Urban
OCTOBER

World
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Day

World
Cities
Day October 31

— BACKGROUND PAPER —
URBAN OCTOBER 2015

Public Spaces for All
Designed to Live Together

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URBAN OCTOBER
BACKGROUND PAPER

Urban October was launched by UN-Habitat in 2014 to emphasize the world's urban challenges and engage the international community towards the New Urban Agenda. This year the month of October will kick-off with World Habitat Day under the motto 'Public Spaces For All' and conclude with World Cities Day under the motto 'Designed to Live Together'.

'Transforming our World – the 2030 development agenda' includes Sustainable Development Goal 11, which formulates the ambition to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable - underlying the relevance of UN-Habitat's mission. Towards the HABITAT III Conference, to be held in Quito, the SDGs should be ingrained in the way we think of cities and plan cities. Emerging from the debates at HABITAT III, the New Urban Agenda will set the agenda on how to deal with the challenges of urbanization in the next two decades.

Rapid urbanization is one of the defining challenges of contemporary societies. For cities to realize the potentials and avoid the pitfalls of population and economic growth, good urban planning is critical. In many countries, unplanned city extensions and decades of car-centric urban design have created sprawling city-regions. As these unplanned areas offer few work opportunities, people and goods have been forced to travel long distances to employment opportunities, leading to congestion, pollution and a generally reduced quality of live. A lack of planning has also led to slum formation, spatial inequality and segregated communities in many contexts, exacerbating inequality and injustice and triggering turmoil and revolt. Over 61% of dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa, 24% in Latin America and 30% in Asia occupy land informally. The lack of adequate street networks and limited and dwindling public space in cities compound further urban inefficiencies and inequalities. Planning should anticipate urban growth, as when land is already occupied and natural areas destroyed, restructuring or rebuilding it becomes a very costly and difficult process. Planning, urban design and public space structure the city, and are powerful tools to engage with these challenges.

Cities of the future should be **'designed to live together'** and urban planning is the tool that will help us accomplish this. One reason is that design of the physical environment greatly influences how people interact with each other. Broad sidewalks and commercial street frontage foster economic activity and make neighborhoods safer. Cities with small building blocks and short distances between intersections are easy to walk and navigate. And cities with quality public space invite people to come outside, communicate and collaborate with each other, and participate in public life. This is why the mission to create **'public spaces for all'** is one of the anchors of urban planning and design.

WORLD HABITAT DAY
PUBLIC SPACES FOR ALL

The character of a city is defined by its streets and public spaces. When we think of great cities, we invariably think of their iconic public spaces: Times Square in New York, Piccadilly Circus in London, Avenida Atlantica in Rio de Janeiro, Azad Maidan in Mumbai and Uhuru Park in Nairobi. From squares and boulevards to neighbourhood gardens and children playgrounds, public space frames city image. The connective matrix of streets and public spaces forms the skeleton of the city upon which all else rests. Public space is a vital component of a prosperous city. Well designed and managed public space is a key asset for a city's functioning and has a positive impact on its economy, environment, safety, health, integration and connectivity. The quality of life for people in cities is directly related to the state of its public spaces.

Public space takes many forms, from the streets to parks and playgrounds of recreation to marketplaces. But this does not mean that all public spaces are "open spaces" – a library, a school or other public facilities are also public spaces. Public space is the setting for a multitude of activities such as festivals, trade, the movement of goods and people, provision of infrastructure, or the setting for community life and livelihoods. Public spaces must be seen as multi-functional areas for meeting, economic exchange and cultural expression among a wide diversity of people and should be designed and managed to build peaceful and democratic societies and promoting cultural diversity.

Public space is crucial for the urban poor: Public space is often referred to as 'the poor man's living room' which hints at its particular importance for marginalized groups, but also its ability to foster integration between different socio-economic groups. Improving access to good public spaces for the most vulnerable urban residents is a powerful tool to improve equity, promote inclusion and combat discrimination. The use of public space by the poor is sometimes ignored, although public space is 'the poor man's living room' and important for recreation, social, cultural and economic development of vulnerable groups. Inadequate housing should be compensated by generous provisions of good quality multi-functional public space. Investments in streets and public space infrastructure improve urban productivity, livelihoods and allow better access to markets, jobs and public services, especially where over half of the urban workforce is informal. In particular, public spaces where informal business can be carried out provide poorer urban dwellers with precious livelihood opportunities. Multi-functional and shared public space is important, for example street vendors often share public space with other users, such as cars and pedestrians.

Public space contributes to building social cohesion: Public space provides room for social and cultural interaction and can foster a sense of belonging and pride in an area. A public space that is open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, provides a democratic forum for citizens and society. Public space can bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.

