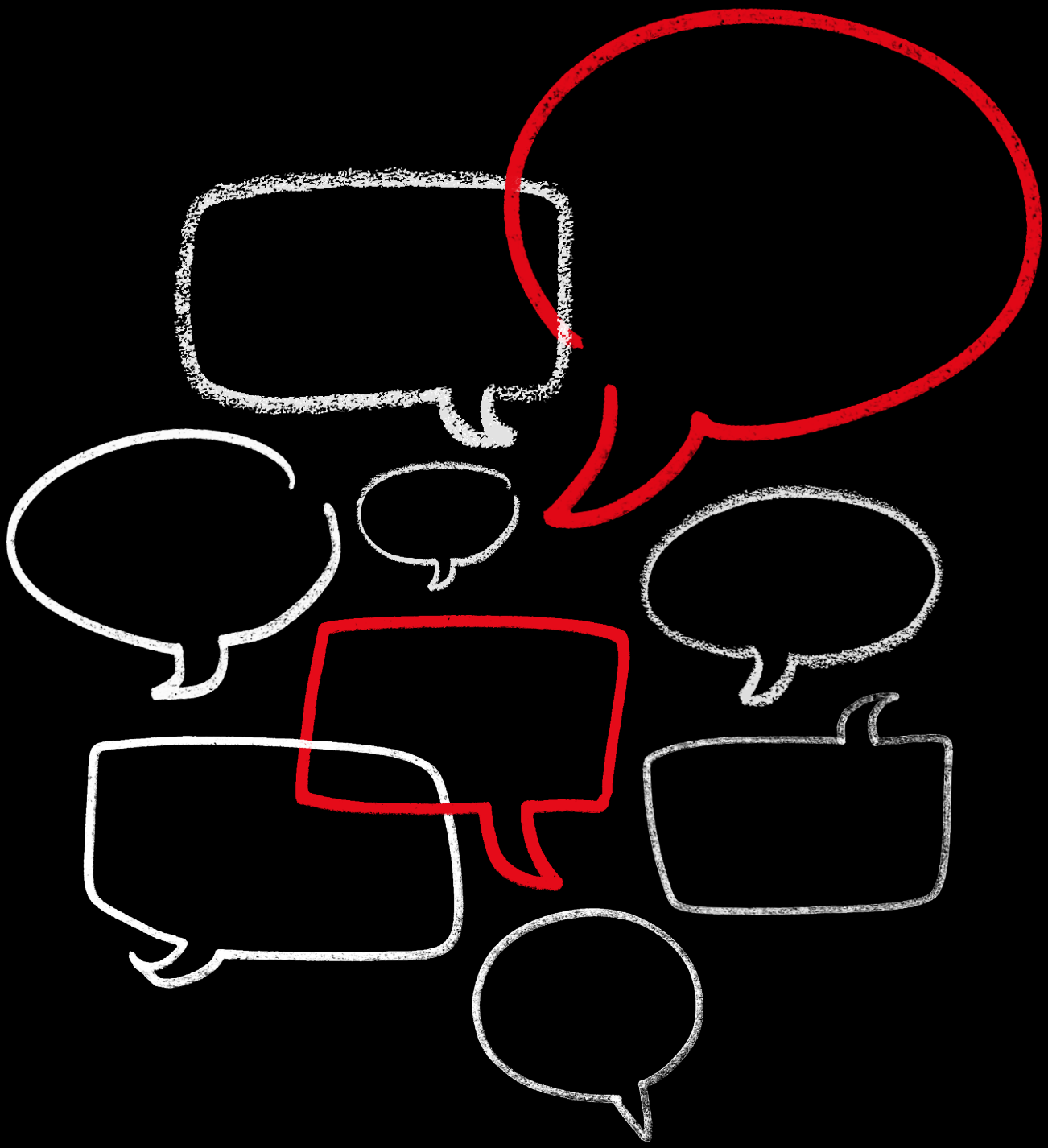
# Every City is a Conversation

HUMANISE

Why Humanise Matters to the UK



by Chris Murray
Urban Psyche

Across the globe, humankind is becoming an urban species – a Homo Urbanis – and our future success is closely connected to that of our cities.

