

Civic Urbanity: Looking at the city afresh

Setting the scene

Ten themes shape the dilemmas, challenges and opportunities for the 21st century city. Each has relevance to how we live and shape our places. They provide an urban narrative I call civic urbanity that seeks to contain the explosive mix of centrifugal and centripetal forces we increasingly find in cities. They help reshape how we can rethink urbanity.

The interlinked concepts to rethink urbanity are: holistic thinking, planning and acting; the shared commons; eco-consciousness; healthy urban planning; cultural literacy; inclusivity; inter-generational equity; the aesthetic imperative; creative city making and an invigorated democracy. Together they frame the modern 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 or city' rather than choices that are only for 'me' and my more selfish needs.

Urbanity and being urbane has a proud history. It is important to recapture its best features. The tradition of urbanity, as conventionally understood, is by origin European. It focuses, to use a modern term, both on 'the right to the city' and 'responsibility for the city'. Urbanity, as a desirable state of being, first arose in the Italian city states, especially during the Renaissance, and it then marked the movement towards meritocracy and freeing individuals from the yoke of feudalism. The German phrase 'Stadtluft macht frei' (city air makes you free) encapsulates this idea. In time though the notion of urbanity degraded ending with the idea of the *flâneur*, someone who watches urban life go by, but uncommitted to the needs of the collective whole.

The cultural drive

Civic urbanity is a normative idea. It is a promise for a better city. It taps into our deeper yearnings for connection and purpose. 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 regulations and incentives regime and programmes. Or put another way swayed by the culture of a place so it becomes self-understood behaviour or seems the right thing to do. Since it is not the default position of citizens, urban professionals or politicians, it is the process or negotiation about why civic urbanity should be put taken seriously that is in itself cultural.

City-making at its core involves arguing about values and making choices based thereon. Then it entails applying values and using politics

to turn values into policies and exerting power to get your way. Choices reflect beliefs and attitudes based on values and value judgements. These are shaped by our culture. So the scope, possibilities, style and tenor of a city's physical look and its social, ecological, and economic development are culturally shaped and culture moves centre-stage. If, for example, a culture invests its faith only in the market principle and trusts the drive of capital always to produce sensible choices, the logic, interests and points of view of those who control markets will count for more than those who believe market based decision-making is an impoverished theory of choice-making.¹ If a culture holds that individual choice is everything – individuals always know best – this impacts the city. Conversely, if people believe the idea of a public, common or collective good has value and is beyond the dynamics of the market a different city evolves. Any culture based argument implies or proposes a trajectory, a plan of action – even a manifesto of what to do next. The best cities it appears balance well private and public interest.

Secular humanism

The ethical frame that best supports civic urbanity is the secular humanist position. This privileges civic values, which in essence seek to foster competent, confident and engaged citizenship. It is concerned with the capabilities, interests and achievements of human beings. It does not decry the virtues of science or the sustenance religion or other belief systems give. In a city context its aim is to ensure that people of difference live together in relative peace and accord as the city is in part defined by and made up of a majority of people do not know each other are strangers.

Here the attempt to arrive at practical standards that provide principles to guide common views, behaviour and to help resolve conflicts aim to provide a frame within which difference can be lived and shared with mutual respect.

Secular humanism as a core Enlightenment project has been drained of confidence. It feels exhausted and consequently it is mistakenly accused of being 'wishy-washy' with no apparent point of view. Its confidence needs to be restored. The confident secular humanist view proposes a set of civic values and rules of engagement, which include: Providing settings for a continually renewing dialogue across differences, cultures and conflicts; allowing strongly held beliefs or faiths expression within this core; and acknowledging the 'naturalness' of conflict and establishing means and mediation devices to deal with difference. It seeks to consolidate different ways of living, recognising arenas in

¹ For a review of these arguments see Amin Ash: Cultural Economy and Cities, Progress in Human Geography

which we must all live together and those where we can live apart. It generates structured opportunities to learn to know 'The Other', to explore and discover similarity and difference. It wishes to drive down decision-making on the subsidiarity principle, which implies much greater decentralisation and devolution of power. Central government takes on a more subsidiary role. This enhances participation and connectivity at local level. It helps generate interest, concern and responsibility.

Secular does not mean emotionally barren. In fact, I treasure the heightened registers of being that spirituality evokes. Indeed its animating force may be just the thing that makes some cities more liveable in than others.

