

# INTRODUCTION TO A BETTER CITY AT EYE LEVEL

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Public space is the backbone of a sustainable city. Great streets, places where you instantly like to be, human scale buildings and streets, co-creation of the public space by the users, placemaking, active ground floors and a people-centred approach based on how we as human beings experience the space around us — that is what The City at Eye Level is all about.

We all know that intuitive feeling when we really feel at home in a street, a park or a square: it is not just a public space, it is a place. With the City at Eye Level, we aim to understand the mechanisms behind that feeling. Because if we do, we can recreate these places in newly developed or in already existing parts of our cities. We can then work with the community to get from spaces to places, from liveable to lovable.

## ABOUT THE CITY AT EYE LEVEL

We ask ourselves: what do we as pedestrians experience when we look around? Is the street comfortable, welcoming and walkable? Do the surrounding buildings, their use, and their design makes an attractive urban environment where we feel at home? Do the ground floors connect with pedestrian flows in the urban area? Do the squares, parks and terraces function as places where we exchange ideas and encounter new, different types of people?

To understand the underlying mechanisms better, and work on strategies for change, we (STIPO, a team for urban development based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands) initiated the international program The City at Eye Level. The network was built with partners such as UN-Habitat, Project for Public Spaces, Gehl Architects, The Future of Places, Think City and PlacemakingX. With them, we generated a group of 80+ contributors worldwide and collectively wrote the book *The City at Eye Level*. All the lessons are open source and shared via the website: [www.thecityateyelevel.com](http://www.thecityateyelevel.com).

## HOW DID WE LOSE HUMAN SCALE?

Before, we built our cities on walking distance. Everything had to happen within one hour of walking: living, working, shopping. It led to compact, walkable, mixed-use cities, that adapted to the local climate. Not because we wanted to, but simply because that was the way life was organised. This all changed in the '60s, with the mass introduction of the car, and the modernist approach to urbanism, separating functions. Le Corbusier's 'Plan Voisin' was the example: a rational high-rise model designed to replace the historic inner city of Paris. It did not get implemented there. However, it did get built in the Paris outskirts, and in so many other cities across the world throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. Most cities lost their eye for a walkable, human scaled city.

This book is not meant as a plea against modernism in general, nor as a plea in favour of traditional architecture. Modernist architecture has brought about some of the most exciting buildings of our time. Modernists sought to create liveable, green, clean cities. However, modernist urban design neglected one key element: we have two parts of our brain. We want our cities to function rationally, but we also want to be inspired and to listen to our hearts. We cannot capture the city in simplified rational models only. Jane Jacobs advocated to embrace the full complexity of the city, and she made us aware of what we throw away when demolishing existing urban fabric. We stand on her shoulders now.

This *City at Eye Level* book, if anything, is meant as a plea to combine and enrich any kind of urbanism with human scale, with the eye level experience, that has been so often overseen in the past decades. This is why from 2014 to 2016, we worked together with UN-Habitat, Future of Places, Project for Public



Shops and traffic in Cheapside, London (1831).



The muted Catharijnesingel-canal in Utrecht, built in the 1960s.

Spaces and many others towards a new World Urban Agenda. We advocated for a holistic, fine-grained city with human scale and a people-centred, participatory approach, and adequate public spaces for all. This was adopted in Quito in 2016, in Habitat III for the New Urban Agenda.

