COMPASSIONATE SPACES

A New Framework for Wellbeing-led Places

home

neighbourhood

nourish us
biological potential

lift us
emotional potential

connect us
social potential

root us
cultural potential

grow us
economic potential

empower us
ownership potential

CCD THE CENTRE FOR CONSCIOUS DESIGN

MATTER . SPACE . SOUL

MATTER . SPACE . SOUL

"The art of architecture studies not only structure in itself, but the effect of structure on the human spirit"

Geoffrey Scott, The Architecture of Humanism, 1914

What would our built environment look like if we took our emotional, psychological and social needs today as the starting point for creating our surroundings?

How would these invisible elements get translated and applied into visible, material form?

Do we need a new set of tools and progressive approaches, responsive to 21st century patterns of life?

Link to original article

Making Places that Matter

Through the sciences, and the work of the Conscious Cities movement, we know more and more about how our surroundings impact us; whether urban spaces, landscapes, buildings or rooms – their nature and quality all profoundly influence human wellbeing.

The places in our lives will shape our behaviours, perceptions, emotions, moods, sociability, feelings - even the sense of our identity[1]. There is growing evidence and awareness[2] that if our surroundings are not actively enriching us, they are impoverishing us.

Despite the projection that more than two-thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas by 2050, buildings are currently produced with scant acknowledgement of the effects on people; often conceived as commodities to be sold rather than as habitats to nurture the human species that we are.

However the economic case for wellbeing is increasingly being recognised in development[3], with greater evidence that places with a better "user experience" will be more economically valuable[4], as well as better for people. There is widening industry interest in creating buildings and places that can "perform" well as human environments.

Everyday moments from Cartagena, Burano, Havana, Bologna, New York and Delhi - Photos: Natasha Reid)

Translating emotional and social needs into built form

In the face of macro trends and accelerating changes to our everyday patterns of life, we need many new and varied forms of architectural practice that can responsively embrace and translate the complexity of human needs – both explicit and implicit – into built form.

"One of the great, but often unmentioned, causes of both happiness and misery is the quality of our environment: the kind of walls, chairs, buildings and streets we're surrounded by."

Alain de Botton, Architecture of Happiness. 2007

The convergence of built environment practice with neuroscience, psychology, and many more disciplines signals the advent of far-reaching, ground-breaking possibilities. Knowledge, insight and developments in the sciences open up significant opportunity for evidence-backed design that can demonstrably create targeted benefits and outcomes.

The topic of wellbeing is as broad-ranging as it is complex; with many frameworks[5], indices and systems that capture a range of fields and perspectives, From the WELL buildings standards[6], to the pillars of PERMA[7] and high-level frameworks from Happy City[8] and the Global Wellness institute[9] to name only a few.

Looking forwards in practical application, we may be mindful of a path that sees wellbeing as something that can simply be achieved through the provision of features and elements. That is something that can be designed or reduced to component parts. Or that is corresponds only to one dimension or discipline.

In harnessing the work being done across a variety of fields, we need both a space for insights to converge and also a process to translate a wide range of research into coherent design approaches and solutions that can actively and effectively enrich our lives.

Three shifts for expanding practice

Through the lens of the emotional and social potential held in places, new approaches could be developed with the ability to incorporate and consider the complexity of human experience. Crosscutting frameworks could integrate a wide register of ideas and metrics of value, from mental wellbeing to Social Return on Investment[10] –from increasing connectedness, cohesion, social productivity[11] and cultural vitality to creativity, joy and awe.

