

Could London Benefit from DIY Urban Planning? Helsinki has. Here's how

By Timo Härmäläinen

London and Helsinki don't seem like cities that have a lot in common. One is a world city and global command center for flows of people and finance while the other is a peripheral capital that often gets shrugged off in favour of its bigger neighbours Stockholm and St. Petersburg.

More than anything, the cities are incomparable in size. There are about 10 times more Londoners than there are residents in the Helsinki urban area.

But if you focus on problems that both cities are preoccupied with solving, similarities are not that hard to find. Surely everyone's aware of the housing crisis in London that's making the city inaccessible to a growing number of people. A condition powered by a rising population, capital inflows and a shift in lifestyle preferences, pulling hordes to enjoy the urban amenities and job opportunities of the bustling capital, and sustained by an incapability of finding ways to extend the supply of apartments. The severe shortage of affordable apartments is a worry shared in both cities.

The obvious remedy would be to intensify already built-up areas near the core as well as in well-serviced transit nodes outside of it.

Practice has however shown that placing such ideas in plans and getting on-the-ground results is no walk in the park. The modernism-embracing planning system doesn't easily deliver anymore, especially when the focus is on intensifying the existing urban fabric. Endless bureaucracy, shallow public participation processes, and a regulatory framework that effectively blocks most attempts for developing human-scale density, all sum to lengthy, expensive and unpleasing planning projects.

Londoners, if this sounds like something you can relate with, we feel for you in Helsinki.

And when local authorities don't seem to have any agreeable solution to this wicked problem, it certainly doesn't seem there's a lot that can be done by citizens to inspire local governments to embrace better ways of planning.

But that's not completely true. I was involved in completing a project in Helsinki which demonstrates that do-it-yourself urban planning can have a real impact on the way we discuss urban development and established planning concepts. Our project helped to create momentum for pushing things in the right direction.

Pro Helsinki 2.0 – The urbanist vision for making Helsinki denser and more diverse

Pro Helsinki 2.0 is an unofficial comprehensive city plan for Helsinki, which illustrates how the city could intensify to accommodate half a million new residents close to transit connections, jobs and services –without needing to sacrifice green areas. It was designed by a voluntary working group called Urban Helsinki and completely in a DIY fashion. Our team represents a new type of

community involvement powered by the rapid rise of the internet, social media, and, above all, the growth of a DIY culture among younger citizens.

