Kind Citizens: Calls for a Better Future from People Underserved by Their Cities

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The Kind City offers an inclusive, global vision of what the future could and should be. Overwhelming evidence reveals that our cities don't do enough to enable and empower citizens, from prioritizing accessibility to cultivating public green spaces. To highlight those opportunities to do better, we asked four city-dwellers—Kind Citizens—to share their stories and hopes: Maili Santos, Kan, Diana Chao, and Arwa Omaren.

Their experiences and calls for action complement the crowd-sourced Founding Principles of the Kind City and the interactive podcast featuring voices from around the world.

Diana Chao, Founder of *Letters to Strangers*
Los Angeles, California, United States



I am a first-generation Chinese-American immigrant living near Los Angeles. When I was 13, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and subsequently survived a series of suicide attempts. On my final attempt, my little brother found me, and I swore I must heal—if not for me then for him. Thus began my journey of writing letters to strangers to rediscover my own worth, empathy, and voice. I turned Letters to Strangers into a student club at 14, thinking what was helping me might mean something to others as well. As I navigated a new diagnosis of uveitis, an eye disease that rendered me blind whenever an episode struck, the power of words and human connections became more healing and necessary than ever. Today, Letters to Strangers is the largest global youth-for-youth mental health NGO, impacting over 35,000 people annually in over 20 countries on six continents.

Rising above racism and stereotypes

In my predominantly affluent and White neighborhood, tan-skinned me growing up below the poverty line was not just an anomaly but a disgrace. Seeking support felt impossible as

teachers and administrators dismissed me with stereotypes. When I tried to speak up after numerous harassments and assaults, my accented English led to only laughter and rolled eyes. The same city that called my family slurs invisibilized my humanity until I brought in accolades it could boast as its own.

A Kind City is one that forgives but remembers. It knows history is never spotless nor linear, and that is precisely why every citizen carries a duty to learn and progress. It acknowledges our intrinsic flaws and mistakes—it builds accessible pathways to turn those pasts into lessons from which we grow. It encapsulates the truth that no one walks this earth alone, providing services and genuine care for all. It builds upon a foundation of empathy, creating change that always asks first: “How should we serve, and does that action align with what people actually need most?”

The Kind City of the Future will remember its past for all its lessons.

Kan, LGBTQ+ Activist
Tokyo, Japan / London, United Kingdom



Since I was not able to marry Tom, my same-sex British partner, in Japan, I quit my job, left my family and friends, and moved to the UK in July to get married so that we could live our life together. As a queer person, I have been treated as if I do not exist in Japanese society. Today, we still do not have a law to protect us from discrimination, or a right for same-sex couples to get married and be legally protected. I am unable to live in such a society with hope for my bright future.

Japan fails to allow same-sex couples to get married. Since our marriage in the UK is not legally recognized in Japan, my partner is legally not family but rather a stranger in Japan. Thus, he is considered a tourist and not able to enter Japan during the pandemic.

The Kind City of the Future will allow two people in love to get married regardless of their gender.

Arwa Omaren, Actress and Model
Damascus, Syria / London, United Kingdom



I was born in Syria as a Palestinian refugee in a place called Yarmouk Camp, which is very specific for the Palestinians refugees. I studied in schools funded by UNRWA and the United Nations, and I had to live my childhood without a country, without a passport, and with no right to vote in any elections.

My dad tried to convince me that we are special as Palestinians. And we should always be proud.

I was raised in an environment where we believed in education. I studied three years of law in Damascus University, and I studied four years acting in the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. I was lucky enough to follow my dreams.

One of my dreams was to leave Yarmouk forever and start a new life in central Damascus near my university. There I could meet Syrian people who only know a stereotype about Palestinians refugees, about how we look like or are aggressive, drugs users, etc. I spent my time trying to correct all of this. I always felt we were victims of the politics. Then the war took place and Yarmouk Camp again became a victim of the war. It was destroyed and many of my people were killed or fled to other places in Damascus or went to Lebanon or immigrated to Europe. I had chance to visit my city of Yarmouk in 2018, the place that I always wished to leave, ironically I fell apart when I saw it destroyed, and all my childhood, too. I felt Yarmouk was a home for us. And we just lost our home again and became refugees for the second time. I moved to the UK, looking for a home—a safe home.

