

THE MAYOR'S GUIDE: HOW TO BUILD BACK JOY AND BELONGING





**WE ALL  NEED
TO FEEL GOOD
ABOUT WHERE
WE LIVE. TO FEEL
THAT SENSE OF
CONNECTION,
THAT PRIDE IN
OUR  TOWNS
AND CITIES.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing body of scientific evidence shows that the buildings around us have the power to shape how we feel. The way they look from the outside – even if we’re just passing them by – has a profound effect on our brains, our bodies and our behaviours. Visually engaging and characterful buildings uplift us. They inspire pride and create places where people genuinely want to live, work and spend time.

Despite improvements in the quality of outdoor public space in the last few decades, less progress has been made on the look and feel of the new buildings that surround that space. They are often generic and sterile. The result is a ‘blandification’ of our towns and cities: monotonous environments that create stress, bring people down and damage their health. The Humanise campaign is fighting for cities to be better than this, in ways that improve everyone’s life.

This guide uses the latest evidence to show how Mayors can create places that bring back joy and belonging.

As devolution unfolds across England, Mayors are uniquely placed to champion a bolder, human-centered approach to new buildings, either across the regions they lead or particular cities and towns. They can set a civic story, align public investment, convene the right partners and show what good looks like in practice. Their role is not to micromanage individual buildings, but to create the conditions in which characterful buildings and places become the norm rather than the exception – delivering healthy cities where people love where they live.



This guide sets out

THREE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAYORS



01. CRAFT AN AWESOME LONG-TERM VISION

Tell a compelling story about how you want your region, city or town to *feel* to people, reflecting its distinctive character. This vision should guide your Spatial Development Strategy and set expectations for uplifting new buildings.

02. EMBED DESIGN EXPERTISE AND WORK WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Bring design expertise – such as a City Architect – into your team to ensure new development delivers human-centred outcomes. Attract developers and investors who meet your standards and share your vision.

03. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Use your influence over public investment, land and procurement to create the conditions for good design. Deploy all the tools at your disposal, including incentives to encourage developers to make better buildings. Back a highly visible project to build momentum.

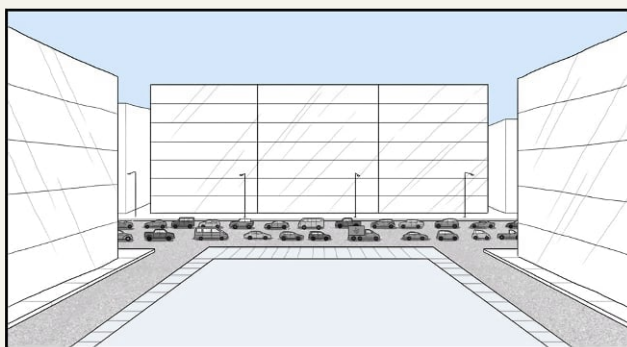
A NEW FRONTIER

for city-making

The UK's urban centres have seen important improvements in their public realm over the last few decades. Galvanised by the Urban Task Force and its focus on design-led regeneration, a concerted effort has been made to improve how the spaces between buildings, such as streets, squares and parks, feel to those who use them.

But while we may find the public realm more green, amenable and animated, the contrast between those enjoyable spaces and the often unwelcoming buildings that surround them can be stark. This does a disservice to communities as well as the investment made in outdoor spaces. What if we gave the exteriors of buildings the same care?

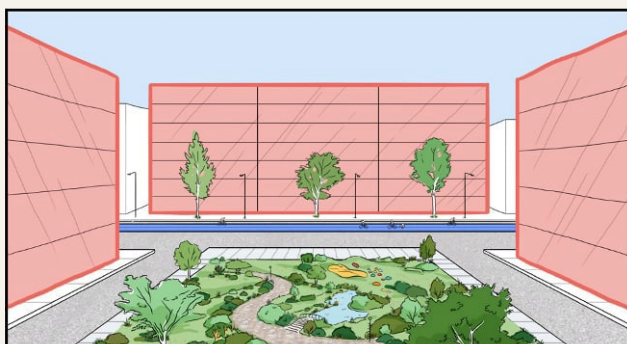
This means buildings that are more engaging to our eyes, with interesting shapes, materials and details. It means buildings that are full of character – the opposite of bland, monotonous blocks. For more on what joyful buildings can look like, see Resource 1 of this guide (page 46).



Bland, soulless buildings are making our cities less successful and sustainable.



Big steps have been made to improve the public realm with better pavements, segregated cycle lanes and more green space.



But what about the buildings themselves? They're the backdrop to our lives, yet they're the elephant in the room making so many places sterile and soulless.



By making the outsides of buildings more interesting, we can create cities where people feel valued and connected.



How you do it, and what it looks like, will be different in every place. It depends on the story of your city, and your vision for its future.



Whatever your version of joyful, engaging and human buildings looks like, it can bring positive health outcomes and long-term economic value.

