

The Flow of Urban Life – a podcast by KONE – Transcript

Episode 3: What makes urban life worth living?

Kristen Jeffers [00:00:02]

A good city to me is that variety, right around the corner from here, kind of outside of like the redeveloped area. In an old parking lot, we have a night market for about six months out of the year, basically because of our weather. You go to that night market and there's empanadas, there's Ethiopian cuisine, there's pizza, there's southern fried chicken, there's pottery, there's a performer. It's right across the plaza from a major supermarket. It's right next to our metro station. And it's at night, so that if people are working during the day or they're going to work at night, then it's there for them, and we've activated the street at night.

Denise Wall [00:00:43]

Wherever you are in the world, there's a good chance that you're one of the 4.4 billion people living in a city.

Sam Kingsley [00:00:50]

And even that number is set to grow massively by the middle of this century.

Denise Wall [00:00:55]

Join us on a journey to understand the changing way we live, work, learn and even play in cities.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:01]

We're going to explore how we can make sure that our urban environments serve all kinds of people at all stages of life, today and in the future.

Female announcer [00:01:13]

The next stop is the flow of urban life.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:19]

I'm Sam Kingsley.

Denise Wall [00:01:21]

And I'm Denise Wall.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:22]

And today, we're going to talk about what we mean when we say that a city is a great place to live. Denise, what's your number one city?

Denise Wall [00:01:31]

Well, you've put me on the spot, but I have not one, but three. I'll start with Bucharest. I've never lived there, only visited some years ago, but I really was charmed by the warmth of the people there. And then for number two, I'm going to go with Paris because, of course, it's an iconic city and so beautiful.

Sam Kingsley [00:01:52]

But is it somewhere you'd want to live?

Denise Wall [00:01:55]

I don't know. I'd have to try it to see. And I do know about one place that I do love, the Port of Spain, that's from my country.

Sam Kingsley [00:02:03]

In Trinidad?

Denise Wall [00:02:05]

That's right, Trinidad and Tobago. And I know what it's like to live there, and I just thoroughly enjoy the vibrancy of the people and the whole scene, the energy of the place is something that I love.

Sam Kingsley [00:02:17]

Yeah, I can imagine. Well, I live in Helsinki, and that often ranks really highly in these kind of best cities, best countries to live in. And it's funny because every morning when I'm making my way to work in the dark and the freezing cold between October and about April, I think to myself, is this really liveable? But that's what we're going to talk about today, isn't it?

Denise Wall [00:02:41]

That's right: we all love a listing. But I think the question we have to ask ourselves, really, is are those cities really the most liveable for everyone? And our guest today is Kristin Jeffers. She's a renowned urbanist, activist, business coach, writer and a fellow podcaster. Kristin joins us from the US to talk about what makes urban life worth living. Hi, Kristin, and welcome.

Kristen Jeffers [00:03:08]

Hi, thank you for having me. It's so great to join you all from DC.

Denise Wall [00:03:11]

You describe yourself as a black, queer, feminist urbanist. Tell us a bit more about what that perspective means when it comes to thinking about cities.

Kristen Jeffers [00:03:22]

Well, I think especially when we get more into the conversation about ranking, so much of that is based on a persona. And, of course, those of us who've done marketing work know that you're encouraged to create a persona when you're marketing a product or you're creating an entity. And so many of this movement of city creation these days is, oh, let's think about creating a city for families or creating a city for singles. There's an implied universal human there that generally does not match what I see when I'm in the mirror. So, I have said, okay, I'm going to think about what it means to be Afro-descendant, Afro-descendant in the United States.

I'm going to think about what it means to be a person who is pansexual and fem-presenting but non-binary and gender fluid. I'm going to think about what that means as someone who

has a chronic illness and doesn't always have the same mobility, and that disability is dynamic. And those things factor into where I want to live, how I can live, everything from can we make seating that fits certain bodies, because my body has changed size. I have a, you know, certain skin colour, my hair is curly and it's a curly in a certain way and not everybody is ready to do that. I wear glasses and, you know, there's certain helmets, like there's all these factors that come into, can I live in this universal city?

Denise Wall [00:05:00]

I think you make a super interesting point, Kristen, because if I apply what you're saying to these rankings, it seems to me that they have been developed with a very specific kind of individual in mind and not necessarily a very broad and universal set of people or a very representative set of criteria.

Sam Kingsley [00:05:23]

I'm gonna put you both on the spot now, Kristen and Denise. I'm going to read out a list of cities, and I want you to tell me what they have in common. Here we go. The list is Vienna, Copenhagen, Melbourne, Sydney, and Vancouver. Any ideas?

