



LEE KUAN YEW WORLD CITY ○ PRIZE

HOW VIENNA AND HAMBURG ARE REDEFINING CITY LIVEABILITY

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BEYOND RANKINGS: CITIES THAT BUILD WITH PURPOSE



Hamburg's experimental HafenCity waterfront district

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In the heart of Europe, two cities are showing the world how liveability can be achieved not by megaprojects, influencer videos, or by topping city rankings, but by rethinking the very process of how cities are developed.

Vienna and Hamburg, both recipients of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, have emerged as beacons of urban adaptability. From Vienna's flourishing Grätzloase neighbourhood communities to Hamburg's experimental HafenCity waterfront district, these cities aren't merely planning for the future, they're prototyping it in real time.

"Both cities have strong environmental commitments and effective governance systems in place," says Yap Lay Bee, Prize Secretary of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize. "Their success stories offer valuable lessons in balancing economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability."

The Prize, awarded biennially, celebrates cities that demonstrate exceptional foresight, strategic planning, and urban innovation

The Prize, awarded biennially, celebrates cities that demonstrate exceptional foresight, strategic planning, and urban innovation. But for both Vienna and Hamburg, winning the Prize was only part of the story. What followed were years of exchange, experimentation, and refinement. Proving that truly liveable cities aren't static achievements but dynamic works-in-progress.

VIENNA: A PARKING SPACE WAS JUST THE BEGINNING



Neighbours and local residents can simply propose their own ideas and make use of the land for a variety of purposes

© Daniel Auer

It starts with a bench, a plant pot, a chalkboard or a box of books. Across Vienna, parking spaces have been reimagined as tiny public havens—known as Grätzloasen, or neighbourhood oases. What began as a pilot in 2015 has become a quiet revolution in how the city makes space for people.

“Any way of interim space activation has gained importance and stepped up on the agenda of urban planning in Vienna,” says Johannes Lutter, Head of Strategic Partnerships and International Affairs at Urban Innovation Vienna. “We’ve seen that small interventions can create lasting value, socially, environmentally, and emotionally.”

The Grätzloase programme invites residents to apply for permission and support to temporarily repurpose street space. A chess table placed in a former parking bay might bring together seniors and students. A planter garden might become the stage for a community potluck. And though many oases are temporary, some evolve into permanent features through community support and municipal planning.

The Grätzloase programme invites residents to apply for permission and support to temporarily repurpose street space

"Vienna has successfully implemented small projects and interventions to improve the quality of life, demonstrating a careful balance between top-down planning and ground-up initiatives," says Yap. "These small interventions have created lasting changes in how communities interact and take ownership of their neighbourhoods."

Neighbours and local residents can simply propose their own ideas and make use of the land for a variety of purposes. Lutter recalls one initiative that used a vacant plot to host evening dance workshops, while in another case, local children gathered in the evenings to listen to music and spend time together.

Crucially, Vienna supports these ideas with resources: simple application processes, micro-grants, and technical support. The city's urban planning department doesn't just issue approvals, it acts as an enabler and, often, a mediator.

"It's also a question of removing barriers instead of implying bureaucratic barriers," Lutter says. "And that's a question of political and of planning culture. To apply and allow for community initiatives is also an effort to reduce those barriers, to help people make things happen and not make it difficult for them."



“It's also a question of removing barriers instead of implying bureaucratic barriers

Johannes Lutter

Head of Strategic Partnerships and International Affairs at Urban Innovation Vienna

Across Vienna, parking spaces have been reimagined as tiny public havens-known as Grätzloasen, or neighbourhood oases

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ASPERN SEESTADT: A CITY THAT GROWS BY LISTENING

The Grätzloase programme invites residents to apply for permission and support to temporarily repurpose street space

© Stadtteilmanagement Seestadt aspern



Vienna's philosophy is most visible in Aspern Seestadt, a vast urban experiment built on a former airfield. Expected to house over 25,000 people and to generate 20,000 jobs, it's one of Europe's largest new city developments. But what sets Seestadt apart isn't its scale but the way the city has chosen to grow it: slowly, experimentally, and with room for change.

"We didn't want to wait until everything was built before bringing life to the district," says Lutter. "Instead, we brought in temporary uses from day one."

These interim uses range from mobile student dormitories to a five-storey hammock lounge called the Flederhaus. This open wooden tower, filled with 32 hammocks, doubles as a viewing platform and cultural venue.

"It's a public space in the air," says Lutter. "People come up and look out over a place that's still becoming itself."

On undeveloped plots, art installations and community gardens emerge. A group of residents, calling themselves *Ackerhelden*-a play on 'agriculture heroes'-began gardening on vacant land. As construction progressed, the city helped them relocate to another site.

"It's not just the project that continues it's the people," says Lutter. "The group became an institution."

