

[The expert view: how to use urban economics in urban planning](#)

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Author of [Order without Design: How Markets Shape Cities](#)

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Alain,

Thank you for your time to discuss urban economics and urban planning with me, including your book [Order without Design: How Markets Shape Cities](#), which I regularly use as a reference in my work on urban resilience and sustainability.



I wondered if we could start this discussion with a brief overview of your career and background. If I understand correctly, in your work as an independent consultant you aim to provide a bridge between urban economics and urban planning – to show how economics theory can help and support the daily decision-making of urban planners around the world.

***Alain:** Thank you for the opportunity to hold this discussion. My work, which I carry out with my wife Marie-Agnès, and my role also as senior research scholar at the [NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management](#) focuses on how urban places, markets and regulations intersect, and how economics can inform good decision-making to make urban environments better. I like to write about urban economics and urban environments. As one example of this, my book, *Order Without Design: How Markets Shape Cities*, is an attempt to distil my thoughts about how markets can help to improve cities (and towns), and how urban planners can make the most of the tools and responsibilities that they have. I look forward to us discussing it.*

In terms of my background, I became an independent consultant in 1999. For many years up to that point I worked at the World Bank as a principal urban planner. Prior to joining the World Bank, I worked as a resident urban planner in various cities around the world, including with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The cities I have worked directly in include Bangkok, San Salvador (El Salvador), Port Au Prince (Haiti), Sana'a (Yemen), New York, Paris, Tlemcen (Algeria), and Chandigarh (India). Each assignment taught me a lot. In my former roles working for the World Bank, UNDP and other organisations I learnt a great deal about the practicalities, challenges and trade-offs to managing urban places. It's hard!

Gareth: Thanks for this context, Alain. I know that, as well as your book, you publish papers about aspects of urban environments [on your website](#). I'm also aware of some interesting interviews you have held, such as one with Econtalk "[on Cities, Planning, and Order Without Design](#)".

By way of some overall context for this interview, it is an important time for urban environments around the world. With some exceptions, urban growth continues to take place, and urban development continues to be a mix of regulated and unregulated, good and not so good, well planned and governed and poorly planned and governed. The world's cities and towns are grappling with how to balance competing needs and limited resources with an aspiration to create and maintain vibrant, greener and more resilient places, including how to help humanity to tackle climate change and minimise vulnerabilities against potential dangers (storms, geological, microbial pathogens et al). On a global scale, this was seen most recently with the way cities and towns had to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let's start with a review of how urban planners articulate objectives. In your book's introduction you say that urban planners tend to describe their objectives in a qualitative way – they describe a desire to make urban places sustainable, liveable, resilient. Great words, but there is often no link from lofty aspirations to measurable outcomes. If urban planners make greater use of urban economics, which is based on quantitative science with theories, models, and empirical evidence, can they get more targeted with their objectives? Urban planners devise and publish master plans for urban areas, and aspirational words of improvement often appear. I'm wondering if a key element to underpin master plans should be the embedment of economic and measurable outcomes to support socio-economic, and ecological improvement?

Alain: *It's an interesting point, and it is worth taking a step back for a moment to consider where we have come from in terms of our ability to collect data about urban areas in order to use it for tracking against targets. What we can do to collect data to act upon today is very different to what it used to be like.*

I think urban planning objectives and goals tend to be qualitative partly because until recently it was difficult to obtain accurate, comprehensive and time-relevant data on what was happening in our cities and towns.

Planners have had above ground and subterranean maps of their cities and towns for some time, but this information was often incorrect, and it would out of date soon after it was published because it could not keep up with the pace of urban change (much of it coming from the private sector). So, there was little to be gained from trying to measure what was happening in urban areas in the absence of good, up to date data.

Consider a couple of examples.

First, seeking to understand the density of people in a city or town and its sub-areas (districts, boroughs, arrondissements, local government areas). Each time it was measured you would see different data and if the task was delegated / assigned to a group outside of the planning office, the data might be collected in a way that makes analysis harder still. National censuses (in countries where they were and are held, which was not, and still is not everywhere) are typically conducted every 10 years. A lot changes in 10 years, results were published in hard copy, and it was laborious and time-consuming to try to use them for urban planning at a city or town level.

Second, seeking to understand people's movements in a city / town, to identify ways to help them with improvements to transport infrastructure. In the past you had to record traffic movements data manually in a traffic and original destination survey, and it would inevitably be piecemeal and subject to error. It too was static (at a point in time) as well. Now it can be done dynamically and continuously through global positioning systems (GPS) and linked technologies. Data that was before so difficult to obtain is now, more or less, at our fingertips.

