



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design

By Charles Montgomery

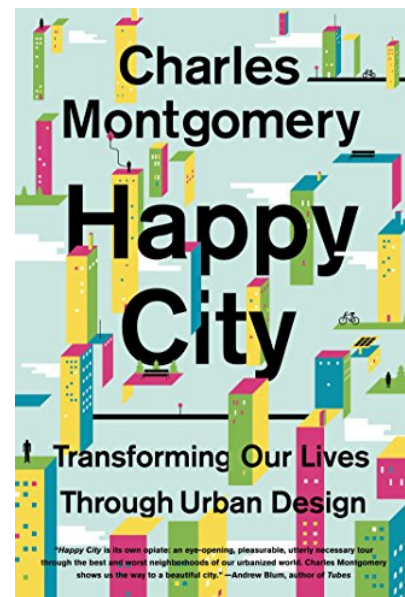
The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Oct. 4, 2023 to discuss *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* by Charles Montgomery. Montgomery is a Canadian journalist who, since writing this book, has founded a firm to do research, planning and design work about urban happiness.

In the book, Montgomery explores two subjects: What causes happiness in most people, and how do the places we live and work influence happiness?

In answering the first question, he finds that “intrinsic” sources of happiness—things like relationships, trust in those around us, and activities that offer us a sense of control—greatly outweigh the value of “extrinsic” sources of happiness—the things we own, job promotions that give us loftier titles, and so on.

But particularly in the U.S., he writes, cities and suburbs cater to extrinsic rewards, such as houses and cars, while ignoring the toll that physical separation and long commutes take on intrinsic pleasures, like time spent with family and friends.

His book, then, is a plea for city leaders and urban planners to understand the importance of happiness (again, relationships and trust), and design cities accordingly—using many of the elements urbanists have long advocated, like density, sidewalks, bike lanes, urban trails, transit, neighborhood parks, and public spaces that encourage people watching.



Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four “big ideas” drawn from *Happy City* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. People involved in urban design, from planners to developers, need goals to guide their work. Creating happiness is a good one.
2. The book makes it clear there are no shortcuts to creating happiness through urban design. Many things are needed, from the right kinds of transportation and housing to neighborhood parks, sidewalk cafes and farmers markets.
3. As we design residential housing, let's keep human scale in mind. As the book shows, density that does not bring people together fails the test.
4. We need to identify models of happiness-inducing urban design in the Atlanta area that city leaders, developers and citizens can visit and learn from. And we need a variety of models that cities, suburbs and neighborhoods can choose from.

Why Do These Things?

Montgomery explains how urban design affects happiness and offers examples from around the world. But should Urban Atlanta heed this research and follow these ideas? We think it should. Here's why:

- As we've seen in other books (specifically, *Palaces for the People*), places that facilitate stronger connections among residents see numerous benefits. Among them: better health among residents and less crime.
- And there are other benefits. If we followed Montgomery's recommendations about housing and transportation, we would reduce Urban Atlanta's notorious commutes. That would be good not only for building happiness but for the environment and climate.
- We know that human-scale density and transit work. If we add to these things amenities aimed specifically at relationship building, such as neighborhood parks, farmers markets and mixed-use developments that encourage shopping and dining, we would attract talented young people. That is good for the economy.
- As Montgomery makes clear, the least-advantaged people in communities benefit especially from public amenities and things like public transit.
- Finally, we *can* do these things. Urban Atlanta is growing. This gives us a future we can shape for the better because many design decisions are yet to be made.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes create opposition. That's true even for something as desirable as building happiness through good design. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- All changes face resistance. These ideas demand a whole new way of looking at urban design, and how the built environment affects our lives. These ideas will not be accepted easily.
- Because these ideas require many things working together—housing, transportation, amenities and so on—they may be opposed by some who feel threatened.
- And it's not just changing thinking that's required. Putting relationship building and trust at the center of urban design requires numerous changes to professional practices, from street design manuals to zoning codes.
- We may lack advocates in Urban Atlanta willing to champion these things.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- Using the right language would help. Too often urbanism is defined as taking things away from people. This book helps us focus on what urbanism gives: better relationships, public trust, happiness.
- When we do citizen engagement well, people often volunteer the very things this book suggests: a desire for better connections among citizens, more attractive public spaces, more mixed-use development.
- We already have some success stories in Urban Atlanta: Smyrna, Suwanee, Decatur, Alpharetta. We should celebrate these places and emphasize how their design choices have made their citizens happier.
- Advocacy is crucial. Given how much is involved in changing housing, transportation, public spaces, etc., it may involve a coalition of groups.
- A community design center supported by foundations and nonprofits could help communities see ways of solving their problems using the concepts in this book.

