In our first ever City Limits, in late 2018, the headline stat was one of phenomenal urban growth: 30 percent of the global population living in cities in 1950; 53 percent today; an estimated 66 percent by 2050. Then came the pandemic and an incredible shift to the narrative: suddenly cities were done-for, apparently surplus to human needs. We doubt that somehow. We’re as certain as can be that urban environments still hold many of the solutions we seek, still cultivate progressive thinking; and - as per our company maxim - still are where so many things become culturally-charged. Yet, as much as we do love the sheer clout of the heavyweights cities (we’ve chosen a few for our office locations, after all), we recognise that now, more than ever, small can be beautiful and the outer fringes can be stimulating.

Hence this issue is all about cities in terms beyond just scale, might and ‘powerhouse’ credentials.

The smaller cities, where great ideas permeate through amicable communities and life becomes more liveable; the suburbs, where codes of social consciousness are now bubbling to the surface (thanks, Real Housewives Of Atlanta). We examine the diffusion of startup culture, share our love letters to small(ish) cities around the world and celebrate the challenger sounds of the tier twos. But we also ask, just how do you keep things weird when your once unchecked conurbation is routinely popping up in Monocle’s Small Cities lists?

Thanks, as ever, to the many amazing City Limits contributors - truly a team effort across all of our offices, and testament to how passionately and articulately we report on culture. Whether thinking big or small, centre or fringes, we cannot wait to get started on issue eight.

Andy Crysell, Crowd DNA founder.
“A time of crisis is also a time of opening up, when thinking that was consigned to the fringes moves to the centre stage... and there are always plenty of people willing to feed it by coming forward with their pet big ideas.

But here’s a thought: what if, in fact, the problem is with bigness itself?”

Paul Kingsnorth, writer

“Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get.”

Rem Koolhaas, architect
Walkability.
Smaller cities give new powers to our feet, and walking the city has become a major new trend. Recent research by Harvard Medical School has shown definitively the benefits of walking to our mental and bodily health. Walking not only improves fitness, but boosts the immune system and reduces the risk of cancer. The Design Museum in London invited collective Something & Son to curate urban walks, opening ‘new ecologies of the city’.

Cheaper, and growing steadily.
The pandemic has initiated a rush-to-buy, and property prices are high in many big cities. In the search for a place to call home, smaller cities are a considerably more affordable option. This is global. In China we’re seeing demand rise steadily in smaller cities on the Yangtze and Pearl River Deltas.

Accessibility to nature.
In many small cities, nature is merely a short bus ride away. And new research published in Nature has shown just how beneficial this access can be to our mental well-being. 120 minutes a week, it turns out, is the sweet spot.

Community.
Not only is it easier to find a sense of belonging in smaller cities, but many things are in fact more achievable than in bigger ones. With a tighter-knit community there are less obstacles when starting a new business, for instance, or embarking on a new artistic project. Indeed, The Times of Entrepreneurship has identified second tier cities as expanding their entrepreneurial ecosystems post-covid.

Slower pace.
While the lockdowns were undoubtedly tough, many felt quite quickly a dread of going back to the pandemic rat race. With #theartofslowliving now at 3.5 million posts on IG, small cities offer a chance to embark on slower paced life as the conditions of the ‘new normal’ settle in.

Space.
The pandemic has made us space hungry, with researchers at University Of Massachusetts Hospital showing an increase in subjects’ ‘personal space requirements’ over the last two years. This is something much more available in smaller cities.
Our expectations of how we work are changing. It’s no secret that the pandemic forced a mass stress-test of remote working models. But we’re also seeing increasing critique of the love affair with workaholism and the demands it places on workers’ time and emotional energy. This is accompanied by growing disenchantment with metropolitan living, which saw people leave their countries’ capitals in search of more open space. Even iconic cities are adapting to recreate a small-city feel and the ‘15-minute City’ concept is finding momentum from Paris to Melbourne.

These shifts are creating the perfect conditions for the decentralisation of work. Startup hubs are now less dependent on the agglomeration benefits of being based in an established foothold for their industry, and more about the lifestyle possibilities for staff. The restructuring we’ve seen in our work/life balance over the past year has placed a premium on the life outside of work. Where it was once a risk to go against the tide and root your start up in a smaller city, the rewards of more open space, affordability and connection to a community are now powerful draws. Here, we look at four second tier cities that are redefining startup culture.

