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Designing Happiness: Urban Lessons from Helsinki and Copenhagen for Indian Cities

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Abstract: ***Can cities be designed to make people happy? As India continues its rapid urbanization, the quality of life in cities plays a critical role in national well-being. This research explores how urban planning and architectural strategies can enhance India's performance on the World Happiness Index (WHI). By examining the urban design frameworks of Helsinki and Copenhagen—two of the world's happiest cities—this paper investigates which elements contribute most to urban well-being and how Indian cities can integrate these into their planning ethos.***

The study evaluates key urban elements such as walkability, green space accessibility, mixed-use development, participatory planning, and spatial equity. It draws from secondary data sources, global reports, and city-specific indicators to analyze how these built-environment features are tied to WHI components such as health, social support, freedom, generosity, trust in institutions, and GDP per capita. Comparative data tables and visualizations help illuminate the differences between urban happiness design in Indian cities and leading global exemplars.

The findings reveal that both Helsinki and Copenhagen foster happiness through integrated, human-centric planning—combining mobility choices, accessible green areas, climate resilience, and trust-based governance. Indian cities, though diverse and complex, can learn from these practices by localizing interventions, prioritizing citizen engagement, and aligning urban policies with well-being outcomes. This paper provides a replicable framework for policy-makers and urban designers to plan Indian cities not merely as economic engines but as habitats of human happiness.

Keywords: Urban happiness, World Happiness Index, Walkability, Green infrastructure, Indian cities, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Urban design for well-being

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, urban life is increasingly becoming synonymous with human life. As more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, urban design is no longer just about aesthetics or infrastructure—it is about shaping human well-being. The concept of urban happiness, has now emerged as a measurable outcome in global indices such as the World Happiness Report. This report ranks countries based on factors including health, social support, personal freedom, generosity, trust in institutions, and GDP per capita. Importantly, each of these domains is strongly influenced by the built environment.

India, despite its rapid development and technological growth, has consistently ranked low on the WHI. In fact, Indian cities are never seen on the list or they stand a very low rank. This raises an important question: Can better urban design contribute to higher happiness in Indian cities? To answer this, the study analyzes two cities—Copenhagen and Helsinki—that have consistently ranked among the top in global happiness. These cities have managed to integrate sustainability, accessibility, equity, and community engagement into their design philosophy. Their urban fabric supports not just economic growth but emotional well-being, physical health, and environmental sustainability.

This research aims to understand the mechanisms behind their success and contrast them with conditions in Indian cities. Rather than focusing on deficits, the paper uses comparative insights to propose strategies for enhancing happiness in the Indian urban context.

Copenhagen

Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, is widely regarded as one of the world's most livable and happiest cities. (WHR,2020) Known for its robust cycling infrastructure, waterfront urbanism, renewable energy use, and people-first planning, it emphasizes public space, sustainability, and social equity. Nearly 62% of its residents commute by bike daily. Copenhagen's public spaces are inclusive, clean, and safe, while its governance practices promote transparency and citizen involvement.

Helsinki

Helsinki, the capital of Finland, is similarly distinguished for its balanced urban planning. Ranked as one of the happiest cities globally, Helsinki offers well-maintained public parks, a highly functional public transport system, affordable healthcare, low crime rates, and a culture of trust. It has made considerable progress in energy-efficient housing, equitable access to services, and inclusive public space planning.

While both cities differ in scale and culture, they share a deep commitment to citizen well-being as a planning priority. By studying their features, Indian urban planners can identify design principles that prioritize happiness.

II. TOOLS AND METHODOLOGIES

An easy way to comply with IJRASET paper formatting requirements is to use this document as a template and simply type your text into it. This study adopts a qualitative and data-driven comparative case study methodology. The research is built on secondary data collection and review. It gathers city-level information from reliable global indices, policy reports, urban design literature, and official planning documents to examine how urban design influences happiness outcomes in Helsinki, Copenhagen, and Indian cities.

