

**INTA INVITATION** LECTURE SERIES 2025  
**URBAN HEALTH CULTURE OF THE FUTURE** [reg:contact@inta-aivn.org](mailto:reg:contact@inta-aivn.org)

**Mental health of cities,  
loneliness and the urban environment**

- **Mental health of cities, loneliness and the urban environment:  
experiencias mundiales recientes**  
Etienne Lhomet, Director DVDH
- **How sound urban mobility infrastructures can heal sick cities: recent  
worldwide experiences**  
Léa Portier, partner and Tamara Yazigi, architect & urban designer Recipro-cité

## URBAN HEALTH CULTURE OF THE FUTURE

### **Mental Health of cities, loneliness and the urban environment**

Date: 20 March 2025, 4-5 pm

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The INTA association has decided to focus on **urban health culture** for the two years 2025/2026 and to attract the attention of the community of professionals working in the field of urban projects. The action plan adopted to achieve this goal includes organizing a series of three conferences on urban health culture.

**The first conference**, on the theme "**What is Urban Health Culture?**", brought together Christer Larsson, former Director of Urban Planning in Malmö, and John Pløger, Professor Emeritus at the Universities of Kristiansand and Oslo, and a specialist in urban sociology.

**The second conference**, on March 20, 2025, from 4:00 PM to 5:00 PM, focused on the theme "**City Mental Health, Loneliness, and the Urban Environment.**"

It featured two speakers: **Étienne Lhomet, Director of DVDH**, a French consulting firm specializing in sustainable mobility, and **Léa Portier, Partner** and **Tamara Yazigi at Recipro-cité**, a French company specializing in the design and implementation of shared accommodation projects.

- Introduction and presentation of the two speakers by **Helle Juul, President of INTA.**

- Presentation by Étienne Lhomet: How efficient urban mobility infrastructures reconnect individuals: recent experiences around the world.
- Presentation by Léa Portier: How shared accommodation projects revitalize social ties: the experience of Récipro-cité.

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# How Sound Urban Mobility Infrastructures Reconnect People: Recent Worldwide Experiences

Étienne Lhomet, Director of DVDH, France

## Slides : A Systemic Vision of Cities



Cities are living organisms, and we are their living cells. We are born, we live, and we pass away, while cities remain, slowly evolving over decades and centuries.

The idea of cities as living entities is not new—urban practitioners have long studied what is known as **urban metabolism**: how cities consume resources (water, food, raw materials, handcrafted goods) and energy, while generating wastewater, solid waste, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

For years, researchers have also examined the interaction between cities and their natural environment.

However, it is worth taking this analogy further by exploring the **psychology of cities** and investigating their enduring values.

## Slides : The Psychology of Cities



Some cities are business-driven, others prioritize social solidarity. Some are intellectual hubs, while others exude a feel-good atmosphere. Some cities are melancholic, while others harbor secrets they wish to forget. Some cities are transparent and open. People come and go, yet the fundamental character of a city endures.

Just like individuals, cities can experience mental distress. Some suffer from megalomania, others are cruel or violent. And when cities suffer, so do their inhabitants.

But here is the good news: just like people, cities can be healed!

## Slides : How Sound Mobility Projects Can Heal Cities

Urban transport engineers can also be city healers. Local governments typically call upon them when cities suffer from severe traffic congestion—or even urban **thrombosis**, where vehicles are immobilized for hours, paralyzing daily life.

Some urban planners, like the renowned Jaime Lerner of Curitiba, Brazil, apply **urban acupuncture**, skillfully blending urban planning with transport infrastructure to resolve mobility issues.

However, most transport engineers still focus primarily on infrastructure solutions—highways dominated the 20th century, while public transport and cycling infrastructure are now prioritized in the 21st century. While these efforts are beneficial, they often treat only the symptoms rather than the root causes of urban dysfunction.

A holistic approach—akin to human medicine—is essential. Who are the people commuting daily? Are they wealthy, middle-class, or economically disadvantaged? Are they women or men? Children, adults, or elderly citizens? Why do they travel—to work, to study, to care for loved ones? Do they live stress-free lives, or do they struggle?

Understanding people's needs and behaviors is crucial for designing truly effective mobility solutions. And in turn, well-designed transport projects can transform people's mindsets and ultimately contribute to healing cities.

Let's move beyond theory and examine some concrete examples.

