THE CITIES BOOK

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BEST CITIES IN THE WORLD

lonely planet

Best Cities 01–10

The heart of this book was set beating by our travellers who provided us with the list of 200 cities for inclusion in the book, via a survey we ran on www.lonelyplanet.com asking travellers (and our staff) to nominate their favourite cities.

The top five held no major surprises – Paris, New York, Sydney, Barcelona and London – although a quick glance at the top 25 cities certainly speaks to the adventurous spirit of our travellers. In the top 10 we have Cape Town and Bangkok, and the top 25 features Kathmandu, Buenos Aires and Jerusalem. In the 200 cities selected, we were able to display the great diversity of city life as it is experienced all over the globe: in the classic Western European cities such as Paris; ancient South American cities such as La Paz and Quito; island cities such as Apia in Samoa; trading centres such as Nairobi, hi-tech/futuristic cities such as Hong Kong and Tokyo; and those iconic cities like London, Florence or Rome, where time appears to stand still and accelerate in the same moment. The incredible diversity of day-to-day life explored through these pages challenges our very notion of a consistent 'city lifestyle', and yet something about the energy, pace and commonality of experiences connects these cities.

We don't set too much store by the 'rating' of these cities, but it was interesting to see just how the city standard is set by Paris. There are several other cities in this book that claim the reputation by association: Budapest, as the Paris of Eastern Europe; Beirut, as the Paris of the Middle East; Buenos Aires, as the Paris of the South; and Melbourne, as the Paris of the southern hemisphere!

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Tony's Best
10 Additional Cities

Detroit

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: DETROIT

NICKNAME: MOTOR CITY

DATE OF BIRTH: 24 JULY 1701; WHEN FRENCH EXPLORER ANTOINE DE LA MOTHE CADILLAC SET UP A FUR-TRADING POST ON THE DETROIT RIVER

HEIGHT: 177M

SIZE: 219 SQ KM

ADDRESS: USA (MAP 1, L9)

POPULATION: 951,000

Detroit is the Motor City, Tamla Motown and home to Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, but it's also the doughnut city, a symbol of urban decay whose centre was abandoned as people moved out to a fringe of rich, thriving suburbs, trying to turn their collective backs on a core that might as well have been nuked. As a child I spent four great years there, back when what must have been half the world's chromium production was rolling down GM, Ford and Chrysler assembly lines, car fins were flying high, and the Detroit Tigers were the hottest baseball team around. It's never going to recover those glory days, but Detroit is still worth a look and Greenfield Village remains a truly fantastic museum, incorporating not only the laboratory where Thomas Edison conducted his pioneering work on electric lighting but also the bicycle shop where the Wright brothers built their first aircraft, quite apart from all the Model T stuff.

Jakarta

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: JAKARTA

NICKNAME: BIG VILLAGE

DATE OF BIRTH: 22 JUNE 1527; WHEN IT WAS NAMED JAYAKARTA (CITY OF GREAT VICTORY) BY FATAHILLAH, A LEADER FROM A NEIGHBOURING SULTANATE

HEIGHT: 1M

SIZE: 661 SQ KM

ADDRESS: INDONESIA (MAP 1, HH16)

POPULATION: 9.3 MILLION

Indonesia's sprawling capital is yet another city considerably overshadowed, in the popularity stakes, by a smaller and more glamorous sister city, in this case tourist favourite and cultural capital Yogyakarta. Nevertheless, Jakarta is, in its own fashion, a mega-city that works from its teeming freeways to its old Dutch colonial capital, the one-time Batavia now known simply as Kota ('city' in Indonesian). No visit to Jakarta is complete without a stroll past the incredible line-up of brightly painted Makassar schooners *(pinisi)* in the old port district of Sunda Kelapa, living proof that the age of sail is definitely not finished. The city is also home to an impressive collection of imposing Stalinist-style socialist-era monuments, including the towering column in the centre of Merdeka (Freedom) Sq, popularly known as 'Soekarno's last erection'.

