

COLUMN 2 Urban spaces where the living is easy

Tokyo: The gentle metropolis?

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With his call for “cities for people,” he is active around the world as an urban designer. From Copenhagen to New York, Sydney and Melbourne, each of his projects has been visually transformative.

I am always inspired by my visits to Tokyo. What fascinates me is that the biggest city in the world is also one of the gentlest. The gentle success comes from a balance between hardware and software. Of course, most people are impressed by the “hardware,” for example, the public transport infrastructure which, with such an extensive and efficient network, must be the best in the world. But I would also draw attention to the “software,” meaning things like the frequency and punctuality of the trains, the polite manners of the passengers and the cleanliness of the station toilets. It is the people that make Tokyo and Tokyo’s success is maintaining a human scale which allows people to live well and communities to flourish. Between the buildings, Tokyo’s neighborhood streets are the original “shared spaces,” which, thanks to their slowness, comfortably accommodate all forms of traffic but somehow still manage to prioritize people. Tokyo’s resilience also comes from strong communities that can self-organize and self-help in times of disaster. Of course there are demographic challenges ahead, including many more old people. How to make a city that makes it easy to be an old person—an active old person who looks after their grandchildren or perhaps one who keeps on working a bit after retirement age? How can the city help the really old to live a dignified life, living independently while still connected to their community? The answer is to preserve the human scale wherever possible and consider the people perspective in every design decision. These include improving walking conditions, providing benches and planting trees, and introducing cycle lanes to the main roads. These are all relatively small things, and much could be done to show the world the gentle metropolis—Tokyo with a human scale.



- 1 Bicycle-friendly Copenhagen
- 2 Pedestrian-friendly Times Square, New York City
- 3 Kagurazaka, Tokyo, where shops and homes coexist



Malmö, Sweden