

The invisible hand of city-making:

Charles Landry

The cultural dimension is the invisible hand of city-making, the core through which ultimately all of our decision-making flows. If a city's culture is open-minded, potential grows. If it's closed-minded, it shrinks or nothing happens. But culture is mostly not a central plank of the operating system for the classic company or city.

A central feature for an urban culture in a globalizing world is the balance between their distinctiveness and the extent to which cities are merely a showcase for global brands. A thought experiment reminds us of the power of corporations: there are 35,000 McDonald's, on average 15 metres wide, that is 525 kilometres; 42,000 Subways totalling 630 kilometres; or KFC, with 19,000 branches and 285 kilometres. With the other top brands, including Burger King, Starbucks and Taco Bell you could nearly line up a chain across the USA from New York to Los Angeles.

This speculation reminds us of the dreary sameness and blandness of things. But then consider Venice, an astonishing place, a global powerhouse for many centuries long past. Yet to keep itself, in a world of austerity, it has to let itself become an advert behind which its maintenance and repair takes place – think of the Bridge of Sighs and Sisley, or San Mark's and the giant Trussardi or Rolex ads.

Then there is the copying phenomenon. There is the real Venice, then a copy as a casino in Las Vegas, and then a copy of that copy in Macau, where the Venice Grand Canal meanders across the third of the giant casino and where the gondola ride passes by shops like Zara, H&M and its more fancy cousins from Bulgari to Prada. And finally there is a copy of a copy of a copy of Venice in its own railway station.

Think too of names like 'Soho' – south of Houston Street in New York or as most believe, the sound of a hunting cry in London. Soho implies 'being cool,' a 'hipster environment,' or a 'creative place,' So you see the Soho coffee bar chain or the many Sohos from night clubs to travel agents across the globe. So they must be 'cool'. Then there is the supreme Soho of Sohos; the Soho Galaxy by Zaha Hadid in Beijing. In the competitive battle between cities we can detect some trends through time. The first is cities seeking to define themselves as 'a city of culture', highlighting their special distinctiveness and vibrancy. The aim is to grab attention and get people to visit and, ideally, to stay.

On that platform many then projected themselves as 'cities of knowledge' focusing on their learning and research resources and the spillover effects on the local economy, so seeking to generate a platform through which the city can harness its collective imagination. The last element in the triad is to say my place is 'a city of opportunity', open and helpful to the start-up culture. Together these threads form a story anchored in vibrancy, diversity and connections.

Another simple, perhaps simplistic, way of trying to define this longer trajectory is to see how cities have moved from a 1.0 version to a 2.0 one and now are seeking to evolve into a 3.0 type of a city. The qualities and characteristics of each are different and since every city has a history, we could call that "City 0.0."

The 'soft' in citymaking focuses on the sensory experience

"City 1.0" is essentially hardware-driven, along the lines, as they say in Australia, of 'Roads, rates and rubbish'. That view of how a city works, as a machine rather than an organism, fosters top-down thinking, hierarchical systems of management and a mindset that comes from the factory age, as if the city is simply a machine to be put together. There is a 1.0 version of planning, which is less consultative, 1.0 version of the economy, largely focused on larger factories, and a 1.0 version of culture focusing more attention on cultural containers rather than content.

This hardware thinking lacks a sense of looking at cities emotionally, given that cities are primarily an emotional experience. So, by contrast Cities 2.0 are different and they focus on 'soft urbanism'. Here the soft and hard is legitimised simultaneously. The soft implies people and their activities and the many invisible things that make cities work, from connections and active networking to the special bonds that come from that.

The 'soft' in city-making focuses on the senses, and the sensory experience, which might change how we see and experience cities. It might lead city makers to provide different ways of meeting, talking, living or navigating the city. In these "softer" cities, the planning becomes more consultative.

Buildings change as well. They are less functional and bland. At times developments are too over stylized, often constructed by architects trying to make a mark on the urban landscape rather than thinking about the needs of users. The culture 2.0 aspect of the city takes on the virtues of 1.0, but focuses more on creative economy activities. Here two trends mesh - creating science parks, often quite sanitized, well away from the city's heart, often with an IT focus, as well as major retro-fitting exercises to reuse older industrial buildings. For instance, more people now work in the Cable Factory, the ex-Nokia building in Helsinki, than when it made cables. What resonates is that in these buildings, you feel you are making, shaping and creating them. The patina of the ages is reflected in them. Here too work settings are completely different spaces, often shared, that are focused on co-working rather than traditional corporate structures. More like a living room than an office.

In moving to the 3.0 city, this connects to the 'here, there' phenomenon, seamlessly connected 24/7: 'I'm here, I'm there. I'm doing two things at the same time'. It's a world where everybody can have an idea. It's a world where you dramatically retrofit things to make the city more walkable and public space rises dramatically in importance.

Think here of the famous Chicago Millennium Square development – the cars, once on top, are still there but hidden underground. This takes commitment given the relative costs of surface versus underground parking. Planning is integrated and more holistic. In its cultural version people are more makers of their culture. This City 3.0 needs a different city. It needs to look different, feel different, and its operating dynamics need to be different from how the bureaucracy works to how people are involved in decision-making.

In these transformations courage is key and this all comes together in a series of priorities: highlighting the shared commons, the invisible assets that are increasingly commodified; seeing the city through the eyes of others; being inclusive and trying to break the rich/poor divide as we understand co-dependency; intergenerational equity and communication; eco-awareness and holistic accounting; healthy urban planning, a planning that, by definition, tries to make you healthy rather than ill; the notion of creative citymaking which seeks to create the conditions in a changing world, which allow people to think, plan and act with imagination. All of this only works in a reinvented democracy, which refits the rule system for the philosophies, priorities and needs of the 21st century.