A Synopsis of *Happy City*

Happy City is 321 pages, not including notes and acknowledgments. It has 13 chapters plus an epilogue.

As mentioned above, the book asks two questions: What causes human happiness? And how do cities, suburbs and the way we live today add to happiness or diminish it?

In answering the first question, Montgomery ranges from university labs to the dorms of Harvard University. Then he visits cities in North America, South America and Europe to see how urban life make us more or less happy. He even stops in Mableton and Smyrna, Georgia.

What he finds is that we overvalue certain kinds of happiness and undervalue others. And the kinds we undervalue tend to be those that bring lasting joy to most people.

These are “intrinsic” sources of happiness, such as time spent with others, trust in those around us, work that makes us feel “competent and effective” and activities that place us in control of our destinies. The sources of happiness we overvalue are “extrinsic.” These are things we own, like houses or cars, or things we win, such as a work promotion that we believe will change how others view us.

What does this have to do with cities? Extrinsic happiness is easier to see and value than intrinsic. (Among other things, it includes tangible items that companies are good at promoting and selling.) Because of this, Montgomery argues, American cities and regions have organized themselves around satisfying these forms of happiness while ignoring intrinsic happiness. Hence, large houses in the suburbs that come with a steep and largely unrecognized cost: time away from family and friends.

This problem of overvaluing some sources of happiness while ignoring others is joined by other flaws in human judgment, Montgomery writes. One is a tendency to simplify complex choices, which he calls the “focusing illusion.” This means that, faced with choices, we focus on one or two differences while overlooking less obvious details. Trying to decide between a townhouse in the city or a large house in the suburbs, a couple might focus on the suburban house’s backyard or its roomy garage, and not recognize the cost of commuting or the distance to

restaurants, schools and entertainment. Again, when extrinsic and intrinsic compete, tangible usually wins.

Unless, that is, we deliberately choose the less tangible, more intrinsic sources of happiness. And that is what Montgomery found when he visited places like Bogota, Colombia and Copenhagen, Denmark. These cities were shaped by leaders who recognized the role that human connections played in creating happiness and built these things into their communities.

The most surprising of these places is Bogota. Before 1997, when Enrique Penalosa took office as mayor, Bogota was like many cities in South America, with enormous gaps in wealth and a belief that the North American form of development, which emphasized cars, highways and suburbs, was the way out. But in a single three-year term, Penalosa changed the thinking of Bogota's citizens and leaders. His belief: We should do things that make people happier.

These things included restricting cars and expanding public transit. He built parks, libraries and schools in the poorest neighborhoods. He redesigned streets so that pedestrians and cyclists used the middle portions and cars traveled on the sides. Penalosa's aim was to make life easier for the city's poorest citizens but not just economically. He wanted to offer them a feeling of belonging, which he said would bring happiness to everyone as trust grew among all citizens. As he explained to Montgomery, "If people are treated as special, as sacred, they behave that way."

Montgomery found similar things in Europe, where Danish architect and planner Jan Gehl learned something important from studying successful public places like plazas and parks. "What is most attractive, what attracts people to stop and linger and look, will invariably be other people," he told Montgomery. So Gehl set out to convince Copenhagen's leaders that the secret to urban success was human connection, even if involves only watching others as you sit in an outdoor cafe.

In the end, Montgomery's suggestions for cities are familiar to most urbanists: Use streets for multiple uses. Build gathering places. Design housing density intelligently so people have opportunities for meeting others but can also withdraw to private spaces when they need to be alone. Make cities welcoming to the least advantaged.

These prescriptions are not the reason to read this book. Montgomery's most important contributions are new ways of talking about urbanism, along with a goal most people can relate to—that cities and suburbs should be designed to improve happiness.

Here is the catch: Because intrinsic happiness is harder to appreciate, you have to experience it to understand its value. In other words, you can't appreciate well-designed city parks or plazas without visiting them. And you can't appreciate the value of a walkable street or good public transit until you park your car and try walking or catching a bus. Even architect Jan Gehl had to learn the value of public places by visiting Italy in the 1960s and seeing how people lingered in the Piazza del Campo in Siena.

Once urbanism is experienced, people still must be convinced that it could work close to where they live. That is what took Montgomery to Mableton, to see how local citizens were reimagining a collection of strip shopping centers as a real city, with a downtown and gathering spots.

In the end, Montgomery's book suggests that turning sprawl into happy cities is difficult but not impossible. It helps to have examples, including places anyone could visit to experience urbanism. It helps, too, to talk about urbanism as a way of making people happier. Finally, it

helps to have a clear set of policy ideas and a process for convincing citizens and leaders to make the effort.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.