

# The Same Bench

50 Lenses for Understanding the City

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# Foreword

A bench is a small piece of the city, but many of the larger questions about cities apply to it. Who can reach it? Who feels welcome enough to stay? What can people see from it, and what happens just out of sight? A bench may offer rest, shade or a chance meeting. From the same bench you may also notice a street that is hard to cross, a park that nobody maintains, or a public space run by rules that some of its users never helped to make.

In a city, homes, streets, jobs, rules, markets and daily habits all affect each other, and no single theory explains how the whole works. This book offers 50 lenses for looking at the city. Together they are not a complete account; the afterword names some of the book's blind spots.

Many lenses start from everyday details like the bench and then ask what shapes them: land prices, rules, budgets and who decides. They move from street life, design and movement to health, climate and nature, and from there to the urban economy, housing, shared decisions and the daily work of keeping places running. Each lens brings one relationship into focus, for example between land prices and who can afford to live nearby. No lens settles every disagreement about what should happen next.

These ideas come from many people and fields. Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl and William H. Whyte watched how people use streets and squares; Kevin Lynch asked how people remember them and find their way. Richard Sennett wrote about openness and the edges between groups. Henri Lefebvre, Susan Fainstein, Elinor Ostrom and many others developed ways to think about rights, justice and shared authority. Where a lens draws on the work of others, it says so. This book introduces their work and invites you to read it yourself.

Many lens titles are my own short descriptions of ideas from the literature. A Source identifies work used in a lens; Related reading points to work on a related subject.

The book is meant for students starting out in urban studies, for people who work on cities and want a quick reminder, and for anyone curious about the place where they live.

Every lens follows the same pattern: a short text, a drawing, two questions under Look again, a source line or related reading where relevant, and cross-references under See also. Each lens can be read on its own; the references under See also lead to related lenses. Take the questions outside. Watch who comes, who waits and who leaves, and who does the work that plans seldom record. Ask what a place makes possible, for whom, and at whose cost. The same bench serves different people at different hours, and people in different circumstances use it differently. No single rule will suit every bench, so the questions need asking again in each place.

The next page shows how ten of these lenses apply to a single bench.

# One bench, ten lenses

Take a bench on a small square at the edge of a city centre. At eight in the morning, an older man reads the paper there, as he does every day. The baker opposite nods to him, and so does the woman waiting for the number 4 bus (02). He sees who comes and goes at the bakery, and three upstairs windows look down on him (01).

By noon the bench stands in full sun. Nobody sits on it; the people eating lunch have moved to the low wall, because the plane tree shades it (03). On hot July nights the square stays warm long after dark, and the flats above the shops are the hottest on the square (23).

The bench sits on a route. Each day a mother with a pushchair crosses the square twice, from the school to the shop and on to her father's flat (17). The kerb on the far side is not dropped, so she takes the long way round (15).

Two years ago a slat broke. A resident reported it twice, but the council did not repair it for months (50). In the meantime, the baker screwed a plank across the gap with his own tools (48).

Now the square is part of a plan for new homes. The plan counts homes; nothing in it measures what the square offers the people who already use it (44). Before the planners move it, they should find out what the bench does, and for whom (47).

Each of these ten lenses shows one part of the square. Together they show who uses the bench, who looks after it, and who would lose out if it went.

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# Eyes on the street

Jane Jacobs asked who sees what happens on an ordinary street. Shopkeepers at their doors, neighbours at their windows and people walking by can keep an eye on the pavement. Jacobs argued that their presence makes a street safer, and makes it feel safer, when three conditions hold: it is clear which space is public and which is private, buildings face the street, and people use the street throughout the day. Windows facing the street help only when someone is behind them and looks out.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who can see this spot, and when?
- Who would notice if someone needed help?

# Public familiarity

You know the baker by sight, nod to the woman waiting for the same bus and recognise the parents at the school gate. None of them is a friend, yet together they can make a neighbourhood feel like yours. Talja Blokland and Julia Nast use the term public familiarity for recognising others and being recognised in local places. In mixed neighbourhoods of Berlin, they found that such recognition helps residents feel at home, even without any real tie to the people they recognise and with little else in common. Shared routes, local shops and places that people use often give them the chance to meet again and again.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where do the same people cross paths every day?
- What would break those routines?

## Necessary, optional and social activities

Jan Gehl grouped outdoor activities into three kinds. People carry out necessary activities, such as going to work, whatever the quality of the place. Optional activities, such as sitting in the sun, happen only when the place and the weather make staying pleasant. Social activities, from a greeting to a long talk, happen when people are near each other. Counting passers-by therefore says little about how good a public space is. Watch instead who chooses to stay, and for how long. William H. Whyte added that people like to choose where to sit: in sun or shade, near others or apart.



### LOOK AGAIN

- Do people here pass through or stop?
- Where can someone sit without buying anything?

# The city at eye level

Most people meet a building through its ground floor: doors, windows and displays. Hans Karssenberg and Jeroen Laven call this the plinth. Many doors, things to look at and space for market stalls, café tables and play give people on foot reasons to slow down; a blank wall or closed car park gives them none. A plan drawn from above can miss what walkers see, so designers and owners should plan and manage the ground floor as a task of its own.

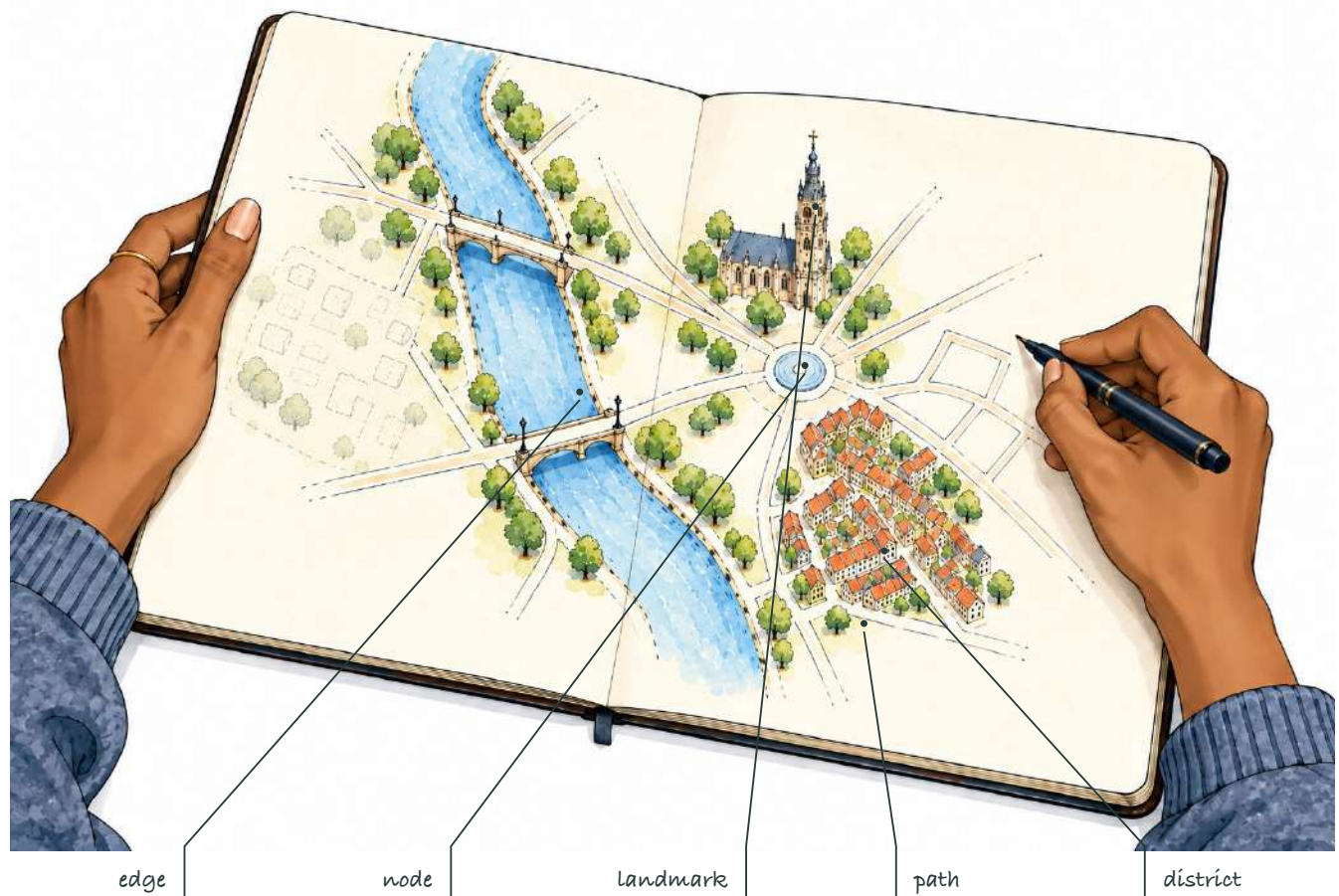


## LOOK AGAIN

- How many doors are there along a hundred metres?
- What does a passer-by see at eye height?