### **Slides : Medellín – From Ultra-Violence to Joyful Reconciliation**



In the early 1990s, Medellín was infamous as the city of Pablo Escobar, controlled by drug cartels, plagued by kidnappings, and surrounded by violent Marxist guerrillas. But in just two decades, Medellín has undergone a dramatic transformation—what locals themselves call **Metro Culture**.

The turning point came with the decision to build a metro line in the valley and aerial cable cars connecting low-income neighborhoods in the steep surrounding hills. But mobility infrastructure alone was not enough. Authorities ensured that these projects were accompanied by:

1. Urban facilities (public spaces, libraries, childcare centers).
2. Social programs (literacy initiatives, women's empowerment projects).

As a result, Medellín's urban culture changed rapidly. Communities that once distrusted each other engaged in reconciliation, even with former guerrilla fighters. Where fear, hatred, and isolation once prevailed, culture, communication, and well-being flourished.

### **Slides : Bordeaux – From Sleepy Nostalgia to a Vibrant Ecological Economy**



Bordeaux is renowned for its wines, but it was also historically a major hub for slavery and colonial trade. In the early 1990s, the city was a melancholic shadow of its past—gloomy and stagnant.

A bold decision was made:

- Cars were banned from the city center.
- An extensive tramway network was built.
- Cycling infrastructure was promoted.

These changes transformed both the city and its people. The Gironde River, once disconnected from urban life, was reintegrated with new parks and public spaces along its banks. Low-income

neighborhoods—mainly home to immigrant communities—were linked directly to the affluent city center. Meanwhile, new economic hubs emerged across the metropolitan area, fostering creative industries, tech startups, universities, and scientific research centers.

Bordeaux is a prime example of a once-ailing city that has been healed—its people reconnected both with nature and with each other.

### **Additional Case Studies: Rabat, Rio de Janeiro, Paris**



Other cities have undergone similar transformations, using mobility projects as a catalyst for broader social and economic regeneration.

### **Slides : European Cities Face Challenges but Have Long Mastered the Art of Well-Being**

Cities can fall ill for many reasons—natural disasters, social inequality, political unrest. When cities suffer, their people become isolated, social bonds erode, and life loses meaning.

Yet, European cities have learned over centuries how to overcome these crises. Time and again, they have found ways to foster well-being and strengthen social cohesion.

**Cities can be healed.**

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## **Promoting mental health in cities through meeting places**

Lea Portier, Tamara Yazigi - Réciprocite, France

Tamara Yazigi, Architect & Urban Designer, Récipro-Cité, France

### **Introduction**



**Slide 28** - We live in a world that is constantly changing, where cities, while offering opportunities and cultural wealth, also become places of significant social and psychological challenges. Mental health is now a major concern, and it's clear that issues like isolation, anxiety, and depression are on the rise.

The way we design our cities plays a key role in this. Urban planning, housing, public spaces, and how they either encourage or hinder social interactions directly affect the mental health of city residents. The need to create and promote spaces for meeting and "doing things together" is growing more urgent. While isolation can weaken individuals, well-designed urban spaces can be a real protective resource.

Today, I'd like to explore with you the concerning trends we're seeing in mental health in cities and show how the design of living spaces can be an effective and lasting solution.

I will start with sharing with you what Récipro-Cité does on everyday bases.

**Slide 25** - Récipro-Cité is a small company, created in 2011 to accompany those who build cities and housing in designing and bringing to life territories that really foster social connections.



**Slide 30** - Throughout the years, Récipro-Cité has developed different field of expertise to answer to the needs that emerged.

- We lead studies and act as consultants for those who build residencies and neighborhood
- We do what is called “assistance à Maitrise d’Usage” (don’t know the translation), meaning that we make sure the users of the future projects, whether is a small housing project or a whole area, are really involved. They are the first experts on their environment, our role there is to make sure what they bring is understood by those who design.
- In the intergenerational projects, which are the heart of our expertise, we place a professional whose job is to create connections and the collective dynamics in everyday life
- We also operate common spaces in neighborhoods, known as third spaces, which take many different configurations
- Finally, we train developers by giving them the tools to create places that create human connections.



**Slide 31** - Today, after 14 years of experience, we can count on 40 different projects supported, representing more than 4000 housing units. Today, about 30 employees are working on site, in the housing projects.