THE PUBLIC CARES ABOUT BUILDINGS



The fronts of buildings form the backdrop to our daily lives. We spend significant time and effort finessing the interiors of where we live, work and play, but far more people experience those buildings' exteriors.

Recent research on English cities, for example, found that the buildings on Blackpool's Church Street, a major retail artery, had 2.5 million more passers-by each year than visitors going inside the buildings – a pattern replicated across the country.¹

In a survey of residents of post-war new towns,² 76% said that buildings should add character and visual interest to their towns. However, less than half said the buildings where they lived currently made them feel proud (46%) or valued (41%).

In a wider study of British public opinion, 69% agreed that society should invest in buildings that make us feel good as passers-by. Over half (52%) said they wanted to get involved with how buildings in their area look, but two-thirds (67%) said they feel powerless.³

¹ *Passing By or Going In?*, Space Syntax (Humanise, 2025), p.8

² *Can New Towns be Joy Towns?* (Humanise, 2025), p.6

³ *Boring or Interesting: You Decide* (Thinks Insight/Humanise, 2023), p.11, p.38, p.41

⁴ *Can New Towns Be Joy Towns?* p.2 (Humanise, 2025)

“I feel like buildings should be built as something that people are going to see in their day to day lives; it affects how you feel; it affects what you do; and I think that should be put into the decision process a bit more, because they’re going to be there for a long time these buildings. And it’s nicer to start with something beautiful that then gets a bit old and weathered, than something that was bad to start with and gets worse.”

PAUL, 31. REDDITCH⁴



Three imaginary high streets developed by Humanise, from *Can New Towns be Joy Towns?* (Humanise, 2025)

Illustrations by Heatherwick Studio. Image 1 (top/left) based on Create Streets image released by the Labour party June 2024

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Our communities face a range of interrelated challenges, from the affordability of housing to increasing social isolation, that have weakened the emotional connection people feel to their towns and cities. This erosion of belonging is exacerbated by the growing influence of technology on our lives.

Poorly designed buildings are also part of the problem, negatively affecting our wellbeing – with significant implications for public health. There is now a substantial body of scientific evidence to prove this, backing up what we all know intuitively.

A 2025 evidence review, synthesising over 80 recent studies, showed how buildings shape body, mind and behaviour.⁵ It found that “building proportions, façade enclosure and glazing patterns affect biomarkers such as heart rate, skin conductance and stress recovery.” Boring buildings caused measurable anxiety and stress. Characterful buildings did the opposite, creating emotional ease and engagement. Research shows that even babies as young as four months old are drawn to looking at visually complex buildings.⁶

Then there is the environmental impact of unloved buildings. In Britain 50,000 are bulldozed each year, a fact that 71% of the public think is unacceptable.⁷ There is a moral imperative to reduce this rate of demolition, when we consider the emissions involved in every clearance and rebuild. In reality, the greenest building is one that is never torn down but instead reused, because it is cherished by the public.

⁵ *Why the Outsides of Buildings Matter to Human Health: A Global Evidence Review*, Anna Kim (Humanise, 2025)

⁶ *From Babies and Architecture: Rethinking Design for the Next Generation*, Anna Franklin (University of Sussex/The Sussex Baby Lab, 2025)

⁷ *Boring or Interesting: You Decide*, p.32

BUILDINGS BRING US PRIDE

The Government acknowledged the public's dissatisfaction with urban centres, and developed a suite of programmes in response: the Pride in Place Programme, additional funding into renewing high streets, reforming the Planning Policy Framework, and committing to delivering the first seven of 12 new towns. Andy Burnham has pledged to make town centre development a cornerstone of his administration, alongside a huge council house-building push.

The design of these buildings can play a critical role. By creating buildings that connect with the public, we make streets where people want to linger, and more human, characterful cities as a whole – places that demonstrate care. The older parts of cities are often those that attract local pride, and larger numbers of tourists, because of the appearance of their buildings.⁸ Why can't new development give just as much character to our cities?

⁸ *Connecting People and Place: Valuing the Felt Experiences of Historic Places*, Rebecca Madgin, Adala Lesson, Catherine MacKenzie, Lucrezia Gigante and Ieuan Rees (AHRC Place-Based Research Programme Report, University of Glasgow, 2026)



THE POWER OF HUMANISED DEVELOPMENT

Human-centered (or humanised) development brings belonging, positive health outcomes and long-term economic value, as well as helping cities combat the climate crisis.



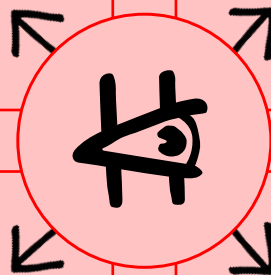
BELONGING

Buildings with character create a sense of belonging. Research shows that the stronger this feeling, the more likely people are to report good health.⁹ Communities become more resilient if they have an emotional connection to their cities and towns.