Denise Wall [00:05:42]

Kristin, you go first.

Kristen Jeffers [00:05:43]

I'm thinking access to, like, a significant water feature or public waterfront.

Sam Kingsley [00:05:47]

That is absolutely something they all have in common.

Denise Wall [00:05:49]

Yeah.

Sam Kingsley [00:05:50]

And that might well be something behind the reason that they're all in this group that I'm presenting to you. Well, I'll put you out of your misery, these are the top 5 cities this year on the global liveability ranking by the Economist Intelligence Unit. So, this is one of the big global listings of the cities with the highest quality of life, so this one is a ranking of 140 cities. For each one, they give a score for stability, healthcare, culture, environment, education and infrastructure. There are actually quite a few other indices like this as well. Monocle magazine has one. This year, the top cities of that one are Vienna, Copenhagen, Munich, Zurich, Stockholm. So, I think you can sort of tell where I'm going here that it is often the same ones that are at the top of these rankings. Kristin, what do you make of these kind of quality of life lists?

Kristen Jeffers [00:06:56]

It's like, I appreciate how much they are global in a sense, but of course, you can't not think about how there are places that are missing that may not be missing because they are lacking quality of life, but they're missing because of a bias against what we think needs to be on an index of quality of life. Now, one city that I am familiar with on all those lists is

Vancouver. I've been, and I can't wait to get back again and I almost moved there. And yes, I do want to highlight for some people there are still biases on things of people of the global majority, like if it's not white and European, then it's not sufficient enough, and I think we have to think about how that idea comes into these rankings.

Denise Wall [00:07:53]

Now, Kristin, you've actually built your own index. It's a black, queer, feminist, urban index. Can you tell us a bit more about that and what's your perspective on how to define a great city through that prism?

Kristen Jeffers [00:08:08]

So, basically what I did was I looked at the things that I wanted. And for me, it was: can I go to work and can I disclose my full identity at work? Is me being black and queer going to be a problem at work? And will I be able to make enough money to make the living wage? I come from the US Black Church. Are those spaces inclusive of me, not just as a black human, but as a queer human? Access to nature, access to bookstores and libraries. I'm a crocheter, so fibercraft is my most important hobby, and I've actually expanded that out to, like, hobby spaces.

And so the first draft of the index kind of looked at the things that I needed, and then I looked at cities across the United States, and I said, okay, these are the cities. They do have to have public transportation, they do have to have housing, they do have to have a critical mass of black women. And, of course, our census has not evolved to include other genders, so I'm gonna go with the one I align the most closely with, which is womanhood and I'm like, do they have a critical mass of black women in this metro area? And in fact, under that index, my home region actually lines up. This was also prompted by the Bloomberg City Lab. They ranked cities based on black women's liveability.

They found that certain cities were tops in employment and healthcare and education, but I'm like, well, what about all the other amenities, like, what about can I go and worship in peace? Are nature spaces open and welcoming to black and even feminine bodies? Can people walk on trails and not feel like they're going to be street harassed or think that someone is there targeting them for sexual assault. That was the thinking I was building on this index, and now version 3.0, as I like to call it, has expanded even more into just kind of a human rights measure.

Denise Wall [00:10:15]

American cities very rarely feature at the top of these most liveable city rankings. Do you have any ideas as to why that might be?

Kristen Jeffers [00:10:24]

I hear these horror stories of Americans who die because they can't get surgeries or they're on longer waiting lists, there's no universal health care. Like, how does that happen? We don't have universal paid leave for parents. Like, there's certain things that are guaranteed in other nations, and especially nations that consider themselves to be, like, global economies, and we're missing those things. It's like, yeah, we're generating the income. We

have the capacity, we have the capability, but we haven't built that infrastructure. That infrastructure is missing.

Sam Kingsley [00:11:05]

I'm really interested to ask you, Kristen, while you were compiling this index of liveability through that black, feminist, queer perspective, what did you learn about what city authorities and maybe other groups, what should they be doing more of to make for more liveable cities?

Kristen Jeffers [00:11:25]

I mean, we do not need to be afraid of taxing our corporate tax base. Often in US cities, we will give massive global conglomerates incentive. Like, we won't charge them taxes, because the idea is that they're going to give jobs to people. But a lot of times there's no floor to how much that they can be paid, and then they don't pay into our municipal tax systems. So, there's not a base of income to pull from. Now, some entities, like yeah, people have been looking at the Amazon example, the municipality around them and the state jurisdiction around them has put stipulations on how much incentive they can get, they have to provide community benefits.