Move forward to where we are today and the situation with the availability of data is very different, but I'm not sure the urban planning community has fully caught up with this change and how to use the fantastic range and breadth of data, much of it real or near-time, that is at our disposal. This is where urban economics can help.

Unfortunately, many urban planning teams are not set up to see the activity of data analysis for decision-making as a high priority.

Gareth: I wonder if behavioural and skills change is required in urban planning teams in order for them to change their approach to using data. Is there a minimum level of training that urban planners should have in urban economics so that they can make use of it in their regular work? Is, or could there be established, a global body that could provide such training? I'm wondering also if your book could be a standard reference text for all urban planning teams. Would urban planning teams benefit from a more diverse skillset which includes economics and data architects / analysts?

Alain: Yes, urban managers would certainly benefit from having professionals with an economic background working in their team. Many universities are now running degrees in data management, such as the [Center for Urban Science + Progress \(CUSP\)](#) at [New York University \(NYU\)](#). I have always thought, also, that ensuring there are people in the urban planning team who are responsible for calculating property taxes for the city would be extremely useful.

People in these roles would quickly calculate the cost to the city budget of, and bring to the attention of decision-makers, restrictive zoning regulations that are underutilizing land. This role exists in Hong Kong, for example.

Gareth: I'd like to pick up on the example you gave just now about the availability of data to understand urban transport and mobility flows in cities and towns. Some municipal teams use [Real Time Traffic Management systems](#) (which use a network of technologies) for this. I can think of a "citizen connection" too. In some cities that I have visited I have seen traffic counters in the streets for the public to see what is going on in a street (for example, the number of bicycle users vs cars against targets in place – see the example below of Perth in Australia). I wonder if urban planners integrate data collation and management into what they do across all aspects of the urban environment – transport, the built environment, energy use, safety and many other things.



Photo of City of Perth cycling dashboard in a street (by author)

Alain: *This is an important point because it links to the training, skills, behaviours and habits of urban planners, and what they see as their priorities. Traditionally, people in these roles tend to be architects or engineers by background. They are not often economists. People from a technical built environment background are typically interested in “what should be”, more than “what currently is”. An architect or an engineer involved in a new building or a new mixed-use development works with a client to define and design specific needs through project management.*

At a city (or town) scale we cannot think in new project terms. Instead, we need to manage what exists, modify it through regulations or infrastructure when there is a case for doing so and work out how to provide options to people with what will be in place for a long time. Of course, we incorporate new projects that should improve the urban fabric, but the vast majority of what urban planners have to work with will take a long time to change. For a city of one million people, there are one million different requirements, most of which will change on a regular basis. From a small business owner to a large multinational, from inner city dwellers to those who prefer to live in a suburb, an urban planner cannot possibly know what everyone wants, and they cannot survey them all continuously to anticipate what they will want in future. But they can monitor data and look at patterns.

Gareth: I'd like to continue with your point about what currently exists in a city or town will be in place for a long time. Is there a case to be made to say that, if we create conditions for the market to make choices to change the existing fabric, things have the potential in a city or town to change quickly, if the right incentives (and of course good governance) exist?

Alain: *Urban planners should be thinking: how efficient is this city or town for all our individual clients and what can I do to improve it? They can learn about macro-level behaviours by observing what is happening in their city (or town), through collecting and analysing appropriate data, looking at trends and thinking through future scenarios in consultation with others.*

Your point about providing markets with choice is an important one, as a core aspect of economics theory. Urban planners have a tendency to want to control too many aspects of urban areas. For example, segmenting societal activities into zones or areas. Instead of focusing on designing and improving infrastructure for such zones, I think they provide the best options to people (who, we must always remember, all want different things) when they focus on providing an urban infrastructure that provides people with different options.

Infrastructure is a top-down provision that urban planners control, and they need to design and manage how to make it work for lots of different needs which they cannot know about, but they can see in near real-time with good data. Planners can engage with and observe local communities to understand viewpoints (their taxes contribute to funding such requirements). The key is to analyse what is required to support efficiency and be guided by economic principles. Whether it is a new piece of infrastructure or an upgrade to existing services (such as a water / sewer network, transport or energy infrastructure), a planner has to work out what is required now and provide options now and for the future.