Public space promotes gender equality: The mainstreaming of gender equality into urban planning, development and design is essential if we are to create public space where men and women, boys and girls have equal opportunities to be happy, healthy, secure as well as economically and politically empowered.

A gender-sensitive and gender-equal public space proactively considers in its design the safety and comfort of all community members, and fosters interaction between people of all genders. Gender-sensitive public space by their design enhance women's safety and feelings of security, through lighting, or access to public transportation. Other important areas of consideration involves landscaping, visibility, signage, and proximity to other public spaces.

Pervasive gender-based street harassment is one of the most significant barriers preventing equitable access and enjoyment of public spaces today. Although violence in the private domain is now widely recognized as a human rights violation, sexual harassment in public spaces remains a challenge globally. We all have a role to play in changing this. Men can speak out against gender discrimination and violence where they see it, challenging their peers and their community to treat others with respect in public spaces.

Public space enhances safety: Where public space is inadequate, poorly designed, or privatized, the city becomes increas¬ingly segregated. The result can be a polarized city where social tensions are likely to flare up and where crime and violence rises. A mixed and diverse public space (use, users, design, state, time, etc.) provides a place that is vibrant and busy automatically reducing insecurity. Fear of crime and crime itself, can deter people, not just vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly, from using public spaces. In addition, women often face particular concerns, and due to fear of crime and violence are often restricted from using some public space in some areas. Well-designed and well-maintained streets and public spaces can help to reduce these fears and contribute to improving mutual trust and safety.

Public space supports economic development: A good connective matrix of public space has impact on economic productivity as it improves the efficiency of the supply chain, reducing production costs and promoting the mobility of goods and people. Public space provides important benefits to all forms of business, both formal and informal. As cities increasingly compete with one another to attract investment, good streets, market places, parks, squares, gardens and other public facilities becomes a vital business and marketing tool. In addition, good public spaces can increase the land values of the adjacent properties. Entrepreneurs, large or small, are attracted to locations that offer well-designed, well-managed public places and these in turn attract customers, employees and services.

Public space improves public health: Good-quality, well-maintained network of public spaces can help to improve our physical and mental health by encouraging physical activity and play, making walking more attractive, reducing stress and providing a calming environment.
Public space increases transportation efficiency: One of the fundamental functions of public space is that it allows us to move around and to access our homes, work, schools and other amenities – on foot, by bicycle, by car, motorbike or public transport. Well-designed connective matrix of streets and public spaces encourages walking and cycling, and has the power to create a safe environment by reducing vehicle speeds and use.

Public space improves the environment: Many cities are developing policies that promote compact, liveable areas, with adequate public space that facilitate public transport, encourages walking and cycling, thereby reducing carbon emissions. Public space is critical for environmental

sustainability. Green and open public space brings many important environmental benefits such as, the cooling of air and the absorption of atmospheric pollutants. The significant increase in hard surfacing and the reduction in green spaces lead to higher temperatures in towns and cities. Vegetation in the public space can help to redress this imbalance.

Given the importance of public spaces, it is worrying that provision of public space is limited in many cities, that access to public space is becoming more and more controlled and that often cities lack comprehensive knowledge of the public space they have and management mechanisms to enhance its quality, access and benefits. In addition, tools for creating and protecting public spaces are not widely applied and accessible to cities across the world, and in particular in developing countries. An enormous local asset is undervalued and underutilized.

Creating safe, inclusive and accessible public spaces for all through public action, participation and partnerships.

Public space creation, protection, management and enjoyment require capable local authorities and collaboration with inhabitants and other actors. Public Space requires cities and local governments to take a trans-disciplinary approach by working in partnership with a range of stakeholders and organizations, which should include civil society, academia and the private sector to ensure inclusive, safe and accessible public spaces for all.

Working on public space is the ideal opportunity for the involvement of all inhabitants. Public space allows people to become engaged and to feel part of the city. This implies to respect and protect a number of rights and freedoms, such as the right to freedom of expression and assembly, the right to information, consultation and participation in decision-making processes. A good city should foster social cohesion and build social capital, engaging the community in design, management and maintenance of safe public spaces.

The creation of public space requires adequate legal frameworks and the relations between private and public interests to be well understood and managed. Opportunities to expand the public space provison can be sized during redevelopment and it is important to plan public space in advance of development wherever possible.

The challenge to maintain public spaces is often the responsibility of municipalities but there is also a key role for the citizens, communities and of course the private sector. Local government can work together with citizens and the private sector to manage and maintain public space. Focusing on streets and public spaces as a business case for urban renewal and regeneration can help cities as engines of economic and social development, redirecting municipal resources towards improving the supply, quantity and distribution of public space in less fortunate neighbourhoods.

Good public spaces play a role in attracting investment, uses and activities, thus enhancing safety; increasing property values, generating municipal revenue; providing opportunities for economic interaction and enhancing livelihood opportunities.

