The 10 Traits of Vibrant Cities

Rethink The Way You Look At Urban Places & Learn What It Really Takes To Make Your Community More Vibrant

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Why Should You Read This Book?
I have some new ideas about how to make your city more vibrant. This book isn’t based on abstract theories. These ideas come from a life of observing, analyzing, and exploring cities and what really makes them work. The sole intention of this book is to uncover the common traits shared by all vibrant cities and how every city can make use of this knowledge to become a better urban place.

This book is for urban planners, economic developers, local government leaders and anyone who gets paid to make their community more vibrant. It’s also for consultants, researchers, academics, and other people who get paid for their advice on how to improve cities. Last but not least, this book is for students, citizens, and professionals who work in other fields that invest time and money to improve their community simply because they believe in the future of their city.

I took a risk by writing this book because many of the ideas I present are the opposite of the conventional wisdom about cities. This will lead to some heated debates, controversy, and possibly even strong opposition. But that’s okay, because above all else, this book is meant to incite change. I want to change the way you think about your city. More specifically, I want to change how you define success for your community. Let’s start by re-defining the word urban.

Urban = Vibrant
In my book (pun intended), a city that is more urban is a city that is more vibrant. So, what exactly is urban? This question will be answered in detail throughout the book, but we can start by deliberately using a positive definition of the word urban from this point forward. Far too often, the terms urban, inner city, and downtown conjure up images of dark, dangerous environments that are filled with criminals, drug dealers, and the down-trodden of our society. For most cities, these images are way off base and don’t reflect reality. The truth is that America’s cities and urban regions are the driving force of economic development, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

Let’s begin exploring the 10 traits of vibrant cities and what it takes for your community to become more vibrant.
The urbanSCALE Rating System
I created a comprehensive framework to measure urban vitality and evaluate how urban a given city is on a scale of 1 to 10 using the urbanSCALE framework below:

Each of these 10 scales, or traits, includes many variables that have been created through comprehensive analysis and data collection. Cities receive a score from 1 to 10 for each scale and for the average total of all 10 traits, giving that city its “urbanSCALE”. We have conducted this full urbanSCALE analysis for each of the 100 largest U.S. cities, but the 10 traits and the principles behind them apply to all cities, regardless of their size.

How The Rest of This Book Works
For each of the 10 traits (the next 10 chapters of the book) we have dedicated a chapter to describe why this trait is a must-have for vibrant cities. Each chapter begins with a series of questions. These questions are the best way to understand what exactly is measured for each trait.

Also, each chapter presents the Top 10 list of cities that rank high on that particular trait, and spotlights one Top 10 city that captures the essence of that trait. For the full rankings of all 100 cities please go to urbanSCALE.com. If your city scores high on one or two traits, but does not rate well on the rest, you (and your colleagues) have your work cut out for you. For a city to be truly vibrant, it must rate well on most, if not all, of the traits. And although there are 10 traits, it is worth pointing out that there is a lot of overlap between them. The 10 traits of vibrant cities don’t live in isolation. In fact, there are three major themes that weave through multiple traits:

• Vibrant City Theme #1 – A strong, growing downtown
• Vibrant City Theme #2 – An extensive transit system
• Vibrant City Theme #3 – Diversity (not just in population, but also in buildings and transportation modes)

Look for these themes as we cover each of the 10 traits in the chapters that follow.
How magnetic is your city? Does it appeal to people from all walks of life? Is your city’s crime rate something that can be bragged about in tourism marketing materials, or is it a negative factor that repels people? Is your city a hub for college students, recent grads and young adults? Is your city a major gateway for immigrants?

Vibrant cities are attractive. We’re not saying they have to look good, although they often do. What we’re saying is that they literally attract. They attract residents. They attract visitors. They attract businesses. They attract investments. They attract publicity (usually the good kind but not always).

A city that ranks high in universal appeal is an urban place that attracts all types of people. Vibrant cities often have large, top-notch universities. Universities bring people from all over the country. The best universities attract people from all over the world. But cities with high universal appeal are much more than that. Vibrant cities are not everything to everyone, but they are many things to many people.
A community that is primarily a “college town” does not have universal appeal because it is only good at attracting one segment of the population: young adults seeking a university education (and perhaps also lots of partying, depending on the university).

By the same token, a city that is largely seen as a “retirement community” does not have universal appeal. Or, a city that is dominated by a single industry (a ski resort community, or an oil/gas boomtown) does not have universal appeal. Vibrant cities bring different people together for different reasons. They are not one-hit wonders.
Don’t be a one-hit wonder, attract all types

SPOTLIGHT ON: BOSTON, MA
Ranked #2 in Universal Appeal

Vibrant cities are charismatic. They draw people in and connect them to each other. And we’re not talking only about a single-purpose tourist destination (think Cancun). We are talking about cities that are appealing to a wide range of people: immigrants, college students, families, singles, young professionals. You get the picture.

Yet, there is one trait that cities with high universal appeal do not have: lots of crime. Even if a city has all of the other ingredients that make it an appealing place for people from all walks of life, if that city has an exceptionally high murder rate, it will push people away, residents, tourists, and businesses alike. If the citizens in your community are afraid to take a walk in their own neighborhood or visit downtown after 5pm, then you have a serious problem.

Cities that score high in universal appeal not only attract people, but they also do not push people away. A certain amount of crime is unavoidable, especially in large cities, and there will always be areas of cities more prone to crime than others, but a general sense of safety is non-negotiable if you want a vibrant city.
Does your city’s surrounding region support urban vitality through its cities, neighborhoods, and employment centers? Is your region a place where someone can get around easily by using public transportation or by walking or biking?