To build new tools and models that are responsive – or even compassionate - to a full spectrum and richness of experiences held within our built environment, we can look towards *design thinking*[12], as a mode of operation that can integrate complex, contradictory elements and divergent ideas into synthesised solutions.
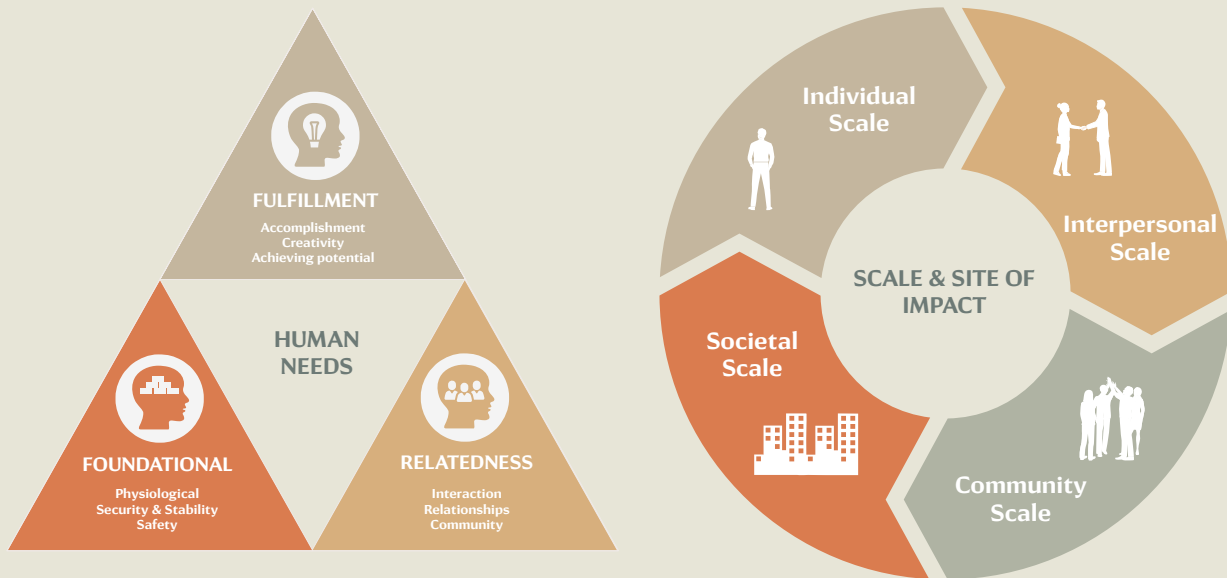
By shifting conversations and conventions, from the design of only built form, to the design of potential human impact, we could expande practice to the cultivation of value, for individuals, organisations, communities, businesses.

From the architecture of inert, physical matter to;

- 1. The architecture of affect – design for human outcomes

- 2. The architecture of integration – experience-led, evidence backed approaches

- 3. The architecture of spatial systems – platforms for experiences and relationships

