

Design Research with Imagination podcast: Season 1, Episode 2

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Chris

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the imagination podcast series where you get to learn all about what we do in imagination as it relates to design, research, imagination, and the future. Today we're taking an in depth look at the question, what is a good city? I'm actually using air quotes. Whenever I say good, you can't see me doing it. But believe me, I will be doing it. They're here to take part in the conversation with me or to lectures and imagination that you have been delving deep into this topic. Recently. Dr. Mariana Cavada and Dr. Marion Calvo. Before we start having a natter about this topic, though, it probably makes sense for us to introduce ourselves. So you as listeners know who we are, and why we want to talk about this topic. So, Mariana, let's start with you. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Marianna

Yes. Thank you very much, Chris. And hello, everyone. I am Mariana. I am a lecturer in urban design policy at Lancaster University, working with a brilliant team of Imagination Lancaster, and I'm also teaching in architecture. I believe, you know, I have a few things to say about what makes a good city. But of course, during our conversations, I'm pretty sure we're gonna learn a few more.

Chris

Miriam, what about you, would you like to introduce yourself,

Miriam

of course. Chris, welcome. Thank you very much for inviting me to be in this podcast. I enjoy a lot the topic, I'm passionate about cities and how we can make it. Yes, I am a doctor. I did my PhD in collaborative design. So I'm an expert in collaboration and bringing people together and using design, different approaches to do that. But I'm also an architect and urban planner. I am currently the lecturer in participatory architecture at Lancaster School of Architecture. I am also a member of the Imagination Lancaster cross disciplinary research team. And I lead research in this centre with members of the public with community members, with policymakers with geographers, artist, activist in all this is to explore other ways of doing architecture by strengthening community engagement and engaging everyone in the formation of the built environment. I'm very, very glad to be here today. Thank you.

Chris

Thanks, Miriam. And you may be wondering who this fabulous voice is, well, it's me. It's Dr. Chris Boyko. I'm a lecturer in urban design also, in Imagination Lancaster, Lancaster University. And I do lots

of research looking at the way that people use their cities and how we can design them in different ways. So I've been involved in lots of different projects over the years. And hopefully during this session, we'll hear about some of those as well as the work that both Mariana and Mirian have done. Okay, so we've introduced ourselves so you know who we are a little bit more as a next step. I'm wondering if it would make sense for us to kind of discuss this question. So what is a good city and as academics, we tend to always look at whatever question we have and say, how, what does this mean? How can we unpack this so maybe as a academic audience, or academic group, we can kind of unpack what this word good means. And kind of get a sense of what we think that what that is and how it relates to the city. So, Mariana, I'm wondering if we can, again, start with you and hear what you think good means in this case, or what it means to you.

Marianna

Thank you, Chris. It's always tricky to unpack what good means, as you mentioned, especially for cities because every city is different. And there are so many different people living around the world in different and beautiful cities. However, if we want to focus on how we can make a beautiful, like, a good city, maybe we can elaborate on the fact that how we can bring positive living, to cities and especially to people. So I think a good city for me would be a city that offers choice, choice of how to live, who to live with a choice of how we are able, as people in cities, to develop, to prosper, to do all this, all these things that one that can make us happy. Of course, I believe that this can only happen within the context of livability and sustainability, and most likely smartness. So how can we be efficient, but also provide this positive outcome from all these smart things that we can do? How are cities better for children? How are designed for people that they have very specific requirements for older generations, or for people that they're just visiting, or just working in the city? So a good city something that, you know, we should use in plural terms, that it brings the benefits for everyone, and not just for the majority, and also bring something positive for the future, a sustainable and prosperous future?

Chris

Wow, that's, that was great. Thank you. Marianna that's really comprehensive. Mirian, do you have anything to add or, or a different take on what good means to you in this context.

