SPATIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND IT'S RELATIONSHIP TO INNER CITY MENTAL WELLNESS IN GENERATION Z

A CRITICAL STUDY
By_Luke_Reynolds

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CONTENTS...

HOW CAN SPATIALLY SUSTAINABLE DESIGN BENIFIT THE COLLECTIVE MENTAL HEALTH OF GEN Z IN UK CITIES?

INTRODUCTION:

Unmanaged urban growth over the last decade has resulted in the deterioration of the urban citizens mental health and has broken bonds between the environment and the community. This literature review will focus on understanding how cities could adapt spatially to meet the fundamental human needs of the Generation Z citizen based on the ideas presented in Cities for a Small Planet by Richard Rogers (1997). The main topics covered will be: the generational potential for spatial change, how spatial sustainability can strengthen Gen Z's connections to community, how this benefits their mental well-being and what can be learnt and applied to cities from international alternative intentional communities. Rogers (1997) argues that without pressures applied by the citizen on global governments, humanity cannot achieve ultimate peace with natures resources. As a result greenbelts and rural spaces will be consumed by urban sprawl from technology capitals and consumerism. However, it has been proven during the past 5 years that real change can be afflicted by the new Gen Z, and this statement is a driving idea throughout this critical study.

In the current climate it's important as a designer and citizen of Gen Z to recognise the finite limits our planet has left. It's said that to continue life on earth unchecked by humanities own consciousness they will come to unplug their very own life support system in their selfish quest to gain power (Rogers, 1997; p154). Whether this be social, political, economic or even technological power, designers have become unhinged in there desire to design for wants over needs. Generation Z will become a historical turning point for the future of design and they offer opportunity for change in spatial habits to allow society a way forward and continue life within one planet's resources.

As humanities connection to nature has been severed, the misuse of technology, resources and territory has been revealed and are now seeing a mass of uncontrolled and unnecessary urban sprawl that threatens the return of harmonious environments.
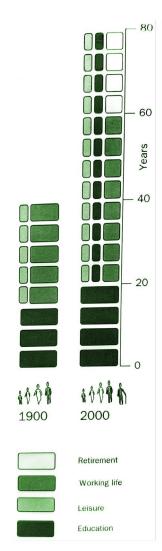
Mental Health and Gen Z Culture:

Fig.1 A bar chart showing the change in ratio between personal and other time over 10 years. (Rogers, R. 1997)

It's critical that designers address the rapid growth of our city spaces in relation the leading factors of anxiety in Generation Z, sustainability and financially stability (Seemiller and Grace, 2018; p32). Generation Z: A generation in the making concludes that the society that's being built up by Gen Z is being crushed by their own traditional childhood combined with the societal pressures from past generations that have immorally passed the responsibility of bigger issues such as environmental, political and technological struggles onto them. Studies show the urban population is now more exposed to stress and are "chronically fatigued" (Mladenovic et al., 2017; p2), and a study conducted by Bloomberg of United Nations data says Gen Z will account for 32 per cent of the global population in 2019.

Now with the average urban citizen spending more than 90% of their day indoors (Kopec, 2012) it could be argued that this generation and their counterparts are becoming alienated by their own environments, and are being held hostage by the need and want for a connection to community. (Grawe, 2014) Even if that means immersing themselves in the very thing that is disconnecting them.

In Richard Rogers's book, cities for a small planet (1997), Rogers suggests that for society to eradicate the increase of both personal and work stress they must reinvest their ever growing free time back into nature and it's power to transform. Much of this stress and mental struggle in society has been generated by the toxic culture of Generation Z, and societal pressures as discussed previously. Excessive hours of virtual connection, potential of vicarious trauma and the fear of failure developed from the upbringing by Gen X (Seemiller and Grace, 2018; pp145-150) are suggested to all be contributors. With an increase in awareness of reality from younger age on a series of topics including the inevitable climate crisis it's no wonder Gen Z are described as " a generation of worriers" by Seemiller (2018; pp145-146). Whilst Seemiller and Grace (2018) present valid facts and statistics on a range of topics and most importantly the state of the Generation Z's mental wellness, it would be beneficial to explore these statistics in relation to the developments that are being taken to protect the mental and

physical health of the citizen and propose how they could guide future generations away from the same misfortunes.

