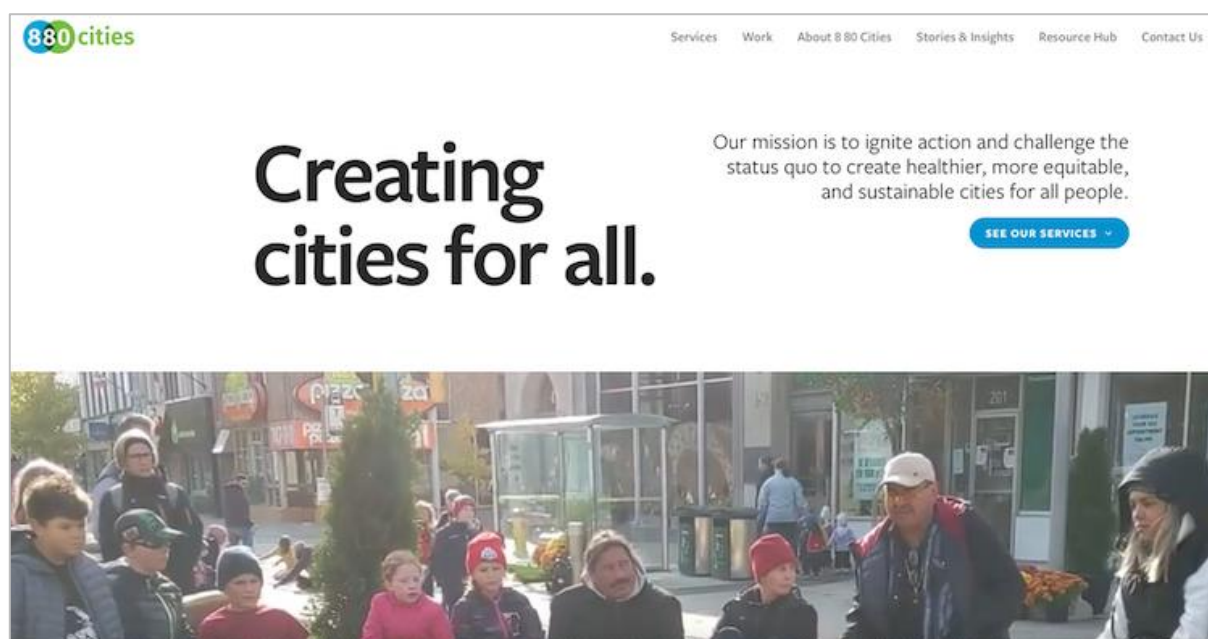


The expert view: designing urban places for everyone

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)
 Interviewee: [Gil Peñalosa](#) – Founder, [8 80 Cities](#) & [Cities4Everyone](#);
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April 2025



[8 80 Cities website](#) (image reproduced with permission by Gil Peñalosa)

Gil,

Thank you for making the time to discuss your inspiring work to make cities and towns good places for everyone. I know you get to talk and work with many people around the world on practical action to make cities and towns thrive, and to generate positive change.

Could we start this interview with a brief outline of the path you have taken to where you are today, and where you see yourself heading in the coming years?

***Gil:** It's a pleasure to be here. I am originally from Bogotá, Colombia, where I led the construction of over 200 parks as the city's commissioner of parks and recreation.*

While I was based in Bogotá I also took on a small streets cycling, walking, running, etc. programme called Ciclovía, which in North America is called Open Streets. At its origins in 1974, Ciclovía covered just a few kilometres. I expanded its spread to stretch across over 120km of roadways, becoming the largest programme of its type in the world.

You can read a summary review of “50 years of Ciclovía” in [a November 2024 article on the World Economic Forum website](#). Nowadays, every Sunday over one and a half million people in Bogotá on Sundays go for a walk, a bike ride, road skating, or a run. People chat and socialise with each other – you can read more about it, including with a browser translation option into English, [on the Bogotá city website](#). I mention this initiative from a few decades ago because it links to the ethos of what I do today.

I moved to Toronto, Canada in 1999, and in 2005 I created [8 80 Cities](#) as a nonprofit organisation. The driver to me deciding to set up 8 80 Cities was that I felt that too many cities were developing as if everybody who lived in them was an athletic 30-year-old – they were not well designed or structured for children, aged people, or those with disabilities.