Vibrant cities are the principal building blocks of vibrant regions. A vibrant region is created by a network of urban places, tied together by a strong central city and an extensive public transit system. A region with only a few isolated pockets of urbanism is not vibrant. Above all else, vibrant urban regions are connected. The cities that make up a vibrant region are connected to the region’s primary central city and to each other. Imagine each metro area as a collection of black dots scattered on a white piece of paper. Each of the dots is a town or city. In order to function together as a region, these dots must be connected. The region’s communities are connected physically by roads, rail lines, and utilities. And the region’s people are connected by a thriving CBD, an extensive transit system, and a wide range of accessible public spaces and walkable commercial districts. Vibrant regions are places where you can access most of the region’s major destinations without having to get in a car.

I have never felt salvation in nature. I love cites above all.
– MICHELANGELO
Vibrant cities occupy a place of importance within their respective regions, often the central city at the core of the metro area with the region’s primary Central Business District (CBD). But many successful communities are not central cities. The most vibrant regions usually have multiple vibrant cities. In fact, look at the Top 10 list of cities with the most vibrant Region to the right, and you’ll notice it’s actually a Top 12 list, with multiple ties. That’s because this is the one trait that measures how vibrant the region is, not just each individual city. The cities of New York, Newark, and Jersey City are each part of the most vibrant region – the greater New York City metro area.
Physical connections within each metro area are necessary but they are only one side of the story. Vibrant regions must also be connected in other meaningful ways, especially through regional collaboration. The individual cities and counties of each region together make up a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts, a regional economy. As such, each of the municipalities within a metro area must work together, instead of competing against each other, making the urban region a single functioning unit, sort of like an extended family or a tribe.

Every metro area is collaborating in at least the realm of transportation infrastructure, usually only because they have to. True regional collaboration – where each city sacrifices a bit for the benefit of the region as a whole – is much harder to come by. The Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, despite not ranking in the Top 10 for the region trait (though it is in the top 30%) offers the best example of true regional collaboration: the Twin Cities Fiscal Disparities regional tax-base sharing program. This program, authorized in 1971, takes 40 percent of the commercial-industrial tax base growth from the region’s 7 core counties and redistributes the money to local governments across the entire metro area to reduce inefficient competition for tax dollars.

SPOTLIGHT ON: NEW YORK, NY

Ranked #1 in Region

Photo by Dimitry B.  www.flickr.com/photos/ru_boff/

REGION: Why does New York score high on this trait?

- Largest subway system in world (by number of stations and miles of total track)
- Most extensive commuter rail system in North America
- Only region in U.S. with several major downtown districts: Midtown Manhattan, Lower Manhattan, Downtown Brooklyn, Downtown Jersey City, and Downtown Newark

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Connect the dots

Photo by Dimitry B.  www.flickr.com/photos/ru_boff/
Other benefits of the Twin Cities Fiscal Disparities program include: increased joint economic development efforts, improved regional land-use planning, stable regional growth patterns, and lower tax rates and service inequalities. A couple other notable examples of regional tax-base sharing include the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission Inter-Municipal Tax Sharing Program and the Pittsburgh region’s Allegheny Regional Asset District.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul region’s “we’re all in this together” approach to regional economic development is a perfect illustration of how communities can combat the economic principle known as the “tragedy of the commons”, a concept which dates back to English villages in the early 1800s. As the Industrial Revolution took hold in England, the demand for wool grew exponentially. In English villages, shepherds often grazed their sheep in common areas. For each individual herder, it made sense to allow all of his sheep to graze from the commons, while the village as a whole suffered from over-grazing of the commons. If each herder in the village allowed all of his sheep to graze in the common, this set of individually rational economic decisions could lead to the deterioration or complete destruction of the common, a bad economic outcome for the entire village and for each of the individual herders. And for the sheep? Well, they all thought it was a b-a-a-a-a-a-a-d decision.

Ultimately, the individual communities that make up an urban region must understand that they have a shared destiny. True collaboration is an essential ingredient for success if you want your region to avoid an outcome similar to the tragedy of the commons. All else equal, metro areas that establish collaborative public policies have the best shot at becoming vibrant regions.
Does your city contain a diverse mix of old and new buildings that supports vibrant neighborhoods and districts? Is your city filled with vacant homes that hinder urban vitality? Does your city have a lot of skyscrapers (buildings that are 30+ stories)? Does your city have a lot of high-rise buildings (buildings of 10-30 stories)? How do the buildings in your city interact with their immediate surroundings?

Simply put, many of the most successful U.S. cities have a high percentage of old buildings (we can define “old” as pre-1940). Old buildings are such an asset because they change organically over time, being converted from one use to another, adding to a city’s diversity. Moreover, they were built in a time when cities were generally more walkable and less auto-oriented. The other side of the same coin is that cities need a good mix of old and new buildings to remain vibrant. A U.S. city that has nothing but old buildings (a sign of decline and disinvestment) is no better off than a city that is dominated entirely by new buildings (an indication of a city lacking in diversity and fine-grained urbanism). The ideal city is one that has a large supply of old, well-maintained buildings and has also consistently added new buildings over the last several decades.
Building variety is a big contributor to urban vitality. It’s better to gain two or three mid-size buildings than one large building, all else equal. This introduces greater potential for diversity of people and activities, thereby encouraging a more vibrant environment. True urbanism is fine-grained. Large, mono-scale buildings (think convention centers) don’t contribute to urban vitality. It’s often the little things – like building variety – that can make your city more vibrant. Other “little things” that make a big difference include street benches, corner trash bins, wide awnings on buildings, and on-street parking spaces that separate moving traffic from pedestrians.
Regardless of whether a building is old or new, there is one more important factor that determines if a building contributes to urban vitality or takes away from it: density. To some people, density is a bad word. You need to get your city (and your citizens) past this. The more dense your city is, the better its chances of becoming a vibrant community.

