

TRUE TO PLACE

Embedding cultural distinctiveness in place making in European cities

Many commentators agree that the 21st century will be the “Century of Cities.” Despite the current global economic crisis, evidence shows that we are facing a new era where the economy, culture, and technology are coming together to create opportunities for those who are prepared to be mobile and adapt to life in mega-cities and in metro-regions across the globe.

However, as well as opportunities, rapid urbanization presents a number of challenges, too. For example, according to the City Mayors think tank,¹ in the past 30 years, more cities in the developed world shrank than grew. Indeed, in many countries, the largest movements of population are taking place *between* cities, and not just from rural to urban areas.

In this scenario, to be able to attract talented and skilled human resources becomes vital, and this is why cities compete. It is also becoming increasingly clear that without forward-looking policies capable of making cities attractive places to live, work, and play, there is little chance of harmonious urban and social development over the long term.

New Approach to Growth and Prosperity

Old ways of working don't apply anymore. In his study of what makes

cities and regions grow and prosper, Richard Florida observes that, rather than being exclusively driven by companies, economic growth is occurring in places that are tolerant, diverse, and open to creativity, mainly because these are the places where creative people of all types want to live.²

In Europe, in some extreme cases, Florida's message has been interpreted as a justification for short-term solutions, quick – mainly cosmetic – forms of urban regeneration, and a marketization of local images and identities.

Furthermore, in places where culture-led regeneration has taken place, the key challenges are not only in the banalization of both the public realm and civic architecture, but also in the privatization of public space, gentrification, and displacement of creative energies into sanitized enclosures of cultural consumption.

More recently, however, there has been a realization of the short-sightedness of such approaches and, in some European countries (for example, in the UK, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Iceland, Germany, and Italy), both civic leaders, and community groups alike are taking action by piloting innovative integrated cultural mapping and planning frameworks.

The argument they use is that, in order to be effective, local cultural plans must be *joined* to the local quality of life agenda. Civic stakeholders in Europe increasingly see sustainable culture-led regeneration interventions and creative economy policies as part of local development plans rooted in the *local* distinctive cultural resources, perceptions, aspirations, and needs. In most cases, the governance aspect is approached through the implementation of ad-hoc forms of collaboration and partnership between different levels of local government matched by community leadership on the ground.

Recognizing Cultural Assets

The reasoning behind such integrated approaches to culture-led local development tends to be informed by evidence of cultural planning practice developed in Australia and North America since the early 1990s.³ The added ingredient here is the ability of some cities to *map* and *think creatively* about their resources, while adopting a broader notion of what constitute local *cultural assets*.

Such a 360-degree birds-eye view of place is a pragmatic one, and – as well as including an inventory of the local



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1 <www.citymayors.com>.

2 Richard Florida (2002), *The Creative Class*. <www.creativeclass.org>.

3 See the work of Greg Baeker and Colin Mercer.

“ ... the cultural identity of a place comprises who the people are and their backgrounds, tastes, rituals, experiences, diversity, talents, and aspirations for the future. Cities are resilient ecosystems.

arts, heritage, leisure, and creative economy and ecology – it also involves an understanding of local perceptions and internal and external image; an examination of the indigenous urban texture and character; an overview of a place’s industrial make-up, trade, and innovation capacity; as well as an assessment of the state of the local education and learning infrastructure.

Key to this approach is the realization that, in the first instance, the cultural identity of a place comprises who the people are and their backgrounds, tastes, rituals, experiences, diversity, talents, and aspirations for the future. Cities are resilient ecosystems, so capturing the specificity of the local

interaction between people and place is the next step. Matching local assets to community needs and aspirations, and developing forward-looking policies, projects, and plans is then the third step. This is also the stage where – in order to capitalize creatively on the broad cultural resources of a place – civic leaders and communities work together to put in place democratic and participatory decision-making mechanisms.