Fighting neglect of both humans and animals

After the war, like many of the people, I was depressed. Especially when I left Syria for Lebanon, I struggled mentally, so I decided to have a pet to help me recover. I always heard that dogs bring happiness, but now he had to return without me to my family in Damascus. The city that failed me once was now doing the same with Jacko (my dog). Unfortunately, most people in Syria are not welcoming to dogs, always trying to avoid him, or scared and screaming when we pass, and the government started to poison the area to kill stray dogs. My family tried to protect him, so they kept him indoors for over eight months. He was depressed and started to lose weight. My city was a nightmare for Jacko until I found a way to bring him to the UK and be reunited again after three years apart.

I would like to see a safe, healthy city where everyone is equal (human beings with all colors and cultures, pets, plants, and streets).

"The Kind City of the Future will be a welcome place for anyone in the world."

Maili Santos, Makeup Artist and Digital Creator
Salvador, Brazil



38 years ago my life crossed paths with that of a strong woman who struggled a lot to raise her 6 children. This same woman who adopted me and whom I am so proud to call Mother is called Ms. Antônia. One day she said that once when I was just a child and we went to the doctor for consultations regarding the process of discovering my disability, I kept looking out of the car. She said that I was attentive everywhere and with people on the street and that I never kept my head down. She didn't tell me directly, but in her words I understood she knew I was sad inside with all the medical denials. She believed I already understood that I couldn't walk, run, or see all those places I saw from inside the car. Today I understand that this thought of my mother was an excessive concern, natural to a mother who did not know the unknown world of disability and the countless challenges she would face. I don't blame her, and I never did.

However, knowing this detail of my life as a child makes me understand myself better today. I am a woman, mother of two, and wife. I'm sure everything was still confusing for me then and still today, I confess, but I believe with all my strength that it was with awe that I looked

at those places and all those people while we were in the car. I'm sure I understood that people and places would never be inaccessible, at least not in my head. Today I'm still that child who looks out from inside a bubble, which society insists on keeping me in and from which one day I would love to break free—to see every possible place and have the right to access every possible person I am curious to know.

My city challenges me, and I accept this challenge with the courage of those who want to leave a legacy for tomorrow, showing that yesterday serves as knowledge so that everyone has a real sense of belonging to the present.

Facing lack of accessibility or true consideration

It is important to highlight first that my city was never interested in us accessing spaces and our questions were not actually welcomed—even if it was not the intention. While there are spaces aimed at people with disabilities, they will not contemplate our existence or our humanities in a plural and individual way, thus ensuring that our existences fall on the margins of these cities. Nowadays, cities still impose what they believe to be diversity, but continually feed the stigma that our bodies do not need to be considered. Cities in general, however much they believe they do not, often still fail their citizens.

Calling for elevation and embrace of people with disabilities

It would be interesting to start from the idea that *seeing* would not be the only way to express or interpret the world, since there is a human diversity where people do not only have vision as a tool for understanding their space and humanity. The city does not necessarily need to be kind, but each and every city should have direct and indirect guarantees in the fulfillment of the rights of people with disabilities in their wide possibilities and intersections, highlighting that it is possible for people with disabilities to occupy any and all space in the society, in all areas that they desire. In a city that places the perception of people with disabilities as an important part of individuals and collectives, it also generates the important notion of belonging that every human being needs to build their subjective aspects.

The Kind City of the Future will be one that has the guarantee of experience and belonging for everyone and everyone in their humanity.

*Maili acts as a speaker at events and institutions where she talks about her experiences as a black woman with a disability. She is also on the board of Quilombo PcD, a collective that aims to take black people with disabilities out of a place of non-belonging through an intersectional work to combat racism and ableism. To learn more, you can contact her at assessoria.mailisantos@gmail.com.*Visit kindcity.com to learn more and experience visions from around the world.