

The Well-Tempered City: How to Balance Prosperity and Equity



I often read and write late into the night, pondering the issues of cities, how out of sync they are with nature and ourselves, and think about the shifts that could realign them—and I listen to Johann Sebastian Bach. It came to me that the concept of temperament that helped Bach create harmony across scales could be a useful guide to composing cities that harmonize humans and nature.

I call this aspiration “the well-tempered city.” It integrates five qualities of temperament to increase urban adaptability in a way that balances prosperity and well-being with efficiency and equity, ever moving toward wholeness.

The first quality of urban temperament is coherence, which can be seen at work in the temperament that Bach used to compose *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Just as an equalizing tuning system permitted 24 different musical scales to integrate and to influence one another for the first time, so cities need a framework to unify their many disparate programs, departments, and aspirations. For example, we know that the best future for children is shaped by the stability of their families and housing, the quality of their schools, their access to health care, the quality of the food they eat, the absence of environmental toxins, and their connection to nature, yet each of these may fall under the mandate of a separate city agency. Most cities lack an integrated platform to support the growth of every child. Coherence is essential for cities to thrive.

The second quality of the well-tempered city is circularity, which is made possible by coherence. Once notes are tempered, they can be connected. One of Bach’s favorite musical patterns was the circle of fifths, a vehicle that allowed a musical composition to move from scale to scale through its fifth note, the one that fitted with the first note of the next scale most naturally, finally ending up back where it began. Cities have metabolisms: Energy, information, and materials flow through them. One of the best responses to threatening megatrends such as limited natural resources is to develop circular urban metabolisms. Our current city systems are linear; they must become circular, following nature’s way of being. As drought-ridden California has discovered, it can purify its wastewater and turn it back into drinking water; it can take organic waste and use it to fertilize crops; it can recycle its soda bottles by turning them into Patagonia vests, creating jobs and resource independence at the same time.

The third quality of temperament, resilience—the ability to bounce forward when stressed—is key to cities’ ability to adapt to the volatility of the 21st century. We can increase urban resilience with buildings that consume significantly less energy to be comfortable, and by connecting them with parks, gardens, and natural landscapes that weave nature back into cities. As our urban centers face extremes of heat and cold, deluge and drought, the well-tempered city can use natural infrastructure to moderate its temperature and provide its residents with a refuge from volatility.

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The fourth quality of a well-tempered city is community—social networks made of well-tempered people. Humans are social animals: Happiness is not just an individual state; it is also collective. This communal temperament arises from pervasive prosperity, security, health, education, social connectivity, collective efficacy, and equitable distribution of these benefits, all of which give rise to a state of well-being. When too many residents of a neighborhood suffer cognitive damage from the stresses of poverty, racism, and trauma, toxins, housing instability, and poor schools, their neighborhoods are less able to deal with the issues of a VUCA [volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous] age. And it turns out that the health or illth of one neighborhood affects its neighbors in contagious ways. Our well-being is collective.

These first four qualities of temperament reveal how intertwined the world is. Cities also emerge from the interdependence of related parts. The fifth quality of the well-tempered city, compassion, is essential for a city to have a healthy balance between individual and collective well-being. The writer Paul Hawken notes that when an ecological community is disturbed by an avalanche or forest fire, it always heals. Human societies do not always restore their communities after stress. A key condition for restoration is compassion, which provides the connective tissue between the me and the we, and leads us to care for something larger than ourselves.

The well-tempered city is not just a dream. Our current best practices in the planning, design, engineering, economics, social science, and governance of cities are moving us closer to increasing urban wellbeing. Even if these actions have only a modest effect when taken alone, their power emerges when they are integrated. Well-tempered cities will be refuges from volatility. If the United States, the world’s largest economy, were to make investments in infrastructure, integrated operating systems, natural systems restoration, and the landscape of opportunity to temper all of its metropolitan regions, it would be an important stabilizing center of gravity in a volatile world.

Imagine a city with Singapore’s social housing, Finland’s public education, Austin’s smart grid, the biking culture of Copenhagen, the urban food production of Hanoi, Florence’s Tuscan regional food system, Seattle’s access to nature, New York City’s arts and culture, Hong Kong’s subway system, Curitiba’s bus rapid transit system, Paris’s bike-share program, London’s congestion pricing, San Francisco’s recycling system, Philadelphia’s green stormwater program, Seoul’s Cheonggyecheon River restoration project, Windhoek’s wastewater recycling system, Rotterdam’s approach to living with rising seas, Tokyo’s health outcomes, the happiness of Sydney, the equality of Stockholm, the peacefulness of Reykjavik, the harmonic form of the Forbidden City, the market vitality of Casablanca, the cooperative industrialization of Bologna, the innovation of Medellín, the hospitals of Cleveland, and the livability of Vancouver. Each of these aspects of a well-tempered city exists today and is continually improving. Each evolved in its own place and time and is adaptable and combinable. Put them together as interconnected systems and their metropolitan regions will evolve into happier, more prosperous, regenerative cities.

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