In recent years the tiny home trend has swept the globe and many praise the movements impact on mental health and it's potential for stability and flexibility, something that the upcoming Gen Z and Generation Alpha are searching for to achieve contentment (Pinsker, 2020)

Spatial Sustainability and Green Potential:

As Baby Boomers and Gen X continue their conquest for efficiency and social status; new generations are looking back at the side effects of this lifestyle and looking to find opportunities, such as tiny living, that contribute to a more sustainable and financially credible future. By utilising opportunities to transition into smaller and greener spaces in urban environments, its possible to reduce the need for urban expansion (Rogers, 1997). Seemiller and Grace (2018; p24), describes Generation Z as a collection of "doers and dreamers" and in an interview with Eric Bunge (a principle at nArchitects) he comments on his urban micro apartment winning proposal for NYC saying "residents might be losing physical space, but they're gaining access to a series of amenities - and for that, many city dwellers might happily trade away 75 square feet" (Urist, 2013) meaning micro-living in the urban environment such as New York, USA or Birmingham, UK shows promise for a healthier and more sustainable solution for both the citizen and the planet without compromising the well-being of the generational mindset. nArchitects clearly understand that its time to start conditioning society to smaller living and the positive health impacts it has on both the residents and the planet.

However many may be concerned, such as Gifford, R (2007), about the potential for the increase of poor living conditions, and real risk high-rise micro living can have on the potential development of psychiatric illness. Robert Gifford (2007) explores the community indifference between residents in high rise and low rise buildings and how space, crowding and access to nature has a significant impact on community, social intervention and alienation.

It finds that those that reside in high risen buildings are often alienated from social interaction with neighbours and pose higher risk of the development of psychiatric illness, however then goes on to provide little data to suggest why this is and makes little effort to understand how this behaviour could be changed. Another study suggested that residents that lived within larger personal spaces were less likely to interact with neighbours (Sinnett et al 1972). But again failed to clarify the reasoning's behind the data.

Studies have found that greenery has beneficial mental effects of residents that embrace the idea of ecology in smaller residences in the quickly expanding city of Novi Sad in Serbia (Mladenovic et al, 2017; p2), and other studies have seen the improvement of lifestyles based in smaller spaces, albeit these improvements are seen within younger age brackets from 18-35 (Wilner et al, 1962), however this data increases the argument that Rogers undertakes, in that society is in a generational position to make substantial change to spatial habits and make room for a society rich with community engagement, more green spaces and improvements on mental health.

Generational Potential for Spatial Change:

In Richard Roger's (1997) book he analyses and explores a series of topics relevant to the change of urban landscapes, such as city culture, sustainability factors and potential models for new sustainable urban plans that could form the basis of new planning. Roger's (1997; p22) presents the idea of "Creative Citizenship" and suggests that this new type of citizenship should be manufactured by the city in order for them to retain relevance and preserve the citizens mental health. "Statistically work now occupies under one third of an adult's working life, which itself occupies on average only half of an individual's lifespan" (Rogers, 1997; p149). This is backed up by the Office for National Statistics in the UK which provides data for labour, which shows the steady increase of unemployment during the 2007 recession and again now in 2019 and 2020 due to the recent Corona-virus Pandemic. Visually these statistics never settle and validate Rogers point for the evolution of the creative citizen that continues to gain more private and personal time as lifespans extend and unemployment increases.

