



# Re-Engaging the Social Potential of the Public Realm of Our Cities

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## METADATA

Urban Eidos Issue 6-2026 (ISSN: 2942-5131)

Article-DOI: 10.62582/UE6003p

Issue-DOI: 10.62582/UE6000

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**Abstract** – Questions regarding place, the individual, and community in 21st century cities are encouraging new research as a result of the transformation of daily life around a barrage of data, entertainment, hyper communication, instant consumer satisfaction and more all constantly available at our side in our pocket or bag we carry. We compulsively interact with this barrage, directing our attention that previously, before the advent of the smartphone, may have meandered more in response to sensory stimuli from our environmental context or periodic shifts inward into a reflective state. When we allow our attention to be grabbed and held by this barrage, is one of the repercussions the diminishment of the importance of actual places we occupy together and pass through in our daily lives or come together in on special occasions? More specifically, are the cities of our nations doomed to be relicts of a former social condition, to be toured with curiosity rather than lived in and animated with intense, vital human energy? I posit here that cities will not only endure but will play a key role in helping us rebalance ourselves and our patterns of daily life as we seek meaning, beauty, camaraderie, connection, purpose.

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## The Endurance of the City in the 21st Century

Questions regarding place, the individual, and community in 21st century cities are encouraging new research as a result of the transformation of daily life around a barrage of data, entertainment, hyper communication, instant consumer satisfaction and more all constantly available at our side in our pocket or bag we carry. We compulsively interact with this barrage, directing our attention that previously, before the advent of the smartphone, may have meandered more in response to sensory stimuli from our environmental context or periodic shifts inward into a reflective state. Is one of the repercussions when we allow our attention to be grabbed and held by this barrage the diminishment of the importance of actual places we occupy together and pass through in our daily lives? More specifically, are the cities of our nations doomed to be relicts of a former social condition, to be toured with curiosity rather than lived in and animated with intense, vital human energy? I posit here that cities will not only endure but will play a key role in helping us rebalance ourselves and our patterns of daily life as we seek meaning, beauty, camaraderie, connection, purpose. Derek Thompson, writing in January 2025 in *The Atlantic*, brings together research from an array of fields in an effort to better understand what he dubs “The Anti-Social

Century.”<sup>1</sup> While much of the thinking on the underlying factors driving an increase in solitary lifestyles appropriately focuses on the digital environment and the impact of social media, a key piece of this research points to the importance of the physical environment’s facilitation of social contact.



**Figure 1:** Allen Street with a central pedestrian promenade, Lower East Side, New York City (Photo by author)

## The Missing Social Connection

In the United States in particular, the transformation of the built environment through a major reorganization of the population into single family homes in first suburbs and now ex-urbs cannot be ignored in regard to its impact on the demise of a socially rich lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> This physical condition of many people’s daily life combines with the digital environment to foster, according to Thompson, two “rings” of social connection: “the inner ring of family and best friends (bound by blood and intimacy) and the outer ring of the tribe (linked by shared affinities).”<sup>3</sup> This outer ring in particular is made possible by the digital environment and the nature of social media. Thompson, in my view, correctly identifies the key missing social connection: “the middle ring of ‘familiar but not intimate’ relationships with the people who live around us...” He points to the potential of this particular social connection as a generator of tolerance of ideas in a social environment that promotes restraint and consideration of others’ viewpoints.<sup>4</sup> The critical need in a democratic society and in any community for this generation of tolerance is well met through daily life in cities, where these types of relationships are facilitated on the streets and public spaces every day.

## The City and Its Social Potential

The physical environment of the city has for centuries generated this key form of social connection through the physical disposition and mixing of housing, workplaces, places of worship, schools, and places for recreation... all connected by rich networks of streets, avenues, alleys and public squares. Of course, cities have not always achieved this social connection in a way that is sustainable, admirable or worthy of

1 Thompson, D. (2025). “The Anti-Social Century,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, accessed online December 24, 2025.

2 Chaffin, J. (2025). “Welcome to Dallas: The City That Just Can’t Stop Expanding,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2025.

3 Thompson, D. (2025). “The Anti-Social Century,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, accessed online December 24, 2025.

4 Ibid.

imitation, with some cities in the past and in our current times with deeply unhealthy and unjust conditions for many or unaffordable conditions hampering access altogether. Nonetheless, the physical density and configuration and mixes of the types of buildings and uses in the city combined with a true public network that facilitates connection and mobility, ie. the public realm of the city, shown in Figure 1, remains the critical human innovation in regard to generating the potential for all the types of social connection described by Thompson.