*I created [8 80 Cities](#) to ask “**What if?**” – which means “what if” everything we did in a city (or a town) – the pavements, the crossroads, the parks, the libraries, the community centres, the restaurants and everything else – was designed to be great for an 8-year-old and for an 80-year-old. By this, I mean the 8-year-old and the 80-year-old giving us two separate indicators to focus on – not the whole age range of “8 to 80”. If a city or town is set up well for people who are 8 years old and people who are 80 years old, it should be good for everybody, from a one-year-old to a 100-year-old. The principle is to stop building cities as if everybody was 30 years old and athletic and instead build them for everyone.*

My work has taken me to over 350 cities around the world on all inhabited continents, in developed and developing economies, and this has allowed me to see a lot and learn from talking with many people about how we can all improve our urban places.

*What I keep finding is that it's not about walking or cycling, or parks or streets. Those are the means. The key question I find that we need to ask, and to solve, is: **How can we live healthier and happier?***

The way to address this question is not to focus on technical solutions, and (whilst each city has a different context), I don't think it is purely a money issue either. The key is to address policy, but unfortunately, most of the cities are not using good policies to ensure they are designed and built to work for everyone. This is what I continue to focus on.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Gil. The [Ciclovía Bogotana initiative](#) to create over 120km of open streets for cycling on Sundays has been a leading light in showing how to create a “happy city”. I enjoyed reading about Bogotá in the book, [Happy City](#) by Charles Montgomery. The author describes the focus on happiness in this city by a former mayor, your brother Enrique Peñalosa (mayor between 1998 and 2001, and re-elected as mayor again between 2015 and 2018).

Whilst we are talking about South American cities, I remember seeing something similar in Santiago, [CicloRecreoVía](#), when I visited in 2022 – perhaps the city's team took inspiration from Bogotá.

The 8 80 Cities Newsletter and the [Stories & Insights section](#) of the 8 80 Cities website, provide many examples of cities pursuing positive action. For a city or a locality that isn't currently in this space, what is your advice for how they can get started, and how they can use an 8 80 mindset in their urban planning and placemaking?

Gil: I think it's important to say that a lot of cities and towns are at least talking about this type of thinking now, which is good. 20 years ago or more it was not part of the debate on how to improve urban places, but the overwhelming majority are not yet acting to do anything about it. They have to move from talking to doing.

We don't need more research to understand technical blockers to moving forwards, and whilst of course good research and good data on specific areas of focus is always welcome, we have enough knowledge of the core essentials today to get on with action to create cities and towns for everybody – what we need is the will to make it happen (which includes policy).

As I mentioned just now, it's not about money because it's inexpensive to do much of what I think we should be doing. With a fraction of the finances required to build or widen highways and build flyovers, we could implement a lot of effective change in urban areas. We need fresh thinking and approaches that are genuinely more local and sustainable, more equitable and more focused on good placemaking.

There are some things that a citizen needs to take responsibility for, and other things where their city or town authorities have to actively help them. Let's talk about five important areas of focus (in no particular order of priority).

1. We need to eat healthily.

- a. *Of course, each person plays their own part in achieving this, but the city / town plays its part too.*
- b. *If authorities provide gardens and allotments in schools and other public facilities such as libraries and parks where children and parents can share their growing activities, surely this would be good for everyone.*
- c. *Authorities can support school canteens to provide healthy food, not sugary drinks and fried foods.*
- d. *Focus on setting up food stalls in public parks that are healthy, not junk food.*

2. Second, we need to sleep.

- a. *Whilst this links to how we house people, I'm not talking here about a human rights issue (that's a specific matter to be addressed in our urban places).*
- b. *Everybody should be able to sleep seven, eight or nine hours a night. The city can help, for example, to promote flexible hours so that people can work to a rhythm that suits them, whether they are early birds or late-night owls.*

3. Third, we need to socialise.

- a. *We are social animals. We need to talk with each other regularly. I believe many national health experts say that loneliness is a major issue in their country. How we design our cities and towns plays a major role in how well we socialise.*
- b. *It is not just about implementing infrastructure such as paths and parks. We need to help people with walking groups, dance groups, exercise groups and*

others, which means we need programmes to support them (linked also to providing healthy food). It's infrastructure and it's just as much the facilitation of programmes. We need the hardware, and we need the software, which we don't have enough of today. So, I think that city and town teams need to focus on this and work out good solutions with their citizens.

