

The City as a Living Work of Art

Artistic imagination and the revival of “civic urbanity”

By CHARLES LANDRY

I feel ambivalent about public art. On occasion I am uplifted, and that, thankfully, is happening more frequently. At other times I simply see material white noise—stuff. Often this happens when I see an abstract red sculpture placed in front of a glassy corporate structure that from a sensory perspective is a *no* building. You cannot communicate with such a setting.

I am a simple person, and I divide the physical environment of cities into *yes* and *no* spaces. Places that emotionally say *yes* engender the virtues we call urbanity. Places that say *no* are lifeless, relentless in their dullness, and often ugly. They fragment and divide us from each other. Many environments lie somewhere in between.

I always look at a city as a total environment and as a potential creative ecology. This is a setting that creates the preconditions for all its citizens to think, plan, and act with imagination, and where the public ethos encourages individuals to feel they can be shapers, makers, and co-creators of their evolving place. This happens rarely.

Cities are complex organisms. They are a mix of their “hardware” foundations and the social energy and activities, or “software,” blended into them. Cities are shaped primarily by a culture of engineering since it is chiefly the hardware folks who determine how places look and feel. But their insights are limited. Too often they do not understand how the emotional flow of the city works—something that artists appreciate. We need the combined insights and intellectual artistry of many players to make a city work, from cultural historians, engineers, social activists, planners, businesspeople, and psychologists, to ordinary citizens, philosophers, artists, and many more. When they work well together they create urbanity, one of our greatest achievements.

Each discipline has its special contribution to make, and ideally in city making each of us grasps the essence of what the others offer. I believe the greatest contribution artists can make to city making is in the way they think, rather than any specific piece of public art, however good, they produce.

At the same time, involvement with the artistic can create problems for typical urban managers because the values and attributes that dominate the modern world are almost *diametrically opposed* to the values promoted by artistic creativity. Urban managers prefer certainty

and predictability. Their worldview is summed up by these words: goal, objective, focus, strategy, outcome, calculation, measurable, quantifiable, logical, solution, efficient, effective, economic sense, profitable, rational, linear. At its best, artistic creativity involves a journey, not knowing where it will lead or who will arrive; it involves truth-searching and embodies a quest for the profound; it has no calculated purpose; it is not goal-oriented, nor measurable in easy ways, nor fully explicable rationally; it denies instant gratification; and it accepts ambiguity, uncertainty, and paradox.

Good art aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity. It champions originality and authenticity



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and opposes vanity, and it generates openness to new ideas and new ways of doing. Good art is also transgressive and disruptive of the existing order, and it is often uncomfortable.

Again, these are attributes that urban decision makers can find worrying.

This links us back to urbanity. It was urbanity that liberated us from the shackles of a feudal world, starting with the Italian city-states and later the Hanseatic League. Here the idea of the responsible, engaged citizen developed strongly, but so did the freedom to explore, to challenge the accepted canon, and to innovate, just like artists do. However, the concept of being urbane became degraded over time and was equated with being too individualistic and self-referential: watching the world go by, as a flâneur, rather than being engaged with it.

I am trying to reconceive these urban virtues through what I call the six threads of “civic urbanity,” and to me it is clear that artistic imagination or arts projects are embedded in each of its components.

The first of these threads is the idea of the intercultural city, where we focus on what we share across our differences rather than what divides us. Great cities thrive on good diversity, and artistic initiatives encourage crossing the divides. Second, fostering eco-consciousness and cradle-to-cradle thinking helps heal the world. Showing our eco-intentions requires a new aesthetic for buildings to foster behavioral change. Third, practical urban planning that allows for navigating the city in ordinary ways makes us healthy rather than needing to go to the gym. Part of being healthy is sensory satisfaction, which is also a priority for the artistic imagination, and walkable cities

give us time and space to experience the city in a visceral way. Fourth and connected is a demand for a shared commons, spaces and places from parks to libraries that are free and noncommercial.

Then there is, fifth, the aesthetic imperative. This reminds us that every physical structure has an aesthetic responsibility to the environment in which it sits. Remember, the pinpricks of ugliness spilling out from horrible buildings throughout their lives have great psychological impact. And while we can argue about ugliness and beauty, there is usually more alignment on what works and what doesn't.

Finally, there is the notion of creative city making, which is a form of planning places that encourages imagination and inventiveness in solving urban problems and grasping opportunities. When all these elements work well together, we can create the lived experience of the city as a living work of art.

CHARLES LANDRY works worldwide and helps cities assess their potential so they build resilience, increase their wealth creation prospects, and get onto the global radar screen as places of verve and vitality. He has written many books including *The Art of City Making* and *The Creative City*. (www.charleslandry.com)

