COMMON GROUND

Spencer de Grey

BIG IDEAS

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BIG IDEAS

By 2050, three-quarters of the world's 9.6 billion-strong population will be living in cities – inhabiting vibrant historic cores, commuting from new hinterlands via high-speed transit, or occupying informal urban settlements.

Some cities will flourish while others will struggle to meet the demands of a growing population and a changing environment. It will take the collaborative expertise of various disciplines, gathered under the umbrella of good governance, to ensure our cities thrive in the future.

Spencer de Grey, Head of Design at Foster + Partners, explores the role that architecture and urban design can play in this global endeavour.

This is the tenth essay in the *Big Ideas* series created by the European Investment Bank.

The EIB has invited international thought leaders to write about the most important issues of the day. These essays are a reminder that we need new thinking to protect the environment, promote equality and improve people's lives around the globe.

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Two thousand years ago, the Roman architect Vitruvius identified the three most quoted imperatives of well-designed buildings: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, in other words *structural integrity, utility*, and what can best be translated as *delight*. Like much of Roman architecture itself, these imperatives have stood the test of time.

However, while Vitruvius articulated the foundations for well-designed buildings, he did not highlight their collective responsibility in creating the surrounding public space – the common ground that stitches buildings into the urban fabric of civil society.

"Through design, we can create meaningful connections between people, be inclusive irrespective of background, disability or difference, and produce sustainable spaces in recognition of the fact that we do not only inherit our cities but also need to preserve them for successive generations.

Common ground, or *Third Places*, as the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg called them, are public places that serve as a neutral ground for people to form associations. He describes them as the "great variety of public places that host regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."[1]

[1] *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg, 1989


SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY

Home, work and the *Third Place* form an important triad of urban life, with the latter playing the important social function of providing a place for community life. In other words, a *Third Place* is an integral part of civic life. Most of them give a sense of identity and a place to "belong to" for people who frequent them. It also becomes a place "to see and be seen in", and a place for real-world social networking.

At Foster + Partners, we recognise the immense importance of common ground. Through design, we can create meaningful connections between people, be inclusive irrespective of background, disability or difference, and produce sustainable spaces in recognition of the fact that we do not only inherit our cities but also need to preserve them for successive generations. Over the past 50 years, we have built buildings, regenerated neighbourhoods, and master-planned cities across cultures, climates and continents. This sense of responsibility and sensitivity to common ground permeates all our work. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are three imperatives we think common ground should include: it must be *social*, *inclusive* and *sustainable*.

PUBLIC REALM AND PUBLIC LIFE

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The interplay between the public realm and public life is intimately intertwined. The most liveable and vibrant cities are those with a rich diversity of public spaces, ranging in scale and function. From the grand piazzas, such as London's Trafalgar Square, that play host to political demonstrations and cultural spectacles, to the intimate pocket parks, such as New York's Paley Park, that offer a cocoon of respite for office workers in Manhattan's busy midtown. Common ground needs to accommodate the largeness of civic events as well as the smallness of everyday life.

> **"One of the keys to creating successful public spaces is maintaining the balance between the needs of the pedestrian and the car.**

One of the keys to creating successful public spaces is maintaining the balance between the needs of the pedestrian and the car. The democratisation of the car in the early 20th century paved the way for significant investments in vehicular infrastructure, resulting in highways cutting across cities, knotted intersections, and a carpet of car parks. Subsequently, cities have become congested and traffic has become a ubiquitous presence in any urban setting. However, it isn't just a matter of simply getting rid of all car-based infrastructure. In fact, roads play an important role in the functioning of the city, from essential public services such as ambulances and fire trucks to ubiquitous white vans carrying goods. It is crucial to strike a balance between the infrastructural needs of the city and the vitality that pedestrian routes and pathways bring to the urban realm.

LONDON, GENERAL VIEW OF THE CROWD DURING THE BT LONDON LIVE PARALYMPICS OPENING CEREMONY CONCERT AT TRAFALGAR SQUARE ON 29 AUGUST 2012

LONDON, TRAFALGAR SQUARE. THIS PANORAMA SHOWS HOW THE SQUARE HAS BEEN FREED FROM THE TRAFFIC CONGESTION THAT ONCE MADE IT INHOSPITABLE.