1. ARCHITECTURE OF AFFECT
Purposeful design for human outcomes

FULFILLMENT
Accomplishment
Creativity
Achieving potential

HUMAN NEEDS

FOUNDATIONAL
Physiological
Security & Stability
Safety

RELATEDNESS
Interaction
Relationships
Community

Individual Scale

Interpersonal Scale

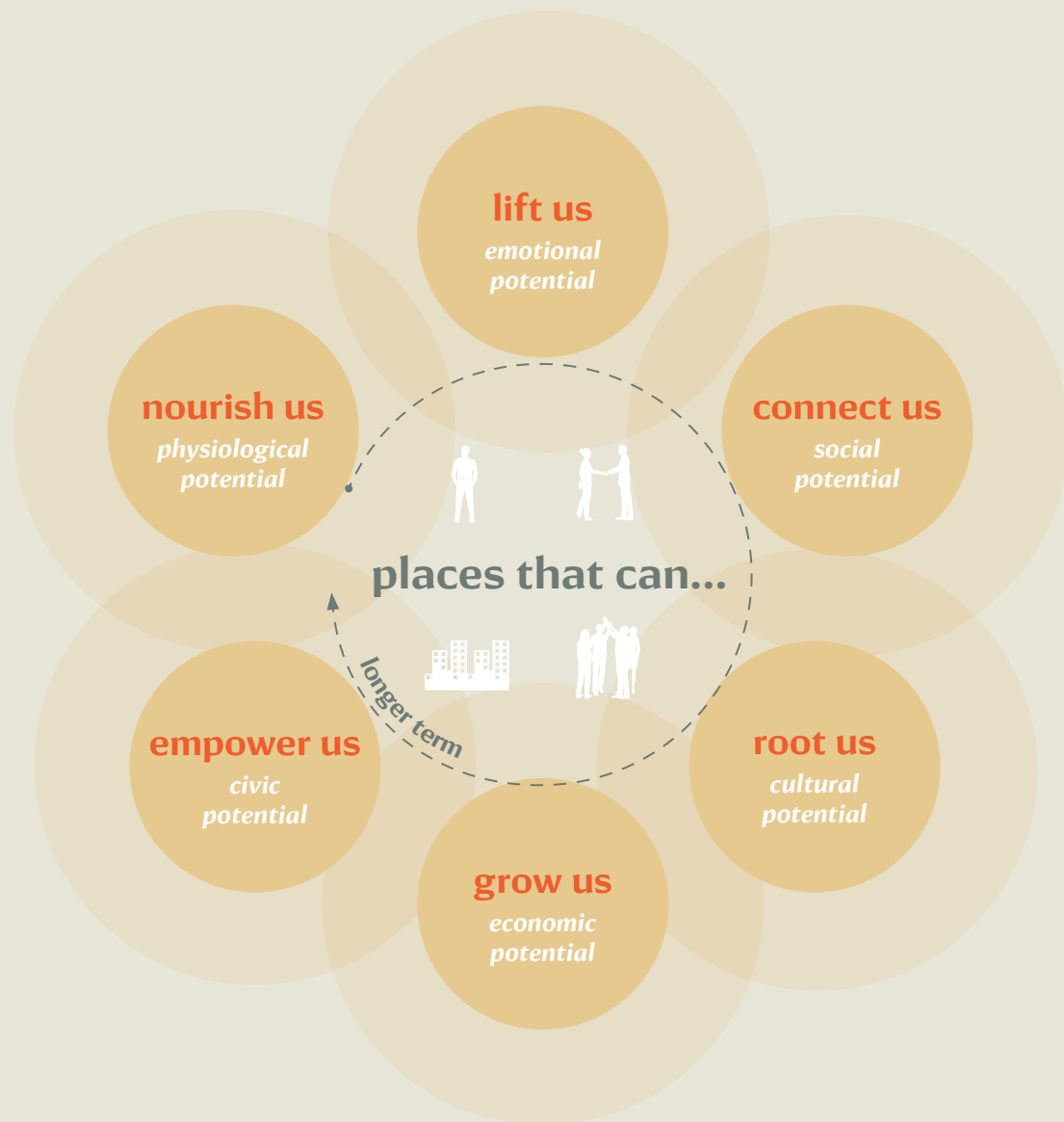SCALE & SITE OF IMPACT

Societal Scale

Community Scale

Assessing type of human needs in relation to scale and "site" (or location) of impact

If we are to design for outcomes, then new metrics and values of "success" need to be defined – whether as individual practices, or as a collective, industry-wide endeavour.

The challenges lie in that quality of life, human experience, wellbeing and states of emotion are not "things" that can be determined through design. Furthermore, each individuals experience of a place may be vastly different depending on their personal context.

But conditions can be created where a range of positive changes can potentially emerge, through activity, use and encounter. We can create frameworks of "potentials" that give the freedom for different relationships between people and a place – evolved and cultivated over time. Design solutions could be conceived as springboards and platforms that enable multiple answers, rather than fixed, static containers.

Through the process of developing an evolving methodology for practice, different ordering concepts have been considered, starting from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and considering how places can impact our lives at different scales. From the individual to the collective – there are different "sites" or layers of intervention that feedback continuously to create a virtuous circle[14] of sustained growth.

lift us
emotional potential

connect us
social potential

nourish us
physiological potential

places that can...

root us
cultural potential

longer term

empower us
civic potential

grow us
economic potential

Framework: Multidimensional Potentials

The framework sets out metrics of potentials, across several dimensions, reflecting the multifaceted social nature of place[15] beyond its physical nature and enabling input from different domains and disciplines to be interwoven into clusters of action.