- c. Some of the people with the biggest problems are the older generation, and they need support. They have arguably the most leisure time, but often the least amount of programmes available to them.
- d. City and town teams can carry out lots of low-cost actions to help people to socialise. We need benches on sidewalks to let people sit down and chat. And benches are for everyone – the young, the old, the homeless and the wealthy. We need benches in playgrounds so that parents and grandparents can sit down and have a chat while their children play. Children play and adults socialise.

4. Fourth, we need enough regular contact with greenery.

- a. Everyone should have a park within walking distance. We should have pockets of nature everywhere – in parks of course, but also at home, in our schools, on our sidewalks / pavements, in our places of work.
- b. This is not just a nice to have. It is very much related to equity and equality. When I visit cities, flying over them provides a pretty accurate view of where the wealthy live and where poor people reside, because there are lots of trees where wealthy people live and far fewer in poorer areas.
- c. As an example, I live in Toronto, a city with about a 28% overall green canopy. In its wealthy neighbourhoods, it's over 50% and in low-income neighbourhoods it is about 5%.
- d. We need equity with nature, and we need regular contact with nature.

5. Fifth, we need to be physically active.

- a. We should be physically active regardless of our age, and much of this is linked to the points above.
- b. When people are physically active, it helps to prevent depression, anxiety, it is good for our bones, to prevent all sorts of physical and mental problems, and we feel better about ourselves.
- c. Cities and towns can do a lot to encourage physical activity, because they can set things up for people to enjoy regular walking, cycling or some other physical activity as part of normal life.
- d. Regularity is key. People might play a sport once or twice a week, but we need to be active five or more days a week. We don't need to run marathons – if we can all be active for 30 minutes a day it makes a huge difference. It's very simple: 30 minutes a day, five or more days a week.
- e. The only way that large groups of population are physically active, five or more days per week, is walking or cycling. Cities should make sure that walking and cycling are enjoyable and also safe, for all ages and abilities.

Gareth: Thanks for these points, Gil. They spur me to think about how city and municipal authorities should support local businesses to help drive action on aspects such as healthy eating, and how to support citizens with access to greenery and good places for physical activities (which needn't cost much).

I know that alongside 8 80 cities, you run the [Cities4Everyone](#) campaign as well. It strikes me that the examples you have outlined just now should not cost a lot of money, that they need someone in city or town hall with the political will and the drive to incorporate them into a good vision of how things can move forward that is created by everyone, for everyone.

I'd like to drill into some details about urban [placemaking](#), and [the principles for creating great community places](#) put forward by [the Project for Public Spaces team](#).

Some poignant examples of turning words into action were provided in the 8 80 Cities webinar, *The Heart of Place: Active Participation & Sense of Belonging*, held on 15 April 2025 (I know [you make recordings available](#) after live webinar sessions). For example, we saw examples of low-cost action taken in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that are community-driven initiatives.

It's vital to get local communities involved, and they need to be actively supported by the city / town authorities to make things happen and to ensure the right type of rules and regulations and governance are in place (not too much, the right amount). Where should we start?

Gil: Placemaking starts with a blank page, literally and metaphorically. The problem with placemaking in many cities and towns is that they are not set up or structured to truly listen to their citizens and local community. Most planning departments find it a headache to ask people for their views, to be honest. It's as if, the less people that turn up to evening planning communications sessions, the better, because there are less questions to respond to! We have to want to listen, and this has to be a mindset that is infused into good policy. It is not a procedural or a technical matter to solve.

If authorities do not really want to listen, they don't listen. This happens when city, municipal and town hall meetings are organised in a place and at a time of day that doesn't work for most citizens, like venues far from where people live, with the timing scheduled as in the evening (just when many people have finished work, and they want to go home).

