Commentary

Toward a global action plan for public space

Bridging the urban SDG with Habitat III.

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By Nicholas You
Public space — streets, squares and parks, waterfronts and markets and other open-air areas for socialization by the world’s peoples — drew nearly 400 urbanists from around the world to a Future of Places conference in Stockholm from 29 June to 1 July. This was the third in a series of three recent international meetings on urban “placemaking” and public spaces.

The conference was a landmark achievement for its Stockholm hosts, the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation. And it marked a major step forward by such groups as the New York City-based Project for Public Spaces that have been espousing the issue of open space for decades — and now see an exciting opportunity to have it championed by high-visibility international bodies. The event was also cosponsored by UN-Habitat, the lead U.N. agency on urban issues.

The conference also marked the first in what will be a series of more than two-dozen global urbanization-focused events known as Urban Thinkers Campuses. These events, under the auspices of UN-Habitat, are designed to enable stakeholders to prepare inputs for consideration in the drafting the New Urban Agenda, the expected outcome of next year’s 20-year Habitat III conference on cities.

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The Future of Places conference also came at a strategic moment, as the United Nations General Assembly is in the process of adopting a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these is Goal 11, the urban SDG, with accompanying targets. (Beneath each of the 17 proposed goals is a range of issue-specific targets; beneath each of those targets, meanwhile are specific metrics, called indicators, by which progress on each of the targets can be measured and tracked.)

Most of the Goal 11 targets deal with the well-known social, economic, environmental and governance
domains of sustainable urban development. Yet Target 7 specifies: “by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.”

The adoption of such a target would be both unexpected and unprecedented. It is unprecedented in that it places the issue of quality of urban living at the same level of consideration as life-threatening issues such as hunger and poverty, clean water and sanitation, and protecting our ecosystems.

This is a welcome introduction, as the issue of public space also has an aesthetic dimension. The adoption of this target would call for not just a functional and safe system of streets, pavements and public facilities but also for parks, gardens and other recreational spaces that are user-friendly and appealing.

In so doing, this focus would introduce a design dimension that could theoretically — and, hopefully, in practice — highlight the role and contribution of art and architecture, urban planning and urban design, landscaping and gardening, among other disciplines that have rarely been at the forefront of a global agenda.

Such a target is also unexpected because it would elevate a very local and contextual issue to the plane of a global plan of action. Target 11.7 is implicitly calling for all tiers of government and stakeholders to work together to ensure the safety, social inclusion and accessibility of green and public spaces.

**Measuring public space**

Despite all appearances, this is a very complex issue.

It would require, for example, that the safety of women, the elderly and children be ensured in public spaces. For women and young girls especially, walking alone at night in most public spaces can be a significant challenge. If these spaces are poorly lit or rarely frequented — as is often the case in many low-income neighbourhoods, in particular — the challenge becomes a tangible risk. For the elderly and physically challenged, getting from one side of another major road can likewise be a daunting experience.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the social-inclusion dimension. This will require, for example, that public authorities take the necessary regulatory measures to counteract a growing trend of green space being locked behind the walls of gated communities. Depending on how green space is defined, ensuring the combined notions of accessibility and social inclusion could put into question the very concept of gated communities.

For obvious reasons, member states will agree to use only a limited number of indicators to measure progress in the implementation of the SDGs. With a total of 17 proposed goals and 169 targets, just two indicators per target would already constitute a major reporting challenge for many member states. This burden would be further compounded by the fact that many of the targets will require new data gathering as well as new forms of data analytics.

Public space is no exception. The effective monitoring of public spaces will require a combination of geospatial data and user-perception surveys. Much of the discussion and debate on proposing an indicator for public space — including at the Stockholm conference — has been on what to measure and how to measure it.

The indicator **now under consideration by the U.N. Statistical Commission** is a quantitative one that would specify the area of public space in proportion to a city’s total space. The figure of 45 percent is currently being considered.
The discussions at the Future of Places conference centred largely on the need to compliment this metric with one of more qualitative indicators. While there were many qualitative indicators proposed, there appeared to be an emerging consensus that it would be important to measure accessibility to green and recreational space in, for example, distance to the nearest green space, park or recreational area.

It should be noted that these are just a few examples of the issues that were raised during the conference. Many other presentations and discussions focused on new and innovative approaches to making public spaces more user-friendly, especially for cyclists and pedestrians. The conference’s final key messages will be available in August here. (The Project for Public Spaces’ own report on the conference can be found here.)

**Urban SDG to Habitat III**

The Future of Places Urban Thinkers Campus underscored the importance of bridging the urban SDG with Habitat III. One quantitative and one qualitative indicator on public space would not be sufficient to ensure the full implementation of compliance with the intent of Target 11.7. More means of action and more tools for monitoring and evaluation will be required.

Making Target 11.7 a reality, especially in the context of rapidly urbanizing societies, will require concerted action across many jurisdictional boundaries. It will require a multidisciplinary approach to infrastructure and land-use planning, public transport and non-motorized means of urban mobility, and networks of interconnected public spaces that are distinct from vehicular traffic and promote accessibility and walkability. It will also require direct engagement with the issue of land value and land-value “capture” as a means of financing and maintaining inclusive and accessible public spaces.

In the months to come, we will have a clearer picture of what indicators are being considered for the other Goal 11 targets. As these emerge, a unique opportunity will present itself to analyze the monitoring gaps inherent to the urban SDG and to push for those gaps to be filled in the New Urban Agenda.

*Editor’s note: The Project for Public Spaces’ message to Future of Places can be found [here](#).*

This story is tagged under: Habitat III, New Urban Agenda, UN-Habitat, Urban Thinker Campus, Project for Public Spaces, Public Safety

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Nicholas You

Editor’s note: Nicholas You is arguably the world’s best-qualified individual to state the precedent and case for a role for a local government and stakeholder group in the Habitat III process. A senior policy adviser at UN-Habitat from 1994 to 2010, he was the manager of operations for the Habitat II Secretariat from 1994 through the completion of the Istanbul sessions in 1996. Before retiring from UN-Habitat, he rallied stakeholders to create the World Urban Campaign and served as its inaugural chair (2010-14). He is currently chair of the Media and Communications Constituency Group of the newly formed General Assembly of
Partners, formed to promote worldwide readiness for Habitat III. He also is the director of Global Partners and Programs of the Guangzhou Institute for Urban Innovation, now the world’s leading competition for city innovations. You was also a key adviser in the creation of Citiscope, and is currently a member of its board of directors. Please see below for additional details.

Nicholas You is a veteran urban specialist and thought leader on sustainable development. He was appointed in 1994 to be the manager of operations for the second United Nations Conference for Human Settlements (Habitat II) and is acknowledged as the leading authority on the reporting of best practices for cities and public authorities. He is the founder and immediate former chairman of the UN-Habitat World Urban Campaign Steering Committee, the Assurance Group for Urban Infrastructure of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and is currently the chair of the Urban Strategy and Innovation Council for GDF-Suez. He also serves as member of the board of Citiscope, the Huairou Commission and the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities, and is a fellow of the Guangzhou Institute for Urban Innovation in China and of the Centre for Liveable Cities in Singapore. He regularly advises governments, cities, technology companies and civil society organizations on urban sustainability and urban innovation. He works as a strategic planning and governance adviser to many governments and metropolitan authorities worldwide.

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