Looking at how our buildings, streets and cities can nourish us, lift us, connect us, root us, grow us and empower us - the sets of potentials are generative, rather than prescriptive. They could be developed into different metrics according to the project type and context;

Whether it is making everyday moments at home a little more joyful, enabling people to connect and be part of a community with a strong spirit of place, creating work environments that both energise us and allow us to focus for productivity and collaboration, public space projects that allow attachment and symbolic identity to be constructed, or interventions that can empower a neighbourhood.

Framework: Multidimensional Human Impacts

The circular diagram contains the following elements:

lift us — *emotional potential*
- engaging experiences
- cognitive restoration
- functional alignment
- feeling good
- optimal ability

connect us — *social potential*
- supports relatedness
- interaction
- strong ties
- strong relationships
- welcoming
- social bonds

nourish us — *physiological potential*
- connection to nature
- comfort
- light
- spaciousness

root us — *cultural potential*
- place attachment
- identity
- sense of belonging
- character
- vibrancy
- spirit of place

empower us — *civic potential*
- stability
- security
- agency
- foundational needs
- autonomy
- collective action

grow us — *economic potential*
- integration
- resources
- affordability
- inclusivity
- achieving aspirations
- social capital

2.   THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTEGRATION – experience-led, evidence-backed approaches

"Not everything that can be counted counts. And not everything that counts can be counted." [16]

For solutions to be meaningful to the people and place they are for, a check-list of "good wellbeing" features does not necessarily make a great place to be in, an inspiring building that moves us, or a well-loved neighbourhood. A mechanistic process of tick-box production would likely be at odds with an aim of generating enriching, delightful spaces that are full of life and possibility.

The opportunity here for practice is to translate multidisciplinary insights and integrate them laterally with experiential, intuitive and narrative-based understandings. To still consider big picture, wide-lens notions such as how a place becomes inscribed with meaning or memory, at the same time as focusing on targeted aspects like cognitive restoration for example.

New blended approaches - experience-led and evidence-backed - could be developed. Metrics could relate to everyday life in a way can is accessible to all, not only built environment professionals, researchers or academics. By overlapping qualitative and quantitative understandings, data-led metrics and subjective Key Performance Indicators could be gathered over time to map longer term and more complex impacts.

quantitative	**qualitative**
evidence-backed	experience-led
elemental tools	relational tools
analytic	intuitive
emotional data	emotional sensibility
narrow focus	wide focus

Methodology: Dual perspective

For example;
- Does the place change a person's mood and encourages them to stay longer
- Do they feel energised, inspired, restored, or able to think more clearly
- Has this created positive impact in wider areas (Ie. more effective at work)
- Has the place allowed people to personalise and inhabit it
- Do they feel a sense of ownership and attachment because of this?
- Do people have the opportunity to encounter others easily here
- Do they feel close to them and have they made new social connections as a result of spending time here?
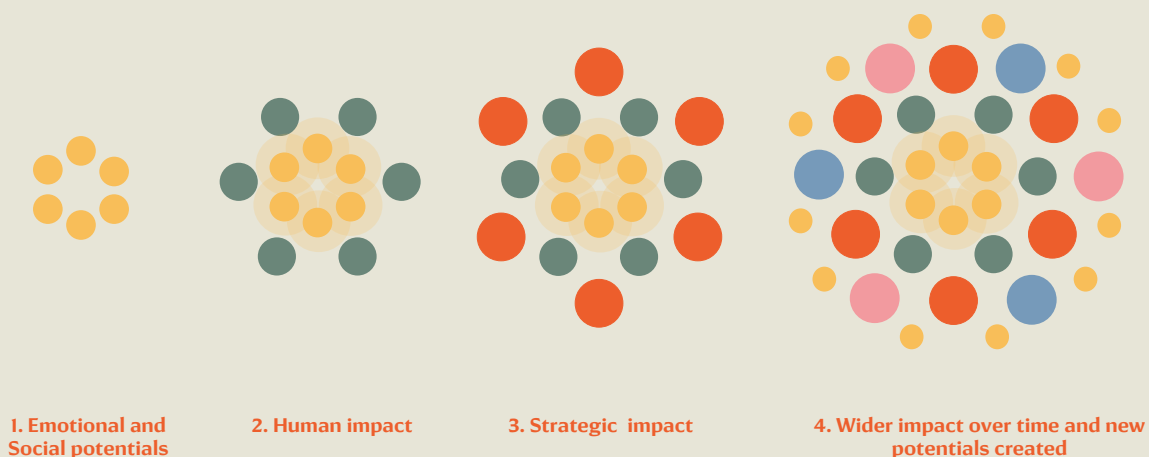
3.   ARCHITECTURE OF SPATIAL SYSTEMS
Platforms for experiences and relationships

