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The Politics of Happiness

Enrique Peñalosa & Susan Ives posted May 20, 2004

Enrique Peñalosa, mayor of Bogota, Colombia, 1995-1998.

The name Bogota conjures images of kidnapping, murder, and drug wars. But today's Bogota is safer than Washington, D.C., or Baltimore. A visionary mayor discovered the secret to making his city safe. Enrique Penalosa tells Susan Ives the story.

We really have to admit that over the past 100 years we have been building cities much more for mobility than for people's well-being. Every year thousands of children are killed by cars. Isn't it time we build cities that are more child-friendly? Over the last 30 years, we've been able to magnify environmental consciousness all over the world. As a result, we know a lot about the ideal environment for a happy whale or a happy mountain gorilla. We're far less clear about what constitutes an ideal environment for a happy human being. One common measure of how clean a mountain stream is is to look for trout. If you find the trout, the habitat is healthy. It's the same way

with children in a city. Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people.

When I was elected mayor of Bogotá and got to city hall, I was handed a transportation study that said the most important thing the city could do was to build an elevated highway at a cost of $600 million. Instead, we installed a bus system that carries 700,000 people a day at a cost of $300 million. We created hundreds of pedestrian-only streets, parks, plazas, and bike paths, planted trees, and got rid of cluttering commercial signs. We constructed the longest pedestrian-only street in the world. It may seem crazy, because this street goes through some of the poorest neighborhoods in Bogotá, and many of the surrounding streets aren't even paved. But we chose not to improve the streets for the sake of cars, but instead to have wonderful spaces for pedestrians. All this pedestrian infrastructure shows respect for human dignity. We're telling people, “You are important—not because you're rich or because you have a Ph.D., but because you are human.” If people are treated as special, as sacred even, they behave that way. This creates a different kind of society.

We began to experiment by instituting a car-free day on a weekday. In a city of about 7 million people, just about everybody managed to get to work by walking, bicycling, bus, even on horseback—and everybody was better off. There was less air pollution, less time sitting in traffic, more time for people to be productive and enjoy themselves. Every Sunday we close 120 kilometers of roads to motor vehicles for seven hours. A million and a half people of all ages and incomes come out to ride bicycles, jog, and simply gather with others in community.

We took a vote, and 83 percent of the public told us they wanted to have car-free days more often. Getting people out of their cars is a means of social integration. You have the upper-income person sitting next to the cleaning lady on the bus.

Parks have a very powerful role to play as equalizers of society. We almost always meet under conditions of social hierarchy. At work, some people are bosses and others are employees; at restaurants, some people are serving and others are being served. Parks are the gathering place for community. They create a sense of belonging. Everybody is welcome regardless of age, background, income, or disabilities. This creates a different type of society.

Today we see images of the beautiful Earth taken from a spaceship, and we

think of it as our planet. But in fact, there are very few places on the planet to which the public has access. Most of the land is privatized, and public spaces are very, very scarce. The fact is, upper-income people have always had access to nature and recreation. They go to country houses, golf clubs, restaurants, hunting preserves. What do the poor, especially in the Third World, have as an alternative to television? All poor people have are public spaces, so this is not a luxury. They are the minimum a democratic society can provide to begin to compensate for the inequalities that exist in society.

Since we took these steps, we've seen a reduction in crime and a change in attitude toward the city. In the worst recession we've ever had, people were asked to pay a 10 percent voluntary tax to support various city services, including parks. More than 40,000 people did so, which I think speaks to the greater sense of community people feel.

If we in the Third World measure our success or failure as a society in terms of income, we would have to classify ourselves as losers until the end of time. Given our limited resources, we have to invent other ways to measure success, and that could be in terms of happiness. It may be in how much time children spend with their grandparents, or the ways in which we are able to enjoy our friendships, or how many times people smile during the week. A city is successful not when it's rich but when its people are happy. Public space is one way to lead us to a society that is not only more equal but also much happier.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to world security is environmental and social sustainability in the world's fastest-growing cities. The population of cities in the Third World is growing by more than 80 million inhabitants per year, which means there will be some 2 billion people living in these cities within the next 25 to 30 years. In dense cities such as Bogotá, São Paolo, Jakarta, and Mexico City, there have been practically no places where people can come into contact with nature, safely play outside, or meet others in society as equals. And we have seen firsthand how living in poor conditions can lead to social problems, including extremism and even terrorism. We need food and housing for survival, but there are even higher types of needs—needs related to happiness. If you look at it that way, parks become as necessary to a city's health—physical and spiritual—as the water supply.