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Book Review

Happy City

Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design

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Introduction

This book review discusses Charles Montgomery's 2013 book entitled 'Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design'. This book discusses the relationship between the form and design of the city and happiness. The physical shape and design of the city affect emotions, health, and the way people interact with each other. The theories in this book draw on perspectives from urban planning, environmental psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral economics. In addition, the regions studied in this book are Bogotá (Colombia), Vancouver (Canada), New York & Atlanta (USA), and Copenhagen (Denmark).

The cover of this book represents the contents of Montgomery's book. We argue that the colorful images of tall buildings fit the book's purpose: happiness. Among these tall buildings, the author tries to visualize the existence of green open spaces with garden benches. This suggests that green open space supports psychological recovery, increases physical activity, and strengthens social activities/interactions, especially in urban communities (Alhadedy and Alomary 2024; Samavati et al. 2025; Samavati and Veenhoven 2024). There is a silhouette image of children playing with kites and bicycles. This illustrates that the city should be built not only with a complete infrastructure that supports economic activities, but

ARTICLE INFO

Received: January 12, 2026

Received in revised form:

June 14, 2026

Accepted: August 30, 2026

doi: [10.46456/jisdep.v7i2.1046](https://doi.org/10.46456/jisdep.v7i2.1046)



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THE JOURNAL OF INDONESIA SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Published by Centre for Planners' Development, Education, and Training (Pusbindiklatren), Ministry of National Development Planning/National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas), Republic of Indonesia

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Supported by Indonesian Development Planners Association (PPPI)

Please cite this article in APA Style as:

Rukmana, S. N., Roychansyah, M. S., Wibisono, B. H., & Swasto, D. F. (2026). Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design. *The Journal of Indonesia Sustainable Development Planning*, Vol 7(2), 433-438. <https://doi.org/10.46456/jisdep.v7i2.1046>

also with a sense of security and comfort for children and the elderly. Thus, the city can be considered inclusive and may become the center of community activities.

This book contributes to the shift in urban development, where initially the city was built with economic growth, to human-oriented development. Several statements are strengths in his writing. At the beginning of the chapter, he wrote about the psychology of mobility. Montgomery explains how people (in this case, society) get stuck in daily commuting. They prefer to live in a suburb far from their work, so they spend their days commuting. This book also mentions that the existence of public transportation often causes disappointment, especially in terms of uncertainty of departure schedules and infrastructure design that is not optimal and comfortable. The impact of high stress levels triggers a decline in the quality of life. On the other hand, people who use their own power to move, such as walking or riding bicycles, consistently report the highest levels of excitement. In the next chapter, Montgomery discusses freedom. He criticized the notion that freedom in mobility is defined by the speed of vehicles through the toll road construction, but rather by the freedom to choose how to move safely and comfortably. He explained that the highway used to be a common space, but cars are currently the priority. This phenomenon certainly harms children, the elderly, and the poor who cannot or cannot afford to drive.

We argue that the phenomenon written by Montgomery is relevant to conditions in Indonesia, especially in metropolitan cities. So far, the urban development is oriented towards private vehicles through road widening, toll road construction, among others. The dominance of this mobility movement certainly creates inequality for marginalized groups, the elderly, and children. Rapid urbanization in metropolitan Indonesia, such as Tangerang, forces people to face long journeys to urban centers (Rosida, Sari, and Irjayanti 2019). This book substantially provides a framework for the concept of a happy city, namely (1) Public space that must be neutral and easily accessible, (2) The existence of an integrated space that encourages the creation of social interaction, (3) the existence of inclusive public transportation and safe and comfortable pedestrian paths, (4) the design of a city that can adapt to the local culture. Therefore, the concept of a happy city, in this case, involves the existence of city spaces, such as a fostered environment, that serve as a forum to improve the quality of life of its people. The four points above show that the better the urban built environment, the higher the level of happiness of the community (Khare and Chatterjee 2024; Makki and Khalid 2025; Mirzaei et al. 2016; Sepe 2017). However, the ideas Montgomery writes about in this book are more narrative and inspirational than technical-empirical, so there is no operational technical formula for developing a happy City. This limitation offers another perspective, written by Brdulak (2017), titled Happy City: How to Plan and Create the Best Livable Area for the People. It offers a more systematic approach to formulating the elements of a livable and happy city. As such, the two books are considered complementary approaches.