# The mental image of the city

Kevin Lynch asked people in Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles to draw their city from memory. Their maps shared five elements: paths, edges such as rivers, districts with their own character, nodes where routes meet, and landmarks that help people find their bearings. Lynch called a city legible when people can easily picture and remember it, and argued that legibility helps newcomers find their way. A mental map also shows which places its maker knows and uses. When parts are missing, the map does not show why: the maker may never need to go there, or may avoid them.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What would a newcomer draw first?
- Which parts of the city are missing from most people's maps?

# Triangulation

William H. Whyte filmed plazas in New York and saw strangers start talking when something gave them a reason to. A street musician, a sculpture, a chess game or a friendly dog could provide that reason. Whyte called this triangulation: a third point that links two people who might otherwise pass without speaking. Designers can make room for such meetings by placing benches near things worth watching, or by keeping space free for markets, performers and play. Whether a chat turns into an acquaintance depends on the people themselves and on whether they meet again.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What here gives strangers something to talk about?
- Is there room for the unplanned?

# Porous borders

Richard Sennett borrows a distinction from ecology. A boundary is an edge where things end, such as a ring road or an office district that empties at five. A border is where different groups and uses meet, like a cell membrane that lets matter through while keeping its shape. Sennett argues that cities need more borders and fewer boundaries. Crossings, entrances on both sides and shared uses such as markets or sports grounds make an edge porous, so that people pass through it in both directions. Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp similarly describe public domain as places where different groups do not just share the space but actually meet.



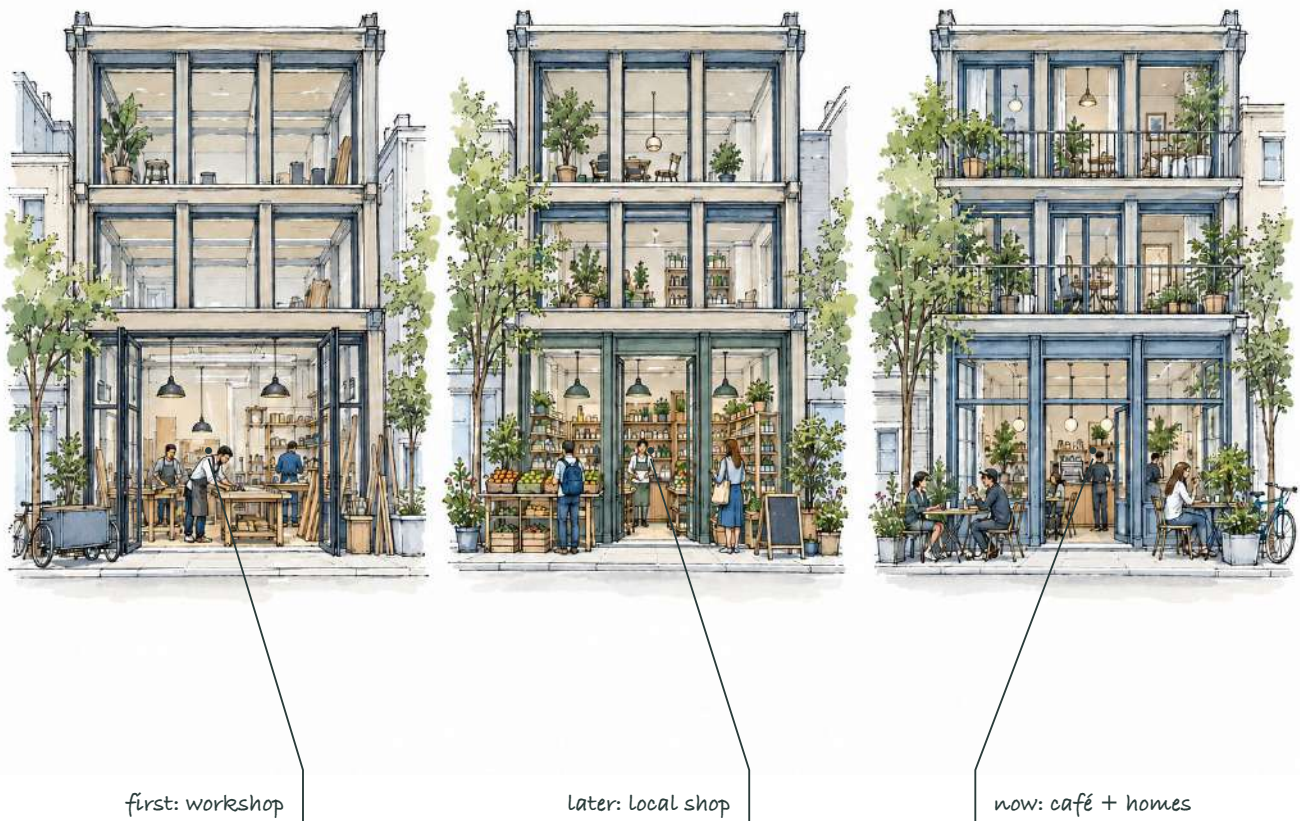
## LOOK AGAIN

- Where does this neighbourhood end, and what happens at that edge?
- Who crosses it, and who stays on one side?

# Room for later use

Richard Sennett's idea of incomplete form describes buildings and spaces that later users can finish or change. Nobody knows what a neighbourhood will need in fifty years, and a building made for one use may be hard to reuse when that use ends. Builders and architects have long noted that buildings adapt more easily when they have a strong frame, high ceilings and floors that can be split or joined. Old warehouses turned into homes, studios and cafés show why spare floor height and a strong structure pay off later. Building this way may cost more at first, but later owners can then change the use without demolishing the building.

*illustrative sequence*



## LOOK AGAIN

- Could this building house something else in fifty years?
- What would stand in the way?

Source: Richard Sennett, *'The Open City'* (2006)

Related reading: N. John Habraken, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (English edition 1972; Dutch original 1961); Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (1994)

See also: 28, 33, 50

# Density is not urbanity

Many homes on a site do not by themselves make a lively neighbourhood. Jane Jacobs named four conditions for urban diversity: a mix of main uses, short blocks, buildings of different ages and costs, and enough people close together. The four work together; density alone produces none of the other three. In *Soft City*, David Sim argues that density combined with diversity brings shops, services and shared places close to home. Towers without shops, long blocks and buildings all of one age can be dense yet quiet. Two sites with the same number of homes per hectare can produce a busy street or an empty one.

*same number of homes per hectare (illustrative)*



## LOOK AGAIN

- What is here besides homes?
- At which hours is the street empty?

Source: Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961); David Sim, *Soft City: Building Density for Everyday Life* (Island Press, 2019), chapter 'Being Neighbors'

See also: 10, 14, 33

# Zoning for a mix of uses

Japan sets its zoning categories nationally. The law defines thirteen use zones, from low-rise residential areas to industrial areas. Local planning authorities decide which zone applies where and can add district plans, but they cannot invent new zone types. Many zones allow lower-impact uses while restricting more disruptive ones. Even in the quietest residential zone, a house may include certain small shops or offices, as long as the business part stays under 50 square metres and less than half the floor area. In many other zones homes, shops, cafés and workshops stand side by side. André Sorensen and others describe how this permissive system has supported mixed-use neighbourhoods. Alongside other factors, these rules have helped Tokyo add homes where demand has risen.

