were: 1) a pleasure to walk through, 2) peaceful, 3) beautiful, 4) appealing for children, 5) lots of visible green space, 6) appealing for youth, 7) appealing for seniors, 8) welcoming, 9) natural, and 10) a pleasure to ride a bicycle through/in.

The sounds that people associate with their delightful place most often were: water, the wind, silence, people talking, and birds. Additional comments included a range of sounds from deer, to butterflies, dogs, ferry boats, fish splashing, frogs, and whales. The most common smells that were mentioned were: the earth, water, flowers, and food. Some people described very specific scents such as pine trees, chocolate, seaweed, fresh air, eucalyptus trees, freshly cut grass, and even, sweat from other cyclists.

What activities are associated with a delightful place? Eighty per cent of our respondents said RELAXING. Next came exercise, nature watching, people watching, eating and drinking, and meeting people. Some specific activities were named such as cycling, camping, canoeing, gardening, hiking, swimming, napping, thinking, and walking. Relaxation stood out as the dominant experience that people feel in a delightful place. (Since they were encouraged to check more than one response, the totals below add up to more than 100%.)



Photo: Linda Tracy

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WHEN...

you experience this delightful place please check whether you feel any of the following:

- I feel relaxed – 83%
- I feel more connected to myself – 65.6%
- I feel connected to nature – 63%
- I feel energized – 61.6%
- I feel safe – 58%
- I feel at home – 55.7%
- I feel connected with other people – 50%
- I feel connected to a spiritual essence – 39%
- Other – 9%

Source: The Delightful Places Survey

People also added responses such as: I feel a connection with my children, I feel connected to history, I feel happy, I feel a sense of stewardship. Others said, I feel hopeful, humbled, stimulated, peaceful, or creative. One person wrote, *“I feel like a good mom – hopeful for my son’s future.”*

More than 65% of those surveyed believe that it would be possible to recreate their delightful place. We included this question, (well aware that many places, such as oceans, can not be recreated), for two reasons. One was to draw attention to the potential for expanding the benefits of delightful places by creating more, and the other is to acknowledge the appreciation we have for places that cannot be recreated and may need protection.

One individual made the inviting comment that we could turn places that are not delightful into delightful places.



Photo: John Williams

Observations regarding our request for the main features of a delightful place reflected both of these perspectives.

“Create a walkable city (like Vancouver), and limit cars inside the perimeter. Include wide sidewalks, good transportation options, plant trees and flowers, good lighting for nighttime accessibility, create lots of little neighbourhood areas with all services needed within the neighbourhood. Create multiple-use buildings.”

“Provide more cycling/walking trails in other natural areas close to cities.”

“Governments would have to share this vision and listen to key stakeholders who want cities to be planned to incorporate bike paths, parks and wonderful meeting places along already existing waterways, etc.”

“It is a nature preserve and to re-create it, we must protect natural areas from development.”

“The ocean is the ocean...you can’t build it someplace else.”

Some people felt that their delightful place was unique and could never be truly re-created. However, they believe that similar feelings could be invoked in other delightful places. One individual made the inviting comment that we could turn places that are not delightful into delightful places.

Many comments referred to the feelings invoked by the place: relaxing, experience of peace or freedom, happiness, calming, joy, or a place that allows one to pause and enjoy life.



Photo: Dan Burden

“These places can not be re-created, but places that are not currently ‘delightful’ can be made to be delightful.”

Memories that are associated with a delightful place are something to be treasured as well.

“There is one aspect of this place that cannot be re-created, however, and that is the warm memories and special attachment generated by having visited this place many times with my children (now grown up) and my mother (now deceased).”

We also asked people to tell us what they consider to be the best indicator of a delightful place. We kept this question open-ended to gather divergent views.