Body

The book written by Montgomery in 2013 consists of 13 chapters. We divided the book based on the characteristics of the reading, which consisted of 4 points. (1) In chapters 1-2, Montgomery explains the philosophical concept of the happy city through several inspirational stories, one of which is in Bogotá. (2) In chapters 3-5, the construction of the present city is considered a failure. (3) Chapters 6-7 are urban spatial design solutions that can create social interaction. (4) A just and humanist city is presented in chapters 8-13.

In chapters 1 and 2, we discuss more about the philosophy of the concept of the Happy City. In Montgomery's early writings stated that:

'We might not be able to make everyone as rich as American. But we can design the city to give people dignity, to make them feel rich. The city can make them happier'.

From this quote, we argue that the city is not an economic engine but a space that is able to provide a dignified space for all citizens, such as quality public spaces, easily accessible to everyone, the provision of sidewalks, bicycle paths, and the provision of public transportation. In addition, we convey that city development consists of two things: first, the city as a physical form. Second, the existence of a space that provides a "set of happiness". It means that the space is able to provide a sense of security and comfort for the community. This follows the theory of the experience of space, which states that space is not just a physical structure but how the space creates positive emotions, citizens' trust, and a sense of belonging

to space (Relph 1976; Seamon and Sowers 2008). If we look at the current condition of Indonesia, our country has been, and still is, trying to implement several points mentioned by Montgomery, one of which is the provision of public transportation. However, empirically, commuter happiness in big cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya is often eroded by travel length and waiting times for public transportation (Rosida et al. 2019). This tends to cause discomfort for its citizens. On the other hand, the positive side is that the existence of local communities in Indonesia is also the vanguard in realizing sustainable cities and communities (SDGs 11) through participatory movements to improve the quality of the ecosystem and the trust of its citizens (Lestari and Satria 2025). This aligns with Montgomery's statement that urban development should not be a commodity of the elite, but should provide a sense of justice in dividing space and services among all citizens.

However, modern urban development often does not occur organically; it is shaped by massive public investment and rigid zoning rules. This is what Montgomery conveys in chapters 3-6 about the failure of modern city development today. One of them is the failure to choose a place to live in the suburbs. They choose suburban areas to get a big house and survive to travel. Montgomery said that

'Self-reported happiness correlates with a lot of things that money cannot buy. Leisure time and shorter commutes are good. So is good health (although feeling healthy is more important than actually being healthy, and that feeling may have more to do with the quality of your friendships than with your medical plan).'

We argue that Montgomery's writing is also relevant to the current conditions in Indonesia, namely that long commuting times tend to cause stress because they face erratic network problems such as congestion, disorderly road users, horn noise, and the possibility of flooding on several roads. In addition, for private vehicle users, of course, the impact of this commuting is that it is difficult to focus, the appearance of fatigue and drowsiness on the trip, and makes people lose a lot of energy on the trip. This condition reduces free time for yourself and for socializing. Another phenomenon is that when viewed empirically, the density of settlements in Indonesia tends to show high social ties. This condition is not the same as the Western view where the density of settlements harms the psychology of the community.

According to the challenges described in the previous paragraph, Montgomery provides a design solution that focuses on the alignment between humans and nature outlined in chapters 6-7. He writes

How much nature do we need? Are there designs that combine the benefits of dispersal with the dividends of proximity? the evidence suggests that to get closer to one another, we need a little more distance from one another, and a little more nature but not too much, and not the sort of nature we might think we need.

From this statement, we know that the needs of nature, in this case green open space, are important in the midst of a dense city. A challenge is how to design a green open space that is able to accommodate community activities both at the city scale and at the neighbourhood/micro scale. Based on Edward O. Wilson (the biologist who coined "biophilia"), later developed by Timothy Beatley through the idea of Biophilic cities, cities are designed so humans can interact with nature. Then, Beatley and Newman (2013) mentioned that Biophilic cities are known as human biological relationships to the existence of nature that can provide positive emotions, reduce stress levels, and improve mood. The existence of nature in urban areas, visualized in green open spaces, provides psychological recovery such as calmness and comfort and triggers the creation of happiness (Alhadedy and Alomary 2024; Samavati et al. 2025; Zahnow 2024).

