



Half the world's population now lives in cities. So the task of redesigning urban life to ensure it works for everyone is more pressing than ever, says *Rachel Abrams*

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Every city needs its designers. In all their variety, cities are a mass of contradictions: clockwork routine and swirling chaos, colossal infrastructure and intangible emotion, individual exuberance and the anonymous crowd.

Someone needs to make sense of it all. Design, in all its forms, can make cities work more effectively. In essence, that's because it can broker relationships between people.

It may call on skills from all kinds of other disciplines – research, psychology, product prototyping, computer science, animation, information and interface design, to name but a few. Most broadly, designers invent and improve products and services that support and enhance elements of daily life. Some outcomes are arrived at through technology, while others are done face-to-face with end users.

The five areas below demonstrate how designers have helped cities across the world. Active citizens, design strategists and innovators have all had an impact in these case studies, each revealing previously unmet needs, introducing small but significant changes, and improving the quality of urban life.

1 Visual information

Networked transit information makes Helsinki's public transport as predictable – and almost as enjoyable – as a merry-go-round ride. For any point-to-point journey, a city-run information system (www.ytv.fi/eng) tells passengers the best options by public transport. Most tram stops have a digital timetable that helps passengers by telling them how many minutes until the next tram arrives. The real magic, however, is an online map of buses and trams in real time (<http://transport.wspgroup.fi/>



hklkartta/), which shows where every one is at any given point and allows commuters to see exactly how long they've got to reach the bus stop, or whether their journey is subject to delays. It's also great fun. "An arrow notes the direction and the icons jolt every few seconds like a city version of *Asteroids*. No more fidgety gazing into the unknown!" says Helsinki-based urban designer Candy Chang, one of a growing band of fans. British commuters needn't feel too left out. The My Society website (www.mysociety.org) – from the team behind the highly effective fixmystreet.com – brings together interactive maps showing London house prices and journey times to a fixed point in a single colour-coordinated graphic. If you're in the market for moving, you can easily balance what you can afford with where you can commute from – or discover an area you might be better off working in. Ultimately, by reducing commuting times, such schemes could make the capital a more sustainable, efficient city.

2 Social interaction

Exploring a foreign city with someone you know makes the experience more meaningful. Social network Dopplr (www.dopplr.com) has taken this idea to new heights with what CEO Marko Ahtisaari, former design director of Nokia, calls "an intention-sharing service online".

Subscribers post details of forthcoming travel plans and share them with a community of friends and acquaintances who have signed up: more than 250,000 trips were posted last year. They can share travel tips – that unsung antique shop the guide books have missed – or arrange to meet. Small groups form around business conferences or far-flung weddings. »



Waiting game: in San Francisco (above left) commuters can hitch a ride, while Helsinki's travel maps (above) take the pain out of waiting

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ways to redesign

Like other social networks, it also becomes a toolkit for sharing and tracking experiences (and carbon footprints), a framework of content as intimate and compelling as the cosmopolitan network that generates it. Expats in some cities find they don't even need to pack their bags to participate, as visitors from home descend on them from the site.

3 Way-finding

Legible London, the brainchild of design consultancy AIG, is an ambitious project to roll out pedestrian-friendly directional signs for the capital.

People walking through the city previously had to consult competing, confusing or incomplete signage, or were left to their own devices (an A-Z pocket guide or, heaven forbid, asking a stranger).

The project team has worked with Transport for London and several different boroughs across the capital to develop comprehensive pilot schemes of consistent signage. These graphics reflect findings from research studies to direct pedestrians, confirm routes and announce destinations. Results so far include a set of successful prototypes that represent clearly not only what people see around them, but correspond to their own mental maps, adding to or reinforcing the partial knowledge of London streets people may already have in their heads.

The best way-finding solutions for cities are people-centred and co-created. The designer's most important task is to synthesise and then visualise what pedestrians have in mind. To do this, they ask a lot of research questions at the start of the process, work hard to earn the participants' trust and draw on their own experiences to shape what comes next.



4 Mass transit

You don't need to be a designer to think about designing better ways of working. When formal systems break down or are lacking an element, people improvise to fill the gaps. Commuting drivers in California's Bay Area have developed their own way of working the system: they pick up random pedestrians at rapid-transit (train) stops in the East Bay to drive them into San Francisco. The pedestrians get a free ride and, with an extra passenger, the drivers get to use the car pool lane toll-free. This cooperative ride-sharing practice has grown up defined by, but independent of, the formal transit network. Over time, participants have documented the etiquette of the ride on a website (www.ridenow.org/carpool), where they also share warnings about 'cars to avoid', but that's about as official as it gets.

