



CITY FOCUS

LEE KUAN YEW
WORLD CITY PRIZE

Laureates Retrospective

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The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize is awarded biennially in recognition of the laureate city's success in overcoming urban challenges and transforming itself. This special photo essay takes a look at how the past five laureates succeeded in doing so, and highlights their respective visions for the future.

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Seoul 2018 Laureate



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Citizens spending time at the restored Cheonggyecheon Stream, formerly the site of a noisy, congested highway.
Image: Seoul Metropolitan Government

Seoul was awarded the 2018 Prize for its transformation from a bureaucratic, top-down city into an inclusive, socially stable and innovative city. With rapid urbanisation, Seoul had faced challenges like environmental degradation, and increasing resistance from a citizenry largely left out of planning decisions. The Seoul Master Plan 2030 was a turning point, with its bold move to make citizen participation the norm in urban planning. Seoul built trust with its citizens, assuring them that through engagement, they could shape the future of the city.



In 1995, Cheonggyecheon was a busy urban industrial centre, which gave rise to problems like noise, air pollution, and traffic congestion.
Image: Seoul Metropolitan Government



A beautiful city with enriching cultural heritage and dynamic character, Seoul is where urban vitality and greenery coexist. As part of growth-oriented measures in the past, Seoul had concentrated on expanding urban infrastructure, a period that was known as the “Miracle on the Han River”. However, some of these measures induced urban problems. Seoul sought answers from its past experience and implemented urban renewal projects focusing on recovery and resilience: such as Cheonggyecheon Stream, Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP), and Seocho 7017.

Now, we face the challenges of COVID-19, which restrain every aspect of our lives. The pandemic drives Seoul to take robust and coordinated actions to improve the city for all. Once again, focusing on existing and new plans, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is striving to make the city more sustainable and resilient, both during and beyond this COVID-19 pandemic.



Mayor of Seoul, Oh Se-hoon

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An overpass reborn as an elevated Skygarden, Seocho 7017 is a prime example of Seoul's urban regeneration.
Image: Seoul Metropolitan Government

Medellín 2016 Laureate



Metrocable, a cable car transit system, connects outlying hilly, informal settlements with central Medellín, improving residents' access to employment, education and social opportunities.

Image: Medellín's Mayor's Office

Medellín was awarded the 2016 Prize for its success in overcoming uncontrolled urban expansion, and violence resulting from social inequalities. A succession of leaders took on these deep-rooted problems. Solutions included the world's first cable car mass transit system, library parks that doubled as social nodes, and urban escalators that improved mobility in its hilly settlements. The city has transformed itself from a notoriously violent city into one that has been held up as a model for urban innovation.



Years ago, violence resulting from inequality robbed Medellín's citizens of the possibility of social interactions in public spaces.

Image: Medellín's Mayor's Office



This artist's impression depicts Medellín's plans to become an Eco-City, with people and intelligent sustainable mobility as major priorities.

Image: Medellín's Mayor's Office



Medellín has a potential like few other cities to adapt to new economic, environmental, ecological and social contexts. At the same time, and paradoxically, it faces unprecedented challenges that demand our ability to work collectively, not only to add value to the public sector but also to reduce social inequality in our pursuit of a sustainable and equitable city.

In our bet to make Medellín an Eco-City, we recognise that the next major disruption is climate change. This is why we are moving forward with the construction of a new Metro rapid transit line and Metrocable, as well as promoting electric mobility. We are also developing cycling infrastructure such as the north-south route that will connect the ten municipalities of the future Software Valley. Finally, we are building new public spaces for residents, especially in parts of the city where there is a greater lack of these.



Mayor of Medellín, Daniel Quintero Calle

Suzhou 2014 Laureate



With balanced urban development, Suzhou transformed itself into a prosperous city with historic culture, verdant greenery and scenic waterways.
Image: The Publicity Department of CPC Suzhou Committee

Suzhou was awarded the 2014 Prize for overcoming the challenges of balancing economic growth with protection of its cultural and built heritage. To preserve its historical and cultural core in the old city, Suzhou redirected urban growth pressures to a new mixed-use Central Business District for the 21st century. Suzhou also invested in its rich heritage, making it come alive. Suzhou's clear long-term vision and planning, with strong leadership and political support, has enabled it to tackle urban challenges effectively.