The Diffusion Of Startup Culture

Indore, India

India currently has the third largest startup ecosystem in the world and the country is leading the trend in moving from mega- to micro-cities. This is supported by government initiatives that encourage a more even geographical spread of skilled workers. The city of Indore is home to several engineering colleges, many of whose graduates are choosing to stay local in favour of open space, manageable traffic and lower pollution levels. It’s something of a ‘reverse brain drain’.

K Ganesh, a partner at entrepreneurship platform GrowthStory, has commentated on the insight that smaller cities can offer: “As India looks to tap deeper into the next 500 million internet user base, the new wave of entrepreneurship will come from people who not just understand that user base but also belong to it.”
**The Groningen OPEN initiative brings together established companies and startups in the region. The city is also home to Startup Visa Groningen, a programme offering facilities and coaching to assist new entrepreneurs.**

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**Tulsa, US**

Traditionally associated with energy companies, the city of Tulsa in Oklahoma is being reinvented as a startup ecosystem through collaborations between the city’s government, philanthropists, businesses and education providers. The city is home to Tulsa Remote, a one-year program that offers a $10,000 grant to workers who relocate there; as well as Tulsa Innovation Labs, an economic development program that aims to make Tulsa ‘the nation’s most inclusive tech community.’

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**Aizuwakamatsu, Japan**

Small cities in Japan are leading innovation in smart-city tech. Despite having a population of only 120,000, Aizuwakamatsu in Fukushima is at the forefront of this shift. Here we’re seeing collaborations between the University Of Aizu and Aizu Laboratory Inc bring about startups that focus on tech-driven social development.

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**What Unites Them All?**

The common thread that runs through these small city startups is the closer connection between industry and residents. In a smaller city, businesses are more tuned into the audiences they’re serving. Residents feel the impact of those businesses more directly. According to the ‘local multiplier effect’ theory, one skilled job generates two and half more in terms of goods and services in a local area. Remote and hybrid working models continue to challenge the monopoly of established cities on certain industries. As a result, we’re set to see liveability overtake location as a key benefit for startup hubs, redressing the balance between first and second tier cities.
Music is the cultural lifeblood of cities. A city’s music scene can sometimes define its identity. Think of Liverpool’s inescapable Beatles heritage, techno emerging from Detroit basements, or New Orleans as the birthplace of jazz. It is so often second tier cities, not the capitals, that are the petri dishes for new sounds, venues and genres. Word travels fast among smaller communities and a new sound can embed itself quickly. Music can also help to express a local, challenger spirit as second tier cities sometimes feel forgotten, or disconnected from the centres of political power. The youth of smaller cities might seek to invigorate their social lives, getting a taste for the big city pie.

Across the world, music fans and party-goers are hungry for the new. Here, we explore some of the latest and most exciting iterations of music culture in global second tier cities - in turn tuning in to the sonic values that brands can harness when speaking to audiences outside of the capital.
China: Rap & The Boring Room, Xi’an

Rap and hip-hop have been gaining popularity in China since the 90s with The Rap Of China competition galvanising its importance in pop culture. Chinese rap has been credited with celebrating local dialects and regional cities. It acknowledges heritage and roots, as well as continuing an age-old Chinese tradition of setting stories to music. The rapper Cai Zhenthong - ‘Xie Di’ or ‘Fat Shady’ - used the track ‘Stupid Foreigners’ to vent frustrations about expats living in China. He raps entirely in the Chengdu dialect, from China’s southwest.

Elsewhere in China, the ancient city of Xi’an, a second tier city (even if 12 million people live there!) has seen the launch of The Boring Room music collective and club nights. A response to being snubbed by Boiler Room when it arrived in China in 2015, producer and DJ Gunknown felt that Xi’an’s nightlife needed a boost. Beginning life as a parody, The Boring Room has now led to Xi’an to become a touring destination for top Chinese producers and a leader in club culture in the country.

South Africa: Gqom, Durban

Back in 2010, young people across the townships of Durban began experimenting with basic kit to develop a whole new genre of electronic music, gqom. Its pioneers - Naked Boys, TLC Fam and Destruction Boyz - say that the sound is distinctly Durban in its guttural, raw beats. And their method of distribution is seriously innovative: the city’s shared taxi system. Producers began making tracks specifically for taxi speakers with a stronger ‘kick’. Soon the city’s clubs were all playing the music, before it spread across the country and beyond.