"Our buildings have lost their opacity and depth, sensory invitation and discovery, mystery and shadow."[17]

New blended approaches and value-systems would catalyse different types of architectural design process – emerging in line with the driver to create spaces that support life and growth. Instead of working with a single vision, a "top down" method, places could be developed starting from the person up – a microscale.

By conceiving a place as a sequence of desired emotions, perceptions, feelings, conditions, states, behaviours, interactions, flows, connections and relationships, a building's form could grow from these overlapping aims, drivers, and mixed up components, to support diverse experiences and needs.

When imagining the design process as the choreography of experiences, atmospheres, spatial characteristics and conditions, the resulting organisation of physical matter would go beyond simply pleasing the eye. Buildings would instead be spatial systems and platforms for possibility that seed rich, multifaceted, adaptive places - solutions that can be greater than the sum of parts.

1. Emotional and Social potentials   2. Human impact   3. Strategic impact   4. Wider impact over time and new potentials created

Interplace concept: Presented at Urbanistas London workshop, July 2019

Future

An early idea for a new type of "interface" practice model was shared at an Urbanistas London workshop, exploring the concept of connecting built environment practice, the sciences of wellbeing and economic domains. The workshop opened up discussion on how the strongest potential for impact and change is held at the very first stages of the development pipeline, when strategic brief are formed.

Through design, we have the capacity to solve problems, harness latent potentials and expand possibilities - exponentially so in concert with the sciences.

When founded on deep understanding of our inner workings as human beings, we can radically shape our surrounding to better serve the needs of people, catalyse the potential for wellbeing and create holistic value across many spheres.

By pushing the boundaries of practice, taking progressive broad-minded approaches, we could shift the production of buildings as inert functional containers, to sources of growth, flourishing and value.

With so much opportunity ahead, why would we not create more life-enriching places?

Not as the exception, but as the rule?

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AUTHOR NOTES:

Passionate about the relationship between people and places, Natasha founded her experimental design studio in 2014 which evolved into MATTER . SPACE . SOUL in 2019. The studio explores the power of design to address critical urban issues and support joyful everyday living through the lens of health, wellbeing, social sustainability, equity and spatial justice.

Natasha has previously worked at award-winning architecture practices whilst also being commissioned as a socially-engaged artist. This combination led to developing a multidisciplinary approach in understanding the quality of people's experience of places, and the social and emotional impacts of our environments. Her practice is now informed by the sciences of the mind and human nature, such as a psychology and neuroscience, to holistically consider emotion, empathy, interconnectedness, identity and rootedness in urban environments.

Natasha studied at Cambridge University and gained a Distinction for her Professional Diploma in Architecture. She is a visiting architecture critic at several universities and is often invited to speak publically at industry conferences on the studio's boundary-pushing approaches and forward-thinking research initiatives.

"The question of how to make places that are meaningful to people is a fundamental one. To know you can tangibly make a difference and positive impact. To make places that can actually matter."

Intimate Infrastructure: Human experience as generator for addressing societal issues (winning proposals for solving the housing crisis - New Ideas for Housing, GLA and NLA. 2015)