

## 3rd International Conference on Education, Environment, Arts and Social Science (EEAS 2026)

Review

# Designing Connection: How Urban Public Spaces Can Address the Loneliness Epidemic in Global Megacities

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**Abstract:** In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared loneliness a pressing global health threat, equating its severe mortality risks to those of smoking and physical inactivity. Amidst the unprecedented density and rapid expansion of global megacities, a profound paradox exists: high population concentration frequently coincides with heightened social isolation and psychological distress. This comprehensive review examines how urban public spaces—encompassing municipal parks, extensive transit networks, public libraries, community centers, and emerging digital hybrid environments—function as indispensable "social infrastructure" to actively mitigate this pervasive loneliness epidemic. By systematically synthesizing interdisciplinary research across urban sociology, environmental psychology, and architecture, alongside diverse international case studies, this paper argues that well-designed green spaces do more than offer aesthetic value; they actively foster incidental social encounters, facilitate community cohesion, and provide critical emotional relief. Furthermore, accessible and equitable transit systems enable broader social participation across diverse demographic groups, while "third places" such as libraries and community hubs provide safe, neutral grounds for cultivating a shared sense of belonging. The study concludes that the true effectiveness of these public spaces depends not merely on their physical existence or spatial dimensions, but fundamentally on inclusive design principles, equitable public access, and intentional, community-driven programming. Ultimately, contemporary urban planning paradigms must urgently evolve beyond mere physical construction to create deeply integrated social systems that successfully transform urban density from a primary source of alienation into a resilient foundation for human connection.

**Keywords:** loneliness; megacities; public spaces; social infrastructure; urban planning; mental health

Received: 09 April 2026

Revised: 27 May 2026

Accepted: 08 June 2026

Published: 13 June 2026



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## 1. Introduction

In 2023, the World Health Organization identified loneliness as a significant global health concern, associating social isolation with increased risks of mental health challenges, cardiovascular conditions, and premature mortality. Concurrently, a major health service and insurance company reported that a substantial portion of adults worldwide perceive themselves as lonely, particularly in densely populated urban areas. This phenomenon presents a striking contradiction: while megacities are hubs of human activity and population density, their residents often face difficulties in forming meaningful connections and sustaining long-term relationships [1]. This paradox highlights the complex interplay between urban living and social well-being, suggesting that the physical proximity of individuals does not necessarily translate into emotional or social closeness [2]. The issue of loneliness in urban environments is not merely a personal

challenge but a societal one, with far-reaching implications for public health and urban planning.

The current prevalence of social disconnection raises an essential question: how can urban public spaces and services, such as parks, libraries, and community centers, be leveraged to mitigate loneliness in global megacities? Research into the role of urban spaces has provided valuable insights [3]. For instance, studies on coffee shops in several cities have explored how these commercial venues can serve as informal social hubs. These spaces, often referred to as "third places," function as environments outside of home and work where individuals can engage in casual social interactions. Such interactions, even when brief or superficial, contribute to a sense of community and belonging. For example, small exchanges at counters or the recognition of familiar faces among patrons can foster a sense of "public familiarity," which is crucial for building social ties, even if they are not deeply personal. However, these spaces are not without limitations. Factors such as cost, customer demographics, and urban design can create barriers to access, potentially leading to exclusion or even gentrification. Similarly, community centers in some regions have demonstrated success in reducing isolation among specific groups, such as older adults, but only when their design and programming are intentionally inclusive and encourage active participation. These examples underscore the importance of thoughtful planning and management in creating public spaces that genuinely promote social interaction and inclusivity. Urban design plays a pivotal role in shaping social dynamics, with features like walkable streets, accessible public transportation, and well-maintained green spaces being identified as protective factors against loneliness and related health issues [4]. Conversely, urban environments that prioritize car dependency and lack accessible public spaces may exacerbate social isolation. This perspective emphasizes that cities are not merely physical constructs but complex social ecosystems that require careful and inclusive planning to foster community and well-being.

This essay contends that the thoughtful design and equitable accessibility of public spaces can play a significant role in alleviating loneliness in megacities [5]. By facilitating frequent, low-pressure social interactions, such spaces can help bridge the gap between physical proximity and emotional connection. However, the effectiveness of these spaces depends on several critical factors, including inclusive planning, safety measures, and the ability to adapt to the unique needs and cultural contexts of local communities. Addressing these factors is essential for transforming urban environments into supportive social systems that enhance the quality of life for their residents [6].