These efforts are monitored through regular resident surveys by asking 'How satisfied are you? Do you feel you can shape your surroundings?', in which the data helps guide what is to be built next.

Yap notes how such methods reflect a broader shift in urban governance.

"What impressed the Prize Committee most was how these initiatives demonstrate Vienna's exceptional commitment," she says. "It provides a direct platform while these projects are modest in scale."

Vienna now treats interim activation as a design principle. Instead of building everything and hoping it works, the city tests, listens, and adjusts.



“Their success stories offer valuable lessons in balancing economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability

Yap Lay Bee

Prize Secretary of the Lee Kuan Yew
World City Prize

On undeveloped plots, art installations and community gardens emerge

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HAFENCITY HAMBURG: INNOVATION AT THE WATERFRONT

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Restored brick warehouses from the UNESCO-listed Speicherstadt district sit alongside sleek new buildings, green promenades and open public spaces

Near the mouth of the Elbe River, where Hamburg's industrial past meets its urban future, HafenCity rises as one of Europe's most ambitious regeneration projects. Built on top of former docklands and port facilities, the 157-hectare district is a living experiment in how to create a climate-resilient, socially inclusive, and liveable urban district.

"We call it a living lab because we try things out here—mobility, housing models, public space. It's not about replicating the past," says Ralf Schmidt, Honorary Hamburg Ambassador to Singapore, who has supported international collaboration on HafenCity for more than a decade.

Restored brick warehouses from the UNESCO-listed Speicherstadt district sit alongside sleek new buildings,

green promenades and open public spaces. Here, form follows function—and climate science.

Instead of relying on barriers, HafenCity's flood protection is integrated through the "Warft" principle, inspired by traditional artificial mounds used to protect settlements in low-lying areas. In HafenCity, this is achieved by constructing streets and buildings on elevated plinths, typically 7.5 to 8.5 metres above mean sea level. Meanwhile, promenades remain at the historic quay level and are intentionally designed to flood during high water, maintaining visual and physical links to the site's maritime past.

"The integration of flood protection with public spaces and recreational areas shows how infrastructure can serve multiple purposes," says Schmidt.

But what truly makes HafenCity a model is how it combines innovation with social policy. Since 2011, each block has been planned with the strict one-third rule which applies to every residential development in Hamburg: one-third social housing, one-third mid-market rental, and one-third privately owned. This ensures a broad demographic cross-section including families, students, professionals, retirees and groups with special needs such as people with disabilities living side-by-side.

“You don’t want to create a new area for only the wealthy,” he explains. “And at the same time not for only the underprivileged. It should be for everybody and should have a big mixture, especially in the city centre. That’s the prime area. With an ageing population and increasing life expectancy it becomes more and more important to make life in the city liveable for everyone. This means inclusion, accessibility, availability of technical and digital solutions for older age groups as well. This is a big challenge for cities around the world.”

The development is driven by many different actors. HafenCity Hamburg GmbH, a subsidiary of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, coordinates and integrates these actors including housing cooperatives, private developers, and various departments of the city itself, assigned to develop the quarters under the broad guidelines of the HafenCity Masterplan. This framework defining the goals and strategies of HafenCity development, originally published in 2000, has helped to maintain cohesion as well as allowing experimentation for the last 25 years.



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Built on top of former docklands and port facilities, HafenCity is a 157-hectare district that is a living experiment

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The district also tests shared micro-mobility systems and dynamic delivery solutions that limit freight vehicles in residential zones



Photo: Stephan Bock_Dreamstime.com

One cooperative built housing where residents co-manage shared laundry rooms, workshops, and rooftop gardens. Another created senior-friendly apartments with on-site care options.

“Each piece is different,” Schmidt explains. “But they all add up to something greater than the sum.”

Education and research were also embedded early. HafenCity University, specialising in architecture and urban planning, occupies a central space in the district and runs over 80 global research collaborations. Students study their city in real time—collecting data on usage, observing community integration, and co-designing mobility pilots.

The district also tests shared micro-mobility systems and dynamic delivery solutions that limit freight vehicles in residential zones.

And culture has played a strategic role. The Elbphilharmonie concert hall is now one of Europe's most recognisable modern buildings. It was built on top of a historic warehouse physically and symbolically linking past and future.

“It was controversial at first,” Schmidt recalls, as costs ballooned from €77 million to over €850 million, and its completion was seven years behind schedule. “But now, it's a point of pride, has the best acoustics in the world, and attracts a lot of people.”

For Yap, HafenCity offers vital lessons for cities attempting large-scale transformation without losing sight of people.

“HafenCity exemplifies Hamburg's broader commitment to inclusiveness through its thoughtful integration of spaces and services that cater to both established residents and newcomers,” she says.

