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MENTORSHIP KNOWLEDGE SERIES

From Urban Loneliness to *Urban Soul*

Planning, Mobility and Regenerative
Placemaking for Connecting
Generations

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“Designing cities that actively cultivate human relationships, belonging, and what this publication calls the urban soul.”

From Urban Loneliness to Urban Soul

Planning, Mobility and Regenerative Placemaking for
Connecting Generations

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene

The design of cities, housing, public space and urban services all can encourage social connection or contribute to isolation in urban life.

Introduction

Loneliness is increasingly recognised as a global public-health crisis, with the WHO treating social disconnection as a priority, comparable in its effect on mortality to risks such as smoking or physical inactivity (WHO, 2025).

The causes of loneliness are shaped by the environments in which people live, not purely personal factors. The design of cities, housing, public space, and urban services all can encourage social connection or contribute to isolation in urban life. Poorly planned environments limit the opportunities for everyday, unplanned encounters which build social life. This burden falls unevenly across the inhabitants of cities, particularly for older adults and young people. This makes loneliness a problem for city planners. If the built environment shapes the conditions for connection, then it is also an important intervention for the prevention of loneliness, as put forward by the WHO "the places, policies, programmes and networks of people that make up towns and cities can all be oriented to increasing and improving relationships" (WHO, 2025, p. 149).

Although a growing number of city governments are increasingly addressing the needs of improved loneliness through health and social care policies, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role of urban planning, urban mobility and urban design in providing preventive solutions.

This publication responds to that gap. Based on the cross-cutting analysis of several international case studies, taking a closer look at the senior generations, the publication aims to demonstrate how the design of urban-scale policies and management of streets, neighbourhoods, mobility systems, and public spaces can help create environments where social interaction occurs naturally.

The authors recognise that the cities we build today will shape not only how people move and live, but also whether they feel connected, included, and at home. Addressing urban loneliness therefore requires a shift from designing cities for efficiency alone to designing cities that actively cultivate human relationships, belonging, and what this publication calls **the urban soul**.

THEME ONE · URBAN SCALE

Urban Scale

Urban loneliness and the larger urban scale: the structural conditions for supporting social life within a city.

01

THEME ONE · URBAN SCALE

Urban Scale: Planning and the Issue of Urban Loneliness

Cities are places where millions of people live side by side, yet for many, everyday life is marked by a profound sense of disconnection. In the middle of crowded streets, busy public transport, and vibrant neighbourhoods, loneliness has become one of the main characteristics of urban life. Defined as the distressing gap between the social relationships people desire and those they actually experience, loneliness now affects an estimated **16% of the world's population**, making it a growing global public health and urban development challenge.

This chapter focuses on urban loneliness and the larger urban scale, and on the structural conditions for supporting social life within a city.

The Urban Scale: Loneliness and the Built Environment

Many traditional urban planning tools such as zoning categories, density standards, road hierarchies, and open space provision ratios, all are calibrated to measurable indicators rather than to the qualitative experience of urban life, which is vital when considering loneliness. According to Jacobs (1961), these planning instruments produce an urban form that suppresses the everyday encounter at the heart of social life on the urban scale. This critique extends to contemporary urban planning, which pursues similar quantitative instruments without corresponding qualitative measures of whether the resulting urban form supports human-scale public life (Gehl, 2010). A city can hit those quantitative targets and still produce a public realm that does not lead to human connection.

Three types of activity can be identified in public space: necessary activities which occur regardless of conditions, such as commuting or shopping; optional activities which only occur when the built environment allows, such as sitting or lingering; and social activities which rely on the presence of optional activity, which are the encounters and conversations which produce familiarity (Gehl, 2011). When the planning architecture delivers infrastructure only for necessary activities, optional activities do not occur, and social activity decreases in the public realm. Mouratidis (2018) finds that compact and mixed-use form is associated with more frequent casual encounters and higher perceived social support, but relationship quality is moderated by additional qualitative factors not captured by quantitative metrics. This relationship between the public environment and preventing urban loneliness depends more on distribution, combination, and qualitative

experience than quantifiable planning metrics (Bower et al., 2023). Satisfaction is an important qualitative metric for planners when considering the impact of public space and amenities on how the built environment can tackle loneliness (Kemperman et al., 2025). Satisfaction can depend on a number of factors, not only design quality itself, and vary based on self-selection (Van Melik and Van der Lee, 2026).

These public spaces and amenities are being increasingly understood as social infrastructure, including Libraries, parks, community centres, swimming pools, community gardens, schools, playgrounds, barbershops are all examples of social infrastructure even though they are often not planned, funded, or governed as such (Klinenberg, 2018). A mixed-methods study across 76 sites documented that more than 60 per cent of users felt less alone, more than 80 per cent felt a sense of belonging, more than 35 per cent had made new friends at the site, and more than 50 per cent had formed connections beyond their own demographics (IPK and Gehl, 2026). For the urban scale, social infrastructure delivers measurable social outcomes where it exists, and the question is not whether such infrastructure works but whether it is distributed evenly across a city or concentrated in particular neighbourhoods. In some cases, social infrastructure can be mediated by income, leading to sociability restricted to neighbourhoods of higher income. At the urban scale, uneven spatial allocation can leave particular neighbourhoods and populations without access to the settings in which social contact occurs (Fincher & Iveson, 2017). This sets the site for the comparison of two case study sites in disadvantaged areas of Dublin and Rotterdam.

Loneliness Across Age on the Urban Scale This uneven distribution has a greater impact on feelings of loneliness for different residents. The populations most exposed to loneliness and isolation are the elderly and young people, with reported rates of loneliness at 20.9% and 17.4% (WHO, 2025). These age groups depend far more on this distribution than others. The elderly have a reduced independent range, and young people lack the income for commercial alternatives and the means to travel far; both require the fair distribution of non-commercial public spaces and rest points within their own areas to determine their ability to form spontaneous social connections.

Case study sites: Dublin & Rotterdam

Case: Dublin, Ireland

Ireland has some of the highest reported rates of loneliness in the European Union. An EU-wide systemic study on loneliness found that over 20% of respondents reported feeling lonely, much higher than the European average of 13% (Schnepf et al., 2024). Research has shown that the built environment of Ireland produces barriers to mobility, access to social services, community activities, and lower social engagement, which contribute to high reported loneliness levels (Mohan, 2024). Dublin's urban area is a small, historic inner core surrounded by extensive low-density car-dependent suburbs, with persistent pockets of acute socio-economic deprivation that have resisted successive regeneration cycles, and a public realm where the qualitative ambitions of city planning sit in long-standing tension with market-led delivery. Public space within Dublin City Centre makes up only 4.22 per cent of the area, marginally above the European Commission's recommended minimum of 2 to 15 per cent (Istrate et al., 2024). The North East Inner City is where this poor access to public space has greater impacts on wellbeing.

Ireland was found to rely on the commercial pathway for third space delivery in a 26-country comparative study (Lambert, 2025). Dublin remains a city where most residents cannot reach their daily needs on foot, where the inner-city public realm is unevenly distributed between areas of high-investment commercial and structurally under-resourced residential neighbourhoods. Dublin's planning has produced a city where access to such infrastructure is heavily mediated by income and by neighbourhood.

An example of these efforts is Ireland's capital city Dublin's most ambitious urban regeneration initiatives, the "North East Inner City (NEIC) Strategic Development and Regeneration Area (SDRA 10) " (figure 1). This plan seeks to reconnect fragmented neighbourhoods while preserving the area's rich cultural heritage. It adopts the place-based approach that strengthens primarily social values of public space, such as walkability and community life.

NEIC Case Study Site

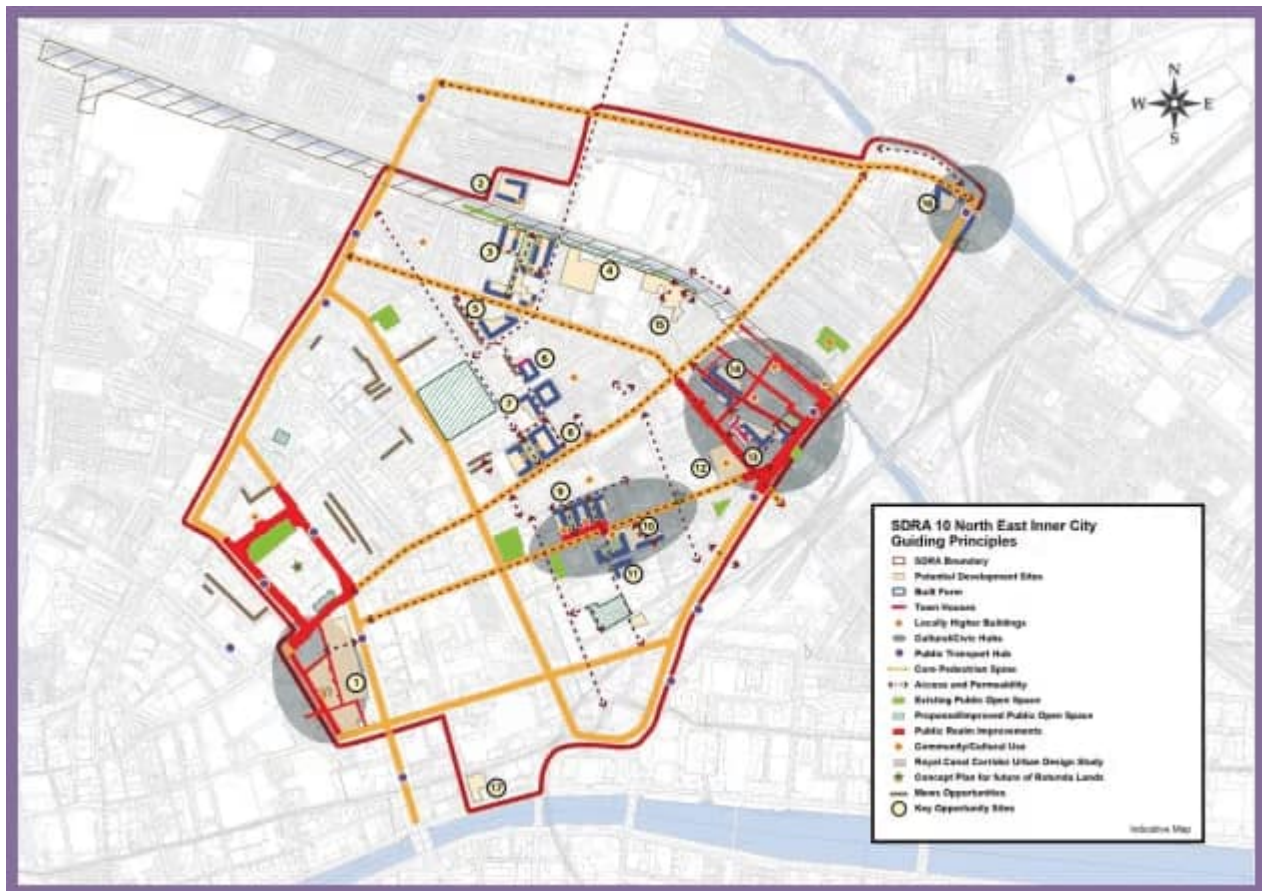


Fig. 1. SDRA 10 North East Inner City - Guiding Principles. Source: Dublin City Council, 2022, Development Plan, Chapter 13.12.

The 2018 NEIC Greening Strategy, a precursor for the NEIC regeneration plan, documented a deficit of quality green infrastructure, with public input identifying derelict and abandoned sites, anti-social behaviour, lack of pedestrian connectivity, large volumes of traffic, lack of pedestrian-friendly areas, and lack of green space as the most pressing concerns (Dublin City Council, 2018). The Strategy's stated goal was "to foster a greater number of social connections and community cohesion". Inhabitants of the NEIC live in close physical proximity to the city's most heavily capitalised commercial zone, but the spatial fabric of their own neighbourhood is fragmented, under-maintained, and contested.

The main Guiding Principles of the plan (as represented in figure 1) are: 1/establishing of the network of new public open spaces that extends beyond traditional parks; 2/improving access routes and urban permeability of the urban blocks; 3/ establishing several Local Area Plans for immediate neighbourhood revival; 4/ identifying Key Opportunity Sites that can act as catalysts for wider neighbourhood transformation.



Fig. 2. NEIC Existing Green Spaces. Source: Dublin City Council, 2018, NEIC Greening Strategy, Fig. 2.6.1.

The Green Spaces Study of the North East Inner City (fig 2), prepared as part of the overall Greening Strategy, provides a comprehensive assessment of the quality, accessibility, and connectivity of green and open spaces. Rather than simply cataloguing existing parks, the study examines how green infrastructure can contribute to healthier neighbourhoods and climate resilience. The study also underlines that many residents have limited access to high-quality public open spaces, impacting negatively their quality of life. The existing well-known green areas such as Mountjoy Square Park, Diamond Park, Liberty Park, and the Royal Canal are paired with smaller ones, aiming to establish a continuous Connected Green Network. The purpose of the Network is to form a safe, inclusive, and easily accessible green infrastructure which can also function as essential social infrastructure.

