



THE ART OF URBAN PLANNING



TURNING GRAY INTO GREEN

One way that urban planners have made cities healthier is by injecting more green into the concrete jungle. Urban planners often utilize parks to increase air quality and inspire a more active, outdoor lifestyle for city-dwellers, while modern-day architects have taken more innovative measures. One USA-based architecture firm, Sagegreenlife, is making grassy green walls the cool new thing. Their vision is to "[build] a better quality of life through living design."

Their "living walls" are constructed by a team of horticulturists who collaborate with local nurseries. The wall system is built out of modular tiles using a layered basalt rock fiber that evenly distributes water and oxygen. No soil and no fear of break down or decay, these living walls take care of themselves.

Sagegreenlife is committed to sustainability in its internal processes, as well. The living wall systems are composed of recyclable materials and their maintenance, which the team takes care of for you, is low on energy and water consumption.

Chicago, IL has taken up Sagegreenlife's services in places all over the city. Companies like Left Coast and Habits at Work have installed living walls in their spaces to bring together nature and people. Their diners and workers benefit from what

Sagegreenlife refers to as the "innate human connection to plants." As populations in cities surge, city-dwellers risk severing this intrinsic connection to the natural world. Typically, city living is thought of as an opposite to the natural, agrarian lifestyle of the countryside. As Steven Cohen of the Huffington Post writes, "The problem with the idea of getting 'back' to nature is that there are too many people and there is not enough nature."

The risk of losing touch with nature makes Sagegreenlife's work all the more important. Fighting against the concrete, brick, and steel is the lush green vegetation that not only provides a familiar and comforting sight to city-dwellers, by also helping with air purification and water management. The Millennial generation in particular is reported to value sustainability and wellness in both their daily and work lives. Cities of the future must commit to greenness if they hope to attract Millennials. Living walls is one method that architects and designers have taken to promoting sustainability and healthy lifestyles in the hopes of boosting economy from new residents. By greening cities, these innovators are choosing to cultivate buildings, not construct them.

Farming Factories

Popping up in abandoned shipping containers and factories in cities is a new type of mass local production--farming. Half of the "buy local" movement and half high-tech farming, these organizations are the new leaders in urban sustainability.

One such organization, AeroFarms out of Newark NJ, has been taking over headlines with their innovative urban farming. Their 70,000 square foot farm takes residence in a former steel plant. In their "vertical farms," crops are stacked in horizontal or vertical rows, fed by water and LED lights. AeroFarms reports that what they grow in 1 acre in vertical farming takes 138 acres to grow in the field. They use 95% less water and no pesticides--when you grow inside, there's no need.

As such urban farming has huge advantages over traditional farming. By overtaking spaces such as abandoned factories, they are resurrecting what would normally be demolished and giving it a new purpose. Inside the farm, they are able to manipulate light and water and create any artificial environment to cater to the needs of each crop, like changing humidity levels or temperature. Even in the cold North East, urban farmers can grow year-round.

Agriculture in the US is one of the most polluting and unsustainable industries. Cash crops like wheat are grown on massive farms, which not only is a misuse of land, but also makes them susceptible to environmental hazards, like pests or climate irregularities that negatively affect growth. In attempts to combat these plagues, crops are sprayed with pesticides, which are not only harmful to the local atmosphere and the farmers, but also to the consumer. What crops survive must be processed so that they can sustain the long shipping process to other parts of the country. So, what is left is nutritionally stripped, bland, and chemically treated, none of which adds to a healthy diet.

Death to Demolition

Conveniently, urban farmers make use of spaces that are otherwise forgotten or unneeded by the rest of the community. These spaces would normally rot and crumble, adding another level of hazard for neighbors, or bought out and demolished by corporations, which uses large amounts of energy and releases pollutants into the air.

As such, not only are urban farms bettering the community's dinner plate, but the local atmosphere. While they don't improve public air quality like the living walls, their roots grow in a building--literally and figuratively--that otherwise would likely be unnecessarily uprooted.

Urban farms respond to this problem in the agriculture industry by mitigating the emission of fossil fuels and use of pollutants and by bringing the farming of food closer to the place it will be consumed. Not only does the food taste better, but it also is healthier and supports local businesses rather than massive corporations that often exploit laborers, particularly those from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

In attempts to further connect with the community and spread their expertise in this growing field, AeroFarms collaborates with a local charter school. They provide produce for school lunches and the children in turn learn about vertical farming techniques.

With their community commitment and innovative approach, AeroFarms prove to be the farming of the future. With such a surge expected in cities, local and innovative farming is essential to keep up with the hungry mouths and promote a healthier lifestyle for city-dwellers.





PRIORITIZING PEOPLE

Urbanist Jeff Speck works to make cities more walkable. It seems so simple, but America has suffered from a phenomenon known as "suburban sprawl." This is when residents choose to live further outside of the city so as to escape the health risks that are synonymous with urban living, like pollutants or lack of green spaces, but living further from the city center makes people car-dependent.