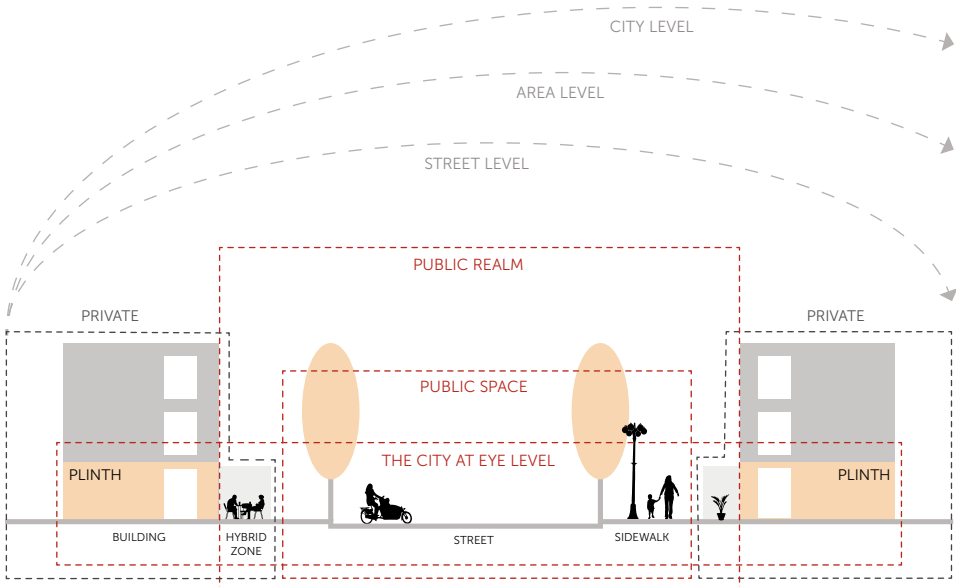
In the meantime, our cities have started to become more attractive to live in. More and more, our economies are based on creativity and innovation. High quality public space and interaction between people are no longer *nice to have* but *need to have*. Many cities are working on restoring the balance between pedestrians and cars. We are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of healthy and happy cities, with public spaces that invite its citizens to walk, cycle, play and engage in sports.

## HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE THE EYE LEVEL?

If we want to work on the eye level more, we should first dig deeper into how we, as human beings, experience our surroundings as we walk down the street.

Let us dive into urban psychology for a bit and highlight three universal aspects of how we experience the city:

- 1. How do we see?** For our eyesight, we have to go back to the frog eye. Frogs can only register moving objects, like a fly passing by. Human eyes are the same, but evolution has provided a trick: tiny muscles make our eyeballs tremble so that we do register still standing objects. Yet, like the frog, we are much more drawn to moving objects. What does this mean for our cities? If we walk in a street with long, horizontally oriented façades, our frog eyes get bored and our view wanders off. We don't feel at home and feel in a hurry. We know from Jan Gehl's research that people turn their heads much less, make fewer stops and walk faster. However, in streets with vertically oriented façades, variety and new units every 5 – 10 meters, our frog eyes are drawn to the side. We slow down, look around, spend more time, and feel more at home.



2. **How do we hear?** *The City at Ear Level*, a chapter in the first City at Eye Level book, shows that sound determines approximately half our experience. In the city, all (mechanical) sounds pile up. With stony and glass surfaces we create the same effect as an empty living room after moving house. Once we have to raise our voices to have a normal human conversation, we don't feel at home anymore. The environment should have 'sound dispersers', as urban acoustics call them, where grass may take the role of the carpet in your living room, and trees, benches, façades jumping in and out, help to break the sound and create a human soundscape.

3. **How do we feel?** There is a lot of research here, on how we need a 'circle of intimacy' around us, on how we react to urban heat islands, and on how we feel more comfortable with a building at our backs. Among others, it relates with the size of the squares that people like as a place to stay. People like the Italian piazzas that are 40x40 to 50x50 meters on average. Why this size? It taps into our subconscious behaviour. While we walk, we constantly scan the expressions on other people's faces to judge whether we will be safe. Under 40 to 50 meters, we can still see these expressions. Over 40 to 50 meters, we feel anonymous and lost.

Our frog eyes call for variety, our ears call for trees and our feeling calls for intimate spaces. These are universal values. Of course, if we want to understand the full experience, the next step should be to dive into the specific aspects depending on the local culture, the social and political relations, the local acceptance of what is decent behaviour, the local climate.