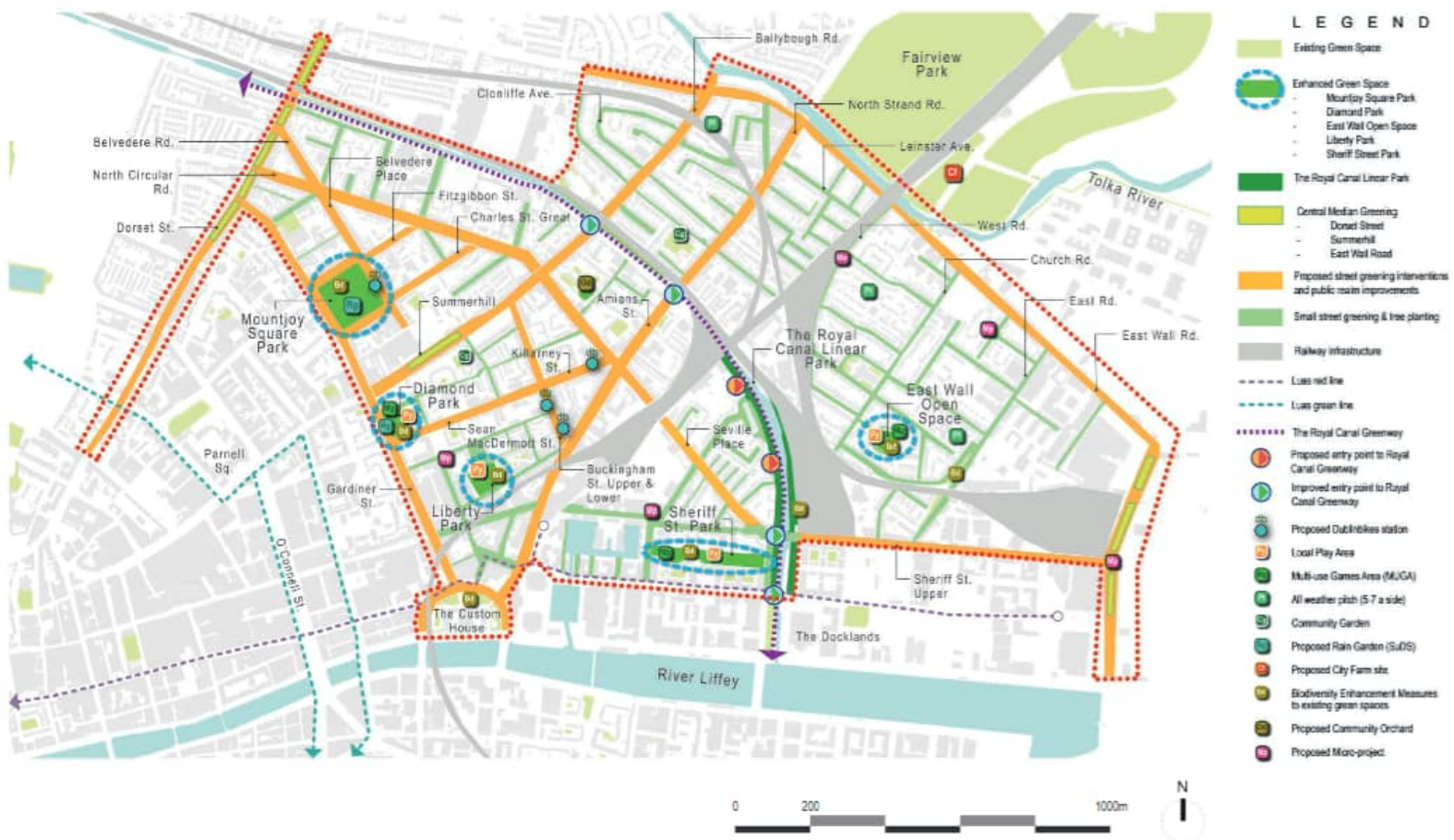


Fig. 3. NEIC Area Wide Strategy. Source: Dublin City Council, 2018, NEIC Greening Strategy, Fig. 3.4.2.

Figure (3) details further how the Guiding Principles for the NEIC and the Greening Strategy are translated into an Area Wide Strategy. The Area Strategy presents a set of diverse micro-location interventions and new programmatic elements such as community gardens, community orchards and Multiple Games Areas (MIGAs). Several neighbourhood sites and streetscapes are identified as future “micro project” sites, meaning those sites can be co-designed in direct participation with the people living in the immediate surroundings.

Although the North East Inner City (NEIC) regeneration strategy was not developed explicitly as an anti-loneliness programme, many of its planning principles directly address the spatial conditions that contribute to social isolation. The emphasis on accessible parks, vibrant streets, and community-oriented public spaces creates opportunities for residents of all ages to spend time outdoors.

How this impacts the elderly and young people: Older Adults

Dublin's public realm produces spatial barriers to mobility and participation. Older adults adapt to the absence of public infrastructure in public spaces by leaning against a wall to wait for a bus where no shelter or seating was provided; another sits on a low parking-divider wall while waiting at a pedestrian crossing (Kazak et al., 2026)

The Age Friendly Ireland (2018) planning toolkit identifies planning guidelines to ensure that parks and urban green spaces in Dublin are made age-inclusive to enable older people to be socially connected. The provision of safe and visually interesting urban pocket parks with age-friendly seating can provide elderly people with increased levels of activity and greater intergenerational social connection, reducing loneliness for older individuals who may be socially isolated due to the lack of adequately planned space in the NEIC (Age Friendly Ireland, 2018). However, uneven distribution across the city remains, leaving older residents in the neighbourhood with a contracted range in which social connection is possible.

Young People: Young people are the age group with the highest reported loneliness globally (WHO, 2025). The absence of non-commercial third places and public space within the NEIC limits opportunities for social connection, requiring them to pay for commercial alternatives or travel to suburban amenities, and the NEIC's deficit of libraries, youth facilities, and quality green space falls on them most directly.

Case: Rotterdam, Netherlands

Loneliness has become an increasingly important policy and planning issue in Rotterdam. While traditionally viewed as a public health concern, municipal research (Municipality of Rotterdam) and academic studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam) demonstrate that loneliness is also closely connected to neighbourhood quality, social cohesion, and the design of the urban environment.

According to the Municipality of Rotterdam's health and neighbourhood monitoring (source: Municipality of Rotterdam. *Wijkprofiel Rotterdam – Tarwewijk* (neighbourhood indicators on social cohesion, health, safety, and living conditions)), feelings of loneliness are concentrated in neighbourhoods characterised by socioeconomic disadvantage, lower levels of social cohesion, poorer health outcomes, and weaker neighbourhood networks. These patterns are particularly visible in parts of Rotterdam Zuid, such as Tarwewijk, Hillesluis, Bloemhof, and Feijenoord neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods have relatively fewer opportunities for informal social interaction, which is one of the main contributors to urban loneliness. The municipality therefore increasingly treats loneliness as a neighbourhood issue requiring place-based interventions, alongside health and welfare policies.

A study conducted by Erasmus University in Rotterdam, which included more than 3000 elderly respondents (65+), found that 60% experienced emotional loneliness, while 47% experienced social loneliness (Wolfers et al., 2022). The research showed that emotional support, quality of life, neighbourhood social capital, companionship, and informal support networks were among the strongest remedies against loneliness. In conclusion to the study, urban loneliness was strongly associated with the social environment in which people live, rather than being determined solely by individual characteristics. (such as age, social background, economic background, etc)

These findings are reinforced by broader Dutch urban research. Studies from Amsterdam UMC have shown that neighbourhood characteristics, including social cohesion, trust between neighbours, accessible public spaces, and opportunities for everyday encounters, play an important role in reducing loneliness among older adults. Neighbourhoods with stronger social capital consistently report higher levels of well-being, suggesting that investments in the public realm and community infrastructure contribute directly to social resilience (Timmermans E., et al., 2021).

For urban planners, these findings represent an important shift in perspective. Loneliness is increasingly understood not simply as an individual psychological condition but as an outcome that is shaped by the built environment. Understanding this, Rotterdam has increasingly incorporated neighbourhood regeneration, placemaking initiatives, community hubs, and improvements to public space into broader strategies aimed at strengthening social cohesion. In this sense, public space becomes a form of social infrastructure, and neighbourhood regeneration becomes a tool not only for physical renewal but also for rebuilding the social fabric of the city.

In the example of the Rotterdam South Masterplan (figure 4), we can see how these ideas have been developed further and incorporated in urban plans.

The Rotterdam South Masterplan presents a long-term vision for transforming the southern part of Rotterdam into a healthier, greener, and more connected urban district. This part of Rotterdam is separated from the historic city centre by the river Maas, and it was developed primarily as a district for port workers and industry. Today, it is home to one of the youngest and most culturally diverse populations in the country. In comparison to the northern part of the city, Rotterdam South faces significant socioeconomic challenges, including lower average incomes, lower educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, and higher unemployment than the city average. These disparities led to the establishment of the National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRZ), a long-term partnership between national and local government, housing corporations, and community organisations aimed at narrowing the gap between Rotterdam South and the rest of the city.

The Masterplan (fig. 4) points out education, work and housing as the main pillars of development, and a perspective for a better life for its citizens. The plan highlights the green qualities of the area, and proposes its better utilisation as the main driver for the future-proof development.



8 Manifest Rotterdam Zuid

Fig. 4. Rotterdam South Masterplan. Source: Manifesto Rotterdam Zuid: An integral vision for a sustainable and future-proof development for the South, Mecanoo Architects 2021, NL

Tarwewijk neighbourhood Located at the heart of Rotterdam South, Tarwewijk occupies a strategic position within the wider transformation ambitions of the Rotterdam South Masterplan. (figure 5) As one of the older neighbourhoods of the district, Tarwewijk represents both the challenges and the potential of Rotterdam South: it combines a rich multicultural identity and strong local networks with persistent social, economic, and spatial inequalities. Within the vision of the Rotterdam South Masterplan, Tarwewijk is seen not only as a neighbourhood requiring physical renewal, but as a place where strengthening “everyday spaces” can improve quality of life,

In neighbourhoods such as Tarwewijk, where socio-economic challenges intersect with an ageing population and increasing diversity, the “everyday spaces” have become an important focus for neighbourhood regeneration and social inclusion.

Location: where is the Tarwewijk?

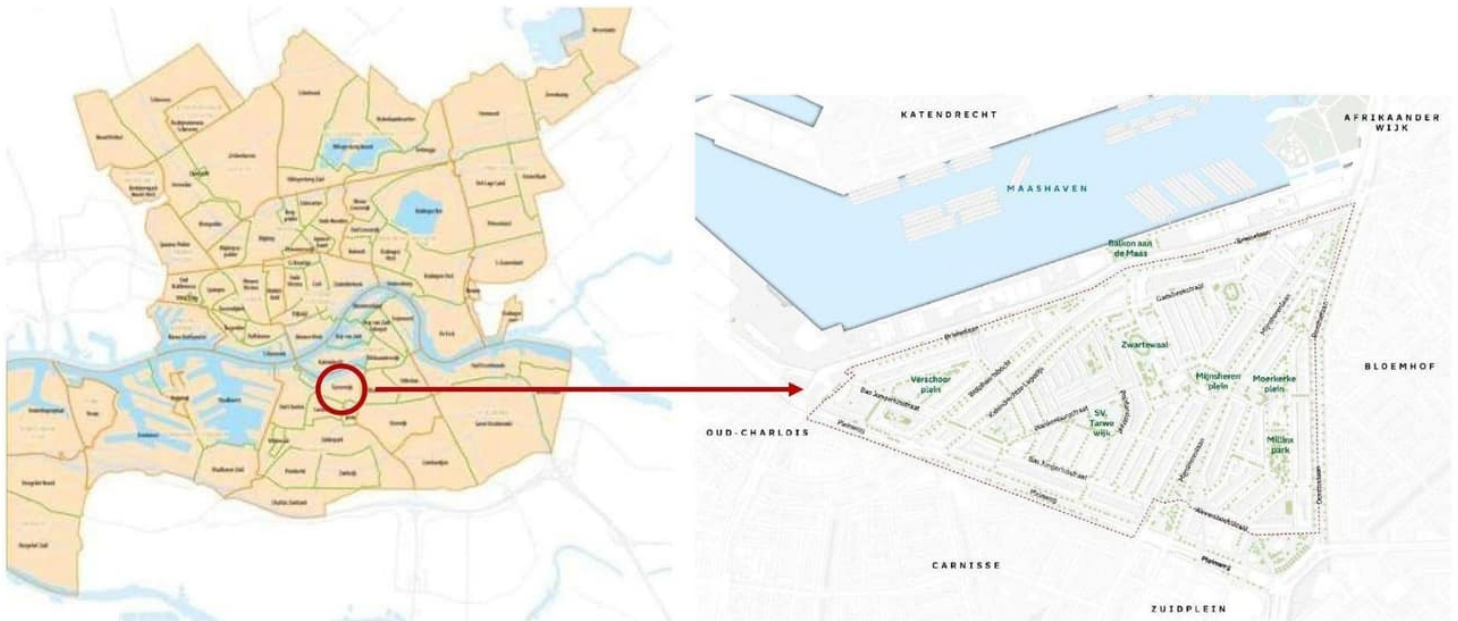


Fig. 5. Vision Tarwewijk - Neighbourhood Location Source: Rotterdam Municipality, Interreg Europe project Step_Up 2025

Central to this strategy of using public space as a motor of urban renewal is the **Campus Tarwewijk Route** project (Karadag, E., 2021) (figure 6).