This approach is exhibited in our refurbishment of **Trafalgar Square** in London. Historically, the square has been the civic centrepiece of the city, but the nonstop tide of traffic had turned Nelson's Column and the fountains into a traffic island, visited only by those willing to risk life and limb, and of course, pigeons. There was an obvious need, and support, for change. After consulting over 180 separate institutions and thousands of individuals, as well as forensically analysing the movement of people and vehicles in and around the square, we arrived at a solution that could reclaim the square for the public. The most significant move was the closure of the north side of the square to traffic and the creation of a broad new terrace, which forms an appropriate setting for the National Gallery and links it via a flight of new steps to the heart of the square and its fountains. Below the terrace, also accessible by lifts, a new café with outdoor seating provides a much-needed spot to rest and take in the sights.

After its successful revamp, Trafalgar Square regained its lustre and appeal. Post-occupancy studies show that the closure of the North Terrace has led to an acceptable delay for cars but eased the flow of public transport immeasurably. People have voted with their feet, and the square is now frequented by 13 times the number of pedestrians compared to earlier use.

What is more, the **National Gallery** reported a significant increase in visitor numbers. The square now hosts many annual events, including cultural celebrations, religious festivals, political rallies and commercial events. The diversity of these events reflects the diversity of Londoners, signalling an openness and inclusivity for which London is celebrated.


Pernod
Häagen-Dazs

More recently, decades of car-centric urbanism had transformed the once **grand quayside at Marseille** into a car park, with rows upon rows of stationary cars. In the run-up to Marseille's designation as the City of Culture in 2013, we undertook, with Michel Desvigne, a regeneration project for the port and its surrounding milieu. Our first step was to greatly reduce the number of parked cars, using movable bollards to designate the space as pedestrian, and to relocate the boathouses occupying the harbour's edge onto purpose-built, floating platforms on the water. These simple yet effective moves allowed the quayside – when re-paved – to be reclaimed as a space for people. The addition of an *ombrière*, a slender and reflective pavilion, provides shelter from the Mediterranean sun, and frames social events such as markets or the spontaneous crowds gathering around a busker. This symbolic space also became the gathering point of Marseille's mourning for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* assassinations, a moving testament to the importance of common ground in sharing grief and empathy.

Much like revitalising the civic *foci* of historic cities, creating new social spaces in cities is crucial to their appeal and liveability. The firm's work in Duisburg in the 1990s demonstrated that the trend towards clean, quiet industries has the potential to reinvigorate declining urban areas and create sustainable communities for the future, where home, workplace and recreation are all close by. In place of the zoned and functionally segregated city of the 20th century, it offers a 21st century urban paradigm of mixed use. The masterplan aimed to draw the life of the city to the waterfront, combining the selective refurbishment of the buildings lining the harbour with new construction to provide housing, offices and space for light-industrial uses, together with a wide range of social and cultural amenities. A guiding principle was the creation of a flexible framework that has allowed elements to be developed independently over time by different architects. New infrastructure and public amenities were put in place first to establish the harbour as an attractive place in which to live and work or to visit. A tree-lined promenade was created along the waterfront and canals were excavated as armatures for new housing development. Apartments are grouped in five-storey terraces, which look out over the water or inland to communal gardens.

MARSEILLE, VIEUX PORT WITH STREET PERFORMERS AND BUSKERS UNDER THE OMBRIERE

In super high-density cities such as Hong Kong, for example, common ground is often in short supply. Adam Frampton's book *Cities Without Ground* chronicles Hong Kong's labyrinthine network of elevated walkways that connect adjacent buildings in a bid to reclaim common ground for pedestrians above the network of inner-city roads.

The importance of safeguarding common ground is made more pressing by Hong Kong's astronomic land values and the shrinking size of dwellings. In the late 1970s, we won the competition to design the new headquarters for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Hong Kong's central business district.

Acutely aware of the lack of public space in the heart of the city, we decided to lift the building up and create a permeable public plaza at the base of the building, which could be given back to the community. This undercroft has since played host to what can best be described as the city's largest weekly picnic – a gathering place for the city's domestic workers who spend Sundays meeting their friends and taking refuge from the sun and rain under the building. For the better part of 30 years, the building has sheltered these domestic workers offering them a place of respite and camaraderie, a place to share food and gossip, form choirs or rehearse dance choreographies. The design intent illustrates an inclusive approach allowing private buildings to enhance the community by creating a common ground.