An emerging system, it's certainly lean and efficient (as long as you don't hitch a lift from a serial killer). Cutting in line is regulated by nothing more than the threat of other commuters' disapproval, proving it's not just we British who disdain a queue-jumper.

Jeff Howard, author of *Design for Service*, a West Coast-based blog, says slang has emerged to celebrate this casual car-pooling phenomenon. In Washington DC, ride-sharing is referred to as 'slugging', where passengers – the slugs – are scooped up. As with any system, it has limitations. Return journeys from the other end tend to be unreliable because the pick-up points are less obvious. But as a peer-to-peer network, it drops a big hint to transit planners, encouraging them to design possibilities for such behaviour into city infrastructure. Sure enough, bays have gradually been marked out in San Francisco to make car-



Day and night: Legible London (above left) is revolutionising way-finding, as clubbers find going green is cool

Venues in the US, UK and mainland Europe are championing green standards for energy-consuming, 24-hour party people

pooling easier, as what began life as a socially driven phenomenon gets co-opted into a city's way of life.

5 Greener lifestyle

Even do-gooders love to disco. Nightclub venues in the US, UK and Europe are championing green standards for energy-consuming, 24-hour party people. Low-wattage lighting, even in illuminated dancefloors, and campaigns to recycle vinyl and CDs are all catching on.

Although flyers remain the definitive way to spread the word about events, party organisers are urged to print them locally at eco-approved print shops, where recycled, unvarnished paper and non-polluting inks are available. Promoters are using mobile and online services to share more of their information digitally and avoid having to clear up masses of waste paper at the end of a big night. And clubs like Watt in Rotterdam will offer drinks on draught from biodegradable cups instead of cans and glass bottles.

Ultimately, the green clubbers hope their standards will sink in, and night-clubbing tourists will take eco-friendly habits back to local clubs. Many of these initiatives have come about organically, but clubbing is all about following trends, and the eco-night-out movement has spread. The music industry is getting on board: a series of projects is planned to 'green' Miami's long-running Winter Music Conference, where DJs and promoters jet in from across the world. The Green Music Alliance (www.greenmusicalliance.org), which spans countries and genres, shows record labels how to reduce their carbon footprint and directs consumers to events and artists with an eco-conscience (take a bow, telecommuters Radiohead and KT Tunstall, who runs her tour bus on biodiesel).

Clearly, designers get involved in many urban infrastructure projects, from transit and healthcare to sustainability and recreation. Complex, city-scale problems and opportunities call for interdisciplinary thought and action. Designers are brilliantly placed to assist in this process. In cities, where things are both never- and ever-changing, design could help us imagine and create a different quality of life. 

Design-driven cities

Across the world, politicians are understanding the importance of design to helping cities function better

London

Almost a quarter of UK design consultancies are based in London. Global clients make up 27% of London designers' work. Last year, the London Development Agency launched a £3.5m design support programme for small businesses, including a roll-out of Designing Demand. The London Design Festival is the largest of its kind in the world.

"London's businesses are becoming increasingly aware of the power of design. They understand that design needs to be integral to the entire process of delivering a product or service. If you try to go to market without thinking about design, you won't be making the most of your opportunity."

Boris Johnson, Mayor



Montréal

Quebec's capital is challenging Toronto as Canada's fashion hub, and is notable for its aerospace and IT industries. In 2006, Montréal became the first North American city to be named a UNESCO City of Design. In his previous role as minister of industry for Quebec, Mayor Gérald Tremblay brought in a tax credit for design, which stimulated private investment.

"Design has meaning only when it enables human beings to live well. Becoming a design city means advocating a better quality of life in a perspective of sustainable development. Design is essential to the future of Montréal, giving us the opportunity to reshape the city."

Gérald Tremblay, Mayor



Seoul

Design is at the heart of the South Korean capital's bid to become internationally competitive. The city's design sector is expected to be worth £10.5bn in under 10 years – nearly twice its value in 2007. The Design Seoul project is transforming the city, from redesigning street signs to reshaping its global brand. The International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) has named Seoul 2010 World Design Capital.

"Design doesn't just mean making the city look smart. Good design makes life safer and easier and makes people feel good. Take education – children who receive education surrounded by good design become flexible and generous in character."

Oh Se-Hoon, Mayor



Sydney

Design accounts for 5% of employment in New South Wales, as much as financial services and more than agriculture. The Sustainable Sydney 2030 Vision sets targets for environmental, social, economic and cultural development through design. Current projects include extending the cycle network, creating new public areas and artworks and building a green infrastructure network.

"Good design is central to the future sustainability and liveability of our cities. Urban design can create connections between where people live and work that encourage people to use public transport."

Clover Moore, Mayor

