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# Enhancing collective happiness in the city: *Felicitas publica* and the availability of relational goods

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**Abstract** Informed by positive psychology and the fields of urban studies, design, economics, political philosophy and sociology, this paper presents an exploration of different conceptual models of happiness and well-being and considers their potential to be applied in an urban context. It introduces the ideas of ‘public happiness’ (*felicitas publica*), ‘relational goods’ and ‘third places’ and makes a case for their foregrounding in urban policy and practice. A case study, focusing upon a project implemented in the city of Lisbon, Portugal is used to demonstrate the ways in which policy makers might actively intervene to enhance collective happiness in the city.

**Keywords:** *felicitas publica, cities, well-being, relational good, relationships, eudaimonia*

‘A cidade não é um lugar. É a moldura de uma vida’. [The city is not a place. It is the frame of a lifetime.]<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Informed by the broad field of positive psychology, but drawing also upon the

disciplines of urban studies, psychology, design, economics, political philosophy and sociology, this paper reviews theories and models of happiness and well-being and reflects upon their capacity to instruct urban public policy. We then introduce the idea of ‘public happiness’ (*felicitas publica*) and explore the potential of what we term ‘relational goods’ and ‘third places’ in promoting happiness in cities. We present a case study of an intervention implemented in the city of Lisbon, Portugal, which demonstrates how it might be possible to enhance collective happiness in an urban context. We conclude that eudaimonic and relational approaches to city governance and urban renewal can enhance public well-being.

### CITIES AS PROGENITORS AND BENEFICIARIES OF HUMAN HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING

Today, as it has always been, two fundamentally different views of the city jostle for our attention. One perspective celebrates the city as a progenitor of human flourishing, trades on utopian rhetoric and generates proposals on how to further build the city so that it better enhances human life.<sup>2–15</sup> Another perspective construes the city as a destructive machine which erodes human flourishing and self-actualisation.<sup>16–18</sup> The city is ugly, dirty, dangerous and overcrowded — beset by poverty, injustice, incivility, pollution and disease. Cities are centres of conflict, scarcity, alarming population growth, ecological disasters, exclusion, inept politics and social and economic inequalities.<sup>19–21</sup> They conspire to estrange us from ourselves, from others, and from nature.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, neither view is exclusively correct; both utopian and dystopian urban imaginations always have a degree of truth and always exist in tension. Given this tension, approaching humanity’s primary

habitat (the city) as a happiness project could therefore be considered somewhat naïve.<sup>23–26</sup> But there can and must be hope that even if cities are not always or even often life-affirming, they can be remade so that they engender greater well-being and happiness.<sup>27</sup>

It is heartening therefore to witness a ‘happiness turn’ in positive psychology, positive design, positive computing, urban planning, economics and mental health care.<sup>28–37</sup> Meanwhile, community psychology<sup>38</sup> and positive community psychology<sup>39–41</sup> have served as a bridge between studies of positive psychology and the meaning and relevance of communities as spaces for transformative dialogue. Both approach the community from the perspective of values.<sup>42,43</sup> There is emerging from this interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral ‘happiness turn’ a happy city model which aims to steer cities away from their worst selves<sup>44</sup> and to promote transformative and disruptive change which focuses urban governance and policy on questions of subjectivity, emotionality and *relationality*.<sup>45–49</sup>

Happy cities matter. It is clear that cities have an impact on our mental emotional states which then affects our general health, and the quality of our relationships, and then all these, in turn, affect the city.<sup>50–52</sup> Because of these relationships, the city can be thought of as a mental health tool or remediating instrument that prevents disease and promotes salutogenesis<sup>53–56</sup> defined as:

‘An approach to human health that examines the factors contributing to the promotion and maintenance of physical and mental wellbeing rather than disease, with particular emphasis on the coping mechanisms of individuals which help preserve health despite stressful conditions.’<sup>57</sup>

A happiness agenda for cities has the potential to have a profound effect on

the social and economic prosperity of cities and in a virtuous cycle of equitable social and economic development has the potential to create conditions in which the happiness and well-being of urban residents flourish.