Mirian

It's again, as Mariana mentioned, I totally agree is a little bit difficult, particularly because good is usually related to subjectivity. And obviously, the city is very subjective, because is, is made out of the imaginary of a collective, as it is multi dimensional, and it's made out of tangible and intangible components that all overlap and interact in our locus of human agency components, such as physical elements like streets, parks, squares, buildings, but then we have also services, public services, businesses, private, the relationship between private and public, we have common good as well, which is like the cornerstone of democratic cities, we have also elements like health care, water supply, food, you know, is a very complex environment, therefore, good, has to be taken in an holistic way. And at the same time, we trace back to the origins of cities, cities, is a function of the urban experts. Let's put in that way because we can trace back to Robert Parker are the people I like him, they William Harvey they talk about the city as one of the greatest events of humankind is where we live, it's how we are we have been able to survive, and to adapt the natural environment into ourselves. So is made out of the knowledge iat the same time. And in has changed ourselves at the same time. So while we have been

designing and making decisions about how our cities work, that implies an implicit change in our lifestyles, because culture at the end of the day is the, is pretty much data formation of the natural environment into the built environment. So a very complex topic, the one that we have today on the table, but they will say that just to put the things more into the context of these days, we have at the stake, a number of challenges that to our cities are crucial. One of them is obviously the climate change, which is already here, on the doorstep. And this requires a certain changes, radical changes in the way that we built our built environment and the relationships that we build as well into those ones. We have the pandemic as well where we have learned loads of very interesting things about how our cities have been used in in late periods, particularly because of the abuse of the car, in the spacial dimensions of our cities, and how they taken car away. And then mobility, we have discovered all the layers of the city that will imply in all cities like the mediaeval city, or you know, the Renaissance city, where the mobility and the fast mobility, particularly for cars have been less present.

Chris

Excellent, thank you for that. So, so much to work with there, and I'm going to throw something else into the mix. When I think a good as it as a relates to the city, I actually struggled to think what that what that looks like what that means. And if I try and think about a word, that's the opposite of it bad, I know, I can think of lots of examples of cities that are bad. So the poorly designed, people who are living there are really struggling with quality of life, or struggling just to survive. And, and from a governance perspective, people aren't actually stepping up and helping those people out to create a city that people want to live in now and in the future. So I can find lots of examples of bad but I struggled to think of something like, what is a good city. Nonetheless, I think that to me building a little bit about, on what Marianna said, this idea of it being inclusive. So a good city is something that's open to everyone, and isn't afraid to be challenged, isn't afraid to try new things. And to take a look at what they've done and very critically, both for people who are making the decisions and the people who are living in their cities, and really trying to understand what they can do to make it better to make it livable, or sustainable, or to improve its well being or so on. But if I'm I find it's, it's, it's hard to actually say what is a good city? Or what is good in this sense. And yeah, I think in looking at the, in what we've said, there are a few themes that are coming out. And so one of them, one of them seems to be around this idea of wellbeing, or yeah, or livability or inclusiveness, and certainly the complexity of cities is coming in as another one. And I'd say pulling on what we've talked about in the past, we've looked at this idea about smartness and participation within cities. So we've kind of talked a little bit about that now, I'm wondering if we want to touch upon any of those issues now, kind of maybe looking at one or two of these themes and maybe one around well being or or inclusiveness maybe a theme around smart and maybe one around like policy or participation Mirian you had your hand up do you want to share some

Mirian

enthusiastic as I am yes and before maybe we dive into the depth of some of these topics, I would like to share like the Urban Planning trends that are emerging now, as part of the big debate that the pandemic has generated in the urban environment, particularly the cities and where we go also looking at the emerging climate changes, how the cities might be adapting and so and so, the global debate is looking at a replanning or increasing three big axes or dimensions if you want one could be like the Healthy City. The healthy city is talking about keeping a close look to indicators such as quality of air quality of water, providing green corridors of biodiversity, looking at the carbon footprint and, also on

the other one is the food growing city, which is obviously another trend we cannot afford anymore to collect transport, to transport things because of the cost of the, that we generated the planet sustainability talking, and yeah, we are talking about like even less than a kilometre in the next 20 years of production for food. So here that is how important component of how we use the empty spaces of our cities to help in that and the last point is the resilient or the well being city, which I think is the one that we can maybe focus a little bit more or not depending on where the conversation goes. But, and I would like to share like one of the quotes that says life first life, then spaces and buildings, the other way around never works. So basically, we need to start by understanding the life and the requirements of our lives and how we live with our lives. It's not just human beings, and then a put it at the centre stage of city that since the 19th century, has been becoming a commodity in order to create profit. So well being at the centre stage, and inclusivity as well. But not just, for humans, if not for creating on balance between all the ecosystems.