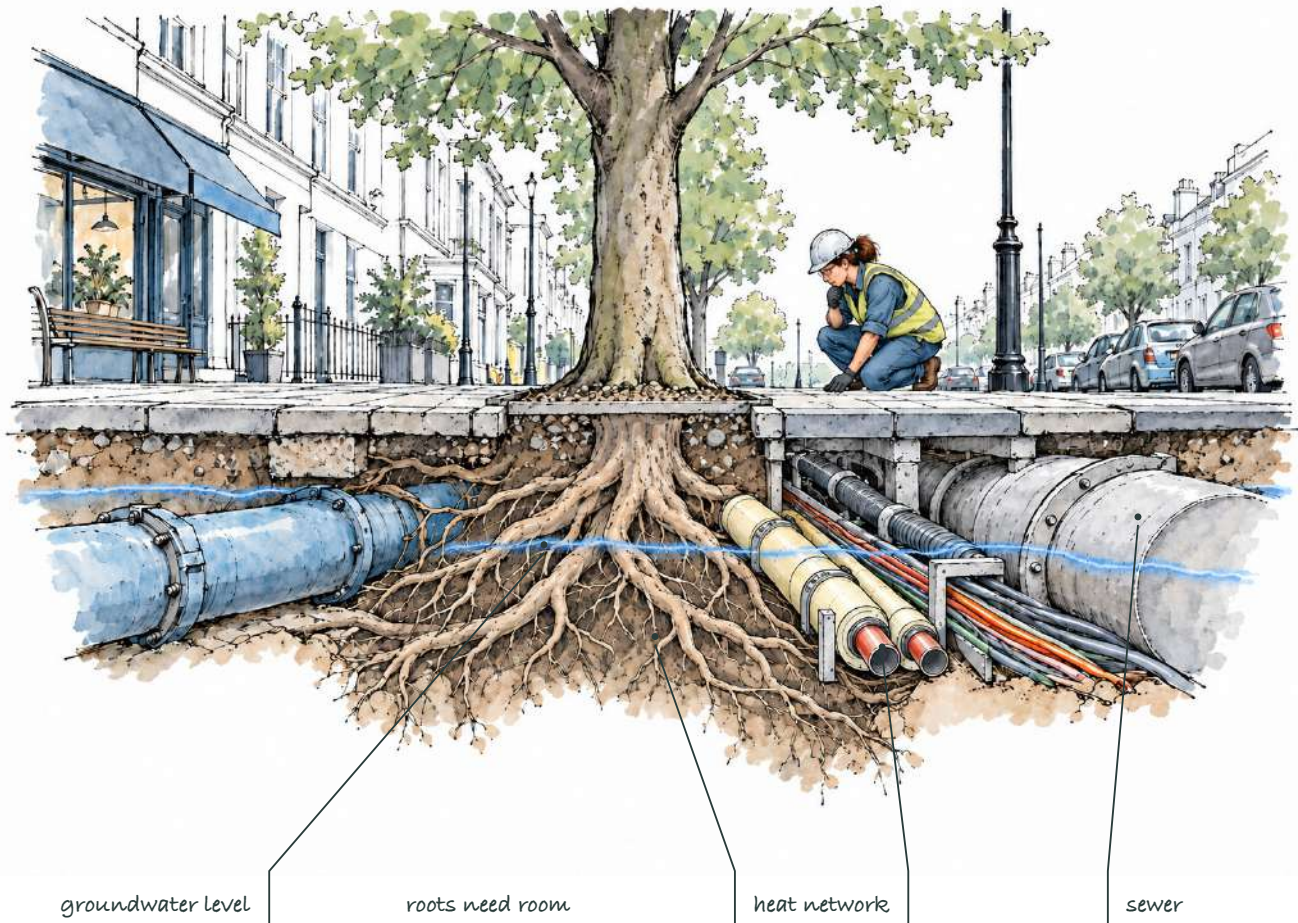


## LOOK AGAIN

- Which uses does the plan for this street allow, and which does it forbid?
- Where could someone open a small shop on the ground floor of their home?

# The ground beneath

Under every street, sewers, pipes, cables, foundations and tree roots compete for limited space. Trees need room for roots, rain needs room to soak away, and the energy transition adds heat networks and heavier cables. Fransje Hooimeijer and Linda Maring argue that cities should plan the ground below together with what lies above. What lies below can decide what is possible above: a street with no space underground cannot take new trees. When planners draw a cross-section from rooftop to groundwater, they see these limits before they fix the design.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What lies under this street?
- Is there room for a tree to grow old here?

# Accessibility as practical freedom

Walter Hansen defined accessibility as the potential to reach opportunities: how many jobs, shops or schools are within reach, weighted by the effort it takes to get there. Karst Geurs and Bert van Wee later distinguished four components of access: where destinations are, how people travel, when places are open, and what each person can manage. Seen this way, accessibility is a practical freedom. A nearby health centre adds to your choices only if you can reach it, get in and afford it. Karel Martens adds the question of fairness: a transport system can work well on average while some people can barely reach anything. He argues that everyone should have at least a sufficient level of access, and that policy should help those below that level first.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What can someone without a car reach from here within half an hour?
- Who falls below that level?

# Time geography

Torsten Hägerstrand saw that time limits people's lives as much as space does. Each day has fixed points: school opening, a shift starting, the last bus. Between those points, people can reach only the places they can get to and return from in the time available. Hägerstrand called this approach time geography. He drew each person's day as a path through space and time. Between fixed points, a prism marks the places that person can reach. Three kinds of limits shape it: what a body and a vehicle can do, fixed times shared with other people, and rules set by others, such as opening hours and timetables. A parent fitting nursery drop-off around work can reach fewer places in a day than a student can.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Whose day is squeezed tightest here?
- Which opening hours or timetables shut people out?

# The 15-minute city

Carlos Moreno proposed that people should be able to meet daily needs such as work, shopping, care, learning and leisure within fifteen minutes on foot or by bike. He asks planners to bring services closer to homes instead of making travel faster. A fifteen-minute circle drawn on a map is only a start. A railway with only one distant crossing, a dangerous junction or a shop that people cannot afford can put a destination out of reach. Smaller cities and rural areas face a further question: which services can each neighbourhood keep running, and which must several places share?



## LOOK AGAIN

- What lies within fifteen minutes on foot from here?
- What blocks the way?

# Universal design

In 1997, a working group at North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design set out seven principles for designing for the widest range of people from the start. They include equitable use, simple and intuitive use, tolerance for error and low physical effort. A step-free main entrance and a dropped kerb are examples: they help wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs, travellers with suitcases and delivery riders. Designed this way, a wheelchair user enters by the same door as everyone else, instead of by a side entrance at the back.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who would need a detour or help to use this place?
- Is the step-free route also the main route?

# Spatial mismatch

In a study published in 1968, John Kain looked at Detroit and Chicago. He argued that residential segregation, combined with jobs moving to the suburbs, limited Black workers' access to employment, and that the distance between home and work helped explain their higher unemployment. Researchers have tested and disputed the hypothesis since, and the findings differ by city and country. The lens remains useful when employers move to sites that are far from affordable housing and hard to reach without a car. It shows why housing policy and economic policy can address the same problem.