HONG KONG, HONGKONG & SHANGHAI BANK. THE PUBLIC PLAZA AT THE BASE OF THE BUILDING WHICH, AT THE WEEKENDS, HAS BECOME A LIVELY PICNIC SPOT FOR LOCAL DOMESTIC WORKERS.


CITIES ARE A
CHEQUERBOARD

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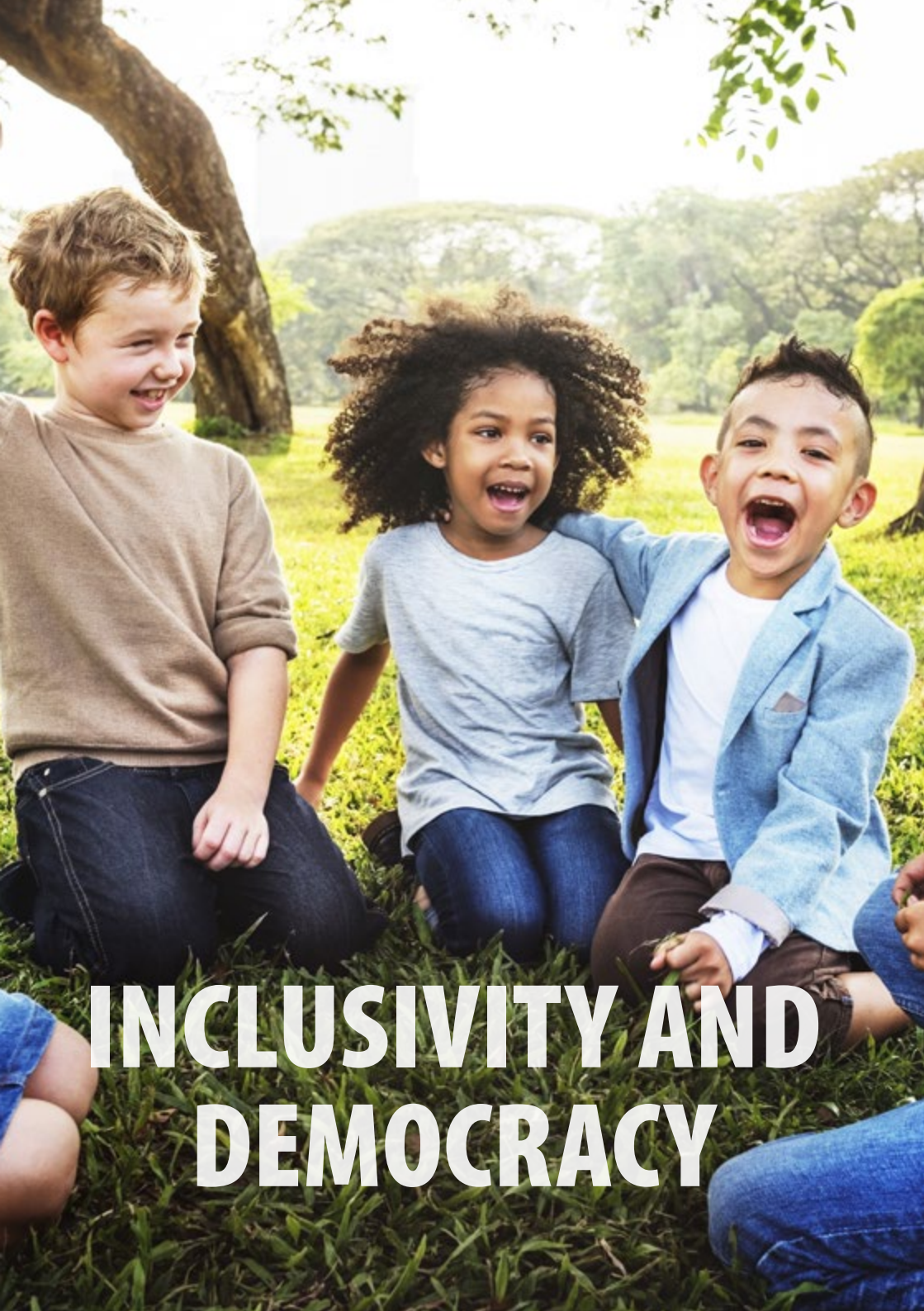
Cities are a chequerboard of public and private spaces. The eponymous *Nolli Map*, invented by the Italian architect and cartographer Giambattista Nolli in 1748, distinguishes between public and private spaces, creating an ersatz fingerprint of cities. In the *Nolli Map*, public space is defined as not only the outdoor streets, squares, courtyards and alleyways, but also the interior of civic buildings such as churches, museums, theatres, cafés, lecture halls, government assemblies and *stadia*.