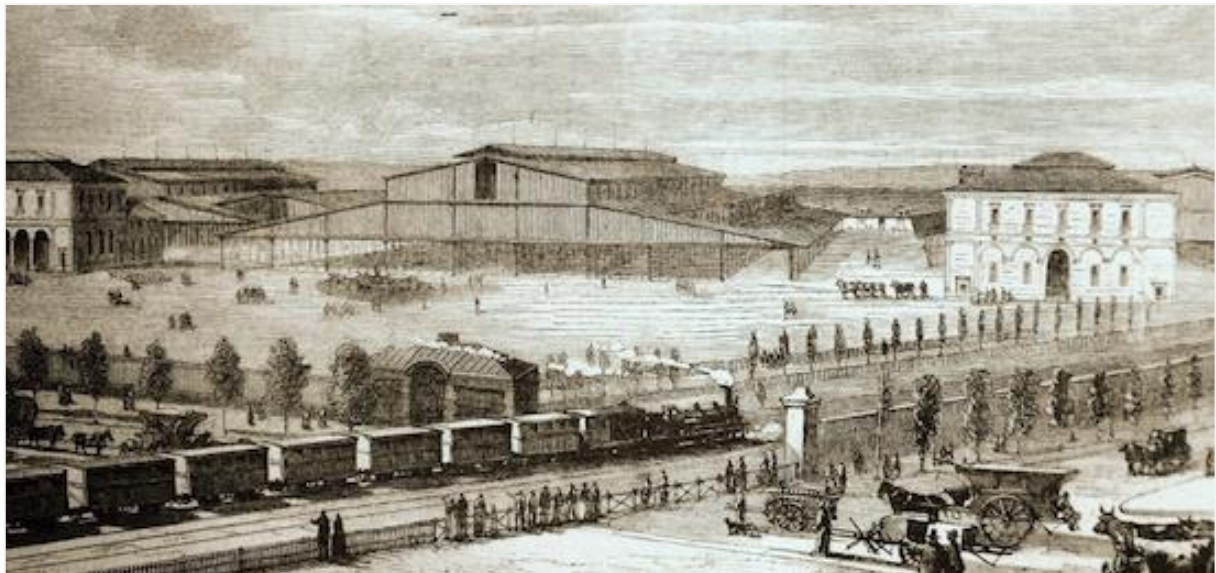
Good infrastructure is the foundation for a dynamic city or town. It allows it to function from the bottom-up, in which individual citizens, businesses and groups of people can make decisions from choices for their specific needs and plans. For example, a household makes conscious trade-offs in deciding where they want to live, the distance they travel to their jobs and the access they want to facilities (such as schools, sports clubs, arts and entertainment).

A business decides how close to a downtown centre they want to be. Everyone will change their views over time. The decisions people make are theirs to own, and as a planner I should not try to drive them down one path. Rather, I should provide them with flexibility and options to make their own trade-offs and to change over time. The field of urban economics helps make urban planning efficient. Economics helps a person, a family or a business to be as efficient as possible with their trade-offs.

Gareth: The point you have made just now about allowing people to choose their trade-offs links in my mind to how city and town master plans should be devised and what they should contain. I have seen quite a few 5-year and 10-year master plans, in which aspirational designs are produced and citizens are invited to comment on them – but usually in a way that, if I'm honest, is easy or that incorporates their feedback very well. I'm sure there are better ways to ask people for their input. Most master plans that I see describe central areas as retail spaces (thus encouraging consumption of goods and services), or business spaces. There's little mix on show or consciously being encouraged. I wonder whether the concept of master plans should change – I don't see why they should be segmented by design.

Alain: *Urban planners need to remember that a city or a town needs to be dynamic to thrive. It changes because people change, and we cannot anticipate what these changes will be.*

Consider as an example the case of the Paris area of La Villette (in the 19th arrondissement). In [1867 a major slaughterhouse and a cattle market to serve the city opened](#), as a municipal service (it was a public, not a private, development). It served this purpose well for some 60 years.



The abattoir (slaughterhouse) of La Villette (image: [ArchDaily](#))

Live animals for slaughter and for market trading were transported into the area by train, and meat was distributed around Paris and further afield across France.

In the 1970's the government decided it was time to create a new slaughterhouse and meat processing development in the area, which took about 10 years to design and 10 years to build, so 20 years in total. By the time it opened, the meat processing industry had changed. Other facilities located where the cattle were raised far from Paris were bringing meat in refrigerated trucks into Paris, the city did not need a meat processing facility anymore. So, as soon as it was finished, it was obsolete. It was left empty. Rock bands squatted into the slaughterhouse which inevitably changed the social dynamics of the area. Eventually, the government realised that it was if nothing else an appropriate space for them to occupy. Now it is a music venue.

