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## **Civic Urbanity: Looking at the city afresh**

There is a broader concept of urban sustainability and culture lies at its heart. Not in a narrow sense of the arts, but in the wider meaning. To become and be self-sustaining is in itself culturally determined and the process of getting there is a cultural project. No more so than for the city, which is a complex organism and in constant movement with perspectives, opinions and priorities about what is right often clashing. To be sustainable requires responsiveness and adaptability yet anchored in some sound principles as to how urban life should be lived. These principles are based on political choices, which derive from our cultural attitudes and proclivities.

The notion of civic urbanity proposed seeks to find a way of telling the story and imagining what will move the 21<sup>st</sup> century urbanite and citizen to be concerned not only about themselves but the wider world. The story of the sustainable needs to sound more attractive than the allure of consumption and endless growth. The aim to become a leader in creating the fourth lean, clean, green industrial should feel compelling. The idea encapsulates this wider sense of sustainability and what needs to be done to achieve it. It focuses on both our right to the city and responsibility for it.

The predominant city narrative currently focuses on their triumphant achievements. Yet this narrative is not matched by an awareness of the looming threats cities face involving a series of interlinked crises mostly out of their control. Dramatic decisions need to be taken to ensure they continue to survive well further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But cities do not have the authority to act. In an interconnected world, nation states remain essential to negotiate the global rules systems and broader national frameworks within which cities operate and inter-governmental agreements remain weak since they are not sufficiently binding.

These crises feed off each interacting often in dangerous ways and they require connected solutions executed with vision, resources, determination, will and behaviour change. The dozen primary threats to the stability and well-being of cities are: Climate change, the food, health, resource, poverty and inequality crises leading to a security problem with in addition the financial crisis which constrains capturing the resources to deal with them. Add to these a growing population which exerts pressure on everything and the mass movement of people across the globe, which can cause the identities of cities to shift often with explosive impacts as often people are living side by side with fundamentally differing views about how life should be lived.

The inability to grasp the complexity of the risks and how to deal with them causes an intense governance and management problem. Finally there is urgency and limited time to act, which is a crisis in itself. At the core of what needs to happen is a mindset and awareness shift and subsequent behaviour change. This means recalibrating our cultural attitudes so that being and acting sustainably is seen as the right thing to do. The approach to achieving this in differing cultural contexts requires deep cultural understanding as well as drawing on that culture to change behaviour patterns. 'Sustainability: A Cultural History' by Ulrich Gruber shows how most cultures across the globe have a history of traditions of sustainability that they can draw on. Yet mostly these have been obscured by a narrow, single track approach to development.

This is the risk landscape cities find themselves in that requires a cultural response. It is interlocking interdependent chain – a risk nexus. What are these chains of connection?

Over-riding everything is the critical climate change challenge and the risks it poses where a possible rise in temperatures of 6°C could see many low lying cities disappear. This causes extreme weather conditions so we are on the brink of a food production crisis as crops get destroyed or under-produce and that with a rising population of 78 million a year means food production will need to double by 2050. That need for increased food adds to the pressure on the climate and causes higher food prices. With an undernourished population of nearly one billion, which in turn adds to global health problems, urban rioting will become the norm. Equally there will be more population movements that can cause instability and as differing cultural groups become absorbed into cities. Climate change equally has immense financial costs and consequences and the price of neglect exacerbates the problem. It creates a security crisis as regions and nations fight over resources and these battles are likely to increase the gap between rich and poor. Global warming affects water resources with widespread effects on food and energy supplies as well as affecting the seas acid balance so threatening a global collapse in fishing, our single largest protein source.

Similarly when we look at the risk nexus through the lens of food and resources equivalent linked patterns emerge. Generating increased food yields requires more energy and the use of water and the need for more arable land requires the felling of trees that capture CO<sub>2</sub> so CO<sub>2</sub> emissions grow and in sum they aggravate the pressures on the climate. This cycle leads to higher food prices which means that the world's poorest must use a larger part of their income for food so exacerbating their poverty. More people will suffer from undernourishment. The resource scarcity, in terms of water, oil and other energy sources, causes price rises even though the economic downturn has decreased them, but shortages will make them rise again. This threatens stability as poverty and inequality will grow and the resources are insufficiently available to move into renewables. In water poor areas or places with substantial food price hikes have occurred conflicts will rise such as the Middle East and North Africa.

And the riots in Rio Istanbul and the Arab Spring uprising are just a foretaste of what is to come.

The stability of cities is further exacerbated in very visible ways when we in addition consider the interactive effects of inequality and poverty, the financial constraints to address issues, the costs of health or the mixed impacts of being multicultural melting pots.

Yet triggered by a common purpose derived from civic engagement cities can collectively create the urgency and demand from national governments that they act upon the interconnected problems they face. This will help governments to restore sufficient legitimate authority to take the difficult decisions required, but at the price of shifting political power away from the centre of government towards cities. Together they can play a significant role in helping to turn these vicious cycles into more virtuous ones. Taking a helicopter view of urban initiatives globally we can see that many sustainable solutions have been implemented to building and construction, to transport or energy production especially with the help of new smart technologies. But cities need the power to act with an appropriate regulations and incentives regime. Cities as creative hubs have always been the laboratories of solving the problems of their own making.

### **Seven concepts**

There are seven interlinked concepts that can reshape how we can rethink urbanity in 21st century terms. They are: The shared commons, eco-consciousness, healthy urban planning, the idea of the intercultural city, the aesthetic imperative, creative city making and an invigorated democracy.. Together they frame the 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' rather than choices that are only for 'me' and my more selfish needs.

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 is 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. So far it is not the default position of citizens, urban professionals or politicians take.

If one aspect of urban life is out of balance it can be threatening and lead the city to spin out of control. But rarely do we see the parts together.

### **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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 resurces 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.

### **The aesthetic imperative**

Fifth, 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.