A. Data Sources

1) *World Happiness Report (2023):* Provides WHI rankings and component-wise scores (Health, Social Support, Freedom, Generosity, Trust, GDP per capita).
2) *Global Liveability Index (2023) and Mercer Quality of Living Survey:* For city-specific livability metrics.
3) *Gehl Architects' urban life data, European Environment Agency reports, and City of Copenhagen and Helsinki urban planning portals:* For detailed information on walkability, air quality, green infrastructure, and public transport systems.
4) *Indian Urban Observatory, Smart Cities Mission, BBMP and BMRCL (for Bengaluru data)*
5) *Academic literature, including Sharma and Arora (2023),* was used to align findings with the Indian urban planning discourse and previous studies on WHI.

B. Analytical Framework

Urban design characteristics were mapped against WHI components to analyze their direct or indirect influence. Additions have been made to include environmental and housing-related indicators:

TABLE I
WHI COMPONENTS WITH THEIR URBAN DESIGN INDICATORS

WHI Component	Urban Design Feature
Health	Access to green spaces, walkability, active mobility, cleanliness, air quality
Social Support	Public realm design, community gathering spaces, inclusive parks
Freedom	Mobility choices, mixed-use zoning, ability to access services independently
Generosity	Neighborhood-level civic initiatives, community spaces for volunteering
Trust in Institutions	Transparent governance, participatory planning, urban safety
GDP per Capita	Spatial equity, access to affordable housing, proximity to employment zones

C. Comparative Indicators and Mapping

The research utilizes comparative tables, graphs, and geospatial data visualizations to assess and contrast:

1) *Walkability scores*- (e.g., Walk Score, city mobility plans)
2) *Green space per capita* (sq.m/person)
3) *Cleanliness and air quality indices* (PM2.5 levels, urban waste management ratings)
4) *Affordable housing access* (as a share of median income)

5) *Public transport coverage* (% of population served)
6) *Satisfaction surveys and livability scores* (as per Mercer and EIU reports)

D. Limitation

This research does not include fieldwork or primary data collection due to time constraints. However, it leverages high-quality, peer-reviewed sources and official city statistics to present a comprehensive and balanced comparison of urban happiness strategies.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW/CASE STUDIES

Urban happiness has increasingly become a focal point in global city planning discourse. The World Happiness Report (WHR) outlines six key variables: income (GDP per capita), healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and trust in institutions. All these variables intersect significantly with urban planning.

Sharma and Arora (2023), in their paper titled "Happiness Index with A Comparative Study on India and Finland," examine general national-level factors influencing happiness. While their work offers a foundational understanding of happiness determinants—such as environment and public satisfaction—this study extends their analysis by incorporating an urban planning perspective. It emphasizes how specific built environment features in cities like Helsinki and Copenhagen can directly support components of the World Happiness Index and explores their relevance for Indian urban contexts.

Other significant references include:

A. Jan Gehl's Work on Human-Scale Urbanism

Jan Gehl, a Danish architect and urban design consultant, is a foundational figure in the discourse on urban happiness. His books—such as "Cities for People" and "Life Between Buildings"—advocate for designing cities around human needs rather than vehicular traffic. His work in Copenhagen led to- expanded pedestrian zones (e.g., Strøget Street), extensive cycling infrastructure, and placemaking strategies that foster social interaction and community bonding.

These interventions not only improve physical mobility but also support several WHR happiness dimensions, including social support, trust in public spaces, and the freedom to make life choices. His work directly illustrates how urban form can enhance emotional and psychological well-being.

B. The Helsinki City Strategy (2021-2025)

The Helsinki City Strategy is a comprehensive roadmap for sustainable, inclusive urban development. It explicitly links:

1) *Social equality*
2) *Environmental sustainability*
3) *Citizen satisfaction* to its planning framework.

Some highlights include:

- An ambitious carbon neutrality target by 2030
- Emphasis on inclusive public spaces
- Integration of smart city technologies to improve accessibility and service delivery.

This research paper illustrates how urban happiness is not a byproduct but a planned outcome, embedded in city governance and policy.

C. OECD Reports on Well-being and the Built Environment

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has published several key reports—such as "How's Life in Your Region?" and "Cities and Well-being"—which argue that:

1) *Walkability*
2) *Green infrastructure*
3) *Affordable housing*
4) *Efficient public transport* are crucial in fostering well-being in urban contexts.