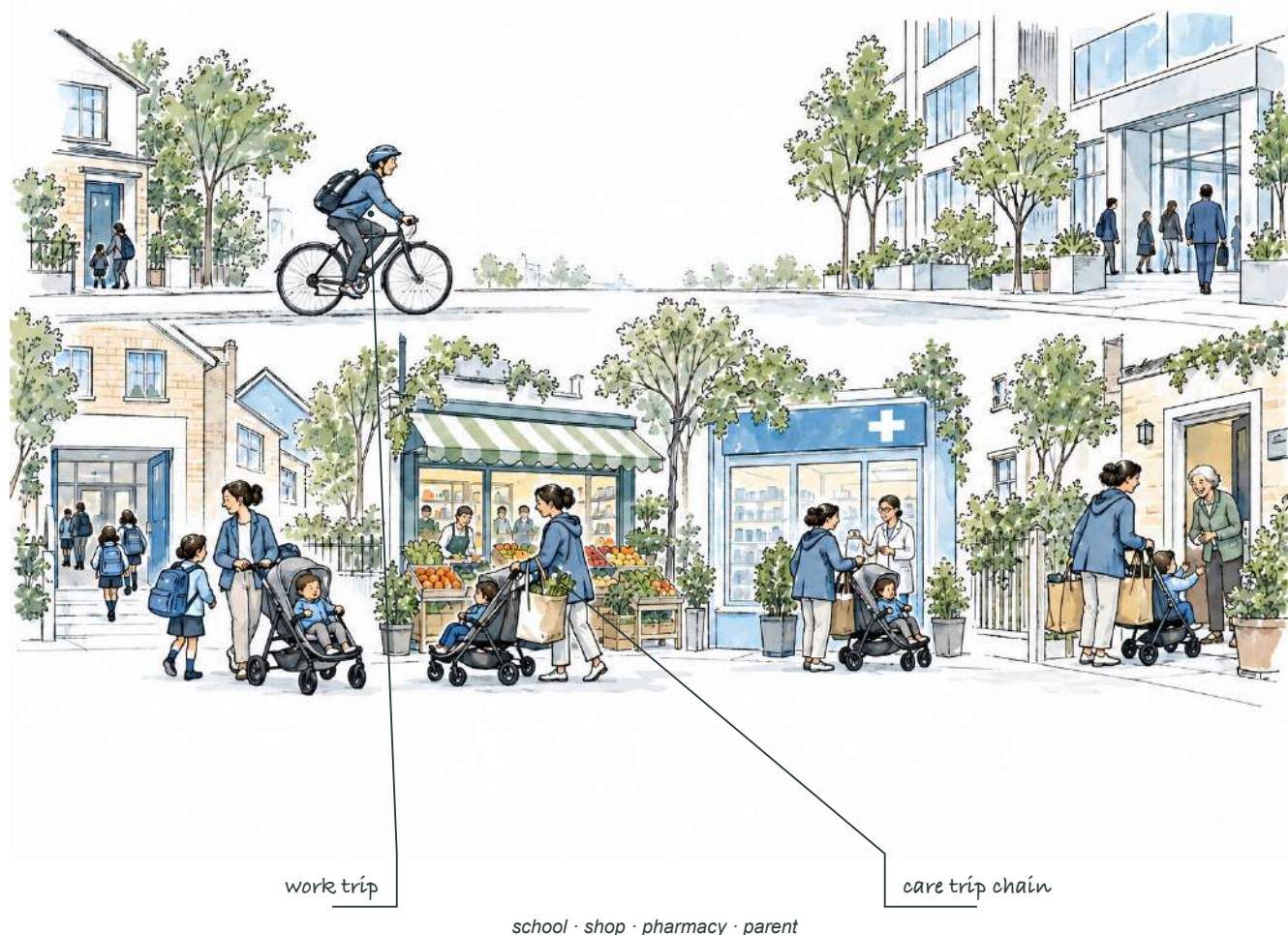


## LOOK AGAIN

- Where are the jobs for people who rely on the bus?
- Can they reach them from where the affordable homes are?

# The city of care

Inés Sánchez de Madariaga coined the term mobility of care for trips made to look after others: taking children to school, shopping for a household or visiting a sick parent. Travel surveys often record these trips under shopping or other headings, so planners see less of the care work behind them. A care trip often links several stops and several ways of travelling in one day. A transport network built around a direct commute can make such trips slower and harder. Leslie Kern argues that urban design has often assumed a worker without daily care duties.



## LOOK AGAIN

- How would a parent with a pushchair and a shopping list get around here?
- Which trips do the traffic counts miss?

# Vision Zero

Sweden adopted Vision Zero in 1997: nobody should be killed or seriously injured in road traffic. Claes Tingvall, one of its authors, argued that people will make mistakes, so the road system must forgive them: a mistake should not cost anyone their life or health. Responsibility therefore also lies with those who build and run the road system, not only with road users. In practice, this means speeds that lower the risk of death, such as 30 km/h where cars mix with people walking and cycling, and separating traffic where speeds differ. A street that is safe only when everyone does everything right is badly designed.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What happens here if someone makes a mistake?
- Do the speeds match the people who use the street?

# Induced demand

Gilles Duranton and Matthew Turner found that across US metropolitan areas between 1983 and 2003, vehicle kilometres travelled on interstate highways rose almost one for one with added lane kilometres. The extra traffic came mainly from residents driving more, from more commercial traffic and from people moving into the area. The study found little diversion from other roads and no evidence that public transport provision affected vehicle kilometres travelled. The result holds for US cities in that period; it does not predict traffic on every widened road. A wider road may still serve other purposes, but adding lanes alone does not reliably reduce congestion. Before widening a road, planners should ask how much extra driving the new lanes may bring, and what else the same space could carry.



two lanes, queued



more lanes

still congested

## LOOK AGAIN

- What will the extra capacity draw in?
- What else could the same space carry?

Source: Gilles Duranton and Matthew A. Turner, 'The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion: Evidence from US Cities', *American Economic Review* 101(6), 2616–2652 (2011)

See also: 12, 14, 20

# No parking space, no car

Since 1962, Japanese law has required car owners in areas where the garage certificate rule applies to show an off-street parking space within two kilometres of home when registering a car. Light cars follow different procedures in some areas. The same national law forbids using a public road as a car's long-term storage space: a car may not be left in the same place on a road for twelve consecutive hours or more, or for eight consecutive hours or more at night, from sunset to sunrise. This shifts much of the cost of storing a car to its owner, especially where land is expensive. Paul Barter argues that the rule helped keep car ownership low in the urban cores of Japan's large cities, where high property prices make parking expensive and public transport makes a car less necessary. The rule is one factor among several; it does not by itself account for travel choices.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who pays for the space where cars stand overnight on this street?
- How would this street change if every car needed its own space off the road?

# Salutogenesis

Medicine often asks what makes people ill. Aaron Antonovsky turned the question around: what helps people stay healthy under stress? He called this approach salutogenesis, the study of where health comes from. At its centre is a sense of coherence: the feeling that life is understandable, manageable and meaningful. Applied to the city, the question becomes whether daily surroundings strengthen that feeling. A clear route, a bus that runs on time, a familiar shop or a welcoming place can make daily life easier to understand and manage. A welcoming place can also offer activities and relationships that people find meaningful.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Does this place make daily life easier or harder to manage?
- Where do people feel at home here?

# Attention restoration

Rachel and Stephen Kaplan's research starts from the observation that long periods of focused attention tire people out. Stephen Kaplan held that nature restores this capacity: clouds, leaves and water hold the eye without effort, an experience he called soft fascination. Kaplan named three further qualities of a restorative place: a sense of being away, enough extent to explore, and a fit with what the visitor wants to do. A park may offer all four; a strip of lawn beside a busy road offers few of them.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where can people here rest their minds within a short walk?
- Does the green feel like a place apart?

# The urban heat island

T. R. Oke explained why cities are warmer than the land around them. Stone, brick and asphalt absorb heat during the day and release it slowly at night. Narrow streets trap heat, and less greenery and water mean less cooling; traffic, machines and buildings add heat as well. The difference is greatest on calm, clear nights, and one street can be much warmer than the next. Older people and people with certain health conditions are especially vulnerable to heat; people in poor-quality homes without cooling and outdoor workers can also face high exposure. Trees, shade and cooler building materials can reduce the heat that residents absorb, so where a city plants trees and adds shade decides which residents benefit.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where in this neighbourhood is it hottest at night?
- Who lives there?

# The sponge city

Landscape architect Kongjian Yu (1963–2025) helped develop and champion the sponge-city approach to urban water management. In 2015 the Chinese government selected its first pilot cities and issued national guidance on sponge-city construction. Instead of piping rain away quickly, a sponge city holds water where it falls, lets it soak into the ground, cleans it through plants and soil, and stores it for dry spells. Many cities now use related measures: green roofs, rain gardens, permeable paving and water squares that hold rain for a few hours. Each measure needs space above and below ground, and someone to maintain it.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where does the rain go here after a heavy shower?
- Which spaces could hold water for a few hours?