Comprehensive Sustainability

The wider notion of sustainability, one that is well beyond merely environmental concerns, embeds itself in this thinking. Taken together the ten themes capture many of the faultlines, battlegrounds and strategic dilemmas in city making that need resolving to address the disparate needs, urgencies and crises of the city and the wider world. Faultlines are change processes that are so deep-seated, intractable and contentious that they shape our entire worldview, such as the conflict between environmental ethics and economic rationality in running countries or cities. Discussions and policy debates around faultlines often become battlegrounds, since opposing opinions are strong, such as in deciding the primacy of holistic or specialist thinking. Some see cities as composed of interacting wholes that are more than simply the sum of the parts and those who look at the fragments within narrow specialisms.

Strategic dilemmas concern the difficult choices that have to be made between two or more alternatives, which are often equally undesirable. Sustainability, as described here, is both the choice making process and result of doing something about faultlines, battlegrounds and dilemmas. Put simply, for instance, if a city allows differences to become hot conflict or lets inequality to lead to disruption or over-rigid rules to constrain creativity the city cannot become resilient to shocks or become sustain itself.

Europolis to cosmopolis

The foundations of city making proposed here may have their origins way back in European history, so giving credence to a notion of Europolis a certain type of city. The underlying principles, however, have broader resonance across cultures and political systems. Who, for instance, would argue against being eco-aware or an effective

governance system. Therefore, civic urbanity stakes a claim to playing a part in developing a new cosmopolis.

Ten themes

Thinking in the round

The starting point is to think in an integrated and connected way. Only then can we discern the linkages and dependencies that help us understand the deeper dynamics of cities and how to make the most of their potential. This requires a changed mindset and is difficult to prescribe. Yet increasingly decision makers realize that silo thinking and strict departmentalism does not offer the complex solutions we need.

A shared commons

There is a demand for a reinvigorated public and shared commons. This is a social ethos that argues against our increasingly tribal and self-centred public culture. It fosters amongst other things spaces and places from parks to libraries that are free, non-commercial and public. Places underpinned by this ethos can help retrofit conviviality and the habits of solidarity so helping to nurture our capacity to bond and to build social capital. Crucially there is a contrast; with financial capital the more you spend the less you have, but the more you spend on building social capital the returns become ever greater. In time the urban civility this fosters encourages individual and collective gestures of generosity. In turn this self-generating process can create a virtuous cycle.

Eco-consciousness

All cities talk of sustainability. Every vision statement mentions combating the effect of climate change. Taking a helicopter view of cities worldwide there are many good initiatives. Yet few cities make the hard planning choices to counteract an economic dynamic, spatial configurations and physical forms that continue to make cities unsustainable in every sense. Cities have not been sufficiently imaginative in helping to change behaviour patterns, nor have they developed a new environmental aesthetic that inspires people to think afresh. Equally 360° thinking has not embedded itself into decision making circles so that it becomes a new common sense. As a consequence the regulations and incentives regimes are not clever enough to drive change. The necessary and dramatic retrofitting process still has a very long way to go even though there are vast economic opportunities from being part of the 4th lean, clean, green industrial revolution. 'Cradle to cradle' decision making remains far off.

Healthy urban planning

Urban planning that helps makes you healthy by just navigating the city in day to day ways has not imbued planning disciplines. The cities we have built and continue to create makes us unhealthy.

We now know about unhealthy urban planning. Rigid 'land use zoning', which separates functions and gets rid of mixing uses such as blending living, working, retail and fun; 'comprehensive development' that can do initiatives in one big hit so often losing 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 things as if they were on a conveyor belt and lastly the 'inevitability of the car' which can lead us to plan as if the car were king and people a mere nuisance. Walkable cities give you time and space to experience the city in visceral ways as part of being healthy is sensory satisfaction.

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 happen as a matter of course and incidentally and 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 us 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.

Intercultural thinking

All our bigger cities are becoming much more diverse in their make-up. Multiculturalism as a planning concept and a policy is the predominant approach acknowledges these differences. It highlights the need to cater their diverse needs. Interculturalism goes one step further and has different aims and priorities. It asks instead 'what when we are sharing a city can we do together across our cultural differences'. It recognises difference, yet seeks out similarities. It highlights that in reality most of us, 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 sum 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.

Inequality & inclusiveness

Unequal societies create tension, resentment and lead to unfulfilled potential. A society of have and have-nots does not harness the collective imagination and intelligence of its citizens nor capture their energy and aspirations sufficiently. The trickle-down effect, it is increasingly recognized, is ineffective and the gap between the rich and poor is exacerbating. From the OECD to the Davos summit there are grave warnings of the looming effects and impacts of severe income disparity. It is seen as the most dangerous risk to social stability and well-being. It is corrosive, divisive, inefficient and ethically unsound. Some degree of inequality may be good for an economy, creating incentives to work hard and take risks, but a high concentration of income gains among the most affluent is damaging. The Occupy protests demonstrated the increasing public anger that it has gone too far. It can be addressed, but only if we bend the market mechanism to public good objectives.