So far, they've built a park. So far, they're paying for an extra entrance to our Metro rail system. Of course, they're helping facilitate the process of having a pedestrian connection to the Washington National Airport, which they're adjacent to, but that's not common. Most of the time, these organizations and a lot of city government leaders are afraid to ask for the right payout amounts. And right now, at least at the federal level, there have been some infrastructure investments. But we're battling that many of the investments are going into interstates, highways, like autobahn-type infrastructure versus filling out our bus systems, filling out our rail, regional rail systems, creating 24-hour transit, making sure the sidewalks are clear. But that comes under local government, and local government: do not be afraid of what it takes to support people.

Sam Kingsley [00:13:17]

Is there also something in the way that cities are designed and the way we're building that can contribute to making them more equitable and better places to live?

Kristen Jeffers [00:13:28]

Yeah, we need to not be afraid of managing when vehicles can access the city. I think we need to go back to making smaller vehicles. I love seeing what the UPS, United Parcel Services, is piloting where they're using cargo bikes. They still have the little box. On the back, the iconic brown box, but it's on a smaller scale. And then there's this other little smaller cab where it's like the little flatbed, but it's smaller, and it fits in in cities. So, definitely, I think the biases on human rights, and how we treat people and how we see people as human do make a difference in what we decide to draw, plan, and enact in our cities. But yes, smaller streets that are available for pedestrians and bicyclists, people-powered streets, public transit, preferably underground or at least not disturbing the street areas. All kinds of housing, especially like, even if you're doing multifamily, we're lacking three, four, and five bedroom units.

We're demonizing those families instead of saying, okay, you need more than two bedrooms in an apartment. It seems like we're making apartments smaller because we want to make housing a commodity, and if you're poor you're supposed to just live in a modern tenement. We should build for all sizes of people and all mobility devices and so, yeah, ramps, elevators and lifts. Clear sight lines, multiple languages, everything from braille to CART captionings and the different sign languages.

Denise Wall [00:15:11]

I'm intrigued by the model of the 15-minute city. All the amenities that a person living in a neighbourhood would need being within walking, or biking, or public transportation reach in 15 minutes. And this is an approach that's generating a lot of buzz here in Europe, but in other parts of the world as well, for example, in Asia. And I know that biking and walking are close to your heart, it's been part of your life since you were a child, but how do you see this model being applied? Do you think that there are some places where it just won't work?

Kristen Jeffers [00:15:48]

Honestly, I think people need to think of the 15-minute city as a village. We're going back to village creation. And what doesn't work like before because I have my doubts, I'm like, okay, well it seems like at least in the States living in a 15-minute city comes at an economic premium. But that's only going back to policy choice. It absolutely works for everybody, but what we have to be ready to do is accept that we're going to have a variety of sizes, income levels, but the over-capitalization of this concept of 15-minute cities and villages, that's where the failure seeps in.

Sam Kingsley [00:16:29]

Yeah, that's really interesting to hear you talk about that because I suppose it sort of speaks to a bigger issue here in the Nordics. It's quite often said that, well, one reason the Nordics always score so well in these sort of liveability rankings is because you have very low population density, you've got a lot of space, people have generally quite a collective mindset, they like to look after their local environments, if I compare it to London where I'm from, where there's a lot more, sort of risk of things being vandalized if they're let out in public. So, I mean, what do you think about that? How much can one city kind of copy another city's success?

Kristen Jeffers [00:17:09]

I think it's, yeah, we do need to copy each other's success. I want to bring into the conversation, like, I was reading in The Guardian about how that West African cluster of urbanization right now is going to be the top population center within the next few years. But what happens is there's no collaboration between borders, sometimes there's a contiguous city, then the border drops off, then you have to get a passport and everything. There's not as much emphasis on urban planning. There's more emphasis on commercialization, like these cities are coming together because there's a marketplace, there's a market, there's a good, namely oil in a lot of cases. But there's no thought as to where people should live, there's no thought as to if these structures are even fit for human habitation, it's just like, oh, get in where you fit in; we've got our money to make. And I think that there's this thought process that in the Nordics that you all have solved that.

There are best practices and dense creation of human urban agglomerations. We can't assume that it's our common look, and our common sound that makes us a good city. A good city to me is that variety right around the corner from here, kind of outside of the redeveloped area. In an old parking lot, we have a night market for about six months out of the year, basically because of our weather. You go to that night market and there's empanadas, there's Ethiopian cuisine, there's pizza, there's southern fried chicken, there's pottery, there's a performer. It's right across the plaza from a major supermarket, it's right next to our metro station. And it's at night, so that if people are working during the day or they're going to work at night, then it's there for them, and we've activated the street at night.