Karachi

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: KARACHI

NICKNAME: CITY OF LIGHTS

DATE OF BIRTH: 1795; WHEN THE MIRS OF TALPUR CONSTRUCTED A MUD FORT AT MANORA

HEIGHT: 4M

SIZE: 1994 SQ KM

ADDRESS: PAKISTAN (MAP 1, CC12)

POPULATION: 9.3 MILLION

From my first birthday to my fifth this was home and, like any childhood memories, my pictures of Pakistan's troubled port city are rose-tinted: a melange of camels, sailboats, sandy beaches and exotic colours. Way back then Karachi was going through wrenching changes as India and Pakistan tore themselves apart and floods of refugees propelled the city's rocketing growth. To my pleasant surprise, when I returned to Karachi after an absence of 40 years, the city still had some of the charm I remembered. I could still hire a sailing boat and crew, drift out on the harbour and dangle a line over the side to pull up crabs to be cooked on the deck, just as I had done with my father all those years ago.

Mandalay

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: MANDALAY

NICKNAME: CITY OF GEMS

DATE OF BIRTH: 1857; WHEN IT WAS ESTABLISHED AS A NEW CENTRE FOR THE TEACHING OF BUDDHISM

HEIGHT: 74M

ADDRESS: MYANMAR (MAP 5, J5)

POPULATION: 801,000

Kipling never actually took the 'Road to Mandalay'; the road to Mandalay is really a river, the mighty Ayeyarwady, but this is still the heart and soul of Myanmar. Quite apart from the huge Mandalay Fort (gutted during the closing phases of WWII), there's a host of temples and assorted Buddhist sites around the city. Plus it's the home of street theatre *(pwe)*, and no visit to Mandalay is complete until you've caught a performance by the subversive Moustache Brothers. Nevertheless, it's outside Mandalay where the real surprises lie: the abandoned royal capitals of Inwa (Ava), Amarapura and Sagaing, and the massive Mingun Paya (pagoda), all a short boat ride north up the Ayeyarwady. Further afield there's the British colonial-era hill station of Pyin U Lwin (formerly Maymyo), or you can jump aboard a river ferry and head downriver all the way to the amazing ancient city of Bagan.

Oslo

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: OSLO

NICKNAME: TIGER CITY

DATE OF BIRTH: AD 1048 (ACCORDING TO THE NORSE SAGAS); HOWEVER, ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH HAS UNCOVERED CHRISTIAN BURIALS DATING FROM BEFORE AD 1000

HEIGHT: 629M

SIZE: 454 SQ KM

ADDRESS: NORWAY (MAP 3, J2)

POPULATION: 529,000

Cold, conservative and mouth-droppingly expensive, it's hardly surprising that Norway's capital and largest city doesn't feature on the city hit parade. Choose a sunny summer day, however, and Oslo can still charm you with leafy parks, busy cafés and restaurants, plenty of outdoor sculpture (Gustav Vigeland is the big name) and a simply dazzling collection of museums and art galleries. The Viking Ship Museum with its collection of longboats is my favourite, but ship lovers can also visit the Kon-Tiki Museum with Thor Heyerdahl's balsa raft and the polarship *Fram,* which carried Roald Amundsen down to Antarctica for his epic journey to the South Pole in 1911. Of course, walking out of an Oslo art gallery with a Munch masterpiece under your arm seems to have become a Norwegian tradition.

MOTOR CITY TEST DUMMIES LINE UP FOR THEIR LAST DAY ON THE JOB.
Photographer: Louie Psihoyos / Corbis

BOATS DOCKED AT SUNDA KELAPA, JAKARTA'S PORT.
Photographer: Glenn Beanland / LPI

SELLING CAKES TO KARACHI'S HUNGRY PORT WORKERS.
Photographer: Martin Puddy / Getty

DELICIOUS STEAMED BUNS AWAIT IMMEDIATE CONSUMPTION.
Photographer: Jerry Alexander / LPI

HOLMENKOLLEN, SITE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST SKI JUMP.
Photographer: Galen Rowell / Corbis

It's easy to love cities like Paris and San Francisco – I've lived for a year in each of them, written guidebooks to them and am a total enthusiast – but there are lots of things to like about cities that don't pop up on anybody's favourites list. Here are 10 cities, in alphabetical order, that didn't make the cut but where I've still managed to leave a piece of my heart.

