

IELTS PRACTICE TASK**Building cities right**

How do we plan and design the best urban environments?

Researchers have estimated that sometime in 2007, more than 50% of the human race lived in cities for the first time in history. In this sense then, most of us are urban dwellers: our home, the place we know best in the world, is a city. Yet despite this widespread familiarity with the urban environment, the issues involved in town planning and design are hugely complex and sometimes misunderstood, according to Dr Simon Lavers, a senior lecturer in urban planning and management at the Millennium Institute. 'I can think of no other form of design that incorporates such a broad range of factors,' he says. 'It comprises a huge number of sometimes conflicting considerations – economic, political, legal, cultural, aesthetic.' Part of the problem, Lavers believes, is that governments pass too many laws regulating design issues, leaving the planning process inflexible and bureaucratic.

'There's something very symbolic about that majority figure,' says Helene Olav, a research fellow at the Institute for Urban Affairs, referring to the fact that over 50% of people now live in cities. In fact, in many countries it's more like 80%. 'Urban life is a fundamentally human experience,' says Olav, 'but in some cities it doesn't necessarily feel like it. Urban planners need to incorporate this reality at the heart of their designs, creating urban facilities intended for all residents, whether that be galleries, museums, recreational centres, or open areas such as parks and squares.' A similar point is made by Professor Margaret Evans, a long-time advocate for tighter controls on urban planning. Too often, she argues, urban planning is geared solely towards commerce and city centres are sold into private ownership. Says Evans, 'Most cities are good at protecting their great landmarks and national monuments, but the smaller heritage sites, the homes of lesser writers or community leaders for example, which also give our cities a sense of common ancestry, are too often torn down by property developers and replaced with glass towers.'

In reality, good urban planning and design is not that hard, continues Olav. 'It's definitely possible to overthink it,' she says. 'Roads, water, sewage disposal – the unexciting but essential issues faced by every urban centre – that's where designers should concentrate their efforts.' However, the next generation of planners might disagree, if doctorate student Suzy Wong is representative. 'I think planning is changing very fast,' she says. 'My contemporaries want urban designs that protect the environment, not only take waste water out of the city but treat it at the same time – that's an initiative for the future.' She also thinks there's too much repetition in urban architecture and that planners need to conceive of architecture in far more innovative and individual ways. Lavers, however, offers a word of caution. 'Planners live in the real world,' he says, 'or more accurately, they

TASK TYPE 6 Matching Features

each live in their own real world. It's not one size fits all. Each city is different, it has its own climate and landscape, its own types of stone, wood and traditional building methods. All of these should be apparent in the way each city is planned.' Given this diversity of opinion, it seems likely that debate over urban planning and design will continue for as long as there are cities.

Questions 1–6

Look at the following statements (Questions 1–6) and the list of researchers below.

Match each statement with one of the researchers, **A, B, C** or **D**.

Write the correct letter **A–D** in boxes 1–6 on your answer sheet.

NB You may use any letter more than once.

- 1 The focus should be on simple, universal, practical issues.
- 2 Conserving buildings of minor historical value is often overlooked.
- 3 Urban design should reflect local conditions and materials.
- 4 The creation of shared public spaces in cities is essential.
- 5 It's important to create unusual and original designs.
- 6 Urban planning is a unique type of design.

List of researchers

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|----------|--------------------------|
| A | Dr Simon Lavers |
| B | Helene Olav |
| C | Professor Margaret Evans |
| D | Suzy Wong |