This intermeshing of public space and the interior came to the fore on a project we carried out at the turn of the Millennium. The **Great Court at the British Museum** was one of London's long-lost spaces. Originally an open garden at the heart of the Museum, the courtyard was lost to the public when construction started on the Round Reading Room and its associated book stacks.

The departure of the British Library to its current location on Euston Road was the catalyst for reclaiming the courtyard as a common ground. The scale of this undertaking propels it beyond a mere expansion and reconfiguration of the Museum's facilities into the realm of urban planning. With its free access and long opening hours, the Great Court becomes a grand covered public space at the centre of a city block. Similar in scale to many of London's smaller public squares, the two-acre piazza – covered by a soaring glass canopy – is available to all, the intersection of public space with the heart of an international museum.

LONDON, BRITISH MUSEUM. THE ORIGINAL ROTUNDA READING ROOM IS FLANKED BY TWO OF THE FOUR ENTRANCES TO THE SPACE. THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED SOUTH PORTICO IS BUILT TO SMIRKE'S ORIGINAL NINETEENTH CENTURY CLASSICAL PLAN, IN LIMESTONE. THE GLASS SKIN THAT COVERS THE ENTIRE GREAT HALL IS A 478-TONNE STEEL STRUCTURE, WHICH SUPPORTS 315 TONNES OF GLASS. IT CREATES THE LARGEST ENCLOSED PUBLIC SPACE IN EUROPE.



INCLUSIVITY AND DEMOCRACY

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Inclusivity is a primary attribute of successful public spaces. The streets, plazas and squares, and parks and gardens are inherently democratic because they are open to everyone and equally accessible to all. To exclude a section of society or a group of people is contrary to the idea of public space itself. The design of public spaces therefore depends greatly on the input of the people that occupy and use them and, as designers, listening is a crucial skill. We have anthropologists and other cultural experts as part of the team at Foster + Partners, who help us better integrate the needs and aspirations of people and communities into a design blueprint.

“Inclusivity is a primary attribute of successful public spaces. The streets, plazas and squares, and parks and gardens are inherently democratic because they are open to everyone and equally accessible to all.

This is particularly evident in our large-scale urban projects in China. Amidst the impressive scale and speed of Chinese urban development, the smallness and slowness of daily life is often overlooked. Entire cities, metro systems and central business districts seemingly blossom overnight, often levelling villages and traditional communities. As planners, urban designers and architects, we must strive to reconcile the need for growth and development with the equally important prerequisite to preserve heritage and conserve communities. In rapidly changing cityscapes, nurturing the “neighbourliness of strangers”, to borrow French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s term, is imperative to social harmony.


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To help its 11 million inhabitants move across the vast metropolis, **the city of Wuhan in central China** has rolled out 237 kilometres of metro lines in just 14 years. Comparing this to London's 402-kilometre Tube network, which was built over a period of 155 years – the pace of urbanisation is staggering. This breakneck pace of development has turned large swathes of the urban fabric into an enmeshed construction site. In light of this, the city's planners asked Foster + Partners to conduct a public realm study for one of the sites, identifying the best practice for stitching the urban fabric together and seamlessly combining the old with the new.

> **"The act of listening is the basis for all people-centred design and anthropological interviews are a vital part of truly understanding civic life.**

We talked extensively to the local community, observing the rhythms of everyday life, listening to oral histories, and compiling an inventory of needs from the locals to create an ethnographic analysis. The act of listening is the basis for all people-centred design and anthropological interviews are a vital part of truly understanding civic life. This provides invaluable cues for design. We interviewed locals aged six to 96 and compiled an inventory of design and programmatic interventions.

For instance, we learnt that traditional wet markets providing fresh produce were disappearing, and hole-in-the-wall eateries specialising in the quintessentially Wuhanese breakfast, Guo Zao, and other affordable lunch options were also shutting down due to urban renewal. In response to the local appetite to revive street food, we designed a market park, lined with stalls that sell fresh produce and prepare food, creating a place to replenish and socialise. We also learnt that grandparents play a critical role in childcare during the week. However, their respective playgrounds and places to play Mahjong were geographically separated, so we created an intergenerational park. Here children can play within sight of their grandparents, creating a social arena that is greater than the sum of its parts. The ownership of public spaces is a complex issue, which goes beyond the question of who owns

the property deed, but relates to how welcoming a space feels and how enmeshed it is within the everyday life of the city. The garden square is one of the defining features of London. Like other European cities, London has its grand civic spaces, but no other city has developed the garden square in quite the same way. The majority of such spaces were the product of private largesse, often built in the name of a wealthy family or individual, but nearly always meant as a communal amenity.