The public realm of urban places where daily movement is more efficient, convenient, and safe as a pedestrian and rider of public transit, shown in Figure 2, operates by design to bring strangers in contact every day through universal access and common routes, transit, and intersections that bring diverse people into close proximity, crossing paths frequently. Transforming slightly Thompson's metaphor of rings of connection, one can recognize radiating concentric ripples or waves of social potential inherent to this urban public realm. These ripples radiate from an origin point of shared space, space we all have access to and is necessary for our daily movement. The first radiating wave is the fundamental human contact we experience in this public realm, being in this space with others, people we may or may not know, who are going about their business of the day: catching the bus to work, walking a dog or heading off to school, taking a morning stroll, heading to the market, delivering food or packages...



**Figure 2:** A crowded sidewalk on Broadway in Soho, New York City (Photo by author)

This first ripple of human contact may mostly remain at this basic level of being in space together, and does not necessarily achieve anything deeper in regard to one's social life, but it can easily lead to the next ripple of social potential, small social contacts through ordinary low stakes interaction, holding a door for someone at the bank, making eye contact and smiling together with a stranger on the sidewalk, greeting someone we know we have seen before, chatting briefly while dogs perform their rituals of greeting, making way for someone who needs extra time to get on the bus

ahead of you.<sup>5</sup> At particular moments: commiserating while waiting in line for tickets to a show or a popular cafe, joining a small group all ducking under cover during a heavy rainstorm, congratulating runners who finished a local race, gathering in a park for a picnic, we may feel the particular “warmth” generated through a shared experience in this space, as shown in Figure 3, another ripple of social potential.



**Figure 3:** Groups enjoy together a spring day in the Sheep Meadow, Central Park, New York City (Photo by author)

The compilation of months or years of this daily life in the physical environment of the public realm can establish the next important ripple of social potential: a powerful sense of place through a sense of belonging in the public realm. This space is ours to be in and share, and when we each feel that we belong and can trust the strangers in this space, we can interact and share at even deeper levels, including special moments of celebration, commemoration, protest, as shown in Figure 4. These moments can build social cohesion and endow places in the public realm with memory and meaning. This daily experience of the public realm can join generations of locals into a sense of community though they may remain strangers. Children growing up in this environment may acquire a sense of camaraderie with strangers through this human contact that lasts a lifetime.

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<sup>5</sup> This reflection leverages heavily Jane Jacob's observations of the public trust that is formed over time in the street space of the city where pedestrians cross paths with strangers on a frequent basis. Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House.



**Figure 4:** No Kings protestors gather at main intersection of Wilmington, Vermont (Photo by author)

## The City, Social Connection, and Well-being

In his article Derek Thompson cites a 2014 research study in Chicago that tested the impact of asking participants to strike up a conversation with strangers during their commute on public transit. These participants reporting having a more positive experience compared to when they sit quietly and keep to themselves on the train.<sup>6</sup> The results reinforce the importance of social connection to our well-being as social animals. As the final days of this quarter century pass the question that we are presented with is can we change course and re-energize our social lives and our social culture? Of the events of the young century, the pandemic reminded much of the human population of the value of social contact at every level of daily life after being deprived of it for months. While it is true that some of the pandemic-inspired adjustments to daily life linger after the social distancing policies were lifted, most significantly the digital meeting platforms like Zoom that facilitated all forms of remoteness from each other, the value of direct human contact and connection has clearly been demonstrated as essential to our health and well-being.<sup>7</sup> Articles are documenting a growing trend of reversals of "the new normal" in society. For example, there is a growing recognition among young professionals of the important benefits of being in the office face to face with peers and mentors as they start their careers and the shortcomings of working from home.<sup>8</sup> In our current moment of social dysfunction (speaking in particular of the United States of America) we might read the rejection of the social isolation of the pandemic and the growing rejection of the continued social isolation through the capitulation of our attention to social media as an emerging desire for meaningful experience through connection with our environment and each other. This re-evaluation of how we are consciously or unconsciously abdicating the steering of our attention may move even more quickly as AI-generated content further distances us from connections we intuitively understand are at the core of our well-being as social animals.

6 Thompson, D. (2025). "The Anti-Social Century," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, accessed online December 24, 2025.

7 World Health Organization (2025). "From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting A Path to Healthier Societies," June 30, 2025, <https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection/report>, accessed December 24, 2025.

8 Scheiber, N. (2025). "Working from Home is Harming Young Employees. They're Starting to See That," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/01/business/young-workers-office.html?smid=url-share>.



## Re-balancing Daily Life

It seems that this is a critical moment when we can reflect on how cultural trends or habits/rituals facilitated by the digital environment may not be supporting our aspirations for our futures but also our health and well-being today. If we are correct to see this impact on our behavior and capitulation of our attention as non-permanent, as merely a matter of daily habit, it may be that this behavior will recede organically as more people every day reject this impact on their lives or recede through more organized and intentional social and political actions that may be around the corner. But in addition to weaning ourselves from an unhealthy use of technology, we also need to examine the physical environment and how we have a form of habitation, in the form of the city, that works in our favor to support a rich, engaged daily life of social connection and deeper social potential.

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