

# my liveable city



ARCHITECTURE



DESIGN



LANDSCAPE



URBAN PLANNING

FOCUS ON  
Local  
Identity



# myliveablecity

INDIA + THE NETHERLANDS

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**Daniela Velazco** is a Master of Landscape Architecture + Urbanism and Heritage Conservation dual-degree student at the University of Southern California. She received her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and worked in outdoor education, connecting children to one another and the intricacies of place through storytelling and hands-on experiences in nature. Her research explores ways in which design can be used to honour culture, hold histories in place and connect people to the natural world.





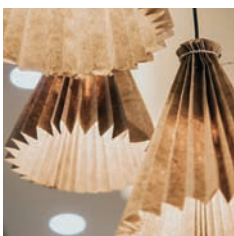
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## Urban Blueprint

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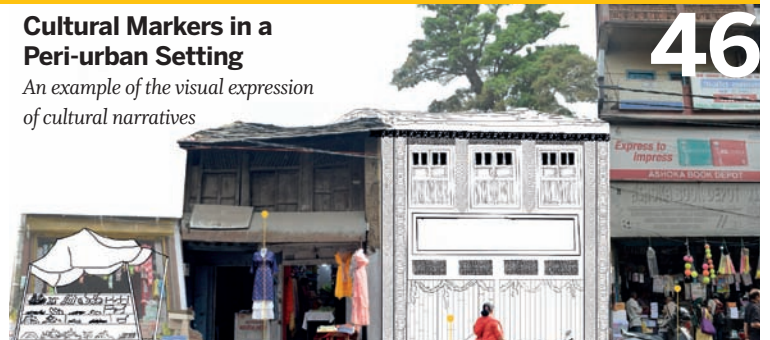
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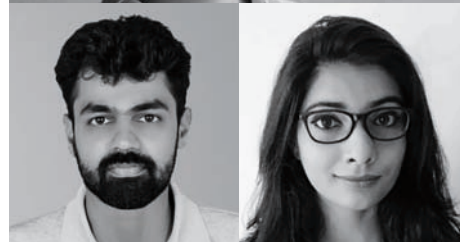
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# Beyond Human-Centered Design for Community Building

Expanding beyond Human-Centered Design processes for community empowerment, **Andrea Veintimilla** explores the need for a system of design approach for local identity making

Three months ago, my husband and I moved across the American Midwest from Iowa to Columbus, Ohio. A city not likely on your radar but recently coined America's 'Silicon Heartland' during President Joe Biden's 2022 State of the Union address. A bold new regional 'brand' signifying a moment of recognition about central Ohio's past and projected economic growth. Growth is exciting, but growth also means change, and with change comes fear of loss. In this case: loss of community, loss of neighbourhood identity and loss of the shared narrative about a place that acts as an essential glue binding people together.

The topic of local identity is timely for me as I recently took up a new role as the Design Research Lead at Smart Columbus, an organisation striving to drive community innovation using a Human-Centered Design approach so as not to leave marginalised residents behind as the region prospers. I am three months into my role and I am already asking myself: is Human-Centered Design enough to navigate such a complex problem space? If not, what other approaches need to be brought into the equation and how?

The idea of 'human-centeredness' being valuable as a way to approach city design is not new. Jane Jacobs, back in the mid-1900s, advocated for the study of human behaviour as a way to preserve and design city life in urban planning efforts long before Human-Centered Design emerged as a globally recognised innovation approach. Yet modern city design and planning tends to favour geometry, tidiness, efficiency and the artistic genius of design professionals over the experience and lived expertise of city dwellers.

However, over the past decade, cities around the world from Boston, USA to Bratislava, Slovakia, have established innovation teams using Human-Centered Design as an underpinning of their work. Perhaps the clearly defined process model and methodologies proven successful for innovation in the commercial sector provided the value proposition necessary to finally shift city design conversations to centre around people.

More and more cities are beginning to shift the way they approach urban problems by talking about residents as primary stakeholders, which has resulted in the creation of new city products, services and experiences that people love. This is an important mindset shift, but is it enough to move city design solutions beyond products and services in an attempt to truly drive transformative outcomes like community identity building?

Several weeks ago, I found myself contemplating this exact question. I was sitting around a table with a handful of community leaders for an innovation workshop focused on addressing poverty in the region. My group was specifically focused on health as a determinant. As we began turning over many of the familiar root causes, a group member said: "What about the environment as it relates to mental health? There's so much loss of community and culture as

*Top: Modern city design tends to favour formal geometry and movement of vehicles over place making centered on the human experience  
Bottom: Community identity may be cultivated or preserved through the creative exposure and celebration of community narratives*



PHOTO: MOHIT KUMAR, UNSPLASH



PHOTO: KAYLE KAUPANGER, UNSPLASH

## Growth is exciting, but growth also means change, and with change comes fear of loss

**System of Design Approaches:** design approaches are not static and this list does not intend to be exhaustive. The principles and processes associated with different approaches may intersect and span across dimensions. As an approach increases in its level of relationship building and community empowerment, the length of time of a typical engagement using that approach tends to increase, as well as its potential for social impact

new people move into neighbourhoods. There's no sense of knowing your neighbour anymore." And an energetic shift to reframe community social capital as wellness commenced. How might we preserve, share and elevate the history and culture that exists in a place as a community goes through change?