First, what do we mean by density? The simplest definition of density is the amount of stuff that a building contains (square feet of office space, number of apartment units, amount of retail space, etc.) relative to the amount of land it takes up. This includes any additional land dedicated to supporting functions like parking, building entrances, freight unloading zones, or green space. If you want to make your city more vibrant, you simply have to have high building densities in your community, especially in your downtown and close-in neighborhoods. However, all density is not created equal.

There are two basic types of building density: vertical density and horizontal density. What is vertical density? You guessed it, building up. Skyscrapers. High-rises. Stacking lots of floors on top of each other to fit more apartments, hotel rooms, or offices into a single building.

**SPOTLIGHT ON: CHICAGO, IL**

Ranked #7 in Buildings

![Photo by chicagogeek](www.flickr.com/photos/chicagogeek/)

BUILDINGS: Why does Chicago score high on this trait?

- More skyscrapers and high-rises than any city other than New York
- 45% of Chicago’s residential buildings were built before 1940, 9th among large cities
- Chicago also ranks 9th among large cities in housing age diversity for all homes built from 1940 to 2010, signaling a steady flow of re-investment
Horizontal density, on the other hand, is building out so that more land is occupied by buildings instead of empty space. A building (or group of buildings) that takes up an entire city block, regardless of how many stories it contains, is an example of horizontal density. The highest levels of density are found in neighborhoods and districts that maximize vertical density and horizontal density. So, which type of density is more important? You can get more bang for your buck with vertical building density, but horizontal building density is actually more important. This might sound counter-intuitive since many of the most vibrant cities (New York, Chicago, Seattle) also have the most impressive skylines. Of course, if your city is in the middle of a skyscraper construction boom, by all means, celebrate! That’s a good sign, and will certainly add to your city’s urban vitality. But, you don’t need super-tall buildings for urban vitality. Just look at D.C., a city that does not have a single skyscraper, but is one of the most vibrant urban places in America. Let’s look at a scenario that illustrates the importance of horizontal density.

Imagine that your city’s downtown has a large block that is about to be converted from a surface parking lot into a large mixed-use building with 300 apartment units and ground-floor retail space. The developer of this building is considering two design options. Option #1 is a sleek 25-story tower that covers about 25% of the lot and is surrounded by a large private plaza on one side and a parking lot on the other side. Option #2 is a 6-story building that covers 100% of the lot and includes an interior parking garage that is hidden from the street on all four sides. Both options will result in several hundred new downtown residents, which is great. Option #1 provides an added bonus because it will enhance your city’s skyline. So, which option do you want? I hope you chose Option #2 – the much shorter building that takes up the whole block – because this is the best option if you want to make your city more vibrant. Here’s why. When you max out a building’s horizontal density, you improve how the building interacts with its surroundings. Good buildings help to shape a comfortable pedestrian zone around them that encourages people to actually use this space. Bad buildings are surrounded by parking lots and use blank, boring walls that discourage humans from walking or spending time next to the building. And by focusing first and foremost on improving horizontal building density, you can improve your city’s potential for developing fine-grained urbanism.
Is your city aspiring to become more urban by building new transit stations? Are your city’s downtown and surrounding neighborhoods becoming more urban over time through the addition of new workers and residents? Are construction cranes for new skyscrapers and high-rises a common sight in your city?

Vibrant cities are ambitious places filled with ambitious people. Vibrant cities are actively and visibly becoming more urban. They have aspirations to become more vibrant. They are growing (more residents, more jobs, new construction) instead of declining. If you want your city to become more vibrant, growth is a must-have, but more important is where and how your city is growing. Cities that rank high in ambition are gaining lots of jobs and residents in and around their downtown. Take a look at the urbanSCALE Top 10 list for ambition (on the next page). The biggest thing these cities have in common is a thriving downtown. Ambitious cities are building and planning new high-rises and skyscrapers. Ambitious cities are building new public transit lines (cities like Seattle and Charlotte) and expanding existing transit systems (cities like D.C, Miami, and New York).
Vibrant cities are not filled with vacant buildings, especially in their downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. In ambitious cities, signs of investment and re-investment are everywhere. Old buildings are either renovated and given a new life, or new structures are built in their place. In both cases, the city’s building stock becomes more valuable.

Every city has its own set of unique strengths and weaknesses. Cities that score high in ambition are different because they build on their strengths and correct their weaknesses.
Ambitious cities improve on their assets – their downtown and their most vibrant urban neighborhoods and commercial corridors. Just as important, ambitious cities also work to enhance the urban vitality of the places in their community that are not very vibrant – impoverished neighborhoods, stagnant commercial corridors, declining industrial districts, and suburban strip mall zones.

Beyond the more visible elements of urban ambition – new transit systems, growing downtowns, urban redevelopment – there is another big component of each city’s aspirations: public policies. Cities that rank high on ambition have policies that aim to make their community more urban. Cities that rank low on ambition have regulations that discourage urban vitality and create suburban sprawl, sometimes on purpose but many times inadvertently. There is one type of regulation that perhaps best exemplifies this lack of urban ambition: minimum parking requirements. Almost every city has them, even in their downtown districts. If your city doesn’t have minimum parking requirements, go ahead and pat yourself on the back...you’re in a small, select group. It’s as if most cities are afraid of becoming more vibrant.

SPOTLIGHT ON: MIAMI, FL
Ranked #2 in Ambition

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AMBITION: Why does Miami score high on this trait?