Let's take an example, of getting citizen and business feedback for an idea of a skateboard park. Consider a few points about this example:

1. *How far has the city / municipal team progressed with the idea?*
 - *Is it a blank page, or have you already designed it?*
 - *You should be starting from scratch...with the blank sheet of paper...*
2. *Who is invited AND who turns up?*
 - *You should involve everyone, including youngsters who the skateboard park is, mostly, intended to be for.*
 - *How can you get people of all ages and different social backgrounds to come along?*
 - *For example, how can youngsters find out about it? Do 14-year-olds read newspapers, let alone adverts for such meetings that are placed in them? Most do not – so you need to engage with them differently.*
 - *If the only people who turn up are those that don't want the park to be built, what kind of meeting is that?*

3. *What kind of meetings should be held?*
 - *If the meeting is purely pitched about being a skateboard park, is that too narrow?*
 - *Should you welcome linked points and thoughts, whilst not anticipating what they may be?*
4. *Where are community meetings being held?*
 - *Is it being held in the area where the park will be created, in “town hall” or elsewhere? The former is surely better. If you hold it in a central city hall or at a plush hotel, that doesn’t reflect what it is about and who it is for.*
 - *If you honestly want to listen to youngsters, maybe you need to arrange to go to schools during school time (coordinating it with schools of course) – and bring some good (healthy) food and juice.*

The most important thing in placemaking is to listen to the experts who are the local community – and to start listening from scratch before you have drawn a single line.

*A simple process way to think about this is **the What, the How and the When**:*

1. *The local experts to advise you on **the What** are the community (you can first give them a bit of context about the Why, of course).*
2. ***The How** can be worked out by technical experts, perhaps to then review options in a second follow-up review with the community experts. This includes thinking about any integration with other urban system points and keeping an 8 80 mindset in mind.*
3. ***The When** can be agreed once plans have been sorted out.*

Most city / municipal teams don't focus properly on the What – they decide “We need this change or new thing to be built, so we will hire some planners and builders to slot it into a masterplan and then hold a “consultation session.”

This is the wrong approach. Before you put a line on paper, go to the community, truly listen to them and see what is it that they want.

Consider another example. Discussions with your local community might show that they would appreciate more walking options (good physical activity, of course). The community probably doesn't know in their local context how many new walking paths could be created, or how wide they should be. Professionals can work on masterplan ideas, look at technical aspects, integration with other parts of the city, any changes required to transport infrastructure, what the funding options can be. All of this can be put into different options for further community involvement in the way forward – the key is to engage the community from the start, with a wide range of people from the community involved.

Similarly, if there are ideas for a new park or some small green areas, it's crucial to involve everyone in the community to hear what they think. Perhaps a “Friends of the Park” group can be formed, which includes everyone from people who like to exercise to dog walkers and elderly people who may need mobility support.

My main point is that the mechanics of these things can become simple if the authorities honestly want to meaningfully involve their local community. They need the right mindset to want to do this.

Yes, there is more effort and work required at the beginning, but there is a lot less afterwards – and people get the outcomes that are best for them.

Gareth: Thanks for this explanation and for emphasising the importance of having the right mindset to achieve good community-driven placemaking, Gil.

When you mentioned the example of cities and towns having enough benches earlier, it reminded me of cases I've seen where local authorities have installed benches on streets (a good idea in principle), only to receive community feedback *afterwards* that they were in the wrong places – so they took them out and relocated them based on community advice. Why did it happen that back-to-front way, which costs needless rework time and money? Why not get it right first time by speaking with people by asking them in a way that works for them, not holding town hall meetings at 7 or 8pm at night when only a small number of people who happen to find out about them might turn up.

A key part, as you say, is about making it easy for everyone to get involved in placemaking discussions, which comes from *wanting* to involve them – not in a classic type of “consultation process” (the very name of which I am not a fan of) but proper, meaningful involvement – of schoolchildren in schools helping to design spaces, and groups of older people helping design spaces as well. Of course, part of involving everyone includes listening to naysayers too.

We need to work out cost feasibility and engineering of all ideas and initiatives and to back up our ideas with good data and analysis and plans – costings and the like can be done after we involve everyone in the first discussion, not before.