In the end, Montgomery's writing gives the message that the city has to be equitable. The message appears in chapters 8-13. In his writing, he mentions

These bollards show that pedestrians are as important as people with cars. We are creating equality; we are creating respect for human dignity. We're telling people, 'You are important—not because you're rich, but because you are human.

We argue that Montgomery's statement provides a reflection on the cities in Indonesia. Whether the design of the city in the form of spatial arrangement and the availability of complete infrastructure has provided justice, especially for marginalized communities. The road, which is sometimes still used for parking, illustrates that the space on the road is still used for those who have vehicles rather than

pedestrian and cyclist lanes that provide safety and comfort for pedestrians. We also provide that dense cities and rigid zoning rules can be modified through environments that spark happiness through denser, greener, and more humane designs. In our opinion, transforming an equitable and humane city is actually transforming and saving ourselves as humans.

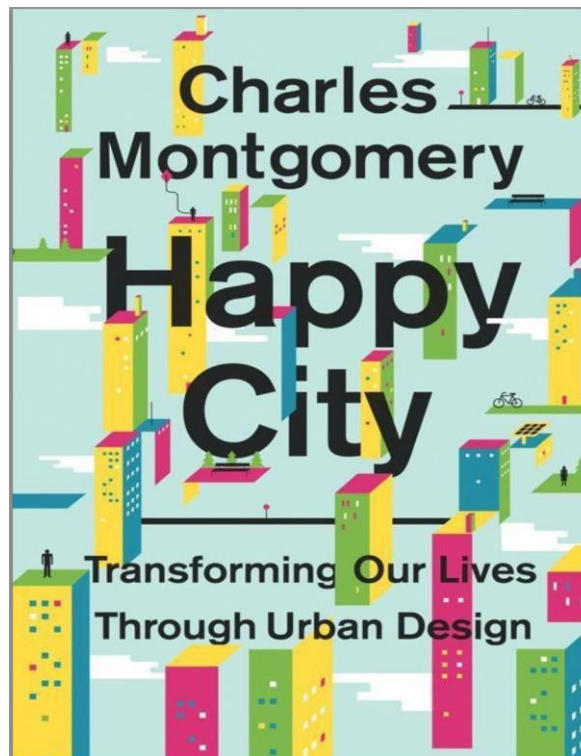
Conclusion

Overall, we conclude that this book has provided new insights into the paradigm shift that was initially more of a technocratic approach to human-oriented development. We also argue that a happy city integrates objective indicators (such as physical, social, and economic aspects) with subjective indicators (such as life satisfaction, feeling healthy, social trust, and a sense of belonging to its place/community). The theoretical contribution to this book lies in (1) the failure of the market in planning public utilities, so that people exchange their life satisfaction by making commuters as their moving space, (2) the provision of natural elements (green and blue) is a basic need for the cognitive and social restoration of their communities, (3) social infrastructure as a forum to improve the social cohesion of their communities, (4) support the economic activities of local communities. In the end, a happy city is not only seen from the physical city and economic growth, but also from how the city can realize social justice. The social justice in this case is that urban space can be distributed evenly, especially for vulnerable communities, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Rate the Book

The rating given to this book is 9 out of 10. Montgomery's book shows that cities are not just piles of concrete but systems that shape our lives. The strength of this book is its ability to connect neuroscience and behavioral economics with urban planning policy. In his writing, he notes that the existence of the physical environment triggers hormones such as oxytocin (which encourages social bonding) or cortisol (which triggers stress due to congestion). This idea is not only a set of concepts or theories; Enrique Peñalosa has put it into practice in Bogotá. This book argues that a happy city is an urban design that brings people, homes, workplaces, and public services closer together so people are free to move; it is friendly to pedestrians; and it is rich in nature (greener, lower-carbon cities). However, Montgomery acknowledged that there are side effects of good urban design has side effects, including sharp jumps of property values that can evict low-income (marginalized) residents. Without government intervention, the "Happy City" can become exclusive only to high-income people.

Cover book



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