Ambitions for the public space

- Tarwewijk as connection between 3 major city projects
- Busy car-oriented edges, quiet bicycle-pedestrian oriented insides
- Slowly, but steadily less space for cars
- Green and blue spaces within walking distance
- Network of green spaces and local facilities
- Climate adaptation strategies in each street



Fig. 6. Vision Tarwewijk - Ambitions for Public Space. Source: Rotterdam Municipality, Interreg Europe project Step_Up 2025



Fig. 7. Strengthening the neighbourhood facilities. Source: AD, photo © Marco van der Caaij, 2025

This project is a municipal initiative that envisions a continuous green pedestrian corridor connecting schools, community facilities, public spaces, and neighbourhood amenities. The route is made of several interconnected streets: Zwartewaalstraat, Mijnsheerenplein, Rijkroodpad, Wevershoek, and Balkon aan de Maashaven (figure 6). The route also connects Tarwewijk with 2 major neighbouring projects, which are The South Square (major mobility and public transport interchange) and Maashaven Area Redevelopment, a new housing area in the old industrial terrain.

Rather than functioning solely as a walking route, the corridor is intended to become a social spine for the neighbourhood, encouraging informal encounters, recreation, and intergenerational interaction. The route is positioned as a catalyst for strengthening neighbourhood cohesion by making everyday destinations safer, greener, and more attractive for residents of all ages. Besides physical improvements, the route has also received a new functional programming to support the idea of being a chain of destinations and services, rather than just a network of interconnected public spaces.

At the heart of this network is the Wijkhouse ("Neighbourhood House"), a neighbourhood hub that functions as a welcoming meeting place for residents of all ages. In the Neighbourhood House, educational programmes, cultural workshops, and volunteer initiatives provide opportunities for people to build relationships beyond their immediate social circles. Complementing these activities, nearby the House are schools, playgrounds, health and social care services and community gardens, each contributing to a continuous programme of activity throughout the day, offering "activation" as an antidote to loneliness.

Other facilities in the Tarwewijk neighbourhood have followed the "Neighbourhood House" formula, and similar community hubs (the Millinxbarkhuis, the Wijkhub Tarwewijk, House of Hope, and Tarwekracht) have been realised, extending the function of public space towards "places where relationships can develop". (figure 7).

These interventions reflect an important shift in contemporary urban planning. Rather than viewing streets, parks, and squares simply as physical infrastructure, Rotterdam planning practice increasingly treats them as social infrastructure capable of supporting health, well-being, and community resilience.

In Tarwewijk, age-friendly public space is therefore understood not only as a means of improving accessibility for older adults but also as a strategy for strengthening the intergenerational character of the neighbourhood. This approach aligns closely with the principles of regenerative placemaking, where public spaces become living environments cultivating a shared sense of belonging through filling the spaces with diversity of functions and content.

Older adults (65+): Tarwewijk, challenges and solutions Older adults in Tarwewijk face a combination of social, spatial, and economic challenges that are increasing their vulnerability to loneliness and reduced participation in neighbourhood life. According to the Municipality of Rotterdam's neighbourhood monitoring (source: Municipality of Rotterdam. *Wijkprofiel Rotterdam – Tarwewijk* neighbourhood indicators on social cohesion, health, safety, and living conditions), Tarwewijk experiences higher levels of socioeconomic vulnerability of older adults compared with many other Rotterdam neighbourhoods, limiting the opportunities for older residents to build and maintain supportive social networks. High residential mobility (short-term rent, house moving, etc) and population diversity create obstacles in developing long-term community relationships and a shared sense of belonging.

From a spatial planning perspective, Tarwewijk has several barriers in the public realm affecting the elderly, such as busy streets and traffic roads, limited access to green spaces, and areas with increased perceived safety concerns. The existing public spaces have limited places to rest and meet others during daily activities. (A.R. Bogert et. al., 2025)

Young People and Children: Tarwewijk, challenges and solutions The socioeconomic and spatial conditions in Tarwewijk are also affecting young residents. The most present limitations are limited access to supportive networks, fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities, and increased pressure on family resources.

From a spatial planning perspective, the quality and accessibility of public spaces play an important role in shaping young people's everyday experiences. In Tarwewijk, there are limited safe play areas. The green spaces are often fragmented, and general concerns about safety can reduce opportunities for outdoor play and informal interaction with peers. (A.R. Bogert et. al., 2025) It is evident that both accessibility issues and safety issues are the major concerns for both the youth and the elderly.

Comparative Insights

Planning at the urban scale produces preconditions for social connection rather than connection itself. As the WHO Commission puts it, "the places, policies, programmes and networks of people that make up towns and cities can all be oriented to increasing and improving relationships" (WHO, 2025, p. 149).

For the city of Rotterdam, loneliness is "strongly associated with the social environment in which people live, rather than being determined solely by individual characteristics", referring to a relational diagnosis in which the planning interventions include a connective corridor and hubs aimed at cohesion and intergenerational interaction. Dublin's Greening Strategy focuses on a more direct response to quantity: correcting an area-wide shortfall in provision. Both of these interventions Rotterdam's diagnosis is relational, but its treatment is physical infrastructure- with shared, safe, attractive space is what hosts the informal encounters that build cohesion. The implication is that a distributional strategy should be clear in what it is actually solving, since the same-looking intervention (more green space, a new facility) does different work depending on whether the underlying deficit is provision or connection.

For the elderly in Dublin, Age Friendly Ireland's seating and crossing benchmarks go largely unmet in a city already short on space. Rotterdam shows a case with a comparable spatial barrier of busy streets, fragmented green space, and few places to rest or meet, while also having high residential turnover, driven by short-term renting and frequent moving, combined with population diversity, works against the time it takes to convert proximity into a long-term relationship. Young people in both cities face similar barriers for social connections, increasing the prevalence of loneliness. Third places in Dublin are fenced off by the high costs associated with the commercial nature of common meeting places. Rotterdam's concerns whether existing free space is actually usable: fragmented green space, limited safe play areas, and safety concerns that discourage outdoor play and peer interaction, compounded by pressure on family and community resources that limits access to structured activities. One is a barrier of cost; the other is a barrier of safety and household capacity.

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THEME TWO · MOBILITY

Mobility

Urban mobility shapes whether cities foster interaction, inclusion and participation, or reinforce isolation and exclusion.

02

THEME TWO · MOBILITY

Mobility and Social Isolation

Mobility as a social infrastructure

Urban mobility extends far beyond the transportation systems that move people and goods. It encompasses the infrastructure that enables movement, the accessibility it provides to essential destinations, and the everyday patterns of travel that shape how people experience and engage with the city. In doing so, **urban mobility** plays a fundamental role in influencing social cohesion, determining whether urban environments foster opportunities for interaction, inclusion, and participation or reinforce isolation and exclusion.

Transport infrastructure can either enable or constrain independent mobility. Continuous, safe, and universally accessible footpaths, well-lit streets, inclusive public transport stops, active street frontages, seating that encourages people to pause and remain in public spaces, and environments designed to accommodate wheelchair users, older adults, children, and caregivers collectively create conditions that support everyday social interaction. Conversely, where these elements are absent, streets become corridors designed primarily for the efficient movement of vehicles. Such environments diminish opportunities for spontaneous encounters, discourage active mobility, and restrict the informal social exchanges that are essential to vibrant public life.

Everyday journeys, such as walking to a bus stop, cycling through a neighbourhood, visiting a local market, or pausing along a street while travelling to a destination, generate countless opportunities for incidental social contact. These forms of slow, human-scale mobility facilitate unplanned interactions that do not require deliberate social engagement. Over time, these repeated micro-interactions strengthen neighbourhood ties, foster trust, enhance social capital, and contribute to overall community well-being. In this sense, mobility is not merely a means of reaching destinations but an essential mechanism through which social relationships are formed and sustained.

Traditionally, urban loneliness has been examined primarily through psychological and individual behavioural perspectives. More recently, however, research has increasingly recognised the influence of the built environment and urban systems in shaping experiences of loneliness and social isolation. The spatial organisation of cities, the quality of public spaces, and the accessibility of mobility networks all influence how frequently people participate in public life and interact with others. Urban mobility, by improving physical access to people, places, and activities, has the potential to strengthen social connectedness and reduce isolation.

Importantly, participation in social life is itself contingent upon mobility. Accessing destinations traditionally regarded as social spaces, such as parks, community centres, cultural venues, or neighbourhood gathering places, depends on safe, affordable, and convenient transportation options, particularly walking, cycling, and public transport. Where these modes are inaccessible or unsafe, participation in public life increasingly becomes dependent on private vehicles, effectively limiting social opportunities for those without access to a car. Despite this strong relationship, mobility remains an underexplored dimension within contemporary discussions on urban loneliness.

In this theme, we explore these relationships through a comparative analysis of Canada and India, two countries representing contrasting patterns of urban development and mobility. Canada exemplifies a highly motorised, low-density urban model characterised by suburban expansion, single-family housing, and a transportation system that has historically prioritised automobile travel. While offering high levels of private mobility, these spatial characteristics often reduce opportunities for incidental social interaction and contribute to fragmented urban environments.

India presents a markedly different urban context. Although rapid motorisation and urban expansion are increasingly reshaping many metropolitan areas, Indian cities continue to exhibit high population densities, mixed land use, and a strong culture of community-based public life. Informal social interactions remain deeply embedded within everyday activities and neighbourhood streets, creating opportunities for frequent social engagement despite significant infrastructure and mobility challenges. These contrasting urban and cultural contexts provide an opportunity to explore how mobility systems, urban form, and socio-cultural practices collectively influence social connectedness and experiences of urban loneliness.

Built Environment, Movement, and Human Connection

In highly car-dependent environments, the loss or restriction of driving access quickly translates to reduced participation in social life. For Canada, a few civic, epidemiological, and survey-based studies have emerged that allow quantified claims about the connection between urban form and loneliness. For India, the peer-reviewed literature on this topic is thinner and less spatially specific but still valuable. However, across both contexts and several others, urban mobility is experienced differently by different age groups. A 16-year old experiences transit and movement around the city very differently than a 36-year old and even more so than a 60-year old. The same affects their access to places, their social participation, and the lack of it. While age alone cannot cover the whole spectrum of mobility-caused loneliness issues, it narrows the built environmental conditions and the relevant mobility mechanisms.