Tony Wheeler
Cofounder, Lonely Planet

Papeete

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: PAPEETE

DATE OF BIRTH: 1824; WHEN THE LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY (LMS) SETTLED HERE

HEIGHT: 2M

ADDRESS: TAHITI (MAP 1, D18)

POPULATION: 26,000

The capital of Tahiti and French Polynesia has a reputation as an overpriced, shonky Pacific disaster zone, a mere jumping-off point to the much more beautiful (though equally overpriced) attractions of neighbouring islands such as Bora Bora. Yeah, sure, but this is still a great place to buy a baguette, sip a glass of wine, sit by the harbour and watch the pirogues (six-man outrigger canoes) charge across the harbour. Meanwhile those dramatic green-draped mountains rise up right behind you, cruising yachts drift in from all over the world, catamaran ferries surge out to nearby Moorea, cargo ships steam out towards the exotic Marquesas (Gauguin's final retreat), the *roulottes* (vans) set up to turn out bargain-priced food beside the docks in the evening, the towering *mahu* (Polynesian cross-dressers) totter off in their high heels and it's all done with a certain French style. What's not to like?

Stanley

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: STANLEY

NICKNAME: CAPITAL OF 'THE CAMP' (FALKLAND ISLANDS)

DATE OF BIRTH: 1843; WHEN THE BRITISH ABANDONED PUERTO DE LA SOLEDAD AND ESTABLISHED STANLEY AS THE CAPITAL

HEIGHT: 135M

ADDRESS: FALKLAND ISLANDS (MAP 1, O23)

POPULATION: 2100

Some of my neglected favourites are those mega-cities few people can warm to, but Stanley is the polar opposite (and not that far from the South Pole). The capital 'city' of the Falkland Islands may be home to 75% of the 'kelpers' (as outsiders sometimes call the islanders), but that still means it can barely scrape together 2000 people. Despite this small population base, colourful Stanley (the islanders love decorating their houses with a technicolour paintbox) has plenty to see. There's a church fronted by a whalebone arch, a line-up of wrecked or dumped ship hulks along the shoreline, several noisy pubs, an iconic hotel (the Upland Goose), and a world-class garden-gnome collection in one front garden.

Tehran

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: TEHRAN

NICKNAME: CITY OF 72 NATIONS

DATE OF BIRTH: 1553; WHEN RAMPARTS WERE CONSTRUCTED AROUND THE VILLAGE OF TEHRAN

HEIGHT: 1200M

SIZE: 1500 SQ KM

ADDRESS: IRAN (MAP 3, BB17)

POPULATION: 12 MILLION

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long list of cities that score more highly than its chaotic capital. Sophisticated Shiraz has culture, and gave its name to one of the world's great wine varieties. Nearby lie the ruins of mighty Persepolis (whisper it). Mashhad and Qom far outscore Tehran when it comes to religious piety, Yazd and Kashan are way ahead when it comes to beautiful old traditional buildings and, of course, Esfahan is everybody's favourite and truly one of the world's most stunning cities. But there's no denying Tehran's energy and enthusiasm, from trendy shopping centres where teenagers raise a tentative finger to the fundamentalist mullahs, to madhouse traffic where women at the wheel give no quarter as they fight it out with their male counterparts, and all the time the magnificent Alborz Mountains (if you can see them through the pollution) rise up like a lodestone to the north – a clear reminder that the ski slopes on Mt Damavand are only a couple of hours away.

Tunis

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: TUNIS

DATE OF BIRTH: 814 BC; FOUNDED BY PHOENICIAN SETTLERS

HEIGHT: 4M

SIZE: 346 SQ KM

ADDRESS: TUNISIA (MAP 3, J16)

POPULATION: 985,000

The sprawling Mediterranean capital of Tunisia is not going to win any beauty contests – although there's a fine World Heritage–listed medina (the ancient walled city) and some great restaurants. But Tunis also has one attraction that alone makes the trip across the Mediterranean from Europe worth the fare: the Bardo Museum. Even if you've never had an enthusiasm for Roman mosaics you will be a convert after you've wandered this treasure house. The Romans left mosaic treasures everywhere they built, from the frigid north of England to the warm Turkish coast, but it was in Tunisia where the art reached its apogee. The glowing artwork, which studs the Bardo's walls, underlines the fact that the colony's rich Roman settlers clearly knew how to build with style.

