

Civic Urbanity: looking at the city afresh

There is a quartet of concepts that can reshape our thinking about urbanity in the 21st century. They are eco-consciousness, healthy urban planning, the idea of the intercultural city and creative city-making.

Together these four concepts frame the idea of civic urbanity. This idea seeks to realign individual desires and self-interest within a collective consciousness focused as much on responsibilities for 'us' or 'our joint world', rather than choices that are only for 'me' and my more selfish needs.

The notion of civic urbanity, which is proposed as a way forward, is a normative idea. It is a promise for a better city. It taps into our deeper yearnings for connection and purpose. Yet it does not come naturally. It has to be fostered and can become part of a new common sense if practiced and encouraged by a revised regime of regulations and incentives. So far it is not the default position that citizens, urban professionals or politicians take.

Concepts to drive city development

Eco-consciousness: all cities talk of sustainability. Yet are they making the hard planning choices to counteract an economic dynamic, spatial configurations and physical forms, as well as behaviour patterns that continue to make cities unsustainable in every sense? The necessary and dramatic retrofitting process still has a very long way to go. 'Cradle to cradle' decision-making remains far off.

Apart from strategies and action plans to move towards carbon neutrality. what helps in this process is to make our ecological intentions visible in the physical environment through signs and symbols. These include a new green aesthetic where buildings respond to light and shade, and where water flows or the qualities of recycled materials are made visible. The structures then appear more emotionally enriching. Other devices include competitions, reward and grants schemes to heighten awareness of what is possible, thus spreading good ideas throughout a community. The aim is to make being more sustainable seem normal and even fun.

Take Arlene Birt's **Malmö** project *Visualising Sustainability*. This closes the feedback loop between people moving in the city and the digital real-time data collected in multiple, usually separate networks. You get the data back from the actions you take, such as reducing CO₂ emissions. When you are cycling, for example, you can see the positive effects on public screens. This makes people more aware of the effects of their actions and can lead to behavioural change.

Healthy urban planning: urban planning that makes you healthy when you just navigate the city in ordinary, day-to-day ways, for example by providing facilities to walk or cycle to work, has not imbued planning disciplines. The cities we have built and continue to create make us unhealthy.

We now know about unhealthy urban planning. Rigid 'land use zoning', which separates functions rather than blending living, working, retail and fun; 'comprehensive development' that can do initiatives in one big hit but so often loses out on providing fine grain, diversity and variety; 'economies of scale' thinking, with its tendency to think that only the big is efficient or to produce off-the-shelf physical infrastructures without sensitivity to local needs; and lastly, focusing on the needs of cars, which can lead us to plan as if the car were king and people a mere nuisance.

A healthy place is one where people feel an emotional, psychological, mental, physical and aesthetic sense of well-being; where doing things that make you healthy happens as a matter of course and, incidentally, not because you have to make a big effort. A healthy place throws generosity of spirit back at you. This makes you feel open and trusting. It encourages people to communicate across divides of wealth, class and ethnicity. It makes for conviviality. And having trust is the pre-condition for learning, creativity and innovation.

The intercultural city: all our bigger cities are becoming much more diverse in their make-up. Multiculturalism as a planning concept and as the predominant approach to policy, acknowledges these differences. It highlights the need to cater for the diverse needs that exist within cities. Interculturalism goes one step further and has different aims and priorities, asking 'when we are sharing a city, what can we do together across our cultural differences?'. It recognises difference, yet seeks out similarities. It highlights that, most of us, in reality, when we look deep, are hybrids, and so downplays ideas of purity. It stresses that there is one single and diverse public sphere and it resources the places where cultures meet. It focuses less on resourcing projects and institutions that can act as gate-keepers and instead encourages bridge-builders. In so doing it does not consider that there is a cosy togetherness. It acknowledges the conflicts and tries to embrace, manage and negotiate a way through them. based on an agreed set of guidelines of how to live together in our diversity and difference.

In total, it goes beyond a notion of equal opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences in order to achieve the pluralist transformation of public space, institutions and our civic culture.

Creative city-making: creative city making seeks to address the escalating crisis cities face that cannot be solved by a business-as-usual approach. It includes the challenge of living together with great diversity, it addresses the sustainability agenda and helps cities rethink their role and purpose in a changing world in order to survive well economically, culturally and socially, and to manage increasing complexity.