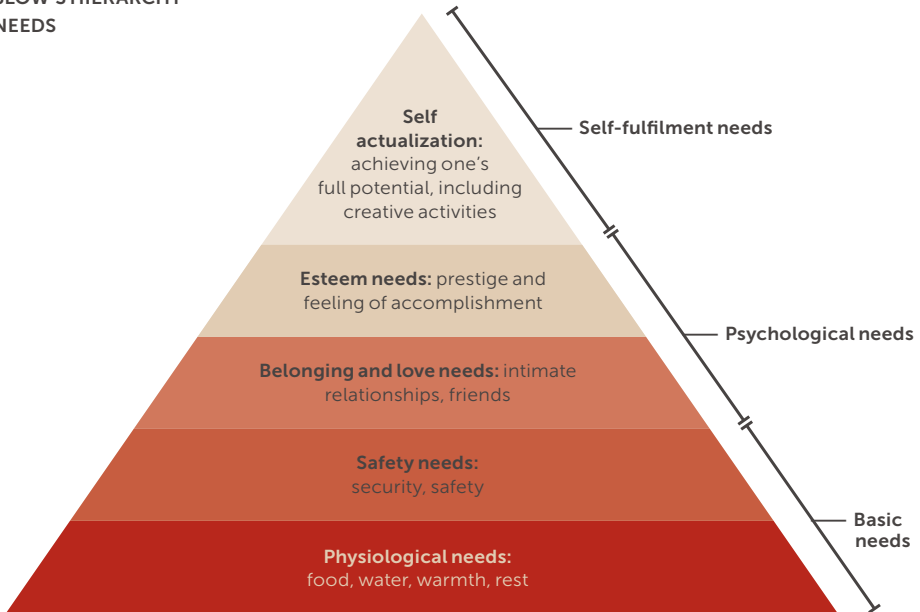
These are the reasons to compose this book, specifically delving in the specific contexts in Asia. But first, we will go into the elements we can take to Asia from the international experiences.

## FOUR LESSONS FROM THE CITY AT EYE LEVEL

*The City at Eye Level* book, fed by many insights and cases from across the world, describes the mechanisms needed to create a more human scaled city. Let us first summarise four key lessons that are a fundament for a better city at eye level in the Asian context and beyond.

1. **Public space should be the backbone for sustainable development**, not just the leftover space next to buildings.
2. **Public space is not 2D but 3D.** Public space is not just the street the city council owns and maintains, it is the entire environment we experience around. So it includes buildings, and most important is the ground floor. It may be only 20% of a building, it determines 80% of our street experience.
3. **From liveable to lovable.** City councils and developers usually take care of only the two basic layers or Maslow's hierarchy of needs for a liveable, whole, clean and safe environment.

## MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



With placemaking we take it to a higher level to turn it into a lovable, social, active, fun, health, tempting and inspiring place.

If we know which mechanisms are working against us, we will know better which issues to address in developing new strategies for our cities. In brief, we recognise at least seven mechanisms:

#### 4. **Software, hardware and orgware.**

First, understand the current and potential use patterns and activities (software), then the design follows (hardware), followed by programming of new activities (orgware). For the long-term, think of a strategy, a method, an approach, a set of rules, a coalition, and funding to keep the learning and investment cycle going for a longer time.

1. **Cities and developers lack good rules for human scale;**
2. **Human scale often comes too late in the process;**
3. **Short term profit orientation;**
4. **Standardisation of the construction industry, sterile development;**
5. **Lack of proper management for good places (place management);**
6. **Top down planning and lack of (mental) ownership;**
7. **Designs being made from the bird's eye view.**

## WHAT ARE THE MECHANISMS WORKING AGAINST US?

Working to achieve a better city at eye level, we need to understand why we are getting so little of it in day-to-day practice.

## TOWARDS SYSTEMIC CHANGE

With the City at Eye Level programme and network, we are uncovering criteria, new approaches and methods for development, transformation and systemic change and tools to address these mechanisms working against us. Many of these can also be recognised in the contributions in this book. We see six drivers for systemic change towards developing our cities more around social life, human scale and great public spaces:

- There is an open source list of **Eye Level Criteria** to use in urban development projects to achieve a better city at eye level.
- We work on **organic transformation** to turn existing urban areas and streets around with the local partners.
- We work on **place-led development** with real estate partners to embed the eye level into the development process from the very first stages.
- We work on **creative bureaucracy** to open up city councils to work together with communities and tap into the city's energy and creativity for improving public space.
- We work on **place management** to build sustainable communities, public-private partnerships and cooperatives to keep programming and improving over time.
- We are building a **global toolbox** with open source tools for the city at eye level and placemaking.

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If you would like to learn more, please visit our website [www.thecityateyelevel.com](http://www.thecityateyelevel.com), where you can find the other *City at Eye Level* books and downloads, and join the global community for exchanging ideas.