

CULTURE COUNTS: A NEW MATH FOR THE FUTURE OF INNOVATIVE CITIES

Plenary Presentation at American Creativity Association International Conference “Creating the Future: Innovation and the Global Challenge,” Orchard Hotel, Singapore, August 30, 2012

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Let's talk about cities and their future.

I'd like to set the context by quoting from the United Nations Population Fund:

“The world is undergoing the largest wave of urban growth in history... [In 2010, 3.5 billion people, more than half the world's population lived in cities.*] By 2030 the number will swell to almost 5 billion, with urban growth concentrated in Africa and Asia. While mega-cities have captured much public attention, most of the new growth will occur in smaller towns and cities, which have fewer resources to respond to the magnitude of the change.

...The challenge for the next few decades is learning how to exploit the possibilities urbanization offers. The future of humanity depends on it.”**

This is a powerful challenge and an urgent call to action. We need creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems in cities large and small, rich and poor, around the globe. We understand the need but it is not clear what we need to DO.

TOP-DOWN

One thing IS clear: The strategies of the past will not answer the challenges of the future. The top-down approach to urban planning still favored by so many politicians, city agencies and planners, will not work. Worse, it can inflict lasting damage on communities.

Perhaps the best example of a top-down planner with a grand ambition is Robert Moses, called the “master builder” of New York. In the mid-20th century, Moses believed that the future of transportation was the automobile. As a result he ruthlessly dislocated hundreds of thousands of residents to build highways and in doing so, destroyed many neighborhoods that have never recovered. While his legacy is mixed, his belief in the supremacy of his vision led him to overlook the disastrous consequences of his own decisions.

But I can understand the appeal of the top down approach. Let's say you are a public official with a big problem in the city's downtown. Traffic is choking your city. Do you choose to build more highways to surround the city or do you channel money towards public transport? You want to resolve this quickly and efficiently, to avoid cost overruns and show the public that progress is being made sooner rather than later. That's important for public morale - to justify the tax dollars being spent - and possibly to ensure your re-election.

You probably want as little public consultation as possible because that can be so messy. People will certainly tell you something you don't want to hear and that you don't want to act on. Besides, you and your experts know best. You find ways to circumvent the public and get on with your plan.

Is this a strategy for success? Sometimes. More often, the public who has not been adequately consulted opposes the plan. They don't like where you want to build the highway or they don't want to give up their cars for public transport. This can result in years of fighting and court battles. Or, it can mean that the building or project fails because the public it is intended to serve don't like it - AND they had no say in it.

Frankly, most urban planning happens this way with some variations. "Planning" is after all the realm of experts: planning experts, transportation experts, housing experts, all kinds of infrastructure experts. They work through a process that may never take into consideration - except on paper - the impact of their decisions on the public. You might know some examples of this kind of planning in your own city. I do in mine.

But with so much money at stake, can it be otherwise? Cities are complex organisms fraught with problems. Will it ever be possible to solve big problems from the bottom up? Do we even want to encourage civic participation in our cities? This depends on what our goal is.

What do we want our cities to become in the future? How do we see ourselves participating in that future?

AMBIVALENCE - THE CITY AS CREATIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE?

I believe that one reason we spend so much time making the case for cities is that we are ambivalent about them. We like some cities. Almost everyone has a favorite, either the one where they were born, or the one in which they feel most at home or enjoy visiting. But we are not completely convinced that all cities have a positive function. Their negatives appear to outweigh their positives. They are emotionally, psychologically and financially draining. They are costly, demanding millions and billions of dollars in tax revenues and subsidies to support their growing populations and myriad problems that lack solutions.

We come by our ambivalence honestly. From ancient times, there has been the notion that the city, at its most formidable, moves forward through the energy, commitment, and participation of its citizens - the city as "a visionary embodiment of ideal community." Here, neighborhoods thrive and people get along. Citizens and government work cooperatively, giving opportunity and comfort to all. But that notion of a city where the social contract between government and its citizens is sacred can now seem lost in the mists of a nostalgic past.