Gil: *We need to listen to everybody. We need to listen to children, adults including older adults, the rich and the poor. Some needs are hyper local. When that's the case, you listen to that particular neighbourhood, whilst thinking about whether there are any linked impacts or opportunities elsewhere. Some needs and ideas have a broader impact, and with these ones you have to listen to more people that live and work across a broader area. It's more work but it's important to do.*

And yes, there are some people who don't want things changing in their backyard – the Nimbys (Not In My Backyard). Some oppose anything changing at all, whom I call CAVE people – the Citizens Against Virtually Everything. But perhaps they have this attitude because they haven't been involved in the right way – or they are the only ones that bother to contact city / municipal teams with their objections.

Gareth: I'll remember the acronym, CAVE. It reminds me of the Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone brigade: the Bananas. Do Cave people change their minds, sometimes?

Gil: People who object to change often have some good points for others to consider. If you have a meeting at the right time, in the right way with many people involved, hopefully they will see that as a result of listening to their objectives and also them listening to others who want something new, they can see a balanced perspective and help to contribute towards something that can work. We need to remember the range of people who we need to listen to.

Gareth: You have a very useful [Resource Hub](#) on the 8 80 Cities website, which provides free to use civic engagement tools and an open streets toolkit (I am embedding links to them into my own Urban 2.0 toolkit). I really like tools such as [the Pop-up Engagements guide](#) and [the Impatiens and Orchids](#) brainstorming technique.

Are you working on any new free to access resources for cities and towns such as short video guides or handbooks? I also find games such as the Bloomberg-created [Can you fix Smogtown?](#) quite useful to play and discuss with people.

Gil: We do have lots of tools on our 8 80 Cities website – thanks for mentioning this. We continue as a team at 8 80 Cities to think of new tools, and we hope people can make good use of them. We are a not-for-profit organisation, we don't put a commercial lens on these tools and methods.

The example you mention of the impatiens and orchids tool is simple and powerful. Let's unpack it as an example.

The essence of this exercise is: Impatiens are simple to grow flowers. Orchids take more work. I often start it by showing community groups lots of images and examples to stimulate their minds.

They then get to work in small groups to look at what can be done as **impatiens** – flowers that are inexpensive and easy to grow. We may ask: "What can you easily do and achieve in the next 12 months? We need low cost, low risk and high visibility outputs", and then people start thinking. I add that we shouldn't need to ask for a new budget or to spend a lot of time on design – focus on low cost, low risk, and high visibility. It's amazing the ideas that people come up with when you ask them.

For example, I remember holding this exercise in one place and people talked about when they walk home at night, the sidewalk / pedestrian pavement is too dark. My immediate thought was that putting in extra streetlights could be expensive and might therefore be hard. The people I was talking with were then more specific about the problem, saying that the sidewalks are very dark at night yet the road next to them that is used by vehicles is very well lit – perhaps the roads don't need so much lighting on them because vehicles are equipped with headlights. They just wanted to see if the city can organise for someone to use the right equipment to turn the streetlights 90° so that they shine half on the street, half on the sidewalk. It's the same street post and the same light at the top of it, the same cabling that powers it – it's just redirecting the light to share it in a more equitable way.

I try to keep these kinds of direct local suggestions in my mind when I talk with people in cities. When I visit places, I look up at the streetlights at night and in too many of them, the light they give is for vehicles on the road and not for the sidewalks / pedestrian pavements. These kinds of things, locals know about because they live there. There are hundreds of things that people can and will point out when you give them the chance to do so, and when sensible ideas come from the community, it is usually very powerful.

*Low cost, low risk and high visibility “impatiens” lead towards credibility to look at the **orchids**. Orchids are more challenging; they take more effort to grow – and they are worth it. We ask: “What can you do that will take between two to four years?” If you don't want to do something within four years, you don't really want to do it.*

Whilst sometimes some big visions can be of use, I am not a big adherer to plans that stretch out for 30 or 40 years. Talking about achieving things by 2050 is too slow. If we know, through good collection of data and monitoring, that too many people do not have access to parks and nature for example, what can we do about it within four years, not 25, 40 or 50 years?