- Recent MetroRail expansion connects airport to downtown
- More skyscrapers planned and under construction than any city other than New York
- Rapid population growth in downtown Miami, including a new apartment skyscraper with zero parking – a first for Miami and a sign of the city’s growing urban ambition

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By establishing minimum parking requirements – such as, you must have at least four parking spaces for every 1,000 square feet of office space – cities are forcing the creation of environments that favor driving and discourage any other form of transportation. And this only drives the cost of new buildings higher. If a developer wants to build a few less parking spaces in order to fit more employees or residents into a new building, why in the world should a local government prevent that?

At a minimum, cities should eliminate minimum parking requirements and allow the market to determine how much parking is actually needed, instead of forcing the construction of more parking spaces than might be necessary. And ideally, cities should set an upper limit on parking spaces, especially in their downtown and close-in neighborhoods where other forms of travel (walking, biking, public transportation) are most practical.

The good news is that, after several decades of suburban-style land use regulations, most cities are at least waking up to the fact that their public policies have been part of the problem. And many cities are now taking proactive steps to re-focus their land use policies to promote urban vitality.

Single-use zoning regulations, for instance, have physically separated homes, shops, and offices from each other in most parts of most cities for nearly a century. Now, mixed-use zoning – which encourages housing, retail, and office space to locate in closer proximity (in the same building or at least on the same block) – is increasingly common in small and large cities. There are still far too many local regulations that hamper urban vitality, but the tide has turned in a more positive direction.

Bottom line: if you are trying to make your city more vibrant, don’t create an uphill battle for your community with public policies that lead to suburban sprawl. It’s time to change your city’s public policies so that they match your citizens’ aspirations for a more vibrant community.
Is your city’s population and housing stock concentrated in dense clusters or spread out over a vast area? Does your city have a balanced mix of houses, townhomes, and apartments? Are new neighborhoods in your city designed and built in a way that contributes to urban vitality?

Just like a vibrant region needs vibrant cities, vibrant neighborhoods are the building blocks of vibrant cities. A city that lacks vibrant urban neighborhoods cannot become a thriving community. First, we need to define what a neighborhood really is, and just as important, what a neighborhood is not. The term neighborhood is one of those words in the English language that is thrown around too loosely. Like the words love or innovation or sustainability, neighborhood is often used when it shouldn’t be, and as a result, it has lost much of its real meaning. If you’re like most people, you probably refer to the area immediately surrounding your home as “your neighborhood”, unless of course, you live in a rural setting. And if you’re like most people (myself included), you are wrong. Think this is too harsh? Keep reading.
An apartment complex is not a neighborhood. A group of high-rises that make up a public housing project is not a neighborhood. A gated subdivision is certainly not a neighborhood. So, what exactly is a neighborhood? It’s a place that has a strong identity. The residents care about it deeply.

And while the best neighborhoods are distinct and identifiable, their boundaries are not set in stone. Instead, the level of debate about a neighborhood’s boundaries is actually one of the most accurate indicators of a vibrant neighborhood.
The previous statement might seem ridiculous at first glance, but it actually makes perfect sense. Think about it. Vibrant urban neighborhoods are connected to one another. They are not separated. Vibrant neighborhoods flow into one another. Each neighborhood has its own unique identity, but is part of a bigger, better whole: a vibrant city with many neighborhoods. Let’s put my claim that “a disputed neighborhood boundary equals a vibrant neighborhood” to the test by looking at the West Village/Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York, NY.

First, is the West Village a vibrant neighborhood? Yes! At least that's what the locals will tell you. And if you haven’t been there, you can take my word for it (I lived there for a year). Now, what about the disputed boundary test? The West Village is perhaps the best example of a disputed boundary indicating a vibrant neighborhood. Just Google “boundaries of the West Village” and you’ll see numerous articles debating the subject, including articles from many years ago. They still haven’t resolved the debate, even after years of arguing! Guess what? The debate will never end as long as the West Village remains a vibrant neighborhood. And this is just one example among hundreds of vibrant neighborhoods with highly disputed boundaries.
There is also an equally useful indicator to determine if a place is not a vibrant neighborhood. If your “neighborhood” does not have a commonly recognized name, it is not a vibrant neighborhood. In fact, it’s probably not even a neighborhood according to our definition. Consider the following scenario:

Imagine you are standing in a city and you ask 10 people walking by what the name of the neighborhood is and 5 of them tell you “Well, this is Chinatown”, and the other 5 say, “No, this Old Town”. This is a good sign. You are standing at the rough dividing line between two neighborhoods with strong identities.

Now, imagine you are in another place and you ask 10 people the same question and you get 5 responses of “Um, I don’t know”, and another 5 responses with the official names of apartment complexes and subdivisions. This is a bad sign. This place does not have a strong, unique identity and is not a vibrant neighborhood.

Ultimately, the essence of a vibrant neighborhood is a strong identity. Vibrant neighborhoods are places that people care about. And a collection of places that people care about is what makes a vibrant city.
Does your city have a well-connected street grid that promotes walking or a far-flung network of streets that are designed only for cars? Do lots of people in your city walk to work or ride their bikes to work? Do your downtown and surrounding neighborhoods have a dense street network that promotes walking and biking? Is your city filled with expressways that restrict urban vitality by separating neighborhoods?

Streets, at their best, are far more than just a place for traffic. Streets are actually the most common public spaces in America. The street network is your city’s largest, most important real estate asset. And it is controlled almost entirely by the public sector. Unfortunately, most streets are designed solely with the intent of moving traffic as fast as possible. In most cities, streets form a barrier that divides the community, separating neighborhoods. In vibrant cities, streets serve to connect neighborhoods. The most successful cities understand the important role that streets play in creating vibrant communities.