## **2. Parks and Green Spaces: Everyday Encounters and Emotional Relief**

Access to parks and urban green spaces fosters casual social interactions and helps alleviate stress, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness. Research has demonstrated that higher neighborhood green coverage can significantly lower loneliness among older adults, even when factors such as income and health status are accounted for [3, 7]. This suggests that the presence of green environments themselves plays a protective role in maintaining mental well-being. Furthermore, studies have shown that incremental increases in local green space are associated with a reduced risk of loneliness, particularly for individuals living alone. These findings emphasize that accessible green spaces serve as more than aesthetic additions to urban areas; they function as essential social infrastructure that supports the mental health of residents. By providing opportunities for informal interactions and shared experiences, parks and green spaces contribute to the emotional resilience of communities.

The design and management of parks can significantly enhance their impact on social interactions and emotional well-being [8, 9]. For example, neighborhoods with well-maintained parks that host regular community events have been shown to foster intergenerational interactions and strengthen a sense of belonging among residents. During periods of restricted social contact, such as those experienced during public health emergencies, parks have provided safe spaces for incidental interactions, enabling individuals to maintain connections with their neighbors and build emotional resilience.

Surveys have indicated that frequent use of parks during such times is associated with greater neighbor contact and improved emotional well-being. These findings highlight the importance of thoughtful park design and management in creating environments that support both social and emotional health, even under challenging circumstances.

Equitable access to parks and green spaces remains a critical issue. Studies have revealed that lower-income neighborhoods often face significant barriers to accessing parks, including inadequate transportation, poor infrastructure, and insufficient urban planning. These disparities limit the ability of disadvantaged communities to benefit from the mental health advantages provided by green spaces. Spatial inequalities, influenced by factors such as income and race, underscore the need for more inclusive urban planning and investment in public green infrastructure. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensure that all communities, regardless of socioeconomic status, can access the benefits of parks and green spaces. By prioritizing equitable access, urban planners can help mitigate mental health challenges in underserved areas and promote overall community well-being.

Parks serve as venues for unplanned interactions, such as brief greetings, shared activities, and moments of mutual presence. However, their ability to reduce loneliness and support mental health depends on inclusive planning and accessibility [10]. Local support and community agreement are essential for the successful implementation and maintenance of these infrastructures. Without such consensus, the effectiveness of parks in addressing mental health challenges may be diminished, and their existence could face significant obstacles. Ensuring that parks are designed and managed in a way that meets the needs of diverse populations is crucial for maximizing their social and emotional benefits. By fostering collaboration among residents and stakeholders, urban planners can create green spaces that truly serve as vital resources for community well-being.

### **3. Connected Transit and Active Mobility: Enabling Social Participation**

While parks provide space for connection, public transportation and walkable infrastructures play a critical role in enabling people to access these facilities and engage with their communities. High-quality transit systems and pedestrian-friendly networks are essential for reducing social isolation by expanding opportunities for interaction and participation in various activities. Reliable transportation systems not only facilitate access to workplaces, social venues, and community events but also contribute to fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion [11]. Research has shown that individuals who have access to dependable public transit options are less likely to experience loneliness, as they can more easily maintain social connections and participate in communal activities. For example, older adults who regularly use buses or trains are often more socially engaged compared to those who remain confined to their homes. This highlights the importance of designing transit systems that cater to the needs of diverse populations, including seniors and individuals with limited mobility. By ensuring that transportation networks are accessible, affordable, and user-friendly, communities can create environments that promote social well-being and reduce feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the integration of transit systems with key social destinations, such as libraries, theaters, and community centers, can enhance their effectiveness in fostering social participation. This underscores the need for urban planning strategies that prioritize connectivity and inclusivity in transportation infrastructure.

However, the availability and quality of transit systems remain significant challenges. Dissatisfaction with the reliability or affordability of public transportation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, as psychological barriers such as frustration and inconvenience may discourage individuals from utilizing these services. Additionally, car-dependent mobility patterns can contribute to social isolation, as driving often limits opportunities for spontaneous interactions that are more common in walkable or transit-oriented environments [12, 13]. Active modes of transport, such as walking and cycling, have been shown to create opportunities for incidental social contact, such as exchanging greetings or making eye contact with others. This was particularly evident during periods of

restricted mobility, where walking and cycling became vital means of maintaining social connections. To maximize the potential of transportation systems in fostering social engagement, it is crucial to invest in infrastructure that is not only reliable and efficient but also designed to encourage interaction and inclusivity. Pedestrian-friendly streets, for instance, can serve as vibrant public spaces where individuals can connect and share experiences. Moreover, ensuring that transit options are affordable and accessible to all segments of the population is essential for promoting equity and reducing social disparities. By addressing both physical and psychological barriers to mobility, transportation systems can play a transformative role in enhancing social cohesion and improving overall quality of life.

