

What Makes A Good City?

Workshop Reflections



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What Makes a Good City? This age-old question has been explored by many, with Plato's ideal city-state as one of the oldest examples. Numerous criteria and indicators exist to define and measure the 'good' city. The disciplinary reflections in this publication are the results of an interdisciplinary workshop organised at Newcastle University on 24 May 2022 and explore 'what makes a good city' from multiple angles.

The Good City project

The project as a whole and this workshop specifically revisited the question not to find a definitive answer but to provoke a dialogue among those interested in and concerned about urban conditions. So why ask the question?

- To develop a research-informed, community-led narrative on components of a good city';
- To facilitate networking across disciplines and perspectives around a provocation;
- To forge new connections with stakeholders and partners;
- To contribute to Newcastle University's civic engagement locally and internationally.



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What makes a good city? Exploring this question today with colleagues from across [@UniofNewcastle](#) - we might not be able to give one answer, but the question is worth exploring!



Workshop format

The workshop consisted of four groups of 5-6 colleagues from across Newcastle University. Each group discussed three questions in three rounds of discussion, of thirty minutes each. After each round, the groups reported the main points in a wider group discussion.

The workshop questions:

- What are the key components of a good city?
- Who are the winners and losers in this good city?
- What is your favourite city?

What are the key components?

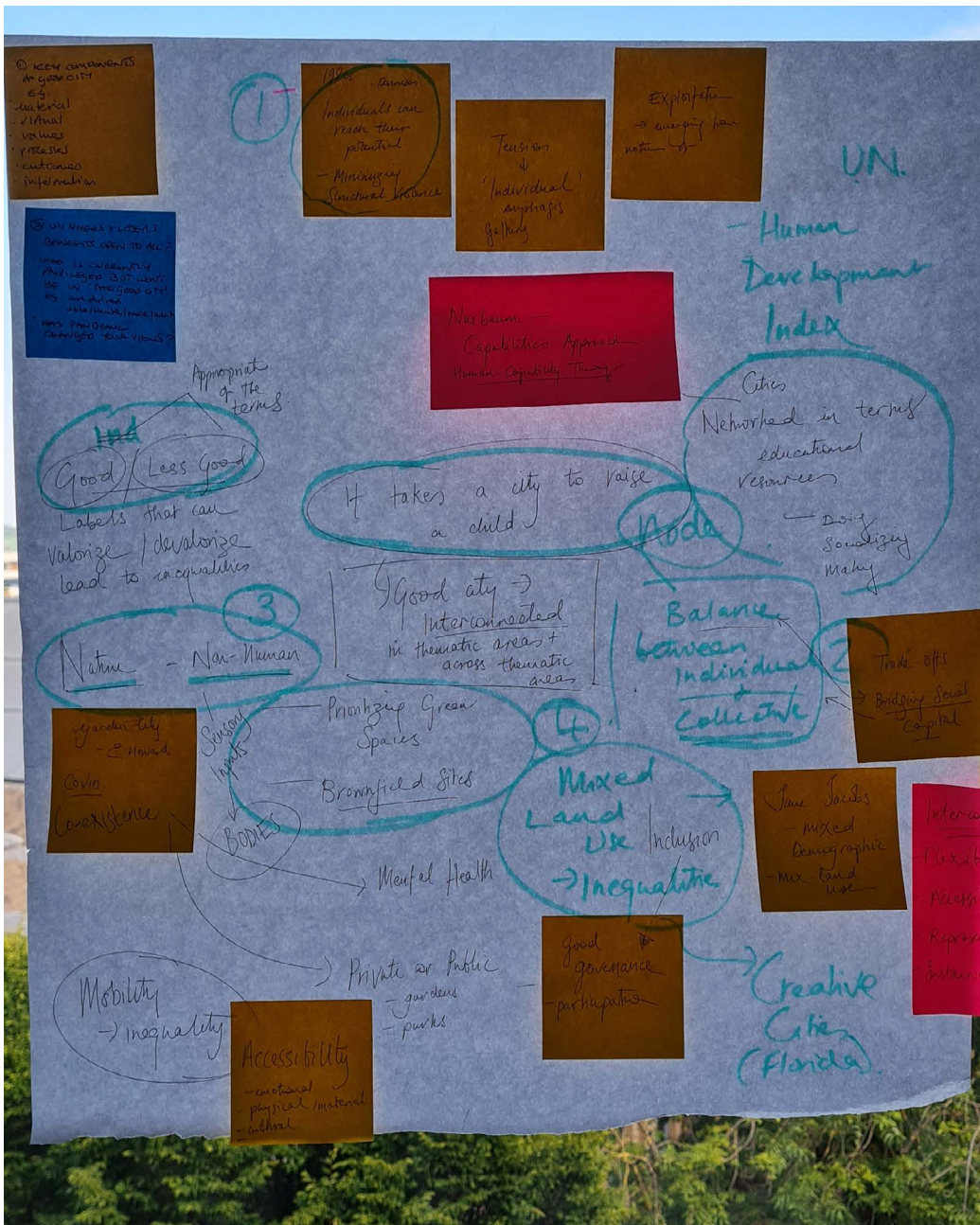
From the perspective of your research, discipline, expertise, what do you think are the key components of a good city? Key components of a good city can be expressed through different perspectives and lenses. Think of, for example, materialisation, the virtual/intangible, values, processes, outcomes, and available information.

