

## How Gratitude Will Solve the Climate Crisis

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### Abstract

The battle of Climate Change has morphed from a humanitarian crisis to a political, economic, and personal battle. Solving climate change has now become a reason to fight each other, instead of becoming a battle we all fight together. The line between positive change and ignorance is blurred, and I believe it can be clearly drawn - it starts with gratitude and healing.

Proposed Climate Change solutions are overburdened with tasks and financial responsibilities, creating a narrative of impossible change. It seems we must create *more* - more solar panels, more homes, more buses - as a solution. Why are we promoting *consumption* while trying to *reduce* waste? Why are we creating *more* while trying to *reduce* our impact? We can't. Maybe what we truly need is to reinvent our own wheels and redefine our concept of success.

The research will explain how overconsumption is our biggest problem when facing climate change, and how Gross Domestic Happiness is the key to a flourishing society. To show the efficacy of GDH, my research highlights how the positive impacts of gratitude on happiness will explain how the concepts of gratitude easily pave a path for city planners. Though it seems impossible for gratitude to heal our ecosystems, it will highlight impactful solutions and create systemic change.

### Background GDP, GDH & Gratitude

GDP was created in 1929 by economist Simon Kuznets as a result of the Great Depression and World War 2 (Coyle 2011). With these tragic events testing the world's composure, international organizations were desperately searching for explanations and solutions. Personal welfare and overall well-being, after being influenced by the Great Depression, suddenly became defined by two components: access to food and real estate. Food and real estate were considered essentials despite their scarcity, they suddenly became the foundations of well-being and success. In a time of reform and political change, GDP was welcomed with open arms by political leaders across the world. GDP was established as a worldwide metric of success in 1944 - just 15 years after its introduction in the US.

However, this metric was not devoid of skepticism. The first to speak out was Economist Moses Ambranovitz, who highlights how there are many important metrics that fail to be considered when calculating GDP. In his book, *The Allocations of Economic Resources*, Abramovitz cautions that "we must be highly skeptical of the view that long-term changes in the rate of growth of welfare can be gauged even roughly from changes in the rate of growth of output." Though Ambranovitz thoroughly analyzed GDP his perspective was dismissed. Was he foreshadowing the future of America?

In the 1970's, Bhutanese leaders introduced Gross Domestic Happiness (United Nations, nd.). The goal of GDH is to take a holistic approach towards sustainable development through

an emphasis on non-economic aspects of wellbeing. Bhutan has been using GDH as its metric of success ever since, and has seen tremendous growth across all sectors.

The primary argument when discussing GDH is that it is unmeasurable, and it is therefore difficult to make an action plan. However, this perspective chooses not to recognize how Happiness truly is measurable across many areas of development. When making a plan to increase Happiness, you can start by taking a step back and examine gratitude as a foundation. As humans, we are told to focus on gratitude, as its connection to happiness is multi-dimensional. Daily gratitude practice can provide healing as individuals; it improves sleep, emotional awareness, vitality, social bonding, and more. (Positive Psychology, 2024). Though it seems impossible for gratitude to heal our ecosystems, it highlights impactful solutions at the state and federal level, and create systemic change.

Asking stakeholders to heal cities with gratitude may seem like a confusing question, but the answer is simple. As humans, our first steps towards trauma recovery are socializing, exercise, self-care, music, and family. Humans do not want to be *consumed* by their traumas. Can our environment heal the same way? Cities are created by people - cities need what people need. To start, Stakeholders must focus on art and healing (gratitude) instead of *consuming*. We must avoid overconsumption the same way we avoid consuming our stressors - consumerism *is* the stressor.

### Introduction

#### **We can't produce less by producing more.**

The world has become polluted with the mindset of consumption, and owning more has become a definition of success - but to solve this crisis, we cannot have both. Overconsumption is our problem, and our foundations have romanticized it, creating an endless cycle of consumerism. This narrative must change. Our current use of Gross Domestic Product to measure a nation's economic success is now what defines our own individual success: owning more homes, having more 'trendy' material goods, and having more money than others. Are these our highest values? Do we want our Successes to be determined by our financial stability? What about our mental and physical health, social development, culture, environmental stability, our overall happiness?

As a result, our proposed Climate Change solutions are overburdened with tasks and financial responsibilities, creating a narrative of impossible change. Traditional climate solutions often emphasize creating more: more renewable energy infrastructure, more transportation systems, and more housing. Why are we promoting *consumption* while trying to *reduce* waste? Why are we creating *more* while trying to *reduce* our impact? We can't. Yet this approach perpetuates the very consumerist mindset that drives environmental degradation.

As a nation built on capitalism with GDP as our metric of success, buying more is necessary. The world produces over 2.0 billion tons of waste annually, with at least 33% not being disposed of properly (World Bank, n.d. ). In addition, only 7% of all *plastic* waste has been properly disposed of. High and upper-middle income countries generate the most waste - could tendencies to consume highlight the cause of these unsustainable statistics? The domino effects

of climate change are largely ignored, as a means of simplifying climate efforts. This paper discusses how through transitioning to GDH and incorporating gratitude into urban planning can create systemic change. By valuing existing resources, revitalizing infrastructure, and prioritizing green spaces, we can reduce consumption while enhancing well-being. The success of such an approach has implications for city planning, landscape architecture, and global environmental policies.