Tasmania: Hobart

The community music scene in Hobart is credited with warming up the city’s harsh winters, earning it the name ‘cold Ibiza’. Music festivals, here, take place over the winter, rather than the “heady summers” of other parts of the world. The Festival Of Voices is a singing-focused festival that happens between the end of June and early July and features the Big Sing Bonfire Event. This event in particular is hailed as being an expression of Tasmania’s rebellious spirit. It’s a reflection of how the island comes alive in winter as its inhabitants show resilience against the freezing cold.
According to a study by The University Of Oxford, 2020 saw some 600,000 people leave London. And, for the first time in decades, there’s talk of London’s population declining as we enter 2022. While Brexit and Covid are clear instigators of this shake-up, researchers are scratching their heads as to what it means exactly. But for many estate agents, the signals are clear. For Hamptons, there’s been a surge of interest in larger houses outside of big cities. In this surge, the suburbs have become an unexpected winner as the pandemic continues to reshuffle the ways we choose to live.

Suburban areas historically model a bucolic, idealised, village-style life of the past. It’s long been assumed that this increased comfort, space and privacy come at cultural cost. But the pandemic has also sped up changing attitudes to these outer-city areas. In terms of culture, politics and health, there’s a lot to be said for suburbs. We investigate three codes of this emergent suburban rebrand.
The suburbs as a serene balance of community and nature

Kidbrooke Village is a development in south east London. Construction started in 2009 and, to date, 1,900 homes have been built. While the development is branded as a ‘village’ from the get-go, the emphasis is on community ambition and looking forward: ‘Regeneration today is about people, places and communities’. The language of the website anchors the development in the challenges of today, rather than an idyllic dream of yesteryear.

Kidbrooke’s branding never apologises for not being urban, but celebrates the wellness-focussed pleasures of the quasi-rural. It’s not a second rate city, it’s a first rate ‘village’ surrounded by and full of greenery and nature. The banner image prioritises open space, and the social media account uses soft, natural colours throughout. Harmony with nature is coded in as core to the brand’s identity.

The suburbs as open to change

The notion of the suburbs as closed off, affluent and perfectly manicured is being thrown into question. Since the upswell of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, there have been small but significant changes to how suburbs are depicted. The Real Housewives Of Atlanta have brought politics into this previously apolitical haven. Amid the wealth and grandeur, we see street art that echoes the sentiments of protesters, and imagery of the impoverished and disenfranchised experiences of many people of colour in the area.

This is a really significant semiotic evolution. It codes social consciousness as part of suburban life. The wealth imbalance in the US is actively addressed. Suburban fantasies are disrupted by visual interjections of social justice, protest and poverty. Characters in the show even engage in political activism. We see protests alongside parties and the aspirational bubble of the suburb bursts. The streets may still be idyllic but they are no longer silent.

The suburbs as creatively inspiring

Byron Bay is a coastal town just under 500 miles north of Sydney, sometimes described, despite the distance, as the city’s ‘most northerly suburb’. It’s in an outstandingly beautiful location and famous for its eclectic style and laid back, often barefoot, attitude. But the place is also noteworthy for its elegance and sophistication.

We can see this in the brands that hail from there. The highly desirable labels St Agni and Nagnata come from Byron, and they’ve cultivated a stripped back but highly elevated approach to style. They both emphasise craft and selectivity. Nagnata’s knitted workout gear brings the simplicity of nature into a highly tech focused category. And St Agni uses monochrome imagery and garments to frame their products as works of art.

SO...

The suburbs and fringes of big cities are clearly no longer the places that fun and ambition go to sleep after a long day. It’s not just about families and four wheel drives anymore. The suburbs represent a newly enlivened and exciting way to live, complete with visions for the future, branding potential and an emergent political consciousness.

Harrods, after all, is opening new stores in Essex and Milton Keynes. How much more proof could you need?
Can We Love Small Cities Too Much?

W e’ve seen how small cities may be just the thing for new modes of post-Covid work and living. But what made small cities appealing could soon be eroded by the influx of new people. It’s the hug of death: when does small city fever become too much? When does a second tier city become a first tier?