These reports provide backing to the argument that spatial planning is directly tied to subjective well-being and happiness, especially when measured across economic, social, and environmental indicators.

D. World Health Organization (WHO) Urban Health and Environment Guidelines

The WHO's Healthy Cities Initiative and urban health frameworks underscore the importance of:

1) Clean air (PM2.5 reduction),
2) Active lifestyles via walkable neighborhoods and biking paths,
3) Access to green spaces for mental health benefits.

These guidelines align closely with the environmental and health-related variables of the WHR and support a proactive planning approach to urban happiness.

Case studies of Copenhagen and Helsinki both demonstrate a strong correlation between thoughtfully planned urban environments and improved WHI scores. These cities prioritize elements like cycle infrastructure, green space access, climate-adaptive housing, and transparent governance—each enhancing the emotional and physical quality of life.

IV. WHY ARE COPENHAGEN AND HELSINKI RANKED SO HIGH ON THE WHI?

A. Copenhagen

1) Over 62% of residents commute by bike, supported by a vast cycling network.
2) Almost every resident lives within 300 meters of a green space.
3) Public transport is integrated, clean, and widely accessible.
4) Participatory planning enhances trust between citizens and government.
5) Social housing ensures affordability and integration across income groups.
6) Green roofs, climate-adaptive infrastructure, and a carbon-neutral goal by 2025 foster environmental well-being.

B. Helsinki

1) Extensive green areas and nature trails provide widespread access to nature.
2) Efficient public transport and pedestrian zones support walkability.
3) Transparent governance and strong local participation create trust.
4) Social equity in housing and services ensures inclusivity.
5) Urban design integrates climate resilience through stormwater parks and sustainable architecture.
6) A strong welfare model enhances freedom and life satisfaction.

These features illustrate how urban form directly contributes to the WHI pillars—health, freedom, trust, social support, and income equality—making both cities benchmarks for urban happiness.

V. URBAN DESIGN FEATURES AND THEIR IMPACT ON WHI COMPONENTS

Urban design serves as the invisible hand shaping daily life, influencing not just physical health but also emotional resilience, social trust, and overall life satisfaction. By analyzing the built environment of cities through the lens of the World Happiness Index (WHI), we can identify tangible urban features that contribute to each component.

TABLE III
URBAN FEATURES OF HELSINKI AND COPENHAGEN THAT CONTRIBUTE TO WHI

WHI Component	Urban Design Feature	Examples from Copenhagen and Helsinki
Health	Air quality, walkability, green spaces, active transport	Clean air, pollution control, citywide parks, extensive bike lanes
Social Support	Mixed-use development, public spaces, community housing	Social housing, inclusive public plazas, libraries, and communal centers
Freedom	Mobility choices, gender-sensitive design, participatory planning	Safe pedestrian zones, cycling networks, citizen planning councils
Generosity	Community hubs, accessible public institutions	Public care centers, free libraries, donation-based markets
Trust in Institutions	Transparent planning, decentralized governance, public maintenance	Open data systems, participatory budgeting, responsive urban management
GDP per Capita	Spatial equity, housing affordability, transit-linked growth	Affordable rentals, mixed-income zoning, high accessibility to job clusters

These urban design choices are not isolated—they create a system of well-being that permeates the entire city. In both Copenhagen and Helsinki, urban planning reinforces human happiness as a civic responsibility and design priority.

VI. FINDINGS

The comparative analysis of Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Indian cities reveals several key urban design features that directly contribute to higher rankings on the World Happiness Index (WHI). By evaluating various indicators, including health, social support, trust, and infrastructure, we found that:

A. Health: Access to Green Spaces and Clean Air

Copenhagen and Helsinki prioritize green spaces and clean air as fundamental aspects of urban life. With a focus on sustainable urban planning, both cities ensure that nearly every resident has access to nature within walking distance.

The presence of large parks, street trees, and green roofs not only improves air quality but also provides recreational areas that contribute to mental well-being.