Warsaw

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: WARSAW

NICKNAME: BIG POTATO

DATE OF BIRTH: 13TH CENTURY; IN 1413 IT BECAME CAPITAL OF THE DUCHY OF MAZOVIA AND, IN 1596, CAPITAL OF POLAND

HEIGHT: 106M

SIZE: 512 SQ KM

ADDRESS: POLAND (MAP 3, O7)

POPULATION: 1.69 MILLION

Poland's capital city, the 'Big Potato', ranks nowhere in the country's glamour stakes – as a tourist attraction Kraków gets all the votes. In fact, this is a city that has clearly gone through hell, and come out the other side throwing high-fives. The Old Town Sq was totally destroyed by Hitler's storm troopers during the closing days of WWII and so flawlessly rebuilt you'd have trouble telling where medieval Europe segues into the reconstruction of the 1970s and '80s. Weep at the poignant reminders of the Warsaw Ghetto; rage at the incredible story of the Warsaw Uprising, meticulously detailed in the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising; laugh at the 'Elephant in Lacy Underwear', the USSR's unwanted gift and for years the tallest building in Europe outside Moscow. And then hit the city's clubs and bars, where the Poles party as though they've got 50 depressing years to make up for.

LOCAL MUSICIANS TAKE SOME OF THE HEAT OFF A LONG BUS RIDE.
Photographer: Barry Lewis / Alamy

CUNNING GARDEN GNOMES PLOT A TAKEOVER OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS.
Photographer: Tony Wheeler / LPI

BEND IT LIKE BRANKO: HALFTIME AT A WOMEN'S FOOTBALL MATCH.
Photographer: Caroline Penn / Panos

ROMAN MOSAICS ADORN THE PALAIS D'ORIENT'S TERRACE.
Photographer: Charles Bowman / LPI

CANDLES BURN FOR THE FALLEN SOLDIERS OF THE WARSAW UPRISING.
Photographer: Krzysztof Dydynski / LPI

Cities

When you look at a city, it's like reading the hopes, aspirations and pride of everyone who built it. – Hugh Newell Jacobsen

The Cities Book is a celebration. Of the physical form, in stone, glass, metal and wood, that is taken by these remarkable spiritual, cultural, political and technological bastions. Of the people whose energy spills out into the city, transforming itself into music, art and culture. Of the myriad sights, smells, sounds and other temptations awaiting travellers at the end of a plane, train or boat journey. By celebrating the majesty of cities on every continent we are pausing to marvel at the contribution they have made to the collective richness of humankind over more than six millennia.

Hence it made sense to us to begin this book with a look at the evolution of the city – the roots of cities in the first civilisations, the characteristics that we associate with the great cities of today, and the possible directions that they will take in the future.

Like so many other things, cities come to us as a gift from the ancients. Although capable of great foresight, our urban ancestors could not possibly have predicted the way in which cities were to change the world we live in. According to the UN, the urban populace is increasing by 60 million people per year, about three times the increase in the rural population. To get a sense of the impact that cities have made, try picturing the world without them. Imagine fashion without Milan, theatre without London's West End, hip-hop without New York, classical music without Vienna, or technology without Tokyo.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan summed it up best when he said: 'We have entered the urban millennium. At their best, cities are engines of growth and incubators of civilization. They are crossroads of ideas, places of great intellectual ferment and innovation…cities can also be places of exploitation, disease, violent crime, unemployment, and extreme poverty…we must do more to make our cities safe and livable places for all.'

Past
Present
Future

Past

The story of how cities evolved is the story of civilisation. The link is encoded in the words themselves: 'civilisation' comes from the Latin *civitas*, meaning 'city'. We can catch a glimpse of the past in the preserved walls of castles, palaces and places of worship that have survived, albeit haphazardly, for centuries, and which influence the colour and flavour of our present-day cities. Cuzco in Peru is the perfect example. The city's strongest walls remain those constructed by the Inca who, unfathomably, erected enormous stone monoliths carved by hand and laid the blocks so precisely, without mortar, that it is impossible to slide paper between them. Following the Spanish conquest, the ancient Inca stones were used to build palaces and cathedrals, but the stones were so mighty that many could not be brought down and so continue to make up the streets and foundations of newer buildings to this day.