A new urban agenda is evolving to create and protect public spaces. Enabling components of the new urban agenda are rules and legislation for creating and protecting access to public spaces, urban planning and design for providing adequate quantity and good quality public space, and urban finance and economy for sharing values, promoting local economic development, providing employment and attracting investment.

WORLD CITIES DAY
DESIGNED TO LIVE TOGETHER
GOOD URBAN DESIGN

Good urban form is the foundation for sustainable cities, and urban design is the tool that provides the opportunity to transform the way that we live, to facilitate the development of socially integrated, prosperous cities where people live together.

Urban form is the combination of streets, building typologies and networks of public spaces. They form the underlying structure of the city, a skeleton around which people's lives are built and activities carried out. Urban form affects how we live, how we move around, how our neighbourhoods look like and how safe we feel on the streets.

The fame and familiarity of many cities is owed to their urban form. Venice's narrow passageways and canals allow a slower pace of life and an intimate familiarity amongst its residents. New York's quick-paced life and character is linked to its big, busy orthogonal avenues, tall buildings and high density of inhabitants. The vibrant and lively community life in Marrakesh is fostered in the narrow, dense streets filled with commercial activities. But not only the examples of good design capture the imagination. In many contexts, the sprawled structure of cities has created a culture dependent on cars. And the contemporary cities with enclosed residential-only neighbourhoods with small street frontage have created streets that are inactive, dark and unsafe at night. Design that supports density, street life and connectivity, facilitates mixed use, enables a mix of social groups and is adapted to local and cultural contexts is a great tool to support sustainable cities and livability.

Good design contributes to social integration, equality and diversity. Planning residential areas with different possibilities in terms of typology and price enables residents from different backgrounds and income levels to live together, prevents the creation of isolated ghettos or gated communities, fights segregation and discrimination. Good design gives space for different cultures, ethnicities, lifestyles to mix and come together.

Good design fosters sustainable use of shared resources. Planning compact, denser cities reduces the overexploitation of natural resources, and facilitates common living by enabling equal access to land, food and water for all.

Good design inspires lively neighborhoods. Designed public spaces, parks, playgrounds, streets and squares filled with activities help create a vibrant public life for all residents.

Good design can make cities safer. Neighbourhoods that remain active and lively at night, with commercial activities on the ground floors, pedestrian friendly well-lit streets and public spaces mean increased personal safety and security.

Good design fosters proximity to jobs and services. With good infrastructure and public transport, higher building density and mixed use neighbourhoods, jobs, markets, schools and recreation are closer to people's homes and are easily accessible by foot, bike or public transport.

Good design helps to create clean, healthy cities. Denser cities and proximity to jobs and services mean reduced need for car use, less congestion and less pollution, as well as more sustainable usage of land and preservation of the natural and green areas.

Good design anticipates climate change and reduces the impacts of disasters. Planning with sensitivity to the surrounding nature, avoiding development in risky zones, planning natural buffers and prevention systems in flood or earthquake prone areas builds resilient settlements and safe communities.

Design as a participatory process

Good design means building an integrated all-encompassing urban system that considers not only what the urban form of the city should be, but also what should be the process of envisioning it.

In many cities, planning mechanisms are rigid and linear. Design is here thought of as final stage of planning, as giving form to a long process of complicated research. Outsourced to specialized consultants, it is the endeavour of a technocratic club -- members only.

Yet the true power of design lies in bringing people together in a process that is inclusive, transparent and iterative in character. In a city, demands and desires of many different stakeholders need to be combined and balanced, as negotiation is the cornerstone of many planning decisions. A traffic engineer advises wide roads, the private sector presses for space for business, politicians dream of great civic squares and inhabitants demand quality affordable residences. Design is thus the combined process of distilling the needs of different stakeholders in a concrete proposal.

When planning cities, public authorities should facilitate a collaborative design process with a broad range of concerned stakeholders, that develops a debate around concrete interventions, step by step. Design is the point of departure from which through debate and reflection, testing and improving, a common vision is reached. If design is integrated throughout the whole process --
from research phase to detailed phase -- it can propose tangible negotiable directions, define problems and provide momentum to every phase of planning. Clear design also makes planning accessible for non-planners, who can be put-off by technical jargon, and encourages them to actively contribute to the process. As clear design facilitates understanding by politicians and civic society, it can also accelerate governments' decision-making processes and save endless deliberations.

Note to the reader:
This year on World Habitat Day, UN-Habitat is partnering with HeForShe, a global UN Women initiative that aims to engage men and boys, one half of humanity, in removing the social and cultural barriers that prevent the other half of humanity from achieving their potential. This partnership examines and promotes the role for men and women alike in the active creation of gender-equal public spaces for all.