Many comments referred to the feelings invoked by the place: relaxing, experience of peace or freedom, happiness, calming, joy, or a place that allows one to pause and enjoy life. Physical attributes of the place were also mentioned: beauty, lots of children, presence of happy people, nature, no auto traffic, quiet. Some suggestions were very precise: 24-hour mass transit (preferably rail) availability of high density; quantify how many people utilize the place. Some people described the lingering impact of visiting a delightful place.

“A delightful place is an area/place you return to over and over and always leave with a smile and a sense of connecting with something bigger than you.”

“A place that makes you feel energized, calm, in tune with life and people.”

“A place where I can’t stop smiling.”

“An ability to return to this place in one’s mind and find an inner peace, even when one is many, many miles away.”

We found the final comments and advice that people gave us to be very helpful. Suggestions were given to revise the survey by including other questions and clarifying some of the existing ones. We

were encouraged to develop a similar survey that distinguishes more clearly between the natural and built environment with respect to delightful places. Most people told us that they thought the survey was a great idea (though one person thought it was silly).

“I think you have hit upon the essential determinant of what makes a place special, and we need to apply what you learn to improve urban spaces everywhere.”

“I wish city planners in all cities would include more delightful places in their master plans.”

“This is a cool idea. I hope to see the results publicized and I’d love it if it meant the creation of more delightful places.”

DISCUSSION

Delightful Places clearly provide an oasis in the busy lifestyles that have become the norm. Richard Louv¹⁹ reminds us that every cell of our body longs for these respites.

In our bones we need the natural curve of hills, the scent of chaparral, the whisper of pines, the possibility of wildness. We require these patches of nature for our mental health and our spiritual resilience. Future generations, regardless of whatever recreation or sport is in vogue, will need nature all the more.

The stress and busyness of our lives, along with fears that are fomented by the media, engender a state of low-grade anxiety – keeping our fight-or-flight response perpetually primed. Jon Kabat-Zinn²⁰, a leader in stress reduction, writes of the US as an A.D.D. nation. Those of us from other countries may see ourselves in his words as well.

I have a sense that as Americans, we also tend to suffer from attention deficit in another, more subtle and subterranean way due to the particular direction our culture has taken in the past half century...think of the incessant drive to fill up your time, to get somewhere else, or obtain what you feel you are lacking so you can feel satisfied and happy.

Rarely are we touched by the benevolent seeing and knowing of who we are by other people, who, for the most part, are moving too fast and are too self-preoccupied to pay attention to anyone else for long.



Photo: Linda Tracy

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Kabat-Zinn believes that learning how to refine our ability to pay attention and to sustain attention may no longer be a luxury but a lifeline back to what is most meaningful in our lives. Our well-being depends on finding a new balance, a reprieve from our adrenaline-based, turbo pace of life. Recent studies indicate that we are biologically wired to experience calm and connection, the body's natural state for healing. Dr. Uvnäs Moberg²¹ has investigated the physiological conditions that are opposite to the fight-or-flight response. She has documented the health benefits and the circumstance that stimulate the release of the hormone, oxytocin – the hormone which many of us may literally be thirsting to experience.

Oxytocin is at work in all of us, children included, and appears to be involved with growth, healing, lowering blood pressure, learning, reducing pain, balancing body temperature, reducing anxiety, regulating digestion and fluid levels, and bonding. We might also see it as the hormone that promotes harmony.

This calm and connection system is associated with trust and curiosity instead of fear, and with friendliness instead of anger. The heart and circulatory system slow down ... When peace and calm prevail, we let our defenses down and instead become sensitive, open, and interested in others around us. Instead of tapping the internal 'power drink,' our bodies offer a ready-made healing nectar. Under its influence, we see the world and our fellow humans in a positive light; we grow; we heal (p. x).

While Dr. Moberg does not deal specifically with how we build our cities she does emphasize that the stresses and fast pace of modern life often keep us more in the fight-or-flight side of the equation. The good news is, the release of oxytocin can be stimulated in many ways, all of which are accessible and exceedingly pleasant.