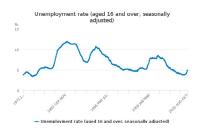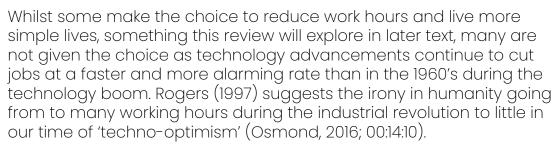*Fig.3 Time Graph Showing Unemployment Rate from 1971 to 2020 (ONS, 2020)*

Whilst some make the choice to reduce work hours and live more simple lives, something this review will explore in later text, many are not given the choice as technology advancements continue to cut jobs at a faster and more alarming rate than in the 1960's during the technology boom. Rogers (1997) suggests the irony in humanity going from to many working hours during the industrial revolution to little in our time of 'techno-optimism' (Osmond, 2016; 00:14:10).

Roger's (1997) ideas in theory would offer increased connection between both the urban environment and the indoor citizen by offering opportunity for more vocational activities and interpersonal connections by restructuring global cities as nets. Whilst this is reliable evidenced by Rogers work on Centre Pompidou and The Millennium Dome some argue that the deconstruction of zoning in cities may cause serious residential supply issues in the future and risk social crowding for others. Research suggests that high social crowding could have a direct impact on the rise of domestic abuse and substance abuse rates. (Kopec, 2013) But the new generational mindset is psychologically set against these forms of abuse and behaviour and hunt for those social connections. (Seemiller and Grace, 2016; pp157-162).

Fig.4 One Hyde Park, London Luxury Apartment Interior. (Candy&Candy, 2014)

As society has developed through generations the boundary between necessity and desire has been blurred and has been heavily reflected through the designer of the 21st century. This has been done specifically through the development of elaborate residential spaces that give a sense of high functionality, such as apartments with multiple bathrooms and extensive bedrooms, but this functionality has a hidden agenda, to express social status. Now as Generation Z has entered this society the fundamental psychological and physical needs have taken centre stage again and often excessive materiality has been met with negative response.

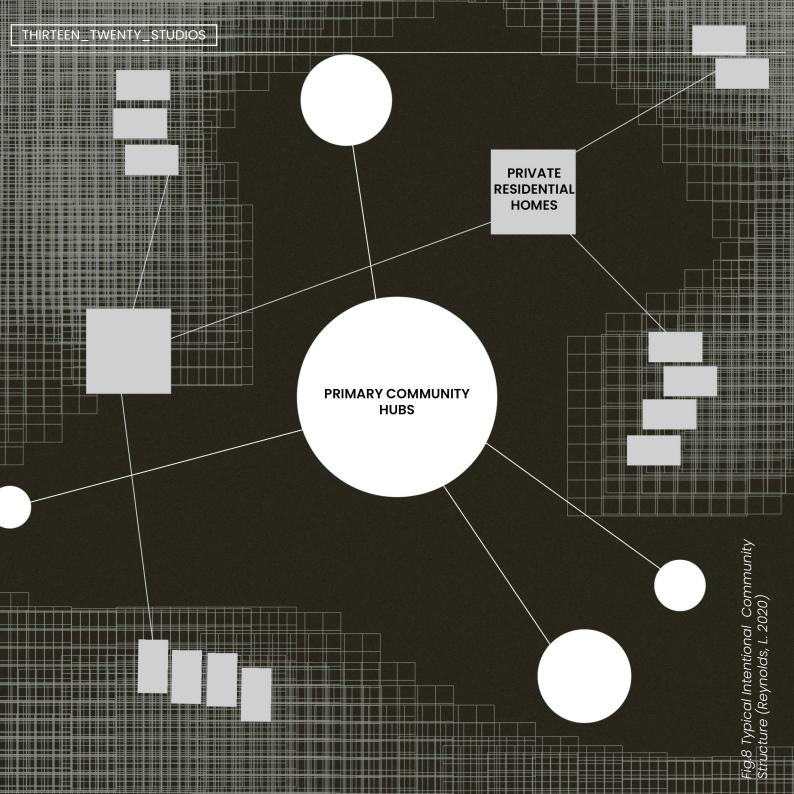**The Blurred Lines between Wants and Needs:**