For your city’s biggest real estate asset

u: universal appeal
r: region
b: buildings
a: ambition
n: neighborhoods
S: streets
C: compactness
A: access
L: and use patterns
E: economy

Forget the damned motor car and build the cities for lovers and friends.
– LEWIS MUMFORD, sociologist and historian
To create a street grid that helps make your city more vibrant, there are three basic rules:

- **Vibrant Streets Rule #1** – Cram in as many streets and intersections as you can into a small area, especially in your city’s downtown.
- **Vibrant Streets Rule #2** – Severely limit the amount of highways in your city, particularly downtown.
- **Vibrant Streets Rule #3** – Your city streets should not look and feel like highways (wide lanes, wide shoulders, designed for high speed), they should be designed for people, just like any high-quality public space.

### Top 10 Cities (2014) Trait: Streets

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<th>Rank</th>
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What does a high-quality street network look like? To start with, the street grid is dense, meaning there are lots of streets and intersections per square mile. Streets are well connected (short block lengths) so that there are always many viable options for a pedestrian, cyclist, or vehicle traveling from Point A to Point B. The roadbeds themselves – the space where vehicles travel – are as narrow as possible, leaving plenty of space for pedestrians, landscaping, and street furniture. And on-street parking exists everywhere as a general rule – on residential and commercial streets – as this is a key factor in improving real and perceived safety for pedestrians, making it much more likely that people will walk.

So, what about highways? Large cities need a limited amount of highways for long distance travel and to accommodate truck traffic. And trucks need highways to operate efficiently. So, we can’t just do away with trucks and the infrastructure they need to make regular deliveries to homes and businesses. But, if you look at the typical traffic mix on any given highway in U.S. cities, trucks only make up 5 to 10% of the total traffic. Okay, this is going to be controversial, but I’m going to say it anyway: We do not need to build any more highways in large U.S. cities, period.
In fact, many of our existing urban expressways need to be removed entirely and replaced with urban boulevards and avenues. Most cities have far too many highways. And we certainly don’t need to expand our existing urban expressways. Think I’m crazy? Let’s take a look at Portland, Oregon, a city that embodies what it means to have a street network that contributes to urban vitality.

Portland has really gone against the grain with its anti-highway culture. In the 1960s – a time when pretty much every large U.S. city was busy tearing down urban neighborhoods to build expressways – Portland cancelled the planned Mount Hood Freeway, a highway that would have demolished the homes of thousands of residents. And in the 1970s – when most big cities were still building urban expressways – Portland became the first major city to actually tear down a highway, Harbor Drive, replacing it with a downtown waterfront park. And few cities have a more dense, well-connected street grid, particularly in their downtown. Today, Portland is well known for its extensive light rail system and its streetcar lines, both of which are currently undergoing major expansions. However, Portland’s street network is the unsung hero, playing a key role in contributing to the city’s urban vitality. What are the results of Portland’s anti-highway efforts and its people-friendly streets? Portland has the highest percentage of bicycle commuters (5.8% of all commuters) among the 100 largest cities and also a high percentage (5.1%) of commuters that walk to work, better than 82 of the 100 largest cities.

In your quest to make your community more vibrant, don’t ignore your city’s biggest real estate asset. It’s okay if your city’s street network is more of a liability than an asset in its current configuration. You can take some initial low-cost baby steps toward a more vibrant city by putting some of your roads on a “road diet”, narrowing lanes and removing lanes to add more on-street parking spaces and bike lanes. You can then implement some slightly more ambitious actions that require a bit more money, like expanding sidewalks and adding landscaping. And for the truly bold, you can strategically de-commission one of your city’s existing expressways – perhaps the highway that is least needed and causes the most separation between neighborhoods – and create an urban boulevard in its place.
How much of your region’s population lives in your city’s downtown and close-in neighborhoods? How much of your region’s total employment is in your city’s downtown and close-in neighborhoods? Are most of your city’s major destinations located in the central part of your city? And are these destinations easily accessible?

Compactness is not the same thing as density even though the two terms are often used interchangeably. Compactness is a measure of concentration and accessibility to a city’s downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. If most of the jobs and homes in your city are concentrated in a single area, your city is compact, regardless of how dense it is. On the other hand, if your city’s major activity centers are scattered over a vast land area, your city is not compact.

Compact means that it is easy to access most of what a city has to offer. In cities that score high on compactness, most people are in close proximity to their daily needs (work, school, shopping, recreation) and to the city’s major destinations (downtown, universities, retail centers, hospitals). Small cities have a big advantage here.
Cities can be very dense, yet not at all compact. Think Los Angeles, which has very high levels of residential density. No one would describe Los Angeles as a compact city. On the other hand, cities can be compact but low-density. Take a look at the cities that made urbanSCALE’s Top 10 list for compactness. Other than Honolulu, none of them are all that dense. In fact, Honolulu is the only city on this list that ranks in the top 50 of the 100 largest U.S. cities for population density. Compactness is probably the only trait of the ten traits that really favors small cities. And this is a major advantage that often gets overlooked.

Top 10 Cities (2014)

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In small cities, you often hear people say, “I can drive anywhere in this town in less than 15 minutes”. This type of comment is frequently made in a half-joking, half-mocking tone that really says, “This is an unimportant town that could never compare to the big cities”. This attitude is unfortunate, because compact, small cities have a built-in advantage that can help it outperform cities that are much larger, even if they are more dense. Take Madison, WI for example.

