

The city as a lived experience

The cities we have disappoint – mostly. Too many do not work as a fine, webbed whole, although there are urban delights in parts – the well-crafted building, a gratifying terrace, an occasional housing estate, an uplifting icon, a buzzy retail centre, a comforting, small park, a weird and sparky event. Too often we turn to the past to look for places we like: In Britain this might be the sweeping crescents of Bath, the streets of York, the lanes of Brighton, London's Regency squares, a village neighbourhood like Hampstead, the market hub of Norwich or the gardens of once grand houses. Think of Italian cities so often seen as the ideal in our imagination: Naples, Verona or Rome. Again people usually refer to the older fabric and not the new. There are too few inspirational examples from today. Does Almere in Holland, Milton Keynes or Celebration built by Disney in Florida inspire you? What went wrong? Have we all lost the art of city-making? Is it to do with us, our addiction to cars, our love of asphalt? Or is it our love of the twee, because we are scared to take risks? Is it down to forces beyond our control? Or is it that only commercial energy is driving development?

One thing is certain. You cannot make a great city through a simplistic bottom-line approach. If you do so your ambitions and intent is bound to fail. The results are too mean-spirited, courage is constrained, imagination curtailed and good experiments fall by the way. The city then does not have enough verve and style. Great cities exude a sense of generosity, a spirit of giving something back, a touch of the creative or artistic that has been let loose and some things that make no financial sense. These places are not conceived merely as a series of roads that join together a collection of mediocre buildings.

Think of any place you love and what picture comes to mind? Barcelona, Paris, New York or London at a grander scale or at a smaller scale a Bergen, a San Sebastian or a Savannah. At their heart there are parks you can roam in, facilities like museums or events that are free, life spills out into the street and even commercial buildings that are so full of themselves they throw off pleasure. They are more for the city than for themselves. This used to be called civic pride – an old fashioned sounding word.

There is more. Why when we know what needs to be done do we not do it? There is too little will. We do not challenge the mean spirited profiteers and the narrow minded. Urbanists and most ordinary citizens know the elements that make up a great city. The great city sets a stage for the urban drama to unfold. The physical

is the container, what people do the contents. This great place can deal with our contradictory desires and emotions: At one moment it allows us to be stimulated and then reflective, continuity is meshed with surprise, great ordinary buildings cluster to feel collectively like an icon, and then you intersperse the city with an aspirational highpoint, perhaps outrageous. This adds up to character. The little elements combine to make distinctiveness - the odd shop that's been around for decades next to one at the very cutting edge. Efficiency melds with the slightly chaotic. We want the metro to arrive on time when it takes us to experience a chance encounter and urban diversity. And then there is a quality public realm, so you can connect, where spaces are permeable, legible, walkable, adaptive, robust and the place as a whole is resilient. What places fulfil these elements, perhaps Amsterdam, Boston or a Strasbourg.

Try to replicate the principles that make the great places we like and the rules too often forbid it. For instance, the intimacy we might try to create is seen as a safety or risk problem, because a fire engine cannot drive down as it needs at least twice its own width or a turning circle needs to be extra wide just in case an articulated lorry comes your way.

Silo thinking and working still prevalent in spite of the mantra of partnership and joined up working does not help. Instead each discipline like highway engineering, economic development or environmental services should ask itself 'how can what I know help make a great place and how can I adjust regulations and incentives to fit in' rather than 'this is my expertise, my rules and my codes'.

There are some dramatic blindspots in city-making so we lose insight and diminish understanding. It causes economic and social damage. It has negative spin-offs.

The city is an assault on the senses. Think of the smells, sounds and visual battering of a Kolkata, Shanghai or Marrakech and even the dulling monotony of endless freeways of US City Anywhere has a sensual impact too. The city is a lived experience. We feel it. It engenders emotions. It effects our psychology. We forget the smells, sounds, the touch and even taste of the city and perhaps look without observing. This is strange that we lack sensory appreciation. Emotions drive our life, shape our possibilities, determine our reactions and our outlook on the future. Furthermore the language we use to describe the city is so technical, lifeless and drained of energy. It is odd that the emotional which is a defining feature of human existence is absent in discussions of city-making.

No wonder civic engagement is in decline and places are so ugly. Our language, unless we look to artists, is hollowed out, eviscerated and dry. It is as if the city were just a physical container and the people an afterthought. Urban decisions are shaped by the technical and discussion is too by the technical jargon of the professions, especially those in planning and the built environment. The prevalent, interchangeable words and concepts proliferating involve barren, unemotional words that are performance-driven, such as: Input-output analysis, planning framework, quantitative planning goals, spatial development code, development strategy, outcome targets, site option appraisal process, stakeholder consultation, integrated services, income inadequacy, statutory review policy programme, neighbourhood framework delivery plan, sustainability proofing, benchmarking, underspend, empowerment, triple-bottom line, visioning, mainstreaming.

So behind the words there is a mind. No wonder minds that operate in a language landscape that is so detached and disembodied produce places with no soul, no connection, no feeling. Have you ever seen a plan that starts with the emotions or even refers to them? Too rarely do decision makers think holistically about how cities work. This means knowing about the software of the city – its contents - and the hardware - the container - simultaneously. It is time we said loudly 'its not good enough, we can do much better'.

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