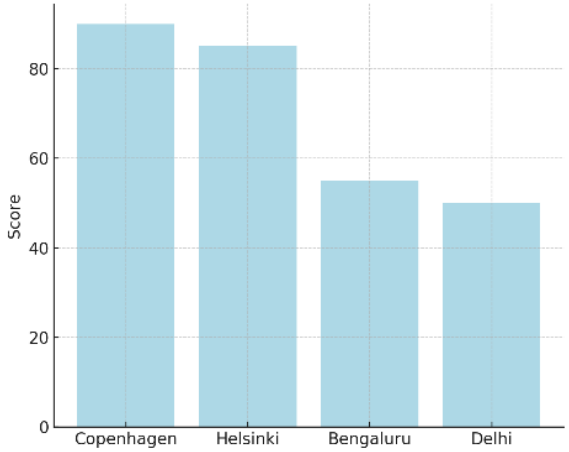

Fig. 1 Walkability Scores

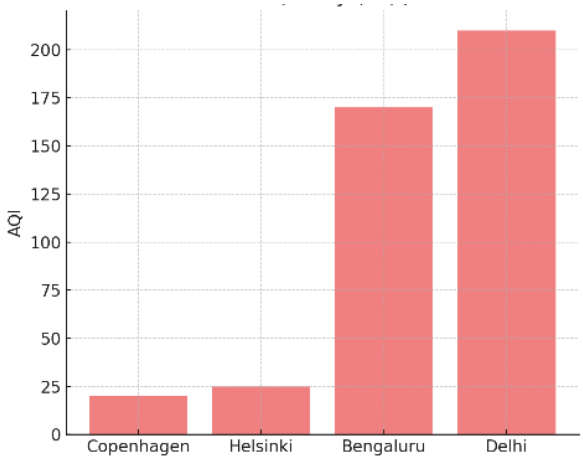

Fig. 2 Air Quality Index (PM 2.5 levels)

B. Social Support: Mixed-Use Development and Community Integration

Both Copenhagen and Helsinki emphasize the integration of residential, commercial, and recreational spaces. This mixed-use development promotes social interaction and community cohesion, ensuring that citizens can easily access essential services without long commutes.

In India, a lot of cities face challenge lies in the growing separation of these functions, which increases reliance on private vehicles, limits social interactions, and contributes to isolation, particularly in rapidly developing urban areas.

C. Trust in Institutions: Participatory Urban Planning and Transparent Governance

One of the standout features of both cities is their commitment to participatory planning, where residents are actively involved in decision-making processes. This approach builds trust between citizens and the government, ensuring that urban developments reflect public needs and aspirations.

D. Freedom: Mobility and Accessibility

The accessibility and efficiency of public transport systems in both Copenhagen and Helsinki significantly contribute to the freedom component of WHI. These cities offer diverse mobility options, including walking, cycling, and public transit, which give people the freedom to move around the city without depending on private cars.

Many Indian cities, however, are still grappling with congestion, inefficient public transport systems, and a lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, which limits mobility options and impacts residents' freedom of movement. Public bi-cycle sharing system like MyByk should be extensively promoted all over India.

Eg. Copenhagen has approximately 350 km of dedicated cycle tracks. Helsinki's cycling network includes about 1,500 km of cycle routes.

Fig. 3 MyByk in Indore

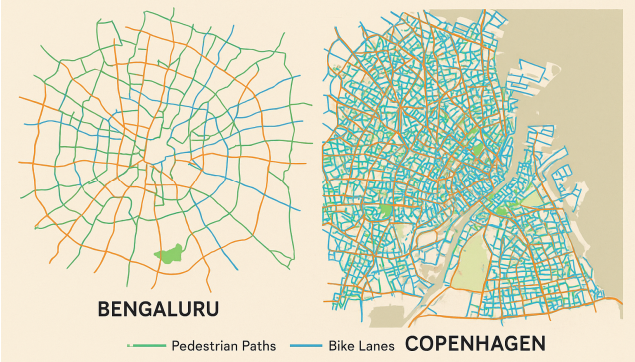

Fig. 4 Pedestrian and Cycling Infrastructure

E. Generosity and Social Capital: Community Engagement and Inclusive Spaces

Both cities encourage generosity and community engagement through urban designs that promote social capital. Public spaces, community hubs, and shared resources ensure that citizens feel a sense of belonging and responsibility toward one another.

