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Healthy Cities and Bodies: Reflections on New Paradigms of Urban Wellbeing

by [Vincent Baptist](#)

Drawing on examples from Amsterdam to Venice, Vincent Baptist analyses two emerging urban paradigms — the “smooth city” and the “wellness city” — as models for understanding the reciprocal relations of care between cities and their inhabitants.

[Ed. note: this article is part of a dossier on [Caring Cities](#).]

In the current era of global urbanization, cities are accompanied by a whole host of adjectives and other descriptive terms in popular discourses, research contexts and policy frameworks.¹ Labels such as the “sustainable city” and the “smart city” have permeated, influenced and organized public debates. They encapsulate ideas about the urban that hold the potential to turn into a metaphor, an invocation and, perhaps ultimately, a policy plan.² Current urban designations such as these thus also indicate on what fronts cities should improve nowadays, or which character traits they need to strive for in the near future. This article reflects on two new city images, the “smooth city” and the “wellness city,” both of which have recently been coined in the specific context of contemporary urban regeneration developments.³ Conceptually, these two labels are quite akin to the types of urban images that academic scholarship started to differentiate a couple of decades ago, in order to more systematically theorize and categorize city images that were “meant to be heuristic and illuminating” and function as “different lenses (...) to communicate about an often elusive and discursively complex subject.”⁴ In addition, the smooth city and the wellness city can be considered as new urban paradigms or models, in the process of manifesting themselves in cities nowadays, albeit perhaps unwittingly and in tandem with other fundamental sociocultural changes.

While the smooth city and the wellness city can still be differentiated from more widespread and recognizable urban ideas that now define policy discourses, they nevertheless also point to the fact that cities are objects of concern and require “care.” The words “smooth” and “wellness” both suggest positive, nurturing connotations linked to appearance and health, which directly connect to acts of care. Building on the etymology of the word, Joan Tronto has defined care as something that goes beyond a mere interest and concerns a deeper level of engagement, especially as it contains a certain action-orientedness.⁵ Care also connotes underlying assumptions of reciprocity: one cares “for” something and takes care “of” something. In an urban context, the question can be raised how such dynamics play out between cities and inhabitants. This article explores this interconnection by providing conceptual and discursive reflections on the smooth city and wellness city in light of the theme of care, as well as associated notions of health and wellbeing, to which these two urban paradigms are intrinsically linked. In doing so, I connect classic and new literature on urban culture, design, and the function of cities, while highlighting a selection of short illustrative city cases. Ultimately, I propose to think further about what kind of care we encounter and need in cities nowadays, thereby urging urban scholars and policymakers coining new urban paradigms to reinforce the bonds between city and residents in comprehensive and mutually healthy ways.

Smooth City

In her book *Naked City*, Sharon Zukin guides readers through various New York districts by picking up the now canonical threads left by Jane Jacobs in the mid-twentieth century.⁶ Zukin posits how her

predecessor's favoring of dense and mixed-use neighborhoods has simultaneously held up and been hollowed out today. In laying out her argument about the loss of urban authenticity, Zukin makes a confession: she is one of those "cynics, who are often the most idealistic city lovers" complaining about how New York "has morphed from a lumbering modern giant to a smooth, sleek, more expensive replica of its former self."⁷ Used in this row of adjectives, the word "smooth" acquires the meaning of tactile satisfaction or perfection, seemingly invoking luxury goods. It is these underlying connections between sense perception, capital and consumerism that are foregrounded in urban critic René Boer's essay on the smooth city, which laments the ideologically skewed nature of seemingly impeccable urban environments.⁸ Boer connects the increasingly global spread of this phenomenon to an amalgamation of overlapping trends, linking the real estate logics behind gentrification to aesthetic and commercial processes of urban sanitization and Disneyfication, among others. In the smooth city, "public spaces are well-designed, well-maintained, clean and safe, if you conform to the rules." This latter aspect seems to be the smooth city's crucial stumbling block in Boer's eyes, but the author nevertheless also acknowledges how this new urban paradigm still serves "people's need for a clean, well-functioning, safe, maintained and prosperous urban environment, free from trouble, danger and crime."⁹