We're not succumbing to, oh no, the night is bad, too. So, I think there's absolutely things to copy. There are absolutely best practices, and I keep harping on human rights because, generally, they get cancelled because we don't think that X person or Y person is deserving of having these things we know that work. We don't want to fund public transit because we don't like the people that take it. We don't want to fund the night market because their food smells weird, or we don't want to give them housing because they didn't work hard enough for it, because you know the American dream, and we love working hard here in America, even though there are contradictions.

Denise Wall [00:19:43]

I like the example of the night market from the perspective of sort of the learnings going both ways. There are many other countries in the world that don't appear on these lists, and many of them are not in the global north obviously, so I'm wondering whether there's any merit in these listings in sort of encouraging countries that are outside of that sort of top ranking to aim to perform well, is there value in these listings?

Kristen Jeffers [00:20:14]

I think the value is... honestly I want more rankings to consider human rights and providing human services. Because all of those other cities in the global south, they've still got the vestiges of colonialism, and there's still some major human rights issues they're not – if anything, they're emulating the worst parts of some of the global north cities and countries, and they're not promoting the best. And so, I don't want that empowerment to be, oh, we're going to be exactly like who came in and gave us these western values. I want us to be more people-focused, I want us to honour indigeneity, but I also want us to honour humanness. I don't want us to duplicate racism, queer antagonism, ableism, sexism, all these horrible human rights things that happen.

Sam Kingsley [00:21:15]

One thing we haven't talked about yet is about whether there's a role that the private sector could and should be playing. So, in terms of, you know, the construction industry, developers, but also the tech sector. What do you think about that, Kristen?

Kristen Jeffers [00:21:31]

I think we have to be realistic. I want to honour the building I live in. Our housing agency, I think it's housing and urban development, has a baseline, where based on what your area median private sector income is, that's how the ideal is to base mortgages and rents on that.

The private sector has to be a partner in that. When you're building buildings, it's more of a public service than it is like a thing of capitalism. I think we need to get out of thinking real estate is going to be a major investment vehicle. Likewise, also private sector building homes that people want, like building the right number of bedrooms, building the right kinds of fixtures, building the quality, building flexibility into the buildings. Here in DC, we're converting a lot of buildings from office buildings to residential buildings because many of us love working from home.

Many of us love having that flexibility to sit at our desk, you know, because many of us are doing desk work, but then people that work at, say, schools, hospitals that are making things, they also deserve space to relax and rest. And so they deserve places to come to. For them, their home is their refuge. You're not working at home. They're coming home as refuge. And so that's where those private sectors come in. I would love to see more projects like Amazon's Housing Trust Fund, and I would love to see that fund be built up even more, so that, okay, you're making money here, you're providing these human services here, oh yeah, please give your warehouse workers the right dignity in the warehouse and give them a home that they can love and can be proud of.

Sam Kingsley [00:23:13]

I wonder, Kristen, what you think, how optimistic are you that cities can sort of remain liveable as they grow? What should they really be taking into account to be able to grow in this kind of sustainable and liveable way?

Kristen Jeffers [00:23:28]

I think I'm seeing more courage, and I think as long as people remain hopeful and courageous, for me, that's what gives me the hope that we're going to do okay. We're not in agreement on what makes a city a city, we're not in agreement with what makes a human a human, and so that's where the future has to go. We have to retain hope in all of humanity and continue to advance human rights and civil rights. I absolutely think we can do that, but we have to be careful, and we have to be mindful, and I think we need to take this technology and use it to our advantage.

Denise Wall [00:24:06]

I love the hopeful message, and I'm going to put you on the spot and ask you a top three question. Could you just provide a top three practical ideas or prescriptions or recommendations that we should have in mind as we design liveable cities for the future?

Kristen Jeffers [00:24:25]

Universal care, universal housing and universal transportation and public transit.

Denise Wall [00:24:32]

Sounds great. Kristen, thank you so much for making the time to chat with us and enjoy the rest of your day there in Washington.

Kristen Jeffers [00:24:39]

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Denise Wall [00:24:41]

The Flow of Urban Life is a podcast that looks at how we live and move in urban landscapes.

Sam Kingsley [00:24:47]

We sit down with people at the forefront of making the world's cities better and more sustainable places to live.

Denise Wall [00:24:53]

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Sam Kingsley [00:25:01]

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