Today, there are a growing number of spaces such as office porticos and commercial courtyards that operate as public spaces. The relatively recent rise of these "Privately Owned Public Spaces" - or POPS as they have come to be known - has prompted a debate into the nature and meaning of common ground. For-profit governance and heavy-handed surveillance can alienate people, curtail functions and create an exclusive environment. However, private funds that can pay for the creation and maintenance of public spaces bring much-needed investment for the enhancement of the city as municipal budgets become increasingly squeezed. Notwithstanding the relative merits and demerits of POPS, they remain a crucial arena in which we as architects can help shape common ground in the contemporary city.

A recent positive example is the **new European Headquarters for Bloomberg in the City of London**. This gave us the opportunity to make a major contribution to the public realm around the building. Bloomberg Arcade – which reinstates a lost portion of Watling Street, an ancient Roman travel route that once connected London to Wales – bisects the site, greatly improving pedestrian flows in the narrow historic streets that surround the building. It also invites people into new restaurants and cafés situated under the covered colonnade. In keeping with Michael Bloomberg's desire to be a "good neighbour", the surrounding common ground invites local workers and visitors to dwell in the elegant spaces around the building. Cristina Iglesias's water sculpture *Forgotten Streams* pays homage to the ancient Walbrook River that once flowed through the site and serves as a peaceful backdrop amidst the city's busy ebb and flow.

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

MASDAR CITY, ABU DHABI. THE MASDAR INSTITUTE'S RESIDENCES AND LABORATORIES ARE ORIENTED TO SHADE BOTH THE ADJACENT BUILDINGS AND THE PEDESTRIAN STREETS BELOW, AND THE FACADES ARE ALSO SELF-SHADING.

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

As we work hard to keep abreast of shifting identities and the needs of rapidly changing populations, we must also design for future generations. This means first and foremost protecting the environment. **Cities cover less than 2% of the Earth's surface and house 55% of the world's population, but account for 67% of global energy consumption and over 70% of greenhouse gas emissions.** To offset this discrepancy, architects have a responsibility to promote sustainable design. While architecture is beholden to multiple international standards of sustainable design such as BREAM or LEED, there are no such specifications for common ground – this is an obvious oversight.

Sustainable design of cities requires an understanding of the urban microclimate, including wind distribution, pollution levels and thermal comfort characteristics. On the bright side, while cities are the biggest contributors to climate change they are also its solution. As centres of knowledge and innovation – both technical and institutional – cities possess the right ingredients to instil greener economies, ensure better governance of resources, and innovate solutions for safeguarding the ecosystem and biodiversity. We believe that architectural trends are being driven by the global ambition to develop a sustainable way of living and to tackle the future challenges we face as the world's urban populations proliferate and our cities are transformed.

Understanding the microclimate of each location should be an integral part of the design process of outdoor spaces. Our ideas for **Masdar City (Abu Dhabi)**, which pioneered an approach towards more sustainable urbanism, combined state-of-the-art technologies with the planning principles of traditional Arab settlements to create a desert community that aims to be carbon-neutral and zero-waste. The 640-hectare project is a key component of the "Masdar Initiative", established by the Government of Abu Dhabi to research and advance the development of renewable energy and clean-technology solutions, planning for a future that is not dependent on oil. The city is a centre for the advancement

of new ideas on energy production, with the ambition of attracting the highest levels of expertise. Knowledge gained here has already aided the development of Abu Dhabi's "Estidama" rating system for sustainable building, and post-occupancy environmental studies have demonstrated the efficacy of the masterplan in reducing felt temperatures and prolonging the moderate season in the city.

Another cornerstone of sustainable urban design is promoting active transport and reducing car dependence. The Slussen (lock) masterplan acts as a bridge between the historic Gamla Stan and Södermalm island in the centre of Stockholm. The project creates a new district at the heart of the Stockholm archipelago and a dynamic new civic destination. The masterplan will provide new public spaces, an accessible quayside, pedestrian and cycle routes and prominent new buildings while transforming the existing infrastructure to minimise the threat of flooding, and creating a 21st century transport interchange.

