

BUILDING AN 8-80 CITY

A Simple Concept for Creating Great Cities for All

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PHOTOS: 8-80 CITIES

If you build a city that is great for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old, then you will build a successful city for everyone.

In all of human history we have never experienced the rapid growth of the aging population that we are experiencing today. Half of the people who have ever lived to age 65 or older are alive today. Just 200 years ago, there was not one country in the world with a life expectancy higher than 45 years old; today, there is not one below 45 years old¹. Not only is the population getting older, it is getting more urban. Today, 54 percent of the global population lives in cities, and by 2050 experts believe that number will have risen to 66 percent². How we plan, design, build, and cultivate a healthy city life for people of all ages has never been more important than it is now³.

This is one of the many reasons I started the non-profit organization 8-80 Cities. The organization is based on the premise that if you build a city that is great for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old, then you will build a successful city for everyone, from 0 to over 100. We need to stop building cities as if everyone was 30 years old and athletic, and instead create vibrant and healthy communities for everyone.

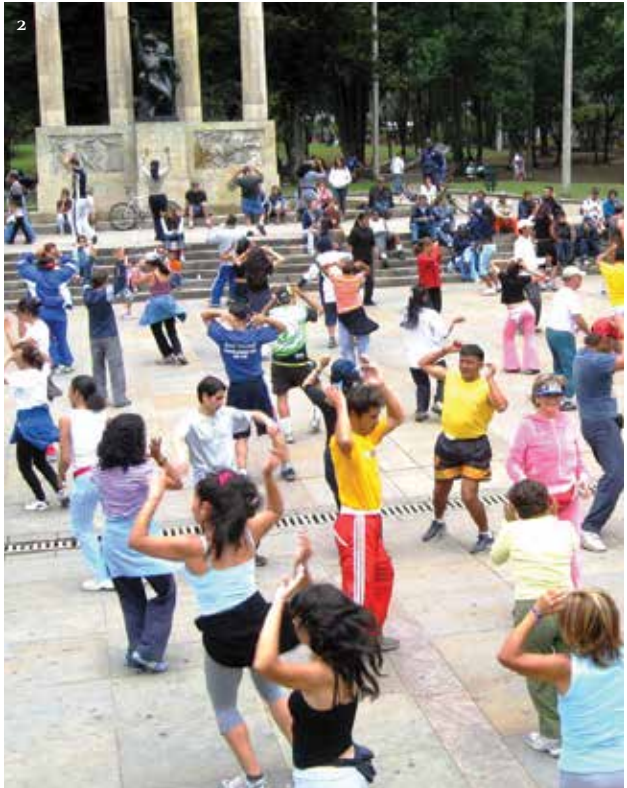
Over the last 50 years, our city planning has unfortunately focused more on the mobility of cars than the health and happiness of people. The 8-80 city concept initiates a conversation about how we can transform our cities into places that prioritize people, reflect social equity in the public realm, and encourage sustainable and healthy lifestyles for people of all ages and abilities.

Sustainable Mobility and Great People Places

As executive director of 8-80 Cities, for the past 8 years, I've had the privilege of advising decision-makers and community groups in more than 180 cities around the world in the areas of sustainable mobility and the design and use of parks and streets as great public spaces. There is no doubt that many of these cities have shared many of the same mistakes. The automobile has dominated planning theory and practice, often to the detriment of social equality, public health, and sustainability, particularly in the developed world. With increased economic growth and private vehicle ownership, many parts of the developing world have also started to follow this misguided path.

Through our work with older adult groups and associations across North America in particular, we've seen some troubling symptoms of this approach. Many older adults are absolutely terrified of the day they lose their driver's license. I am convinced this is not because they love their car, but because they love mobility and the quality of life it brings. That is why convenient, accessible, and affordable alternatives like public transit are an absolute must in any city.

