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Scotiabank, John Newell

## Charles Montgomery

BMW/GUGGENHEIM LAB TEAM MEMBER, JOURNALIST, URBAN EXPERIMENTALIST

“All you have to do is walk down to the site and see a metaphor for what the Lab really is, which is a much more open environment. What begins with conversations between Lab members, various local collaborators, and community groups has already begun to open up.”

**I know you must be very busy with all the many things you’re doing right now, from your book to working with the BMW/Guggenheim Lab.**

Life is full. I’m currently editing, or doing a serious revision of, my book *Happy City*. The Lab has kind of arrived in my life as a welcome and taxing surprise.

**How did you get involved with that?**

I got the call out of the blue in February when the curators David van de Leer and Maria Nicanor of the Guggenheim were putting together a Lab team for the three months that it will be in New York City. Essentially they asked me and the other team members to New York, where they threw us in a room for three weeks and invited us to consider this theme of confronting comfort and what it meant for cities. Coming from our various perspectives, home cities, and ideologies, we were asked to come up with an installation concept, all the programs, and even experiments thinking about comfort in the city.

**Were all the people invited chosen to be part of the final team?**

I know there was some process before we were chosen. There were probably some fights or discussion between the advisory committee and the curators. By the time they called us we were all on board. We were a pretty diverse group of people. I am a middle-class white guy from Vancouver, Canada, we have a bio inventor from Lagos, Nigeria, we have a green jobs activist from the South Bronx, and then we have ZUS, a pair of architects from Rotterdam, Netherlands.

**Are you finding that things that have come out of these discussions have influenced your book or your next project?**

It’s hard to say yet. The real experiment here for us was to find out what happens when you put five people from wildly different backgrounds together and ask them to bring their own background stories, understanding, and learning of the world to the task and see if we could find some common ground. The Lab just opened a couple of weeks ago and I don’t think we’re at the stage yet where we know specifically what learnings will emerge from the Lab. We’re hoping the discussions we create and the experiments we conduct will lead us towards new ideas and new and better designs for living in future cities.

**I was reading about the emotional map you did where you gave people sensors. Could you talk about**



**that?**

We have to be a little circumspect; if we give too much detail it will give bias to our participants and skew some of the data they will be giving. My research into *Happy City* led me to all kinds of theories put forth by urbanists and psychologists about how configurations of public space and mobility system configurations influence how we feel. They theorize that they don't just change how we feel but how we behave. The Lab was a terrific chance to put some of these ideas to the test.

To this end, I am working with a brilliant Canadian psychologist named Colin Ellard to put together an experimental tour that leads people through a streetscape in the Lower East Side. It tests the effect that those streetscapes have on people's brains, bodies, and emotions.

We do that in two phases. At first we use a BlackBerry to get people's subjective responses about the places they are in. We'd ask you, how happy do you feel (how happy or sad)? How aroused are you (how excited or calm)? And then they have to perform a cognitive numbers test to see how easy it is for them to focus in the moment. In the second phase, we bring out more serious equipment in which we test physiological response or people's body response to those places. In one example we are using skin conductance monitors which measure the activity of the pores on your skin, telling how aroused you are. So we don't just end up with a series of points on the map of the neighborhood, which we can compare in terms of arousal and happiness—we also get a rollercoaster line in between those points showing how anxious people might be crossing Houston St.

So why does this matter? In New York and other cities the role of public space and streets are being contested. There are battles being fought over what we should do with streets and who has the right to use what part of streets. How much of the street should be used for cars, or sidewalks, or bike lanes? Who has the right to do what with a street edge? Does a blank façade make people more calm or nervous than a street edge fronted with many doors, windows, and interesting openings?

**How did you decide on the area of the Lower East Side?**

Mostly that decision came through the influence of weather. When we were trying to nail down testing sites and routes, we were very ambitious at first. But when the staff first went out to test the routes, it was 110 degrees. We realized we couldn't ask people visiting the Lab to be hiking around a couple of miles in Manhattan in the summer heat.

**I imagine the heat would also probably skew the emotional data because it's probably very unpleasant.**

We're continuing tours right through the end of the Lab on October 16th. So we'll be able to compare the data of people walking in heat and then hopefully cooler weather.

**Will you also be participating in the Labs in other cities?**

I'm not sure. They are creating a different Lab team for every city. It is up to those Lab teams to see if they are interested in our work. What we hope is that by the end of term of this Lab, we will be able to produce some questions, data, and some design manifestos that may be considered in future labs.

**It would be interesting to go to another city to try the same experiment.**

I'm in contact with some Lab team members from Berlin and have been encouraging them to pick up this ball and run with it.

