

# COMPASSIONATE PLACES: SMART CITIES AS PSYCHOLOGICALLY, EMOTIONALLY & SOCIALLY INTELLIGENT CITIES

PRESNTATION BY NATASHA REID AT SMART CITY EXPO MIAMI - RE:IMAGINE URBAN SPACES

As cities grow more complex, a new paradigm is emerging—one that treats the built environment as a living ecosystem shaped by human emotion, connection, and well-being. Compassionate Places redefines smart cities through empathy, equity, and psychological insight.

**C**ompassionate Places is a philosophy and practical method for humanistic, interdisciplinary built environment design that focuses on how we can accelerate the shift toward a new urban paradigm—one where we are intentionally shaping places for human outcomes, where our surroundings are considered not as static bricks-and-mortar constructions but as living ecosystems that respond to human experience, emotion, evidence emerging from the sciences, and equity-based approaches and values. Can the advances in technology and data that smart cities offer be combined in developments in the emergent fields of human-centric design and neuroarchitecture to accelerate human health and social well-being?

## Toward Compassionate Places

The Compassionate Places method is a form of built environment design that recognizes and prioritizes human experience, feelings, and relationships. It seeks to reconnect us to ourselves, to those around us, to community, and to the natural world. It proposes a structured, multifaceted approach for human-centric and science-informed design that can be applied to design and planning standards, policy, and directly into everyday design practice in industry.

Compassionate Design looks at how we can design for mental well-being to tackle

loneliness or anxiety or for opportunity and social mobility. It is about centering feelings, connection, emotional impacts, and factors that are not easily measurable. It's about changing what we value and prioritize and rethinking how our surroundings are shaped accordingly. Compassionate Design moves beyond beauty and surface appearances to span across concepts from designing for joy to spatial justice.

## Why Is Change Needed?

We know the built environment has a profound impact on people's lives, health, happiness, and the way we come together as communities and society. Our surroundings affect how we feel as individuals, how we interact as groups, our sense of identity, sense of place, and belonging. But in public health terms, critically, the built environment is one of the determinants of health, affecting life expectancy and life chances as well.

However, the business-as-usual practices of design, planning, and development do not typically integrate knowledge, insight, and research from many other disciplines that address how people are affected by places, from public health to cutting-edge research and findings in neuroscience. Similarly, it is rare for the lived experience of people and communities to be meaningfully applied to shape a place. With multiple ongoing urban crises—such as mental health, loneliness, and social fragmentation—the built

environment offers a tool and potential that's not being fully optimized to help with these interconnected issues.

## Three Shifts for Compassionate Places

**1. Different Ways of Seeing:** The approach takes a different starting point to specifically address the missing layer of human experience in the design, development, and planning processes.

**2. Different Methods:** A multifaceted method is key to being able to address the full complexity of human needs and human nature and draw from different perspectives, areas of knowledge, and insights from different disciplines, such as environmental psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, or sociology.

**3. Different Value Systems:** The benchmarks for success are based on the impacts on human beings, such as health, social well-being, and inclusivity outcomes. In this way, design practice is orientated to directly address the benefits for people and communities, rather than only physical attributes.

## Key Design Shifts Include:

- Design that goes deeper than skin-deep aesthetics to make meaningful impact for people.
- Design that anticipates, acknowledges, and accommodates users' needs and responses, including perception, feelings, behaviors, etc.



**Natasha Reid**  
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Natasha Reid is the founder of Matter Space Soul, a progressive spatial design lab working at the intersection of architecture, urban design, art, and the human sciences, such as neuroscience and environmental psychology. The studio specializes in the emerging fields of human-centric design and neuroarchitecture, with a focus on biophilic design. Building on her experience at award-winning architecture studios, Reid has spent over a decade developing and implementing new approaches for humanistic design in practice. Prioritizing people's experience, emotion, empathy, and equity, her "Compassionate Places" design method focuses on holistically addressing the human dimension of the built environment to better support people's well-being.

- Design that creates new dynamics, new relationships, new connective tissue, and types of social fabric. Fundamentally, Compassionate Places starts with understanding what people want and need—emotionally, socially, psychologically—alongside what is important to people and what matters in their lives.

## Smart Cities That Are Socially, Emotionally & Psychologically Intelligent

Smart cities are associated most strongly with technological advances and data, but when combined with the goal of improving citizen quality of life and well-being, smart cities could also mean psychologically, emotionally, and socially intelligent cities. With advances in neuroscience and the emergent field of neuroarchitecture, there are increasing possibilities to measure directly how people feel and respond to built environments through wearable technologies that can record aspects like stress responses and brain activity. This

new era of data will not only shine a light on how people experience places but also on the impact of design interventions. This can support human experience and well-being becoming part of the typical understanding of what makes a successful place, and the importance of this for commercial value, rather than the human impacts being considered a separate "nice to have" area.

With rapid urbanization accelerating globally, increasing urban density will only create more challenges for quality of life. To face the challenges of today, we need a new type of response. We need a new philosophy for making our cities and places that is drawn from our own humanity and approaches, methods, technologies, and forms of practice that are in service of this. Smart cities made through the lens of Compassionate Places could help accelerate the paradigm shift so urgently needed, leveraging advances in many fields to truly and deeply design for health, humanity, equity, and economic impact all together.