### FROM URBAN ECONOMICS TO SUBJECTIVE MONITORING OF URBAN WELL-BEING

The social-scientific theorising of happiness and its expression in policy, practice and public affairs, presents as a diverse and nascent field.<sup>58–60</sup> There is much to unpack. There would appear to exist two chief analytical strands in the making.

The first seeks to understand psychologies of ‘hedonism’: the dynamics of basic life satisfaction and positive emotional experience (the drive to avoid or minimise pain while seeking pleasure).<sup>61</sup> The second prioritises ‘eudaimonia’: a more rounded sense of happiness that arises as people function and interact within society, focusing on purpose, meaning and virtue.<sup>62,63</sup> The latter tradition emphasises non-material pursuits, such as genuine relationality and intrinsic motivation, and can be defined as the happiness of sociality achieved throughout the practice of civic virtues, the realisation of one’s true potential, the presence of non-instrumental and positive relationships, and the experience of a meaningful life.<sup>64–68</sup>

With regard to measuring well-being as a subjective experience, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),<sup>69</sup> in its document ‘Guidelines on Measuring of Subjective Well-being’, aimed to integrate both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, and thus included all forms of positive and negative assessment that people make when assessing their quality of life and affective state.<sup>70,71</sup> The OECD definition includes three dimensions:

1. A cognitive and evaluative (objective) dimension — the estimation of satisfaction with life, which measures how people feel through a thoughtful assessment of their life in general, or of some specific sphere of their existence like work, urban life, commuting, leisure time, or family;
2. An affective (subjective) dimension, which measures emotional states or feelings, usually based on a time point, such as the experiences of the previous day; and
3. A dimension connected to meaning and purpose in life — also described as the measurement of psychological functioning or flourishing.

A happy city is one where people feel relaxed, safe, comfortable, and confident in others — that is, where they experience positive emotions.<sup>72–75</sup>

Economic and other objective indicators are frequently at odds with reports of well-being in developed countries. This is because, despite the clear increase in material wealth, subjective well-being levels have stabilised, mental illness has increased at an intense rate and the social fabric has weakened more visibly than in times of greater poverty.<sup>76,77</sup> There is robust evidence that there exists a correlation between income and happiness,<sup>78</sup> but rising income does not always mean rising happiness. Some economists see a positive correlation, based on evidence that, on average, persons living in richer countries are happier than are those living in poorer countries. But others take the view a positive wealth–happiness association is neither universal nor strong: poorer countries do not always appear to be less happy than richer countries.<sup>79,80</sup>

Reflecting these complications, it is increasingly claimed that governments should use measures of population well-being instead of economic activity to

assess national growth and articulate policy accordingly.<sup>81</sup> Gross domestic product (GDP) is considered an outdated measure to analyse the economic performance of a country or region or to make international comparisons. GDP is a construct that has limited meaning for the individual citizen:

‘Happiness tells us how well a society satisfies the major concerns of people’s everyday life. GDP is a measure limited to one aspect of economic life, the production of material goods. The aphorism that money isn’t everything in life, applies here. If happiness were to supplant GDP as a leading measure of societal well-being, public policy might perhaps be moved in a direction more meaningful to people’s lives.’<sup>82</sup>

Together, objective and subjective measures of well-being and happiness allow for a deeper understanding of how demographic, socioeconomic, geographic and social determinants affect the happiness of citizens in urban contexts, and to quantify their relative importance.<sup>83–86</sup> Composite measures are being devised, integrating indicators of, for example, good services, local and community initiatives, social quality, regional and social policies (such as those linked to employment opportunities), transport quality, and travel time between home and work. These composite indicators of quality of urban life enable us to understand happiness and to measure its impact.<sup>87–89</sup>