## 1. Observation: weakened mental health and growing isolation

**Slide 32** - In large cities, mental health issues are increasing. Stress, work pressure, urban density, and insecurity are often the main causes. But another significant factor has emerged in recent years: the COVID-19 crisis. The lockdowns were a challenge for everyone, but they had a particularly strong impact on two groups: the young and the elderly.

- For young people, loneliness has become much more common. According to a study by the Fondation de France, 62% of 18-24 year-olds have regularly felt lonely since the pandemic. The closure of universities, the loss of spontaneous social interactions, and increased screen time contributed to a rise in depression and suicidal thoughts among this age group.
- For seniors, isolation worsened with restricted visits and fear of the virus. The latest report from Petits Frères des Pauvres reveals that 530,000 elderly people in France live in "social death," meaning they have no regular contact with others. Beyond the health crisis, we are also seeing a steady decline in free spaces for socializing. Cafes, libraries, and community centers are disappearing or becoming paid, excluding the most vulnerable groups. Public spaces are often designed with a functional approach, without considering the social and psychological needs of citizens.

## 2. The Consequences of social Isolation

**Slide 34** - Social isolation has serious consequences, both for individuals and for society as a whole.

It affects the general state of the person by, among other, contributing to the renunciation of care, a poorer diet, and the non-use of social rights...

#### **At the individual level:**

- Isolation increases anxiety and depression.
- It is a risk factor for cognitive decline in the elderly.
- It affects physical health: isolated individuals are at higher risk for heart disease and premature death.

#### **At the societal level:**

- Isolation costs healthcare systems a lot. The rise in mental health issues leads to more consultations, hospitalizations, and prescriptions.
- It weakens social cohesion and increases inequality.

### **3. Urban planning and creating spaces that promote social connections**

**Slide 35** - To tackle these issues, it's crucial to rethink how we design our cities and public spaces to encourage more social interaction. This can involve:



- **Accessible and inclusive public spaces** : public spaces that are well-designed, gender-neutral, and encourage conversation, with playgrounds for children and outdoor spaces for activities (sports fields, barbecue areas, picnic tables, etc.).

• **Shared spaces in residential buildings**: Spaces like multifunctional community rooms, shared kitchens, or community gardens play a key role in neighborhood life.

**Slide 37** - For example, Récipro-Cité supports over thirty intergenerational residences in France, along with shared spaces called “**Maisons des Projets**”, which encourage connections and well-being for residents and neighbourhood who join in regular activities.



**Slide 38** - These residences have in common 3 ingredients: the architecture of the whole housing project (intergenerational but not stigmatizing), the animation of everyday life by someone on site, at least at the start of the social project and the configuration of the common spaces which can be easily appropriated by the residents.

**Slide 39** - We conducted a social impact survey with hundreds of beneficiaries, and here's what we found:

- Feeling surrounded: 81% of participants feel somewhat supported.
- Being part of a group: 65% feel they belong to a group.
- Feeling recognized: 62% feel they contribute positively to their neighborhood or residence.

### **4. The role of professionals and urban mediation**

**Slide 40** - Our experience shows that simply creating these spaces isn't enough—they must be designed, managed, and supported by trained professionals.

Before starting projects, urban planners and architects must take mental health into account when designing spaces. Temporary urbanism, which promotes short-term interventions to test

how spaces are used allows us to see how well these spaces work and how they affect the community.

Spaces designed for participation should be planned “by” and “for” future users. This means involving them from the start through surveys, one-on-one interviews, and collective brainstorming workshops to identify their needs and desires.

Finally, social workers and mediators play an essential role in ensuring these spaces have a positive impact:

- They help initiate a collective dynamic when the spaces are first opened.
- They create a safe and welcoming environment that promotes inclusivity.
- They mediate any conflicts that arise.
- They identify people in distress and help them access specialized support.

It’s clear that local authorities have a crucial role to play by supporting these initiatives and funding solutions that meet local needs.

### **Conclusion**

**Slide 42** - Fighting isolation and promoting mental health in cities requires rethinking urban planning and creating spaces that encourage social interaction. Cities should be places of life, not sources of stress and loneliness. It’s urgent to make our urban spaces more human and inclusive. Through practical initiatives, we can turn our public spaces into places of well-being and social cohesion, where everyone can find their place. By designing cities as spaces for meeting and sharing, we can build a more supportive and healthier future for all.