Cultural planning or planning culturally

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Preface

A series of concepts emerged in the late 1980s in city making always including the word 'culture'. Cultural resources, cultural mapping, cultural planning, cultural literacy. It felt exciting as a participant. It was as if we were creating a new conceptual landscape. It had some impact, yet as I reflect back today, in 2019, I believe we did not achieve enough. The thinking we proposed – thinking culturally or a culturally driven approach - has not embedded itself sufficiently into how city development is conducted. One phrase I now realize limited the potential – it is 'cultural planning'. Say that to yourself and what does it conjure up – 'planning for culture'. And this can mostly mean planning for the arts - their institutions, their buildings, their programmes, their events, encouraging artists. Very important, but it does not capture the major shift we were hoping for which was to think, plan and act culturally. This is seeing culture in its broader sense. It is more than word play. Planning culturally implies embedding cultural knowledge, insight and understanding in everything we do and especially, we hoped, it would change the way city making would evolve.

The trajectory

This text seeks to honour the memory of Jan Verwijnen and so I feel a personal history is appropriate in describing how these ideas evolved. At times this explains more than any analytical description. My interest in culture and creativity was inevitable – to me at least, it links to my life trajectory. Brought up in Britain, Germany and also studying in Italy made me think 'who am I' and 'where do I belong' and what 'makes a place a place' and 'what is special about here'. My parents escaped from the Nazis in the 1930s, they spoke with a German accent, they were intellectuals, my father a philosophical writer, my mother an artist later in her life. They spoke many languages, at home people from many countries passed through. A cosmopolitan environment as cultural difference was around me, all the time – Europe, Africa, Asia. Education later reinforced this - years and years of Latin and Ancient Greek in a classic German gymnasium anchored in the idea 'what are our roots', what are the historical sources of who we are and how we think. My masters thesis at John Hopkins Bologna was on 'problems of post-industrial societies' and here already the culture issue lurked in the background, but not too centrally.

My first job before was at the EU on a longer-term research project called Europe plus 30. It was a foresight project looking at where Europe was going from the perspective of multiple disciplines cutting across social life, economics to the environment and culturally. Its aim was to see how Europe's diversity and distinctiveness could be brought together in some kind of vision of a future Europe. Continually moving around Europe reinforced by sense of how different, yet the same we are. It reminded me that we can belong to many places

Three conclusions emerge from this background: Identity is complex; places try to make the most of the resources they have; everywhere there is something unique and distinctive.

I founded Comedia when I was 30 in 1978. The words signalled then a mix of associations 'communications' and 'media' plus 'community'. I did not mind the link to 'commedia dell'arte' or even 'comedy'. Things are serious I thought, but being light hearted is OK too. Comedia focused initially on how organizations, especially radical ones, got their message across in seeking to foster change before we then began to look at cities as a whole. The early 1980s was a period of dramatic restructuring and global dislocation and affected European cities intensely as the world began to shift towards the East. Unemployment was rising, older factories were closing down, confidence was waning. Cities began to ask themselves 'who are we', 'where are we going', 'what assets do we have'. That began a long term trajectory of working with cities in helping them to reposition themselves in coupling economic, social and cultural development together in spite of all the difficulties that involved. Most importantly we thought that the ability to transform was in essence a cultural project and involved shifting the mindset and the willingness to create. That history is explained in my archive[1].

My journey, thus, connected three themes: Culture, creativity and the city. Culture is who we are, creativity shapes what we can become and the city is where most of us live. I thought heritage and history and creativity could be great partners as simply erasing memory could leave people lost by shattering their sense of identity and belonging. I realized too that going with the grain of peoples' culture, acknowledging its significance and recognizing its power would make people feel more at ease with change especially if they could become shapers, makers and co-creators of their evolving city. All things that are easy to say and difficult to implement.

Culture, Creativity & the City

My understanding of the elements that make up the toolkit of planning a city culturally are:

Cultural resources are the raw materials of the city and its value base; its assets replacing coal, steel or gold. Cultural resources are ordinary, everyday and diverse and also sometimes exceptional. Creativity is the method of exploiting these resources and helping them grow. It is the capacity to work things through with curiosity and imagination and its main characteristic is openness.

