Qualities of ambition

The central theme the Cities of Ambition project explores is: how do cities that are not major global hubs and thus with fewer resources 'punch above their weight' and make the most of their potential. Below I describe some of the main features.

Cities that fall back and decline, the survey revealed, are **consumed by micro politics** and parochial thinking and this disturbs their wider focus, they look inward rather than outward. By not looking ahead this detracts from generating urgency and will. Things never seem bad enough to trigger action. Muddling through is the predominant approach. The organizational structure is siloed and insufficiently empowers staff. Decisions take too long to make. Laziness and complacency take over. It is worse for cities where things seem fine on the surface. In more attractive places there is a danger of imperceptible yet graceful decline when neither boom nor bust pressures are immediately at the forefront.

By contrast the best cities which we regard as global models, the relative feeling of comfort is not enough. They say 'It is not it OK to be OK'. The characteristics of ambitious cities are complex and not all are present in every city all of the time. Yet the trajectory and overall balance is clear.

The main qualities of cities of ambition follow. They appear here as a simple list yet the reality in the cities surveyed   were struggles to achieve success. In most cases it was **difficult to become ambitious. Tradition dies hard** especially when places had their reputations built on former assets such as an industry, a resource or set of circumstances and even a culture. Views and ways of doing things entrench. They become a mindset. Those who are part of a city's former achievements tend to resist change unless they have foresight. Many leaders described how **there were blockers and entrenched interests**, how people and institutions tried to create obstacles, and how many were unable to think in terms of the bigger picture. People often had to be moved on and there was resistance. **Often the change makers struggled**. There are few places where being ambitious is a natural way of life. How do ambitious cities generate these qualities and this drive? The qualities highlighted were:

Courage, tenacity & boldness

- Crisis is seen as an opportunity to take responsibility, be bold and to look at things afresh

- Ambitious places recognize a business as usual approach will not get them to where they need to be as they understand how the operating dynamics of cities are changing and that new competitive resources are coming to the fore.

- They look at the bigger picture, they think forward and plan backwards. Their thinking is strategic. They assess the future in the broadest terms. They exhibit foresight and awareness beyond the confines of their own discipline, field and interests and are conscious that they are helping to future-proof their city.

- Their city leaderships, public and private, create a crisis of ambition - this is a crisis of a special kind. With a normal crisis threats loom sharply and action is required, but for others not so alert there is the 'frog in boiling water' threat. The problems can then be addressed too late.

Progressive administration

- Good urban governance is regarded as the sine qua of success as is using resources effectively. The administration is seen as transparent, clear and focused. They are well-organized. Working with other leaders they create mature, motivated partnerships with private and third sector organizations. This increasingly becomes the norm.

- They are not only collegiate, but collaborative and so make the most of their potential.

- The rules and incentives system are adapted to the emerging vision of the city rather than existing rules constraining potential. They think through new financing mechanisms to achieve objectives.

- This enhances the ability to construct more flexible mechanisms to achieve the complex deals focused on creating public interest outcomes.

Farsighted vision

- Being farsighted and understanding global dynamics is considered a central leadership virtue to achieve ambitions. The ability to place the possibilities for the city in a broader context and how they fit in is vital.

- Being strategically principled and tactically flexible helps frame the city's modus operandi guided by a determined delivery focus

- There is an ability to tell a story of place and how everyone might fit in

- The capacity to orchestrate the short, less expensive and easier initiatives with longer term, less easy and more expensive ones is crucial is achieve momentum and to add value

Honest about realities

- A realistic assessment and deep understanding of economic prospects and problems shapes strategic thinking and develops urgency

- There is an openness and transparency about overcoming obstacles

- Programmes exist to help bring people from the old economy into the new

Widespread leadership

- Departments and sectors are willing to work together and to develop a culture of collaboration. Integrated thinking, planning and acting is seen as vital. Interdisciplinary working is encouraged and an understanding that not all wisdom is to be found within the public administration and thus cooperation with many stakeholders is the key to success.

- Leadership is seen as a discipline and resource that can be learnt and overrides power play. There are possibilities of creating widespread leadership groupings with decision making communities in public and private walks of life. These have a forward focus, whether they are teachers, public servants, transports chiefs, middle and higher management in industry and business, or community organisers or those in the artistic world. There are many leaders and many levels of leadership.

- There are dynamic and forward looking people of quality in every sector providing a strong sense of vision for the place, meaning that there is deep awareness of current trends and emerging developments and their implications.

- The culture and leadership style is inspiring, able to delegate and be empowering to others. Things are accessible. These leaders describe an achievable yet ambitious future that acts as a compelling and involving story, be it a vision for the city or region, or a business venture or educational programme. There is professional pride and this is infectious.

