Fighting the loneliness pandemic — one public space at a time

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The global loneliness pandemic is costing us. That is according to an article by US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, published in *The New York Times* in May 2023: "When people are socially disconnected, their risk of anxiety and depression increases. So does their risk of heart disease (29 per cent), dementia (50 per cent), and stroke (32 per cent). The increased risk of premature death associated with social disconnection is comparable to smoking daily — and may be even greater than the risk associated with obesity. Loneliness and isolation hurt whole communities. Social disconnection is associated with reduced productivity in the workplace, worse performance in school, and diminished civic engagement. When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve."

This is where the development of innovative, multipurpose public spaces is pertinent — creating a sphere in which we can meet and connect as an integral part of our day-to-day lives, thus providing solutions to one of our shared basic needs — connectivity; being a part of a group, a community, a culture.

Why do our public spaces matter?

Navigating through any metropolis in the world can be a somewhat polarizing experience — whether taking a stroll through town or commuting, picking children up from school or visiting as a tourist and exploring with fresh eyes, it is possible to witness several scenarios. On the one hand, there are islands of solitude floating in concrete jungles, people enclosed in their cars or on the subway, hypnotized by their phones and disconnected from the

Image: Guy Yechielly

Different sitting areas in the public space in Tel Aviv-Yafo, which combine green space and shade

Rothschild Boulevard, Tel Aviv-Yafo

Park Hamesila, Tel Aviv-Yafo, designed for all genders and communties

environment by soundproofed headphones, and a labyrinth of main streets that seem detached, hostile, and uninviting. But it is also possible to imagine the opportunity for strengthening communities, dissipating the loneliness pandemic and bringing nature back into the environment harmoniously, thus fostering a thriving, communal city. The Tel Aviv Foundation vividly imagines the latter.

What makes our cities innovative? The residents themselves. Every city has its own DNA and guiding core values leading its path. But they all share one thing — cities are only as strong as their residents, as the diversity of their communities, and as the well-being of those who live in the city itself. If one listens to what the residents want and need, the answer is obvious — well-built, multifunctional, green, communal public spaces that provide for basic needs: safe, welcoming spheres where anyone and everyone can meet, work, and study, equally.

In 2018, the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality rebuilt Dizengoff Square — an elevated public space, neglected and often empty, removed from the streets' vibrant urban natural flow by various sets of stairs. Today, back on street level, bustling with energy, it is a symbol of thriving city life. It took the simple action of "levelling" to make everyone realize that the space belongs to all equally — residents, and visitors alike, regardless of their background, religion, gender or income. The Square became a pocket of well-being — an "equalizing outdoor community centre" bettering the well-being of both visitors and residents alike, embodying the urban values of pluralism, equality, freedom, and quality living for all.

The renovated Dizengoff Square,Tel Aviv-Yafo

How do we revolutionize our public spaces?
- We listen to residents — what do they need, want and envision? What location is right for them? Their needs are the base from which city planning must begin.
- We envision connectivity — redesign and transform main roads, streets, and squares creating a seamless connection between all, maintaining the constant flow of pedestrians across the city.
- We look through the gender lens, widening it beyond gender, creating an inclusive design — what do teenage

Different seating areas, Ben gurion Boulevard, Tel Aviv-Yafo, where people can meet, work and study

girls need to feel safe? How does the world look from the height of a nine-year-old? Which are the common uses of workout facilities for all genders? What is the measurement for an outdoor accessible workspace? What is the distance an elderly person can easily walk? How many people need to use a public toilet at any given hour?

- We bring nature in — weaving nature and local greenery, supporting the ecosystem by providing natural shade, clean air and a hospitable bio-environment.
- We look at the city and local neighbourhoods as a whole — how can public spaces work seamlessly with the hustle and bustle of city life? How can they be distinguished both as pockets of well-being and as an inseparable part of the streets?
- We take action — creating must-have facilities to ensure welcoming and safe public spaces, including: shade during the day, strong lighting at night, security cameras, distress buttons, available Wi-Fi and electricity outlets, an array of sitting areas adjusted for different ages, genders, and group sizes, sustainable outdoor furniture that can function as a classroom and a shared office space, clean and accessible public restrooms, water fountains and plentiful greenery.