F. Economic Prosperity: Housing Affordability and Economic Opportunity

Both Copenhagen and Helsinki have prioritized affordable housing as a central element of urban design. Mixed-income housing projects ensure that people from different economic backgrounds can access housing close to employment opportunities.

Many Indian cities face the challenge of rising housing prices and a lack of affordable housing, which contributes to socio-economic disparities and limits access to opportunities for lower-income residents.

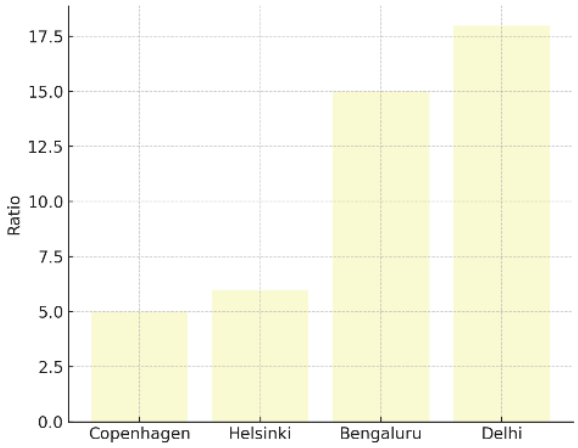

Fig. 5 Housing Cost/Income Ratio

G. Climate *Resilience* and Environmental Sustainability: Green Infrastructure

Copenhagen has a green space per capita of approximately 30%, with a tree coverage of 23%. Helsinki offers about 135 m² of green space per capita. Bengaluru has approximately 2.2 m² of open space per person, significantly below the recommended 10-12 m². Chandigarh boasts a per capita green space of approximately 17.43 m², among the highest in Indian cities. (Source-Eupedia)

Copenhagen and Helsinki have integrated climate resilience into their urban design. Copenhagen's commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2025 and Helsinki's focus on sustainable infrastructure through green roofs, stormwater parks, and energy-efficient buildings are key elements of their environmental strategy.

While Indian cities are beginning to adopt more sustainable practices, the scale of the problem, including air pollution and water management issues, calls for more aggressive interventions

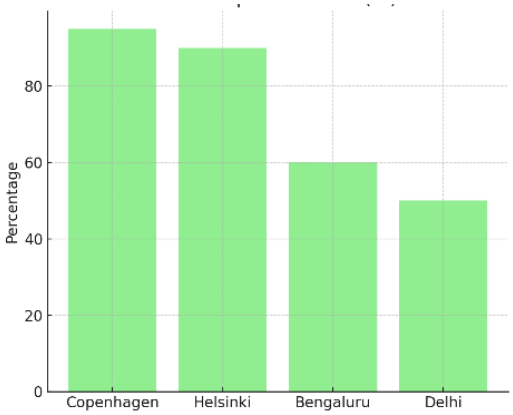

Fig. 6 Green space access percentage

VII. RESULT- LESSONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN CITIES

A. Prioritize Walkability and Active Transport:

Copenhagen and Helsinki place a strong emphasis on walkability and cycling, which contribute to better health, reduced traffic congestion, and lower carbon emissions. Both cities have extensive pedestrian zones, bike lanes, and a robust public transport network.

Policy Recommendation for India: Indian cities, particularly densely populated ones like Delhi and Bengaluru, can significantly benefit from improving their walkability scores. Introducing more pedestrian zones, cycling lanes, and incentivizing the use of public transport can improve mobility, reduce pollution, and promote healthier lifestyles.

Example: Bengaluru could expand its network of pedestrian-friendly streets and cycling infrastructure, which would help reduce traffic congestion and improve the city's air quality.

B. Increase Green Space Accessibility:

Access to green spaces is a critical factor in both physical and mental well-being. Copenhagen and Helsinki ensure that almost every resident is within walking distance of green spaces, which contribute to environmental quality and offer residents recreational opportunities.

Policy Recommendation for India: With increasing urbanization in India, access to green spaces is becoming more limited. Indian cities should focus on increasing the availability of public parks and green areas. This could be achieved through the creation of urban forests, rooftop gardens, and green belts along transport corridors.

