

The shifting landscape of cities

 By [Yael Geffen](#)

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Urban development, the heartbeat of progress, constantly evolves in response to societal, economic, and technological shifts. In the dynamic tapestry of cities, emergent trends are weaving themselves into the urban fabric, while established ones stand resilient.



Source: Yael Geffen, chief executive officer and a shareholder of Lew Geffen Sotheby's International Realty.

Never before have shifting and emergent trends been as dramatic as in recent years.

Urban development is a dynamic field that continually evolves in response to societal-, economic-, and environmental shifts but the rapid and ongoing evolution we are now seeing in cities is totally reshaping the urban real-estate market as well as precipitating new approaches to urban living.

Understanding the forces driving these trends provides a roadmap for cities aiming not just for growth but sustainable and vibrant futures. And, as cities worldwide grapple with rapid population growth and the challenges of sustainability, urban planners and policymakers are embracing innovative approaches to reshape urban landscapes.

The following are the key emergent trends:

- **Smart cities and technological Integration:** The rise of smart cities is not just a buzzword; it's a transformative trend

reshaping the urban landscape. From intelligent traffic management to data-driven governance, cities are leveraging technology for efficiency and sustainability. The integration of IoT devices, AI-driven solutions, and data analytics is enhancing urban services, making cities more responsive to the needs of their residents.

- **Sustainable and green design:** As environmental concerns take centre stage, urban development is embracing sustainable- and green design principles. From green roofs and vertical gardens to eco-friendly infrastructure, cities are prioritising environmental impact. Sustainable urban planning not only addresses climate change but also creates healthier, more liveable spaces for residents.
- **Mixed-use developments:** The traditional demarcation between residential-, commercial-, and recreational spaces is blurring as mixed-use developments gain popularity. These integrated neighbourhoods provide a holistic living experience, where residents can live, work, and play within a walkable distance. This trend fosters community engagement, reduces traffic congestion, and enhances the overall quality of life.
- **Adaptive re-use of spaces:** A departure from conventional demolition and reconstruction, adaptive reuse involves repurposing existing structures for new functions. Abandoned warehouses becoming trendy lofts, and historic buildings transforming into vibrant cultural hubs are examples of this trend. Adaptive reuse not only preserves architectural heritage but also adds character to urban spaces.
- **Resilient urban planning:** With the increasing frequency of natural disasters and the unpredictability of climate change, resilient urban planning is gaining prominence. Cities are adopting strategies that enhance their ability to withstand and recover from shocks, including floods, earthquakes, and pandemics. Resilient urban planning prioritises flexible infrastructure, robust healthcare systems, and adaptable housing solutions.



Source: Supplied.

There are also a number of key established trends that underpin the new ones, and which are here to stay for the foreseeable future:

- **Transit-oriented development (TOD):** TOD entails creating compact, mixed-use communities around transit hubs. Proximity to public transportation reduces reliance on private vehicles, mitigating traffic congestion and lowering carbon footprints. As urban populations grow, TOD remains a sustainable solution to transportation challenges.
- **Placemaking and community engagement:** The emphasis on placemaking, creating spaces that resonate with the community, continues to shape urban development. Establishing vibrant public spaces, cultural hubs, and recreational areas fosters a sense of community and identity. Cities are recognising that involving residents in the planning process leads to more inclusive and authentic urban environments.
- **High-density urbanisation:** The shift towards high-density urbanisation, driven by population growth and the need for efficient land use, remains a prevailing trend. Compact, high-rise structures contribute to reduced urban sprawl, promote walkability, and facilitate the efficient delivery of services. However, balancing high-density with green spaces and amenities is crucial for the wellbeing of urban dwellers.
- **Affordable housing solutions:** The perennial challenge of affordable housing continues to shape urban-development strategies. From innovative financing models to collaborative initiatives between public- and private sectors, cities are exploring diverse approaches to address the housing needs of diverse socio-economic groups.
- **Transit innovation:** Established trends in transit innovation, such as the expansion of public-transportation networks and the integration of sustainable modes like biking and walking, remain pivotal. Cities are investing in efficient, well-connected transit systems to reduce congestion, improve air quality, and enhance overall mobility.

The dramatic shifts we've been seeing, and the perseverance of certain existing trends are due to several main drivers, including:

- **Population growth and urbanisation:** The global trend of increasing urbanisation and population growth remains a primary driver of urban-development trends. Cities are under constant pressure to accommodate growing populations while ensuring sustainability, efficiency, and quality of life.
- **Technological advancements:** The rapid evolution of technology is a catalyst for emergent trends. The integration of smart solutions, data analytics, and digital infrastructure is transforming how cities operate and deliver services.
- **Environmental consciousness:** Growing environmental consciousness, amplified by the realities of climate change, is steering urban development towards sustainability. Cities are adopting eco-friendly practices, green design, and resilient planning to mitigate environmental impact.
- **Economic shifts and globalisation:** Economic shifts and globalisation influence how cities position themselves on the global stage. The need to attract talent, businesses, and investments drives urban-development strategies, pushing cities to innovate and create competitive, attractive environments.
- **Social and cultural shifts:** Changing societal expectations and cultural shifts shape urban development. The desire for community-centric spaces, diverse cultural offerings, and inclusive environments influence how cities plan and design their spaces.

In navigating the complex landscape of urban development, cities must find a delicate balance between honouring established trends that have proven their worth and embracing emergent ones that respond to the evolving needs of the present and future.

The key lies in adaptability, innovation, and a commitment to creating urban spaces that are not just functional but also enriching for those who call them home. As the urban canvas evolves, the brushstrokes of both tradition and innovation create a tapestry that reflects the aspirations and resilience of cities worldwide.

ABOUT YAEL GEFFEN

Yael Geffen is the chief executive officer and a shareholder of Lew Geffen Sotheby's International Realty as well as a member of the Europe, Middle East, India and Africa region task force for Sotheby's International Realty. Geffen is the winner of the 2020 Standard Bank's prestigious *Top Woman in Property Award* and is the 2023 winner of *Woman of Stature's CEO of the Year*.

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