# Designing for biodiversity

A mown lawn and rows of identical trees look green but give few species what they need. Georgia Garrard and colleagues proposed biodiversity sensitive urban design: start with the needs of chosen species, including food, shelter, breeding places and links to other habitat. Holly Kirk and colleagues show how this works at different scales, from nesting bricks in a wall to linked green corridors. Simple questions can test a neighbourhood: can hedgehogs move between gardens, do bees find flowers through the seasons, and can swifts nest?



## LOOK AGAIN

- Which species could live here, and what do they lack?
- Can animals move from one green patch to the next?

# Agglomeration economies

In 1890 Alfred Marshall explained why firms in the same trade cluster together. They share specialised suppliers, draw on a large pool of skilled workers and exchange know-how more easily. Economists still use these three forces to explain why firms gain from locating close together, and call these gains agglomeration economies. The same closeness raises demand for land, which pushes up rents for residents and firms that cannot pay as much.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Which firms gain from being here?
- Who pays for that closeness through higher rents?

# Borrowed size

A smaller city can offer functions usually found in a larger one because it belongs to a wider urban region. William Alonso coined the term borrowed size for this in 1973. Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger later extended the idea: a city uses its links with other places to keep a theatre, a university or a specialist hospital going. The same links can also work against a smaller city. A larger neighbour may draw shops and services away from it, an effect economic geographers call an agglomeration shadow.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Which functions does this city have that its size alone would not support?
- From where does it borrow, and who lies in its shadow?

# Renewal through diversity

Jane Jacobs argued that a city's economy grows when people find new uses for old skills and businesses. A metalworker may start making baking tins for the baker next door; a supplier may start making its own products. A firm may combine know-how from different trades. New businesses of this kind need somewhere cheap to start: older buildings, low rents and people from different lines of work who meet often. When a city replaces such places with rows of identical offices or homes, it removes the space where new businesses start.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where can someone start a business cheaply?
- Which trades sit close enough to exchange ideas?

# Sharing land value uplift

A new tram stop, a zoning change or a better street can raise the value of nearby land. Henry George argued that when public investment or a growing community raises land values, that gain should return to the community, and he called for a tax on land value. Today, land value capture includes several tools: development charges, levies on owners whose land has gained value, leasing public land instead of selling it, and public land ownership. What these tools achieve depends on local law and on the deal a city makes. Together, the tool and the deal decide how much of the rise in land value returns to the public, and whether landowners, developers or buyers pay for it.

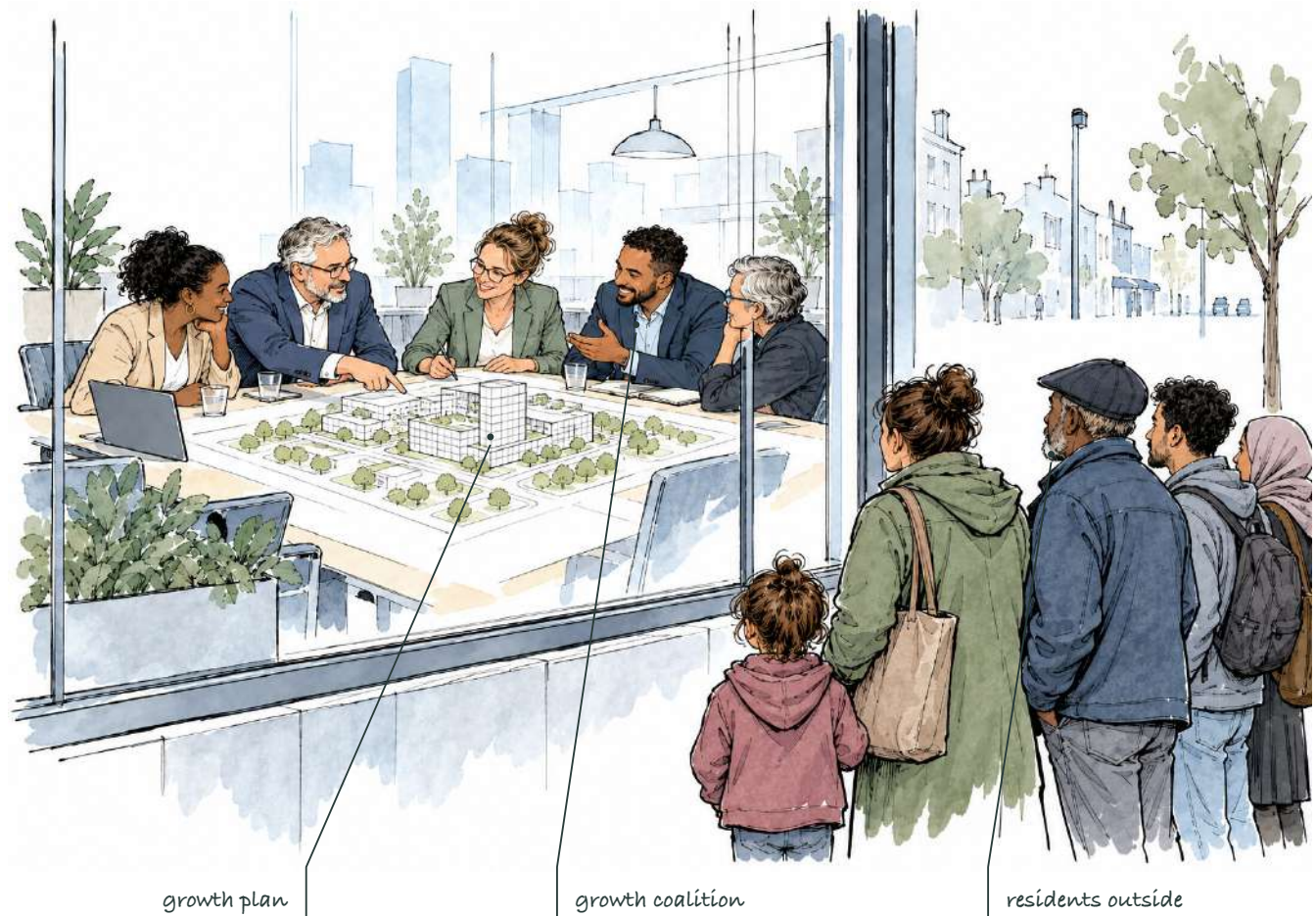


## LOOK AGAIN

- Who gains when this area is upgraded?
- How much of that gain returns to the public?

# The growth coalition

Harvey Molotch described a growth machine in American local politics: a coalition of landowners, developers, businesses and local media that works together to promote growth, because growth raises land values and profits. In *Urban Fortunes*, John Logan and Molotch questioned the claim that growth benefits everyone. Residents value a place for daily life, its use value; a growth coalition values it for the income it brings, its exchange value. Their questions are who sets the agenda, who gains from a plan, and whose concerns, including those of current residents, get less of a hearing.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who gains if this plan goes ahead?
- Whose concerns are missing from the table?

# The rent gap

Neil Smith's rent gap is the difference between the ground rent a site earns under its current use and the potential ground rent under a more profitable use. As that gap widens, investors find it worthwhile to buy, renovate or rebuild. This helps explain why investors return to some neighbourhoods before new residents arrive. A new station or a zoning change can raise the potential ground rent, but the gap alone does not decide who moves, who stays or who gains.



