

Why Sustainable Cities Matter More Than Ever

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When people think about environmental issues, they often picture forests, oceans, or wildlife habitats. Yet many of the issues shaping our future are unfolding much closer to home, in the cities and towns where most of us live.

Today, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, and cities continue to grow rapidly. As communities expand, so do the challenges associated with housing, transport, energy use, waste management, biodiversity loss, and climate resilience. At the same time, cities are places where many solutions can be found. They are increasingly at the centre of a global movement towards healthier, more sustainable, and resilient communities. This is why the choices made in our urban areas can have profound impacts on public health, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and prosperity.

Cities at the Centre of Change

Cities are where people live, work, learn, and connect. They are centres of economic activity, innovation, and cultural exchange. They are also places where environmental and social challenges often become most visible.

Poorly planned growth can contribute to habitat loss, pollution, traffic congestion, urban heat, and pressure on natural resources. In contrast, thoughtful planning can create greener neighbourhoods, healthier communities, and more resilient environments. It can improve access to services, strengthen social connections, and help create places where people feel safe, supported, and able to thrive.

The way our cities are planned influences much more than the appearance of streets and buildings. It shapes how people move, interact, access opportunities, and experience everyday life.

A New Urban Narrative

For many years, conversations about cities have focused on growth, infrastructure, and economic development. While these remain important, there is growing recognition that cities are much more complex than physical development alone.

A new urban narrative encourages us to think differently about cities and communities. It recognises that environmental, social, cultural, and economic challenges are closely connected and should not be addressed in isolation. Decisions about housing, transport, public spaces, environmental protection, health, and community wellbeing all influence one another.

Although the term "new urban narrative" may sound recent, many of its underlying principles have been recognised for generations. One of the most famous examples comes from nineteenth-century London, where physician and epidemiologist John Snow investigated a deadly cholera outbreak. By mapping cases of illness, he identified a contaminated public water pump as the likely source of the disease. His work demonstrated how the design and management of urban systems can directly affect public health and helped lay the foundations of modern epidemiology.

Today, the challenges facing cities may be different, but the principle remains the same. Decisions about housing, transport, green spaces, water, and infrastructure continue to influence health, well-being, and quality of life. Thoughtful planning guided by healthy and sustainable city principles can reduce health risks, support economic productivity, and create places where people have greater opportunities to live fulfilling lives.

This broader perspective also highlights opportunities for innovation, research, and environmental action. As cities continue to evolve, new ideas, research, and approaches can help shape how neighbourhoods, transport systems, public spaces, and green infrastructure support healthier communities and more sustainable futures. Looking ahead, we can imagine cities as living laboratories where creativity, research, and collaboration come together to test new ideas, improve the quality of life, and strengthen relationships between people and the natural environment.

Connecting People and Nature

A sustainable city is not simply a place with more buildings or infrastructure. It is a place where people and nature coexist in ways that benefit both.

Green spaces, wetlands, waterways, and green corridors provide more than aesthetic value. They help cool cities, improve air quality, support biodiversity, reduce flooding risks, and contribute to community wellbeing.

Protecting and restoring these natural systems is an important part of creating resilient communities. These spaces remind us that nature is not separate from our daily lives. Rather, it is intertwined into the places where we live, work, learn, and connect with others.

Healthy ecosystems support healthy communities, and healthy communities are more likely to care for and protect the natural environment. The benefits of this relationship extend beyond environmental outcomes. Access to nature can improve well-being, strengthen community connections, and enhance overall quality of life.

Looking Beyond Economic Growth

For many years, progress has often been measured primarily by economic growth. While prosperity remains important, there is growing recognition that thriving communities also depend on social wellbeing, environmental stewardship, and equitable access to opportunities.

A successful city is not measured solely by economic growth or physical expansion. It is also reflected in the well-being of its people, the health of its natural systems, and its ability to adapt to future challenges.

Good planning encourages long-term thinking and recognises that the benefits of today's decisions may be felt for many years to come. By considering the bigger picture, communities can create lasting benefits that support both people and the environment.

Building Resilient Communities

The first half of 2026 has already highlighted how vulnerable communities can be to environmental and social challenges. Extreme weather events, natural disasters, and public health challenges have demonstrated how quickly everyday life can be disrupted and how important it is to build prepared, adaptable, and resilient communities.

Resilience involves more than responding to emergencies. It includes creating neighbourhoods that support community connections, access to services, sustainable transport options, green spaces, and healthy ecosystems.

When people are connected, informed, and engaged, communities are often better equipped to adapt and respond to challenges. Strong communities are built through shared responsibility, local action, and a willingness to support one another during times of change. After all, no one stands alone in a changing world.

Everyone Has a Role to Play

Creating sustainable cities is not solely the responsibility of governments or planners. Community groups, businesses, households, and individuals all play a role.

Simple actions such as supporting local environmental initiatives, reducing waste, conserving water, planting native vegetation, participating in community projects, and engaging in local decision-making can all contribute to positive outcomes.

It is easy to feel that the challenges facing our environment are too large for any one person to influence. Yet progress is often built through small, consistent actions. While these efforts may seem small, they are signs that

we are moving in the right direction together, and over time, they can inspire others, strengthen community connections, and contribute to a more sustainable future.

A Shared Future

The future of sustainability is closely linked to the future of our cities and towns. By recognising the connections between people, communities, and the natural environment, we can help create places that are not only productive and prosperous, but also healthy, inclusive, resilient, and environmentally responsible.

Every community has an opportunity to contribute to this future. Through community participation, thoughtful planning, and environmental care, we can help create places where both people and nature are valued and supported.

As cities continue to evolve, there is an opportunity to build communities that support both people and nature. By caring for the environment, strengthening community connections, and planning for the future, we can create healthier, more resilient, and more enjoyable places to live.

As individuals, we all experience change throughout our lives. We navigate different opportunities, challenges, and uncertainties as we try to build a better future for ourselves and those we care about. Despite our different circumstances, many of us share a common hope: to live in communities that are safe, healthy, and connected to the natural world, places we are proud to call home.

While our paths may differ, the future we hope for is often remarkably similar: a future where people and nature can not only live, but live well together. Every step we take today helps move us closer to that future.