My point with this example is that too much planning in advance without observing what is happening in the market can render an urban development plan obsolete. The market is dynamic, and if we do not observe it and plan for change, we will not provide the best places for citizens and society as a whole.

Gareth: Regarding this story about La Villette, if the development had been in private hands, would the developers have paid more attention to market dynamics and devised a more flexible plan for the area?

Alain: *If the development had been private, the people paying for it would have probably been paying attention to market changes and made adjustments to the development along the way, so yes, I would say so.*

Gareth: It would be good to continue discussing how a city's infrastructure needs to be adaptable to focus on efficiency of movement, and of labour. In your book (Chapter 2), you describe how cities are primarily dynamic labour markets, and that without a well-functioning labour market there is no city (or town). This seems to be a foundation of a city or town's socio-economic structure, and it got me thinking about whether the efficiency of labour markets is changing.

With the increase in homeworking (for those who can do so, which of course is not everyone) since the COVID-19 pandemic, should urban planners be taking account of different ways people are choosing where they work and live?

Alain: *The COVID-19 pandemic was a huge shock for cities (and towns) in many ways. We don't yet know what the outcome will be from all the changes that occurred as people had to stay at home and lockdowns had their effect. I now see a tug of war going on between employees, who would like to commute to their usual workplace a few times a week, and many employers who want them to be at their designated place of work more regularly than that. Urban planners need to allow flexibility for urban centres to change, yet I don't think they can anticipate one way or another how they should develop – the market will need to work this out. Planners should try to make the overall environment efficient and flexible.*

The changing rent paid for office space, retail and residential building would be the best indicator of the impact of remote work in various neighbourhoods. Municipality should remove regulatory barriers that may prevent the adjustment to a new reality.

Silicon Valley in California saw this situation a few years before the pandemic, in fact. Tech companies in the area responded by building fantastic HQs that provide a wealth of facilities, such as day-care centres to allow parents to bring their kids with them rather than have to get their kids looked after elsewhere (which also cost them time). The many measures they set up cost these tech businesses money, but they decided it was worth the investment as it increased efficiency. We are seeing similar changes to offices around the world today, whilst some are being slated for different purposes, potentially.

Employment patterns in urban environments were already changing before the pandemic, due to changes in how businesses operate their supply chains. One thing I have seen happening in many cities over the past few years is that a lot of jobs are moving to suburban locations. Various jobs in city centre areas (the central business district or downtown) are relocating, and the skills required are changing as well as the nature of jobs changes.

That said, it's important to note that a great deal of economic research shows us the value of random face to face contact in increasing productivity. We can solve specific problems remotely, but innovation benefits from random contact between people who have different perspectives and offer something different to each other. Diverse urban environments encourage such connections.

Gareth: I believe there are case studies that show how innovation in cities and towns can be negatively impacted by trying to control urban development too much. In your book, you discuss how centrally planned cities like Brasilia are examples of the dream of urban planners to plan it all, but that such places lack spontaneity. Brasilia isn't the only example of course, there are others around the world.

Alain: *It's true that centrally planned cities lack spontaneity for people to decide to make trade-offs. In such cities plot sizes are designed in advance, the commercial area is calculated out, areas are segmented in a mistaken belief that it provides efficiency.*

Many planners are reassured by homogeneity, but I believe they should resist the temptation to plan urban environments too much. I am reminded of the reaction of the architect Le Corbusier when he visited New York City many years ago. He called it a beautiful disaster ([on his first visit in 1935, he described the city as "utterly devoid of harmony"](#)). Today, his influence can be seen across the city (and different people have different opinions about this legacy).

To give you another American example of how we can lock ourselves into rigid built environment structures, thirty years ago the average household size in New York was 4.6 people. Nowadays it is 1.2 people – a big change.

The average space consumed per person is very different today with old housing stock. Buildings last a long time, and many apartment blocks have apartments with three or four bedrooms that are now out of date.

Gareth: It's a feature of resilience as well, to make small changes on a regular basis, to anticipate and adapt to our external environment.