Paradoxically, with the advent of the first sedentary settlements, where people flocked together to settle in large groups instead of roaming the countryside as small bands of hunter-gatherers, came the advent of inter-city travel. Initially people travelled (as they still do) for trade and business, war, or religious pilgrimages, but eventually cities gave birth to the leisured classes who could travel for curiosity and pleasure. Even in ancient times there were hoteliers who ran a roaring trade for prototypal backpackers and travel writers and historians who made their livings from the fantastical tales of their wanderings.

Sumerian Cities

Divine Nature gave the fields, human art built the cities.
– Marcus Terentius Varro

Current archaeological records indicate that the oldest cities are those found scattered along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq.

Five thousand years ago merchants travelling upriver from Egypt would have entered the great Sumerian capital of Uruk by boat, sailing swiftly past the fertile shores lined with irrigation ditches that had been dug centuries before. These ditches, filled with water from the Euphrates River, had allowed the Sumerians to begin farming the land, producing surpluses of food that were used to feed an army of construction workers, possibly slaves, to raise the first cities the world had ever seen. The most ancient of these was Uruk and with its construction the door was firmly closed on the prehistoric epoch.

The city of Uruk was famous for its giant defensive walls, luscious gardens and the sophistication of its ruling elite, chief among them the god-king Gilgamesh, who became the subject for the world's oldest epic, the *Song of Gilgamesh*, which is still in print today. Excavation of the vast site where the city once stood, an area covering 450 hectares, has yielded astonishing finds. In the 1900s a cuneiform tablet found at Uruk happened to contain what is regarded as the best and most accurate description of the legendary Tower of Babel, an architectural feat referred to in the Bible.

But the real fascination is with the form of the city itself. In 2003 Jorg Fassbinder, part of a German-led archaeological team conducting excavations at the site, said that in its heyday Uruk must have been 'like Venice in the desert'. The dig covered more than 100 hectares, uncovering extensive gardens as well as an extremely sophisticated network of canals by which the Sumerians swanned around their idyllic city in absolute luxury.

It is incredible to think that after more than 5000 years the legacy of Sumerian culture could still remain potent. Not only did they invent the wheel and come up with the world's first written language (Sumerian cuneiform script, which emerged around 3500 BC), but they also dreamt up the sexagesimal number system, which we still use to measure time. Every time you count down the minutes to an event, you have the Sumerians to thank.

What we know of ancient Sumer has been deduced through careful analysis and interpretation of the discoveries made by archaeologists. These include stone tablets inscribed with ancient stories (the first ever recorded); gold necklaces inlaid with lapis lazuli that were once worn by Sumer's elite; weathered fragments of beautiful vases depicting the conquest and subjugation of rival cities; and the broken outlines of once-feared cities that stretched for kilometres. Interpreting these finds with a little imagination only whets our appetite and makes us want to learn more about these strange worlds that have been lost in time.

Rome – Antiquity's Great Melting Pot

A great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art. – Benjamin Disraeli

Sicilian writer Vincenzo Salerno said that despite everything that came after it, the blueprint for Western civilisation was the society of ancient Rome. The Romans gave us our alphabet (minus *u* and *w*), and many of the words we still use are derived from ancient Latin. They gave us the 12-month lunar calendar; the rudiments of classical architecture; the pope; straight roads; a system of government; literature; public-ablution facilities; and endless subject matter for Shakespearian plays and even movies, such as *Gladiator* and *I, Claudius*. The Romans came, saw and conquered, and left enough behind that they would never be forgotten. And at the heart of the mighty empire was the imperial capital, a monolith of power carved in brilliant marble, home of the Senate and generations of megalomaniac emperors. Ancient Rome's former pagan glory is still visible if you take a stroll around the modern city, notably the remains of the Roman Forum, the Pantheon and the Colosseum.

Quite clearly, the Romans were a pretty remarkable bunch. But they were not the first people to become civilised, and nor did they develop in a vacuum. They were great assimilators, subsuming the skills, knowledge, literary conventions and even deities from neighbouring or past civilisations – a process hastened through conquest. From afar Rome admired in particular the Greek and Egyptian civilisations, centred on the capitals of Athens and Alexandria, which were already melting pots of ideas, racial groups and culture.