From the many perspectives of the diverse audience, many different components are mentioned. Every table mentioned:

- **Inclusion and a sense of belonging**
- **Social and cultural integration**
- **Safety and security**
- **Practicality:** accessible and walkable
- **Health and wellbeing**
- **Prosperity:** affordable, with investments in place
- **Good governance:** participative decision making, power to change things
- **Sustainable and green**
- **Space for the non-human**

“Freedom and ownership, when do these start to infringe on one another? E.g., being free to do everything does not equal the same freedom for others. There are trade-offs, a balance between the individual and the collective, bridging social capital. The good city is interconnected in thematic areas and across thematic areas.”

“Good cities have a level of interconnectedness between the key components! It's not just about the individual components, but about the way they are dependent on each other within systems.



QUESTION 1

- 1. Right of Belonging / Living - Ownership -> Connected.
- 2. Safety & Security.
- 3. Accessibility + walkability.
- 4. Garden + green -> Parks.
- 5. Pubs + cultural/social space -> keep people connected.
- 6. Affordability.
- 7. Wellbeing + Neighbourhood Proj.

① -> Sense of Belonging / Ownership
 ② -> Social / cultural integration.

Enough Prosperity

Everyone (inclusivity)

or Ever green space

power to change things

sustainability

Sense of belonging

Good governance - participative decision making

city as garbage machine

- ①
- CO-EXISTENCE: HUMAN / ENVIRONMENT
 - INCLUSION: GENDER / RACIAL / POWER RELATION
 - ADAPTABILITY / RESPONSE: THE CHANCE TO LIVE
 - PRACTICITY: SERVICES / AMENITY / BUSINESS / INFRASTRUCTURE / ACCESSIBILITY / TRANSPORT
 - FINANCE: FROM CITY CENTRE INVESTMENT / DEVELOPMENT
 - GOVERNANCE: POLICIES / STRATEGIC WEALTH + STRUCTURE

In the good city, those are adaptable and have the flexibility to change and develop in response to lived experiences."

"There are multiple theories on good cities. Davison (1980s) talked about the good city as a place where individuals can reach their potential. For this to happen, structural violence needs to be minimised. Tension emphasises 'the individual'. Nusbaum talks about the Human Capability Theory and takes a capabilities approach. Simultaneously, the UN Human Development Index regards cities as networks in terms of educational resources and for doing, socialising and making: 'It takes a city to raise child!'"

"It's about accessibility in all ways: physical, emotional, financial, cultural. Good city components are about multi-sensory experiences, with urban spaces for (self) regulation. The trade-offs between components are important."

QUESTION 1

- Right of Belonging
- Ownership → Connect
- Safety & Security.

/ Living ⇒ Without
ted. limits.
But regul

Who are the winners and losers?

From your perspective, who are the winners and losers in this good city? On winners and losers, are the benefits of good cities open to all? Who is currently privileged, e.g. car drivers, city residents, or white/male/able bodied adults? How has the pandemic changed your views?