**They've been explaining the Lab as a think tank. Are you having conversations with other team members about your projects?**

I've heard the Lab called a think tank and I don't like that term. All you have to do is walk down to the site and see a metaphor for what the Lab really is, which is a much more open environment. What begins with conversations between Lab members, various local collaborators, and community groups has already begun to open up. People are welcome to come to the space; all the workshops are free. Ideas are pouring in from all directions.

You asked the more specific question about learning from one another's disciplines. Personally, it's been a big challenge coming from a journalistic environment where I work entirely on my own. I've had to open my doors and learn from people with wildly different backgrounds. I've learned to use unlined notebooks, so I've moved from being a linear thinker to thinking in much more open ways. I could thank my fellow Lab team members for that.

Obayomi from Nigeria has been pushing us to take a much more scientific perspective, make a thesis, and then

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2	IBM	69,905 (\$m)
3	Microsoft	59,087 (\$m)
4	Google	55,317 (\$m)
5	GE	42,808 (\$m)
6	McDonald's	35,593 (\$m)
7	Intel	35,217 (\$m)
8	Apple	33,492 (\$m)
9	Disney	29,018 (\$m)
10	HP	28,479 (\$m)

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Best Global Brands 2011 | Charles Montgomery of BMW/Guggenheim Lab

test it. ZUS has a big interest in the intersection of global capital and local issues like gentrification. We're being pushed to think about things in much more nuanced ways, letting go of the good vs. bad paradigm.

Omar Freilla, is steeped in some of the democratic and political battles in equities of New York City. He is reminding us all that we are operating in contested space. The notion of comfort is kind of meaningless unless you ask who that comfort is for.

### **What is the level of BMW's involvement in the Lab?**

BMW has given complete curatorial control over to the curators and the Lab teams. We've met their representatives and really enjoyed those meetings. Here is a car company working to transform itself into a mobility company and they've shared some of those challenges with us. I'd say this a very brave endeavor of them. They make most of their money selling cars and motorcycles. And yet, they have funded an initiative whose advisors include Enrique Peñalosa, ex-mayor of Bogotá, also known as "War on Cars Mayor." It's a very brave move and nobody is certain of the ideas the Lab will generate. Everyone agrees to consider honestly the challenges of cities and the role of cars in cities.

### **When is your book due to come out?**

Should be Summer 2012.

### **Could you talk a little bit about your book?**

*Happy City* explores the intersection between the emerging science of happiness and the way we design and live in cities. Through stories about neuroscience, behavioral economics, psychology, and design innovation around the world, I've come to realize that the "happy city" and the city that is going to solve our greatest challenges this century is going to be the same place.

### **Are you doing another project for the Lab?**

I've tried to take the word Lab literally so I'm using the Lab's resources to conduct various experiments. Looking not just at the effect of public space but how we feel and treat other people in the city. I've been working with Kio Stark from NYU's ITP program to challenge Lab visitors to confront strangers in different city environments and see what happens. We may even be measuring their physiological responses.

Here's what we know. Nothing matters more to happiness than human relationships. The city is a machine for altering the way we meet and behave toward other people.

### **You wrote a very different book in the past. What inspired you to write this?**

It happened after the World Urban Forum came to Vancouver in 2006. Enrique Peñalosa, mayor of Bogotá, gave a talk about the future of cities. He suggested the city needs to change its goal, and the goal of the city should be happiness. I visited his own city, it seemed like he used Bogotá as a laboratory for the science of happiness in some way. I was so intrigued by his big idea, a tremendously hopeful idea, that it led me on a several-year journey both through the laboratories of psychology and neuroscience and to cities around the world to see if he was right or not. Can the city really be a machine for happiness?

### **Did you find that there were a lot of people studying the same thing?**

At first I set out to find the expert on cities and the science of happiness. I looked around the world and met a lot of smart people working in these various disciplines, and they started to tell me that the only person pulling these threads together is me. So I realized I better get this book done and at least try to represent the science and potential of cities as honestly as possible.

### **ABOUT CHARLES MONTGOMERY**

Charles Montgomery is a journalist, urbanist, photographer, speaker, and advocate for cities and well being. He has discovered a striking relationship between the design of our minds and the design of our cities, a concept he lays out in his forthcoming book *Happy City*. Montgomery's writings on urban planning, psychology, culture, and history have appeared in magazines and journals on three continents. His first book, *The Last Heathen* (published internationally as *The Shark God*), won the 2005 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. Among his numerous other awards is a Citation of Merit for outstanding contribution toward public understanding of climate change science from the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society.

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