



World Urban Forum

Cities: Crossroads of Cultures

Architecture and Integration?

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Dialogue On Globalization & Culture In An Urbanizing World

The global symbolic economy, cultural capital and urban regeneration

In recent years, culture has taken on an increasingly important role in the design and planning of cities. Today it represents the ideas and practices, sites and symbols, of what has been called the symbolic economy. The phrase refers to the process of wealth creation through cultural activities, including the fine and performing arts, creative design and sport. This new concept of culture increasingly shapes city strategies in the face of both global competition and local tensions. The focus of this dialogue is to investigate the ways in which culture has influenced city planning and management, or has been deliberately used to shape them.

The global dilemma

Today, cultural innovations travel at much greater speed than ever before via airplane, satellites and the Internet. Easier import and export of culture helps ethnic groups living away from home to maintain their cultural identity, while exposing those in their home countries to new cultural stimuli.

In this context, each city must find a viable role in the current international division of labour. However, this poses a dilemma. A city must open itself to free exchanges with other cities and cultures. At the same time, it must protect residents from the negative aspects of those free flows across the world.

Fears and benefits

Globalization both diversifies and enriches urban cultures. On the other hand, the 'strange' or 'alien' cultures of international immigrants can cause fear, racial tension and polarization.

Globalization also results in standardization. More and more people all over the world gain access to the same cultural products, such as music and film, through the Internet, satellite television and radio. Yet at the same time, globalization facilitates the development of the symbolic economy, as cities seek to cash in on the economic value of culture.

Diversity and resistance

Access to more images and information enriches the cosmopolitan culture of cities. It encourages urban residents to become versatile cultural consumers, potentially making them more tolerant of strangers in their own community, or more closely connected to a distant homeland.

However, the inability to escape today's multiple images and sources of information can be disconcerting and may sometimes lead to local resistance against "cultural globalization". Which attitude will prevail, where, and when, remains to be seen. But the uncertainty that surrounds the effects of wider access to cultural diversity is a reflection of a larger problem of globalization: regardless of how "strange" or "alien" it may feel at first. The critical question is whether global culture will or should replace the more familiar local one?

Immigrants and outsourcing

Globalization brings immigrants to cities all over the world. One of the great strengths of cities is their openness to the economic functions that strangers fulfil. On the other hand, their great weakness is a slowness to absorb those strangers in the micro-politics of everyday life, in both public spaces and private institutions.



Continuous flows of immigrants, products and images are currently reducing absolute differences of space and time. Cities relate to the same projects and timelines as capital moves swiftly around the world, heavy manufacturing transfers to developing countries, and rich countries take to outsourcing many skilled jobs, even in the services and IT fields. This evolution broadens the menu of economic and cultural choices that are available to even relatively poor consumers.

Ethnic vitality

For all their apparent tolerance and real social diversity, cities have always been flashpoints of ethnic hostility. Lack of money and of familiarity with the local language both pulls and pushes fresh immigrants into ghettos with groups very much like themselves. In so doing, they recreate some of their original culture, which in turn often provides them with jobs. Immigrant ethnic groups help create a broader, more diverse urban culture, especially with regard to food. Their diverse forms of ethnic food counters - from take-away to grocery to restaurant - are hallmarks of multicultural urbanity. Often, these new residents of the city are its true cosmopolitans. Yet, cities too often tend to marginalize them and to cast them in ethnic and racial hierarchies that undermine multiculturalism.

'Cultural cities'

From Singapore to Glasgow, many cities today turn to culture-related activities for redevelopment or revitalization. The strategy can promote the civic identity of cities. It can market (and 'brand') cities on a world-wide scale and, in particular, boost the economic fortunes of those experiencing decline in conventional manufacturing industries.

These redevelopment strategies have their own problems, however. 'Cultural cities' claim distinctiveness but reproduce the same facilities and 'global districts'. In many cases, the many competitions to host special events risk exhausting a city's resources. Winning cities take the major share of regional and national funds. Such large investment into the fixed capital of cultural facilities concentrates resources in the urban centre rather than culturally underserved peripheries.

Cultural heritage and production

Culturally driven models of redevelopment also reflect new perceptions of older buildings as cultural capital. From Zanzibar to India, these redevelopments come to symbolize the city's collective memory and principled opposition to bureaucratic modernism. Low-rent old buildings can become incubators for small-scale artisans and businesses, acting as springboards of local economic revival.

From Bordeaux to New York, culture as an engine of urban economic growth coincides with the transition of many cities from manufacturing to design- and knowledge-based production. Cities thrive on an abundance of creative skills just as diversely inspired as they are willing to experiment. Many governments target subsidies to cultural districts as they hope to persuade major companies to shift some of their production there, or at the very least to attract tourists.

Fusion and the creative city

Globalization has brought new cultures to cities and their fusion with old ones, including in design and architecture. Developing countries will see more of such creative cities. Partly under the influence of intensified shopping around the world, these cities provide new forms of 'consumption spaces'. However, a defining feature of those spaces is their 'enclosure', which tends to reinforce social exclusion within cities. At the same time, these new 'consumption spaces' increasingly signal the transition of a city's status from local to 'global'.

A creative city is one that has learnt how to use its cultural capital to attract innovative businesses, services and members of the mobile 'creative class'. However, to nurture creativity, a city requires a generous and inclusive culture — some sort of 'attitude'. A creative city must value racial diversity and yearn for novelty even as it values the old.

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