It's not a matter of *who* is to blame, or *who* should be paying for the climate crisis. It's a matter of *how* our personal choices impact the environment: *how* we can influence others and negatively impact the environment: *how* the domino effect of creation can alter our ecosystems. In a country of innovation and opportunity, refocusing these necessities is imperative; we should *want* to redirect the narrative of success from that of financial wellbeing to personal happiness and fulfillment.

### Literature Review

#### What about Gratitude?

Gratitude is synonymous to thankfulness - focusing on the good and emphasizing respect for what we have received.

How does gratitude create a foundation for a sustainable future? Gratitude invites us to reflect on our past, and identify things, people, or concepts that we are thankful for, and have likely been crucial in our personal growth. In another word, gratitude is most synonymous to Culture; culture is what educates us and brings us together. It brings thankfulness and appreciation for our loved ones and our resources.

#### Gratitude and the Consumer

Madhavi Venkatesan, a Northeastern University economist, asserts that addressing fast fashion requires shifting systemic approaches to happiness, targeting the root issue of consumerist practices."Her words can change how the world views Climate Change as a whole; by realizing want versus need, analyzing systemic habits, and reapproaching social environments. To chase after climate stability, these necessities must be refocused.

At the societal level the solution is to encourage others to redesign their own belongings to bring satisfaction: cut or dye old clothes to create something new and unique; paint or reuse old decorations to make new ones. Though the overall impact of these personal actions are seemingly negligible on a large scale, a ripple effect is evident; systemic change is very possible.

With this shift in the consumerist narrative, it highlights gratitude as the foundation for 'trends'. Using your old things, redesigning, upcycling. For urban planners and landscape architects, this mindset encourages preserving the built environment and integrating nature into urban spaces rather than prioritizing new development. Gratitude-inspired projects prioritize sustainability and cultural heritage, fostering connections between people and their environments.

### Research

Gross Domestic Happiness is being tested in some areas of the world. Bhutan is attempting to measure Gross National Happiness, and has been largely successful. According to an article published by the Harvard Business review, “[Gross National Happiness] considers factors like equitable socio-economic development and good governance, and UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI), which encapsulates health and knowledge apart from economic prosperity.”

Though Bhutan is making this shift, how has it made an impact? Their recent statistics prove that it has. “It has recorded an average growth in annual GDP of 7.5% since the early 1980s and poverty levels have declined from 36% in 2007 to 10% in 2019.” (World Economic Forum, 2021). They achieved 100% electricity access, 72.5% of their land is forested, and they are the only carbon-negative country in the *world*. As a result, in 2023 Bhutan graduated from its status on the UN list of least developed countries.

Being in the United States, we are rooted in a country that praises hard work, innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity, yet we fail to recognize the desperate need for innovation in our own foundations. Though policies have changed and the political landscape has dramatically morphed, we have to think of the big picture. We can put bandaids on our cuts, but will it heal the wound?

### Findings A Framework for Gratitude and City Planning

Gratitude-driven urban planning is not merely theoretical; it offers practical strategies for creating sustainable, inclusive, and resilient cities. These strategies can be implemented through revitalization, expansion of green spaces, and community engagement.

Gratitude-focused planning requires two overarching fundamental steps: reflection and preservation and/or restoration. Firstly, reflect on the past - what elements have shaped a city’s growth? Identify natural landscapes, streets, people, and businesses that we are thankful for, that have been beneficial to a cities’ overall growth. Gratitude through the lens of greenway planning is most synonymous to culture development. It brings thankfulness and appreciation for our loved ones and our resources. By recognizing these foundational aspects, urban planners can appreciate the unique characteristics of a city and use them as a foundation for future development.

The second step focuses on identifying and preserving current assets that enhance wellbeing. What do we have that we are grateful for? What do we find value in? What do citizens find value in? We are grateful for businesses that are flourishing, low crime rates, sustainable infrastructure, vibrant landscapes, tourism, and good healthcare systems. When all of these components flourish, so does the city and its economy. Gratitude highlights these strengths, guiding planning decisions that aim to preserve and enhance them. This approach ensures that development initiatives align with the values and priorities of the community.

Unfortunately, most frequently, buildings, streets, and businesses from a town’s past are often left in the past. Instead, what if we implemented policies encouraging the *reuse* and *rehabilitation* of these areas? By restoring these places, we are encouraging culture and connection. By picking the low hanging fruit and implementing choice architecture, we can develop physical and emotional

resilience, because we are supporting ecology, equity, and the economy. When approaching sustainable development, we focus on these 3 components - ecology, equity and the economy. Another practice slightly changes the narrative - it focuses on 4 pillars: environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability. ("The 4 Pillars of Sustainability Explained" n.d.) A gratitude-based approach to sustainability highlights all of the above components.