Madison is a compact city that provides easy access to most of its destinations. Despite Madison’s moderate levels of density – Madison has lower population density than Houston and Atlanta, two cities that are not known for their density – the city performs very well in numerous ways because of its superb compactness. In fact, 4.8% of workers in Madison commute to work on a bicycle, second only to Portland, OR among the 100 largest cities. And Madison is ranked #6 for pedestrian commuters (9.2% of all commuters), behind only New York, San Francisco, Boston, D.C., and Pittsburgh. This is even more remarkable when you consider Madison’s average annual temperature of 46 degrees Fahrenheit, which makes it the fourth coldest climate among large cities, warmer than only Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Anchorage.
Compactness is essentially the opposite of sprawl. If you want to improve or maintain your city’s compactness, you can take one of two basic approaches. First, you could take a heavy-handed approach that forces compactness, commonly known as an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). Only a handful of places utilize this approach. Boulder (CO), Lexington (KY), and Portland (OR) are the most well known examples. The UGB approach can definitely create compactness, but often leads to unintended outcomes like inflated housing prices inside the boundary and higher demand for suburban sprawl outside of the boundary. In a perfect world, the UGB could serve as the ideal model for compact cities. But, since we live in the real world, what can you do for your real-world city to ensure its compactness? Here is the second approach: take proactive measures to encourage development in centrally located areas of your city (i.e. your city’s downtown and existing urban neighborhoods). This is very important and quite simple, but not necessarily easy.

For example, if your city needs a new high school, don’t build it two miles past the edge of town just because the land is cheaper out there. Decisions like these will not only limit your city’s compactness, but they will also ruin your city’s fiscal state over time because it costs a lot more to deliver municipal services to far-flung areas. Or, if your city is in need of new retail options, work with commercial real estate developers to incentivize re-investment and modernization of existing shopping centers that are centrally located. If instead, you allow the creation of a new strip mall at the edge of your city, this will cause existing shopping districts to stagnate and will lead to suburban sprawl.

While the vast majority of buildings in our country are created by the private sector, their location (and how they impact urban vitality) is greatly influenced by the public sector. It’s critical to understand that the public sector – local government in this case – plays a huge role in promoting compactness. If you want your city to excel in compactness, remember one simple rule when making any public sector decision: channel growth and development into your downtown and existing urban neighborhoods.
Do lots of people in your city take public transportation to work? Is there a wide range of public transportation options available in your city? Are there carshare and bikeshare programs available in your city? Does your city contain a high percentage of carless households? Are the major airports in your region connected to rail transit lines? In other words, can you access most of your city without having to get in a car?

Bad traffic is great for cities, large cities in particular. Wait! Don’t shoot me just yet! Let me explain. I hate sitting in traffic just as much as you do. Bad traffic sucks, at least when you’re driving in it. However, as miserable as it is to drive in bad traffic, this is actually a sign that your city is doing something right. Traffic congestion is just a symptom of a city that has a strong, growing economy. The most effective way to get rid of your city’s traffic problems is to kill your city’s economy. Doesn’t sound very appealing does it? Just take a look at cities with astronomical unemployment rates that have lost a large amount of jobs and residents in the last few decades. You won’t find yourself stuck in a traffic jam in these cities, but good luck getting a job, starting a successful business, or even enjoying an evening stroll along an active urban corridor.

They say the universe is expanding. That should help with traffic.

– STEVEN WRIGHT, comedian
Okay, so maybe it’s not that hard to see that traffic congestion is a side effect of a healthy, growing city. But, I said bad traffic is a good thing, right? That’s right. If you’re trying to make your city more vibrant (which I’m guessing you are since you’ve gotten this far into the book), traffic congestion is actually a huge opportunity disguised as a problem. Don’t waste that opportunity by expanding your city’s highways to accommodate (and thus, create) more traffic. The biggest opportunity provided by traffic congestion is that it encourages the development of a more complete transportation network, ultimately improving the accessibility of your city.
Anyone responsible for managing and improving a city should not be focused on traffic. Especially in large cities. The amount of money, time, and mental capacity spent by all governments (local, state, and federal) in the name of traffic reduction is enormous. And what’s the result? More traffic! Yes, that’s right. And it’s not complicated, if you think about it. Expanding the highways of a large, growing city to handle more traffic will simply allow the same highway to handle more traffic. As your city grows over time, this increase in traffic will create more congestion. Los Angeles is a perfect example of this. LA has successfully created the largest, most expensive regional highway system in U.S. history. And what does LA get in return? The worst traffic congestion in the country. A single-minded focus on highway expansion will short-change your city’s residents because they will still be left with only one option for getting around: driving.

Vibrant cities are accessible. If you can’t access what your city has to offer without getting behind the wheel of a car, your city is not vibrant. The most accessible cities provide a wide range of options for people to move around: walking, biking, buses, commuter rail, light rail, streetcars, ferries.

**SPOTLIGHT ON: WASHINGTON, DC**

**Ranked #5 in Access**

**ACCESS: Why does DC score high on this trait?**

- Most of DC’s major destinations are easily accessible without having to get in a car
- More rail transit stations (subway, commuter rail, streetcar) than any city other than New York
- 6th highest percentage of households with no vehicle among 100 largest U.S. cities

Photo by Dewita Soeharjono  www.flickr.com/photos/dewita-soeharjono/
The most vibrant cities are usually the cities where the highest percentage of homes, jobs, and public facilities are within a short walk from transit stations. One of the most effective ways to boost your city’s urban vitality is to build a new transit line (light rail, streetcar, commuter rail, etc.) where one does not currently exist. New transit lines work best when they connect your downtown to nearby urban neighborhoods and other major centers of activity such as a university, a medical center, or an airport. Building a new transit line in your city will also improve land values and development potential in key areas. New transit lines are often the first step in the process of creating a dynamic urban environment, but in many cities, they help facilitate and accelerate urban redevelopment that is already taking place.