Gareth: I appreciate the real-world example of how to use one of your placemaking tools, Gil ([Impatiens and Orchids](#)). Bearing in mind your observation about how we need to focus on things we can do within four years (for the orchids), I wonder if this type of activity to getting things done is worth linking to relevant strategic city / municipal masterplans and long-term international goals that exist such as the 15-year-lifespan [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (the SDGs)? We have five years left for the SDGs, to 2030, to see how well they are implemented. Maybe we could we link some of the four- or five-year orchid actions to SDGs – if it adds value?

Gil: Well, there are a number of large organisations such as National Parks and Recreation (or similarly named entities around the world) and others working on urban development that have published long-term plans to 2050. Whilst I know why these plans exist, citizens need to see results today, not in 25 years' time!

I therefore challenge organisations that create such long-term plans to specifically articulate what can meaningfully be done on a rolling four or five-year basis in plain language – which in 2025, means by 2030. Let's evolve the discussion point about parks. There is no reason why children and people of all other ages cannot have a park within two or three years in the area where they live if we put our minds to it.

For sure, we may need investment and resources to be arranged for it, so you should collectively work out how to obtain the right type of funds to drive and implement change. Per my point earlier, the right type of funds does not necessarily mean a lot of money. It depends. You might need to carry out some sort of fundraising. You might need to change certain regulations in the city to spur action (whilst always having good governance). You might need to convince other levels of government about the need for fast change.

Using workshops like Impatiens and Orchids, in just three or four hours a community can have a set of clear and achievable ideas:

- 1. Your impatiens are for the next 12 months, low cost, low risk, high visibility.*
- 2. Your orchids are to be implemented between two to four years.*

Can and should city / municipality elected officials and staff be actively involved in these types of engagements on an iterative basis with communities? They need the mindset to want to go to these events and not be scared of what citizens may suggest for the places where they live and work.

We cannot do everything, of course, but we shouldn't limit our choices by a self-imposed low ceiling. There is no reason for decision-makers in a city / municipality to be scared of what citizens will ask or suggest. If you give people the right context, they won't ask for crazy things (people will understand they can't have a 100-hectare park in a small neighbourhood), or for things where it is clear there isn't the money available. It's more likely to be the opposite. If anything, we should encourage our communities to be bolder and more adventurous. Sometimes in the middle of these types of workshops I stop and remind people: "Be ambitious, be bold, dream big!" (of course, I know I am also talking about fast action).

Let's get back to our point earlier about involving everyone right from the start – the blank sheet of paper. Just to recap, one of the biggest problems with city and municipal teams is that too often they go to the community once they have worked on concept and detailed designs, so citizens turn up to a meeting and there are all these technical drawings on the walls and they may be reluctant to make any comments because they may think: "Everything's already been done. I don't even understand those designs. What can I add to this?"

*As we discussed earlier, start with **the What**. People will not know exactly whether new play facilities should have specific amenities in them, but they can explain that it's important to have places where children can play and also adults can socialise and maybe even exercise in these places too. I strongly believe in working with the community first on the What, and I have seen the benefits of taking this approach in cities and towns around the world.*

Gareth: It strikes me, Gil, that when we can hold energetic discussions with the community, and novel and practical ideas emerge as impatiens and orchids, citizens are probably helping the city / municipality to work out some thorny things at a city scale and maybe to solve broader government-level matters they are already thinking about, such as how and when to change land regulations, zoning and permits, how to create new employment opportunities, how to "go green" and other things.

Gil: *Community workshops and meetings can be held in different ways. We don't always need to be sat down to run them. To have good city we want to sleep and be safe at home, and we want to live outside. Try having a walking review with them and identify impatiens and orchids as you go (we know that walking is a good way to spur ideas from people). Or hold an open review on a sidewalk, which might get people joining as they walk past.*

We need to appreciate the value of everything that is outdoors, even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic after which, in many (not all) parts of the world, a lot of people prefer to work in a hybrid office-remote type of way. Pre-pandemic, city centres in particular were very much seen as places of work and commerce during the working week and many would be deserted on the weekends. Now, these centres are more and more being seen as places for people to live (for this, I appreciate that some changes are hard, such as changing the purpose of office blocks).

