

Designing Cities as Human Habitats

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Is it time to rethink what it means to design cities as human habitats?

Humans are not designed to live in cities.

For over 99.99% of our evolutionary history, we lived immersed in nature among small communities which moulded our psychological and social well-being. Since the industrial revolution, urban living has grown exponentially - bringing millions of strangers rubbing shoulder to shoulder with one another within landscapes largely devoid of nature and breaching with fatiguing stimuli. Frequently, these dense living environments inadequately meet our innate psychological need for restorative nature, leading individuals to either seeking refuge from the crowds, or to move away from urban density to seek more spacious and calming living conditions. Without a desired community network as support, this can have a negative knock-on effect on our social well-being.

Is it possible to design high density urban habitats that harmonise our need for daily quality contact with restorative nature and our need for a variety of meaningful social bonds? And is it time to rethink what it means to design cities as human habitats?

Evolution of Human Habitats

A habitat by definition is an environment that meets all the conditions an organism needs to survive¹. For the vast majority of modern human history spanning 200,000 years, the human habitat was the savannas of Africa where we first evolved living as nomads, and later the temperate grasslands of Asia and Europe. Small permanent settlements only appeared with the rise of agriculture 12,000 years ago. Up until this point humans had lived, worked and played within nature intimately. We lived in small, sparse nomadic communities which fashioned our social networks typically comprising of close-knit community groups of a few dozen individuals of core family members, extended family members and close friends. These close-knit community groups would interact with other groups to trade and hold various ceremonies forming a wider and looser layer of social bonds. We therefore evolved having various layers of relationships within a small societal network.