HEALTH

More joyful development can boost health and wellbeing – 76% of people in the UK think that the way buildings look affects their mental health.¹⁰ Visually engaging buildings help us think and feel better.



COMMERCIAL VALUE

Investment in design quality is repaid many times over. Housing schemes designated as “better designed” achieve an average sales value uplift of 75% compared to less well-designed schemes, accounting for other factors including location.¹¹



SUSTAINABILITY

Demolition and construction emit more carbon than aviation and shipping combined.¹² The average commercial building in the UK is demolished after only 40 years. If buildings are loved, they are likely to last longer – for the good of the planet.

⁹ *The Impact of Sense of Belonging on Health: Canadian Evidence*, Ian Allan, Mehdi Ammi and F. Antoine Dedewanou, in *Applied Economics* (Taylor & Francis, online 2024)

¹⁰ *Boring or Interesting: You Decide*, p.2

¹¹ *Building and Thriving: A Review of the Evidence Linking Building Design to Health and Wellbeing*, The New Economics Foundation (Humanise, 2023), p.20

¹² *Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap Technical Report* (UK Green Building Council, 2021)

CASE STUDY

UTRECHT

TREATING VISUAL
STIMULATION AS
A HEALTH ISSUE

Utrecht has embedded 'Healthy Urban Living' into its city policy, explicitly linking the appearance of its built environment to health, happiness and life expectancy. In the new Merwede development, this translates into a requirement for variation in width, height, material and architectural style across adjacent buildings, avoiding repetition and creating a stimulating collage of visual texture. Double-height ground floors reduce the feel of top-heavy buildings and create generous, flexible spaces for commerce and community use. Visual interest is not a trivial extra, but a key part of the city's health and wellbeing strategy.

Plan for Merwede district in Utrecht
Image: Marc Koehler Associates



CASE STUDY

SYDNEY

INTEGRATING NATURE INTO BUILDINGS

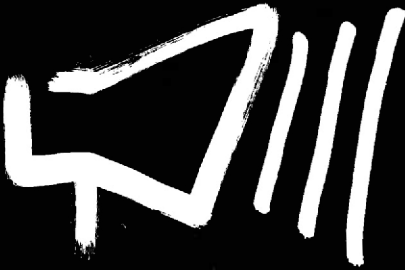
Sydney's One Central Park is an example of a residential building becoming more human and joyful through the incorporation of nature. Its two towers integrate more than 300 Australian plant species across their exterior, creating a changing surface of colour, texture and movement. This kind of 'vertical greenery' does more than support biodiversity, air quality and cooling: it also brings visual interest to people passing by, showing how buildings can contribute sensory richness and delight at the scale people actually experience them, rather than acting as inert backdrops to urban life.

One Central Park, Sydney by Ateliers Jean
Nouvel / PTW Architects / ASPECT|OCULUS
Image: Simon Wood





WHY MAYORS CAN LEAD THE CHANGE



Of course, no architect, policymaker or long-term investor would intentionally seek to build unattractive or alienating buildings. No-one argues openly against quality and joy in new developments.

But that doesn't make it easy to achieve, in a climate where development viability is often marginal, and when there can be an absence of the culture, systems and expertise to procure good design. Caution becomes a barrier, a preference for the safe and familiar over anything distinctive. An interesting façade can be seen as 'nice to have' but expensive, even in high-value locations.

We believe that we can overcome this cautious approach. Well-established evidence demonstrates that joyful buildings command a premium, often let and sell faster, and retain value better than those of poorer quality – in addition to their positive social and health impacts on cities.¹³ For assets held over the long-term (such as offices, retail and build-to-rent residential), quality creates higher occupation and increasing rents over time.



“Investing in human-centred design, even at a marginal upfront premium, strengthens a city’s competitiveness for decades. It’s not idealistic. It’s not sentimental. It’s simply smart business.”

Midori Omori
Mori Building Company

¹³ *The Value of Urban Design* (Commission for the Built Environment, 2001)