- Every place that people live in is important, but because of their scale, if we don't get things right in cities, we won't get them right at all.
- Outdated, post-war notions of how a city should function are no longer useful and are being reformulated. Whilst we are moving toward a more human-centred view of cities, in many places the built environment does not yet reflect this.
- Buildings have a profound effect upon us, for good or bad, impacting on people's emotional and physical wellbeing, relationships, sense of community and identity.
- Visual complexity and quality of design in particular have a major influence on all these factors, yet too many places are dull, monotonous and depressing.
- UK cities, always hubs of innovation, have bounced back from deindustrialisation and decline in manufacture, challenges that were compounded by the centralised nature of the UK state.
- Today, they face fresh challenges: post-Covid shifts in living and working; economic uncertainty; climate change; and older, persistent issues like deprivation.
- Design can't solve everything. But alongside other measures it can have a deeply positive and lasting impact on the quality of people's lives and on local economies.
- As we move to empower cities, we must also empower communities. That should mean creating a sense of excellence in the everyday, not just the iconic, making everyone feel valued as well as sheltered, expressing a generosity of civic spirit.
- Every city is a conversation and the language is design.

# Why Humanise Cities?

Globally, urbanisation is increasing. In 2008 for the first time the world's urban population hit 50%. It is set to rise to 80% around 2070[i]. That will mean 9.3bn people living in cities. We have become a 'Homo Urbanis'[ii], a people of the city, and whether we like it or not, the future of our species is closely connected to the success of our most complex creation.

The choice is not whether we want cities, it is about what kind of cities we want: sprawling, monolithic, disconnected, stultifying environments that reflect a lack of aspiration which is then lived out by their residents, or places that build a sense of belonging, connection, anchorage, stimulation and nurture the deep-seated needs we bring to the city from our ancient past.

There are great examples. Yet many places fail to grasp this obvious opportunity. Unpacking the 'why' behind all this is complex, though the answer includes questions of money, know-how, and an incremental slide that feels too big to change. At the root of it all is the simple fact that we have forgotten to see cities through a human lens. We need to understand that they are not just the sum of infrastructure, buildings and business, as vital as these are. They are collections of people on a huge scale.

That mechanistic view of cities accelerated massively in the post-war period alongside modernism, seeing cities as 'broken machines' that needed fixing, reflected in harsh, punitive design solutions. Chaotic street patterns brought to heel with the concrete collar of a ring road, inhuman buildings, barren spaces, unadorned, minimal deserts where glimpses of quality and complexity felt like an oasis.

In reality, cities are living, organic, cultural entities, capable of real marvels as mediators between global forces and local communities. They remain our greatest hope for sustainability, shared prosperity and social cohesion.

Cities ask us to mix with difference, be more tolerant and as a result can cohere multiple identities in a way nations often find hard to do, as Liverpudlian, New Yorker or Glaswegian, with their distinctiveness expressed through design.

Today, the balance of power is shifting toward cities[iii], partly in recognition of these roles, but also because 21st century challenges are simply too complex to solve top-down at the national level alone. Powerful networks of cities have emerged, within and across nations, working together to act on change, building networks of trade and cooperation. They collaborate as much as they compete.

Cities are now the solution, not the problem. But it is clear they challenge us too. Mental health can be twice as bad in urban than non-urban areas on some measures[iv], with poor health and wellbeing closely linked to urban deprivation, pollution and low-quality built environments, particularly housing[v].

A growing body of evidence shows how we are profoundly connected to and influenced by the built environment, internalising our relationship with place in the same way we do that of family[vi]. If that connection is weak or negative, the consequences can be devastating, impacting across our emotional and physical wellbeing, relationships, sense of community and personal identity.