Sophisticated learning landscapes

- The move to the knowledge intensive economy demands outward looking learning institutions adept at understanding how new learning and communications systems work

- A culture of debate fosters an environment of openness and this is encouraged by awards, recognition schemes and the encouragement of experimental practices

- A culture of self-development, learning and foresight is encouraged with appropriate mechanisms to match

- Learning does not only happen in universities, but also other settings such as centres of excellence or professional development contexts

Harnessing all talents

- Cities have a talent attraction and retention strategy and nurture and mobilize the ideas, talents and creative organizations in their city in order to keep the young and gifted

- Ladders of opportunity are created to generate good transitions between the world of learning and work. Often this involves setting up incubation and co-working networks and centres of excellence. The link between research worlds and industry is productive.

- Younger cohorts are encouraged to grow through mentoring programmes in the public and private sectors so that leadership qualities cascade down the organizational structure.

Bi-partisanship & active citizens

- Bi-partisanship on the major issues concerning the city is seen as crucial both within the political class as well as with the private sector. This involves bringing public and private partners together on jointly agreed agendas

- Citizens are activated on a larger scale and initiatives exist to seek their involvement as shapers, makers and co-creators.

Collaborating across boundaries

- Creating an environment that opens up opportunities and not seeking to control sensible proposals and activities too much is a core ethos.

- A well-respected multi-disciplinary 'thinking brain' for the city made up of private and public sector partners is seen as essential. Part of their work is sophisticated auditing of urban assets and resources and obstacles to success. This evaluation happens on a continuing basis.

Transparent, inclusive processes

- There is a wellbalanced combined top down and bottom approach that recognizes both the value of citizens and external specialists

- The public institutions combine a listening capacity yet simultaneously are willing to be bold and have a clear standpoint when necessary

- A default position exists to involve people and organizations even though it takes more time, yet with an understanding that this helps create resilience

Hubs & hotspots

- Creating areas where critical mass can be established focused on niches like a designated business district or the creative economy sectors

- Spreading renewal initiatives across the city to create alternative hotspots

- Developing a networked incubator and breeding ground strategy

Balancing the big & small

- Not being too focused on creating single big icons at the expense of taking budgets from other initiatives

- Seeking to avoid overwhelming and over scale comprehensive development schemes

- Creating master planning frameworks that allow for a diversity of housing choices

- Orchestrating well thought through smaller initiatives that collectively represent a larger icon and celebrating the fine grain

Mainstream & alternative

- Being relaxed about encouraging alternatives that challenge the status quo

- Instituting a balanced support structure to ensure creativity is embedded in how the urban dynamic evolves

- Celebrating imagination, creativity and imagination through award schemes and recognition programmes

Diversity & openness

- Highlighting and working with the diversity advantage

- Fostering a culture of openness and ensuring this is manifested in all areas of public life

- Expressing diversity in the built form

Highlighting cultural distinctiveness

- Identifying the unique, special and distinctive and promoting this accordingly

- Using cultural programmes as an attractor and thus helping develop a strategy of confidence

- Using artistic interventions to generate a sense of wonder and using the city as a stage and canvas to express itself

- Orchestrating a calendar with locally derived and internationally oriented events

Measuring against the best

- Good mechanisms exist to gather information on good practices and innovative solutions from around the globe, such as research centres and collaborative devices such as cluster networks, specialist hubs or centres of excellence.

- All parties are alert and scan the horizon in their respective sectors, actively looking out for the next important thing in their respective domains – currently   there is likely to a significant involvement in *things green*. Pride in place helps the city share a common agenda.

Strategically opportunistic

- They are strategically agile knowing when and how to seize opportunities, for which they have already created a state of preparedness.

- Creating a bidding machine constantly alert to opportunities

- They see the planning process as continuous and not as a one off activity. They survey the world to pick up projects that further their purposes. Bidding for the World Design Capital is an example. These are assessed in terms of the legacy they can build and how they can take the city forward.

High quality physical environments

- There is recognition that urban quality is vital in inspiring motivation, commitment and loyalty to place.

- There is a good balance between old and new physical structures and recognition of the value of heritage and how the old can stimulate the new

- There are rental and purchase opportunities at different price points and there are housing choices to meet different levels of income

- Public transport and accessibility are well developed allowing for seamless connectivity and walkability and wi-fi connectivity is ubiquitous

- An understanding of the environments and physical settings that attract young innovators

Perception & marketing

- Projecting a compelling story of place globally and where it is going in a sophisticated manner

- Bringing in the media as a collaborator to communicate broader goals

- Supporting new forms of communications including with social media strategies

- They work on the image and perception of their city focusing on how they are contemporary and cutting edge

- **Delivering on promises**

- Identifying game changers that create a new dynamic can be significant.

- Most importantly ambitious places get things done. They 'walk the talk'. The real life examples of things achieved really matter. This makes invisible assets and achievements visible. These inspire and help develop a culture of continuous improvement and mutual learning. It provides confidence. This allows ambitious cities 'to punch above their expected weight'.