Chris

I think, that's a really great couple of points there one being what kind of like asking that question, similar to what is a good city? But what would a city look like if it had well being as its as its core? You know, what, what shape does the city have? What does that look like? How is it designed? What are the services that are attached to that? What makes it different to what we do now? And then also this this really nice attention, as you say, it's been certainly on the agenda of some academics and, and practitioners and local authorities for a little while is that focus on more than human. So it's not only thinking about cities as good for humans, but cities as inclusive for plants, animals, insects, and so on. And that they have they have, I guess, in academic terms "agency", or that they need to be thought about, rather than just there for human consumption, necessarily. Marianna if you have any thoughts on this idea, but around well being?

Marianna

Yes, thank you, Chris. Very interesting point overall. And at this point, I think I'm going to focus on smartness. Because smart cities have been, you know, the centre focus of my research the past few years, the way I see smartness and the research I conducted on smart cities, led me to the conclusion that cities can only be truly smart, if they're livable. That means whatever we're doing in the smart city spectrum, has to have clear and measurable, measurable benefits for the people and the city itself. Of course, what we need to look further into is to explore how these benefits come about. So you know, are they sustainable enough? Do they provide economic benefits for people in cities? Do they provide a platform to develop a governance systems, and at the end, you know, are they overall healthy outcomes, and so on. So for this reason, I developed a system that actually evaluates all these points, and concludes with a general measurement of whether the city can be called smart or not, of course, you know, by doing that in, in several cities, we can have a rating between cities and understand which city can be smarter. Now, not only more, but this tool gives the opportunity to people to simple people like you, me, and everyone to understand how we could make a city smarter, by providing benefits people and of course, you know, if we're developing and designing as a smart city initiative, if that will reach a certain amount of people or the whole city. So this tool actually puts people at the centre of decision making, in order to benefit them to benefit the group or the whole city. Or maybe, you know, I city system like Singapore, let's say, which is both a city and a country. So smartness is just not a technological advancement, a tool for actually making the city more efficient or more, you know,

economic, economical, prosperous, but actually one that advances said the quality of life and the well being, and it actually analyses, all these elements, that we actually have a city assets, and how we can use that for improving the city living. So overall, I think smartness would be really associated and closely linked with well being, because I think everybody wants to live in a city that, you know, it feels good to live in, rather than a city is highly technological, and brings all these digital advancements. Because, you know, as we know, all these devices, they they run out of battery at some point. And what we're left with is a city with the streets and the people to live happily together.

Chris

So just to follow that up, that was really, really helpful. I think for some listeners, they'll be really knowledgeable about the idea of this smart city as a concept. But if you were to try and explain it to someone's mum, for example, how might you do that in a way that connected with well being, just so that people can get a good sense of that?

Marianna

That's a really good question, Chris. And that's probably the main issue of smart cities. Because, you know, so far, we don't know what exactly it means to be smart. We don't know how we are smarter in a city and so on. So I would start there saying to someone that you know, you have a smartphone, right, you know, what a smartphone does, you know, roughly how to use it. Now, if you try to advance that on to a city level, of course, that might not work. But then what some cities have done is they have introduced some initiatives. So they have taken the lead into creating some programmes, let's say, either it's, you know, it's the digital governance system in the city, for easier administration, or it might be a cycle lane that has been introduced. Now, taking these initiatives taking these city actions into the smart tool, we can assess how many benefits would bring that to people for how long? And what is the rate of this outcome, how, you know, if a cycle lane in the city can impact the majority of the people for a longer period of time, and not just not just those who can actually, you know, cycle between nine to five. Now, by assessing these initiatives, we can see that whatever smart initiative we do, either if it's digital or something different, we can understand if it brings benefits to the people. So it's about smartness is about doing, doing things in the city, that they're actually good for everyone. So it's a very, it's an overarching idea. But I think specifically, once we can take this tool, and assess these initiatives, we can understand how this can be better and how they can bring sustainability and urban health and quality of life. So I think smartness overall is about improving city living, and not just by efficiency, but also by the efficacy of the solution.

Chris

Okay, that that's helpful to kind of encapsulate what you know, which is you did a PhD on this. It's incredible. So it's really great to hear that. Thank you. Marianna, I think I want to bring in Mirian if that's okay, because one of the components of a smart city is ensuring said an inclusive, hopefully an inclusive way of living and participating, Mirian, you, you are an expert in participatory architecture, among other things, I'm wondering how you feel a participation within a smart city agenda could improve well being or do you not think that's possible.