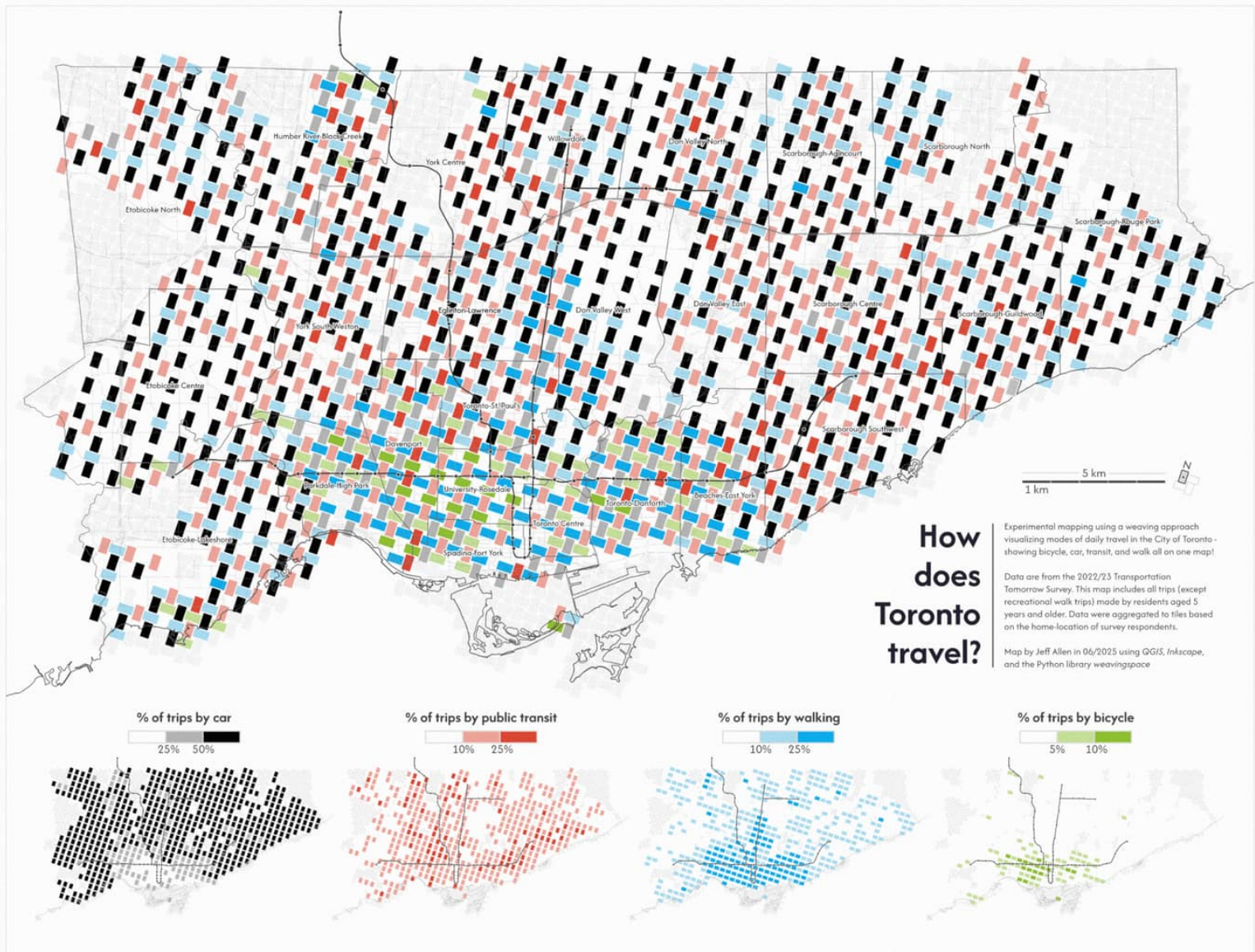


Fig. 8. How does Toronto travel? Source: Allen & Bin Samion, 2022

Canada

A 2022 reported one in four Canadians feeling lonely always or often. **29% of people between 18 and 39 years, and 15.6% of people over 60 felt lonely (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2022)**. Although the survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings stay relevant.

The urban mobility restrictions in most Canadian cities can be studied across three sections: time poverty, spatial isolation, and independent travelling ability.

Youth and young adults: Toronto's young adults are most financially stretched, transit dependent, and live furthest from the city. For youth, reaching social activities outside of school easily takes somewhere between 60-90 minutes, which forces them to opt out of

after-school events, clubs, and other activities entirely. This excessive time waiting for and commuting on transit also impacts their ability to participate in on-campus activities. The 2019 'StudentMoveTO' study surveyed over 18,000 students across ten universities and colleges in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) and found that almost 60% reported that commute was a barrier to campus participation, including classes, community events, clubs, and informal social encounters that constitute students' social life (Mitra et al., 2020). The findings sit right with broader time-poverty literature wherein commuting consumes the discretionary time required for social participation. Mitra and Taylor (2021) identify this connection between commute dissatisfaction and reduced social participation.

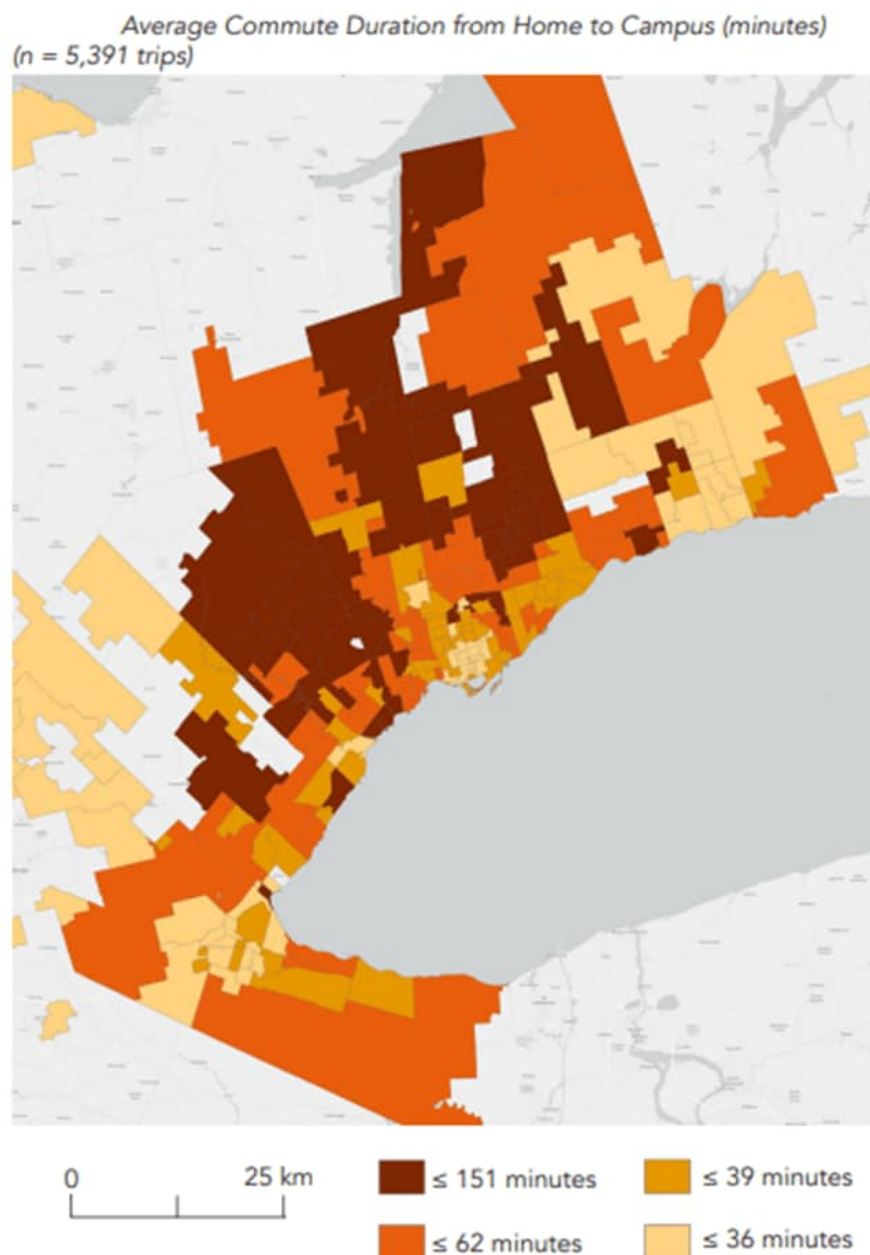


Fig. 9. Average commute distance from Home to Campus in Minutes (in Greater Toronto Area). Source: Mitra et al., 2020

It is worth noting that the majority of racialised and lower-income populations are disproportionately concentrated in areas of Scarborough, North Etobicoke, Brampton, and Hamilton, which are also the areas with **weak internal-transit links and longer commutes** to Toronto. The **dedicated cycling and pedestrian infrastructure** remains concentrated in the downtown core and inferior in suburbs, which physically isolates suburban youth from major urban service zones and civic life. Therefore, the numbers of racialised communities and first-generation post-secondary students who commute from low-income suburban households read alongside race-equity literature show how, for residents without cars, this time burden is not a preference but a structural condition. It reduces their independent mobility, takes away the chance of organic interaction with peers while walking or cycling, reduces the hours available for social participation, and eventually impacts their overall sense of community belonging.

Older adults: On the other end of the spectrum are older adults (65+) who frequently face structural and physiological barriers in accessing places. Several mid-sized cities in Canada, such as Kingston and others, are ageing. The consequence of this is a growing population of elderly people who are increasingly dependent on non-driving modes but live in a built environment that is designed to support car movement. Moving slowly on unpaved or unsafe routes while walking, navigating steep vehicle steps, Rushing to catch a bus, waiting extended periods after missing a service, coping with the stress and uncertainty associated with public transport, or fearing the consequences of missing a stop and having to retrace the journey are among the many physical, emotional, and spatiotemporal burdens that older adults encounter in navigating urban mobility and accessing everyday destinations. When older adults stop driving due to age or health conditions, their independent mobility drops sharply. This matters because social participation or lack thereof alone is not always an indicator of loneliness, but rather cognitive social capital, i.e., attitudes about one's community with respect to trust, reciprocity and cooperation are significant variables (MacDonald & Schermer, 2025). When combined, these factors also affect people's ability to move around. When a community is close-knit, when neighbours are **helpful and available**, people can get a ride from a neighbour when they cannot drive or request someone to accompany them when going for a walk. In compact, dense urban environments, although the number of people in the vicinity is high, the likelihood of neighbours being home or in social spaces at the same time as you is lower. This, combined with people's inability to travel to social events or spaces, can easily translate into people feeling lonely even in crowded places.

A 2021 study by Dr Maxwell Hartt dived deeper into how public space design affects older adults' social life. His 2023 study on 'Expanding the Playful City' argues that public realm design standards and guidelines should include play principles. His work also focused on mobility design features, such as active frontage, varied street surfaces and topography, and street design that encourages loitering and social interactions. Combined, these factors can support an ambient social environment for older residents whose independent travel range is shrinking.

India

The claim that India is a collective society and Indians have strong family ties is one that appears frequently in everyday conversations; however, it is the least examined idea in the South Asian urban discourse. The joint family clusters and strong neighbourhood bonds persist, but they are not evenly distributed across all gender, age and income groups; therefore, does not shelter Indians from the loneliness crisis. India experiences proximate isolation: a state of being physically, socially, or geographically close to an entity or community, yet remaining functionally separated or disconnected from them.

India's urban areas show fragmentation, not because of the dispersal similar to the North American suburb, but because of a series of large, internally self-sufficient but gated communities and corporate campuses. A series of such large blocks is separated by arterial roads and has nearly absent non-motorised transport infrastructure. Unsafe walking paths, broken networks, and the absence of street activities often discourage people from walking, cycling, or using public transit. This then leaves private vehicles as the only convenient option, taking away the 'social' aspect out of any and all trips.

Youth and Young-adults: In a city like Mumbai, there are two drastic realities. One where the affluent societies and lower-income informal settlements are often on the opposite sides of the road but never meet. The other is Mumbai's suburban/local train journeys, which are crowded, uncomfortable, and frustrating, yet generate unexpected social bonds.

For example, wealthier youth and young adults in Mumbai have a highly curated social life with private clubhouses, holiday homes, and hip cafes in areas like South Mumbai and Bandra. At the same time, the working-class and middle-class youth from Kalyan or Vasai have to cover massive distances between housing and educational or social hubs. This finding is similar to racialised youth's experience in Canada, where by the time they reach a social gathering, they suffer from transit burnout, leaving little or no energy for meaningful social engagement. As a result, they often stay restricted to the areas closer to their residence but with broken or absent footpaths and stressful first- and last-mile journeys on foot.

Working adults in Mumbai experience the transportation system differently than youth. Since Mumbai's public, free social spaces, like the Marine Drive or Juhu Beach, require long journeys, people, especially those from low-income households, face recreational deprivation. They either have to dedicate considerable disposable income to the cost of transportation (Mukherjee et. al. 2023) or skip social meetups entirely to save money. Yadav et al. (2022) looked at slum rehabilitation buildings in Mumbai using the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The study compared the intricate yet drastic lifestyle changes that come with the process of relocating informal communities from ground-floor, street-facing, socially permeable dwellings into formal high-rise apartment blocks that dismantle

the very social ecology of their previous living environment. Rehabilitation housing in almost all Indian cities is often located on the city outskirts with limited public transit and amenities. It results in work trips in different directions that require more time and reliance on different commute modes, which do not exist. In this new lifestyle, every social encounter requires a deliberate trip, reducing not only unplanned encounters with neighbours but also access to other economic as well as recreational opportunities. For a community where car-ownership is near to none and access to transit comes with financial burdens, the social life of its residents becomes restricted to a few events within that neighbourhood. It goes beyond the absence or presence of social contact and becomes more about the access, quality, and diversity of mobility options or lack thereof that affects their social life.