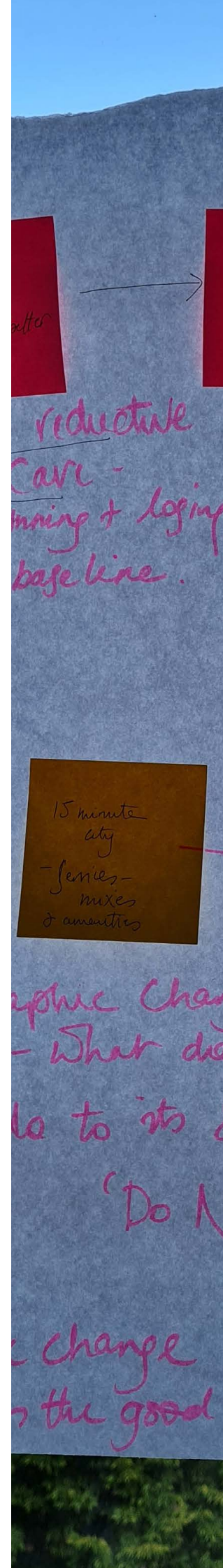
The ensuing discussion concludes that these questions are difficult and provocative. Who is winning and who is losing depends on your perspective!

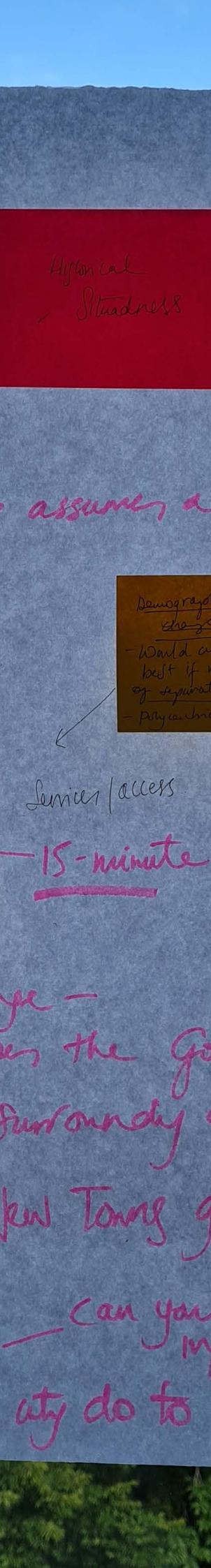
"Most importantly, the good city depends on where you start. Winning and losing assumes a baseline."

In a good city, the residents are the winners. The wealthy are the losers: they have more to lose in striving for equity. Ultimately, winners and losers are balanced in a good city. There is no competition. A good city is without the concept of winning and losing. A good city is about sharing and exchanging. In a good city, winners and losers are therefore not 'fixed'. A good city would have a blending of interests and a blending of the bottom-up/top-down power balance. Individual and collective interests, and the balance between the centre and the periphery are matters of scale, too.

"A good city is not a utopian city... it's real!"

The good city has a good density, with a balance of self-contained neighbourhoods within the city. Insecurity and precarity undermine rootedness in this good city. Think of being dependent on renting a home: in the good city, everyone can develop a sense of belonging.





A good city accounts for demographic change. Adaptable infrastructure and a good relation between the city and its surrounding area are vital.

On winners

A good city has a level of distinctiveness. It reflects the past but is fit for the now and the future. There are no losers in the good city. Both insiders and outsiders have a place in the good city: indigenous and original populations on the one hand, and tourists and people who work in the city but live elsewhere on the other.

"In a good city, the benefactor is the winner. Those who can flourish and progress, those who are adaptable, and included in society."

"Historical situatedness is a winner in the good city. The young should inherit something better than the old."

On losers

All too often, the environment, and non-human aspects and attributes are the losers of the good city. It's important to recognise and acknowledge such direct and indirect impacts and complications.

Losers in the good city lose because on themes like belonging, identity and dispossession. Think of local communities being displaced to build sports infrastructure.

The good city is not purely pragmatic. A collection of separate settlements for the ageing, migrants, and working people would not contribute to a good city. Instead, services and amenities should be mixed, with access to those qualities within 15 minutes.

Enough Prosperity

{ everyone
| inclusivity
age - kids - older people
arts, culture, amenities

for Ever
green space
power to change things?
Sustainability

Sensory Experience

Sense of Belonging

Good governance

= participative decision making

mobility

Health

city as
e.g. sewerage machine

accessibility



Distinctiveness
↳ reflecting the past but not for now future

Temporal Dimension

There are no losers in the good city

o Tourists
o People who work in the city but live somewhere else

Reality

Insecurity
Precarity } Undermines rootedness

What happens to the indigenous/original population

insider vs outsider?