Fig.5 & 6 Portloop urban Plans and Illustraitions (Glen Howlles Architects, 2014)

According to Klaus Grawe (2014), and his theory of consistency, basic psychology in the human mind strives for 4 main goals and are controlled by our need to meet each psychological need and goal: attachment; control; avoidance of pain; and self-esteem enhancement. Generation Z so clearly have much to achieve before these can be met. Whilst other generations are happy with self preservation, Gen Z are a collective in there need to help others (Seemiller and Grace, 2018) and therefore it could be argued that to achieve attachment they would need to create community and connections in a physical realm. Control, avoidance of pain and self-esteem enhancement are equally unattainable in the current economic and social societies but could be achieved through the reduction of environmental impact and the reduction of interaction via social platforms.

A project in Edgbaston, Birmingham by Urban Splash in collaboration with Birmingham City Council and The Canal and River Trust uses the ideas set out in Cities for a Small Planet (Roger, R. 1997) that suggest an urban restructure to facilitate the incubation of the creative citizen as well as encourage social community engagement based on the fundamental psychological needs set out by Klaus Grawe's Consistency Theory. PortLoop has been designed using spatial sustainability and the need for a change in the traditional community structure, to strengthen the connections between people, nature and to themselves. "Urban Splash in particular is a very progressive and innovative developer" (Holyoak, J. 2017). The project is a series of low-rise community focused homes that offer quality fundamentals catered towards a series of residential circumstances, including parents with children. In previous texts it was argued by Susan Saegert (2013), a professor of environmental psychology at the CUNY Graduate Centre, that tiny living or even more spatially sustainable homes could be "terrible for other residents—particularly if a couple or a parent and child squeeze into 300 square feet for the long term, no matter how well a unit is designed." (Urist, 2013). Only time will tell if the project is successful in capturing mainstream families or if it will be a community of inner city robots.

Fig.7 Portloop Communal Green Space, Birmingham (Glen Howells Architects, 2014)

PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL HOMES

PRIMARY COMMUNITY HUBS

Fig.8 Typical Intentional Community Structure (Reynolds, L. 2020)

Intentional Communities:

The theory of consistency, Portloop and the idea of creative citizenship can all be seen combined in international intentional communities seen in places such as Germany and Australia, whilst both countries navigate individual issues in regards to climate, territory and government, its clear the rest of humanity could learn from these alternative communities.

Intentional Communities are a group that shares values on topics such as religion, lifestyle, sustainability and a variety of other subjects, for the purpose of this review it will look at this concept in relation to sustainable living and how these communities live in cohabitation whilst preserving there values, ideas and privacy.

Director of feature film, A Simpler Way: Crisis as Opportunity (2016; 00:01:28), Jordan Osmond suggests that human nature can feel within the consciousness and through the planet that change needs to be invoked through the citizen, and yet generation after generation become products of there upbringing. Seemiller and Grace (2018) argue otherwise and that Gen Z will make this change with guidance and is supported by Rogers (1997) idea of the creative citizen. As the experiment in the film continues it's clear that many participants, whilst are looking to live sustainably, are looking for opportunity for personal growth and development and to challenge themselves to make a difference. "The current system is a planet killing Ponzi scheme" (Osmond, 2016; 00:23:12). Multiple times throughout the feature film, editor for the automatic earth, Nicola Foss, refers to the economic structure of cities as Ponzi schemes and highlights the efficiency of capitalism as a Ponzi scheme, suggesting once humanity reach the spatial and resource limits, our cities will crumble and no longer be relevant, leaving lack of order. In 1995 the UK, particularly London was one of the worst regions in the world for unmanaged urban sprawl and misdirection of government resources according to Rogers (1997) And more recent events such as the climate strikes lead by Greta Thunberg suggest this is very well still the case not only in London but across the globe.