Measures of happiness (subjective well-being) and objective measures of quality of life are intimately linked. One study shows an inverted U in the relationship between happiness and quality of life, on the one hand, and population density, on the other.<sup>90</sup> Climate, education, economic conditions, safety and environment seem also relevant to self-reported quality of life.<sup>91</sup> Perceived health

is likewise a very important dimension in determining urban happiness levels.<sup>92</sup> Fear of crime, terrorism and war also clearly influence subjective happiness,<sup>93</sup> as does commuting time.<sup>94</sup> A significant negative correlation between happiness and air, water, and noise pollution, traffic congestion and environmental disasters has also been identified.<sup>95,96</sup> In addition, a clear and positive relationship has been found between happiness and higher winter temperatures, and lower summer temperatures and a negative relationship with higher-rainfall regions and cities.<sup>97</sup> The analysis of the impact of green areas on well-being<sup>98</sup> similarly has found a positive and significant relationship; data confirms the existence of an inverted U-shaped relationship between subjective well-being and quantity and distance from green zones.<sup>99</sup>

### **FELICITAS PUBLICA (PUBLIC HAPPINESS) AND THE AVAILABILITY OF RELATIONAL GOODS**

In the culture of ancient Rome, *felicitas* was the condition of fertility, blessing and bliss inspired by the gods. This concept has been linked with some of the current images of idealised future cities: cities that thrive healthily and help their citizens flourish, achieving their full potential and working together for the common good.<sup>100</sup> This vision of happiness is linked to civic sociability and relational goods, and to the three dimensions of interpersonal relationships: family, friends and society. It is present today in the rebirth of the concept of public happiness, initially discussed by 18th-century Italian economists.<sup>101,102</sup> Now, applied to the city, it realigns us with a humanistic perspective, which defends happiness as a relational and virtuous experience of human institutions, organisations and systems — a model that stands in opposition to the mere view of happiness

as an internal, individual and hedonic experience. The concept of 'public' in 'public happiness' refers to participation in the public sphere, that is, having a part in the affairs of the (local and / or national) state. It represents a feature of the system of rights that defines the political relationship between citizens, as opposed to their personal well-being or individual mental states.

Some authors<sup>103</sup> consider that the low consumption of relational goods — briefly defined as non-instrumental interpersonal relations — explains many of the paradoxes of happiness that we see, for example, in its divergence from levels of relative wealth. The affective components of interpersonal relationships that are perceived as having value, meaning and authenticity are, thus, vital to well-being.<sup>104</sup>

The dissolution of social relations is one of the most destructive agents that can act against happiness.<sup>105</sup> Recent literature within the social sciences offers increasing grounds for concern, affirming that time devoted to interpersonal relations is falling, crowded-out by the extension of markets into domains covered, in the past, by non-market institutions such as family, churches and civil society in general. Well-being is contingent, to an increasing extent, upon social features like social environment and the ability to construct and appreciate meaningful and pleasing relations with others. Interpersonal trust and local community networks are, indeed, one of the greatest sources of well-being, so the quality of interpersonal relationships and the ability to have secure, intimate, and stable social connections is highly beneficial to people's happiness.<sup>106,107</sup> It is easy to see how the structure, architecture and design of cities can promote or weaken this type of happiness.

Two models investigate relational goods linked to urban quality of life

and well-being, based on subjective approaches:<sup>108</sup> the Hedonic Price model<sup>109,110</sup> and the Life Satisfaction Approach.<sup>111</sup>

The first argues that people reveal their preferences for attributes associated with urban areas through decisions that are rooted in location, making these decisions depend on the presence (or absence) of certain amenities. People are willing to pay more for housing or to receive lower wages to live in certain locations and access certain amenities.<sup>112</sup> This model is based on the notion that housing production costs are equal across cities, allowing the 'added value' price of amenities to be assessed, interpreted as the monetary value that a typical household attaches to the set of accessible amenities in each city. This model, however, fails to grasp the way in which cities have evolved with distinctive spatial barriers between rich, poor and other demographic groups, and how decisions have been made on the location of amenities. It has also been criticised for considering that social relations are not among the amenities of a city, at least not in the same way as air quality, access to greenery, schools or other services.<sup>113</sup>