Size?

density → self contained neighborhoods vs cities

What are examples of 'good' cities?

Talk about somewhere you consider to be a 'good' city. What makes it a good city? Is there a city that is 'good' on paper, and you don't agree? Or a city that is 'bad' that you enjoy?

There is common ground to be found in deciding which cities are good: it depends on your perspective. Is it a good city for you, or for a certain group of people, from a certain perspective? This is important, because there is a vantage, a privilege of position in answering the 'what makes a good city' question. Consider therefore: who is asking the question? In what capacity are they answering? Situated knowledges impact the outcomes. Concepts like storytelling, narrative, liveable cities, and affective and emotional states all drive potential answers to the question. Even the terms 'good' and 'less good' can impact the answers, as valorising labels can lead to inequalities.

Another conclusion is that some cities may be bad, but are still lovely to live in. *"Some cities are **bad**, but I still love them!"* Other cities may look good, but make us question if they work. Good cities centre the quality of life. A good city 'has everything it needs'.

Finally, there are many place specific conclusions to be drawn. The northernmost cities of Scandinavia are mentioned as showing incredible adaptability. Not just the people, also the animal inhabitants of those cities. The concept of 'living in' is deemed an English rural idyll. These thoughts are further reflected in the good cities and good city qualities mentioned during conversation.

Good cities and good city qualities mentioned...

...in the United Kingdom:

- Brighton: *"Diversity, the environment, the size, its accessibility"*
- Dundee: *"The urban regeneration especially"*
- Edinburgh
- Glasgow
- Milton-Keynes
- Newcastle upon Tyne: *"It has everything it needs. We like it for its cultural amenities, the surrounding country side and hinterland, its hub function and sense of centrality, and the boundaries that determine affective response."*
- Plymouth: *"The cities diversity, size, the environment, its perseverance and inclusivity, its climate"*
- Sheffield: *"The urban to rural proximity!"*

...abroad:

- Amsterdam, The Netherlands: *"Especially the Bijlmer district"*
- Auckland, New Zealand: *"Appreciated for its accessibility and connectedness, the aesthetics, options for leisure and food, the atmosphere and its multi-cultural character"*
- Berlin, Germany
- Chicago, Illinois, USA: *Chicago has a 'city-ness', atmosphere and drama"*
- Dakar, Senegal
- Göthenburg, Sweden
- Helsinki, Finland: *"The cultural affects, walkability (access), access to water and the green and blue spaces, public spaces used by the public, the education system, the space for personal choice, its scale."*
- Montreal, Canada
- Portland, Oregon, USA
- Reims, France: *"It's green and human-focused"*
- Tromsø, Norway: *"A good city on an island, it is inspiring, with great adaptability of the people and local bird life, the woods and the sea close by, and built with natural materials. It is an amazing city."*
- Valencia, Spain

As there are good cities, so too are there examples of 'bad' city qualities:

- Charming cities that don't work for the inhabitants
- Cities designed for cars
- Cities designed for tourism, without space for locals
- Cities sparking questions on democracy and equality
- Cities that are too big
- Cities without green spaces or green space qualities
- Cities without local character: *"Americanised cities outside of the United States"*
- Polluted cities, which still might be lovely

Acknowledgement

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The disciplinary reflections are the results of an interdisciplinary workshop organised at Newcastle University on 24 May 2022, between 12:00-14:00. Around twenty participants from across the university attended the workshop and shared their professional experiences and personal views.

Participants

Liz Brooks	Helen Jarvis
Lorna Burn	Gillian Jein
Tony Champion	David Leat
Anna Christy	Danny MacKinnon
Alison Clarke	Guldem Ozatagan
Mike Coombes	Alex Robson
Simin Davoudi	Ted Schrecker
Lotte Dijkstra	Ceren Senturk
Adam Dixon	Robert Shaw
Tom Draper	Isabel Williams
Luke Green	

Images

All images in this publication were taken by Lotte Dijkstra (2022) during the workshop. The words depicted were produced by the participants.

Cover image: 'A city' by Elizabeth Brooks on yellow post-it, against an urban background.