How do we measure success?
Usage
- Direct observation and surveys: observing the number of people using a public space, for how long and for what purpose. Asking about frequency of use and reasons for visiting.
- Sensors: tracking the number of visitors.

Diversity
- Demographics: analyzing the age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status of visitors.
- Accessibility: measuring accessibility for people with disabilities or mobility issues.
- Inclusivity: assessing the degree to which a public space is welcoming to people from all backgrounds.

Safety
- Crime rates: analyzing crime rates in and around a public space.
- Perception surveys: asking visitors about their perception of safety and security.
- Lighting: assessing the quality and coverage of lighting in a public space.

Economic impact
- Foot traffic: measuring the number of people that visit a public space and the frequency of their visits.
- Sales tax revenue: analyzing the amount of sales tax revenue generated by businesses in and around a public space.
- Property values: assessing the impact on nearby property values.

Environmental impact
- Sustainability: assessing the use of renewable energy, recycling programmes, etc.
- Greenery: analyzing the amount and quality of greenery.
- Carbon footprint: measuring the carbon footprint and its impact on the environment.

Community engagement
- Community events: measuring how many events take place in a public space and the number of people attending.
- Partnerships: measuring the collaboration between local organizations and businesses.
- Feedback: soliciting comment from community members on what is working well and what could be improved.

Health and well-being
- Physical activity: measuring the amount and type of physical activity that takes place in a public space.
- Mental health: assessing the impact on mental health, using surveys or interviews.
- Access to nature: analyzing the degree to which a public space provides access to nature.

Social impact
- Social connections: measuring the number and quality of social connections that are facilitated or strengthened by a public space.
- Civic engagement: analyzing the degree to which a public space fosters civic engagement, through voting drives, community meetings or public art installations.
- Sense of place: assessing the degree to which a public space contributes to the overall sense of place and identity in a community.

Innovation
- Design awards: evaluating the number and quality of design awards that a public space has received.
- Unique programming: assessing the creativity and uniqueness of the programming offered in a public space.
- Community partnerships: analyzing the degree to which a public space has collaborated with other organizations or businesses to create innovative programming.

Long-term sustainability
- Maintenance: analyzing the quality and frequency of maintenance.
- Funding: assessing the stability and diversity of funding sources for a public space.
- Adaptability: evaluating the degree to which a public space can adapt to changing conditions, such as climate change or shifting community needs.

Why we need to rethink our shared urban spaces
Well-developed public spaces are not a luxury, but a fundamental human right.

Innovative public spaces that bring people together not only create stronger communities but also better, sustainable, prosperous, and resilient cities. Communal outdoor areas aid in:
- Reducing pollution — more pedestrians mean fewer cars, more time spent outside means less time spent using electricity inside
- Supporting a balanced ecosystem — public spaces require greenery, trees, and ecological pools
- Developing sustainable shared economies with shared bikes, cars and communal vegetable gardens
- Supporting local business that become an inseparable part of walkable streets and squares
- Increasing real estate value, where housing is measured by the quality of its outdoor surrounding, whether that is to a 9- or a 90-year-old.

There are many examples of cities around the world celebrating the power of innovative public spaces to drive social change, creating out- and in-door places that can be seen as part of our homes. Examples include:
- Bryant Park, New York City, attracting over 12 million people per year and offering free classes, workshops, outdoor concerts and movie nights
- The Seoul Innovation Park, an abandoned railway transformed into a community hub for start-ups
- The Stravos Niachos Cultural Centre, Athens, a multifunctional, environmentally sustainable centre of education, art, sports and recreation, with a green roof that functions as a park
- The Tenri Railway Station, Japan, with outdoor areas serving the whole community
- The Malón Urbano National Holiday, Chile.

Urban designers must shift from urban to social planning, treating streets as extensions of schools, offices and living rooms by creating well-planned public spaces that cater to the needs of every resident. The Mayor of London, Sadik Khan, has said: "If you can change the street, you can change the world." So, providing safe, welcoming public spaces that function as green outdoor community centres not only betters the day-to-day lives of residents, but creates safer, more equal, and just societies based on communal life, where loneliness can be eradicated, bettering the world, one public space at a time.

Image: the Tel-Aviv Yafo Municipality

The Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality lobby is used as a space for free weekly activities for all ages