Mirian

Well, the first thing to say is that, so, the concept of smart cities is becoming a little bit misuse in certain arenas. The reason for that is because there are certain words that we now repeat, and we say, we say these words and by saying this once we consider that we are in, in tune with with in solving some issues, but the reality of the pandemic, for instance, has shown us three things one, that human beings we are social by nature, and by not being a social that creates a number of mental illnesses, which are longer term worse, and decrease the level of well being. And actually, there are studies that demonstrate that social cohesion or the lack of social cohesion is equally to smoke 15 cigarettes a day in our body. And the second thing that the pandemic has shown us is that we are a codependent which means that without bio, without any ecosystem, we cannot survive. The climate change is here to demonstrate that and that is why our survival is at stake. And that is why the architecture and urban cities need drastically to change in the way that we relate to each other but also to the production of things and the relationship with nature. And the third thing is that we are not so as smart as we believe. The reason for that is that suddenly the virus just came. And we didn't know where it was coming was there a lot of things that we don't know. So smart cities are concept that is quite broad and is based in the use of technology. In order to solve that that is an old fashion idea that has been refuted in the 60s already. And that is why Marianna is making the emphasis that a city is smart, as long as it's participative. So, there is no smart without human beings without the collective, there are no other components coming here. So on the one hand, we have all the climate change, which are wicked problems, wicked problems, we call it in the design arena, pretty much problems that are so complex that no one expert can solve it, if not, loads of people can to come together to solve it. And this is the situation where we are living now with a climate emergency and what some people call terraforming the the Earth, which is pretty much the period that we are living so the the Earth is changing, and we need to terraform it in order to be able to survive, this is the future. And at the same time, we're living thanks to the new technologies, the smartphones and all this third a revolution that they call it and the revolution that is the technology digital and hybrid spaces, a highly American society that claims more and more participation and being part of the decision making. So a participatory methods, participatory research, participatory architecture are being hailed as methods that can join all these teams together.

Chris

So you think that cities themselves are only smart because of the people who live there, but it also means that they need to be active in decision making active in making and doing designing, Is that Is that accurate

Mirian

is because the system that is underpinning the governance and the in the whole system. So it's not just governance is governance is policies is how the policies around how the the the role of the citizens is in play and all these things around because they belong to another city, and other history of the city that is industrial, we are in a post industrial situation, we are in a transition moment, the pandemic has been tested us in a small scale, but things are coming stronger and the city that we have now is past, we need to think about the future in the future in another thing is that we are not so smart as we believe the reason there are loads of evidence of that one is the pandemic but the other is as well like the creation of the city as I was trying to explain before. And with this quote from Robert Park, that, you know, highlights we are doing things on our on the go. But we reflect like maybe that much. And we are not so able to anticipate. That's why what is I would say these are very difficult question is because we cannot

anticipate what is happening. And at the same time it's subjective because it's made out of a collective. So to summarise, yes, collect a collaboration and participation in our future is highly demand these days because of the complexity of the situation that we have at the stake.

Chris

Absolutely. I think that idea that you just mentioned about, well, what is a good city depends on when and where you are in the world. And when you are in the world in terms of its timeline, because during the modernist period of Architecture and Planning, good maybe meant rational, you know, in terms of the layout and the way that people use space, and there's zoning of space. So here's a city centre with businesses, and here's a suburb with houses. And that's wonderful. And that's what good is. But now, as you say, because of climate change because of increasing use of technologies in different ways. So increases in migration patterns, certainly increases in wars and tensions, all sorts of things happening. I think we need to be reassessing and as, as academics who work in the design field, I think it's important that we really spend some time and reflect on how we do that. And understand what the good city means today for us. Mirian, you wanted to jump in?