That level of seriousness was reflected even in how the award was received. When Olaf Scholz, then Hamburg's mayor and until May of this year, Chancellor of Germany, travelled to Singapore to accept the prize, he brought only six colleagues. All from the planning department.

“He told me: ‘I want to learn from Singapore and discuss town planning. I don't want to be disturbed by corporate agendas or other issues,’” recalls Schmidt.

URBAN PLANNING FOR PEOPLE

Vienna invites residents to design their own parklets

© Daniel Auer



In both Vienna and Hamburg, co-creation is embedded in the culture of these initiatives. It's seen in how Vienna invites residents to design their own parklets and in how HafenCity gives cooperatives the freedom to shape entire quarters. Both cities treat civic participation not as an afterthought, but as part of their operating systems.

Vienna has formalised its approach. For initiatives like Grätzloase or community gardens in Aspern Seestadt, there are clear channels for residents to propose ideas, apply for support, and receive guidance from dedicated city staff. Micro-grants are available for everything from street art to local cooking events. The goal is to empower, not to overwhelm.

"It's not just about saying yes or no," Lutter says. "It's about helping people think through what's possible."

In Hamburg, HafenCity GmbH, plays a similar role. It convenes developers, residents, and cultural institutions to shape cohesive planning visions. Public exhibitions and stakeholder forums are common practice.

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HafenCity Hamburg GmbH launched the Netzwerk HafenCity association in 2009 to represent neighbourhood interests, and it has since evolved into an active platform with various focus groups contributing to local projects and discussions. The company maintains regular contact with Netzwerk HafenCity and other emerging initiatives. Residents are routinely involved in planning processes, including architectural competitions and specific developments. For example, children and students helped shape the design of Grasbrook Park, Lohsepark, and the open spaces in Baakenhafen through participatory activities such as advisory committees and public camps. Open forums and information events are also held regularly for residents and local businesses.

Since late 2023, HafenCity has had dedicated neighbourhood management to act as a local

contact point and drive social engagement. The Quartiersmanagement HafenCity association aims to represent the diverse interests of owners, tenants, businesses, institutions, and community groups, working collaboratively to foster a neighbourly, inclusive, and vibrant district.

In both cities, this co-creative ethos has also shaped how cultural programmes are run. In Seestadt, vacant warehouses host everything from language cafes to art exhibitions curated by youth collectives. In HafenCity, pop-up cinemas and food festivals are co-programmed with local schools and churches.

“It’s not about event management,” says Lutter. “It’s about placemaking and giving people permission to create culture together.”

The Quartiersmanagement HafenCity association aims to represent the diverse interests of owners, tenants, businesses, institutions, and community groups, working collaboratively to foster a neighbourly, inclusive, and vibrant district



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TRUST, USE AND BELONGING

Both Vienna and Hamburg have tried to answer what makes a city liveable with meaningful, people-first metrics. Because in both cities, liveability isn't just about infrastructure. It's about how people feel.

In Vienna, the city conducts periodic surveys in new districts like Aspern Seestadt, not just to track satisfaction with services, but to ask more profound questions: Do you feel at home here? Do you know your neighbours? Do you feel you have a voice?

"Trust and belonging are hard to quantify, but we try," says Johannes Lutter. "Because if we don't measure them, we miss the point."

One of the most revealing survey questions is: How satisfied are you with your ability to shape your surroundings? According to Lutter, this indicator correlates strongly with civic pride, participation, and retention. When people feel involved, they're more likely to stay.

Yap sees this as a crucial insight for global cities.

One of the most revealing survey questions is: How satisfied are you with your ability to shape your surroundings?

Both Vienna and Hamburg have tried to answer what makes a city liveable with meaningful, people-first metrics

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Hamburg has even undertaken studies to assess and improve wind conditions in pedestrian areas, leading to design considerations that enhance comfort and usability

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Too often cities fall into the trap of focusing on 'hard' indicators like GDP, transport capacity, or housing units. But for liveability the key is in the name: lived.

HCU's CityScienceLab engages in various projects that involve data-driven urban analysis and citizen participation. For instance, the FindingPlaces project was a collaboration between HCU and the City of Hamburg, aiming to identify suitable locations for refugee accommodation through participatory workshops. This initiative utilized digital tools to facilitate citizen engagement in urban planning decisions.

Additionally, HCU's involvement in projects like SmartSquare demonstrates their commitment to analysing and revitalising public spaces using data-oriented methodologies.

"We don't just want to know how many people live here," says Schmidt. "We want to know how they live. What they do. What brings them joy."

Too often cities fall into the trap of focusing on 'hard' indicators like GDP, transport capacity, or housing units. But for liveability the key is in the name: lived

Hamburg has even undertaken studies to assess and improve wind conditions in pedestrian areas, leading to design considerations that enhance comfort and usability.