Gareth: In some respects, it's a case of Back to the Future with people returning to live in city centres, rather than the centres being zoned mostly for commercial use. For sure, it's not easy to convert existing city centre buildings to liveable or community spaces, but changes are happening in many parts of the world that, pre-pandemic, were quite segregated in their zoning and uses and people didn't think would change.

Gil: We should make cities playful. We need sidewalks / pedestrian pavements and crossings that are good quality, kept clean and safe. We need to have lots of activities in parks, and we need to enjoy activities outdoors across the year, not just in the summertime.

Indeed, we need arguably more activities in the wintertime because people are more likely to stay indoors otherwise and not exercise. We need to provide incentives for people to be outside.

We need to work on all of this because of what I call "the benefits of the actions". As I mentioned earlier, it's not just about having a good sidewalk / pedestrian pavement. It's not just about cycling and it's not just about the trees. They are the means to achieve real outcomes.

These outcomes come back to my earlier points – they are about physical and mental health, physical activities, socialising and enjoying nature and greenery.

As a result, it's important to note that we should see economic development and progress. Cities and towns need to see that one of the biggest challenges they will be facing, perhaps not right now or even in the next decade, but I would say soon afterwards – it will be how to retain and attract good people. In our world today, if you are good at anything – if you are good at making coffee or you are a good teacher or you are good doctor, an engineer or anything else – you can live anywhere, and you will be in demand.

Gareth: As I travel around, I see some good examples of urban art that help introduce a playful vibe to a city or a town. I hope this continues to occur everywhere.

Good economics is also key, isn't it. I'd like to think that economics can be tackled through practical engagement sessions in which we don't need to go into economic verbiage to find good economic solutions.

[I had a great discussion with the economist, Alain Bertaud, in April 2025](#), when we discussed this exact point. Alain provided me with some great examples of examples where cities have been innovative about tackling this, by focusing on what people want and deserve, very similar to the points you have raised. I also think this is important for town-sized smaller urban areas as well as cities with their larger scale.

Gil: Economics is very important. City and municipal teams should be asking themselves: “Why would you live in our city / town?”

Every day the decision makers of a city / municipality should be asking themselves questions like why would a good teacher or a good doctor want to live and work here? Are we losing out on the best teachers and doctors? If so, is it because they prefer to be in other cities and towns that they think are better than ours, or are we not doing enough to show them what we can offer?

If you want good teachers, good nurses, good policemen, good planners and engineers, good finance experts and good musicians, make your city or town work for them. Find out what they want – they are your citizens.

A city or town needs to be a good place to live, because otherwise your existing citizens are going to move away, and new citizens will not come. For economic development, cities and towns will be competitive if they are good – if they can retain good people, if they can attract good people – otherwise they're services won't be good enough and they will deteriorate.

It's worth thinking about how cities are structured as part of this discussion. They are made up of separate areas – and city teams should seriously question why it is that some of these areas are wealthy, with good life expectancy, and others are not? Some cities have a very wide gap in the quality of life across different areas / neighbourhoods. We have to solve this.

The core value of economic development is very powerful. Being happy is not just about fun and games. It's about all the things we have talked about. I think that that we need to switch our mindsets and evaluate everything we do in our cities and towns with an overarching focus on health – of individuals, of communities, of nature that supports us, which links in sustainability and how we tackle important aspects of climate change.

We need to be sustainable. With a good, communal approach to sustainability we can live happy and meaningful lives. I think one of the biggest problems that we've had with sustainability is that people have sometimes been provided with a narrative that it is a sacrifice of some sort. Maybe we might live better in a more reasonably sized house, and we might be better off without owning a car.

This is an opportunity for us to live better, together. It is not a sacrifice.

It's good that you mention small towns, because the exact same things can and should happen in towns as they do in cities. There are good towns and there are bad towns, just like there are good cities and bad cities, and good and bad areas within cities. For example, many people talk about the 15-minute city and proximity concepts.

These principles apply to a small town as well, where most things should be within 15 minutes of where people live. Towns should have good, vibrant centres, just like cities. We can't assume that it is easy and enjoyable for people to get around a town just because it is smaller than a city – if the town isn't planned well, it will be difficult. So, is it easy for people of all ages to walk everywhere in a town, and for children to cycle? Transport is scalable – and urban places of all sizes need good public transport. Perhaps good public transport in a small town is a decent and regular bus service, whereas a city needs more options. It may not be possible for people to walk to many places in a town if the design of transport is poor. It's the same thing with tree cover and easy access to parks and greenery.