Alain: *Cities are confronted with external shocks all the time, including those that are nature-related and those that are economic. When the price of fuel jumps it quickly changes people's commuting patterns. People adjust to changes and to shocks, large and small, short-term and long-term. How they adapt, and how as an urban planner can you allow them to adapt in an efficient way, is a key focus of urban economics – to help people be as efficient as possible and as a result help society to thrive.*

Gareth: Given what you just said about centrally planned cities, what are your thoughts about brand new cities that are on the drawing board or in the early stages of development, and also large urban developments within existing cities? Do you have any views on key aspects that urban planners should focus on? I could name many – but as examples, there is Indonesia's planned new capital, [Nusantara](#), [Neom](#) in Saudi Arabia, [The Orbit](#) in Canada, [BiodiverCity](#) in Malaysia and the [Waterfront Toronto](#). Are there some large-scale developments you know of that are setting very good examples of urban planning, that perhaps others can learn from?

Alain: *I think that new cities created by governments are very costly. People move to cities because of the quality and quantity of jobs to be found there. So, a new city is at a disadvantage as initially it provides few jobs and limited economic diversity. Governments creating a new capital have the advantage of a captive labour force of civil servants and government consultants. But the cost to the taxpayer and to the economy is always very high. In the case of Indonesia, it is legitimate for the government to re-evaluate the location of its ministries and offices in very high land price areas. However, creating a new capital in the middle of the Kalimantan jungle is a terrible decision. It will isolate the government from its citizens, and the cost of the new capital will starve Jakarta from desperately needed investments in infrastructure. Jakarta is the main economic engine of Indonesia – and allowing Jakarta's infrastructure to deteriorate will compound the already high cost of building the new capital. It would have been better to select a site in the Southern suburbs of Jakarta as a new site for government buildings, in my view.*

As for new cities like Neom, which is promoted on the sole attraction of promised high tech infrastructure, it contradicts everything we know about cities. People move to cities because of the quality of the people already living there, not because the city has an efficient sewer or transport system!

Gareth: Thanks for these views on new cities, Alain. I'd like to move onto urban energy infrastructure and the role of urban planners. On a basic level, the energy grids of cities and towns seem to me to be quite flexible, but we know that they need to change as part of climate adaptation. As the IEA has [stressed in reports](#), cities are key to achieving net-zero emissions goals, as urban environments account for two-thirds of global energy consumption and more than 70 per cent of annual global carbon emissions. Should urban planners be reshaping the energy infrastructure of cities and towns through regulations and planning codes, or is this interfering with urban development in a negative way? I'm thinking that they should not restrict options, but provide the basis for different sustainable energy options.

To give you an example of what I've seen recently "on my doorstep", a new housing development is being built close to where I live and a new gas main connection has been installed for it. Rather than permit this gas connection, should my local planners be requiring a new urban development like this by regulation to implement a greener type of solution, without specifying what it has to be? Or is this trying to control things too much? I don't know the answer to this!

***Alain:** This is an interesting question. A city's energy needs are challenging to grapple with. Remember our point earlier about "working with what you have". As well as new developments that take place, how can it change for the existing building stock? It is a tricky situation for an urban planner. People obviously need a reliable source of energy, and we cannot turn off a gas supply without good alternatives being available. A private developer can consider the cost of connecting to an existing gas pipeline to be amortised in their accounts over time, and to be ready to change it when a new solution comes along. It is not possible to know which sources of energy we will be using in 20-30 years' time. National and state governments can provide incentives for people to switch to different energy forms. Cities can track what's going on through data, and perhaps they can spot areas where there are negative aspects to fix.*

I hope that a major part of our future energy mix will be nuclear fusion – which is still in development and not guaranteed to succeed. There is a lot of development with renewables (solar, wind, hydro etc.). When the economies of scale make sense, the market can determine what provides the best value in the context of a more sustainable world, in which investors are businesses and citizens who have pension funds. Markets act quickly when there is a compelling incentive. Our energy solutions should be provided by markets that are incentivised to innovate, and individuals can decide which properties provide them with the energy solutions they believe in.

Gareth: You raise a good point about accounting rules (and amortisation). I've been wondering for some time if (or when) international accounting rules will be changed so that the concept of an asset is not purely financially driven, but that value is booked in ways that value nature and ecology – for example, what constitutes how an asset has been produced (in a "green way" or not).

Can we return to our discussion about transport and mobility, and how to make urban places function as efficiently as possible?