Alexandria the Great

It was in Alexandria, during the six hundred years beginning around 300 BC, that human beings, in an important sense, began the intellectual adventure.
– Carl Sagan

In 332 BC Alexander the Great thrashed the Persians and then conquered Egypt for the Greeks. The following year, after being crowned pharaoh, he ordered the construction of a fortified port which he named, in a moment of egotism, Alexandria. The city was to replace Memphis as the capital of ancient Egypt and, had Alexander not died of fever during the conquest of Babylon, would have become the capital of his enormous empire. As it happened, the empire was carved up by Alexander's generals following his death and Ptolemy Soter took over as pharaoh and king of Alexandria.

During antiquity the Egyptian capital was famous for its wonderful papyrus and had a reputation for producing great medicines, perfume, jewellery and gold work. But most of all, the city was, and still is, legendary for the Pharos Lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and for its library, established under Ptolemy III. It is alleged that he composed a letter 'to all sovereigns on earth, requesting them to send him works by every kind of author, including poets and prose-writers, rhetoricians and sophists, doctors and soothsayers, historians and all the others too'. Such was his zealousness in collecting knowledge that he gave orders for any books on board ships calling at Alexandria to be copied, and only the copies were

Present

In the days of the European Grand Tour of the 19th century, it was fashionable for young aristocrats to complete their education by travelling to the great cities of the Continent to study their history and art. These 'tourists' are the origin of our modern word. But travel was still time-consuming, difficult and expensive and therefore only really available to the privileged classes. Today, modern transport means that we can travel between cities in hours, not days. The world is becoming smaller while correspondingly people's interests are becoming broader, thanks to our greater access to the world through the media. Recent travel trends show that short-break city trips are one of the most popular kinds of travel, and that the main motivators are education and exploring other cultures, escaping the stresses of everyday life for a while, and a sense of adventure. Travellers claim that travel has had a considerable impact on their lives, helping define a social conscience and positively impacting personal goals and values. Today, the most difficult part of city travel is deciding which city to visit next.

Stormy Weather

Not houses finely roofed or the stones of walls well builded, nay nor canals and dockyards make the city, but men able to use their opportunity. – Alcaeus

In 2004 the reality of a disaster such as that which may have destroyed Alexandria and Atlantis was brought home, literally, when it was beamed into TV sets around the world. The devastating tsunami that struck in December that year, causing widespread coastal damage, affecting 12 countries and causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, was followed by two further brutal natural disasters in the form of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

When Katrina lashed into New Orleans at the end of August, it was confirmation, if such was needed, that in the future even cities with significant defences could not take their safety for granted.

New Orleans lies below sea level in a wide, shallow bowl on delicate marshlands, with the Mississippi River running through the centre. It is situated under the lip of a vast lake more than twice its size, while to the south and east lies the Gulf of Mexico, one of the world's most fertile hurricane zones. Following the devastation that occurred when the Mississippi burst its banks in 1927, engineers designed and built a complex system of flood defences, enough to protect it from a Category 5 storm. Even though New Orleans did not take the full brunt of the storm in 2005, the historic city lost a large number of its priceless old buildings, became engulfed by toxic waters, and many inhabitants suffered significant physical and psychological damage. Many people feel that to avoid a rebuilding process that will benefit property developers rather than those made homeless by the disaster, the authorities should entrust the power and responsibility of reconstructing the old jazz capital to its former citizens.

One thing is certain: however much equity goes into the reconstruction, the next system of levees will have to be a vast improvement on the ones that broke under the weight of Katrina. If New Orleans needs help choosing its future direction, the city's mayor could do a lot worse than turn to the example set by the world's most livable city, Vancouver.

Plan for Living

The chief function of the city is to convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity. – Lewis Mumford

If anyone was surprised that Vancouver emerged as the world's most livable city in 2005, as nominated by William M Mercer quality-of-life survey and the *Economist*, then it certainly wasn't the city's planners or its residents. Over more than three decades the idyllic Canadian city has earned this accolade through the introduction of a simple yet revolutionary approach to city planning and design.

In 1972 the city's planning office took a bold step often feared by public servants scared of opening a Pandora's box. They decided to look beyond the computer models, livability indicators and programme plans they had created and ask the public what they thought would make the city most livable. The more they tried to answer the question 'what is livability?', the more they realised they didn't have the answer. So they decided to phone a friend – millions of friends.

Another instance where Vancouver looked to the needs of its citizens was the Art Underfoot initiative, a competition in which members of the public came up with the best designs for the city's manhole covers. The idea was to help make city infrastructure more visible to the public. How much more a part of the city would you feel if you had a chance to design illustrations that would appear on manhole covers everywhere?