If you have bad traffic in your city, embrace it instead of building more highways, expanding roads, and trying to speed up traffic. Save your efforts for more productive pursuits like expanding your city’s transit system and making investments that enhance your city’s walking and biking infrastructure. In the end, fighting against bad traffic is not only futile, it’s actually counter-productive if you’re trying to make your community more vibrant. If you’re still not buying into this line of thinking, that’s understandable. It may be difficult to accept a new idea that is entirely opposed to the conventional wisdom about how cities are supposed to function. The good news is that you don’t have to take my word for it. Just look at the table to the right, which shows the top 10 U.S. cities with the worst traffic congestion according to the TomTom Traffic Index, along with each city’s urbanSCALE rank. It turns out that the most congested cities are also among the most vibrant cities. Despite the bad traffic (and in part, because of it), these cities have managed to become vibrant communities.

It doesn’t look like traffic congestion is really the boogieman that it’s made out to be, does it?
Can your kids walk to school?

I'm not going to buy my kids an encyclopedia. Let them walk to school like I did.

– YOGI BERRA, Hall of Fame baseball player

Are your city’s neighborhoods and major employment areas within walking distance to transit stations? How concentrated is the population in your city’s downtown and surrounding neighborhoods? How much of your city's land area is within easy walking distance to a transit station? Are most of your city’s residents within close proximity to retail areas, schools, and other public facilities?

Urban land use patterns that contribute to vibrant cities are all about mixed-use development. There are basically three ways to achieve mixed-use:

• Mixed-use style #1 – Vertical mixing of multiple land uses into a single mixed-use building or tower
• Mixed-use style #2 – Close positioning of multiple land uses around central public spaces such as a street, plaza, park, atrium, or retail center
• Mixed-use style #3 – Interconnection of buildings with differing land uses through pedestrian-friendly pathways (sidewalks, concourses, escalators, and bridges)

In the most vibrant neighborhoods you will find numerous examples of all three of these mixed-use development styles.
Here’s a quick rule of thumb to know if your city has urban land use patterns: Imagine an average adult in your city. Let’s call him Johnny. Now, imagine that Johnny just got home from work and is cooking dinner. Halfway through the meal preparation, Johnny realizes that he’s missing a key ingredient. He has 10 minutes to leave his home, walk to the nearest grocery store, purchase the missing ingredient, and walk back home. Will Johnny be able to do this? If you answered “yes” or something close to yes, like “probably”, then your city has land use patterns that make it more vibrant. If you answered “no”, then your city’s land use patterns are part of the problem.

Top 10 Cities (2014)
Trait: Land Use Patterns

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Here’s one more rule of thumb to determine how urban your city’s land use patterns are: Imagine an average family that is relocating to your city. Let’s call the parents William and Amy. This family has two elementary school-age kids – Kevin and Olivia – and a dog named Fluffy. William and Amy really want their kids to be able to walk to school. And they also want to be able to walk to a dog run for Fluffy (although this is not a deal-breaker). Is it likely that William and Amy will be able to find a home in any part of your city that is within a short, pleasant walk of an elementary school?

If you answered, “very likely” because most homes in your city are within close proximity (say, a five-minute walk) to a school, then your city has urban land use patterns. If you answered, “unlikely” because few people in your city live near schools, then your city does not have land use patterns that support urban vitality. You can’t have a vibrant city if most of your city’s major land use types are physically separated. Residential areas must be located near employment centers. Retail and service businesses must exist within and near residential zones and employment districts. Schools, churches, and parks (and yes, even dog runs) must be part of the fabric of your city’s neighborhoods.
Transit systems must also work to connect major land uses in your city. If you build a new transit line in your city that does little more than connect a string of park-and-ride lots to each other, then you haven’t done much to improve your city’s land use patterns. Not only does your city need an extensive transit system to become a vibrant community, but it is equally important that the zones immediately surrounding most of the transit stations in your city are characterized by mixed-use development patterns.

Vibrant cities provide their citizens with a diversity of choices about where to live, work, shop, entertain themselves, and how to travel between these places. And cities where mixed-use development is the norm rather than the exception are the most successful in creating diversity of choices.
Does your city function as a business and employment center, or is it more of a bedroom community? Does your city have a recognized downtown district? Is your city’s downtown area the primary Central Business District (CBD) of the surrounding region? What is the level of employment density in your city’s downtown, close-in neighborhoods, and the city as a whole?

The most important function served by cities throughout history has been as a center of commerce and as a gathering place for people and businesses from surrounding areas. Vibrant cities typically have far more jobs than they have employed residents. And all of this starts downtown. The primary CBD of an urban region usually contains the highest concentration of that region’s jobs, entertainment venues, and unique cultural assets. Downtowns are almost always the most important part of cities and urban regions. We can even go as far as to say that you can’t have a vibrant city without a vibrant downtown, and if your city’s downtown is stagnating, it’s a good bet that your entire city is in decline. So, how can you tell if your city has a vibrant downtown or a stagnating downtown? There are a handful of signs, or rule-of-thumb indicators, that will answer this question.

The key to success today lies in developing a world-class people climate.

– RICHARD FLORIDA, Rise of the Creative Class
The downtown areas of vibrant cities have:

- A good mix of major functions in the CBD (office space, hotels, retail/restaurants, residential, cultural and entertainment venues)
- Lots of construction cranes
- A large concentration of public sector and private sector employment
- Public spaces (parks, plazas, promenades) that are well-used by people from all walks of life throughout the day
- Numerous thriving urban neighborhoods that are within a short walk, bike ride, or transit ride (1 to 3-mile radius) to the CBD

Top 10 Cities (2014) Trait: Economy

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The downtown areas of stagnating cities have:
- Little or no construction activity
- Public spaces that are largely empty or primarily occupied by vagrants
- Adjacent neighborhoods that are filled with vacant, boarded-up homes
- A lack of diversity in major functions, usually dominated by day-time office jobs

So, what will it take for your city to have a thriving downtown? More jobs? Probably not. In fact, most downtowns in large and mid-size cities already have plenty of jobs in their CBD, but many of these downtowns are not vibrant. The biggest deficiency in most downtowns is not jobs, but residents. Just about every downtown would benefit from new residents, but not every downtown needs more jobs. The most successful downtowns are not necessarily the ones with the most jobs (or hotels, bars, entertainment venues, or any single thing). A vibrant downtown district usually has multiple primary functions that all work together to create an environment that attracts people from all walks of life.