This commitment to soft data has inspired changes across city departments. In Vienna, the planning authority has adapted zoning guidelines to prioritise multi-use, small-scale commercial spaces after surveys showed a lack of informal gathering spots. In Hamburg, informal insights from cafe owners influenced the redesign of a pedestrian square to reduce wind tunnel effects.

THE PANDEMIC AS A PROOF-OF-CONCEPT

The COVID-19 pandemic tested every assumption about urban life. Streets emptied, public transport slowed and community events vanished. But the pandemic didn't paralyse innovation, it accelerated it.

"Everything we'd been advocating—distributed space, flexibility, people-first planning—suddenly became essential," says Lutter.

In Hamburg, the city rapidly rolled out expanded cycling infrastructure using HafenCity's design guidelines. Green corridors were introduced to link parks and ease crowding. Pop-up spaces hosted music performances, while autonomous shuttle pilots were repurposed to deliver goods to older residents.

The cities that responded best to the crisis weren't necessarily the most high-tech but were the ones that had built relationships, that had empowered people and that knew how to listen.

And beyond crisis response, the pandemic prompted deep reflection on urban purpose. In both cities, the question became not just how to "bounce back," but how to "bounce forward".

Vienna has embraced the concept of the 15-minute city, aiming to ensure that residents can access essential services within a short walking or cycling distance. This approach is detailed in Vienna's Smart City Strategy, which emphasises the development of

lively, mixed-use neighbourhoods with short distances to services and amenities.

Hamburg is developing the Grasbrook district as a new, green waterfront area that draws on experiences from the HafenCity project. The Grasbrook development, also managed by HafenCity Hamburg GmbH, focuses on creating living space for approximately 6,000 people and 16,000 workplaces. Key objectives for the district include climate and resource protection, social cohesion, and the integration of new working environments. The planning emphasises sustainable urban development, with mixed-use quarters designed to facilitate short distances and contribute to a shift in urban mobility.

In Hamburg, the city rapidly rolled out expanded cycling infrastructure using HafenCity's design guidelines

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

FOR ADAPTIVE URBAN INNOVATION

Vienna and Hamburg are not alone in their ambition to create more liveable cities but their success lies in how they've approached that goal

1 Start with people, not plans

In both cities, the most impactful changes often stemmed from small-scale, community-driven interventions. While Vienna's parklets and Aspern Seestadt's pilots illustrate how simple ideas can catalyse transformation, HafenCity followed a different path. From the beginning, its development was shaped by the city's Masterplan 2000, a strategic framework that was both visionary and adaptable and continues to guide progress today.

2 Embed experimentation in your systems

What sets these cities apart is not just their willingness to experiment, but their ability to do so in a systematic way. Hamburg's one-third housing rule, mixed governance, and flood-resilient landscape were built with iteration in mind. Vienna's public programmes treat "pilot" and "policy" as compatible.

3 Make interim uses part of your masterplan

Temporary activation isn't a sideshow, it's a strategy. In Seestadt, temporary student housing, gardens, and cultural spaces build community even before construction is complete. These are testbeds for what will eventually become permanent.

4 Trust your citizens

Participation works when it's real. Both cities provide technical help, funding, and responsive governance. As Yap says: "Urban spaces can be reimaged through citizen participation, creating meaningful places for community interaction."

5 Rethink metrics

Traditional indicators miss the full picture. Vienna and Hamburg measure how people feel, not just how they move or consume. They track belonging, co-creation, use of space, and cultural activity.

6 Treat crises as accelerators

The pandemic revealed the value of flexibility, not just in physical infrastructure, but in governance and community relationships. These cities didn't pivot; they adapted because they were already built to bend.

7 Stay curious. Stay connected

The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize gave both cities a platform for global learning. And both cities used it. "The Prize is not the end, it's an invitation," says Schmidt. "To keep learning, to keep sharing, and to keep improving."

LIVEABILITY AS A CONTINUING PROCESS

Cities are often assessed in global liveability “rankings” by the scale of their shiny new infrastructure or the visibility of their flagship developments. However, in Vienna and Hamburg, the focus has increasingly shifted towards the conditions that enable quality of life to emerge organically, through public trust, community interaction, and the flexibility to adapt over time

These cities continue to face the challenges common to many urban environments, including affordability, demographic shifts, and the need to reduce emissions. What differentiates their approach is the emphasis on incremental improvement, structured experimentation, and multi-level collaboration.

Both Hamburg and Vienna have developed frameworks that support civic participation and interim use as central planning tools, rather than supplementary features. Their policies enable residents, community groups and institutions to test ideas and, in many cases, scale them.

This adaptive approach is part of a continuing process which the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize committee recognised as a distinguishing factor.

As cities worldwide look for pathways toward resilience, inclusion and liveability, the experiences of Vienna and Hamburg suggest that adaptability, when supported by governance structures and social trust, can be a lasting strength.

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