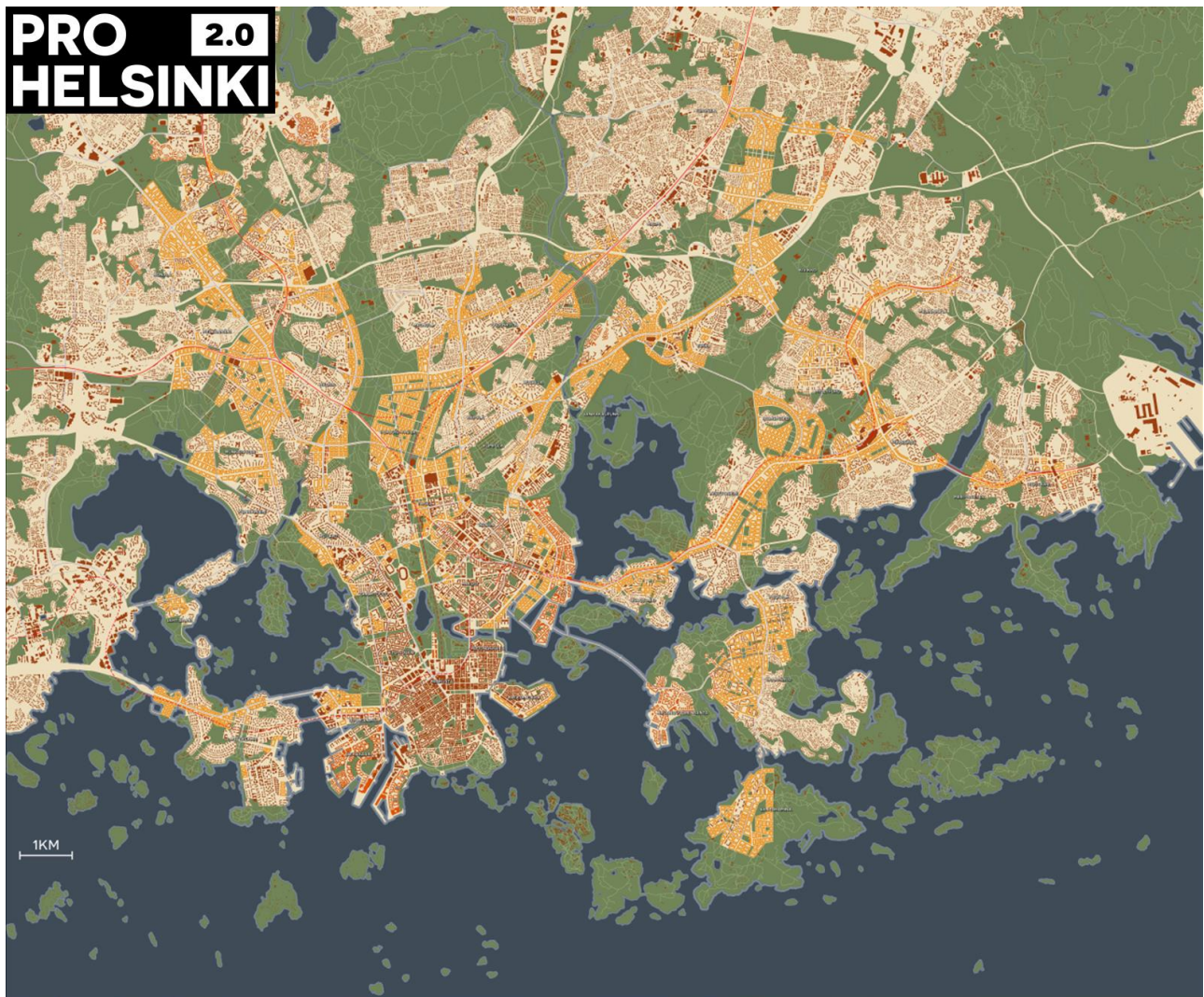


Fig i - the Pro Helsinki 2.0 city plan. The new development we propose is marked with orange. Map by Urban Helsinki. View the full 'zoomable' map [here](#).

The idea to create Pro Helsinki 2.0 sparked from a need to give Helsinkiers an opportunity to compare and contrast alternative pathways as city officials are in the process of drafting [a new strategic plan](#) to guide the city's growth until 2050. Once enforced, this plan will necessarily have a tremendous impact on what Helsinki will be like 35 years from now – for better or for worse. To help make sure it won't be the latter, we decided to draft our own strategic plan.

We named the project Pro Helsinki 2.0 as a tribute to [Eliel Saarinen](#), who published a plan called Pro Helsingfors in 1918 to guide how Helsinki could grow into a world city. In his time, Saarinen envisioned a model for Helsinki's outward expansion based on dense urban nodes and railway connections. Sadly, hardly any of his ideas ever materialised. Now a century later, we've envisioned a plan to turn Helsinki into a world city by drafting a model for growing inwards.

Here are a few key principles our work is grounded on:

Future growth will be accommodated by making the inner city larger as well as creating new and strong urban nodes not too far from the old urban core. This will create critical masses to introduce and upkeep a good choice of services also outside of the city center, give more people the

possibility to walk to their everyday destinations, and allow the city to develop a comprehensive public transport network. Concentrating more people closer together also leads to more jobs. And finally, dense neighbourhoods mitigate the need to build up parks and nature areas.