SPOTLIGHT ON: SEATTLE, WA
Ranked #7 in Economy

ECONOMY: Why does Seattle score high on this trait?
- High ratio of jobs to employed residents (1.69 jobs for every employed resident in Seattle)
- 4th highest downtown employment density among large cities, behind New York, San Francisco, and Boston
- Vibrant downtown district with a high concentration of employment, residents, shopping, and entertainment

The most important part of your city

Photo by Greg Goebel  www.flickr.com/photos/37467370@N08/
The level of success your city’s downtown achieves in making your city more vibrant is also closely linked to its location within the region. More specifically, the closer a region’s downtown is to that region’s center of gravity (its mean center of population), the more that region’s downtown functions like the focal point of that region. Centrally located downtowns can more easily sustain efficient transit systems, improve regional workforce access (benefiting employers and employees alike), and support a wide range of retail and service businesses.

The importance of having a strong downtown cannot be overstated. Your city’s downtown is a reflection of your city and metro area as a whole. It’s pretty much a universal truth: vibrant cities have growing downtowns and stagnating cities have declining downtowns. It’s very difficult for a city to achieve overall success and become a more vibrant community if its downtown is bleeding jobs and residents. Likewise, a city that has a booming downtown is likely to benefit from waves of prosperity and growth that originate in the city’s center and spread throughout the entire region.
WHAT’S NEXT?

The best way to predict the future is to create it.
– PETER DRUCKER, management consultant, author, and recipient of Presidential Medal of Freedom

Measure What Matters
Cities are perhaps the most ranked, rated, and measured entities in our world. And most of the characteristics that get measured have little or no relation to what truly makes a city successful. Of course, it’s certainly useful and important to analyze things like a city’s budget, or its air quality, or the educational attainment of its citizens. But is that what cities are really all about? If you’re like me, you’re not satisfied with the status quo. Above all else, you want to make your community a more vibrant place. So do I. You want to be able to track this progress. So do I. That’s why I wrote this book. The urbanSCALE rating system is based on the 10 traits of vibrant cities to measure what really matters.

What’s next? Take another look at your city (or the city you are working for if you’re a consultant) and ask yourself if it’s a vibrant community. Because most of all, that is what urban places are meant to be. This has been the case since the early cities of Rome and Constantinople and will continue to hold true for future generations. Start measuring your city in a whole new way and let this be the first step toward making your city more vibrant.

I hope that you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I also hope that you use each of the 10 traits to guide any major decisions that impact your city’s future. But even if you don’t memorize the 10 traits, remember the three themes I mentioned back in the introduction: 1) a strong downtown; 2) an extensive transit system; and 3) diversity. If you can keep these three themes at the top of your mind as you (and your colleagues) go about your daily work to improve your city, this alone will go a long way toward helping you make your community more vibrant.

A Final Request
If you took anything from this book – even just a single nugget of wisdom – please share it with someone you think will find some value from reading it. Thank you.
urbanSCALE is an Austin-based firm that provides free online resources for the advancement of vibrant cities. The urbanSCALE rating system is the first comprehensive measure of how urban a city is on a scale of 1 to 10.

I created urbanSCALE.com to help you make your city more vibrant. Why? Because I think cities are the world’s greatest invention and I have lots of ideas to make cities better. Speaking of ideas, I’d love to hear what you’re doing to make your community more vibrant. Here are the best ways to get in touch with urbanSCALE:

**Website**
urbanSCALE.com
Resources for vibrant cities.

**Blog**
urbanSCALE.com/blog
Blog about cities and how they work.

**Email**
info@urbanSCALE.com

**Twitter**
@urban_SCALE

**Google+**
plus.google.com/+JohnKarras

**LinkedIn**
linkedin.com/in/johnkarras
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Karras believes that all communities have the potential to become more vibrant. John’s professional passions are aligned at the three-way intersection of urban planning, economic development and transportation policy. John founded urbanSCALE.com to empower urban planning and economic development professionals with the knowledge and tools needed to make their communities more vibrant. John is also the creator of the urbanSCALE Rating System, the first comprehensive measure of how urban a city is on a scale of 1 to 10.

John has gained an eclectic combination of experiences:
• Economic development consultant for cities, counties, and metro areas across U.S.
• Animal van driver for Animal Haven, a New York-based dog & cat shelter
• Public speaker at dozens of presentations to City Councils, County Commissions, and groups of business executives
• Graffiti removal in Lubbock, TX
• Urban planning specialist with AECOM under the mentorship of former San Antonio Mayor Ed Garza
• Specialty retail in Manhattan’s 5th Avenue Shopping District
• Speaker of 3 languages (English, Spanish, and Geography)
• Youngest Project Manager in the history of the NYC Dept. of Transportation’s Division of Planning & Sustainability

John received his BS from Texas State University where he studied in the Geography and Public Administration departments. John received his MS from the University of Texas where he studied Community and Regional Planning.

John lives in Austin, Texas with his wife, Cyndy, and son, Gavin. In addition to exploring urban places, John enjoys red wine, 85% dark chocolate, circuit-style weight training, and rooting for Austin’s “pro” football team- the University of Texas Longhorns.

Email
John.Karras@urbanSCALE.com
THE 10 TRAITS OF VIBRANT CITIES