A second notion of the city, also both historical and contemporary, is the one that sees the city as the great seducer of weak and strong alike, leading them to rack and ruin. In this view the complexity of the city rather than stimulating and supporting our best aspirations, leaves us broken and failed. This same sense of the city, dangerous and unpredictable, overwhelming us with troubles still prevails as we recite the litany of urban woes that we feel cannot be fixed now or possibly ever: traffic, crime, poverty, immigration, the list goes on and on. In this view complexity leads to chaos rather than inspiring creativity.

Let's look at two exemplar cities for example, Cities A & B.

City A is attractive, fun and intriguing, full of wonderful things to do and great places to see. It is thriving. Whatever its shortcomings, we overlook them or don't see them at all. We love City A and want to visit it again or to live there.

City B, on the other hand, is none of the above. It represents everything about cities that makes us tired to think about them. High unemployment, failing schools, and limited resources. It's also dirty. We can't see anything valuable or useful there. Let's go home.

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Our judgements of City A and City B are only partially correct. City A and City B are in fact the same city. We could call it New York City or London, Istanbul or Berlin. Most cities are both Cities A and B, depending on how we look at them.

Can we reconcile these two positions? Can we adopt a framework that will allow us to comprehend the city of beauty, architecture, arts, and finance with the city of dirt and noise and endless irritations?

We can if we grind a new lens and look at cities from a cultural point of view. It is the only way we can. If we don't, we run the risk of overlooking the creative solutions demanded by the problems of today and tomorrow.

Top-down planning will not work for the future. Economic and financial assessments are necessary but insufficient on their own because they do not offer a nuanced understanding of the city, its people, their needs and aspirations. And, yes, sound leadership is critical. But without active participation of the public and a clear understanding of what people themselves want from their city, projects will not succeed.

In his book, "The Expediency of Culture," George Yudice says that culture is now "invoked to solve problems formerly in the social and economic realms." That makes sense. Culture is as complicated as we are, as cities themselves. Culture enables us to exploit those complications to our advantage.

WHY CULTURE IS REJECTED

It is a wonder then that culture is such a hard sell in the assessment and evaluation of city projects, unless those projects are directly dedicated to the arts.

Just recently, the World Cities Culture Report published a hefty document with enormous amounts of data on 12 cities. The Report underscores the importance of the arts and other aspects of popular culture from museum and art gallery visitorship to the number of bars, restaurants and night clubs per city, 70 indicators in all. The authors make the argument that the broad sweep of cultural activity as measured in the report "is a celebration of the importance of culture in the public **and political life** of cities." Why aren't cities paying attention?

When it comes to solving the problems of urban daily life on the one hand, or affecting major urban development projects on the other, culture takes a back seat. Because for those who make the hard decisions about how real estate will be developed and how financial resources will be invested - politicians, real estate developers, and city development agencies - culture is considered "soft". What decision makers really mean by that is that it is "incidental," "decorative," basically "not fundamental." For them, culture cannot be used as an indicator for evaluating the efficacy of urban projects because it cannot be measured. It doesn't fit on a balance sheet...until now.

THE ALTERNATIVES

Shifting away from this attitude is tough going. As much as Richard Florida, the author of the enormously successful book "The Creative Class", has contributed to moving the conversation in another direction - towards the qualities he believes are required to make a city creative - what he calls the three Ts: Talent, Tolerance, and Technology, the jury is still out on whether or not this mantra has resulted in changing the mindset of those who make decisions about how or

where a new housing project or a highway is built, or whether yet another costly stadium or convention center breaks ground, or how a city funds its parks and playgrounds. Mr. Florida has laid out a formula for attracting the young and the hip to cities on the promise that businesses and vibrancy will follow. But the tough questions for cities cannot be answered this easily and the three T's will not persuade people whose eye is only on the bottom line.

The same mentality-changing obstacles can be found among architects who often these days nominate themselves as "urbanists." You will have a hard time locating the truly public-minded at the top of the list of architectural stars. Much in demand as they are, they rarely touch down to deal with issues like public housing, economic recession, or the challenges of cities in the developing world. Recently, the architecture critic of the New York Times reviewed the Venice Biennale concluding that it "suggests that cities and architects still have a ways to go to catch up with an increasingly restless public's appetite for better design and better living. And that the public isn't waiting." He isn't talking about the wealthy either. He means the citizens who, on their own, re-purposed the abandoned Tempelhof Airport in Berlin as a park and in Caracas those who squatted in the 45-story ruin called Torre de David, turning it into what he calls a "vertical slum" by setting up, much like the favelas in Rio, shops, bodegas, and habitable spaces. [NYT, Sept 11, 2012, Projects Without Architects Steal The Show, Kimmelman]

For planners, developers, city and national governments, and yes, even architects to "get" this will take more than catchy formulas and insincere paeans to citizen participation.