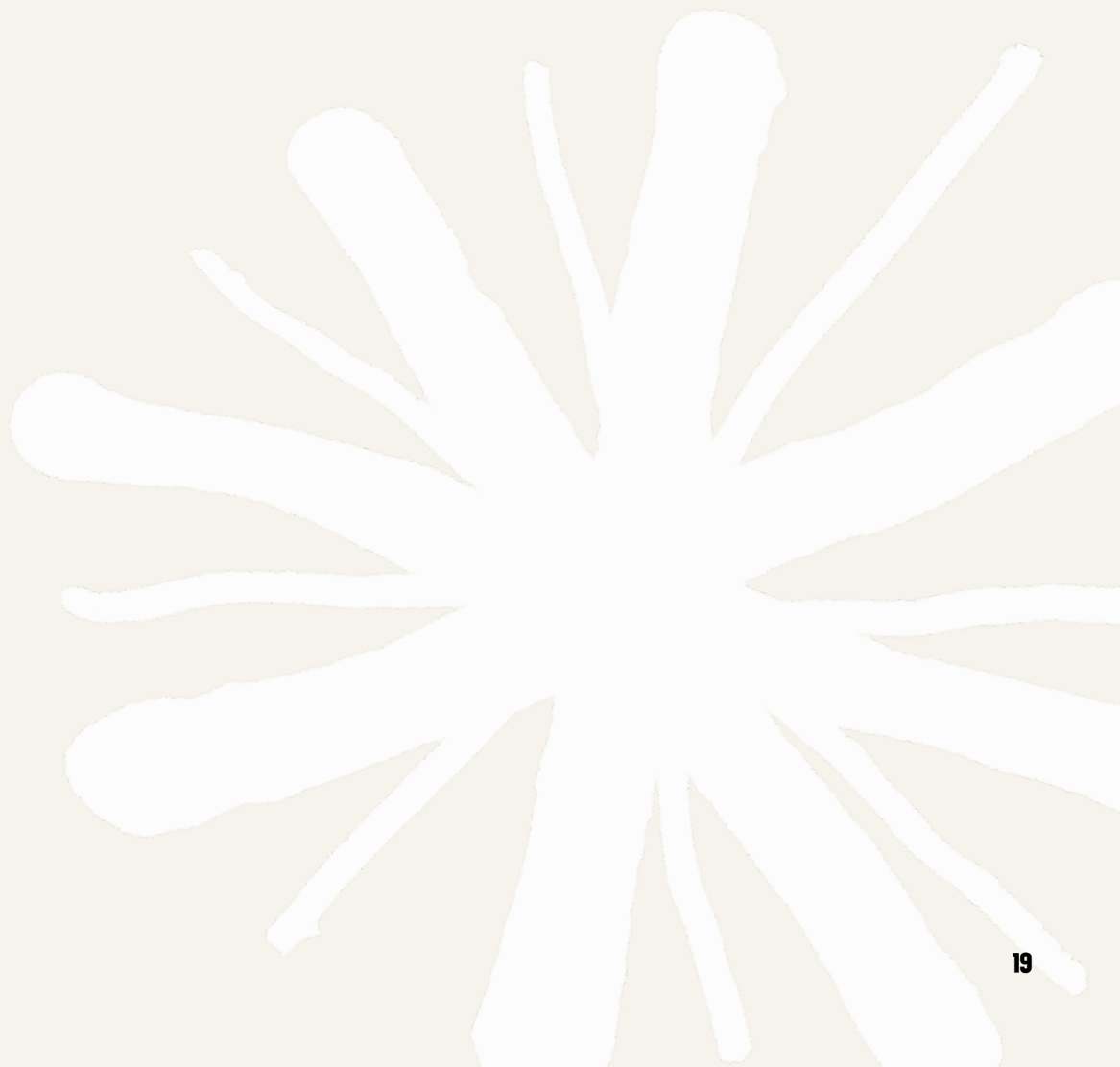
**DEVOLUTION
CAN BUILD
BACK JOY**



Today, there is a huge opportunity for Mayors to be bold in their vision for cities, and combat the 'blandemic' of boring buildings, cookie-cutter development and identikit streets.

There are ample initiatives on the policy agenda to support this. At the heart of the Government's growth plan has been a set of ambitious development targets – 1.5 million new homes, seven prioritised New Towns and a raft of transport infrastructure projects. With devolution now a national principle, Mayors and their teams sit at the heart of delivering housing and regeneration plans, finding themselves under pressure to show that devolved delivery can outperform Whitehall's own record.

Humanised development can be a visible expression of devolution's success.



MAYORS CAN PULL FOUR LEVERS:

1. VISION AND STRATEGY

Setting place expectations through regional and city strategies, growth plans, regeneration frameworks and public messaging.



2. PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Attaching design expectations to transport, housing, land, infrastructure and regeneration funding.



3. CONVENING POWER

Bringing together councils, developers, investors, cultural institutions, communities and design experts around a shared ambition.



4. DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Using Mayoral sites, partnerships or pilot neighbourhoods to prove that interesting, human buildings can be delivered at scale.



CASE STUDY

COPENHAGEN

CODIFYING ACTIVE, ENGAGING BUILDING FRONTS

Copenhagen is one of the clearest examples of a city turning human-centred design into concrete building rules. The city's 'A Metropolis for People' plan argued that open and active ground floors were a precondition for well-functioning urban life, and under Mayor Frank Jensen (2010-20) these principles were codified into local plans. Higher-than-standard ceilings, frequent doorways, human-scale detailing and public amenity were encouraged or required in new ground floors, to strengthen the connection between buildings and people. This shows that buildings do not emerge by accident: cities can write expectations directly into policy.