On the surface, the smooth city appears to contain an abundance of care, so how does it then not unequivocally translate into a positively regarded or intimately experienced environment? Is it merely made up of spaces in which, as Boer posits, it is "almost impossible to leave one's own traces"¹⁰ — in other words, spaces that forget and thus do not really "care" about the people populating them? When contemplating the smooth city's aforementioned descriptive terms, a classic issue related to (architectural) semantics appears as well: "Words, floating like veils, over a philosophy of design, may cover up shifts in thinking, and attachments to surprising values."¹¹ To take the word "clean" as an example, this key element of the smooth city's characterization simultaneously implies two opposing logics. On the one hand, the smooth city is a neatly organized environment, one that has received a great effort of care from its makers, so that urban dwellers can easily enjoy it. After all, everything has been taken care of for them already. In contrast, and particularly when it starts operating as a self-conscious character trait that consistently needs to be maintained, cleanliness "assumes a strong negative tone," that of "ejecting the irrelevant" or getting rid of the dirt, so to speak.¹² In Boer's words, the things that are eliminated in this cleansing process are "all opportunities for productive friction, sudden transitions or subversive transgressions."¹³ Zukin succinctly pinpoints this tendency too when mentioning the smoothing of those "uneven layers of grit and glamour" in which the socio-cultural and spatial diversity of modern city life would manifest itself most, resulting in a vibrantly clashing, never indistinctive patchwork.¹⁴

What drives the smooth city, then, are processes of homogenization — a word that also appears in both Boer's and Zukin's writings. Its underlying implications help in understanding how, in the eyes of these authors, the paradigm of the smooth city fails to translate into that of a truly caring city. As mentioned before, Boer is critical of the smooth city's capabilities to neutralize any disruption, from aesthetics to social norms. According to Tronto's previously highlighted definition of care, this may imply that only a superficial relation can be established between an urban environment and its residents: a more in-depth, intimate investment is not enabled or, even more so, needed. Like Zukin, Boer accusingly points at hegemonic (re)development forces in this respect, but he additionally makes use of another word that hints at a supplementary, technology-driven characterization of the urban phenomenon under investigation: the smooth city runs on "scripts." The original idea of scripted spaces, as coined by Norman Klein, is first and foremost concerned with how aspects of media culture and entertainment economy structure spatial experiences.¹⁵ The casino is the quintessential example here, and may still be an apt landmark within the smooth city, but the latter's scriptedness is arguably more ubiquitous and

quotidian. It relates to an everyday efficiency and reliability found in the usage and experience of urban spaces, which is mirrored in the smooth city's aesthetics, slick and shiny like a smartphone's screen glass.

A key image accompanying Boer's text is one of Amsterdam's De Hallen complex, a redeveloped tram depot comprising a now highly recognizable mix of leisure and professional spaces for urban dwellers. It includes an indoor food market, a phenomenon with centuries of history in southern European countries, but which has only been adopted in the Netherlands through the recent intertwined trends of urban regeneration and the experience economy.¹⁶ The picture of De Hallen's long public hallway presents an environment in which it is impossible to get lost: aesthetically homogeneous signboards hanging from the ceiling carry the names of all facilities to be found left and right, rather like highlights popping up on Google Maps. The spatial outline is convenient and streamlined, presumably as much as scanning QR code reservations or carrying out cashless payments somewhere inside.

This type of blending of digital interventions and mediations with modern city experiences has recently been theorized by Mónica Degen and Gillian Rose as a "new urban aesthetic."¹⁷ They particularly frame their inquiries from a sensorial perspective, which allows them to argue that no matter the increasing likeness of contemporary city- and streetscapes, it is still possible to discern a variety of urban experiences. "Flow" is one of the experiences identified in their case studies, which the authors associate with the data-driven movement, unfolding "smoothly and efficiently," of both city inhabitants and infrastructure.¹⁸ Nourished by technological processes and scripts, some reciprocity can be found after all in the smooth city, it seems, but does it also bring about closer engagement between the built environment and the people involved?