Many of us have heard the slogan for Austin, Texas: ‘Keep Austin Weird.’ But weirdness is a hard thing to preserve amid Austin’s meteoric population growth. According to census data, it is the fastest growing city in the US as a percentage of the city’s total population. That’s a whole lot of new people who could be adding to Austin’s weirdness - or just diluting it.

The slogan was coined by local Austin librarian Red Wassenich. He called in to a local radio station in 2000 to donate money and when the DJ asked him why, he replied: “I don’t know. It helps keep Austin weird.”

Urban migration is nothing new. Consider Johannesburg, once gold was found. The population exploded and within ten years more people were living in Johannesburg than Cape Town, founded 200 years earlier. This is part of a much larger trend of rural-urban migration underway since the start of the industrial revolution. But these migrations were about access to economic opportunity. In Austin, now, it’s about a better work-life balance, a fully-walkable city centre and building meaningful relationships with your neighbours.

As more economies become post-industrialised, the need for centralised hubs diminishes. Covid has accelerated this, being the largest test case for remote work we’ve ever seen. But how can cities like Porto, Leuven or Itoshima maintain their unique feel when they take the top three spots in Monocle’s Bright Lights, Small City list for 2021? They sound like great places to set down roots, start a family (if you’re so inclined) and pursue meaningful career ambitions. But if we all decide to move to smaller cities en masse, maybe we’re the bad guys.

From a brand perspective, this is a strong signal people are searching for authenticity. People want real interactions on a personal scale. Big isn’t always better. Maybe we allow our brands to be a little less polished and show a little more realness (and even weirdness).

Our case studies have shown that despite second tier populations growing, these cities aren’t simply becoming first tier cities.

It appears that much of the time second tier cities have resisted shifting to the splendid sameness of first tier. It’s about more than just population size; they’ve retained something of their culture. It’s about the feel of a place.

Perhaps it’s not so much a question of ‘keeping weird’, but a willingness to change, grow up (a little) and make something new. When Red Wassenich was interviewed by Culturemap Austin in 2018 about his feelings toward the city and the phrase he made famous, he summed it up pretty well: “It ain’t as funky as it used to be, but neither am I.”
We spoke with Michelle W and Ayana D about San Francisco and Austin, respectively. Both of them work in tech and have witnessed changes in their cities over the past few years. Influxes of new people, demographics and money into both the cities have gentrified areas and put pressure on older businesses to stay competitive. And yet, both have also seen increased levels of solidarity and care for the identities of these places. While a time of great change and uncertainty, small cities still offer a peace, calm and connection you can’t get in larger urban centres.

What changes have you seen in your city over the past five years?

Michelle W, San Francisco: “In the past five years, SF was growing and hit its peak in terms of housing and job markets. Some locals complained about the influx of new residents but enjoyed increased salaries and value on their property. $15 sandwiches and $6 coffees were the norm. The liberal attitudes and culture did not change much in the past five years.”

Ayana D, Austin: “I moved to Austin in 2014 as a freshman at UT, like thousands of other people that live here. I’ve definitely seen changes in the city since. A lot of historically Black and Hispanic neighbourhoods are now unaffordable - massive food deserts, reports of people having to buy products and groceries from gas stations, no banks - all in the east and north of the city.”

How do the residents relate to the city’s businesses? Has this changed since Covid?

MW, San Francisco “People love local establishments that have been around for a while and don’t want to see them fail. There was a big movement to support local businesses by patronising them in the last year, but simultaneously regulations surged that made it difficult for them to survive.”

AD, Austin “Austin really prioritises supporting local businesses - that’s what makes it special. A good number of local favourites and older businesses that have a large following closed due to Covid. A lot of tech companies invested in local businesses to keep them afloat.”

How is the tech industry shaping your city?

MW, San Francisco “In the last 10 years, the proliferation of tech created an influx of young workers from all over. People that did not leave San Francisco have some additional allegiance to the city, such as having family nearby, owning a home, or having a job that is not remote-friendly. I think this is creating more solidarity amongst residents. We feel more pride in our city because we are willing to stick around, even though we don’t ‘have to’ for work.”