The iconic Gate to the East building, which was completed in 2016, pictured under construction on the Suzhou skyline.
Image: Zha Zhengfeng

Looking forward, Suzhou will continue its people-oriented, open and inclusive development. Having inherited a craftsmanship spirit of striving for the best, Suzhou is dedicated to the harmonious integration of the city's tradition and modernity.

We are currently working on a "Made in Suzhou" brand initiative to highlight the outstanding quality of Suzhou's industries. Meanwhile, another hallmark programme entitled "Jiangnan Culture" has been launched to preserve and promote Suzhou's traditional culture in innovative ways.

Thanks to its superb services, Suzhou also provides a world-class business environment. The city is innovative, open, cultural and ecological, and features high liveability and good governance. Suzhou aims to be an international modern metropolis with the unique charm of an oriental water city, as well as a beautiful home and a happy paradise on earth.

Mayor of Suzhou, Li Yaping



Jinji Lake Business District, designed to integrate the concept of a modern garden city with that of a traditional Chinese garden.
Image: SIPAC

New York City 2012 Laureate



Times Square, previously congested with traffic, has been transformed into a safe and vibrant pedestrianised space.
Image: dconvertini / Flickr

New York City was awarded the 2012 Prize in recognition of its remarkable transformation over the first decade of the 2000s. The year 2001 was a traumatic point. Under visionary leadership, the city faced that adversity by defining a bold vision for its future. With crime reduction and other initiatives, its leaders renewed New Yorkers' confidence in the future. New York City's transformation was testament to the dynamic partnership between its leaders, government agencies and stakeholders to implement a shared vision for the city.



New York City is moving forward with congestion pricing to ease traffic jams and boost mass transit.
Image: Craebby Crabbon / Flickr

There were times when we were laid low, when so many naysayers said New York City's best days were over—after the Great Depression, after the 9/11 attacks, after Hurricane Sandy. And yet New York City fought back. By January 2020, we were at the strongest point we'd ever experienced in our history. Then COVID-19 hit.

In April 2020 we were the epicentre of the crisis. But we built ventilators, produced PPE, and created our own testing lab. Whatever it took, we found a way here in New York City. By the summer of 2020, we went from worst to first, from the epicentre to one of the safest places in the United States. We created the largest Test and Trace Corps. in the nation, protecting thousands and thousands of New Yorkers.

That's our way forward. That spirit, that heart, that willingness to take on any challenge, that is how we build a new city.

Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio
Edited excerpt from 2021 State of the City Address



Artist's impression of the Brooklyn Bridge-Montgomery Coastal Resilience Project, which will reduce flooding risk while preserving access to the waterfront.
Image: New York City Economic Development Corporation

Bilbao City Hall 2010 Laureate



Present-day view of Bilbao's Abandoibarra waterfront, the Guggenheim Museum, the estuary and the surrounding green belt.
Image: Bilbao City Council

Bilbao City Hall was named the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Laureate in 2010 in recognition of its integrated and holistic approach to urban transformation. This was instrumental in transforming Bilbao from an obsolete and dilapidated industrial city into a knowledge-based economy. Bilbao rejuvenated itself by emphasising environmental clean-up, design and culture, major improvements to its infrastructure, and restoration of its historic areas. This boosted social and cultural integration, and made the city a centre for innovation and creativity.



Bilbao suffered an economic slump in the 1980s that led to high unemployment, environmental degradation and other problems.
Image: Bilbao City Council

Bilbao has substantially changed its urban landscape in recent years. We are now facing a great opportunity, as well as a great obligation: to move towards a smart, green, socially cohesive city model that stands out for its high levels of wellbeing and urban quality. We are working on a new strategic framework with four key objectives:

- (1) Competitive and innovative capacity
- (2) Continuous process of urban regeneration
- (3) Environmentally sustainable transformation
- (4) Social cohesion as an inclusive city

Following these principles, there are several projects under development in Bilbao. First, the Zorrotzaurre project, Bilbao's latest major urban renewal project. This is an integral and sustainable plan to recuperate a derelict site and convert it into a new quarter. Second, to increase green space for our residents, we are expanding the Bilbao Green Belt, which connects the city with the surrounding natural terrain. Lastly, the Bilbao estuary, after a strong environmental recovery, is the undisputed axis of the city. We are enhancing it further to integrate it with our citizens' daily social, economic and cultural lives.

Mayor of Bilbao, Juan Mari Aburto



Artist's impression of Zorrotzaurre Island, an upcoming mixed-use district with affordable housing, green space and an eco-friendly business park.
Image: Bilbao City Council