Towns need this just as much as cities do. The principles are scalable up and down in size. And small towns need to get better and ensure they attract and retain good people, just like cities – good schools, good nature and greenery, good parks, good cafés and so on. Small is not good or bad in itself.

Politics at a town level can be easier in some respects to influence. In a city, it can be hard to talk to the mayor. In a small town, if you want to talk with the mayor but it's proving hard, you might run into her at a café! People often wear several hats in small towns, which can sometimes provide some good advantages to get things done.

Cities, and towns as well, need the right type of density. When you mention the word density to some people, they think we are talking about 50-storey buildings. This is not the case. It can mean a range of things (see our webinar recording on “the middle housing”).

Main Street needs a minimum density, whether it is in a city or a town. We know that Main Street fails if everybody starts going to the outskirts to shopping centres, but if it has the right type of density, with lots of different services and offerings that are driven by the market, then it should have vitality and thrive. Without the right density, people desert them. It comes back to synchronisation of the points we have discussed earlier – health, socialisation, greenery and the environment, economic development. We need a balance that is good for everyone and it's doable.

Gareth: A theme we have had in this interview, Gil, is that cities and towns can get things done when they involve citizens, and they see that many of the suggestions that are made are low cost and easy to implement (as impatiens). For sure, some things will cost more, and some things will be harder to implement (orchids), which will also be worth pursuing.

I am thinking that, for the people that govern our urban places, they should keep [the urban system](#) in mind at all times. They don't need to explain the system in detail to citizens in workshops – perhaps it can be put on display in City / Municipal Open Centres for people to visit and look at if they are interested (I've seen some good examples of these types of citizen engagement centres).

Given what you do, and the examples you see around the world, it sounds like, overall, you are hopeful about how we are moving forward with urban development?

Gil: *Well, I'm optimistic because all of this is doable, but I am also pessimistic when I see that many cities are not approaching things in what I believe is the right way forward.*

Too many cities and towns that we have created and developed over the last 75 years have not been built in the best way. These cities and towns are not good for people's mental or physical or social health, and are not good enough for air quality, water availability or greenery. Many are missing out on economic development opportunities.

I wonder if there will be a point soon when we realise that we can, and we should, do better. We all need to remember that, in democratic nations and states, elections matter and that we need to elect people who really care about these things and can make change happen. In autocracies, we can also drive positive change. That's why I make the time to visit different places, to find out about and share ideas to help people to plant seeds that I hope will germinate and bloom.

We can all play a part. For city and municipal authorities, I see that sometimes it takes someone from "outside their ranks" to get the senior people in these organisations to listen. When I talk to a mayor and I describe what I have done and seen in over 350 cities, I may be talking about the same things that someone in the mayor's team has been saying for some time, but having someone from the outside who has no nothing to gain from any type of political perspective can sometimes be a way to get an idea heard.

Gareth: I'd like to finish by providing some examples of low-cost, low risk placemaking from your 8 80 Cities webinars. In the webinar held on April 15, 2025, "*The Heart of Place: Active Participation and a Sense of Belonging*", there were some compelling examples of practical placemaking in [Halifax, Nova Scotia](#) – such as asking kids to design their own playgrounds, setting up simple chairs and hammocks on the marina for public use (of course considering all safety matters first), and a shopping area that was designed with active citizen participation which has proven to be a popular, happy place for people AND also be a commercial success for its owners. Good public spaces and good commercial objectives go hand in hand when we take the right approach to involve everyone, it seems fair to say.

Examples of community involvement in placemaking in Halifax, Nova Scotia – providing low-cost tables and chairs, and novel deck chairs, and a playground submarine inspired by ideas from children (images: 8 80 Cities, presented by TJ Maguire of Evergreen)





Thank you very much for your time to discuss practical placemaking, Gil.
I look forward to seeing how your work to support urban environments around the world continues to evolve. I am a subscriber to your excellent 8 80 Cities Newsletter, by the way ([here's the link to sign up to it](#) for readers).