There are other influences at work but the way we design and make cities is something we can act on now, alongside measures to tackle deprivation. Indeed, the most impoverished design frequently feels reserved for the most vulnerable when our design ambitions should speak up loudly for and with them.

## Why Humanise Cities?

That is the simple aim of Humanise. To inject more visual complexity, interest, a sense of wonder and awe into the built landscape of human existence, where we have our being as well as our jobs, where we need to feel valued as well as sheltered. A sense of excellence in the everyday as well as the iconic, where a city wears the heart of civic generosity on its sleeve.

Covid changed many things but not the underlying importance of cities. They have been through pandemics before and always emerged stronger, innovating their way forward, often through design and planning. Footfall is almost back to pre-pandemic levels[vii], but work patterns have shifted as has our relationship to cities, raising important questions about the future of urban living and city centres, as does climate change.

These are all fundamentally questions about quality of place and liveability, and building design is therefore a critical part of the answer. If we want our cities to thrive, then people must do so first in a place that helps this to happen, because without people, there is no city.

We can all think of urban environments that tell us this is not too obvious a statement to make.

As Patrick Geddes said, cities are a 'drama in time as well as a place in space'. The Humanise agenda seeks to refocus our lens on buildings and cities. To rethink and reimagine them as fundamentally life enhancing, emotional experiences in a way that energises their other social and economic functions.

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## Taking Up the Challenge

The UK is already highly urbanised: over 80% of its citizens live in an urban area[viii]. Yet it has had an ambivalent relationship to its cities across the last half century. Deindustrialisation, offshoring and new global competition created major post-war challenges, leading to urban economic and population decline. Even 1980s London shared this fate; its economic future was by no means certain.

As urban wealth reduced, so did the relative power of municipal authority with control flowing relentlessly back to the centre. The days of urban innovation that gave us water companies, the rail network and spawned the national grid – all local not national ideas – seemed a distant memory.

Yet the UK's cities bounced back through regeneration programmes that completely rethought their purpose, used creativity, and reimagined old manufacturing centres as cool urban living.

This was partly due to a recognition within government that successful nations need successful cities. Our competitors had not forgotten this, and the UK was lagging behind. To this day, the productivity of the UK's biggest cities outside London remains oddly low by international standards[ix].

One reason is the UK has one of the most centralised states in the developed world. Around 8% of the total tax raised in a UK city stays in that city – Council Tax and a portion of Business Rates. The rest goes to national government; some comes back, but with strings attached. Across the OECD on average, 25% of tax remains at the local or regional level. In Germany 35%, North America 50% and in Tokyo 80% (although it is the size of some countries). UK cities have very little control either over raising revenues or deciding how to spend them[x].

Devolution has helped, including to the Devolved Administrations, but even there, control stays at the national not local level. City and Devolution Deals are designed to remedy this but are more the decentralisation of functions, not yet the municipal autonomy seen elsewhere.

The profile of cities in national policy remained high until the end of the coalition government but waned thereafter, with a divisive narrative emerging that pitted towns against cities. There is an inescapable truth that some towns have not benefitted from the growth of recent decades and need more help. But if you are a struggling town next to a struggling city, you need your city to do better, and that city needs the town too[xi]. Places are linked, not economic islands.