Axel Towers by Lundgaard & Tranberg Arkitekter
Image: Rasmus Hjortshøj



CASE STUDY

PARIS

IGNITING IMAGINATION THROUGH A PUBLIC COMPETITION

Mayor Anne Hidalgo (2014-26) launched the 'Reinventing Paris' competition to change the conversation about what new buildings should look and feel like. Instead of development proposals being assessed behind closed doors, the city opened up 23 public sites to a visible competition that prioritised design innovation. This created a wider civic debate about buildings and produced schemes such as Morland Mixité Capitale, where an austere existing complex was humanised through a new vaulted arcade. Paris shows how Mayoral leadership can excite the public and raise expectations by putting design ambition front and centre.



Morland Mixité Capitale
by David Chipperfield Architects
Image: Simon Menges



Highgate Newtown Community Centre by RKCa
Image: Jim Stephenson



We have developed three core recommendations to help Mayors ensure their cities attract the right kind of development –

**DEVELOPMENT
THAT IS HUMAN
AND BENEFITS
COMMUNITIES**

RECOMMENDATION 1:**CRAFT AN
AWESOME
LONG-TERM VISION**

As Chief Storytellers, Mayors have immense soft power to lead a public conversation about the evolution of their areas. A strong Mayoral vision goes beyond describing outputs such as new homes, jobs or transport to share the kinds of experiences citizens will have in their city or town, and how growth will strengthen local identity and belonging.

Mayors have an immediate opportunity to create an ambitious, long-term vision for their region through their Spatial Development Strategy (SDS), a new requirement introduced by the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. This vision should set rules and expectations for development, and attract developers who reflect its ambition for quality.

A good civic story should define what makes the region, city or town special, what kind of place it will become, and how good growth can contribute to people's sense of pride. Specifically, it should:

- define what is distinctive about the city and what must not be lost
- describe how new development should feel
- set expectations for buildings, ground floors, streets, public life, materials, character and stewardship.



WHAT TO DO:

01. CRAFT A STRONG, COMPELLING VISION FOR YOUR CITY

02. WORK WITH COMMUNITIES

Set up an Urban Room or a festival that engages the public in decisions about how their city should grow and feel

03. TRANSLATE THESE DISCUSSIONS INTO A SET OF NON-NEGOTIABLE EXPECTATIONS FOR FUTURE GROWTH



“At its best, city making is a statement of a city’s values”

Clover Moore
Mayor of Sydney

CASE STUDY

URBAN ROOMS

CREATING A SHARED CIVIC VISION

Urban Rooms provide a dedicated space for communities to engage with the future of their city, helping recast high-level ambitions into a shared civic story. First championed by the Farrell Review in 2013, they have now been adopted across England as a way to bring citizens, professionals and decision-makers into an ongoing dialogue about place. Some Urban Rooms are permanent, such as the Farrell Centre in Newcastle, while others are more flexible, like Folkestone's mobile Urban Room, which moves between locations to reach different communities. Through exhibitions and events, they allow people to guide development, and can help Mayors build a widely owned vision grounded in local identity and everyday experience.



Farrell Centre Urban Room
Image: Jim Stephenson

CASE STUDY

THE OSLO ARCHITECTURE TRIENNALE

STAGING A FESTIVAL

An accessible design festival can grab the media and public's attention, creating healthy debate about the future of the city. The Oslo Architecture Triennale is one of Europe's most effective examples. Each edition is built around a single curatorial theme, delivered through exhibitions, debates, publications, competitions and events over roughly ten weeks. It turns building design into a shared civic issue, not a specialist discussion behind closed doors. Its 2022 edition *Mission Neighbourhood* focused on friendly, human-scaled environments, while its 2026 edition *What if Nature Comes First?* explores how biodiversity can be sustained by development.

Bispevika apartments, Oslo by Vandkunsten
Image: Damian Heinisch



RECOMMENDATION 2:

EMBED DESIGN EXPERTISE...

Design understanding needs to be embedded into decision-making: it strengthens a Mayor's ability to champion an interesting, successful city. Mayors should establish senior, permanent roles to steward design quality, ensuring everyday development decisions are grounded in human experience and long-term thinking.¹⁴

This may take the form of a City Architect, Chief Design Officer or a cross-disciplinary team of design advisors. The exact model matters less than making sure an individual or team is clearly responsible for discussing what the ambition means in practice, protecting design quality and translating the Mayor's vision into live decisions. Design leadership should help the Mayoral team:

- advocate for visual complexity in the design of buildings
- codify Humanise principles in local plans, and the suite of design tools and processes they require from applicants
- review major schemes
- support and challenge local authorities and delivery partners
- connect architecture, landscape, transport, culture, heritage and public health rather than treating them separately.