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The catalyst is an urgent need to replace much of the crumbling pre-war infrastructure. The **City of Stockholm** is taking the opportunity to transform this important part of the capital into a new destination, creating a balance between road vehicles and pedestrians while enhancing the public realm with easier access to the waterfront. The masterplan's scale and grain consciously preserve the city's character at this historic location. The challenge at Slussen was to create a civic space in an area that had for nearly a decade served merely as a below ground transport interchange but not as a civic space. In addition to upgrading the transport infrastructure and safeguarding it from rising sea levels,

the Slussen strategy is to create a new city destination. The scheme introduces more walkable areas across Slussen, including a new public park in the centre of the city, as well as opening up the waterfront to the public and strengthening the city's flood defences.

Ultimately, sustainability is about restoring the balance between humankind and nature. It is about designing in consonance with natural systems rather than against them. Most cities today are disconnected from the natural world. Well-designed outdoor spaces, driven by biophilia to bring nature to the city, re-facilitate the human experience with nature. While enhancing and supporting urban well-being, nature has a major impact on thermal comfort, and it is expected to grow in the future with climate change. Re-greening previously developed areas while creating neighbourhoods that balance urbanity with parks, pedestrians with traffic, and old with new is a theme that underpins our approach towards public space design.

For instance, Milan, like many large cities, is bordered by former industrial areas that can be reclaimed and brought to life as sustainable urban communities. We are working on revitalising a part of the city on the outskirts called Milano Santa Giulia, a site blessed by a combination of size, location and excellent transport connections. Designed for a diverse and rich mix of residents and visitors, public space is fundamental. A central promenade, linked to a series of public squares, is the heart of the development. The design specifically addresses environmental and ecological issues at every level, from the creation of green spaces to the orientation of the buildings, their flexibility and lifespan, the materials used to build them, and the energy they consume. By balancing the vitality of urban life against the calming influence of nature, Santa Giulia will offer a welcoming environment with a strong sense of place.

GREEN AND BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE

Integrating nature-based solutions through so-called "green and blue infrastructure" will help maintain temperatures in cities, while efficiently fighting flooding. They also have a prime role in enhancing biodiversity and providing ecological corridors that will help local species thrive. Likewise, in the context of the current food crisis, urban farming can accommodate food production in the future.

The value of well-designed common ground has manifold social, environmental, and economic benefits. It contributes to a sense of belonging, community cohesion, improved health and well-being, reduction of crime and anti-social behaviour, and greater opportunities for play and learning. The environmental benefits include an improvement in air quality, a reduction in pollution and urban heat islands, increased biodiversity, infrastructure for greening measures, the reuse of redundant and derelict spaces, food production, and green energy generation. From the perspective of economics, it also increases visitor, worker and resident spending, attracts and maintains a local workforce, contributes to an uplift in property and rental values, and gives rise to inward investment and business location.

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We need to shift the needle of city branding from iconic skylines and vertical silhouettes, towards the spaces between and within buildings. It is the quality of common ground that creates a sense of place and stitches the urban fabric together into a networked ecosystem. We believe it is important we set the tone for good urbanism with ambitious and responsible benchmarks. The projects discussed here illustrate our approach towards the design of public spaces and how they stitch the city together. Norman Foster has often said: "If you visit any city, it is the sequence of spaces and connections – whether they are streets, squares, parks, bridges or transport systems – that shape your experience." While communication technologies may have altered our conception of the public realm, moving towards virtual communities in cyberspace, there is still the physical space we all inhabit. It is perhaps ironic that we are now becoming digitally connected but physically detached. In an age where communities and cultures are becoming ever more interconnected, the need to cultivate common ground as a place to engage with one another is now more imperative than ever before.

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BIOGRAPHY

Spencer de Grey (1944) shares responsibility for all Foster + Partners' projects as Head of Design, a key member of the Design Board. He studied at Cambridge University, joining the practice in 1973. He set up Foster + Partners' Hong Kong office in 1979 for the Hong Kong Bank project, returning in 1981 to work on Stansted Airport and the Sackler Galleries at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. Since then he has worked on a wide range of cultural, civic, education and masterplan projects, including the Great Court, the Sage and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He is visiting Professor of Design at Cambridge University and a Royal Academician.

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