#### **4. Libraries, Community Centers, and Third Places: Neutral Grounds for Belonging**

Beyond mobility and green space, community institutions serve as essential neutral meeting grounds that foster social connections and inclusivity. Public libraries, for instance, have evolved far beyond their traditional role of lending books. They now host a variety of programs such as clubs, literacy initiatives, and outreach efforts aimed at supporting marginalized groups, including immigrants and homeless individuals. These initiatives create a network of support that extends beyond the physical act of borrowing materials. Similarly, modern libraries in urban centers have embraced the concept of multifunctional spaces. For example, some libraries have transformed into civic hubs, offering workshops, performances, and communal workspaces equipped with advanced tools like recording rooms and 3D printers. These spaces are designed to be open-access and low-pressure, which significantly lowers barriers to participation and encourages a broader segment of the population to engage in social interactions. Informal social spaces, often referred to as "third places," also play a critical role in fostering community ties. Coffee shops, for example, provide a welcoming environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds can communicate, relax, and build connections. Unlike exclusive venues or spaces requiring reservations, these establishments are accessible to a wide range of people, promoting casual and spontaneous interactions. This concept aligns with the design of community centers in various regions, which aim to provide low-pressure environments that cater to socially introverted individuals or those seeking a sense of belonging.

However, the benefits of these community spaces are not universally experienced. Research indicates that the effectiveness of such spaces can vary based on demographic and cultural factors. For instance, while community centers may offer opportunities for social engagement, their impact on reducing loneliness is not guaranteed [14]. In some cases, frequent use of these spaces has been shown to enhance life satisfaction among specific groups, such as men, but may not significantly alleviate feelings of isolation among older adults as a whole. This suggests that the quality of programming and alignment with cultural norms play a crucial role in determining outcomes. Additionally, individual personality traits, such as shyness or introversion, can influence participation rates. Shy individuals, for example, may feel hesitant to engage in group settings, even in low-pressure environments. This highlights the importance of designing inclusive and adaptable programs that cater to a diverse range of needs and preferences, ensuring that community spaces fulfill their potential as hubs of social connection and support.

#### **5. Digital and Hybrid Public Spaces: Extending Connection Beyond Physical Boundaries**

In addition to physical parks and libraries, digital and hybrid public spaces are increasingly functioning as extensions of urban social infrastructure, particularly in post-pandemic megacities. Virtual library programming, such as online book clubs, streamed lectures, and discussion forums, has emerged as a significant innovation in fostering social interaction and inclusivity. These platforms, when intentionally designed to be accessible and engaging, can help reduce barriers for individuals who face challenges related to

physical mobility or other constraints. For example, digital spaces can provide opportunities for individuals with physical limitations or those who experience discomfort in traditional social settings to participate in meaningful interactions. Furthermore, experimental research on social virtual reality platforms has demonstrated their potential to alleviate feelings of isolation. During periods of restricted physical movement, such as the COVID-19 lockdowns, participants engaging in shared virtual spaces reported lower levels of loneliness, particularly when they interacted with groups they felt connected to. Similarly, active participation in online community groups and digital forums has been associated with improved emotional well-being, as these platforms enable individuals to communicate with diverse groups and foster a sense of belonging. These findings underscore the importance of designing digital public spaces that prioritize inclusivity and interactivity, as they can play a vital role in reducing social isolation and enhancing urban social infrastructure.

Digital public spaces, while offering numerous benefits, also face limitations that must be addressed to maximize their effectiveness [15]. One significant challenge is the disparity in access to technology and digital literacy, which can hinder participation among lower-income populations who may lack the resources to own electronic devices or acquire the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms. This digital divide highlights the need for targeted interventions, such as community programs that provide access to technology and training, to ensure equitable participation in these spaces. Additionally, while online libraries and chat rooms serve as valuable outreach and communication channels, they cannot entirely replace physical "third places" that offer tangible, face-to-face interactions. However, digital platforms can complement physical spaces by providing alternative pathways for individuals who remain isolated from the majority to connect with others. For instance, residents who face geographical or mobility constraints can benefit from virtual interactions that bridge physical distances and foster a sense of community. By addressing these challenges and leveraging the strengths of digital public spaces, urban planners and policymakers can create a more inclusive and interconnected social infrastructure that meets the diverse needs of modern urban populations.