WHAT TO DO:

**01. APPOINT A CITY ARCHITECT
OR A CHIEF DESIGN OFFICER**

**02. ESTABLISH A ROUTINE DESIGN REVIEW
PROCESS FOR MAJOR PROJECTS
WITH MAYORAL SUPPORT**

**03. REQUIRE OFFICERS TO ASSESS DESIGN
DECISIONS ACCORDING TO THE
HUMANISE PRINCIPLES**



CASE STUDY

MALMÖ

NOMINATING A CITY ARCHITECT AS LONG-TERM STEWARD

In Malmö, the City Architect oversees architectural quality across the full lifecycle of development. The role spans strategy, policy and individual schemes, with a clear mandate to influence outcomes. Under this model, the City Architect ensures that ambitions around quality are maintained as projects move through planning, procurement and construction. The focus is not only on flagship schemes but everyday buildings. Because the role sits within government and works across departments in Malmö, it can align political ambition, planning decisions and delivery mechanisms.



“My job includes advising Malmö’s Mayor and planning committee, helping them to form their agenda, and communicating this to developers, architects and the public. On a typical day I will be working on everything from the detail of an individual planning application to the principles for a major masterplan, to redesigning our strategies for procuring architects or how we develop public land. It’s very wide-ranging.”

Finn Williams
Malmö City Architect



Malmö Saluhall by Wingårdh.
Image: André Pihl

CASE STUDY

LYON

CONTROLLING ARCHITECT CHOICE TO AVOID BAD BUILDINGS

Lyon's city centre development, La Confluence, shows how design expertise can protect architectural quality across a major regeneration area. The city did not allow developers to select designers independently; instead, they appointed world-class lead architects, who then compiled a pool of forward-thinking design firms for developers to choose from. The final sale of land was conditional on planning approval for building designs. This reduced the risk of standards being watered down late in the process under time or cost pressure. The resulting district includes inventive building façades, appearing varied and porous to people passing by.

La Confluence, Lyon
Image: dvoevnore



RECOMMENDATION 2:**...AND WORK
WITH THE
RIGHT PEOPLE**

Seek out developers who share your vision. Who builds the city matters. Mayors should proactively identify and attract the developers that suit their vision and standards. Mayoral Combined Authorities can incentivise these partners to create characterful buildings that feel meaningful to people. Barriers can be removed to help developers deliver.

Building partnerships with people who genuinely share a region's vision is the most effective way to create positive change. Collaborations grounded in mutual understanding offer private sector partners certainty and trust, and are far more effective than vague mandates or inconsistent requirements. It's an approach that attracts long-term 'patient capital' rather than quick returns with corners cut.

WHAT TO DO:

01. MAP THE DEVELOPERS, INVESTORS, HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS MOST ACTIVE IN YOUR CITY OR REGION

02. IDENTIFY THOSE WITH A RECORD OF LONG-TERM STEWARDSHIP, DELIVERY OF DESIGN QUALITY OR PATIENT CAPITAL

and ideally all three

03. CREATE EARLY-MARKET CONVERSATIONS AROUND VISION AND STORY

not only density, viability and programme

CASE STUDY

VIENNA

ENCOURAGING BETTER
HOUSING THROUGH
A MIXED MODEL

Vienna's influential limited-profit housing associations prove that better everyday buildings depend on who is delivering them and how they are financed. Because these associations can only make a small profit and must reinvest surpluses, they invest more into meeting competition criteria that explicitly value visual appearance as well as social and environmental sustainability. Their projects' high quality of design also encourages better standards in for-profit developments – an example being the new Grünblick Tower, where wrap-around concrete balconies vary rhythmically in depth and length.

Gleis 21 by einszueins arkitektur
Image: Hertha Hurnaus



CASE STUDY

COPENHAGEN

ATTACHING DESIGN EXPECTATIONS TO LAND DISPOSAL

Copenhagen's publicly owned development company, By & Havn, acts as a master developer, putting infrastructure in place to raise a plot's value and then using land disposal to shape the kind of buildings that get delivered. Before sites are sold, bidding developers are offered incentives for better design: green roofs can reduce tax burdens, and a strong façade may help secure permission for additional floors. Copenhagen shows that cities do not have to rely on developers' goodwill alone – they can bake in humanised design before the land changes hands.

The Silo by Cobe
Image: Rasmus Hjortshøj



RECOMMENDATION 3:

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

The quality of the urban environment is a physical expression of a city's story. Accepting blandness in publicly funded schemes sends a message that the bare minimum is good enough.

Mayors have considerable convening power, and can use it to create conditions that make humanised design the commercial norm. Mayors can incentivise developers in many practical ways: for example, through early engagement, planning certainty, time savings, targeted flexibility, public recognition and access to public land.

However, where Mayors have the most direct control, and can therefore make significant impact, is in how they deploy their own investment, procurement and assets – either directly or via new Mayoral Development Corporations.

Mayors should commit to using their assets and investments to realise better development. A simple starting point could be to embed humanised outcomes within their development specifications – and ensuring these translate into procurement criteria. This sends a clear market signal and allows partners to 'price in' good design, knowing it increases their chances of successful bids.