AD, Austin “It’s really being a catalyst for gentrification. Real estate is becoming more expensive - it highly contributes to the wealth in the city and the rate of gentrification in the city, and just general increase in the cost of living in the city.”

Who’s moving to your city? Who’s leaving?

MW, San Francisco “The incentives to move to SF for work are diminishing - people can potentially maintain their earning potential and reduce their costs by moving to another city like Austin or Portland. I don’t think this trend is unique to SF, however, it is happening more frequently due to the high cost of living in SF. People who own homes and want to sell to take advantage of the competitive market may be moving elsewhere.”

AD, Austin “I am looking to move. I lived in DC and came back to Austin, because I got a really great job opportunity. It’s proven to be worthwhile, but the challenges I faced before are still here. I feel like there’s nothing integral to the culture in Austin that creates a space for a Black woman to thrive and build a community and a supportive ecosystem. There are definitely times where I feel extremely unsafe because of my Blackness.”

What (if anything) is keeping you in the city?

MW, San Francisco “I value the city for its diversity and culture; also access to incredible nature. It’s the home of some of the best art and food in the world. Those benefits, along with my desire to stay close to family that live nearby, are the primary factors for why I am staying.”

AD, Austin “I like the weather. It’s a very green city. Lots of outdoor activities and spaces to enjoy nature without having to go too far out of the city. There’s good food in Austin. There’s lots of things to do in and around the city. A lot of Black people come to visit and they’re really surprised by the fun stuff to do. But how comfortable do you feel being the only Black person in a two-block radius and not having any reflections of Black joy and culture around you? I definitely recommend you look at the ATX barrio archive Instagram. Just spending five minutes at that page you get a really great glimpse at the city’s history and where we’re at now.”
Dear Shenzhen,

I chose to move to you in 2013, because you were warm and mysterious. I caught you at a specific moment in time where many worlds co-existed at once. From my apartment, I’d walk from the barbed wire border crossing from Hong Kong, through narrow, tiled backstreets with sizzling woks, pigs’ carcasses being blow-torched in the street and old Cantonese men and women napping on pink plastic chairs. Then I’d cross the street to a new shopping mall, a four-storey gold Gucci flagship, the new tallest skyscraper in China and a sign to a members-only, 30th floor massage parlour that started at $100k a year. Nearly 10 years later, you, Shenzhen, are much more globally known and have gone from a second tier challenger city to a first tier international player. From peaceful fishing village to futuristic utopia in 40 years - you’re the definition of modern China’s wild contradictions and relentless change.

For me, you were thrilling.

Thanks,
Shenzhen.

Yours,

Chris (Crowd DNA associate director)

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Dear Durban,

There’s quite a bit to love about you. It’s the view as you come through Umhlanga toward the city and first see the sea; container ships lolling on the horizon. The faded grandeur of the art deco buildings. The thick black smoke of the burning sugarcane fields. The hollowed out, skittering gqom beats rattling taxi windows. And yes, the bunny chows, too - because where else but Durban would eating the world’s hottest curry in a hollowed out loaf of bread make sense?

I remember sitting in a vegan coffee shop on Florida Road, smelling and listening to a group of outlaw bikers interview a potential new member. I never did find out whether Bones and Spider would let him join because a family of vervet monkeys had arrived and we all had to move inside. I’m still dying to find out whether his access to a minivan swung the vote in his favour, but there are worse interruptions than a continuous stream of monkeys tumbling over tables and stealing sugar packets. Bikers discussing crimes, interrupted by monkeys, at a vegan coffee shop. What more could you ever want?

Oh, just one thing, though - could we do something about the humidity?

Best wishes,

Paul (Crowd DNA director)

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Dear Marseille,

I moved to you for three months to write up my PhD in the summer of 2018. You were insanely hot and I had to rise at 5am to get any work done. I’d write all morning, eat at 12 and then swim for the rest of the day. Many people say PhDs are lonely maddening things. And maybe they are. But doing it with you made it enjoyable. Your crazy streets bursting with seafood and North African fabrics and olives. Your blue sea and graffiti covered rocks. Your refusal to be defined as anything but absolutely Marseille. My thanks.

Regards,

Freddie (Crowd DNA consultant)
Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney and Stockholm.

Formed in 2008, operating in 70+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, data analysts, strategists, data analysts, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands.