

Life

Urbanism: the new ideas for city living

Simon Kuper

Opening shot

It was the perfect autumn afternoon in Paris. We sat on a *café terrasse* on the Place des Vosges, one of Europe's finest squares, craving a beer. Finally, the surly waiter took our order. But first, without asking, he demonstratively moved from his territory the rental bike that my companion Carlo Ratti had parked there.

Ratti runs the SENSEable City Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He knows his urbanism. That waiter, Ratti told me, hasn't yet understood that customers are now rating him online. The café we were in, Ma Bourgogne, specialises in surliness. Parisian tourist traps work on the theory that each tourist only comes once, so you can mistreat him with impunity. People still stumble on Ma Bourgogne while ogling the Place des Vosges. But, one day, before they sit down, their smartphones will flash an alert - "Rude waiters!" - and suggest a nicer alternative. Already, says Ratti, hotels are becoming more polite because they need good ratings.

Life in western cities gets better every day for people rich enough to live in them. This is happening for many reasons: technology, data, the hipster ethos, competitive city rankings, and the takeover of cities by a global elite ruthlessly determined to live well. Downtowns are becoming "living rooms", says John Eger of San Diego State University. And as Ratti and others told me, even bigger changes are coming soon.

The biggest of all could be driverless cars. Already you can occasionally spot them on northern Californian streets. In perhaps a decade, these things will start transforming the city. One day your car will drop you at work, then

drive itself off, either to park outside town or to collect someone else. One benefit: hardly any parking in cities any more. (Warning: do not buy an urban parking space now.)

From our table, Ratti pointed at the cars lining the gorgeous square. "Think how much real estate you are using to store idle pieces of metal that are used for what - an hour a day?"

Urban planners are already thinking of uses for former parking spaces. The obvious one is bike lanes. I've seen the future of urban transport, and it was the small Dutch town where I grew up in the 1970s. By the age of eight, my entire class was cycling to school without parents. It was (fairly) safe because we had dedicated bike lanes. Cycling in Paris still isn't very safe, because there aren't enough bike lanes. I stopped cycling here after a car door knocked me down. The driver dismissed my complaints, pointing out that I was merely bleeding from the head, not dead.

Biking is for everyone. One new trend is hybrid bikes with electric wheels. If you're old, or going uphill, just turn on the motor.

Another potential future for parking spaces: mini-parks, says Mathieu Lefevre, executive director of the New Cities Foundation. Previously, anyone with kids was expected to leave the city. Now that cities are nice and safe, families want to stay. However, they need more play areas. Replace that parked car outside Ma Bourgogne with a swing or slide, and you'd have the perfect family spot: parent friendly, which means "with coffee".

Already, urban workplaces have changed. Ratti and I were having a business meeting in Ma Bourgogne. "I don't think there is a better office

than this," he said. But working in cafés is very 2003. The next step: working in parks, even in winter. New technologies can follow you around, giving you your own little portable bubble of heat and light, said Ratti.

Cities are now dominated by knowledge workers. But Ratti has a counterintuitive candidate for the next urban industry:

manufacturing. He explains that 3D printing will be done by creative types in small spaces such as former garages. These people want to be somewhere like the Place des Vosges.

As the western city ceases to be a giant office-cum-parking lot, it looks better every day. But there's an iron rule of our time: anything desirable gets grabbed by the 1 per cent. Cities are becoming unaffordable for anyone else. One way to counter this is to build bridges - often literally - between rich and poor areas. In Johannesburg, rich Sandton and poor black Alexandra are now neighbours. Soon a 250m footbridge will connect them. In Paris, "horizontal skyscrapers" and parks could cross the ring road to link the city with its suburbs, says Lefevre.

Today's cities also suffer from an age divide. Young people can't afford the house prices. Meanwhile, many older inhabitants are getting infirm and lonely. Seoul has a nice solution: a programme that helps an old person arrange to share with a student.

Other cities will surely steal the idea, just as they are copying Amsterdam's bike lanes and Sydney's coffee. If only all policy making today were as creative as urbanism.

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