International intentional communities have proven that community living strengthens the soul and enriches the being, which will allow us to develop much faster and see the alarming reality and make the changes needed. This concept could be introduced into cities by cutting the size of private residential spaces and introducing cohabitation kitchens, gardens and workspaces which would quench the generational need of millennials, generation z and alpha by creating non virtual connections between people and providing opportunity to grow with the planet instead of against it.

CONCLUSION:

This literature review has explored the primary question of: How can spatially sustainable design benefit the collective mental health of Gen Z in cities? and has reviewed a series of main topics: the generational potential for spatial change, how spatial sustainability can strengthen Gen Z's connections to community, how this benefits their mental well-being and what can be learnt and applied to our cities from international alternative intentional communities.

What emerged from the review is that "Doers and Dreamers" or Gen Z, are concerned with environmental change and finance and are more likely to transition into smaller spaces to preserve resources on both a macro and micro scale. However may only build momentum if given the right environment that supports mental and physical growth as well as supports a financially stable narrative.

With this in mind it seems Portloop developers Urban Splash may have cracked the code and opened the doorway for a new urban structure that meets this criteria for radical spatial change. Whilst the majority of literature throughout this review is in agreement with the solution to spatial sustainability and its relationship to mental health, it could still be argued that further research into these solutions could produce a more refined concept that would strengthen the tiny home movement, specifically research through interviews with current Gen Z residents who live spatially sustainably.

Word Count: 2701

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A Manifesto For A Generation Z Designer

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Based on the findings of my literature review I summarise the impact generation z designers will have on the design industry using 4 generational characteristics and present my mission, my beliefs and my approach to design. Lets get started!

Who Are Gen Z? We are a generation of opportunity, change, compassion and fear. A generation plagued by trauma and a collective of the future, but most importantly we are individuals, shaped by our predecessors, planet, and concerns. We are action for change.

OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity forces courage, without we are content with the present and therefore extinguish our desire for growth and remain in the past. We will take every opportunity that presents itself for personal and community growth. As a generation we are in a position to make radical change but if we as designers ignore the potential for behavioural change in our generation, the future will glide past and we will become products of our environment just as those of the past became.

We will stimulate curiosity for alternative lifestyles, explore the thrill of spatial adjustments and empower the citizen to take opportunities for self-development in align with our planet and its need for sustainable minds.

CHANGE

In order to move in any direction there must be change, without we stand still. As a generation we have ideas for a hopeful future but we must evoke the change needed to achieve our goals. We will push the boundaries of mainstream issues and bring a fresh perspective on topics hidden by those is power. We must gather evidence in order to create change.

A Manifesto For A
Generation Z Designer

I believe that change will not just arise through governmental change but we must shift the responsibility to the consumer and company and in order to do this we must show resilience in our behavioural changes as designers and consumers in order to convince large corporate companies to make the changes through the hope of financial gain.

COMPASSION

Why should we disguise the past as perfect dreams, as though darkness is fiction? It will be used as reflection, a guide to avoid repetition for future design. We will embrace society's rejections as symbols of movement and learn to love even that darkest of truths.

Without it we are destined to fail again and again and again! As compassion leads us we protect the future and reject the past but we must shine a light on the prejudice, injustice and history that has shaped us and march with the power of 1000 army's towards a future that benefits all whilst seeing clearly back in time. Only then can we achieve the nurturing future we claim to seek.

FEAR

Our generation has grown fearful of the future and as designers it is our responsibility to ease us into the new future using smart, well designed and considered choices that make the transition into spatial sustainability more desirable. We will combine the advancements in technology and alternative forms of power to reduce financial cost for our generations in doing so encourage change and create opportunity.

As a conclusion to my degree I hope to combine my generational identity with my own and explore how technology and our own fear can provide opportunity to grow in relation to the ever growing tiny home movement.

Word Count: 544

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