Fig ii - land-use patterns in comparison. Two very different ways of making homes for 300 people. Image by Antti Auvinen

Much of the new development will be built 1) along highways by retrofitting them into urban boulevards; 2) in previously strictly-for-business areas by retrofitting them into mixed-use neighbourhoods; 3) on railway yards and other land-consuming functions that are hogging up valuable land in the middle of the city; 4) and between existing neighbourhoods to connect them with each other.

A precondition for our plan to be successful is that Helsinki needs to learn how to make urban blocks, streets and public spaces again. Density is only attractive if coupled with the qualities associated with urban neighbourhoods. Focus needs to be put on diverse streetscapes, buildings facing the street, shops and other businesses, and putting pedestrians first. Essentially, planning should be done from the perspective of pedestrians.



Fig iii - a future street in Helsinki, we hope. Image by Niilo Tenkanen

Another precondition is that to build those urban neighbourhoods, we need to evaluate our existing zoning and building codes critically. At the moment it would be illegal to build anything comparable to Helsinki's most highly valued neighbourhoods. It sounds ludicrous, but the inconvenient truth is that there are many regulations in place that effectively block all chances of applying time-tested concepts of good city-building. These have been summoned by authorities from various departments who all mean well, but concentrate on observing the world solely through their line of work. In the city-making business, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We need to put places first.

The motivation

So why do this? Well, besides the fact that we really love Helsinki and want to see it prosper, we wanted to give citizens the opportunity to compare and contrast alternatives once the City Planning Department had released the official draft plan. Urban planning is a complex topic to discuss and also plans at all scales are often very complex documents to grasp. This makes it extremely difficult for even professionals to give insightful feedback just based on a single vision.

Also, Helsinki hasn't built any new neighbourhoods with a truly urban character since the 1930s or 40s. On the very contrary, Helsinki has evolved into one of the most sprawled out city regions in Europe. In just over half a century, while the population of the metropolitan area considered to be Helsinki has grown five-fold to well over a million, the city's geographical scope has multiplied by nearly a hundred times.



Fig iv - Finnish sprawl in Helsinki's suburbs. In our plan this spot will get retrofitted into urban blocks

Helsinki's expansion with a sprawl pattern has caused some very serious negative impacts. And these will keep on getting worse if nothing is done. For instance, for many people and for most trips, driving is by far the most convenient way of getting around. Structuring life around walking is a privilege for those lucky few who live in the inner city. And while Helsinki's public transportation system is of very good quality in terms of trustworthiness and infrastructure, too often travel times between destinations are considerably longer than if you just got behind the wheel.

I'm not going to walk you through all of sprawl's negative effects as most people are well aware of them. But I want to emphasize one equally important reason I and my colleagues have spent hours after hours to draft this plan in our free time: the need to offer people more choices. And especially for urbanites like us.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to note that there is an imbalance in how much good quality dense urban fabric Helsinki can offer to those seeking urban lifestyles. The story is that throughout the city's significant growth period during the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century, Helsinki's inner city has pretty much stayed the same. Planners in Helsinki and neighbouring municipalities focused on building multiple suburban neighbourhoods believing that this is what all people want. Of course that never was the case, but mainstream urban policy had just one goal in mind. Eventually, we've collectively managed to develop an urban area that offers inner-city housing options for only about 17% of the Capital Region's residents. And even fewer if we look at the entire [City Region](#).



Fig v - this is what many want, but for some reason it has been impossible to provide it. Now's time to change things. Image by Niilo Tenkanen

The best way to grasp the imbalance is to compare apartment prices. Choose any apartment in the inner city and you'll need to pay considerably higher prices than in the rest of the city. Not to mention the rest of the country. With the price of a small studio in central Helsinki you could get a mansion in the countryside.

This brings us to the other side of the same problem: increasingly many just won't opt for the mansion in the wrong area. Just as "[Millennials](#)" are changing the housing market in London, so

too are Finnish young adults with their aspirations of settling into conventional, one might almost say traditional, urban communities.