## LOOK AGAIN

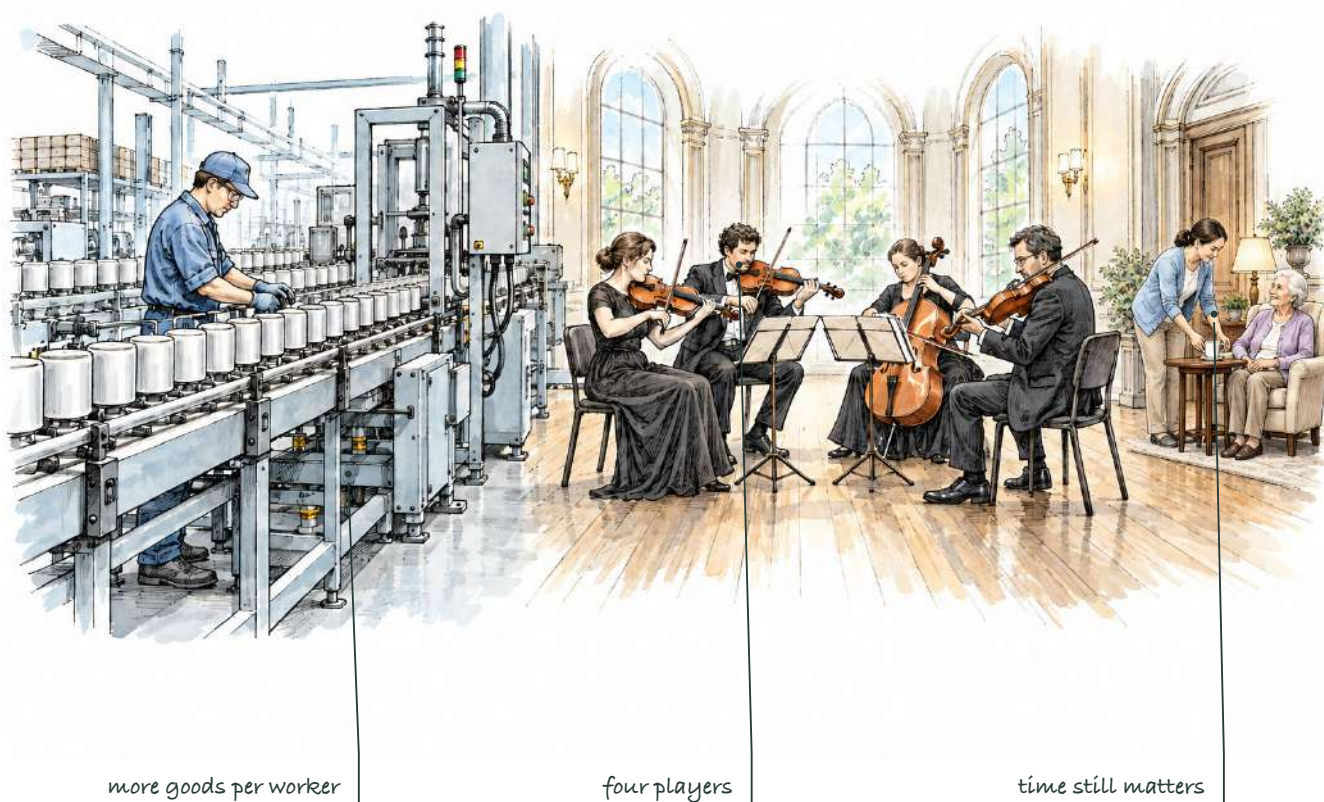
- What ground rent does this site earn now, and what could it earn under another use?
- Which public decision could change that gap?

Source: Neil Smith, 'Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45(4), 538–548 (1979)

See also: 29, 37

# Baumol's cost disease

A home care worker can visit only so many people in an hour, just as a string quartet still needs four players. William Baumol and William Bowen explained why such work becomes more expensive over time. In factories, each worker produces more every year, so wages rise. Care workers and musicians must earn comparable wages, or they leave for other jobs, while their output per hour stays the same. The cost of an hour of care or music therefore keeps rising. Economists call this Baumol's cost disease. Care, teaching, cleaning and libraries all depend on human time, and their rising cost is not by itself a sign of waste.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Which services here depend most on human time?
- How will their costs be met over the next decade?

# Dwelling type as an urban choice

A tower, a courtyard block, a terrace and flats above shops can hold a similar number of homes on the same plot, yet each gives the street a different number of doors, windows and entrances. Front doors, shared entrances, lifts and car parks shape how people come home, meet their neighbours and use shared space. Dwelling type is therefore an urban choice as well as an architectural one. The choice often follows from who builds and how the homes are financed: a developer who must sell flats quickly may build one entrance hall and an underground car park, while a housing cooperative may choose front doors and a shared garden. The resulting form then shapes daily routines and who pays for upkeep.



## LOOK AGAIN

- How many front doors open onto this street?
- Who looks after shared spaces, and who pays?

# Vacancy chains

A couple buys a new house and leaves their flat behind. A family moves into the flat and frees a smaller home, and so on across the city. In the 1960s Frank Kristof and John Lansing's team traced such chains of moves and asked what they mean for housing policy. One new home can free up several others over time. The chain can stop before it reaches a lower-income household, however. Demolition, allocation rules, prices and rents all shape who gets in and where the chain ends.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who moves into the new homes, and which homes do they leave behind?
- Where does the chain break?

# The financialisation of housing

Manuel Aalbers describes how banks and investors have become central to housing. Banks bundle and sell mortgages, investment funds buy rental homes, and owners treat homes as assets that must earn a return. A home then serves as both a place to live and an investment. An owner who must pay investors decides differently about rents and repairs from an owner who lives on the street.

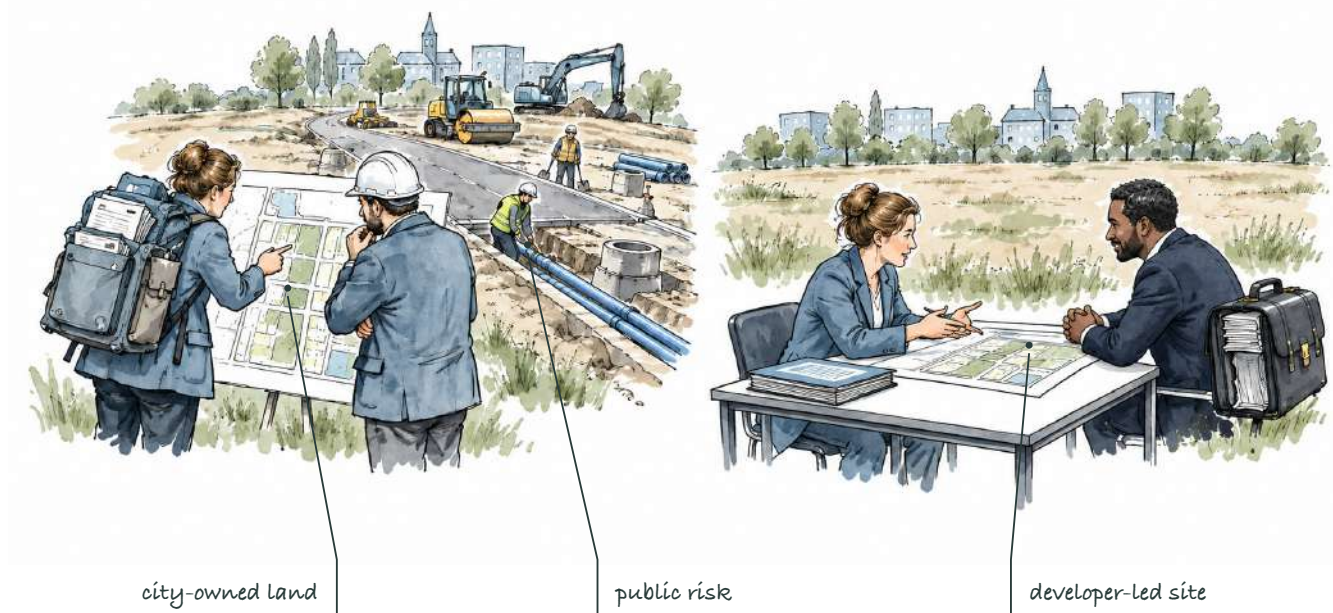


## LOOK AGAIN

- Who owns the homes on this street?
- What does that owner need to earn from them?