Potentially, the functioning of a city and the movements of its population in it could be mutually enhancing. This idea is not specifically linked to the current urban era, but goes back to the Enlightenment during which "the medical discovery of the human circulatory system and eighteenth-century developments in city planning" became intertwined, as investigated by Richard Sennett.¹⁹ In his book *Flesh and Stone*, Sennett explains how "Enlightenment planners wanted the city in its very design to function like a 'healthy' body, freely flowing as well as possessed of a 'clean' skin."²⁰ This reads like a foundational statement of sorts on the smooth city, in which one could potentially identify a substantial logic of care structuring the urban condition: the city is a living organism whose healthy condition can be improved, as well as nurtured by the people and society that make up this organic system. Modern urban planning endeavors have rarely benefited all inhabitant groups in cities, however, or even prioritized them. Planners in the eighteenth century seemed mostly concerned with urban traffic and spatial circulation rather than people,²¹ and such issues would, for instance, give rise to the spread of the aforementioned market hall phenomenon across Western European cities a century later.²²

Over time, technological innovations have become further integrated in urban care practices, sometimes even to excessive proportions. In the lagoon that surrounds Venice, for example, a gigantic system of mechanical flood barriers has recently been constructed in much-plagued attempts to stop tides and floods from engulfing and paralyzing the city.²³ Out of sight of Venice's incessant flow of leisure seekers, a script-based infrastructure is thus at work, trying to take care of and guarantee a smooth continuation of urban life.

Wellness City

The city of Venice complicates the aforementioned idea of a healthy urban organism dependent on smooth circulation, through its well-known problems of mass tourism congestion and environmental degradation. Two contrasting but interlinked iconic images that come to mind in this respect are, on the

one hand, press photos of tourists clinging on to shopping bags or travel luggage while wading through a flooded Venice, and on the other hand, stills of deserted streets from Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971), in which the film's protagonist staggers through a desolate epidemic-stricken city while neatly dressed and groomed after a barber visit. In both of these instances, Venice can be seen as a city in decay, respectively through the blocking of its urban circulation and through its stasis.²⁴ What is more striking, however, is that the human figures depicted in both of these city images seemingly continue to relate themselves to activities that accentuate individual acts of care, especially those connected to consumerism and beauty, despite their crumbling urban surroundings. Notwithstanding the obvious difference in nature between the press photos and film scenes, both representations of Venice can arguably be considered dystopian imagery of what one could call the wellness city: an environment that under normal circumstances caters to individuals' health and wellbeing, but which is ignored or neglected when in crisis, with people's pursuit of care activities paradoxically turning into a protective shield against this very environment. Where Boer's previously discussed critique of the smooth city implied an uncaring, impersonal attitude of the city towards its inhabitants, potential ruptures in this relational reciprocity seem to run in the opposite direction within the wellness city.

In this respect, the question arises whether urban environments that specifically cater to wellness for people are simultaneously also cared for by their residents. The governance studies scholar Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko has laid out comprehensive policy frameworks for modeling a wellness city in his eponymous book. While *Wellness City* is predominantly written with an eye on the practical implications for local economic development, Anttiroiko's initial conceptualization of wellness reveals some key insights about the topic. Wellness is at once related to individual decision-making aimed at "positive" and "health-promoting lifestyle behavior,"²⁵ but more fundamentally also to the fulfillment of basic human needs.²⁶ Here, Anttiroiko links back to Abraham Maslow's classic psychological theory of the hierarchy of needs, whereby different behavioral motivations necessarily succeed each other in a trajectory towards self-actualization.²⁷ Viewed through this lens, the untenable, almost surreal character of the discussed Venice images also becomes more apparent: the depicted figures' pursued indulgence in "aesthetic needs," through retail and beauty activities, presents itself as unattainable in an urban environment that cannot fulfill the more basic need of "safety."²⁸ The layered wellness city policy that Anttiroiko puts forward at the end of his book recycles Maslow's pyramid model, and highlights that the urban environment itself is part of a base layer needed to accommodate various instances of wellness in a city in the first place.²⁹ This aligns with the author's emphasis on wellness as fundamentally holistic, tying in personal health aspirations with the wellness of urban communities.³⁰

Anttiroiko stresses the importance of local urban provisions for wellness activities and vice versa.³¹ Ideally, "wellness can be an integral part of the philosophy of urban revitalization" and should move beyond "just offering a few shops or clinics."³² The wellness city might otherwise still fall into the trap of simply producing shiny aesthetic regimes of "spectacular excess" or "placelessness" that remain associated with contemporary resort-like spaces.³³ In this respect, the underlying pitfalls of the wellness city and the smooth city seem the same, as are perhaps their potential to blend in with more dominant urban paradigms such as the smart or sustainable city,³⁴ as previously mentioned. Can the reciprocity between city and inhabitants, which is so needed for genuine urban conditions of care, be reinforced by combining smooth aesthetics or wellness provisions with other prerequisites of leading city conceptions?