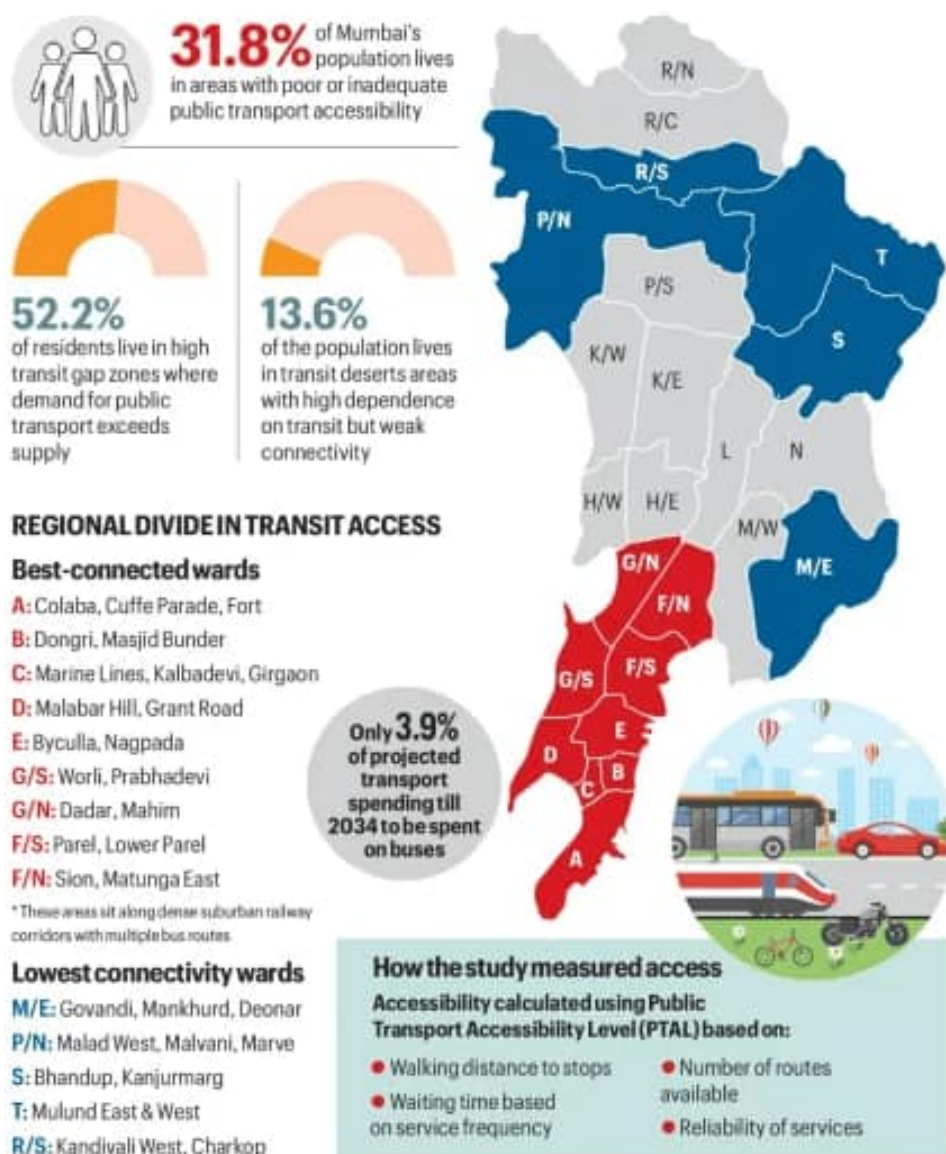


Fig. 10. Uneven Distribution of Transit in Mumbai. Source: Image based on Indian Express' article on Sharma & Patil (2021)'s work

Older Adults: The relationship between mobility, accessibility, and social participation is particularly evident among older adults. Similar to affluent youth, older adults from higher-income households often have access to gated communities, senior citizens' associations, landscaped walking tracks, and organised social activities within their residential enclaves. These environments provide opportunities for routine physical activity and sustained social interaction while reducing dependence on the broader transport network.

For low-income older adults, however, the experience is markedly different. Many reside in peripheral neighbourhoods where urban expansion, relocation, and gentrification have weakened long-standing community networks and increased the distance to essential services. Everyday travel frequently depends on overcrowded suburban rail and bus systems, requiring them to negotiate congested stations, steep staircases, long walking distances, and physically demanding transfers. For many, private modes such as auto rickshaws or app-based taxis are financially inaccessible, making walking and public transport their only viable options. Yet hostile pedestrian environments, characterised by discontinuous footpaths, poor lighting, limited seating, inadequate crossings, and inaccessible transit stops, further restrict their ability to reach neighbourhood destinations such as parks, markets, temples, and community centres. Over time, these barriers reduce independent mobility, confine older adults to their homes, and gradually weaken their social networks.

This pattern resonates with the findings of Ali and George (2022), who reported that 94% of respondents in Mumbai perceived a lack of social connections as a major contributor to urban isolation. Their study distinguishes between *sociability*, referring to the frequency and quality of social interactions, and *acceptability*, reflecting an individual's sense of belonging and recognition within the urban environment. Notably, respondents identified multifunctional public spaces and pedestrian-friendly streets as the most important interventions for addressing urban isolation, highlighting the central role of the built environment in facilitating everyday social engagement.

These findings are reinforced by recent work from WRI, which argues that transport systems should be designed not only to improve accessibility but also to support social participation. WRI identifies a range of mobility barriers experienced by older adults that extend beyond physical accessibility. Physical challenges include long walking distances, uneven footpaths, the absence of seating, inadequate shelters, inaccessible bus boarding, and missing ramps. These are compounded by temporal barriers, such as long waiting times, infrequent off-peak public transport services, and schedules oriented primarily towards peak hour commuters. Equally important are psychological barriers, including anxiety about missing buses or transit stops, fear of falling, uncertainty associated with complex journeys, and increasing reliance on digital ticketing systems that may be unfamiliar to many older users. Collectively, these factors discourage

discretionary travel, reduce visits to parks and community spaces, limit participation in neighbourhood life, and contribute to increasing social isolation.

Comparable patterns are evident among women, whose mobility is frequently shaped by concerns relating to personal safety, harassment, childcare responsibilities, time poverty, and, in some contexts, dependence on male family members for travel. These constraints reduce opportunities for independent movement, restrict participation in public spaces, and reinforce social exclusion. Together, these findings suggest that mobility disadvantage is not simply a transport issue but a broader question of social equity. Access to safe, affordable, and inclusive mobility systems directly influences the ability of different population groups to participate in public life, sustain social relationships, and maintain a sense of belonging within the city.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the built environment and urban mobility systems systematically impose unequal mobility burdens across different demographic groups. Whether experienced through physical barriers, temporal constraints, financial limitations, or psychological stress, these burdens erode the discretionary time, independent mobility, and spontaneous opportunities for social interaction that are fundamental to community life. While loneliness is not always measured directly, the evidence strongly suggests that mobility and accessibility constitute important structural pathways through which urban environments shape social connectedness and, ultimately, experiences of urban loneliness.

Comparison

Canada's suburban sprawl and India's fragmented social life are produced by different economic logics, histories, and cultures. However, a few observations and findings are consistent:

- **Car dependency produces social isolation:** Whether driven by low-density suburban development, where nearly every destination requires a private vehicle, or by urban environments that fail to support walking, cycling, or public transport through inadequate or unsafe infrastructure, dependence on private vehicles or cars fundamentally limits opportunities for everyday social interaction. In both contexts, individuals who cannot drive, whether due to age, disability, financial constraints, or personal choice, face significant barriers to participating in public life. Consequently, the availability of social networks becomes secondary when the urban environment itself offers few alternative pathways for maintaining social contact.
- **Proximity does not guarantee social accessibility:** Conventional planning often assumes that locating services and amenities within close geographic distance is sufficient to promote accessibility. However, accessibility is shaped not only by distance but also by the quality, safety, comfort, affordability, and reliability of the journey. Walking, cycling, and public transport facilitate social participation by requiring

people to occupy shared public spaces, creating opportunities for incidental encounters and informal interactions. Conversely, when a short trip becomes physically demanding, time-consuming, or perceived as unsafe, nearby destinations become functionally inaccessible. Under these conditions, social participation becomes increasingly dependent on private vehicles, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and reducing opportunities for spontaneous social engagement.

- Public space quality and street design are direct determinants of community interaction and social inclusion: Evidence from cities across the world demonstrates that relatively modest improvements to the public realm, including enhanced lighting, pedestrian infrastructure, seating, traffic calming, universal accessibility, and active street frontages, significantly increase the use of public spaces by women, older adults, children, and other vulnerable groups. These interventions encourage people not only to move through urban spaces but also to remain within them, increasing opportunities for lingering, observation, conversation, and unplanned encounters. Such everyday interactions form the foundation of social capital, neighbourhood cohesion, and community belonging.

Collectively, these observations suggest that urban mobility should be understood as a pathway to social participation rather than simply a mechanism for movement. The relationship can be conceptualised as a sequential process in which transport infrastructure shapes mobility choices, mobility choices determine accessibility, accessibility influences participation in public life, and participation creates opportunities for incidental social interaction that strengthen social connectedness and reduce experiences of loneliness.

Transport infrastructure ↓ Mobility choices ↓ Accessibility ↓ Participation in public life ↓ Incidental social interaction ↓ Social connectedness ↓ Reduced urban loneliness

From this perspective, urban loneliness is not solely a consequence of individual circumstances or residential proximity to destinations. It is also an outcome of how cities are planned, designed, and governed. Mobility systems that prioritise the social function of movement, alongside the movement of people, create environments that enable everyday encounters, strengthen community ties, and foster a greater sense of belonging. In contrast, transport systems designed primarily to maximise vehicle throughput risk diminishing the social life of streets and weakening the informal interactions that underpin healthy, resilient, and inclusive cities.

Co-learning and Potential Solutions

At first glance, Canada's experience of urban loneliness appears to stem from suburban dispersal and vehicle dependency, whereas India's challenges are rooted in inequitable and often hostile pedestrian environments. However, the solution does not lie in Canada simply adopting India's urban compactness or India replicating Canada's planning

frameworks. Rather, the lesson from both contexts is that the quality of the local built environment ultimately determines whether mobility systems promote social participation or reinforce isolation. Regardless of urban density, transportation systems must enable safe, comfortable, and independent movement through walking, cycling, and public transport if cities are to foster inclusive and connected communities.

The first priority is to re-establish streets as public spaces rather than solely transport corridors. Streets should be designed as places where people can safely walk, cycle, pause, meet, and spend time. This requires continuous and universally accessible footpaths, protected cycling infrastructure, street trees that provide shade and thermal comfort, seating, play opportunities, and spaces that accommodate people of all ages and abilities. Streets that support informal activities, local vending, and everyday interactions become important settings for social cohesion while simultaneously strengthening local economies.

Equally important is the relationship between buildings and streets. Active ground-floor frontages that provide visual permeability, commercial activity, and direct engagement with the public realm create safer, more vibrant, and socially interactive environments by increasing natural surveillance and encouraging people to linger. In many traditional Indian neighbourhoods, active street frontages have historically formed an integral part of everyday urban life rather than being treated as a specialised design feature. Conversely, in many Canadian suburban developments, active frontages are often introduced selectively through redevelopment or mixed-use projects. Treating street-facing activity as a fundamental principle of urban design rather than an optional intervention can significantly strengthen everyday social interaction in both contexts.

A second area of shared learning concerns informal social infrastructure. Research from Indian cities such as Delhi and Chennai demonstrates how communities often create their own social infrastructure through neighbourhood gathering spaces, local markets, religious institutions, and informal public activities that extend beyond formally planned facilities. Similarly, Canada's growing adoption of social prescribing, where healthcare providers connect individuals with community groups, recreational programmes, and local services to address loneliness and other non-medical needs, illustrates the importance of strengthening social networks alongside physical infrastructure. These approaches recognise that urban well-being depends not only on the availability of public spaces but also on the opportunities they create for meaningful social participation.

Planning policies should also embrace the principles of the 15-minute city by ensuring that residents can safely access everyday destinations, including workplaces, schools, parks, healthcare, public transport, and local commerce, through walking, cycling, or public transport. Proximity alone is insufficient unless supported by high-quality mobility infrastructure that makes active travel convenient, safe, and attractive for people across different ages, genders, and abilities.

Finally, designing streets for safe speeds is fundamental to creating socially inclusive public spaces. Consistent with Vision Zero principles, urban streets with significant pedestrian activity should be designed to operate at speeds of 30 km/h or lower. Achieving safe speeds should rely primarily on self-enforcing street design through narrower carriageways, raised crossings, protected intersections, and geometric traffic calming rather than driver compliance alone. Likewise, pedestrian and cycling networks should be supported by permanent, physically protected infrastructure instead of temporary measures such as paint, signage, or movable barriers.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate that addressing urban loneliness requires mobility planning to move beyond the traditional objective of maximising traffic flow. Instead, planning must recognise mobility as a social function that enables access to people as much as access to places. Walkable neighbourhoods, human-centred streets, inclusive public spaces, and equitable transportation systems collectively create the conditions for everyday encounters, stronger community ties, and healthier, more socially connected cities.