The Life Satisfaction Approach model instead uses self-rated life satisfaction as an approximation of subjective well-being and assumes that local amenities — or their absence — contribute to determining well-being.<sup>114</sup> The promising aspects of the preliminary studies using this second model have already led to the creation and use of relational quality of life indices in cities.<sup>115</sup> One index<sup>116</sup> applied in Italian cities includes three indicators: 1) time spent with friends; 2) active participation in associations and volunteering; and 3) frequency of outings for leisure activities. Results show that people are willing to pay significant money to live in cities where they can access these goods. These values may be

around €3,880, which is significant in a sample with an average annual salary of €30,000.<sup>117</sup> The choice of a place to live is thus affected by relational amenities, not just material factors such as services, climate or environment. In another study, based on the British Household Panel Survey, Powdthavee<sup>118</sup> showed that an increase in social involvement with friends, family and neighbours is worth up to £85,000 a year in terms of life satisfaction. Also, citizens indicated that they were happier in cities where they felt they could rely more on neighbours and strangers.<sup>119</sup>

The results are clear: relational variables unequivocally affect the quality of urban life and perceived well-being, accounting for substantial variability. Data also indicates that social capital is a substitute for the failure of cities' services and social conditions: less efficient areas in terms of the quality of society, interpersonal relationships, climate and the environment, compensate for these failures.<sup>120</sup> This does not diminish, however, the fact that quality of life is mostly influenced by services and social components.<sup>121</sup>

Current data indicates that amenities created by people, concrete and visible, carry significant weight in deciding which city to live in and on migration between cities, which means that public policies in municipal management, particularly for investment in the area of human and social capital, can make a real difference to people's locational choices.<sup>122–127</sup>

### **BUILDING COMMUNITIES WITHIN CITIES: 'THIRD PLACES'**

Despite the tensions that can arise between groups in communal city living — having at the same time 'the wound and the blessing'<sup>128</sup> — a good collective life is best achieved through communion and dialogue that includes all levels

and parts of a social system. This way, society can move towards more equality, social justice and public happiness, since living based on mutually respectful and interdependent coexistence with others and the planet will enhance the presence and quality of common goods. If community is referred to as a value (a way of bringing cohesion, social justice, empowerment, etc.) and as a set of descriptive variables and categories (such as location, interest, identity, communion, risk, resources, organisations, diasporas), the value of the community itself can be perceived and potentially measured and the need for a healthy community at the urban level articulated and understood. If human development has been shown to have a positive impact on economic growth, the opposite is not necessarily true and the above understanding helps to redress this imbalance.<sup>129</sup>

One way to mobilise relational and public happiness is by creating 'third places',<sup>130</sup> taking into account the physicality of everyday spaces. 'Third places' is an expression referring to locations where people spend time between home (first place) and work (second place).<sup>131</sup> In these third places, people build horizontal relationships, create dialogue and exchange ideas in a casual way. Informal conversations are the main activity. The experience itself is a pleasant and positive one. Urban planners who want to support the sense of community and reinforce neighbourhoods are converging on the critical role of these locations. Cafes, public parks, bookstores, neighbourhood associations, places of worship, hairdressers, gyms, restaurants, the beach — these are examples of third places where community building occurs through routine connections. They are considered the 'living room of society'. In Europe, for instance, cafes were traditionally a place to promote culture, creativity and networking. Third



places have many relevant community-building attributes. Some are levelling out differences between social classes and ethnic groups, because people feel like equals within them. Third places are unpretentious and neutral, meaning that people can come and go without any penalty. They are accessible, and no reservation is needed. Strengthening social webs is a vital step in building cities as spaces of happiness, and this can be done by revitalising neighbourhoods, ensuring a determined approach to tackling social problems. These third places can make a decisive contribution to lessening human and social gaps, stabilising communities and reducing social problems.<sup>132</sup> The differences in status that matter so much elsewhere are not significant here.

The risk of losing face-to-face social connections from going increasingly digital is escalating and makes third places more relevant than ever. They are not just a central city issue — they are equally applicable in suburban neighbourhoods. In both locations, they can help build social and economic connections that enhance health, well-being and equity, and can even help lower poverty levels. The availability of meeting spaces, walking spaces (banning the car from the centre of urban life, for example, is one of the current solutions for a good city) or free Wi-Fi areas can create more hospitable conditions for social connection, especially between groups that might otherwise be separated. Local government agencies, decision-makers, local businesses, universities and schools and senior centres, can work together with architects, designers, students, elderly and other community members to develop spaces that promote the opportunity for third places to emerge. Citizen-generated contexts<sup>133</sup> contradict highly hierarchical settings and propose conversational frameworks for public administration, and a means to achieve more shared goals.<sup>134</sup>