Bad for the environment and for activity levels and social life, car dependency is the plague of the healthy American lifestyle. Ever heard the phrase "sitting is the new smoking"? Staying stationary behind a desk, then behind the wheel of a car, contributes to the unhealthy lifestyles that make 65% of Americans adults overweight. The prevalence of suburban sprawl, which is often thought of as the goal of the American Dream, has required automobiles to be, as Speck calls them, a prosthetic device. Hours spent in the car are isolating and wasted, making particularly suburbanites obese and depressed, according to studies synthesized by Brandon Mckee of the New York Times.

New-age urbanists are working at the root of the cause to combat suburban sprawl and prevent it from increasing with the expected influx in city-dwellers in the coming years. Speck refers to the American healthcare crisis of overweight and obese adults as the disease that urban designers can cure. All that's needed is to make a city more walkable. Dr. Steven Polzin emphasizes the benefits of common healthy practices, such as walking, with his headline on Planetizen: "So the Chief Doc says 'Talk a Walk.'" Speck outlines in his Theory of Walkability four main ways to do this: 1) have a reason to walk 2) the walk has to feel safe and be safe 3) the walk has to be comfortable and 4) the walk has to be interesting. Instead of making large zones for each part of living--shopping, learning, working, and living--urban planners like Speck argue to mix these zones so each is reachable by walking.

Urbanists like Speck want city-dwellers to walk to work, walk to the store, walk to school, and walk to visit their friends. However, building this kind of lifestyle can easily take years, space, and money that a lot of American cities do not have.

As a more short-term approach, innovators and advocates like the ones in San Francisco are taking to establishing pop-up parks that encourage walking in ways that don't require major remodeling.



Small Spaces doing Big Things

What has been lost with the dependency on cars is the "leisurely walk." Longer commuting times as a result of living further away from work takes away valuable down-time, causing working professionals to choose to spend their time indoors rather than outside.

"Parklets," micro-parks built in whatever available space, have reignited the pleasure of the Walk. Parklets have been making a statement in San Francisco, where weather allows these sometimes-temporary structures to remain permanent. One leader in the Parklet movement is Pavements to Parks, which notes that 25% of San Francisco's land is taken up by streets-- more space than all the public parks combined. Since American cities are traditionally built for the vehicle instead of the resident, streets are often excessively wide and contain large underutilized spaces.

The Pavement to Park program, in opposition, seeks to "test the possibilities of these underused areas of land by quickly and inexpensively converting them into new pedestrian spaces." By taking over parking spaces, they prioritize people over cars, and simultaneously reduce automotive use and pollution.

Pavement to Park's parklets reimagine the potential of city streets, encourage non-motorized transportation, enhance pedestrian safety and activities, foster neighborhood interaction, and support local businesses, which thrive on walk-in business.

Andrew Stober, chief of staff in the Mayor's Office of Transportation and Utilities in Philadelphia, another city which has started to implement parklets, states that these pint-sized parks are "part of a larger movement in the city as we think about how to make it a more livable place."

The idea that cities have become unlivable is an unfortunate truth to many American cities. Industry and infrastructure have historically taken city space away from the city-dweller. Parklets, like living walls, offer greenness with which city-dwellers can reconnect with nature.

But parklets do more than just spectacle a pretty space. Their benches or chairs, which are obviously distinct from those in nearby cafes or restaurants, provide spaces for pedestrians to enjoy time outdoors. Akin to the European Plaza, an urban design aspect that largely missed American cities, parklets are spaces where time is slowed for the enjoyment of just sitting.



The art of urban planning will save the future. Their holistic responses to issues like car dependency, poor food quality, and poor air quality create lifestyle changes that are necessary to foster healthy lifestyles.

These lifestyle changes are not innate to American culture as they are with other countries. In Spain, the after-work hour is often spent sitting outside socializing with friends. In China, people of all ages gather in parks to practice tai chi in the morning. In Holland, bike-riding is the norm mode of city transportation.

Lifestyle change is the hardest to enforce. Even Jeff Speck shares his hesitation with America's ability to change its ways. Urban design, though, has the ability to inspire these lifestyle changes en masse instead of waiting for individuals. In doing so, they are not only inspiring a healthier lifestyle, but they are changing American culture.

Choosing a healthy city then becomes the next step in individual responsible to a healthy lifestyle. The 60% of city-dwellers come 2030 should take care into researching which cities will give the best quality of life.

Recognizing small initiatives like urban farms, parklets, green spaces, or pedestrian-friendly zones give prospective city-dwellers an insight into how green a city is. While economic-standing, nightlife scene, kinds of corporations, and school system should all be considered when moving to a new city, prospective residents should not overlook the prevalence and quality, or lack thereof, of public spaces.