In your book you talk about “the daily human tide” (page 28) which is linked to the urban transportation network – and that commuting costs and time limit the size of labour markets (page 30). Many cities are well known for their road traffic logjams. Some are terrible, but some, such as London (a city I visit regularly), are successfully (in my view) reducing traffic congestion with planning policies that reduce individual car use and improve active mobility (walking, bike lanes etc). I am a supporter of “active mobility”, to provide the means to walk/ride (for those who are mobile, with other options for people who are not mobile), and good public transport for longer travel rather than people using cars (I like trams, for example).

My first question is: can policies to reduce car use and change a city or a town’s transport infrastructure for active mobility and decent public transport improve the daily human tide and improve city prosperity?

My second question is: can a better blend of public and private sector management for urban transport be developed, inclusive of the needs of people who are not very mobile? I think about the inefficiencies of many public bus systems, especially in smaller urban areas that lack people density (and many who use them are older and have free bus passes). Would micro-public transport be better than long and large public transport, and could it take the form of a “public-funded Uber service” of some sort, to convince people to use cars less?

Alain: The point you have raised here about transport is an example of how housing and transport need to be seen as two sides of the same coin. Where we build housing is key. Is it integrated with transport. We control the supply of land for housing through our transport arteries.

In a large metropolitan area, I think there is a case to say that the most efficient trips can be micro-mobility to hubs, to then catch a larger-volume solution (such as a mass rapid transit), then finish your journey perhaps with another micro-mobility solution.

I provide a few examples of this in my book, in fact, for example:



The Toyota i-Road personal mobility vehicle (left) and the Beijing three-wheeler (right) provide on-demand trips from station to door, and door to station (provided by A Bertaud)

Sometimes, planners decide in advance on a technology they think will be best – another example of wanting to shape and control the urban environment. They state that transport will be cheaper if we chose to introduce or use a particular transport mode. It needs people at a certain density for the business case to succeed. What we need to do is look at how people are distributed and design a transit system to allow people to move around as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Consider a light rail project. For its financial viability it needs enough density of population who will pay to use it. If we are not careful, we may focus on encouraging density along the intended route and preventing density elsewhere. I'm not saying light rail is a bad idea, I am saying that it needs to be informed by good economics.

Our approach to major transport infrastructure should be to look at where people are today and where they want to get to (good data can inform us about this), and how things could potentially change over time (again, using good data). A collection of individuals wants a large blend of different transport routes, so when a major new transport route is built, if it is not aligned to what most people want for efficient movement, most people will use a car or another form of direct transport. They choose their individual car over public transport because it is the most efficient option for them, even accepting the negative aspects that come with it in an urban environment.

When it comes to public bus transport, I tend to agree about your points. Consider the typical big city bus. I appreciate that more of them are electric or hydrogen-powered nowadays, so they are a lot cleaner than before. Firstly, a large bus is an expensive asset. Then, the most expensive running part of a large bus is the driver. Because they are large, they are not very regular in timing – people typically have to wait. Yet consider our point about technology that we started our discussion with. Technology allows us to have vehicles that can be used to quickly catch the public equivalent of an Uber (perhaps one with 10 seats, in a co-sharing arrangement for people who all want to get to more or less the same location). Can the city infrastructure have some sensors to recognise it.

We also need to remember that a city with no vehicles is not a reality. We always need supplies, logistics and distribution, maintenance work. A supplier cannot deliver beer via the bus or the subway. Trucks do not exist for fun. Maybe in time there will be deliveries from the sky, but let's not plan our infrastructure on that right now.

I agree about providing appropriate mobility options for disabled people. This is important for society.

Gareth: You mention early in your book that knowledge from economic literature seldom makes its way into urban operational planning practices (page 7). In the introduction, you emphasise that urban planning is learned through practice and experience, and the decisions urban planners make have an immediate impact on local urban environments – such as the width of streets and sidewalks, bike lanes, the size and division of land parcels, and the heights of buildings.

Can municipal authorities embed urban economics theories into urban planning, and are there replicable examples you have seen of making this work, with quantifiable benefits achieved? I'm wondering if large urban planning teams should have an urban economics unit within their overall team, and perhaps smaller urban planning teams can have a part-time urban economics function?

Alain: *The question we need to ask ourselves here is: How can economics help urban planners to do their jobs?*

I was recently invited to a discussion at Harvard University. I was invited by a senior urban planner and a facility director at the university. She asked me whether there is a connection between planners who want to achieve social value, and economists who want to achieve efficiency.

It's a fair question, but I would say that people want efficiency in everything they do. They may not think about it this way, but when they decide to take their car, they do so for efficiency reasons.