The city's public discourse about livability eventually led to a plan that recognised the city as an organic entity in itself. A discussion paper on Vancouver prepared by the Vancouver-based International Centre for Sustainable Cities stated:

> *The brain and nervous system of a livable city refers to participatory processes by which a city develops visions and plans, monitors the implementation of its plans and adjusts to changing circumstances. The heart is the common values and public space of a city that define its essential identity. The neighborhoods, industrial clusters, downtown, parks and other hubs form the organs of a city. Similar to the circulatory system and neural networks that weave connections within a living organism, transportation routes, infrastructure, waste disposal, communication lines, water flows, and green space connect these nodes.*

The essence of livability was found to be about quality of life, which is tied to the ability of citizens to access food; clean air; affordable housing; infrastructure (transportation, communication, water and sanitation); meaningful employment; and green parks and spaces, and is also determined by the access that its residents have to participate in decision-making to meet their needs.

The *Economist* survey, published in October 2005, assesses living conditions in 127 cities around the world by looking at these factors. Vancouver is the highest ranked city, but a further two Canadian cities (Montréal and Toronto) feature in the top five. Alongside Canada, Australia has some of the most livable places in the world, with Melbourne ranked joint second overall. Perth, Adelaide and Sydney join Zürich, Toronto and Calgary in joint fifth place. Not far behind is Brisbane in joint 11th place.

Elsewhere in the Asian region, cities in Japan, New Zealand, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan all offer a good standard of living, and it is only a humid climate that brings scores down slightly. The influx of investment in China alongside the increased availability of goods has helped all six Chinese cities surveyed perform relatively well, along with other emerging business centres such as Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

Although higher crime rates and a greater threat of terror put US cities below those of Canada, US cities are still among the world's most livable. Cleveland and Pittsburgh are the joint best scoring cities in the US, in joint 26th place in the global ranking. Although no Latin American city surveyed manages to present ideal living conditions, neither do any fall into the category where extreme difficulties are faced. Montevideo (Uruguay), Santiago (Chile) and Buenos Aires (Argentina), which share joint 64th place, offer the best living conditions in Latin America.

Africa and the Middle East fare the worst of any region. Instability, the threat of terror and many cultural restrictions bring the ratings down, although strong anticrime measures in many Arab states are a stabilising factor, and in Israel the negatives are offset by a generally high level of development that makes Tel Aviv the best destination surveyed there.

Future

Having lured us out of the wild and into homes that for many are packed with creature comforts, fridges, running hot water, electricity, heating, ADSL connections, telephones and the rest, what more does the city have up its sleeve? One thing is certain and that is that there will be change.

The challenges for the future faced by cities mainly revolve around sustainability and managing growing populations. Among the UN's Millennium Development Goals is a target to 'significantly improve' the lives of at least 100 million people living in urban slums by the year 2020. At the same time, cities must also plan to be less enviromentally damaging. Economic factors and the desire for unparalleled luxury are also motivators for city planners of the future. Technology moves ahead in leaps and bounds, and ultimately the only thing that can limit a city is the imaginations of the people who are building it. And today, perhaps more than at any time in history, ordinary people are nearer to turning their own city daydreams into something real.

New Real Estate

In a real estate man's eye, the most expensive part of the city is where he has a house to sell. – Will Rogers

In an essay entitled 'The Rise of the Ephemeral City' published in *Metropolis Magazine*, Joel Kotkin has suggested that we are witnessing the emergence of a new urban environment populated by 'non-families' and the nomadic rich whose needs are attended to by a subservient service class. He calls it the ephemeral city and suggests that it prospers merely through its ability to provide an 'alternative' – and one suspects extravagantly decadent – lifestyle for the wealthy few who can afford it. Even though Kotkin wasn't referring to the city of Dubai, he might well have been describing the glittering, paradisal playground for the rich, famous and, especially, the nouveau riche.

Often the difference between the possible and the impossible is someone brave enough to have a vision. In the coastal city of Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is such a man.

In 2001 he ordered construction work to begin on two palm tree–shaped artificial islands. According to the European Space Agency, whose satellite has been monitoring the construction, the islands comprise approximately 100 million cubic metres of rock and sand and are set to increase Dubai's shoreline by 120km.

