

Child-friendly Cities are Livable Cities

Richard Gilbert

Each year, two organizations with a business perspective rate cities around the world for their *livability*. In February 2010, Toronto was ranked fourth among 140 cities by the Economist Intelligence Unit, based in London, UK. The rating was on 30 factors in five areas: stability, health care, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure.

In 2009, Toronto was ranked fifteenth among 215 cities by one-time Canadian company Mercer LLC. The rating was on 39 factors, notably safety, education, hygiene, health care, culture, environment, recreation, political-economic stability, and public transportation.

These ratings and others get much media play, especially in Vancouver, which came top in the Economist's ranking and fourth in Mercer's. Yet it's hard not to wonder whether the ratings reflect livability as felt by the residents of our cities. They do serve the purpose of making us question what this elusive term means.

My own thinking about livability has been influenced by Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia. With Antanas Mockus, his predecessor, Peñalosa is credited with turning "one of the world's most dangerous, violent, and corrupt capitals into a peaceful model city populated by caring citizens" all in less than 10 years.

Here is Peñalosa's city-building philosophy: "If we can build a successful city for children we will have a successful city for all people." It captures just about everything I have learned about cities as a resident and politician, and above all as a father and grandfather. A successful city for children is a place that helps children grow well, learn effectively, and develop a sense of responsibility and caring that translates into a civically engaged adult.

Almost everything done to achieve these goals benefits not only children, but people of every age. If we design sidewalks and transit systems for children, they are better for everyone. If we have better schools, not only do we have better adults in later years, we have a better city now. A good school can be the core of its neighbourhood, and good neighbourhoods are most of what makes a livable city.

I was pleased to learn that the October 2010 conference of the venerable organization known as the International Making Cities Livable Council has the theme 'True Urbanism: Planning Healthy and Child-Friendly Communities.' The focus is on how good cities ensure children's independent mobility, on how they foster spatial skills, autonomy, and self-assurance.

What appeals to me about St. Stephen's Community House, and a reason I've served on its Board of Directors for the past six years, is its focus not only on providing for evident community needs but also on building a city that serves every resident. St. Stephen's starts with our children and is there at every stage of the life cycle. That's a city-building model that I can get behind. If it works for kids, it works for me.

This article was prepared for the 2009-2010 Annual Report of St. Stephen's Community House, Toronto (see www.ststephenshouse.com).