Unfortunately, there just isn't enough supply to meet the demand. Many need to resort to a plan B and move someplace that "*could be worse*". A story I keep on hearing all the time among people in my age group.

The big question is what will happen if Helsinki proceeds with its new city plan and urban policies as if it still was 1960? I believe that ultimately Helsinki can forget about competing with Stockholm, Copenhagen or any other European metropolis if it can't offer good quality of life or affordable housing for people thinking about working there. Today's economy is based on services and innovations, both of which need people interacting with each other. And more fundamentally, aren't cities supposed to focus on delivering happiness for their residents?

Last Chance to Turn the Tide

On the bright side, the new city plan comes at a time when Helsinki still has hope. The city can still soothe damage caused by sprawl and focus on the needs of 21st-century urban dwellers. But it will need to turn around its current, sprawl-inducing, planning culture to do so.

Helsinki's potential to develop into a diverse urban center is thanks to the fact that Finland has a low urbanisation rate (around 70%), mostly due to our late industrialization process. The rate is however increasing constantly as new jobs are being formed in cities and because cities attract increasingly many urban lifestyle-seekers.



Fig vi - construction cranes is what we'll be seeing in our cities for a long time coming

If, for example, we were to follow what has happened in neighbouring Sweden (their urbanisation rate is 85%), then Finland's future urbanisation process translates into a pool of hundreds of thousands of people still moving from country to city in the near future. Meanwhile many others, already statistically considered to be living in cities, are on the lookout for better neighbourhoods if possible.

Because there still are a lot of people who are extremely likely to move in the coming years, I can't stress sufficiently the importance of focusing on the patterns of urban development Helsinki and other growing urban centres should adopt for their future growth.

Considering the already present imbalance in matching the city's housing supply with living preferences, now is Helsinki's last chance to react and focus on zoning neighbourhoods that offer urban settings for urban lifestyles. Suburbia is no longer a priority; there is more than enough of that to go around.

This is exactly why we decided to act and highlight the importance of looking at cities as diverse entities that offer options for everyone.



Fig vii - this is how Helsinki's inner city could expand north to Pasila. Map by Urban Helsinki

What are the lessons for London?

One year after the launch of our plan, I'm confident in saying that it has had an impact in the local urban planning debate. Urban Helsinki's members have been asked to attend numerous professional discussions and to give interviews or opinions on all things urban following the plan's release. Moreover, our team and especially the alternative city plan have been widely covered in the Finnish media (and some foreign media outlets as well). Pro Helsinki 2.0 has become an important piece of reference in official and unofficial discussions concerning city planning.

One achievement I want to highlight is that we've managed to make the complex world of urban planning more approachable for fellow citizens. Unlike in Helsinki's official plan, the basics of Pro Helsinki 2.0 are presented in fairly simple terms. We've made it our priority to produce easily approachable and legible images. When communicating to the wider public, not just the experts in the field of urban development, it is important to avoid professional jargon and abstract imagery.

The big achievement of Pro Helsinki 2.0 has been in forcing Helsinki's planners and politicians to reflect their thinking against ours and check the validity of their arguments for what makes a great city. Following our goal of challenging business-as-usual planning ideas, I received a promising email from an architect within the City Planning Department: *"Hopefully we'll also start to be more receptive towards new ideas and won't just hold on to ones once found good. The world is indeed changing quickly and few things are exactly as they used to be."*

Perhaps the main lesson we have learnt, is that we as citizens can stand up to shake the system from within not by complaining about the *status quo* but by actively proposing something better.

The Author

Timo Hämäläinen is a geographer who is part strategic urban development consultant, part city planning "activist" and thought leader in contemporary urbanism via his blog urbanfinland.com and membership in a Helsinki-based planning collective 'Urban Helsinki'. Timo's blog dissects the inner workings of Finnish urban development and has been chosen among the "best city blogs around the world" by *The Guardian*. Timo has been working with projects that seek to harness the latest insight in urbanism for the planning of lovable cities.