Creative city-making argues that curiosity, imagination and creativity are the pre-conditions for invention and innovation to develop, as well as solving intractable urban problems and creating interesting opportunities. Unleashing

the creativity of citizens, organisations and the city is an empowering process. It harnesses potential, it searches out what is distinctive and special about a place and is a vital resource. It is a new form of capital and a currency in its own right. Creativity has broad-based implications and applications in all spheres of life. It is not only the domain of artists or those working in the creative economy or scientists, though they are important. It includes people like social innovators, imaginative bureaucrats or anyone who can solve problems in unusual ways. Cities need to create the conditions for people to think, plan and act with imagination.

To make this happen requires a different conceptual framework. The capacity of a place is shaped by its history, its culture, its physical setting and its overall operating conditions. This determines its character and mindset. For too long there has been an 'urban engineering paradigm' of city development focused on hardware. Creative city-making, by contrast, emphasises how we need to understand the hardware and software simultaneously. This, in turn, affects the 'orgware' of a city, which is how we manage the city under these new conditions. Today the essential element of the personality of many cities is their 'culture of engineering'. The attributes associated with this mindset are both positive and negative. It is logical, rational and technologically adept, it learns by doing, it tends to advance step by step and through trial and error. It is hardware-focused. It gets things done. There is a weakness in that this mindset can become narrow, unimaginative and inflexible and forget the software aspect, which is concerned with how a place feels, its capacity to foster interactions and to develop and harness skill and talent.

Overall, key themes highlighted by the four concepts are caring for others and the wider world, celebrating and fostering distinctiveness and identity, and being open minded in order to find solutions to any urban challenge.

Urbanity and its past

Urbanity and being urbane has a combined economic, social, political and cultural history that is useful to retrace for today and to recapture its best features. It represents an urban culture. The tradition of urbanity is essentially European, reflecting an attitude that emerged in the late Middle Ages in Italian city states and in Northern Europe, especially the Hanseatic League cities. It was led by merchants who tried to escape from the shackles and constrictions of feudalism to trade in a less impeded way. In so doing, they became a vigorous group with their own political, economic and cultural interests that successfully competed with the existing medieval order. They developed what became the bourgeois style of life, including their own learning and cultural institutions and norms and values. They were anti-feudal and, in their context, democratic; they were open and cosmopolitan and proud of their city and invested in it. They reflected a new emerging economy based on trade and new methods of production; there were new professional bodies, education and science institutions and a focus on rational calculation. This gave citizens a sense of

collective identity and shared solidarity reflecting an attitude to life. The city became more important than familial ties, clan bonds or ethnicity. This allowed for greater mobility. This was a completely different worldview.

We are at a similar junction today and a new, more knowledge-intensive economy is emerging. For our purposes, it is the commitment to the city rather than to particular interests, a concern with its identity and openness that are significant from this past urbanity. This represents a civic culture.

In time as the nation states evolved, the role of cities changed. Their independence declined as capital cities like London or Paris began to dominate. Equally with the rise of states, the force of identity shifted to the nation, thus diminishing the power of cities. The rise of a more centralised welfare state in some countries exacerbated this situation.

It is unwise to idealise this original bourgeois urbanity, since it subsequently degraded and became superficial and consumption oriented. So today we sometimes interpret urbanity or associate it as a synonym for being suave, refined or well-mannered. Others see it as something to do with café culture, being somewhat cool, or a place with many cultural choices. Yet others of a more post-modern bent think that whatever a city happens to be represents its urbanity. They might say a concrete jungle and dreadful place is simply a form of modern urbanity rather than a place where urbanity needs to be re-created.

Barriers to urbanity

Urbanity in my definition is not a merely descriptive term but a programme for action. Today, the world is becoming ever more mobile, people identify with various places, and cities increasingly focus on attracting this work force. These itinerant citizens have a different relationship to their city. It is less intense or long term and there is less commitment to place than in past decades. Equally the city usually has less power over key issues that determine its fate, such as education, transport and social welfare. It is less able to create its own rules, such as establishing its own citizenship with appropriate rights. At the same time, many independent voluntary and community structures, which were historically vital as the mediating institutions and 'nervous system' of a city, have weakened relatively as they are more reliant on national governments for survival. This makes our urban culture a reduced one, because it has fewer levers to help it develop citizens and so the civic. This decline in engagement is visible everywhere. It is reflected in low voting rates and the decline in trust in other people and institutions. As a consequence, the invisible threads of connection that make community work weaken. Not surprisingly, therefore, when we think of urban culture, we think merely about the atmosphere, events and arts of a city.