### **Applying Gratitude-Focused Planning Building Revitalization**

Revitalizing old buildings exemplifies how gratitude can drive sustainable urban development. This approach reflects an appreciation for the cultural, historical, and material resources embedded in existing structures. By preserving and adapting these buildings, we honor the past while creating functional spaces for contemporary use. This practice not only reduces construction waste but also conserves raw materials, minimizing environmental impact.

In Portland, Oregon, revitalized buildings showcase the intersection of historical preservation and modern sustainability. For example, the adaptive reuse of industrial warehouses into vibrant mixed-use spaces integrates energy-efficient technologies while maintaining architectural integrity. These projects reduce urban sprawl by repurposing existing structures instead of constructing new developments on undeveloped land. Additionally, they lower greenhouse gas emissions associated with demolition and new construction, contributing to a more sustainable urban footprint.

Revitalized buildings also support economic development by attracting tourists and fostering a sense of place. Historic preservation often elevates property values, bolstering local economies and encouraging investment in surrounding areas. Furthermore, these projects create vibrant, livable communities by providing spaces for cultural events, small businesses, and community engagement. By celebrating architectural heritage, cities can strengthen community identity and inspire pride among residents.

Preserving existing resources through adaptive reuse reduces construction waste, conserves materials, and maintains cultural identity. Cities like Paris and Amsterdam illustrate how historic preservation can coexist with modern innovation. In Paris, the transformation of the Halle Pajol, a former warehouse, into a sustainable mixed-use complex with solar panels and green roofs exemplifies this principle. Similarly, Amsterdam's canal houses have been repurposed into offices, hotels, and residences, blending historical charm with contemporary functionality.

Adaptive reuse projects also contribute to sustainability by extending the lifespan of buildings and reducing the need for new construction. This practice minimizes the environmental footprint of urban development and promotes resource efficiency. By valuing existing structures, cities demonstrate gratitude for their architectural heritage and the resources embedded within them.

### **Incorporating Green Infrastructure**

Green infrastructure is another cornerstone of gratitude-driven urban planning, emphasizing the natural environment while enhancing urban livability and resilience. Parks, greenways, and urban forests provide numerous benefits, including improved mental health, reduced stress, increased physical activity, and enhanced social interactions. These areas also enhance economic vitality by increasing tourism, attracting businesses, and raising property values.

Studies reveal that access to green spaces reduces stress, improves cognitive function, and fosters a sense of community. For instance, Copenhagen's extensive network of parks and greenways promotes outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship, earning the city a reputation as one of the world's most livable places.

Not only does it improve mental health and economic development, but it is crucial for sustainability and climate change mitigation. Green infrastructure projects, such as tree-lined streets, community gardens, and urban forests, mitigate urban heat islands, improve air quality, and support biodiversity. For instance, the High Line in New York City transforms an abandoned railway into an elevated greenway, blending ecological restoration with urban design. This project not only provides a recreational space for residents and tourists but also serves as a model for repurposing underutilized infrastructure to address environmental challenges.

Moreover, green infrastructure plays a pivotal role in climate change mitigation. By incorporating permeable surfaces, rain gardens, and green roofs, cities can manage stormwater, reduce flooding, and improve water quality. These features demonstrate gratitude for natural resources, highlighting the interconnectedness of urban and ecological systems. Cities that prioritize green infrastructure signal a commitment to sustainability, resilience, and the well-being of current and future generations.

### **Promoting Community Engagement**

Community engagement is a cornerstone of gratitude-driven urban planning, ensuring that development projects reflect shared values and priorities. Involving citizens in the planning process fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, strengthening social cohesion and trust. Collaborative efforts encourage diverse perspectives, leading to more equitable and inclusive outcomes.

There must be an emphasis on community-wide social events, festivals, and gatherings to connect with citizens, to learn, to form new ideas, to create new connections, and perhaps to discover the path to revitalizing a town. Cities like Seattle have successfully implemented participatory budgeting, allowing residents to allocate funding for neighborhood improvements. The people hold all the answers to our questions - we just have to look in the right places, and maybe ask the *right* questions.

To grow, stakeholders should conduct surveys to analyze happiness and fulfillment while identifying stressors. Participatory planning initiatives, such as public workshops and online forums, provide platforms for community members to voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making. This approach not only enhances transparency but also cultivates gratitude by recognizing the contributions of community members.

### **Conclusion:**

To prosper, we must disobey systemic structures and realize how to do more while creating *less*. Focus on the low hanging fruit, and the tree will be prosperous for generations to come. Gratitude-driven urban planning offers a transformative framework for creating sustainable, inclusive, and vibrant cities. By revitalizing old buildings, incorporating green infrastructure, and

emphasizing community engagement, urban planners can honor the past, address present challenges, and build a resilient future. Practical applications, such as adaptive reuse, expansion of green spaces, participatory planning, and alternative success metrics, provide actionable strategies for fostering gratitude and well-being in urban development.

Ultimately, gratitude-driven urban planning is a testament to the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems. By appreciating and preserving the resources, history, and community assets that define a city, we can create environments that nurture both people and the planet. This approach not only enhances quality of life but also lays the foundation for a more sustainable and equitable urban future.

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