Mirian

Yeah, just two quick things that because I think this conversation is amazing. But so you mentioned and this I think is very important inequality, the big gap is increasing over and over in the last 40 years. Particularly with, in the spirit of the capitalist system. And one of the things that also the pandemic has the most right is that we cannot live in isolation. And that is why we need to retake our public space, the public space is crucial in cities, but also in our social lives. And in our governance in our politics. The public space is the element, the component that is able to mediate and create spaces for equality and inclusivity. In our cities, as long as those spaces are accessible for everyone, of course, under the view of a democratic city, this cannot be seen in another way. So, yeah, I think it's very important to consider how we bridge the gap between inequalities in our city we are, it doesn't matter the scale, there are increasing in, an increasing gap between poor and rich. And also like, another thing that, that I mentioned before, that has been important in a democratic city, that is the access to public services in the common good, that is also been lost in the last 40 years. The reason for that is, again, this time in, in the speed of the liberalism, by privatising certain public goods. And in we can see the through the pandemic, how, you know, the best neighbourhoods in London, for instance, were those ones that have a green areas and quality of public space, and near 10 minutes walking. And then you look at other neighbourhoods where you know, all these things were not in place, and therefore people have, really, so the pandemic has created very different experiences, inequalities in our society, in our citizens.

Chris

I'm aware of time, and we could continue talking about this for forever, because it's such an interesting topic. And both of you have worked on this as part of British Academy work that you've been a part of. So I'm sure you will need to have you back on this podcast series just to continue talking about this. And wondering then if we should wrap it up. But before doing that, maybe just get one kind of reflection from each of us. Just based on what we've been talking about today. Anything jumping out at you that you think yeah, that's what makes a good city or, you know what, I have some more questions. I'm not quite sure about this. Marianna, do want to start with you.

Marianna

Yeah, thanks, Chris. And since you mentioned the British Academy research work, I would like to give a hint, using their work. The work that we are currently doing on what is a good city through the British Academy fund is called Caring with Cities. So to us to the team is important to see how cities can care for their people. So I'm mentioning that because you know, that's another lens at what makes a good city, a city that actually is caring about people. And that's not only as a service provision, but it's, it has the notions of inclusivity, equality, diversity, and all these things that, you know, are going to teach us to live with each other in a peaceful and prosperous manner for the future. And again, the work that I'm doing around how to design urban policy, it's actually looking into the ways into the methodologies that we can use to design policies according to this new concept of caring, of bring diversity of creating harmonious and equal environment for everyone in the city. So I'd like to conclude that, you know, a good city is is not an old concept is a concept that talks about the future, and how we can create this future together. So I think that's just me. Yes. It is about bringing the future closer together. And thank you very much.

Chris

Thanks. Marianna. What about you, Mirian, do you have any thoughts from what we've said about what is a good city or just generally some comments?

Mirian

Yeah, happy to. So briefly mentioned, I think in the Imagination Lancaster website, you can find a projects leading are collaborating, some of them are truly looking at this topic. Two of them one is called Mapping Values is a very interdisciplinary team with several universities located in London. And we're looking at different methodologies to map out post pandemic, neighbourhoods with inequalities and try to come up with what is (??) the next pandemic city. The second project that is on the agenda is called, is long name, democracy and sustainable citizenship. And this one is pretty much looking at encouraging the voice of young adults who usually are left behind in all the participatory processes. So looking at a what are the methodologies to enhance their participation in policymaking? So we are working with three council, London, actually, the GLA climate Council and Lancaster City Council, looking at different scales and looking at different ways to approach this to bring together policymakers. And just to finish, and I think this is a good way, all of them are embracing or are subsuming under the umbrella of social sustainability. And these opens up new opportunities for legitimatising community engagement and these advocates for other ways to understand the right to the city, but also the citizens rights in decision making. And I think the I would say it has to be done holistically with everyone included. And that's why participation becomes a an essential.

Chris

That's great, it's, so I think it's something that I just wanted to mention, Mirian said about cities are social. And I think to me that that really hit home. Cities need to be designed to be social. Now I understand that there's an entire spectrum of people from introverted or extroverted and I'm sure there are lots of different ways of splicing that, but I think providing sit in cities need to be providing spaces and services that are public, that allow people to come together, to mix to learn from each other to share, to experience a place and identify within that and have an identity with it. And I think that's that's really so much but what to me, a good city is having this, these places and services for people to come

together to interact, to learn and to share and so on. So as I have the last word that will be it for us. So I just wanted to say thank you very much. We're going to wrap it up. And thank you so much Marianna and Mirian for joining me, Chris today on this podcast. It's been a pleasure.

Marianna

Fantastic. Thank you, Chris.

Mirian

And thank you very much. We did great