I left the workshop contemplating this question and feeling a bit anxious about whether or not Human-Centered Design is the right approach for navigating such complexity. In this case, the desired outcome is not a new product or service, but rather the cultivation of social capital as a community resource. As we move up the scale of increasing desired impact, we should seek to take principles from many different design approaches and critically examine what each challenge might require.

When designing in the context of cities and communities there are two important dimensions to consider: the level of design decision-making power of communities, and the level of relationship-building with communities. Different design approaches fall in different locations along these two dimensions. This allows us to think about our design approaches as a system where we can draw on principles from multiple approaches for different purposes. With this model in mind, there are two approaches that are of particular interest to community identity design: Co-design and Tactical Urbanism.

Co-design brings people most impacted by design outcomes along as experts and decision-makers throughout the process by first fostering trusted relationships and then building design capacity among community co-designers. BlackSpace, a collective of designers across the United States, demonstrates how this approach can be used to elevate community identity. BlackSpace worked alongside Brownsville community residents in an exploratory process of co-designing heritage conservation efforts. Together they documented neighbourhood memories, identified cultural assets and heritage values and created space for local heritage conservationists to connect in their neighbourhood. By empowering residents to acknowledge cultural traditions, BlackSpace designers were able to strengthen community agency, inspire local advocates and fortify social networks.

Tactical Urbanism is an approach to prototyping, testing and iterating possible solutions in the city. City dwellers often find creative ways to adapt the urban environment to their needs where formal city processes are too slow or ineffective. Tactical Urbanism seeks to harness this creativity by taking the learnings from speedy temporary solutions and using them as proof of concept to be formalised at scale. There are many examples of this stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic where people in cities took power into their own hands to quickly adapt their environments and enhance community identity in public spaces. In Charlotte, North Carolina, 17 local artists gathered to paint the phrase 'BLACK LIVES MATTER' on a street in the urban center of the city. The mural, known as 'The Message on the Street', has become a major gathering place for the Black community and others who would not typically visit there.

I focus on co-design and Tactical Urbanism here because of their unique ability to push our thinking about how community identity is created and by whom. For cities and communities with complex histories, power dynamics and cultures, innovation resulting in product and service experiences is not enough. Cities relying on Human-Centered Design alone run the risk of reducing the impact that design can have. The approach does not go far enough to share design decision-making power and build the relationships with communities necessary to nurture social transformation. Rather than focusing solely on Human-Centered Design for innovation outcomes, I argue that cities should expand to a system of design approach to combine different design principles in different ways to achieve many different outcomes and levels of social impact. ●

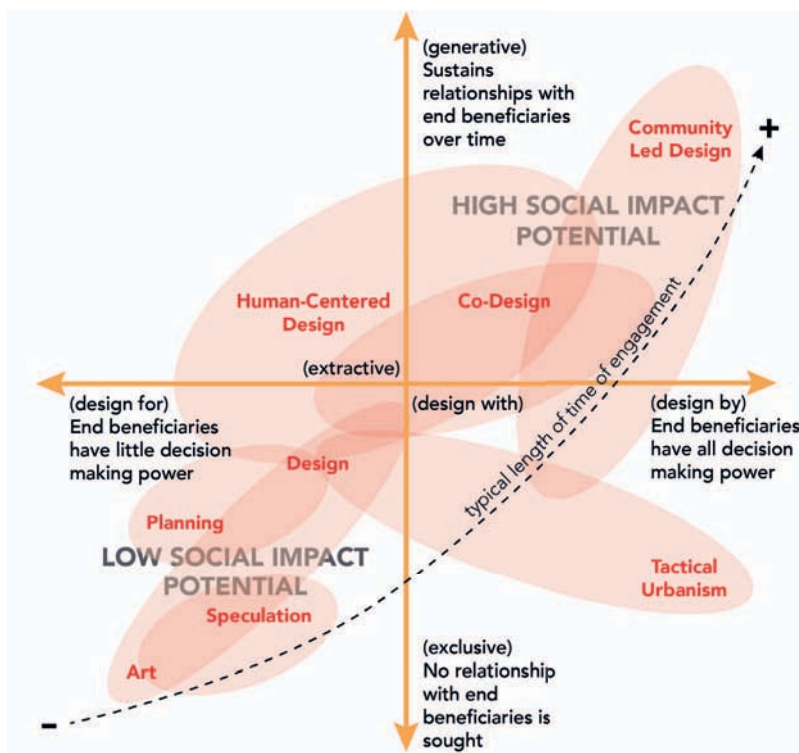


IMAGE: ANDREYA VEINTIMILLA

# ...but our dreams are big!



**MAGAZINE • BOOKS • EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS • CONFERENCES • URBAN ACTIVATION • KNOWLEDGE TOURS**

With small steps we are inspiring cities to become more inclusive, liveable, sustainable and respectful of the environment  
As our family of believers grow, we know we can;  
And you, your city and all of us, can become the change we need to see

Over the last 7 years we've shared our beliefs with and among others: The International New Town Institute, KRVIA, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Nirlon Knowledge Park, Alembic City, National Institute of Urban Affairs, KU Leuven, ORO Editions, DAIDA Foundation, HUDCO, Citizens Alliance (Delhi), National Housing Bank, SPA Bhopal, HDFC, ISHRAE, Intelligent Community Forum (New York), IGBC, Finch Buildings, readers and contributors from over 100 cities around the world.

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