How to deliver 'happiness' in the built environment

Introduction

In July 2017, the EmiratesGBC Technical Workshop discussed different ways of delivering happiness in the built environment, which focused on the planning and design of districts and cities. Participants were invited to discuss the key drivers of happiness and how they can be implemented in the built environment based on their experiences.

Defining Happiness

The concept of measuring happiness in cities comes from the Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index, developed in 1972, which was meant to serve as an alternative to GDP as a measure of a country's progress. Since then, the topic of happiness has gradually much interest from different government and international organisations. This has resulted in the development of various indices and frameworks aimed at measuring happiness on local or national or international scale. More specifically, the UAE has set itself the objective of ranking amongst the top five happiest countries in the world by 2021. Research by psychologists Lykken and Tellegen has shown that 50% of happiness is related to baseline level (i.e. a person's pre-disposition to happiness), 10% to circumstances (such as wealth) and around 40% is intentional activities (i.e. one's pursuit of happiness) [Lykken and Tellegen, 1996]. This highlights the role the community can play in promoting its own happiness. This in turn is being translated – albeit in very small steps – into interventions planners and designers can implement within the built environment to enhance happiness and wellbeing.

The key drivers and example design interventions for happiness can be outlined as follows:

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Health: having physical and mental health are essential for one to be happy

- Having an interconnected network of travel options such as shaded pathways, bicycle facilities, and rest stops encourage residents to actively engage with the built environment, promoting a healthier living.
- Green spaces to provide shading, reduce pollution and noise levels, and enhance thermal comfort.

Figure 1, Using vacant spaces to create spaces fpr social interaction adds life to the community

Thoughtfulness: community plays a vital role in giving on a sense of belonging and support. Being part of a community also gives one a sense of purpose and fulfilment which enhances happiness.

- Initiatives such as 'Take a book/Leave a book' can help people feel that they are part of a community that encourages sharing and active engagement.
- Community can also create a sense of security, making it safe for children to play and interact within. This provides a peace of mind and helps to de-stress.

Beauty: being surrounded by pleasant environment, as opposed to a poorly maintained and dull surrounding, creates a sense of pride and trust and engagement.

- Open public spaces with public art and nice landscaping allow for respite from daily stress.
- Revitalising vacant plots can encourage engagement within the community. For instance, local communities can use open spaces to organise screenings, open-air markets, performing arts, etc.

Figure 2. Take a book/Leave a book campaign engages with the community

Inclusivity and Play: Children are a good indicator of happiness. Designing child-friendly spaces can facilitate growth of a happier community as a city which caters for children caters for all and inclusion is important for a happy society.
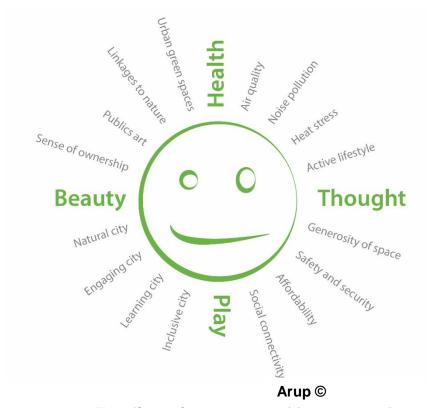
- Provision of open spaces accessible to all.

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- Designing spaces to allow children and their families to mix and enjoy their time.

Conclusion

The built environment has a role to play in promoting both physical and mental happiness and designers and planners are starting to identify these complex linkages. For instance, green spaces not only promote health but can add beauty and a playful aspect to the environment. As such, the pursuit of happiness within the built environment should follow a more holistic approach to planning and design, by focusing on the needs of the community. Though the definition of happiness is largely subjective, the key drivers and design features discussed during the workshop present a synopsis of the key drivers and design interventions that need to be considered to promote the happiness of the community as a whole, as well as the individuals within.

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