

BY MARJA MAKAROW

Cities in transition

My initiation to city life began at the age of six in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, where I once took the wrong tram from school. It took me hours to find my way home after testing every possible tram line through the busy city centre.

Since then, I have grown accustomed to leading an international, urban existence, having lived for many years in Heidelberg, Germany, and Strasbourg, France.

My current home town is Helsinki. Back in 1812 when Helsinki was promoted to capital of the autonomous Grand Duchy of

Imperial Russia, it was not much more than a tiny village. This changed when the Saint Petersburg-based German architect Carl Ludvig Engel designed the buildings of the university and government, the Lutheran cathedral, and the national library around Senate Square, all of which became iconic landmarks.

One and a half centuries later, the metropolitan area witnessed profound change. People migrated from rural regions to work in factories and services. They needed housing, which kicked off a construction boom in the suburbs. New apartment buildings were designed by the best architects to serve the needs of a modern, democratic lifestyle. The suburbs provided easy access

to nature, and this is still true of contemporary Helsinki. There are few capitals in the world where residents can go for a walk in the forest or for a ski on the frozen sea directly from their doorstep.

In this sense, Helsinki is a forerunner in connecting city life with nature, which is an emerging global trend. Green spaces are being cultivated between buildings and on roofs and walls. They are even being brought into homes and offices. The Finnish medical technology company Naava has begun exporting “smart green walls” to bring fresh air into the lives of city dwellers who spend most of their time

indoors breathing artificially purified air.

Green spaces are one of many examples in the ongoing battle against pollution,

one of the biggest downsides of urbanisation. Many capitals worldwide are preparing to ban diesel cars, and Finnish cities are shifting to electric buses and more efficient use of vehicles through the use of digital technologies. Finland is becoming a testbed for smart transport solutions by opening up real-time data on traffic and weather conditions for smartphone applications. With new mobile apps, commuters can soon book a combination of a bus, rail, taxi, city bike, and car pool journey, and pay for all of it in one go.

Some cities, such as my former hometown Strasbourg, have led a vibrant urban existence for a much longer time than Helsinki. But while one city is two thousand years older than the other, today they both strive to embrace, treasure, and enhance their unique closeness to nature. ●

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LIFE TO NATURE.

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