### **A CASE STUDY IN LISBON: UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF UNIVERSITIES AS FACILITATORS OF PUBLIC HAPPINESS**

The city of Lisbon, populated since prehistory as a colony of the Roman Empire as part of the province of Lusitania, was called *Olisipo Felicitas Julia*, a clear reference to a city of happiness. This inspired the project delivered by the University of Lisbon (Universidade de Lisboa), a public institution with different campuses around the Portuguese capital and 18 different schools. This initiative aimed to bring together people from all sectors, ages, social class, etc. to participate in dialogues around positive and hopeful topics (peace, environmental sustainability and biodiversity, global citizenship, quality of life, new economic models, mental health, etc.) that might be of common and societal interest, in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Each conversation was unique — while still respecting values, opinions and individual and scientific rhetoric — and people happily anticipated each reunion.

The project included walks for sustainability in green areas nearby the different campuses, and meetings that gave voice to everyone and helped to build a sense of community, while exploring different locations, around and about the diverse university premises, sometimes in the old centre of town, other times in the peripheries of the city. People from different backgrounds were brought together to work in projects of common interest — seniors, handicapped, politicians, adolescents and many others — providing inclusiveness, empowerment and an ethics of caring, while fighting prejudice and despair. The project, which had many versions in previous years,<sup>135–137</sup> so far has had the support of local authorities, community and university leaders, students and teachers, artists, neighbourhood associations, the

university rectorate, opinion leaders and the municipality. The debates provided a setting for grassroots democracy and politics, informal public life and are consequential for the quality of life of citizens. Using the university settings and other public locations as shared spaces to connect and provide a culture of belonging — since no one plays host at a third place — is also contributing to everyday negotiation of diversity, enabling participants to be active citizens.

People have long pursued happy places — ie settings where everyone is satisfied and fulfilled. These social places negotiate diversity and are somehow transgressive. In the case of this project, part of a UNESCO Chair on Education for Global Peace Sustainability, university premises are used with a function that goes way beyond the one usually stated for academia. It can tackle the increasing privatisation and isolation of home life, while feeling similar to a good, comfortable home. As one of the most relevant researchers on happiness put it: 'Third places contribute to the life worth living. They root us; they give us an identity; they restore us; they support us. Bottom line: They allow us to be us. And everyone knows our name.'<sup>138</sup> Undertaking society's fragmentation through projects that underline civic politics, delivering on the ground, slowly instils a democracy of participation, in a moment of our collective story where, again, we need to save and value our shared humanity.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding the interaction between the geography of a place and what makes people happy will help to anticipate what urban policies are needed and to predict the impacts of urban policy decisions. Additionally, a hopeful view of future urban life needs to be more clearly imagined and delivered. Creating

a socially just and inclusive city, with strong obligations towards the people that are marginalised from human fulfilment of all kinds,<sup>139</sup> is a shared responsibility. There is a growing interest in studying and promoting eudaimonic approaches to urbanism, understanding the direct links between relational goods, the success of a city and the cost benefits of enhancing them.<sup>140</sup> Relational goods can only be enjoyed in a reciprocal manner because they are built of two-way relationships. In affluent societies, people produce and consume too few relational goods, with the unintentional result of a decrease of individual and public happiness.<sup>141</sup> This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for contemporary social sciences.<sup>142–147</sup>

The conclusion is therefore that we should design and manage emotionally intelligent cities, building close communities, promoting non-instrumental relatedness, which increases solidarity, fairness and justice — a sort of 'social accountability' — and expand the possibilities for informed choices, with benefits shared by all.<sup>148–153</sup>

One of the fundamental purposes of cities should be to make people healthy and happy, so the happiness of citizens needs to be taken into account when planning, designing and governing a city.<sup>154–162</sup> As the 19th-century Portuguese writer Eça de Queiroz eloquently described in his book *The City and the Mountains*, 'the most genuinely human feelings soon dehumanize in the city'.<sup>163</sup> May we enhance the conditions that contradict him in the near future.

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