Walking, cycling, and public transit must be best friends. I am always surprised when I visit cities where cycling advocates, pedestrian advocates, and public transit officials don't speak to each other. To truly create a viable alternative to car travel, walking, cycling, and public transit must be well-integrated into a network of great public spaces. There is no public transportation system in the world that will pick us up in front of our homes and drop us off at our destination. Many cities and communities around the world lack sidewalks or have sidewalks in poor repair, have dangerous road crossings, and have high traffic speeds



1,2 Aerobics in the Ciclovía.

on neighborhood streets. In the United States alone more than 4,400 pedestrians lost their lives in traffic crashes in 2011, and more than 76,000 were injured, many of whom were children and older adults⁴. Two of every three people killed in intersections are over 65 years old, more than four times their proportion of the population. Globally, 5,000 pedestrians are killed on the roads each week. Among them, children, older adults, and poor people are the most susceptible.

A city that provides viable sustainable mobility choices is a city that is not only more equitable, but one that is economically prosperous. It's no coincidence some of the cities that are considered the most livable are also the most economically

competitive. Businesses know that to attract and retain the best people, they have to offer a great quality of life. Melbourne, Vancouver, Portland (Oregon), and Copenhagen are great examples of cities that have reaped the rewards of investing in sustainable mobility.

Open Streets Mean Streets for All

A city's streets are not just for mobility—they are valuable public spaces in and of themselves. When you look at any city from the air, you can see that streets account for the majority of public space. Streets belong to all citizens regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. It seems evident that just driving cars is not the best use of such valuable space, which is owned by all citizens.

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Long before my work with 8-80 Cities, I was the commissioner of parks, sport, and recreation in Bogota, Colombia. Aside from having the wonderful opportunity to lead the design and development of more than 200 parks, I took over the task with running what at the time was a small program called “Ciclovía.” Every Sunday, 13 miles of Bogota’s city roads were opened to people and closed to cars. The program was initiated as a way to free up some much-needed public space for the people of Bogota to walk, bike, and exercise.

I was so enamored with the idea that I could create a whole new “paved Central Park” in the center of Bogota that I expanded the Ciclovía program from 13 miles to 76 miles of open city roads every Sunday. Currently, more than 1 million people walk, run, skate, bike, dance, and engage in all kinds of recreational activities along the Ciclovía route. That’s 1 million people of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds benefitting from exercise and social interaction, for an average of 3-4 hours every week. The Ciclovía has significantly improved the overall livability of Bogota. The program has been so successful that it has been widely emulated, with more than 100 programs in diverse countries around the world, including many in the United States. These “open street” programs are one of the most cost-effective and high-impact tools

any city, large or small, can use to improve the quality of life for people of all ages.

We Have a Responsibility to Act

As a baby boomer myself, I know the great effect our generation has had on shaping the world we live in today. We’ve fought for civil rights, gender equality, racial equality, and peace, and have contributed to the most economically prosperous era in history. But we know that our job is not done. We are a group that is better educated, more well-traveled, and wealthier than our parents were at our age. We are also committed voters and have strength in numbers, so let’s use this opportunity to be community transformers. We have a magnificent opportunity and responsibility to influence how billions will live for centuries. Whether it’s a street, a park, a neighborhood, or a city, let’s make our voices heard and create the 8-80 cities together. ●



Gil Penalosa

Gil Penalosa is passionate about cities for all people. As executive director of the Canadian non-profit organization 8-80 Cities, he advises decision-makers and communities on how to create vibrant cities and healthy communities for everyone. Because of his unique blend of pragmatism and passion, Penalosa’s leadership and advice is sought out by many cities and organizations, giving him the opportunity to work in more than 180 different cities across six continents.

¹ <http://www.gapminder.org/world>

² 2014 revision of the World Urbanization Prospects by UN DESA’s Population Division <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects-2014.html>

³ Population Division, DESA, United Nations <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/pdf/80chapterii.pdf>

⁴ Dangerous by Design 2014 <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/research/dangerous-by-design/dbd2014/national-overview/>