I'll give you a personal example. When I travel into the heart of New York City I tend to drive, which takes me about 45 minutes (and I pay the market rate for parking). My alternative to take public transport is not practical for me. My local bus that goes into NYC stops 75 times and takes 2.5 hours.

In Manhattan, most of the parking is free. Whilst citizens will be happy with this, it comes with problems and is an example of unintended consequences. When car spaces in the street are fully taken, the plumber who needs to attend to a problem parks alongside already parked vehicles (a practice known as double-parking), which can often impinge on a bicycle lane (of which there are more and more in Manhattan). Therefore, despite having more bike lanes it can be more dangerous for bike riders that have to swerve around double-parked vehicles.

Gareth: Let's talk about the efficiency of rules and regulations now. Should governments and municipal authorities implement rules (governance) to ensure urban planners review, on a regular basis and perhaps through audits, their regulations and that they continuously trim them and eliminate those that do not add value? In your book you describe this approach as akin to pruning a tree (page 7). Regulations are important of course, as you say in your book, but I wonder if urban planners "make a rod for their own backs" with too much regulation, including some that do not add value – or not anymore. For example, should rules and regulations around our consumption of goods and services be more flexible (such as the zoning of urban areas, the size of housing in certain areas, and the types of businesses that can exist in certain areas)?

Alain: *Whenever you have a policy or a rule, you should review it to see whether it is adding value and effective, or not. Do we have the courage to change? Sometimes there is an ideological principle that persists in government, that removing regulations is good just in itself. You have to audit them regularly, some become obsolete, others become necessary.*

Consider the impact of a well-meaning regulation like rent control. In many parts of Europe cities control rental increases. People are happy, but if costs rise faster than rental income, the end result will be that buildings will not be looked after, and a local area can become tatty and suffer. That's not a good outcome for anyone.

Consider another example, of where planners allow industry to be sited. Much industry used to be polluting and dirty, so it was normal for it to be outside of an urban centre (though this wasn't the case in the 1700s and 1800s). Some of industry still needs to be located outside of a city or a town, yet now much industry is now clean – indeed, cleaner than many shops and offices. There is no reason to separate clean industry from other parts of the urban fabric. Let the market decide.

Consider an example of zoning that exists in New York City, which demonstrates this principle. There are approx. 75 specific different areas where you can sell or repair a bicycle. There are even zoning permits for selling umbrellas. There was a case in Queens where you would be allowed to have a hardware store, but not to sell appliances!! It took 5-6 years to change this zoning – and then the city planners claimed a victory with making the change!

When I was a planner in the historic city of [Sana'a](#), Yemen, people either obtained drinking water from their own wells or they would buy it from those who had water. A project was put forward for a water engineering initiative. The city was growing, and people were living in an area of basalt hills where it was hard to drill water wells. Their preference was to live close to the city centre. The engineer asked if we could prevent people from living in the hills it would save a lot of money spent on water towers and lift pumps. However, these hills have their own land value to residents. If they moved, they would have needed more transport options. This is an example of when you try to optimise one part of urban infrastructure, you can very easily negatively affect another part. Provide flexibility and let people decide what is best for them.

Gareth: Are things different with cities and towns in developing parts of the world? I know you have a lot of experience in varying economic environments.

Alain: *We should not aggregate the populations of countries, and by extension cities and towns, into generic terms such as Lower Income Countries (LICs) or Lower Middle Income Countries (LMICs). I think it is better to think of a population's prosperity along a curve. For example, in my book I use income curves and percentiles to describe income distribution rather than use a finite term such as LIC or LMIC. We should not put people into a box. Their challenges and problems are different, for different reasons (which goes back to my point earlier in our interview about cities consisting of millions of individuals each facing different choices).*

Gareth: In terms of the physical structure of a city or town, land use, land scarcity and how it is governed is central to how urban environments can thrive. In your book Chapter 3 you describe how markets create and shape land use (page 56).

What can urban planners do to drive purposeful land use – do they need to “get out of the way” of the markets, or are there certain things they can do? And does the same ethos apply to developed and developing nations alike?

For example, I see varying examples of how housing developments are approached in different cities and towns. Some are well connected into a city centre and have good greenery and facilities, others have as many houses as possible, nothing else and are only linked to a central district in a basic way via a new access road and nothing in the way of public transport, and no imagination with sustainable energy infrastructure (indeed, in some poor cities we continue to see shanty towns built in precarious areas such as landslide zones).