Our notion of 'civic urbanity' has more lofty aims. Yet how, in this overall context, do you develop a 'civic urbanity' where place or our sense of anchoring are not what they used to be, where virtual and real worlds blend more readily, and where globalisation changes the social life of communities in often negative

ways so that they feel fragmented?

Being civic

Being civic is to be a full citizen, which is a person engaged with their city in multiple ways on an on-going basis in order to improve their lives and those of others. It is about feeling that 'you' and the 'city', and every brick or blade of grass in it, merge into one as if it were part of you. The city owns you and you own the city. Small day-to-day things, like the regular breakfast at a local café or the local dentist that you have seen for years, and occasional larger events, weave a web that over time feels like community. This familiarity happens imperceptibly, step by step as associations with place and people builds up. These create memories, meanings and histories. This identification takes time. It is the reason why people often like places that, to others, are faceless, ugly or soulless because these places can draw in so many experiences, like a bench where you had your first kiss, and so much of people's identity is invested and embodied in them. There is a danger that this can entrap you and become claustrophobic as it closes you in, especially if the city in question is static and unchanging. The young, and especially the ambitious, prefer to escape and may prefer a place that is on the move. This signals excitement, stimulation and being where the action is. Yet acting in a civic way can, in principle, both deepen identity whilst developing and changing the city, so making it feel alive and alert. The focus can be vast from shifting the city to be green, to fostering local entrepreneurship or getting different groups to mix or celebrate. Throughout history, being civic has been linked to the democratic impulse. This implies being active and so fosters a realm of debate and public discussion. Citizens at their best are thus makers, shapers and co-creators of their evolving city. They are producers of their place rather than merely consumers. The danger for most cities that need to attract the semi-permanents and itinerants with talent is that those have little time to build commitment, direct involvement, participation and loyalty. Instead the buzz and liveliness is created for them, so reinforcing the consumption bias.

To be civic often involves challenging the status quo and official institutions and being an activist. This builds up a civic society as a collection of engaged individuals often acting voluntarily, as well as organisations and institutions that work together in a way that official bodies cannot or will not.

Generating civic urbanity

Here are some guidelines to building civic urbanity:

- The first step is to bring the concept of civic urbanity into wider circulation to discuss its merits and possibilities.
- Spell out its potentially positive impacts to solve problems across a number of domains. This process builds evidence by showing examples of good practice.
- Persuade a city to explore civic urbanity in detail and to make this a policy programme. This will involve bringing a cross-departmental group

together from physical planning, health, social affairs, economic development, environment and culture.

- Develop a professional development programme to assess the city through various lenses, such as healthy urban planning or how interculturalism could work.
- Undertake practical projects that embody the spirit of civic urbanity.

Charles Landry advises cities on their future. He has written several books, most recently *The Origins and Futures of the Creative City* and *The Sensory Landscape of Cities*. For more details, go to www.charleslandry.com

Suggested quotes to accompany text:

"The original European urbanity soon became a source of socio-cultural, economic and political energies. It stimulated urban democracy, urban social life, urban economy, the arts, the sciences, technology. Cities with urbanity took the lead, leaving those without it far behind... such vital cities provided the urban community with an identifiable face and, above all, with pride."

Anton C. Zijderveld in: *A Theory of Urbanity* (1998)

"Today we begin to see that the improvement of cities is no matter for small one-sided reforms: the task of city design involves the vaster task of rebuilding our civilization. We must alter the parasitic and predatory modes of life that now play so large a part, and we must create region by region, continent by continent, an effective symbiosis, or co-operative living together."

Lewis Mumford in: *The Culture of Cities* (1938)

"Can we make *civilisation* come back to life again? Can we put the pulsing heart of conviviality back into our cities? How can we make sure of creating *cities of diversity* for the new millennium – places of cultural vigour, of lively encounters and physical beauty that are also sustainable in economic and environmental terms?"

Herbert Girardet in: *Creating Sustainable Cities* (1999)

"There is not a scientifically or technically correct or incorrect way of making a city. Defining what makes a good city is more a matter of heart and soul than of engineering. It is more akin to an art than to a science. Yet, despite the subjective nature of urbanism, a government must adopt a vision and promote it, make decisions, build, define rules and enforce them – it must not only envision but also enact the city. If a good city is society's collective work of art, then its government acts as the piece's conductor and often its composer as well."

Enrique Peñalosa in: *Endless City* (2007)