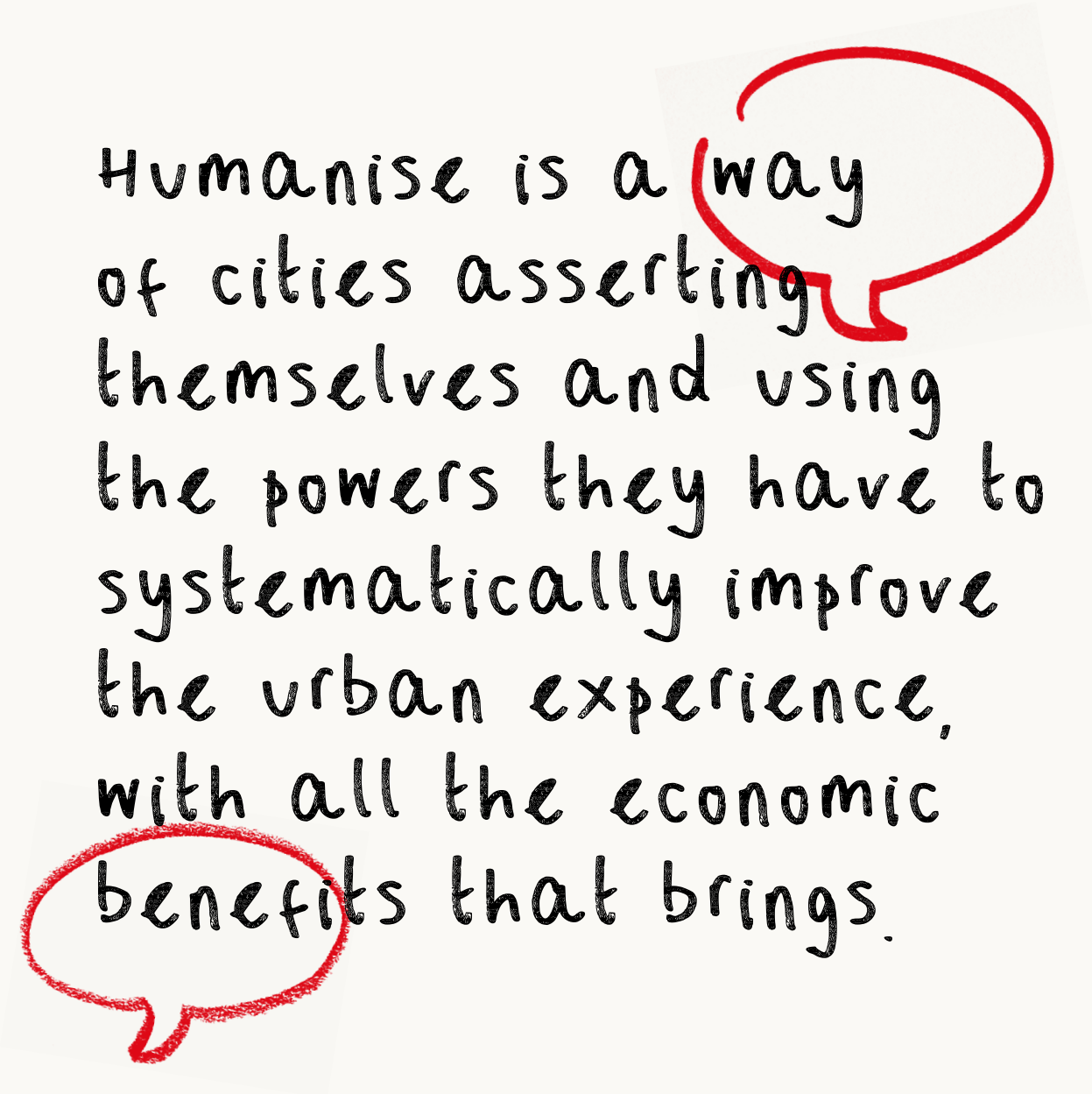
That is now changing, with cities and towns working together more closely. The creation of Combined Authorities with directly elected Metro Mayors has helped drive change, their areas generally taking in a major city, several towns and rural areas under one umbrella.

Humanise speaks to all these issues. It is a way of UK cities asserting themselves, taking back some control and using the powers they do have to systematically improve the urban experience and attractiveness, with all the economic benefits that brings.

It's not a question of whether we can afford to Humanise. It's a statement of fact that we cannot afford not to.

Visual complexity isn't just about how things look; it's about how things work. It can influence us at a very deep level in ways we must begin to take much more seriously. Attempts to restore public trust, public health and our city centres can all be fatally undermined by boring, soulless buildings.

As the planner Patsy Healey once said, 'every city is a conversation' and the language is design. What that looks and feels like will speak volumes. Let's grasp the opportunity, change the debate and rehumanise our cities.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# References


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