When complete, the Palm Islands will support over 60 luxury hotels, 5000 residential villas, 5000 apartments, marinas, water theme parks, restaurants, shopping malls, sports facilities, health spas, cinemas and numerous dive sites. It is hoped the development, dubbed by proud locals as the Eighth Wonder of the World, will further secure the city's reputation as a top tourist destination and fantasy playground for the fabulously wealthy. Football ace David Beckham is rumoured to have purchased an apartment.

To prove that less is not more, the sheikh announced in 2004 that a third and even grander Palm island, the Deira Palm, was to begin construction. This palm tree–shaped island will become the largest artificial island in the world, with an area of 80 sq km, and will consist of a trunk, a crown with 41 fronds and a surrounding crescent island that acts as a breaker. The residential area, located on the fronds, will consist of 8000 two-storey town houses.

And just in case there was any shadow cast over Dubai's ambition to remain completely over the top, the sheikh has also commissioned the erection of the enormous Burj Dubai, which will be the world's tallest tower when completed. In keeping with the plant theme, the tower's triple-lobed design is based, according to the press release, 'on an abstracted version of a desert flower, while the silhouette of the lobes resonate the onion-dome constructions of an Islamic culture'.

Another epic urban-development project, considered to be the largest private commercial real-estate development in the world, is underway in South Korea. At an initial cost of US$15 billion, New Songdo City is under construction on a 556-hectare landfill connected to mainland Seoul by bridge. When complete it is planned to be home to almost half a million people and an economic hub to rival Hong Kong. The picturesque, high-density city aims to attract multinational corporations wishing to set up new headquarters for their Northeast Asian operations. Developers have declared New Songdo will be a free economic zone, with tax incentives and low-interest loans. It will feature international schools, hospitals and pharmacies, canals, a water shuttle, a golf course and a 'green lung' modelled on New York's Central Park. The city will also become a test-bed for new technology.

Seoul residents have already shown tremendous interest in the project and New Songdo apartments are rumoured to be selling fast. In the past real estate developers would build houses, office and apartment blocks, it seems that the 21st century has ushered in a new era of real estate where developers construct entire cities.

Raising the Dream

The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind. – Lewis Mumford

Some city planners have a vastly different vision from the property developers, some would say less mercenary and certainly more environmentally sustainable. In the Arizona desert, north of Phoenix, a revolutionary city has been under construction since 1970. Its founder, Italian architect Paolo Soleri, hopes Arcosanti will inspire a change in the prevailing culture. Arcosanti is said to resemble the modernist urban Utopian designs of Le Corbusier and Sant'Elia. However, the principles of design are based on Soleri's concept of 'arcology' (a fusion of architecture and ecology). His vision is for an organic sustainable city that fits into the ecological system rather than imposing itself upon it. For example, greenhouses beneath residential buildings generate solar energy for heating, as well as producing food. Soleri insists that when people come to Arcosanti they will be inspired and that when they leave they will begin to insist that genuinely sustainable principles start being applied to the development of their own cities.

With an average of only 50 permanent residents who also work to construct the city, Arcosanti is on too small a scale to provide the technical solutions for the challenges that face the world's major urban centres. However, in terms of the principles he has applied to his design, Soleri fulfils the role of a visionary, in that he believes that cities must become confluent with the example set by nature if they are not to be destroyed by the same forces that give them life. He writes:

In nature, as an organism evolves it increases in complexity and it also becomes a more compact or miniaturized system. Similarly a city should function as a living system… The city is the necessary instrument for the evolution of humankind.

Citizen City

I have an affection for a great city. I feel safe in the neighbourhood of man, and enjoy the sweet security of the streets. – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

While old-school realists take a deep breath and get on with it, dreamers continue to dream. Anyone who has played Sim City knows the allure of being able to construct your own metropolis. Deciding whether the citizens have a greater need for a new university or a high-security prison can be fun, but for an increasing number of ordinary folk the fun is turning into reality.

Constructing cities started off as the sole preserve of warrior god-kings, then it passed into the hands of elected politicians, and now it seems anyone with enough passion, perseverance and financial backing can give it a go.

In the USA the Laurent Company, in rural South Dakota, is trying to recruit a vice president of construction to help it build 'the world's first fully integrated signing community'. The plan is to build a city that centres on the