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Regenerative Placemaking

Many urban environments have become efficient but not necessarily social, offering spaces for movement and consumption rather than interaction and community building.

03

THEME THREE · REGENERATIVE PLACEMAKING

Regenerative Placemaking to Overcome Loneliness

Introduction

Planning approaches starting from the 20th century onwards have often focused on the physical and functional performance of cities (housing, transport, infrastructure, and economic development), while paying less attention to the quality of social relationships that make communities resilient and vibrant.

As a result, many urban environments have become efficient but not necessarily social, offering spaces for movement and consumption rather than interaction and community building. Local typologies, urban heritage, and cultural assets have been put under pressure by rapid urban development, focusing on the functionality of public physical infrastructure (streets, roads, utilities, public transport systems, parks, squares) and less on their social role.

In that sense, regenerative placemaking design and planning approach offers a promising alternative perspective, and aims to restore and nurture the social, cultural, ecological, and economic values that have been put under pressure or are lost. It views public spaces as "places": living systems where human well-being depends on the health of both social networks and local environments.

The wider definition of placemaking (according to Project for Public Spaces (PPS)) is that it is a collaborative endeavour dedicated to designing public environments that amplify vibrancy while directly addressing the needs of their users.

The foundational principle of this concept lies in the transition from a mere physical "space" to a "place", which is understood as an environment imbued with meaning, through social interaction and collective experience (Tarek et al., 2025).

PPS states that for a good placemaking process, the place is evaluated upon four main criteria (see fig 11), which are:

- Sociability
- Comfort
- Accessibility
- Multi use

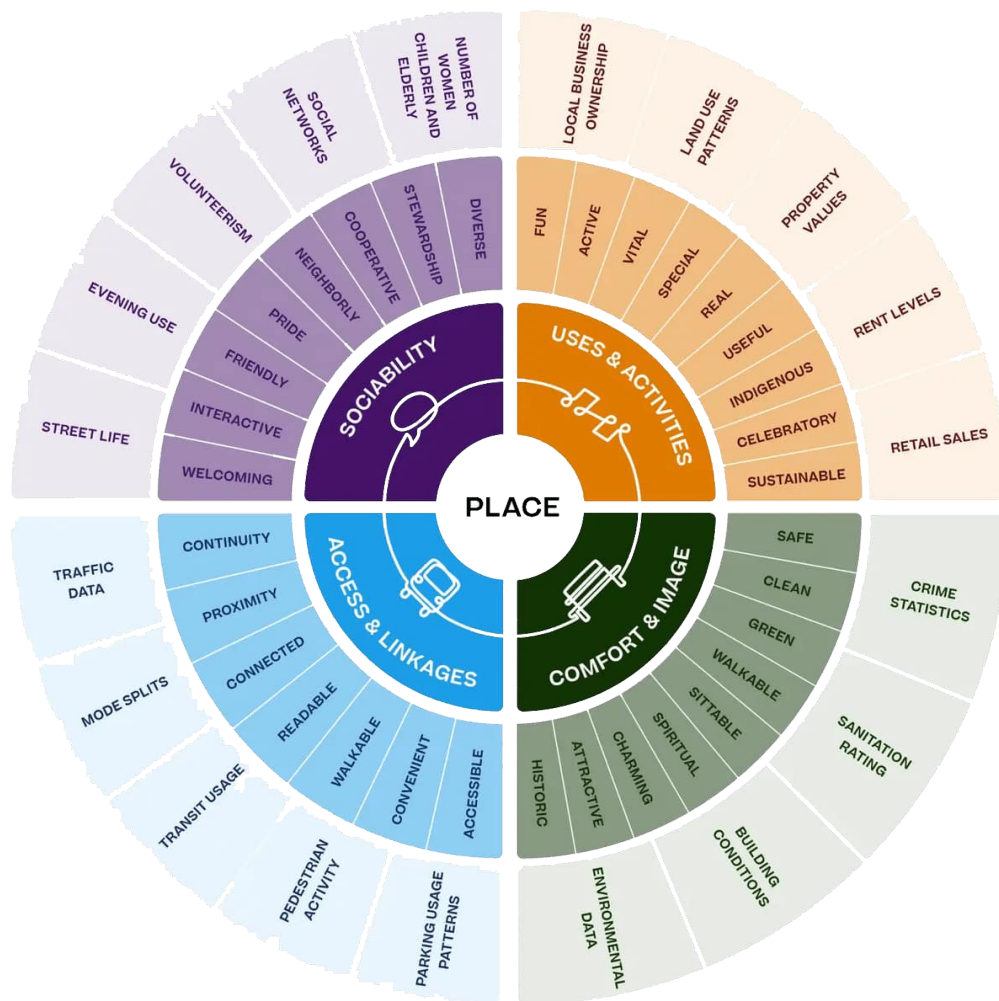


Fig. 11. Showing the Place Diagram created by PPS. Source: Projects for Public Spaces (PPS), n.d.

With this human-centric methodological approach, placemaking seeks to convert underutilised or dysfunctional streets and squares into inclusive, animated public domains. The focus on prioritising people and their needs serves not only to improve the state of the built environment, but also to strengthen social bonds, stimulate local economies and support cultural diversity. Ultimately, by actively involving residents in the design process, this approach fosters a deep sense of community ownership and shared responsibility for the environment (Theo & Lubis, 2025).

Regenerative placemaking and urban loneliness In the context of transforming alienating urban infrastructure towards a more inclusive and human-centred one, regenerative placemaking represents an emerging paradigm that synthesises the principles of integrated urban renewal (one that takes into account natural, physical and social development in a holistic way) with placemaking theory as displayed in the PlaceDiagram. Regenerative placemaking focuses on the restoration of existing spaces in order to

"cultivate environments that simultaneously revitalise natural systems and foster community well-being" (Hes et al., 2020).

Can regenerative placemaking be a tool for combatting urban loneliness, especially among older generations of citizens? As discussed in the previous chapters, urban loneliness is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and can be examined from the perspective of public health, but also from the perspective of urban design and planning, looking at what the opportunities are for creating human connections in public spaces.

Rather than treating loneliness solely as an individual or health issue, regenerative placemaking can be used to address spatial and social roots of modern urban alienation by creating environments that encourage meaningful encounters, intergenerational exchange, and active participation in community life. Community life plays out in urban neighbourhoods, and that is the scale where we will further discuss regenerative placemaking and urban loneliness. The urban nature dimension will be especially highlighted in this chapter, when we will discuss the regenerative placemaking tools applied in Cairo, Egypt, and Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

The Rusu-Moşnoi et al. (n.d.) conceptualise the regeneration of communal areas as an empowering process driven by the integration of human needs and nature-based solutions. Within this approach, the efficacy of regenerative interventions is measured through specific socio-ecological indicators, including active community engagement, the physical extent of the revitalised public realm, and the structural incorporation of natural elements.

Synthesising several complementary perspectives, this chapter bridges the process-oriented placemaking framework pioneered by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS, n.d.) with the evaluative indicators established by Rusu-Moşnoi et al. (n.d.). Fundamentally, regenerative placemaking aimed to treat urban loneliness operates at the intersection of social activities, ecological systems, and the physical urban form. This synthesis constructs a comprehensive theoretical framework for evaluating regenerative interventions, as detailed in Table 1 below.

Framework for evaluating regenerative interventions

REGENERATIVE PLACEMAKING INDICATORS

Indicator	Sub-indicator	Measurement aspects
Human-Centered	Sociability	Diverse, welcoming, engaging
	Comfort	Attractive, safe, lighted
	Accessibility	Walkable, nearby public transportation, disability accessibility, not charged.
	Multi-use	Active, fun, different uses
Engaged communities	Age groups / Gender Balanced	Elderly, adults, young adults, and children. Males & Females
	Average count	User engagement, reactions, and evaluation.
Ecological-Centered	Presence of natural components	Parks, community gardens, or greenery.
	Quality of the regenerated spaces	Sustainable, circular, clean, organised

Table 1: Theoretical framework for a successful regenerated placemaking (source: authors, 2026)

In this chapter, we will use this framework to assess whether regenerative placemaking interventions create public spaces that are accessible, safe, welcoming, and engaging for older adults (65+), thereby contributing to the reduction of urban loneliness.

Case Studies: Looking at Cairo and Rotterdam

The assessment of regenerative interventions is conducted through two case studies in different urban contexts: one involving an implemented regeneration project and the other examining a project currently in the planning phase. The chosen case studies are Al-Sharifain Street in Downtown Cairo, Egypt, and the Campus Tarwewijk Route project in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Although the case studies are from two different cities, they both illustrate how street-level interventions can be used to strengthen social connections and counter urban loneliness in very different urban and developmental contexts. While the Cairo project

focuses on reclaiming public space in a dense historic centre, the Tarwewijk Rotterdam initiative emphasises social cohesion and neighbourhood regeneration for a culturally very diverse urban district. Both cases demonstrate that streets can function as vital social infrastructure: by prioritising people rather than traffic. When traffic has been positioned as a secondary function, the street space creates opportunities for informal interaction, strengthens local identity, and fosters a greater sense of belonging among residents and visitors alike.

As essential public spaces, streets provide settings for everyday encounters, spontaneous interactions, and community engagement. When opportunities for these interactions are diminished, social isolation increases, contributing indirectly to urban loneliness.

Regenerative placemaking at the street level seeks to restore the social function of streets by prioritising pedestrian-friendly design, creating shared seating and gathering spaces, and integrating local cultural activities and place-based identity. Through these interventions, streets can be transformed into inclusive public spaces that encourage social interaction, strengthen community ties, and support the well-being of diverse user groups.

Case: Downtown Cairo and overcoming urban loneliness among older adults

Urban loneliness for older adults in Cairo is caused by several factors, including:

- **The Car-Centric Shift and Erasure of Public Space:** This is a primary physical cause. By swapping walkable sidewalks and community squares for high-speed flyovers and massive highways, the built environment physically blocks people from spontaneous, daily face-to-face interactions (Radwan & Morsi, 2020).
- **Degradation of Urban Safety Infrastructure:** This is a critical psychological and environmental cause. Dimmed streetlights and unmanaged pedestrian bottlenecks increase the fear of pickpocketing and harassment. This fear forces residents, especially females and the elderly, to lock in, driving up loneliness through protective isolation (Shalabi, 2017).
- **Commercialisation of Open Public Spaces:** This represents a critical socioeconomic barrier to spatial justice. The marketisation of historically democratic urban assets, such as the Nile corniche, public plazas, and green spaces, into privatised, consumption-driven venues establishes financial prerequisites for retired and dependent people. Consequently, excluding them from urban life (El Saman, 2022).

This institutionalised exclusion curtails opportunities for spontaneous socio-spatial mixing, exacerbating alienation and driving psychological withdrawal among vulnerable populations.

Project Context of: Al-Sharifain Street, Downtown Cairo Al-Sharifain Street is part of the Cairo Downtown Passageways pilot project aiming to renovate and revitalise nearly 162 passageways in Downtown Cairo. Developed by CLUSTER (The Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research) alongside other European contributors, this initiative works to create a safer, more inclusive downtown area. The project aims to create a safer, inclusive, and livable Downtown Cairo (Cairobserver, 2015; Ashour & Shamekh, 2023).

In May 2026, the Governorate of Cairo, the Ministry of Culture, and the Academy of Arts launched The Arts Street Initiative in Al-Sharifain Street (Cairo Governorate, 2026). Applying the principles of Placemaking, utilising the renovated historic alley space and the cultural arts.

Site Analysis: Downtown Cairo Before the regeneration, the circulation pattern of **Al-Sharifain Street** was primarily designed to accommodate vehicular movement, with limited consideration for pedestrians.

As illustrated in **fig. 12**, the street functioned as a thorough route for cars, restricting opportunities for safe and comfortable pedestrian movement.



Fig. 12. Illustrated maps showing the circulation studies before the regeneration. Source: Authors, 2026, based on Google Maps data

As shown in **fig. 13**, the street featured an asphalt surface and remained open to vehicular traffic. Bollards installed along both sides of the street further reduced the effective pedestrian width, creating barriers to movement and limiting the usability of the public space. These conditions resulted in a street environment that prioritised vehicles over people, highlighting the need for regeneration to improve pedestrian accessibility, safety, and opportunities for social interaction.



Fig. 13. Street conditions before the regeneration. Source: Jamil (2017).