The task of urban planners and city makers we argued is to recognize, manage and exploit these resources responsibly and to dare to be creative. Culture thus should shape the technicalities of city making rather than being seen as a marginal add-on to be considered once the important planning questions like housing, transport and land-use have been dealt with as discrete issues. By contrast

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[1] http://charleslandry.com/resources-downloads/archive-of-talks-and-projects/

a culturally informed perspective should condition how planning as well as economic development or social affairs should be addressed. So housing might look and feel different or economic programmes might work with and build on peoples cultures.

Recognizing culture as a resource was a personal revelation and thereafter I began to think of cities and assets in completely different ways. Every crevice in the city had a hidden story or undiscovered potential that could be re-used for a positive urban purpose. This led to a new form of urban asset audit. By taking a broad sweep of a city's economy, social potential and political traditions we assessed how cultural assets could be turned to economic advantage or social strength. How an old skill in carpentry or metal working could be linked with new technology to satisfy a new market for household goods or how a tradition of learning and debate could be used to market a city as an ideas hub so strengthening its learning institutions. We even considered the 'senses' of the city from colour, to sound, smell and visual appearance, also taking a broad sweep through mutual aid traditions, associative networks and social rituals as we saw that these could make a city both competitive and reinforce its sense of self. This approach to the concept of cultural assets made me think of the city as a malleable artefact shaped both by built projects and by activity; I thought of the city as having a personality and emotions, with feelings uplifted at one moment and depressed in the next. The city conceived of in this way was a living organism, not a machine.

Along the way some conceptual tricks were learnt that at first sight sound simplistic. One was the idea of 'turning a weakness into a strength.' Coldness could be used to create ice hotels as in Kiruna/Jukkasjärvi in Sweden or Kemi in Finland. Or as I heard in the early 1990's Glasgow's tourism officer say: We are drier than Iceland so let's promote the city as a kind of Riviera to Icelanders. As the world of cultural resources opened out it became clear that every city could have a unique niche and 'making something out of nothing' became totemic to anyone trying to develop or promote ugly cities, cold or hot cities or marginal places.

The realization dawned that every city could be a world centre for something if it was persistent and tried hard enough—Freiburg for eco-research, New Orleans for the blues or Hay-on-Wye for bookselling. In identifying urban resources much could be learnt from the Italians renowned for their 'feste' or 'sagre', which celebrate whatever resource their region is known for from mushrooms, to pasta to literature.

It became clear that cultural resources were embodied in peoples' skills and talents. They were not only 'things' like buildings, but also symbols, activities and the repertoire of local products in crafts, manufacturing and services, like the intricate skills of sari makers in Indian cities, wood carvers of Bali or dyers of Djenne in Mali. Urban cultural resources are a historical, industrial and artistic heritage representing assets including architecture, urban landscapes or landmarks. Local and indigenous traditions of public life, festivals, rituals or stories as well as hobbies and enthusiasms. Amateur cultural activities can all be rethought to generate new products or services. Resources like food and cooking, leisure activities, clothing and sub-cultures that exist everywhere are often

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neglected. Cultural resources too are the range and quality of skills in the performing and visual arts, design, music, the new media. Then called 'cultural industries' and now the 'creative economy'.

Cultural mapping: The next step in culturally driven urban development was to detail and map those tangible and quantifiable or intangible and qualitative resources systematically. It is a 360% method and tool to identify community strengths and weaknesses in a participative way giving people and organizations from differing backgrounds and interests the voice to say what values and aspirations they think are important. In pulling this information and knowledge together the complexity of a city reveals itself as there will inevitably be differences in intentions and goals. Local community groups may have differing priorities from those of business or public sector institutions and how to align these potentially starkly conflicting and contrasting world views is a central challenge of city making. The task then is how planning can use this rich resource to shape urban strategies and, in the process overcome the obstacles.[2]