Example: Chandigarh could serve as a model, expanding on its existing green infrastructure by integrating more parks and green roofs in newly developed urban spaces.

C. Promote Mixed-Use Development:

Mixed-use development in Copenhagen and Helsinki ensures that residential, commercial, and recreational spaces are well-integrated, reducing the need for long commutes and promoting social interaction. This integration supports a stronger sense of community and economic productivity.

Policy Recommendation for India: Indian cities should encourage mixed-use developments, especially near transit hubs. This would allow people to live, work, and play in the same area, reducing reliance on vehicles and fostering vibrant, cohesive communities.

Example: Mumbai's high-density areas, such as Nariman Point, could further develop mixed-use zones, which would alleviate pressure on residential areas and reduce traffic congestion.

D. Enhance Public Transport Systems:

Public transport in Copenhagen and Helsinki is efficient, affordable, and well-connected, ensuring that residents can easily access essential services, workplaces, and leisure destinations.

Policy Recommendation for India: Indian cities should prioritize public transport improvements. Expanding metro networks, introducing clean and efficient bus systems, and ensuring last-mile connectivity will help reduce dependency on private cars and enhance social equity by making mobility affordable.

Example: Delhi's metro system is a good starting point, but it can be expanded further to cover underserved areas, and initiatives like affordable transportation options like metro and ibus in cities like Indore and Bhopal, serve as a great betterment step.

E. Foster Citizen Engagement and Participatory Planning:

Copenhagen and Helsinki both prioritize citizen involvement in urban planning. This fosters trust in government and ensures that developments are in line with the needs and desires of the residents.

Policy Recommendation for India: In India, where public participation in urban planning is often limited, creating more opportunities for residents to engage in decision-making is crucial. Local governments can organize regular town hall meetings, participatory budgeting processes, and feedback systems to ensure that urban developments align with the needs of all citizens.

Example: Bengaluru has begun involving citizens in urban planning discussions, but this process can be scaled up to include marginalized communities and ensure a more inclusive approach.

F. Build Resilient and Climate-Adapted Infrastructure:

Both Copenhagen and Helsinki integrate climate resilience into their urban planning. Features such as green roofs, stormwater parks, and low-carbon buildings ensure that the cities are better equipped to handle climate change.

Policy Recommendation for India: Indian cities should prioritize climate-resilient infrastructure. This includes adopting green building standards, implementing effective stormwater management systems, and using renewable energy sources to reduce carbon footprints.

Example: Cities like Chennai, prone to flooding, could implement more stormwater management systems and green infrastructure solutions, similar to those seen in Helsinki's stormwater parks.

G. Concluding Policy Implications:

To translate these lessons into actionable policy for Indian cities, urban planners and policymakers need to focus on holistic, long-term strategies that prioritize both social equity and environmental sustainability.

Adopting the urban design principles of Copenhagen and Helsinki is not just about copying their models, but about tailoring these features to the unique context and challenges of Indian cities.

H. Key Action Points for Indian Cities:

1) Develop and implement comprehensive urban design strategies that prioritize walkability, green spaces, and mixed-use development.
2) Invest in improving public transport networks and accessibility.
3) Foster greater citizen engagement in urban planning processes.
4) Emphasize climate resilience in all new urban projects.
5) Focus on creating affordable and sustainable housing.

By prioritizing these urban design features, Indian cities can enhance the quality of life for their residents, increase their rankings on the World Happiness Index, and become more sustainable and resilient in the face of future challenges

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research paper sheds light on the importance of happiness and well-being in an individual's life, as well as in the broader context of a nation's growth and development. The Happiness Index, a comprehensive survey tool, is used to assess the level of happiness and satisfaction among citizens of various nations. The World Happiness Report, published annually, ranks nations based on their collective happiness and aims to capture progress beyond mere economic indicators.

The research also highlights India's declining position in recent World Happiness Reports and suggests strategies for improving its standing. One critical area of intervention lies in the design and planning of Indian cities. Cities like Helsinki and Copenhagen have shown that factors such as walkable neighborhoods, green infrastructure, strong social support, inclusive public spaces, and climate resilience directly contribute to the six WHI components.