Using this approach does not require more money; rather that investment is focused on criteria that will boost wellbeing. This approach ensures funds contribute positively to public good. If delivered consistently across the public asset and investment portfolio, the scale of impact can encourage other landowners and investors to follow suit.

USE PUBLIC FUNDING TO PROVE THE CONCEPT

When regional and city Mayors spend public money, they set the standard. There are now specific opportunities for Mayors to use new streams of public investment, such as the City Investment Fund and City Densification Fund, to lead by example. This means insisting on new building design that is characterful, works at the scale of the street and the door – where it has most impact on the public – and applies long-term approaches instead of quick fixes.

Mayors can work with communities on the use of capital funding through the Government's Pride in Place fund, to make individual neighbourhoods more human and engaging. Small-scale investments in community buildings and infrastructure can make people feel valued in a relatively short timeframe.

Kidbrooke Park Road by HTA for Greenwich Council
Image: HTA





WHAT TO DO:

01. **DEPLOY FUTURE FUNDING TO PROJECTS THAT DEMONSTRATE HUMANISED DESIGN**



02. **REVISE PROCUREMENT PROCESSES**

so that design quality and human-centered outcomes carry meaningful weight alongside deliverability and cost

03. **REQUIRE BIDDERS TO EXPLAIN HOW PROPOSALS IMPROVE STREET-LEVEL EXPERIENCE**

04. **USE PUBLIC LAND AND PILOT FUNDING TO BACK HIGHLY VISIBLE DEMONSTRATOR PROJECTS**

which can prove great design is commercially and politically possible

05. **REQUIRE POST-COMPLETION SURVEYS TO MEASURE WIDER PUBLIC SENTIMENT**





Edgewood Mews by Peter Barber Architects
Image: Asif Salman



CASE STUDY

LONDON

PUBLIC FUNDING TO PROVE BETTER BUILDINGS

London's Affordable Housing Programme shows how public funding can be used to prioritise design quality as a core requirement, not an optional extra. At Edgewood Mews in Finchley, grant funding has supported distinctive brick façades, varied forms and strong street-level engagement, arranged around a pedestrianised mews designed to foster social interaction. When money is tied to clear design expectations, it is possible to deliver – within real constraints – buildings that are more characterful, socially engaging and human in scale.

Edgewood Mews by Peter Barber Architects
Images: Asif Salman



CASE STUDY

SEOUL

USING SUBSIDIES
TO SHAPE BUILDING
CHARACTER

Seoul's Seongdong district demonstrates how financial support can actively shape buildings that make the public proud. As part of the transformation of Seongdong from a declining industrial area into a major cultural and commercial district, the local authority introduced a 'Red Brick Building Support Project' to extend the area's architectural identity. Direct subsidies to building owners covered up to half of construction or renovation costs (capped at 20 million won) for red brick façades, a key feature of the area's industrial heritage. This backing created a coherent 'urban brand' that blended old and new, attracting creative businesses. Seongdong shows that targeted subsidies, if tied to design principles, can move cities towards more distinctive, locally meaningful architecture.

B.Round by Sosu Architects. Image: Kyung Roh





CONCLUSION

The case for joyful, human buildings takes seriously what decades of evidence – and common sense – already tell us: that the buildings around us shape how we feel, how healthy we are, and how successful our cities become.

Mayors cannot design every building. But they can make interesting, joyful buildings the standard rather than an exceptional outcome. Through a compelling city vision, having the right people in the right roles, and the deliberate use of public investment, incentives and convening power, Mayors can shift the conditions in which buildings get built. By doing so, they improve what their cities feel like and whether they prosper.

The moment is now.



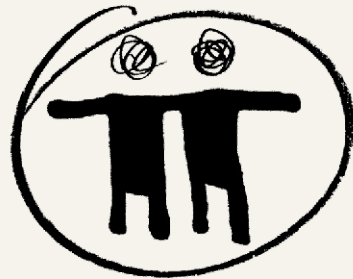
“Homes built now will last for generations. They will be the settings in which children grow up and lives are lived. It should be fundamental that these places help people flourish, rather than exist as mere units of accommodation.”

Rowan Moore
The Observer



RESOURCE 1:

WHAT MAKES A BUILDING INTERESTING, JOYFUL AND HUMAN?



1. IT'S INTERESTING FROM THREE DISTANCES

A humanised building is distinctive as a silhouette on the horizon or viewed at a distance (city distance). It catches the attention of passers-by when seen from a few metres away (street distance). For those who approach (door distance), smaller-scale elements, such as an expressive entrance canopy or a quirky door knocker, give the building its own character.

2. IT'S VARIED

Some building facades are homogenous – such as a city skyscrapers clad in glazed curtain walling. Human buildings incorporate variation: changes in shape, differences in texture, or variety in the materials they're built with.

3. IT HAS DETAIL

Instead of being made up of flat planes, the building has details that repay your attention. Interesting door handles, letter boxes, window reveals and lift buttons that each add extra interest – positioned where they can be experienced by as many people as possible.