The surrounding land uses, illustrated in **fig. 14**, indicate a mixed-use urban context comprising residential, commercial, and community functions that generate significant pedestrian activity. This mismatch between the street's vehicular-oriented design and the needs of its users reduced the quality, accessibility, and vitality of the public realm.



Fig. 14. Map showing the surrounding land uses. Source: Authors, 2026, based on Google Maps data.

Following the regeneration, **Al-Sharifain Street** and the side streets leading to it were fully pedestrianised, transforming the area into a pedestrian-oriented public space. As illustrated in **fig. 15**, the post-regeneration circulation plan eliminated vehicular traffic and established continuous pedestrian routes, significantly improving connectivity, accessibility, and safety throughout the site.



Fig. 15. Illustrated maps showing the circulation studies after the regeneration. Source: Authors, 2026, based on Google Maps data.

The redesigned street was paved with light-colored tiles to reduce heat absorption and provide a smooth, accessible surface suitable for a wide range of users, including older adults and people with disabilities. As shown in **fig.16**, these interventions created a more comfortable and inclusive environment that encourages walking, social interaction, and community use.



Fig. 16. The regenerated public space accommodates people of different ages and abilities, encouraging inclusive use and social interaction. Source: Authors, 2026.



Fig. 17. Showing the integration of different ages through arts within the space. (Source: authors, 2026)

Notably, the space has become a vibrant community hub where people of different age groups connect and exchange experiences and knowledge through arts and cultural activities, fostering intergenerational interaction and contributing to the reduction of urban loneliness.

Improvements and social infrastructure initiatives aimed at strengthening neighbourhood connections and creating more opportunities for everyday interaction; see **fig. 17**.

KEY FINDINGS IN THE CASE STUDY OF DOWNTOWN CAIRO

The physical regeneration interventions included the creation of pedestrian passages, street widening, the installation of smooth paving, the addition of trees to provide natural shade, and improved nighttime lighting. These interventions enhanced safety, accessibility, and user comfort, enabling people with diverse mobility needs and demographic profiles to use the space more easily. Furthermore, the introduction of the Street of Art initiative encouraged participation and interaction among community members of different age groups, fostering a welcoming and inclusive public environment. This was particularly beneficial for the socially isolated older adult population, whose engagement with public spaces is often constrained by economic, health, and poor street-quality conditions in Cairo.

The Cairo example shows the benefits of implementing a regenerative placemaking approach to urban infrastructure remodelling, in which small-scaled improvements, such as how the benches are placed, how the sidewalks are interconnected safely, preventing car traffic domination, and how people can actually “see” each other better through improved lighting, shading and overall comfort.

Expressed in the terms of the main regenerative placemaking indicators (as defined in Table 1), the success of Al-Sharifain Street reconstruction can be presented as follows:

- **Human-centred:** The Al-Sharifain Street has increased the level of walkability by shifting priority from vehicles to people. Improved paving and enhanced streetscape quality have made the street more attractive and safer for everyday use. The interventions that are increasing walkability are at the same time encouraging longer visits and spontaneous social interaction, giving the people safe space to show up and connect.
- **Intergenerational Use:** Rather than serving a single user group, the street accommodates multiple generations and diverse social activities simultaneously.
- **Ecological-Centered:** Although located in a dense historic district with limited opportunities for extensive green infrastructure, the Al-Sharifain Street project demonstrates how cleaner, better-organised space can be achieved by prioritising adaptive reuse and preservation of cultural heritage, over resource-intensive (greening) redevelopment.

Case: Tarwewijk, Rotterdam

Tarwewijk is located in the southern part of Rotterdam and is characterised by a culturally diverse and mostly young population, with a large proportion of residents from immigrant backgrounds (Karadag, 2021).

Despite its diversity, the neighbourhood faces several social and spatial challenges that contribute to urban loneliness among older adults. These challenges include limited social cohesion resulting from the neighbourhood's cultural diversity, relatively low educational attainment, lower household incomes and a low percentage of older adults (65+). In addition, residents often experience a weaker sense of place attachment and ownership, while perceived levels of safety are lower than the Rotterdam average (Karadag, 2021; Gerven, 2021).

Tarwewijk is one of the neighbourhoods where social vulnerability and loneliness have become important concerns for urban planners and community organisations. Municipal monitoring (*Wijkprofiel*: neighbourhood Profile) and neighbourhood studies have consistently identified lower levels of perceived health, social cohesion, and neighbourhood satisfaction compared to the city average.

Research in Rotterdam has shown that feelings of loneliness are often concentrated in neighbourhoods with weaker social networks and limited access to informal meeting spaces. In response, Tarwewijk has become a focus area for community-led regeneration. Together, these socioeconomic and environmental factors reduce opportunities for social interaction and community participation, increasing the risk of social isolation and urban loneliness among older residents (Karadag, 2021; van Gerven, 2021; Bavelaar, 2021)

Spatial Context of: Campus Tarwewijk Route The Campus Tarwewijk Route, also known as Talent Lab Tarwewijk, is an urban development and community engagement initiative commissioned by the Municipality of Rotterdam (Gemeente Rotterdam). The project is led by Veldacademie in collaboration with the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), the House of Urban Arts, and the primary school De Globe (Karadag, 2021).

The project consists of three intervention areas: Hellevoetstraat, Zwartewaalstraat, and Mijnsherenplein. Prior to regeneration, the area suffered from several spatial challenges, including narrow streets (particularly along Hellevoetstraat), poorly defined transitions between private and public spaces, and circulation constraints that limited accessibility and social interaction (Karadag, 2021).



Fig. 18. Campus Tarwewijk conceptual design. Source: Wouters (2020).

The project aims to strengthen intergenerational interaction, improve the accessibility of public spaces, and promote an inclusive neighbourhood environment. In her master's thesis, Karadag (2021) argued that both the physical design of public space and the activities it accommodates determine the degree to which older adults are socially included. Accordingly, she proposed four key design strategies for the Campus Tarwewijk project:

- Mixed land uses
- Walkability
- Places for staying
- Defined edges between private and public spaces

Karadag's (2021) research found that the primary needs of older adults in the neighbourhood were accessible shared outdoor spaces that encourage social interaction, together with environments that support mobility and universal accessibility. During street interviews, participants expressed a desire for welcoming communal spaces. One participant stated, *"I would like to have an outdoor shared space with others,"* while another emphasised the need for accessible infrastructure by noting that *"The public spaces need to be maintained well for the accessibility for mobilised scooters"* (Karadag, 2021, p. 78). These findings demonstrate that inclusive and well-maintained public spaces play an essential role in improving older adults' quality of life and social participation.

Site Analysis The site analysis focuses on the area surrounding De Globe Primary School on Zwartewaalstraat, where several regeneration interventions have already been implemented.

Before the regeneration, the area lacked attractive public spaces for gathering and offered limited opportunities for intergenerational interaction. The street environment was dominated by circulation rather than social activities, providing few amenities that encouraged residents to spend time outdoors. As shown in **fig. 19**, the playground lacked supporting infrastructure such as seating areas for caregivers and older adults, limiting opportunities for rest, supervision, and informal social interaction.



Fig. 19. Playground before the regeneration, showing the absence of seating and supporting public amenities. Source: Authors, 2020.

After the regeneration, following the regeneration, the introduction of a playground transformed the space into an active neighbourhood destination. The playground attracted children and their caregivers, increasing pedestrian activity and creating opportunities for informal interactions between different generations. The redesigned public space became more vibrant, socially inclusive, and better integrated into everyday neighbourhood life, demonstrating how relatively simple interventions can encourage community engagement and strengthen social cohesion.

These physical and social interventions closely align with the theoretical framework established in this research. First, the combination of accessible pathways, activity spaces, and opportunities for social interaction reflects the key attributes identified by the **PPS**, particularly comfort, accessibility, and sociability. Second, the interventions directly implement Karadag's (2021) recommendations by creating age-inclusive public spaces

with clear circulation, active micro-spaces, and environments that support interaction between different age groups. Together, these measures demonstrate how relatively modest physical interventions can significantly enhance the inclusiveness and usability of neighbourhood public spaces.

Ongoing Development

At the time of conducting this study, extensive regeneration works were underway at **Mijnsherenplein**, representing the next phase of the Campus Tarwewijk Route. The proposed improvements include additional seating areas, increased tree planting, and further enhancements to the public realm, with the aim of completing the interconnected network of inclusive public spaces envisioned in the master plan.



Fig. 20. The regenerated space around Mijnsherenplein showing increased public activity and intergenerational use following the introduction of the playground. Source: Authors, 2026.

KEY FINDINGS IN THE CASE STUDY OF CAMPUS TARWEWIJK ROUTE

The Campus Tarwewijk Route shows that age-friendly public spaces require an integrated approach combining inclusive design, accessible infrastructure, and community activation. Following the main regenerative placemaking indicators (as defined in Table 1), the factors that characterise Campus Tarwewijk Route are:

- **Human-Centered and Walkable**

The plan insists on human-centred comfort and rest infrastructure as essential for supporting older adults' independent mobility. Ergonomic benches made for conversation, not just seating, and low-barrier spaces are there to secure the use of the Tarwewijk Route for longer periods, and at different times of the day.

- **Engaged Communities and Intergenerational Use**

The plan proposes re-design of public spaces in order to offer the diversity of uses that goes beyond just an individual needs satisfaction, or spatial "beautification", but stimulates collective use. The planned spaces therefore offer flexibility for neighbourhood events, local markets, festivals, etc., through programming that provides opportunities for residents to meet, exchange knowledge, and strengthen local identity, helping reduce loneliness by creating meaningful opportunities for participation and belonging.

- **Ecological-Centered, Sustainable, Clean and Organised**

Tarwewijk neighbourhood is one of Rotterdam's most densely paved and urbanised neighbourhoods, consisting primarily of private gardens and a few tree-lined streets. These conditions are amplifying the phenomenon of urban loneliness. With the new plan, more nature-based solutions will be introduced in the neighbourhood, not only as a measure against climate change, but also as a social infrastructure measure. De-paving and small-scale greening initiatives will enable two kinds of spaces: the ones to foster spending more time in the open, and the ones that may stimulate volunteering, stewardship and self-organisation of the elderly in maintaining and contributing to keep the Tarwewijk green.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that regenerative placemaking extends beyond the physical improvement of public spaces by creating environments that foster social interaction, accessibility, and community well-being. Using the PPS framework, it identified **sociability, comfort, accessibility, and mixed-use activities** as the core qualities of successful public spaces and illustrated how these principles can be applied to address urban loneliness among older adults.

The comparative analysis of the two case studies showed that although **Al-Sharifain Street** in Cairo and the **Campus Tarwewijk Route** in Rotterdam differ in their urban context and stage of implementation, both demonstrate the value of prioritising people over vehicles and creating public spaces that encourage everyday social encounters. The Cairo case provided evidence that pedestrianisation, improved accessibility, and cultural programming can successfully transform streets into vibrant social environments, while the Tarwewijk case highlighted how age-inclusive design and community-led activities can strengthen intergenerational relationships and neighbourhood cohesion.

Building on these findings, this chapter proposed a contextualised design strategy for the Campus Tarwewijk project based on Karadag's (2021) spatial design guidelines. By combining accessible public spaces with community-based social programming, the proposed interventions position older adults as active participants in neighbourhood life rather than passive recipients of care. This integrated approach not only improves physical accessibility but also strengthens social capital, reinforces residents' sense of belonging, and creates opportunities for meaningful civic participation.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that regenerative placemaking should be understood as both a spatial and a social strategy. When public spaces are intentionally designed to support interaction, inclusion, and everyday community life, they can contribute to reducing urban loneliness while fostering more resilient, age-friendly, and socially cohesive neighbourhoods.

COMPARATIVE CASE-STUDY FINDINGS

Case study selected	Downtown, Cairo	Tarwewijk, Rotterdam
Context	Al-Sharifain Street, Downtown	Campus Tarwewijk route
Reasons for loneliness	• Car Dependency • Long Commuting hours • Degradation of Urban Safety • Commercialisation of Spaces	• Lack of Social Cohesion: • Less Feeling of Ownership • Lower Security Levels in the neighbourhood
Status	Implemented	Ongoing
Site specifications as per current situation	• Mixed used • Walkable • Shaded • Welcoming	• Greenery • Mixed-use
Recommendations for improvements	• Extra Lightings • Seats	• Seats • Rain shades • Social activities • Accessibility facilities

Table 2: Comparing Conclusions for the selected two case studies (Source: author, 2026).