For India, adapting and localizing these principles offers a promising pathway to not only enhance the livability of its rapidly urbanizing centers but also to contribute positively to its overall WHI ranking. Improving happiness in cities—where a growing majority of the population resides—can have a ripple effect on national well-being.

Ultimately, designing cities with happiness and human well-being at their core is not just a progressive urban planning approach; it is a necessary step toward sustainable national development.

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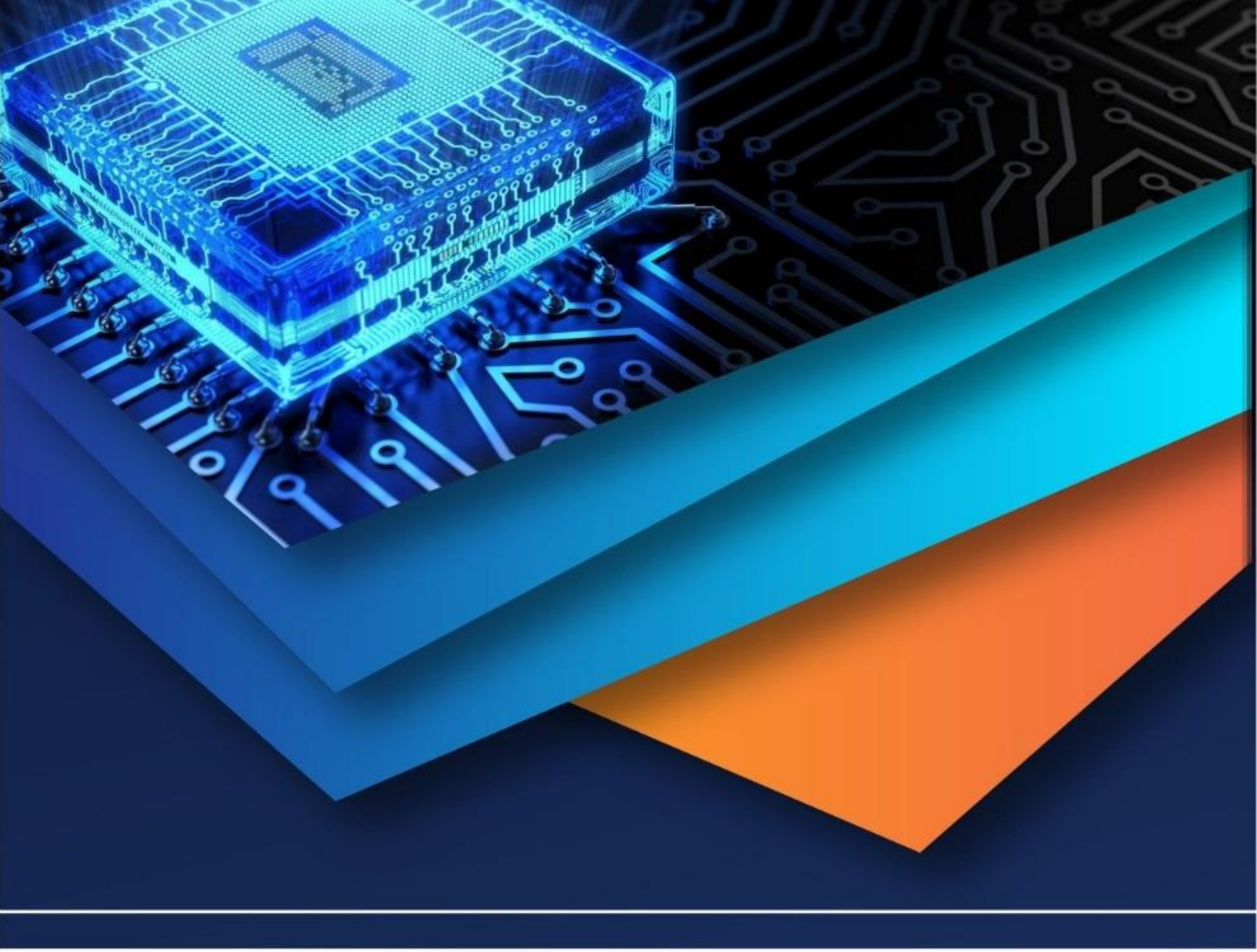

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