European Examples of Implementation

City of Malmö

In the Swedish city of Malmö, the cultural planning framework has been

used to deal with the task of regenerating the harbour area. Malmö is a cosmopolitan and multicultural city where high-tech and knowledge-intensive activities are increasingly replacing the old, traditional industrial structure characteristic of the southern Sweden region since the 1960s.

Six years ago, a number of cultural mapping and “visioning” exercises were conducted involving policy makers, planners, and local community representatives. The result was to bring together, for the first time, teams of stakeholders from different departments of the local authority – ranging from planning, to economic development, education, and social integration – with

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voluntary sector organizations, artists, cultural practitioners, community representatives, and developers in a mechanism called the City Planning Forum.

Through the forum, a consultative platform was put in place (Build Live Dialogue) specifically to look into the unique cultural character of the harbour. This tool is still used today to arrive at a comprehensive urban vision for how the city wants to develop in the future. Other policy spin-offs generated by the dialogue's experiment range from the mapping of Malmö's talent (looking at the cultural diversity of the city as an asset) to the creation on the waterfront of sustainable, affordable accommoda-

tion for young people (in partnership with the university) to the setting up of incubators for creative entrepreneurs and the provision of artists' studios in the harbour area. This, in turn, has contributed to making Malmö the preferred destination of young creatives in the Öresund region,⁴ and design and IT companies now perceive the city as a hot place to locate.

Kronoberg Region

Elsewhere in Sweden, the Kronoberg Region (also known as Södra Småland) has developed a pilot cultural planning strategy involving its six municipalities. The aim of the strategy was

principally to raise the profile of the area following the disaster caused by "Storm Gudrun," which hit the region in January 2005.

A series of seminars and workshops were organized and a full-scale cultural mapping of the region's assets was undertaken. Over a period of six months, mapping became the catalyst for a process of cross-sector work and partnership building, which led to the setting up of a Södra Småland Stakeholders Group (which included elected representatives from each municipality; cultural insti-

⁴ The area of Southern Sweden joined to Denmark via a bridge.

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tutions; directors from the economic, cultural, tourism, and place marketing organizations; voluntary sector organizations; and, crucially, locally-based businesses). The group identified a set of targeted actions, which included (among others) the creation of a Storm House (Stormen Hus).

Though still in its feasibility stage, the Storm House is set to become a high-quality, carbon-neutral visitors' attraction (with spaces where visitors can experience the sensory effects of storms), and an education and research centre focused on the study of weather patterns and renewable sources of energy. It will also be a place where local artists and creative industries entrepreneurs will be able to experiment with new digital and 3D technologies to create products and artefacts around the theme of nature and extreme weather. The idea behind the Storm House is that of using a catalyst project and the theme of renewable resources to set in motion a process of formulating a new and shared brand image for the region.

Other Examples

Elsewhere, in the UK, the City of Bristol was the first to adopt a cultural plan in 1993. Since then, other cities in the UK have followed Bristol's example and developed cultural planning based strategies. Essentially, what unites such strategies is an understanding that *ad hoc* stakeholders partnerships – which are created on the basis of a local mapping of “cultural resources” and rooted on a process of understanding of the local cultural DNA – can achieve good results in dealing with a multiplicity of local challenges. Such local focus (and knowledge) ensures support from key local stakeholders and communities alike, and gives partnerships the freedom and flexibility to implement actions in the way they want, and with the partners they chose to work with.

In Scotland, the devolved government is in the process of producing guidelines for setting up local authority-driven cultural planning partner-

ships as a means to deliver cultural and sports entitlements for Scottish citizens. If implemented, such partnerships could provide concrete evidence of the capacity of cultural planning to achieve results in fields as diverse as urban regeneration and community rebuilding.

Ingredients for Success

There are many more examples of cultural plans developed in European countries (from Italy to Germany, Ireland to Denmark), but there are two key lessons civic leaders and communities are drawing from them. One is that cultural plans must be connected to local assets, needs and aspirations, and that they must be participatory, flexible, and democratic in the way they administer and deliver on the ground. The determination of individuals, the vision of civic leaders, and an ability to take calculated risks are equally vital ingredients in any successful cultural plan. MW

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