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CONCLUSIONS

Toward the Urban Soul

Millions of people live closer together than ever before, yet many experience profound social isolation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Major insights from all the lenses which are linked or correlated:

RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

Scale	Recommendation
City-Wide Scale / Urban Planning	• Embedding well-being as an urban planning objective • Strengthening the role, function and aesthetics of public space as social infrastructure, encouraging an intergenerational dimension • Improve accessibility to everyday destinations
Infrastructure Scale / Mobility planning and Urban Design	• Design streets for safe speeds • Optimise existing mobility infrastructure before expanding networks. • Develop socially connected mobility corridor • Reclaim underutilised transport spaces as community assets. • Integrate mobility improvements with local economic activity.
Neighbourhood Scale / Regenerative Placemaking and Public Space Design	• Transform street spaces to social corridors • Design for staying, not only moving • Celebrate local identity

Key recommendations: Urban Scale

• Embedding well-being as an urban planning objective

Within the planning discipline, there is a growing body of research connecting urban design with happiness, quality of life, and mental health. The interest in these linkages is showing the importance of role shifting in traditional urban planning objectives. Streets, public spaces, mobility systems, and neighbourhood structures are not neutral backgrounds to everyday life; they actively shape opportunities for interaction, belonging, and social connection.

However, translating the results of this emerging research into planning practice remains challenging. Existing regulatory frameworks often focus on measurable physical outcomes, such as housing capacity, traffic flow, and land use efficiency, while social

outcomes are more difficult to measure, and therefore often seen as slow-developing, difficult to manage and marginally important in the conventional planning processes.

The case studies of Rotterdam and Dublin illustrate both the challenges and opportunities of bridging this gap. In Dublin, the development of age-friendly policies demonstrates how a city can begin to integrate social well-being into urban governance.

Rotterdam case provides a complementary example of a more place-based approach, where neighbourhood regeneration and public space interventions are used as tools for strengthening social infrastructure. Both Rotterdam and Dublin cases demonstrate that addressing urban loneliness does not require waiting for a complete transformation of planning systems; it requires step-by-step transformation within the existing systems, by including well-being as a planning objective.

- **Strengthening the role, function and aesthetics of public space as social infrastructure, encouraging an intergenerational dimension**

Beauty, comfort, and care are not luxury elements of public space design, but essential conditions for creating places where people want to spend time and connect with others. Low-cost, high-impact interventions can push further well-being policies on the city-wide scale, especially on the neighbourhood level, where there is less need for big “landmark” investments or bold, fashionable architectural design, and more need for unique, local, natural and cultural expressions.

- **Improve accessibility to everyday destinations**

The Dublin and Rotterdam cases demonstrate that preventing urban loneliness does not always require radical transformation of the city. Instead, meaningful change can emerge through a series of targeted adjustments (such as e.g. improving accessibility to everyday destinations) connected by well-crafted visions and policies, gradually building the conditions for more well-being.

Putting everyday destinations in focus means not to redesign everything from the ground up, but fine-tuning the urban environment in ways that help people meet and participate in their daily routines. The accumulation of smaller, but strategic interventions will then lead to mentally more resilient communities.

Key recommendations: Mobility

The findings suggest that reducing urban loneliness does not necessarily require major new transport infrastructure but rather a fundamental shift in how existing streets and mobility networks are planned, designed, and managed. Cities should prioritise optimising existing transport assets to improve accessibility, strengthen social participation, and enhance the public life of streets.

- **Design streets for safe speeds**

Safe speeds are fundamental to creating streets that encourage walking, cycling, and everyday social interaction. Streets designed to operate at lower target speeds are safer, quieter, less polluted, and more comfortable for people of all ages and abilities, making active mobility a practical choice for short trips while enhancing neighbourhood liveability. Slower streets also encourage people to spend more time in public spaces, increasing opportunities for incidental encounters, neighbourly interaction, and informal social support. For children, older adults, and people with disabilities, safe streets foster greater independence, enabling them to participate more actively in community life without relying on others for mobility. This increased accessibility and confidence helps strengthen social connectedness, nurtures a greater sense of belonging, and creates environments where everyday acts of care and community interaction can flourish. At the same time, lower vehicle speeds reduce the frequency and severity of crashes, contributing to the broader public health objective of reducing the global burden of road traffic injuries. Achieving safe speeds should rely primarily on self-enforcing street design including narrower carriageways, raised crossings, protected intersections, compact junction geometry, and traffic calming measures supported by appropriate speed limits and consistent enforcement, rather than depending on driver compliance alone.

- **Optimise existing mobility infrastructure before expanding networks**

Rather than increasing road capacity, cities should repurpose underutilised carriageways, oversized travel lanes, excess road space, and residual areas around transport infrastructure to improve walking, cycling, public transport access, and public space. Strengthening and effectively implementing existing transport and urban planning policies should take precedence over creating new policy frameworks, ensuring that existing infrastructure delivers greater social, environmental, and economic value.

- **Develop socially connected mobility corridors**

Corridors linking markets, schools, transit hubs, parks, healthcare facilities, religious institutions, and other everyday destinations should be reconfigured as people-centred streets that prioritise walking, cycling, and public transport. Continuous footpaths, protected cycling infrastructure, universal accessibility, street trees, seating, lighting, and active ground-floor frontages can transform these corridors from movement routes into vibrant public spaces that encourage everyday interaction, improve accessibility, and strengthen neighbourhood cohesion.

- **Reclaim underutilised transport spaces as community assets**

Spaces beneath elevated highways, flyovers, and grade-separated infrastructure should be viewed as opportunities to reconnect neighbourhoods rather than as residual land. Through strategic redesign, these areas can accommodate playgrounds, sports facilities, community markets, shaded gathering spaces, cultural activities, and safe walking and

cycling connections linking surrounding neighbourhoods to schools, transit stations, parks, and commercial areas. Such interventions improve accessibility while restoring the social function of transport infrastructure by creating places where communities can meet, interact, and build lasting social relationships.

- **Integrate mobility improvements with local economic activity**

Incorporating local vendors, community markets, and small businesses within pedestrian and cycling corridors can increase street activity, support local livelihoods, strengthen natural surveillance, and create more vibrant public spaces. Combined with landscaping, lighting, public art, and community stewardship, these interventions maximise the social value of existing transport infrastructure while reinforcing neighbourhood identity, economic vitality, and community ownership.

Collectively, these recommendations reinforce a broader shift in urban mobility planning from expanding infrastructure for vehicle movement to optimising existing networks for people, accessibility, and social connection. By treating mobility infrastructure as both a transport system and a form of social infrastructure, cities can improve accessibility, encourage everyday social interaction, and create healthier, more inclusive, and resilient urban environments.

Key recommendations: Regenerative Placemaking

- **Transform street spaces to social corridors**

As the Rotterdam and Cairo studies have shown, streets and generally neighbourhood-level mobility corridors should no longer be understood simply as routes that move people from one destination to another. Through the use of regenerative placemaking methods, streets can become important social corridors: places that cultivate everyday life and create a sense of belonging.

The regenerative placemaking methods aimed at this transformation are focusing on re-integrating the values that have been lost in the public space realm of the streets, due to intensive urbanisation, modernisation and transformation of the previous neighbourhood structure.

At the core of the transformation is the revision of the role of car traffic: are the traffic spaces really needed on that scale and scope, and can they become more than just a functional car-traffic corridor? The actual measures, such as widening pedestrian spaces, introducing eye-level greenery and shade, creating comfortable seating, and supporting active ground-floor uses, are turning the streets into powerful settings for reducing urban loneliness.

Foremost, the continuity of walkable spaces ensures that different generations, and especially elderly people and people with reduced mobility, can independently use public

spaces, increasing opportunities for spontaneous intergenerational activities. This continuity of walkable spaces prioritises the quality of the journey (“the walk”) itself, recognising that many of the most meaningful social connections occur in the ordinary moments between destinations.

- **Design for staying, not only moving**

Regenerative placemaking places emphasis on creating environments that invite people to pause, as a way to create an environment for mental well-being. The intergenerational design should avoid separating groups by age and instead encourage natural overlap between different generations.

The experiences of Rotterdam and Cairo demonstrate that even modest improvements to existing environments, combined with community activities and local programming, can create powerful opportunities for connection.

- **Celebrate local identity**

Celebrating local identity is not about preserving the past unchanged; it is about creating spaces where different generations and communities can see themselves represented and where new shared memories can emerge. In increasingly diverse cities, celebrating local identity requires moving beyond a single, fixed interpretation of heritage and embracing the layered, hybrid nature of contemporary urban communities. Not just the historical architectural styles and designs are important, but migration, cultural exchange, and the everyday experiences of different generations and communities are the building blocks of the local identity.

As seen in the Cairo case, the pedestrianisation of Al-Sharifain Street was not treating heritage as a frozen image of the past, but it showed how historical identity can be revitalised by allowing different generations and contemporary users to reinterpret the traditional view of the street.

In the Rotterdam case, celebrating local identity showed that it does not mean returning to a singular historical narrative, but creating spaces where multiple communities can see themselves represented.

By embracing hybrid cultural references, regenerative placemaking in Tarwewijk is particularly important in addressing urban loneliness, since a shared sense of belonging emerges not from everyone having the same background, but from carefully redesigned projects aimed at removing the physical barriers to socialisation.

From Urban Loneliness to Urban Soul

Urban loneliness is no longer simply a personal experience or a social care issue; it has become one of the defining public health challenges of the twenty-first century. As cities

continue to grow, densify, and diversify, the following paradox becomes increasingly apparent: millions of people live closer together than ever before, yet many experience profound social isolation. The consequences extend far beyond individual well-being, contributing to poorer physical and mental health, reduced community resilience, weakened social cohesion, and rising public health costs. If loneliness is shaped by the environments in which people live, then it must also become a central concern of urban planning.

This publication argues that cities can no longer afford to treat social connection as an unintended by-product of development. Instead, belonging, everyday interaction, and community life, especially for elderly people and young adults, should become explicit objectives of planning and design. The international case studies, from Dublin, Rotterdam, Cairo, Toronto, and Gurugram, demonstrate that the built environment can either reinforce isolation or create the conditions for meaningful human connection. Whether through city-wide regeneration strategies, mobility systems transformation, or neighbourhood-scale placemaking, each example illustrates that relatively modest interventions can have profound social impacts when guided by a human-centred vision.

A common thread throughout the publication is the role of integrated public space transformation. Rather than focusing solely on physical renewal, integrated public space transformation aimed at combatting urban loneliness seeks to regenerate relationships between people, places, nature, and local culture. It views traditional elements of mobility infrastructures (streets, parks, neighbourhood routes, public squares) as living social infrastructure, when combined with community facilities (schools, daycares, health amenities, shops).

The way forward requires a shift in both mindset and practice. Urban planning must move beyond measuring success through numbers only: housing units built, transport efficiency, or economic growth. It must also evaluate whether neighbourhoods create opportunities for people to meet, whether older adults feel welcome to remain active, whether children can safely play and explore independently, whether cultural diversity is reflected in public space, and whether everyday journeys foster connection rather than isolation. These are the fundamental indicators of healthy and resilient cities, with the same importance as the technical data on how the city is performing.

The importance of these quality of life indicators is crucial for the future of cities. This future will not be determined solely by the buildings we construct or the infrastructure we deliver, but by the quality of the relationships they make possible. Preventing urban loneliness therefore requires a new planning approach: one that places human connection at the heart of urban development. By designing public spaces as intergenerational social infrastructure, transforming mobility into opportunities for encounter, and celebrating local identity, cities can move **from urban loneliness to urban soul**. In doing so, they will not only build more liveable places, but healthier, more compassionate, and more resilient societies for generations to come.

THE TEAM

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Cities Forum · Mentorship Knowledge Series

This publication was developed as part of the Mentorship Knowledge Series at Cities Forum, bringing together mentors and mentees who contributed their expertise, research and perspectives to this study of urban loneliness.



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Nada Soliman

MENTEE

Nada Soliman is an architect and urbanist specialising in urban planning, regeneration, and community-centred development. She holds an MSc in Urban Management and Development from Erasmus University Rotterdam.

For Urban Soul, she explores how regenerative placemaking can reduce urban loneliness by creating accessible public spaces that support social interaction, well-being, and everyday connection. Through a comparative study of public spaces in Cairo and Rotterdam, she examines how pedestrian-friendly design, age-inclusive accessibility, cultural programming, and community-led activities can foster belonging and strengthen neighbourhood cohesion.

Her work positions placemaking as both a spatial and social strategy, highlighting how inclusive, locally rooted public spaces can support older adults as active participants in community life and contribute to more resilient, age-friendly, and socially cohesive communities.



Darragh Grealy

MENTEE

Darragh Grealy is an urban and social sustainability researcher specialising in urban commons, community-led spatial practice, and civic participation. He is a recent graduate of Urban Governance of Inclusive Sustainable Cities from the Institute of Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, following a BA in Sociology and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin.

Previously working for Ireland's tenant rights organisation, he has also contributed to research projects on cooperative housing models, the impacts of Dutch energy transitions, community organising in Dublin, and smart city data usage in Germany.



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