Some new urban projects already try to point the way. Consider, for instance, the Floating Office Rotterdam, located on the waters of one of Rotterdam's redeveloped harbor districts, which was constructed a few years ago according to circular design principles and comprises various climate-adaptive technologies.. Commentators have especially praised the slim-looking, innovative complex for

its “wellbeing-oriented workspaces and public facilities,” which add up to a “mood-lifting atmosphere.”³⁵ In other words, the project simultaneously presents itself as a materialization of the smooth city and the wellness city. Would self-declared urban cynics then not dismiss it as yet another isolated, affluent island in the archipelago of urban regeneration? This may well depend on how convincingly the office complex lets its aesthetic and people-centered qualities blend in with its “sustainable city”-inspired aspirations. The environmental resilience displayed by the Floating Office should arguably generate in its users a more thorough understanding of and engagement with their surroundings, instead of maintaining a divide in care provisions for both.

Another, final example in this respect is the emergence of “smart wellness city” initiatives, particularly in Japan. As Anttiroiko discusses, the first instances of this phenomenon have highlighted a convergence of technology-driven urban innovations and an increasingly holistic sense of promoting health across national and urban populations. In Japan specifically, this links to broader concerns about “the rapidly rising average age, the share of senior citizens in the nation’s population, and their profound impact on national and local economies.”³⁶ Supported by urban technologies that connect to broader societal challenges, new wellness provisions for residents ideally do not function as isolated bubbles then, but instead become intrinsic to the local environment. Reciprocal care is established here in a more encompassing approach to let cities and inhabitants engage with each other, in light of future aspirations.

Carefree Cities?

While discourses on the smooth city and the wellness city both place a particular emphasis on healthy appearances and link this to a general sense of wellbeing, the former is mostly discussed in relation to urban aesthetics and planning, whereas debates on the latter focus more to the activities and services city inhabitants engage in. Both these levels have become increasingly intertwined, as discussed in this article: a city may be considered a healthy body if its inhabitants can thrive in it. Herein lies an implicit relation of reciprocal care and thus of a certain intimacy between the city organism, following Sennett’s writings, and its population. In relation to present-day urban environments, however, the newly coined paradigms of the smooth city and the wellness city often seem to hint at a growing disconnect between the two: as the modern era of urban regeneration dictates that cities should be modelled and groomed according to generalizable and consumerist redevelopment schemes, the focus of city inhabitants on wellbeing runs the risk of turning increasingly individual and inward-oriented. It could be said that both tendencies are marked by a heightened sense of urban and personal care, not for each other, however, but rather for oneself. Ultimately, this also raises the question of whether contemporary urbanity has perhaps grown all too “careful,” so to speak, and is in need of a more “carefree” nature.

Such sentiments at least seem to underlie some of the critical comments formulated on visions of contemporary cities as smooth and wellness-oriented. As previously mentioned, Boer and also Zukin miss the friction and unevenness that communal city life can produce. In order to regain that, the layout, functioning and amenities of regenerated cities would also need to change, or at least be further intervened in. Harking back to classic writings of his, Sennett recently advocated for “designing disorder,” according to principles of the “open city.”³⁷ Ezio Manzini has instead proposed to rethink cities through new notions of proximity, further building on the paradigm of the “15-minute city” that gained increasing attention during the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁸ These different urban models arguably incorporate ideas of care that emphasize spontaneity and immediacy as main character traits, especially compared to connotations of the smooth city and the wellness city investigated in this article. Regardless of which new paradigm will steal the spotlight in the future, urban thinkers may want to continue to reflect on what kind of care cities are in need of most: one that stimulates reciprocity on a limited ad

hoc basis, or one that reaffirms healthy connections between people and urban surroundings in decidedly encompassing ways.