# Active and facilitating land policy

Dutch planners distinguish two roles. With active land policy, a municipality buys and prepares land, then sells building plots. It gains more direct control and may keep some of the rise in value, but it carries the financial risk if building stalls. Under facilitating policy, the land stays in other hands and the municipality steers through plans and agreements. Between the two lie mixed forms, such as joint ventures and agreements that make developers pay towards public works. Neither approach is neutral: each divides the financial risk, the gain in land value and control over the plan differently between the municipality and the developer. A municipality may take different roles from site to site, depending on who owns the land, what money is available and what the municipality wants to achieve.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who owns the land here, and since when?
- Who carries the risk if the plan stalls?

# Gentrification and displacement

Ruth Glass used the word gentrification for middle-class households moving into working-class neighbourhoods of London and changing their character. The term now describes a wider pattern of investment, rising prices and better-off newcomers. Peter Marcuse distinguished several forms of displacement, including direct displacement, displacement pressure on those who stay, and exclusionary displacement, when people can no longer move in. Gentrification and displacement are linked, but one does not prove the other. The first names a pattern of change; the second concerns the people who must leave or can no longer move in.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who lived here ten years ago, and where are they now?
- Who can no longer move in?

# The right to the city and the just city

Henri Lefebvre argued that city dwellers have a right to shape the city as well as to use it. Susan Fainstein turned urban justice into three criteria that planners can apply: equity, diversity and democracy. These criteria can conflict: residents may support a plan that keeps poorer households from moving into their area. Fainstein asks planners to face that conflict instead of treating majority support as proof of fairness, and generally to give equity priority. The questions become who gets the new homes, jobs and parks, and who pays for them.

*equity · diversity · democracy*



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who gets to change this place?
- Who gains, and who bears the cost?

# Real capabilities

Amartya Sen asks what people are actually able to do and be: to learn, work, stay healthy and take part in public life. He calls these capabilities. Income is one means, but the same income can give people different freedoms depending on health, care duties, where they live and the rules they face. For a city, this shifts attention from what people have to what they can make of it. A free bus pass, for example, is worth little to someone who cannot leave a parent alone, or when no bus runs after the late shift.



same resource, different freedom



care work

## LOOK AGAIN

- What stops people here from doing what they value?
- Which resources do they have but cannot use?

# Participation as power

Sherry Arnstein's ladder has eight rungs, from manipulation and therapy at the bottom to partnership, delegated power and citizen control at the top. The middle rungs, which Arnstein grouped as tokenism and which include informing and consultation, give residents a voice without the power to decide. The ladder remains a useful test for meetings and surveys. Applied to a plan, it shows what residents can still change, who holds the budget and which decisions are already made. A consultation can collect views while leaving the main choices untouched.

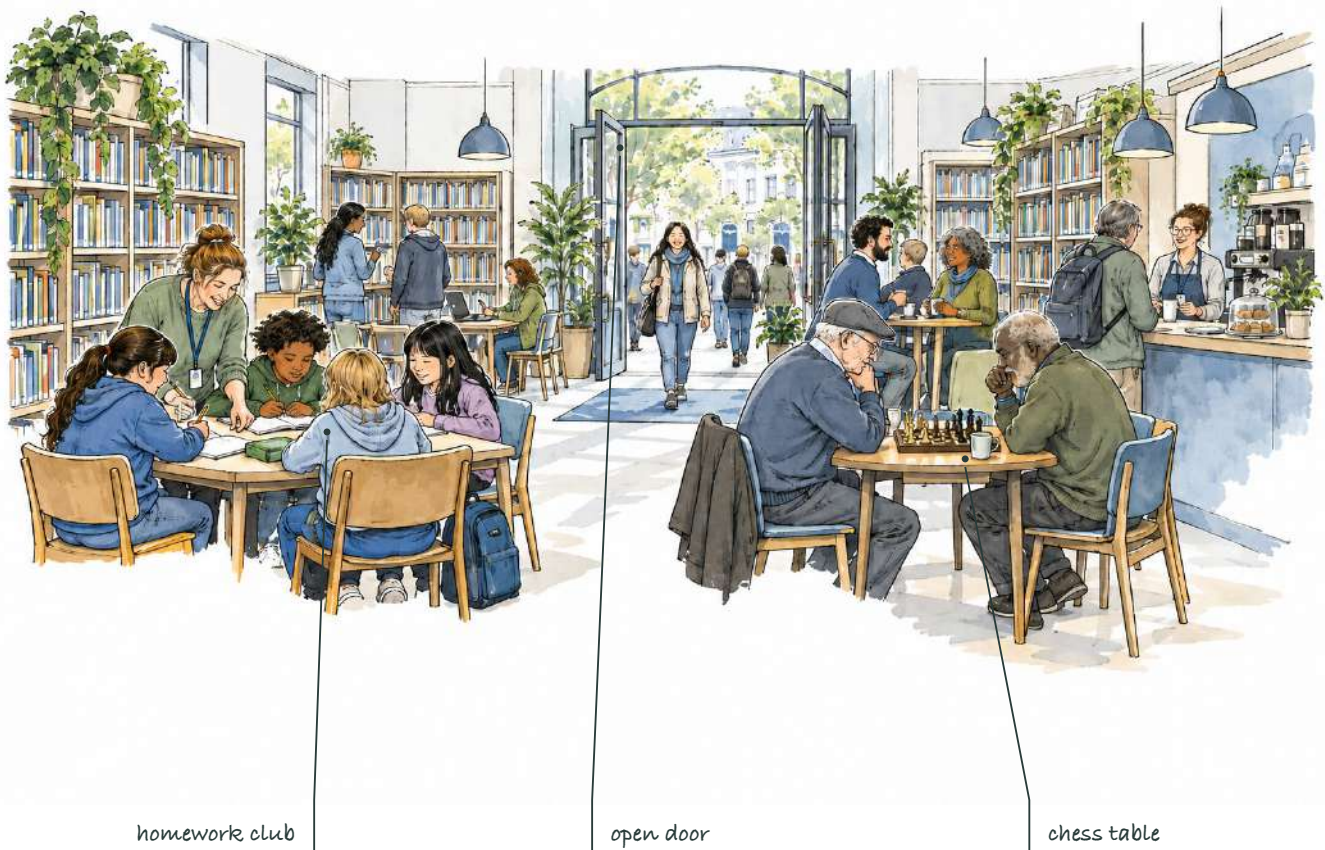


## LOOK AGAIN

- What can residents still change in this plan?
- Who is missing from the room?

# Social infrastructure

Eric Klinenberg compared Chicago neighbourhoods during the 1995 heatwave. Where busy streets, shops and meeting places drew people outdoors, neighbours were more likely to notice when an older resident had not been seen, and death rates were lower. In *Palaces for the People*, Klinenberg calls the places that let people meet and build ties social infrastructure: libraries, parks, community centres and barbershops. Whether such a place reduces isolation depends on its opening hours, staff, cost and who feels welcome there.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Where can people meet here without paying?
- Who keeps those places open?

# Commons and self-governance

Garrett Hardin described how users may overuse a shared resource that anyone can use, when each user gains by taking more. Elinor Ostrom studied resources whose users made and enforced their own rules, and showed that shared use need not exhaust a resource. Lasting arrangements often have clear boundaries, rules that fit the place, users who help make the rules, someone who monitors use, and ways to settle conflicts. In a city, the same questions apply to community gardens, shared courtyards and cooperatives: who sets the rules, and how can users change them when circumstances shift?