We can consciously stimulate our calm and connection systems without negative side effects by choosing from various methods... When we get a massage, and probably when we get an acupuncture treatment, oxytocin is released in our bodies. When we **exercise**, make love, meditate, **spend time with people we like, when we are having fun and enjoying life this substance is working in our bodies...** (p.176) (my emphasis).

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Photo: John Williams

Should exercise, relaxation, and enjoyment be relegated to the fringe of our lives and our cities? Or should we seek a greater balance?... Over the past fifty years, while GNP in the US has been growing, tripling in fact, measures of subjective well-being, and life satisfaction have remained flat.

photo: John Williams



Should exercise, relaxation, and enjoyment be relegated to the fringe of our lives and our cities? Or should we seek a greater balance? Some may argue that we should *not* strive for a balance between our adrenaline-driven lifestyle and the rare moments when we regroup, recharge and return to the heady rush of modern goals and agendas. Wouldn't slowing down and relaxing more often be bad for the economy? How would we get anything *done*? Here's where the happiness research becomes extremely interesting. Over the past fifty years, while GNP in the US has been growing, tripling in fact, measures of subjective well-being, and life satisfaction have remained flat.

Studies show that once we have met our basic needs, increased wealth does not contribute significantly to our well-being. Simply put, money doesn't buy happiness. Diener and Seligman²² argue that economic indicators of well-being, in fact, are not sufficiently comprehensive to tell us how we are doing as a society. If economic growth is our main measure of success, but it does not lead to sustained happiness, then as individuals and societies it is time for us to pause and ask, "what are we doing and why are we doing it? Is all our rushing around getting us truly where, or who, we want to be?"

Consider how this might be applied to planning. Creating efficient transport systems is important and something that many commuters appreciate. Shaving five or ten minutes off a jam-packed schedule can be a real priority for some. It may also be an addiction to speed that merits further investigation. Carl Honoré has explored the benefits of slowing down in his recent book, *In Praise of Slow – How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*²³. One chapter describes the Slow City movement that has its roots in Italy. Many Italian cities have taken the Slow City pledge and are working to improve the quality of life of their citizens.

The Citta Slow manifesto contains fifty-five pledges, such as cutting noise and traffic, increasing green spaces and pedestrian zones; backing local farmers and the shops, markets and restaurants that sell their produce; promoting technology that protects the environment; preserving local aesthetic and culinary traditions; and fostering a spirit of hospitality and neighbourliness. The hope is that the reforms... will revolutionize the way people think about urban living.

The Slow City movement is still evolving but it is gaining momentum (no pun intended). There were twenty-eight Italian cities officially designated as Slow Cities in 2003. Twenty-six others are working towards certification and many other countries are beginning to pay attention to this movement.

This brings us back full circle to the question of planning for sustainable happiness. In efforts to support the widespread demand for speed and efficiency, planners may become caught up in responding to an unsustainable view of happiness from individuals and the general public. It is well documented that our preoccupation with motorized transport has come at the expense of the most vulnerable sectors of society, the environment, and future generations. It may well be the case that if we can begin to understand, individually and collectively, how to pursue sustainable happiness, then every other sustainability issue would be addressed.

It appears that Delightful Places have a role in this (though accessing them through sustainable transport is still an issue). Places that delight, slow us down, provide the physical and emotional space, to reconnect and remember who we are, perhaps even why we are here. They are only one component. As our survey indicated, we need delightful communities and cities so that there is greater harmony between our internal and external landscapes. We feel better with daily doses of delight and we can choose to bring more of this into our life. Several survey comments pointed out that delightful places may be as close as your own backyard or kitchen table, sharing a meal with family and friends. Each of us can create and seek delight in our surroundings at work and at home.

It was a tremendous delight to read the survey responses. We look forward to revising the survey and distributing it to a larger number of people that are more representative by age and gender. We would love to learn more from children, youth and seniors about planning for sustainable happiness and creating a footprint of delight.

ENDNOTES

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