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C'mon, Get Happy

What kind of living environment makes us happy? Does the way we design our cities impact the ways we think, feel and act?

Looking for answers from urban design and the emerging field of “happiness studies,” journalist Charles Montgomery considers these questions in his book “Happy City: Transforming Our lives Through Urban Design” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

Drawing on the work of behavioral economists, psychologists, neuroscientists and city planners, Montgomery explores how city planning and personal decisions can have profound implications for social equity, sustainability and our overall well-being.

“Happy City,” a nominee for the Hilary Weston Writers’ Trust Prize for Nonfiction, is now the 2023 selection for UCSB Reads, an initiative of the UC Santa Barbara Library. Now in its 17th year, the program brings together the campus and Santa Barbara communities to read a common book that explores compelling issues of our time.

“The selection committee recommended ‘Happy City’ as this year’s UCSB Reads pick because everyone can see themselves reflected in the book,” said Alex Regan, events and exhibitions librarian. “We all make choices about how and where we live. This book will empower readers to better understand those choices.”

The new season of UCSB Reads will officially get underway at 12 p.m. Friday, Jan. 20, 2023, with a book giveaway for students at the UC Santa Barbara Library. Chancellor Henry Yang, Executive Vice Chancellor David Marshall, and University Librarian Kristin Antelman will distribute copies of “Happy City” while supplies last.

From January through May, the library will sponsor talks, panel discussions, film screenings, book clubs and other events to explore the book’s themes. Faculty are encouraged to incorporate “Happy City” into their winter or spring courses.

UCSB Reads will culminate at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 10, 2023, with a free public talk on campus by author Charles Montgomery, presented in partnership with UCSB Arts & Lectures.

An award-winning author and urbanist, Montgomery leads a consultancy with a mission to build more happiness into cities. He has advised and lectured planners, students and decision-makers across the U.S., Canada, the UK, Saudi Arabia and Mexico. His writing on urban planning, psychology, culture and history has appeared in magazines and journals on three continents. Among his awards is a Citation of Merit from the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society for outstanding contribution towards public understanding of climate change science. His first book, “The Last Heathen,” won the 2005 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Nonfiction.

Montgomery also creates experiments that challenge us to see our cities — and ourselves — in entirely new ways. His Home for the Games initiative led hundreds of people to follow his example and open their homes to strangers during the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. Working with the BMW Guggenheim Lab and the residents of New York City, he transformed an empty lot into a machine to maximize feelings of altruism. Whether it is empowering people to re-imagine a city street using hundreds of huge building blocks, or challenging them to hug total strangers, each experiment is driven by insights in the science of human wellbeing. His work aims to nudge us out of our comfort zone to find a hopeful new vision for cities of joy.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.