

**Welcome - to our Planning World Opinion Piece**

Every year we try and present you with a hot topic in planning written by staff or former students. These are designed to get you thinking about some of the difficult issues we face as urban professionals. In past years we have had articles on London Governance, the Urban Policy of the now President of the United States of America - Barack Obama, and an outsider's view of the Paris Riots. This year we have a piece written by Meredith Whitten a RUPS graduate of 2006/07 who works in planning consultancy. Her piece asks us the challenging question of "What makes a liveable city?". This is written in response to the numerous surveys and studies published that rank cities on liveability indices.

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Liveable Cities Rankings



Meredith Whitten

Almost weekly, it seems, an organization releases its annual "best cities" list. These lists rank everything from the best cities for young professionals or working mothers, to the best cities for urban gardening or entrepreneurs. A number of organizations tackle the bigger, broader challenge of ranking the world's most liveable cities.

What determines if a city is "liveable"? The criteria used for such rankings vary wildly, reflecting an organization's biases or specific audience. No matter how much the rankings use independent data or scientific methods, subjectivity always seeps in. Indeed, the mere decision about which criteria to use is subjective. More importantly, what one person feels makes a city liveable, may drive another person mad. So, "most liveable cities" lists are not one-size-fits-all. It's not surprising, then, that, as a quick Internet search will prove, ranking the world's most liveable cities spurs considerable debate among planners, economists, civic boosters, and others.

Three of the most popular “best cities” rankings are those by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Mercer Consulting, and Monocle magazine, with the rankings in these three lists garnering much attention every year. The cities ranked by these organizations in 2009 highlight how liveable cities can vary based on the criteria used, as well as the weight of those criteria. Only two cities – Vienna and Zurich – made all three lists. In fact, 20 different cities were mentioned in the three top-10 lists. This variation stems from the criteria and scoring systems used by each organization, as well as the purpose of each organization’s list.

For example, The Economist scored 140 cities on a scale from 1 to 100 based on 30 factors spread across five areas: stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, Mercer’s Quality of Living Survey scored 215 cities based on 39 factors, including safety, education, hygiene, recreation, public transportation, and political-economic stability. Mercer rates cities against New York City, which is given a baseline score of 100. Monocle magazine, which quickly admits the subjectivity of its rankings, used criteria such as international connectivity, public transportation, days of sunshine per year, medical care, architecture and urban design, safety/crime, access to natural areas, and business conditions.

Another criterion used by Monocle in this year’s list is the number of chain stores in a city. The magazine noted that first-place Zurich has maintained a diverse and independent retail sector and praised fifth-ranked Helsinki for having no Starbucks. Monocle, an upscale lifestyle magazine, presumably targets its readership with its list. Meanwhile, Mercer’s survey is conducted to help governments and major companies place employees on international assignments, so the emphasis tends to be on safety, infrastructure, and the local economy. The Economist Intelligence Unit issues its list for a more general audience.

The results of the three “most liveable cities” rankings can be found in the table below.

Top 10 Most Liveable Cities, 2009			
	The Economist Intelligence Unit	Mercer	Monocle magazine
1	Vancouver	Vienna	Zurich
2	Vienna	Zurich	Copenhagen
3	Melbourne	Geneva	Tokyo
4	Toronto	Vancouver Auckland (TIE)	Munich
5	Perth Calgary (TIE)		Helsinki
6		Dusseldorf	Stockholm
7	Helsinki	Munich	Vienna
8	Geneva	Frankfort	Paris
9	Sydney Zurich (TIE)	Bern	Melbourne
10		Sydney	Berlin

Despite the differing target audiences of each list, some readers still ask “liveable for whom?” As urban development scholar Joel Kotkin noted in a recent column, the cities at the top of these lists tend to be among the world’s most expensive, with high taxes and stagnant job markets. “For the average person seeking to make money and improve his or her economic status, it usually pays not to settle in one of the world’s ‘most liveable’ cities,” Kotkin wrote. Comments made on the three organizations’ websites illustrate just how much the concept of “liveability” varies. For example, commentators on EIU’s website questioned several cities in the top 10 given their unaffordable housing and low wages.

So, if “most liveable cities” lists vary so greatly and cause so much debate, why should planners take note? Regardless of the criteria used, the source of those criteria, the weight placed on each criterion, or the ultimate lists that result, the factors that all organizations use to rank the world’s most liveable cities read straight from a planning textbook. Aspects deemed to make a city “liveable” include the built environment, clusters and the local economy, housing, natural environment and open spaces, entrepreneurship, talent attraction, transportation and infrastructure, society and politics, sustainability, and quality-of-place amenities.

This highlights the significant influence – and the significant responsibility – a planner has on daily life. Indeed, whether a planner focuses on transportation or housing or the environment, the role of the planner in shaping every city worldwide is immense. Planning – more than any other profession – lies at the heart of what makes a city liveable.