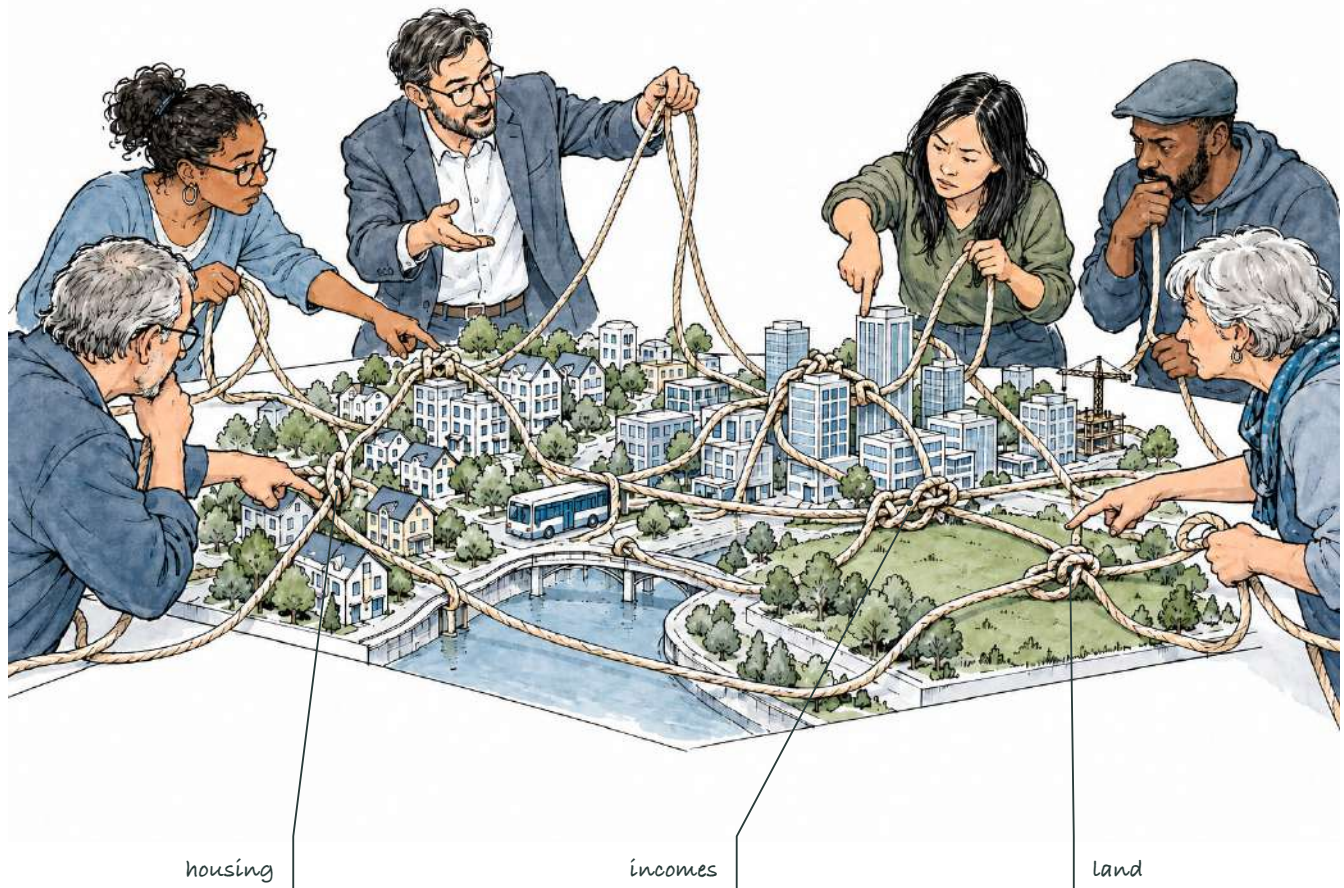


## LOOK AGAIN

- Who makes the rules for this shared place?
- What happens when users disagree?

# Wicked problems

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber distinguished tame problems, which can be clearly stated and checked against an agreed answer, from wicked problems. How someone frames a wicked problem already shapes the possible answers; there is no clear moment at which the problem is solved, and each intervention changes the problem itself. Many urban questions tie together housing, incomes, land, interest rates and building costs. Rittel and Webber added a harder point: every intervention has lasting effects, so planners cannot test a solution and then return to the starting point. A plan that promises to end a housing shortage once and for all treats a wicked problem as a tame one.



## LOOK AGAIN

- How would different parties define this problem?
- What would show that an intervention is going wrong?

# Targets and counter-indicators

Charles Goodhart observed that a statistical relationship can break down once people use it to steer outcomes, a pattern now known as Goodhart's law. Marilyn Strathern later put the point more generally: 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.' A housing target may reward the number of finished homes while saying little about affordability, fit or location. Counter-indicators measure those things alongside the target. They do not replace the target; they show what is going wrong while the headline number still looks good.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Which number steers this project?
- What could go wrong while that number looks good?

# Frontline decisions

Michael Lipsky studied public-facing workers such as teachers, police officers, social workers and housing officers, whom he called street-level bureaucrats. They seldom have the time or means to apply every rule to the letter, so they ration their attention, decide which cases come first and fall back on routines. Through these choices they help make policy in practice. Discretion lets them fit help to a person's situation, but it can also reproduce bias, for example when people who know the rules are helped first. To understand a policy, look at the service counter as well as the policy paper.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who decides here in practice, and with how much time per case?
- Who is helped first?

# Tacit knowledge

Michael Polanyi wrote that 'we can know more than we can tell'. Some knowledge comes from doing a task and is hard to put into words: a cyclist keeps balance without working out each movement, and an experienced nurse may sense that a patient is getting worse before the measurements show it. In cities, caretakers, bus drivers, cleaners and long-time residents often know how places work from day to day. What they notice can point to problems that reports miss. Planners should take this knowledge seriously, then test it against data and research.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who knows this place through daily work?
- How does their knowledge reach the people who decide?

# Chesterton's fence

G. K. Chesterton imagined a reformer who finds a fence across a path and wants to pull it down because nobody knows what it is for. The wiser step is to find out why someone put it there before changing it. In urban development, the 'fence' might be a scruffy market, cheap workspace, a shortcut through a courtyard or an unwritten agreement between neighbours. Such arrangements may serve purposes that no plan records, such as a safe route to school or a cheap first workshop. Find out what they do first; then decide what should stay, change or go.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What does this place do, and for whom, beyond its official use?
- What would be lost if it disappeared?

# Hidden compensating work

People quietly make up for what a place lacks. A neighbour carries a pushchair upstairs when the lift breaks; a teacher stays late to open a hall; a caretaker repairs a door with his own tools. This compensating work keeps places running, yet budgets and evaluations seldom record it. When a plan depends on such work without recording it, residents, staff and volunteers pay the costs that the plan's budget leaves out. Star and Strauss describe the wider category as invisible work.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What goes wrong here regularly, and who fixes it?
- What would happen if they stopped?

# Phasing decides who waits

Large developments can take ten years or more to build. The first residents may move in years before the school, bus line, shops or park shown in the final plan. Phasing therefore decides who waits, and the waiting falls on those who arrive first. Makeshift routes, distant shops and missing services are real costs for them. Annette Kroen and colleagues found that residents of new suburbs on Melbourne's urban fringe waited three to four years on average for a bus service. Planners should decide which services must come early, who answers for the years in between, and what happens if a later phase is delayed or dropped.



## LOOK AGAIN

- What is missing for the people who already live here?
- Who answers for the years in between?

# Place-keeping

Placemaking often centres on design and opening day. Nicola Dempsey and Mel Burton focus instead on place-keeping: the long-term management of public space. Besides design and maintenance, it covers partnerships, governance, funding, policy and evaluation. Behind this lies a question of authority: who has the money and the power to fix problems as they arise? Users and managers learn what works, but that knowledge helps only if someone can turn it into a decision, a budget or a repair.



## LOOK AGAIN

- Who looks after this place in ten years, and with what budget?
- How does what users notice lead to a repair?

# Afterword

The lenses in this book rest on the work of many people. Some wrote more than a century ago, such as Alfred Marshall and Henry George. Others are still researching and writing today, such as Talja Blokland, Carlos Moreno and Fransje Hooimeijer. Their work, and the work of many others not named here, helps us see how cities function, and why they often function differently from what plans intend.

The selection leans heavily on Western Europe, North America and Australia. That reflects what I know best, not where good thinking about cities comes from. Cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America have produced their own ideas and practices, and many of them deserve a place in a book like this. The two lenses on Japan and the one on China's sponge cities are a small start. The book also draws mainly on published theory. Informal building and work, migration, digital platforms and data, and children's experience of cities receive little attention. The licence of this book allows readers to add lenses from the places and traditions they know, and I hope they will.

Remco Deelstra

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# Colophon

The Same Bench: 50 Lenses for Understanding the City

Remco Deelstra

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