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CITIES: THE OVERLOOKED PILLAR

Discussions about economic resilience and competitiveness often center on technology, capital, and regulation. Yet one of the most underappreciated determinants of Europe's competitiveness remains the places where people live, work, and connect: our cities. City quality shapes health outcomes, social cohesion, and everyday life directly, so competitiveness cannot rest on technology and capital alone.

As demographic shifts, climate change, and workplace evolution reshape our societies, improving how cities function should become a shared priority, one that businesses, policymakers, and residents each shape differently, and that none of them can deliver alone.

For decades, urban development in many European regions prioritized car-centric infrastructure, functional segregation, and urban sprawl, isolating residential areas from commerce and degrading public space. Compact, walkable, mixed-use environments - often framed around the concept of the 15-minute neighborhood - reduce transit friction, lower carbon footprints, and restore time to residents. But delivering this is as much a governance test as a design one: local authorities must zone, permit, and coordinate investment around a shared plan; businesses must locate shops and services inside neighborhoods rather than in car-dependent retail parks; and residents must accept the density that makes walkability possible.

Revitalizing underutilized industrial land is the second lever. Brownfield redevelopment adds housing and jobs without expanding into surrounding countryside, reusing existing infrastructure rather than building new. Turning a factory site into a mixed-use quarter is rarely just

technical: it depends on owners agreeing to sell or partner, municipalities fast-tracking permits and approvals, private capital taking on development risk, and nearby residents accepting years of construction and a changed neighborhood.



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Green infrastructure is the third lever, and it works only if treated as a functional layer of the city rather than decoration. Green roofs, rain gardens, and permeable surfaces cool the city and manage storm water locally, easing pressure on municipal drainage, while accessible parks support mental health and everyday interaction. None of this survives on design intent alone: municipalities must

fund maintenance beyond a single budget cycle; developers must build green elements into private projects; not treat them as optional extras; and residents must use and look after shared green space for it to remain an asset rather than a liability. These three levers only work when business, policymakers, and society each play their part - and what is at stake, and how each one participates, look different for every group.

For business, cities concentrate talent and commercial diversity, lowering recruitment costs and speeding innovation through agglomeration. Urban quality of life is now a competitive lever in its own right, capable of attracting talent that salary or tax structure alone cannot. As architect David Sim argues in *Soft City*, density alone does not improve economic performance; what matters is density combined with diversity, which raises the odds that useful people, places, and functions cluster together - the real mechanism behind knowledge spillovers between universities, startups, and established firms. Business participates not just as a beneficiary but as a builder: through where it locates offices and retail, how much it invests in mixed-use development over single-use campuses, or through the public space it creates and upgrades for the communities around its developments.

For policymakers, these levers are less a design menu than a test of institutional capacity, because policymakers hold a tool the other two groups lack: the authority to zone, permit, and enforce commitments across an electoral cycle, long enough for a brownfield site or green corridor to get built. Their participation means convening business and residents early, committing budgets that outlast a change of administration, and protecting maintenance funding even when a new, more visible project competes for the same money. Cities that do this lower investment risk and build credibility with residents and capital markets; cities that don't risk stalled projects and eroded trust.

For society, urban design shapes social trust directly. Trust like this is rarely declared; it accumulates through daily experience with public transport, park safety, and street cleanliness. Copenhagen shows how that accumulation works: as architect Jan Gehl documented in *Cities for People*, when the city converted its main shopping street, Strøget, into a pedestrian promenade in 1962, foot traffic rose 35 percent within a year. That early result built enough support to expand car-free space over four decades, until the area devoted to pedestrians and public life had grown sevenfold by

2005. Society's participation is less visible than a zoning decision or an investment: it is residents choosing to walk instead of drive, using and looking after shared space, and showing up - at consultations, in local elections - in ways that give politicians a mandate to keep expanding what works.

Walkable neighborhoods, brownfield regeneration, and green infrastructure are the three levers most directly available to European cities today. But none gets built by design quality alone: each depends on business, policymakers, and society acting together, and acting differently. Business participates by choosing where to invest and locate; policymakers by zoning, controlling how fast permits move through approval, and enforcing commitments over time; society by using public space, tolerating disruption during delivery, and giving politicians a mandate to keep going. Where these three forms of participation align, cities become more competitive almost as a side effect, as it brings lower recruitment costs for firms, lower project risk for policymakers, higher trust for residents. Where they don't, well-designed projects still stall, waiting for one of the three to show up. It is that alignment, not any single strategy, that decides whether quality of life becomes a real competitive advantage or stays an intention.