4. IT USES INTERESTING MATERIALS

Humanised buildings might use materials that are interesting or unusual, such as ceramic tiles, bricks laid in a distinctive pattern or railings that show signs of how they were forged. Materials that show their age gracefully remain engaging once they're no longer new.

5. IT HAS CRAFT

Humanised buildings often look like they've been made by real people. They might even offer clues about the techniques used. Perhaps the stonework bears the marks of the mason's chisel, or there might be timber cladding that curves around a corner beautifully, or tiles that look handmade.

6. IT TELLS STORIES

There might be elements of the building that relate to where it is, or what was there before, or the specific characteristics of the area. This could mean an eaves detail that echoes those found in local architecture, or the use of local stone that speaks of a city's proud heritage.

7. IT INVOLVES NATURE

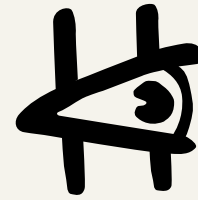
This is more than potted trees placed outside front doors. Planting might be integrated into the building fabric (in balconies, roofs or 'living walls'). Or there might be more subtle references to the natural world – through organic shapes and patterns, or the use of materials like wood.

8. IT'S PLAYFUL

Playful buildings delight us and stay in the memory. They might include unexpected colours, elements or details – something that doesn't take itself too seriously.

**RESOURCE 2:**

THE HUMANISE PRINCIPLES



The five Humanise Principles are a practical tool that brings a people-centred perspective to development. They can help inform decisions about design and investment, allow better conversations with developers and communities, and ultimately help deliver more joyful, engaging and human buildings.

Mayors and their teams should review development plans through these five principles:

1. EMOTION AS A FUNCTION OF DESIGN

Development is not neutral. Mayors need to acknowledge the emotional role buildings have in boosting pride, health and wellbeing. People want to spend time in places that make them feel good and connected to their community. The way that places look and feel are crucial elements in nurturing attachment and belonging.

2. PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

New development in cities makes people nervous – and they often feel locked out of the conversation about what is getting built. A different type of dialogue is needed: one where the public feel confident, welcome and heard. That needs to take place both at the level of individual sites and across cities as a whole.

3. VISUAL COMPLEXITY

Dull and monotonous development is bad for our bodies, our brains and our behaviour. Mayors need to encourage developers to design sufficient visual complexity into the façades of buildings to ensure streets are visually engaging to the passer-by. This could take the form of adding different types of detail, texture, materiality, forms and patterns at the street and door level, which together can work to reduce stress and make us think and feel better. This creates places that deliver on character, pride and distinctiveness – goals in the Government's Planning Policy Framework.

4. DOOR AND STREET SCALE

Mayors should prioritise the human experience of development at the street level and at the scale people actually experience buildings – entrances, ground floors, edges and thresholds. Buildings should reward close attention and support safety, interest and wellbeing at walking pace.

5. 1,000-YEAR THINKING

Mayors are custodians of a relatively small chapter in the long history of a city. They have an opportunity to ensure new development stands the test of time. There is a need to protect existing heritage in cities but also to create new heritage cherished by future generations, delivering on the long-term vision for a city. Mayors should work with developers who are committed to investing in a city over the long-term.

RESOURCE 3:

A SIMPLE TEST FOR ALL MAJOR SCHEMES



Mayoral teams can ask seven questions when reviewing significant developments:

- 1. WOULD LOCAL PEOPLE FEEL PROUD TO POINT THIS PLACE OUT TO A VISITOR?**
- 2. DOES IT STRENGTHEN THE DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY OF THE AREA, OR COULD IT BE ANYWHERE?**
- 3. IS THE STREET-LEVEL EXPERIENCE INTERESTING, SAFE, ACTIVE AND HUMAN?**
- 4. WHAT WILL PEOPLE NOTICE AT WALKING PACE, ESPECIALLY AROUND ENTRANCES AND GROUND FLOORS?**
- 5. WILL THE BUILDINGS AGE WELL AND STILL BE VALUED IN SEVERAL DECADES' TIME?**
- 6. DOES THE SCHEME INCLUDE NATURE, COMFORT, SOCIABILITY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVERYDAY DELIGHT?**
- 7. IS QUALITY EMBEDDED IN DELIVERY AND STEWARDSHIP, NOT ONLY IN THE INITIAL VISUALISATION?**

If a scheme cannot answer these questions convincingly, it is unlikely to be creating full public value.

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Campaigning for more joyful buildings and cities

The Humanise campaign is a global movement calling for more joyful, engaging and human buildings and cities. Inspired by Thomas Heatherwick's book *Humanise: A Maker's Guide to Building our World*, we're drawing on a growing body of research which proves that the buildings around us affect our health and wellbeing, our economies and the planet. We're inspiring everyone to recognise that what's around us, shapes us – and to demand buildings which lift us up, connect us and bring us joy.

Find out more and join the movement at humanise.org