Cultural planning: Cultural mapping turns into cultural planning when the material is assessed. For this to work well requires imaginative and creative and often courageous thinking to make the most of the possibilities. The approach does not just look at needs but also entrepreneurial opportunities and desires, as well as obstacles and constraints. Its approach is holistic, interdisciplinary, collaborative and horizontal and it seeks to build networks of opportunity. From this a strategy and action plan can be created. David Yencken one of the organizers of the first Creative City conference in Melbourne in 1988, which focused on the arts and prefigured some of the key themes of the creative city noted. "Creative planning is based on the idea of cultural resources and the holistic notion that every problem is merely an opportunity in disguise"[3]. Thus, every weakness has a potential strength and that even the seemingly 'invisible' can be made into something positive - that is something can be made out of nothing. These phrases might sound like sloganeering, but when full-heartedly believed can be powerful planning and ideas generating tools.

This reflects what Wolf von Eckhardt said in 1980 in 'The Arts & City Planning' [4] where the English word 'art' is given a much wider meaning well beyond the 'arts' like painting or playing music. 'Art' here means doing something well and with thought and quality such as in the 'art of gardening'. He said: 'effective cultural planning involves all the arts, the art of urban design, the art of winning community support, the art of transportation planning and mastering the dynamics of community development', to which Bianchini added 'the art of forming partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors and ensuring the fair distribution of economic, social and cultural resources'.[5] I took this concept forward in my book 'The Art of City Making'[6].

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[2] Duxbury Nancy, Garrett-Petts W.F., MacLennan David eds. Cultural Mapping as Cultural Inquiry, Routledge, 2015

[3] Landry Charles, Helsinki Towards a Creative City, Helsinki Urban Facts, 2001
[4] 'The Arts & City Planning' R Porter ed. American Council for the Arts Synopsis von Eckhardt 1980
[5] Franco Bianchini Urban renaissance? The arts and the urban regeneration process – tackling the inner cities ed. Susanne Macgregor & Ben Pimlott , OUP 1990
[6] Landry, Charles; (2006), The Art of City Making, Routledge, London

Australia was the first country to incorporate cultural resources and cultural planning thinking into practice. The Australian Local Government Association's (ALGA), 1992 plan[7] included cultural planning along with economic, infrastructural, environmental and social planning among its imperatives for local government in Australia. The ALGA also developed a mechanism - Integrated Local Area Planning(ILAP) to help implement this and Brian Howe, then deputy prime minister under the Keating government was crucial in providing resources to give the ILAP process some impact. 'Cultural planning' also began to be taken seriously in planning frameworks and to enter the language of urban planners and designers, local government officers, community arts workers, and community organisations. Colin Mercer[8] at the time Director of the Institute for Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University, Brisbane was important in advocating this new approach and co-wrote 'The Cultural Planning Handbook' in 1995[9].

Cultural literacy was the fourth element of the conceptual quartet. It is a necessary, vital skill as important as numeracy, normal literacy, or understanding the laws of physics, especially now that cities are far more diverse. Without it we wander as if we had no sight or language. Cultural literacy is the ability to read, understand, find significance in, evaluate, compare and decode the local cultures in a place. This allows one to work out what is meaningful and significant to people who live there. It helps understand better how local identity is made up and what its potential and problems are and how these may be addressed.

All bigger cities are 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 to 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.

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[7] Australian Local Government Association (1992) Making the Connections: Towards Integrated Local Area Planning, Canberra

[8] Mercer, Colin; (2006), Cultural Planning for Urban Development and Creative Cities
http://www.kulturplan-oresund.dk/pdf/Shanghai_cultural_planning_paper.pdf

[9] Grogan, David; Mercer, Colin; with Engwicht, David; (1995), The Cultural Planning Handbook: An essential Australian guide, Allen & Unwin

In sum my bigger intent was to develop a culture of creativity to be rooted into how urban stakeholders operate. By encouraging creativity and legitimising the use of imagination within the public, private and community spheres the ideas bank of possibilities and potential solutions to any urban problem would be broadened. This is the divergent thinking that generates multiple options and ideas. It needs to been aligned to convergent thinking that narrows down possibilities and that sorts out the good ideas from the bad. In short going through the reality checker.