## **6. Conclusion (Limitations?)**

Multiple studies across continents, from densely populated Asian megacities to European welfare-oriented urban systems and rapidly urbanizing regions in Africa and Latin America, indicate that well-designed public infrastructure can play a substantial role in reducing loneliness. Evidence from cities such as Tokyo and Helsinki suggests that accessible neighborhoods, well-maintained parks, pedestrian networks, and reliable transit systems increase the likelihood of repeated social encounters and low-stakes everyday interactions that gradually build familiarity, trust, and a sense of local belonging. Comparable patterns are visible in a wide range of urban contexts. In South American and African cities such as São Paulo and Lagos, even where resources are constrained, carefully planned public markets, bus corridors, and shared community hubs can support meaningful social contact. These spaces can encourage interaction, routine visibility, and informal exchange, even in settings where institutional capacity, long-term maintenance, or broad public support may be uneven. Taken together, these findings suggest that the social value of infrastructure is not limited to mobility or service delivery alone; it also lies in its capacity to shape the rhythms of everyday life and to create repeated opportunities for connection among residents who might otherwise remain socially distant despite physical proximity.

This body of evidence underscores the importance of integrated urban planning rather than isolated measures. Green space without adequate transit can limit access, particularly for older adults, low-income residents, and people with limited mobility. In turn, transit systems that connect poorly to public destinations may move people efficiently without creating opportunities for social participation, recreation, or community use. Public libraries, neighborhood centers, sidewalks, plazas, and transport networks function most effectively when they are conceived as parts of a connected urban

system rather than as separate projects. Therefore, a central responsibility of city governments is to invest in transportation, maintenance, and the construction of public amenities in a coordinated manner. This includes not only new metro lines, bus routes, public libraries, and community centers, but also the long-term upkeep, safety, accessibility, and usability of these facilities. Effective planning must also consider distributional equity so that benefits are not concentrated in already advantaged districts. When infrastructure is planned comprehensively, it can support daily routines, improve access to shared spaces, and strengthen the conditions under which social ties can emerge and endure over time.

Well-designed public spaces have the potential to alleviate loneliness and improve emotional well-being among urban residents. However, simply adding public areas and making them nominally available is not, by itself, an effective solution. Proximity to green space alone does not necessarily reduce loneliness, and parks are not the only settings in which residents can encounter one another, communicate, or develop a sense of community. Streets, transit stops, libraries, markets, sports facilities, and multipurpose civic venues may also serve this function, depending on how they are designed and used. The broader lesson is that the social and psychological value of public space depends on quality, accessibility, safety, comfort, programming, and the degree of community engagement it supports. Benefits associated with urban green spaces and other shared environments often operate through social interaction, routine participation, and satisfaction with the local environment rather than through physical space alone. Public spaces contribute to well-being most effectively when they foster inclusion, repeated contact, and a sense of belonging across different social groups. This means that design features such as seating, shade, walkability, visibility, mixed uses, and universal accessibility are not minor details; they are central to whether a space becomes socially meaningful. In addition, active stewardship, local programming, and community participation can determine whether a public area remains vibrant, trusted, and widely used. In summary, public infrastructure can make an important contribution to urban mental well-being, but policymakers should recognize that physical spaces alone cannot address complex forms of social disconnection. Their effectiveness depends on complementary social support, inclusive design, responsive management, and sustained community involvement.

Ultimately, loneliness is not simply an individual psychological condition or a private personal circumstance; it is also a structural challenge that reflects broader social arrangements and patterns of urban development. The design of cities influences how often people encounter one another, how easily they can access shared resources, and whether daily life encourages withdrawal or participation. If urban areas intentionally develop community-oriented spaces, improve opportunities for communication among residents, and maintain well-connected transportation systems, they can transform density from a source of alienation into a foundation for connection. In this sense, urban planning should not be understood as a peripheral policy domain concerned only with land use or physical form. It is also a form of social infrastructure that shapes belonging, trust, and the practical conditions of collective life. Contemporary societies have increasingly drawn attention to social isolation, unequal access to resources, and the weakening of everyday communal ties. Within this context, the built environment becomes especially important because it can either reinforce fragmentation or help counter it. Streets that are safe and walkable, transit that is affordable and dependable, and public institutions that are open, welcoming, and well maintained can support routine interaction across age, class, and cultural differences. At the same time, the limitations of infrastructure must be acknowledged. Built form alone cannot resolve all dimensions of loneliness, especially where economic insecurity, social exclusion, or weak institutional support persist. For this reason, the most effective urban strategies are likely to combine physical planning with social programming, local participation, and long-term governance capacity. A balanced conclusion, therefore, is that urban infrastructure is neither a complete remedy nor a negligible factor. Rather, it is a powerful enabling

condition that can improve the social experience of city life when it is inclusive, interconnected, and supported by broader community-oriented policies. Under these conditions, urban residents are more likely to experience their city not as an anonymous environment, but as a setting in which belonging, familiarity, and mutual recognition can gradually take shape.

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