



OPINION

VIEWPOINT

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Post-pandemic, How Attention and Care Can Help Us Flourish



Our current climate and mental health crises are a wake-up call for us to reinvent a society gone wrong, says strategist and author Sarah Mineko Ichioka, who argues urban space management can be a big part of the solution.



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We are waking up. Waking up to more free will after the constrained regimens of the pandemic, we search for new ways to strengthen our cities and communities. We discover how our inner and outer transformations are interlinked; our mental health crisis and today's climate and ecological breakdown are shared symptoms of a system-wide dysfunction.

In this liminal period, those who govern, build and manage our cities face a now-or-never opportunity. As we collectively stretch and rub our eyes, leftover norms of behaviour that no longer serve (or perhaps never did serve) the best interests of people and planet must be questioned and transformed.

To address these symptomatic crises, we must contend with the underlying causes, notably the extractive extremes of hyper production and hyper consumerism, which have distorted both the form of our cities and how we are conditioned to behave within them.

Seeking a better alternative, scholars such as economist Kate Raworth and economic anthropologist Jason Hickel advocate compellingly for an economics that centres our decision on care for living systems and the meeting of real human needs (instead of return on capital and the creation of artificial wants).

If we want to survive, we must swiftly transform our economies to follow the lodestar of planetary health instead of the metric of GDP growth. This is one of the key shifts towards regenerative design and development that Michael Pawlyn and I describe in our book, *Flourish: Design Paradigms for Our Planetary Emergency*. As many traditional cultures already understand, our health as individuals connects to our health as communities, which is in turn embedded within the health of our ecosystems and the biosphere overall.

Moving from theory to application, the city is the scale at which new ideas can be inhabited.

Think of walking through a public space in your city. Whom do you make eye contact with? Think of the volume of multi-channel advertising you encounter on an average journey by public transport.

Too often, we place responsibility on the individual to manage their own behaviour. But faced with the negative effects of pervasive and often addictive technologies and lavishly funded commercial campaigns, we have a challenge that demands government intervention.

More cities should follow the lead of São Paulo, Brazil, which instituted a "Clean City Law" to

remove all outdoor advertising. While we might argue for retaining some forms of graphic communication in our public spaces, in the form of artworks or wayfinding, imagine the boost of visual decluttering to our lives. Clearing the cacophony would help to free more of us from the snares of manufactured dissatisfaction, in which our current condition is never as desirable as the next thing to be acquired.

While we advocate for regulation, actions we can take at a local level include designating more zones and periods for distraction-free awareness and/or direct human connection. If a city-wide ban seems unviable, why not designate specific districts as advertising-free zones and observe how the benefits develop?

Several recent examples from Singapore, where I live, help to model how we, as citizens, can experience and share our urban environment in a new way—from distraction to attention, from consumption to care. There is the Big Sit, for instance. Organised by my fellow World Cities Summit Young Leader, Anupam Yog, and mindfulness coach Erin Lee, it runs social meditation and mindfulness sessions in usually hectic spaces in the central business district, turning them into sites of focused stillness, open to all. The result is an act of peaceful subversion; as the organisers put it, “Don’t just do something. Sit there.”

Investments in mental health should not be justified in terms of productivity, but even so, think how much clearer-headed and more harmonious our cities would be if we all had access to a safe public space—and an open invitation to sit quietly with others for an hour every week. It’s a powerful design challenge, to conceptualise how our urban spaces might be shaped to support mindfulness.

Today’s exhortation to consume the new currently extends beyond products and services to the way we perceive our urban fabric, driving a cycle of constant demolition and rebuilding. Consider the noise and air pollution—both well-documented health risks—and logistical disruption resulting from frequent cycles of demolition and construction in a city. As our climate emergency looms, we know that working to maintain our existing structures—and all of their embodied carbon—should be the default choice. What if we prioritised care for our existing buildings, both their physical forms and the communities they host?

Housed in a refurbished 1920s building, bordering Singapore’s main shopping district, the Temasek Shophouse models an ethic of care on multiple levels. Sensitive renovation made the most of its inherited structure, while its public exhibitions and events—focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goals—promote engagement with some of the most pressing issues of our time

in an accessible manner. Recent exhibitions showcased artfully repurposed second-hand clothing, and an audio archive of stories from seniors who volunteer in the community. Events have convened partners to examine urban solutions to the plastic pollution crisis, or how online culture affects youth mental health. Passers-by can support its social enterprise café, or simply sit and listen to songs played by fellow visitors on its shared pianos.

In sum, Temasek Shophouse provides a purposeful and restorative oasis within an expanse of uninspired, overstimulating retail. How might it further benefit its district?

In the digital realm, susGain, an app founded by entrepreneur Carolin Barr in 2020, provides an attractive alternative to consumption-focused loyalty programmes. Designed to address the “intention-action gap” for Singaporeans looking to green their lifestyles, it rewards behaviours such as volunteering, donating pre-loved items, and spending time in the outdoors, while signposting to more sustainable businesses. Loyalty points can be redeemed to plant mangroves and donate to local charities.

I recently joined a clean-up led by a susGain partner, Ocean Purpose Project (OPP), at Singapore’s Pasir Ris beach. A social enterprise founded in 2020 by media personality

Mathilda D’Silva, the OPP seeks to go beyond clean-ups to piloting new solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. Some of the collected ocean plastic is cleaned and converted into hydrogen fuel and high-value carbon nanotubes by scientists from the local Nanyang Technological University. The OPP is also trialing water remediation (not the same as treating wastewater) using shellfish and seaweed, potentially for developing bioplastics.

Deeper transformation of our urban economies would see such promising organisations move from largely volunteer-based teams towards the creation of livelihoods that enable workers to support their families by meeting real needs of human communities and the wider web of life.

When we start thinking about ourselves as more than consumers, a different city opens up to us. We begin to understand ourselves more expansively, as members of diverse communities and constituencies. We begin to think about our shared places in terms of our rights and the rights of others to access them. More than a collection of products and services, we can begin to think about our cities as places that we contribute to making and caring for. When the city and its citizens are de-commodified, they can unlock transformative potential. 🧠