Inter-generational equity

The demographic time bomb hangs over everything cities do. There will be pressure to isolate the ageing population into retirement zones with housing adapted to their needs. More innovative places will seek to think through city making from an inter-generational perspective and develop adaptable housing forms that can be transformed through the lifecycle.

The aesthetic imperative

There is the aesthetic imperative. The city is a 360° immersive experience and it communicates through every fibre of its being, its built structures, its natural forms, its activities and overall atmosphere. Its aesthetics engender an emotional response with psychological impacts. We can argue about ugliness and beauty and crucially we should. This heightens our awareness of our surroundings and in time creates standards which of course are re-negotiated. Yet there is usually more alignment on what works and what doesn't aesthetically.

This reminds us that every physical structure has an aesthetic responsibility to the environment and to the people in which it sits. Remember the pinpricks of ugliness spilling out from horrible buildings, misplaced urban design or insensitive infrastructures throughout their lives. These have a negative impact leading to depression and other diseases as work in environmental psychology shows again and again.

Creative city making

Creative city making seeks to address the escalating crisis cities face that cannot be solved by a business as usual approach, including the challenge of living together with great diversity, addressing the sustainability agenda and how cities can rethink their role and purpose in a changing world to survive well economically, culturally and socially and to manage increasing complexity.

It argues that curiosity, imagination and creativity are the pre-conditions for inventions and innovations to develop as well as to solve intractable urban problems and to create interesting opportunities. Unleashing the creativity of citizens, organizations 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 too social innovators, interesting 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 emphasizes how we need to understand the hardware and software simultaneously. In turn this effects the 'orgware' of a city, which is how 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.

An invigorated democracy

Most things have been reinvented such as how we do business, how we build cities or how we entertain ourselves and of course technology has moved apace in gigantic leaps enabling to connect across the world in completely unforeseen ways. Yet our forms of representative democracy

have remained largely the same for hundreds of years. Essentially we vote for politicians to speak on our behalf every four years with little involvement in between, even though substantial efforts are made to consult citizens on local plans or in some countries to hold referenda on major issues. Clearly this is not enough as low participation in voting show. Cities need to explore new ways of communicating with citizens so engagement with the civic can be reignited and policies can be co-created. Here the open data movement is one important initiative in making hitherto hidden information freely available as are new ways of decision making such as citizen juries or other forms of participative democracy from on-line voting to town hall meetings.

Overall, key themes highlighted here are caring for others, 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 to be urbane has a combined economic, social, political and cultural history which 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 and especially the Hanseatic League cities. It was led by merchants who tried to escape from the shackles and constrictions of feudalism to do their trades 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, 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 particular interests, a concern with its identity and the 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 so diminishing the power of cities. The rise of a more centralized welfare state in some countries exacerbated this situation.

It is unwise to idealize this original bourgeois urbanity since it became more degraded 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. Others of a more post-modern bent think that whatever a city is represents its urbanity. So if a place is a concrete jungle and dreadful so be it.

Barriers to urbanity

Urbanity here is not merely a descriptive term but a programme for action. Today the world is more mobile, we identify with various places and cities increasingly focus of attracting this work force. These itinerant citizens have a different relationship to their city. It is less intense or deep or long term and there is less commitment to place. Equally the city usually has less power over key issues that determine its fate, such as education, transport, social welfare or its ability to create its own rules, such as creating its own citizenship with appropriate rights. At the same time many independent voluntary and community structures, which were historically vital as the nervous system and mediating institutions 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 develop citizens and so the civic. This decline in engagement is visible everywhere. It is reflected in low voting rates or the decline in trust and so 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 is not what it used to be or where virtual and real worlds blend more readily and where globalization 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' merge into one as if it were part of you as is every brick or blade of grass. 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 imperceptively and step by step as associations with place and people build up. These create memories, meanings and histories. This identification takes time. It is why people often like places that to others are faceless, ugly or soulless because they can draw in many experiences. The bench where you had your first kiss, for instance, is why so much of peoples' 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 develop and change 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. Being civic throughout history has been linked to the democratic impulse. This implies being active and so fosters a realm of debate and public discussion. Citizens thus at their best are 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, or as organizations and institutions that work together in a way that official bodies cannot or will not.

Generating civic urbanity

Here are some guidelines to build 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 Digitized City: Influence & Impact'; 'Cities of Ambition'; 'The Fragile City & the Risk Nexus' with Tom Burke, plus others such as 'Origins and Futures of the Creative City' and the 'Sensory Landscape of Cities'. For more details see www.charleslandry.com