Notes

- ↑1 The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 speaks of 'sustainable cities' while additionally using the adjectives 'inclusive', 'safe' and 'resilient', for instance. Several of these words also feature in the mission statement of the European Union's recently launched New European Bauhaus initiative, which strives to translate the European Green Deal into concrete realizations of 'beautiful' and 'enriching' cities and living spaces more generally, together with associated experiences. See, respectively, "Goal 11: Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Sustainable Development, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>; and "New European Bauhaus," European Union, accessed April 14, 2023, https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en.
- ↑2 Geoff Vigar, Stephen Graham, and Patsy Healey, "In Search of the City in Spatial Strategies: Past Legacies, Future Imaginings," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 8 (2005): 1392–3.
- ↑3 See, respectively, René Boer, "Smooth City Is the New Urban," *Volume 52* (2018), <http://archis.org/volume/smooth-city-is-the-new-urban/>; and Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko, *Wellness City: Health and Well-Being in Urban Economic Development* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). At the time of writing, a book on the smooth city was forthcoming: René Boer, *Smooth City: Against Urban Perfection, Towards Collective Alternatives* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2023).
- ↑4 Setha M. Low, "The Anthropology of Cities: Imagining and Theorizing the City," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1996): 387.
- ↑5 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 102.
- ↑6 Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ↑7 Zukin, *Naked City*, x.
- ↑8, ↑9, ↑10, ↑13 Boer, "Smooth City."
- ↑11 Katharine Gilbert, "Clean and Organic: A Study in Architectural Semantics," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 10, no. 3 (1951): 4.

- ↑12 Gilbert, “Clean and Organic.”
- ↑14 Zukin, *Naked City*, x.
- ↑15 See Norman M. Klein, “Absences, Scripted Spaces and the Urban Imaginary: Unlikely Models for the City in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Norman M. Klein’s Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles: An Updated Edition 20 Years Later*, ed. Jens Martin Gurr (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), as well as Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (London and New York: The New Press, 2004).
- ↑16 Edwin van de Wiel and Gert-Jan Hospers, “De opmars van de markthal,” *Geografie* no. 8 (2015): 15.
- ↑17 Mónica Montserrat Degen and Gillian Rose, *The New Urban Aesthetic: Digital Experiences of Urban Change* (Dublin, London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), 3–4.
- ↑18 Mónica Degen and Gillian Rose, “Spectacle and/as the New Urban Aesthetic,” *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 8, no. 1 (March 2023), <https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2023/03/new-urban-aesthetic/>.
- ↑19 Elena Woolley, “The Dead City: The Decay of the Urban Organism,” *Scope* 23 (2012): 1.
- ↑20 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 263 (emphasis added).
- ↑21 Ibid, 264.
- ↑22 Van de Wiel and Hospers, “De opmars van de markthal,” 16.
- ↑23 Robert L. France, *Veniceland Atlantis: The Bleak Future of the World’s Favourite City* (Faringdon: Libri Publishing, 2011), 47–8.
- ↑24 Cf. Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*, 264 and Woolley, “The Dead City,” 1, respectively.
- ↑25 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 8.
- ↑26 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 11.

- ↑27 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 11.
- ↑28 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 12.
- ↑29 Ibid, 150.
- ↑30 Ibid, 4–5.
- ↑31 Ibid, 4, 144.
- ↑32 Ibid, 144.
- ↑33 See, respectively, Christoph Lindner and Gerard F. Sandoval, “Introduction: Aesthetics of Gentrification,” in *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City*, eds. Christoph Lindner and Gerard F. Sandoval (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 14; and Steven Miles, *Spaces for Consumption: Pleasure and Placelessness in the Post-Industrial City* (London, New Delhi, Singapore and Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2010).
- ↑34 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 28-9.
- ↑35 “Large Office of the Year: Floating Office Rotterdam, Powerhouse Company,” *Frame*, February-March, 2023, 61.
- ↑36 Anttiroiko, *Wellness City*, 109.
- ↑37 See Pablo Sendra and Richard Sennett, *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).
- ↑38 Ezio Manzini, *Livable Proximity: Ideas for the City that Cares* (Milan: Bocconi University Press, 2022).

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