You briefly discuss the Urban Village Model in your book, and that it does not really exist (page 40). I have read your 2022 article about 15-minute cities also (I liked the examples about Paris, a city where I used to live and still visit regularly). Sydney, where I used to live, describes itself as a City of Villages. Some cities talk about their 15 (or 20)-minute approach to design. I make a link here with the ability to get to regular amenities I need within 15 minutes, a bit like we can in a village. Where I choose to work and earn a living, however, is not controlled by this concept. Does this align with your thinking?

***Alain:** When it comes to the 15-minute city, my concern is that the planners may not have the tools to make it work.*

Consider Paris – where there are some good changes taking place, and the density of boulangeries and restaurants is pretty good (and always has been). A key point for the 15-minute city is whether job locations are included (now we have good data on job distribution). Something like 60 per cent of people who live in Paris work in Paris. One third of them work outside the city centre, in suburbs and outside (which relates to the point I made earlier about changing work locations). We have this cross-over of people and I wonder how efficient it is – the daily human tide. How many jobs can be within 15 minutes for people nowadays?

Then consider other cities which have large populations of people who are poor and who live in slum areas; they cannot afford to take a bus or to own a bicycle. This limits their earnings. They may be forced to stay within 15 minutes of their slum, but if they could spread themselves further, they would have more employment opportunities. Mobility is key. There are some areas that can level it up.

Gareth: What are your views on community participation in urban planning. In my discussions with many people involved in city and town urban improvement and regeneration projects, they often talk about the importance of extensive community liaison and engagement. Urban planners seek feedback from citizens on their master plans (though often in a rather poor way, in my view) and on specific local developments, but I suspect feedback is not always of much value, when urban planners do not provide context to what the change is about.

So, how can and should citizens best get involved? Does community liaison align with market-driven development and good urban economics? Is there a case for a better, more active engagement that changes the relationship between municipal authorities and their citizens? I have some ideas for an “urban app” to help this, for example.

***Alain:** For true community participation, I have thought for some time that the best way to get involved is through local politics.*

In the use of a shared common space, community engagement can be productive, but it depends on whether people make the time to think through things, or whether they have a narrow point of view.

There have been some projects where architects have pretended that the city could have all sorts of things, which have not materialised. We should not try to sell a dream that cannot be realised.

If you are looking for community feedback to a specific section such as their street, they have to see its place in the grid. Every street is part of the network so citizens can't just focus on their one street (e.g. ban cars) without considering the others.

As a citizen, when you see that something doesn't work there should be an easy way for you to raise it with a planning team. Remember that planners cannot satisfy the needs of everyone, but through data and information they can have better context for infrastructure needs. At the end of my book, I talk about the vital role of educators. You need to monitor what is happening, and then not hesitate to raise your points.

Gareth: I'd like to return to a point I mentioned at the start of our discussion – how to best quantify and measure urban improvements. We discussed how urban planners often use qualitative, rather than quantitative, objectives. Can monitoring improvements against the SDGs add value? Some cities do this through Voluntary Local Reviews. I've been looking at and experimenting with the possibility of detailed urban indicators linked to the SDGs.

***Alain:** I think the SDGs need to be disaggregated at a city level. At their standard level, they are too generic for suitable monitoring. The SDGs attract a lot of attention of course, so there could be merit in working out how to use them at the right level of detail.*

Moreover, I would say that urban planners should develop indicators that they monitor every 3 months. I use the term “blinking indicators”, which highlight potential problems before they become a problem. For example, if rents are rising too fast, if transport times are getting worse, if transport volumes are dropping relative to the population. If there are problems on the horizon, you have to act.

Gareth: To return to your book, which I really do find an excellent guide, I have seen that it has been translated into several languages. It is good to see that it is being sold in markets around the world. I know you also continue to write papers. Do you have any plans for any other books if I may ask?

Alain: I would like to write a book on urban design, at a lower scale that I am not treating at all in my book Order without Design. The word “design” in the title of Order without Design really means “planning”. I think that the way sidewalks and open spaces are designed is important for the success of cities that are built on multiplying the opportunities of human contacts and exchanges. I would also like to write a book about the history, culture and politics of cities in which Marie-Agnès and I have lived. I am not sure that I will be able to write all these books. Given my age, Order without Design might well be my swan song!

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Alain. I look forward to seeing how your tremendous work to support urban environments all around the world continues to evolve – and to seeing some new books published by you!