That change requires a shift much more dramatic and sustained. It requires a *cultural* shift, a fundamental adjustment in perception and attitude that applies a different set of assumptions to the problem at hand. This changed perspective cares about how we live and what we value as human beings. It does not dismiss the quantitative and crucial issues of economic pressures, population growth or loss, cost of living, infrastructure challenges, and so on. Those are all part of the story that we must know to understand how people are doing now and what they will need to do better. Those factors help us look to the future to make sure that how we are planning now can be sustained. But AS CRITICAL to that planning is knowing how people want to live.

The stories about the every day - what works for people, how they problem-solve, what they are already doing that enhances their lives and communities - tell us together as a city what to support and build on. This is the city of lived experience...from the bottom up.

Prescribed civic duty alone does not account for civic participation. Witness the examples of Berlin and Rio I just mentioned. Responsible citizens often take action on their own to make better neighborhoods and communities for themselves, regardless or sometimes in spite of local or national governments.

YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Let's put this in terms of you and your own backyard for a moment.

Think about your own neighborhood, the pattern of your day, the park where you go with your kids or to relax with a book, the store where you buy your groceries, or where you buy gasoline for your car, the various people you encounter in an average day, the small things that give you pleasure or those that annoy you.

Even your routine day is a complex one. If we multiple your day times the number of people in the city, looking at what they do each day as well, the things they like and the things they don't, and then multiply again by the number of days in the year, we arrive at a very complex view of

city life indeed, but one which is real, not reduced simply to an economist's equation based on data points of cost of living and average income.

If we could capture data as complex as this, what might it tell us? The task does seem impossible, although the advertisers and merchandisers who make it their business to know every movement of every single minute of our lives manage to accumulate massive amounts of information from us and profit nicely from it. They know what we do and more than that, they want to find out why we do it.

But even with much less information which we can obtain by asking you questions, we can get a picture of how you live in your city, what you think about it, what's working right and how you might want to make it better. In other words, your urban experience and that of your fellow citizens is of more than passing interest. It makes up the fabric of the city, its essential cultural story.

This is the basic assumption of the Vitality Index™ and why we call it a cultural impact study. We start from a simple premise that the best way to know what people are thinking and feeling about their city is to ask them.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE Vitality Index™- Breakthrough Research

The impulse for what became the Vitality Index™ came at the first international conference Creative Cities International (CCI) organized following the attack on the World Trade Center.

We thought it would be a good thing to bring together cities that had experienced severe devastation and trauma from the bombings of World War II to share the stories of their rebuilding efforts. That conference was called "New York Talks to London and Berlin" and was held in May 2002. There were glimmers even at that early date that the New York power establishment had already laid claim to the rebuilding process and even the horrific destruction at Ground Zero would not change the way they did business.

Indeed, public consultation was a sham. Big money and political interests combined to produce a plan that almost no one liked except the people who would profit from it. For years New Yorkers could see only a hole in the ground while the players in this heated drama fought convoluted battles over insurance money, authority, and the design itself.

For the average citizen, it was also nearly impossible to follow what was happening. And really, why did we need to know? We had no say in the proceedings.

Watching all this was depressing. Why had the experience of other cities like London and Berlin not been taken to heart? Why were we not willing to learn from their mistakes and their successes? New York was attempting to reinvent the wheel and failing. To say, as some did at the time, that this was "New York" and we do things differently was parochial.

The right response would have been yes, let's see what we can learn from these cities which are now, half a century later, able to look back on their hard experience with cool judgement about what worked and didn't. But if the city wouldn't do it, we would.

We researched best practice in other cities through international conferences and forums not only in reference to Ground Zero, but to establish broader principles of good planning. We established some guidelines. These principles - which are definitely not prescriptions - must

1. be comparative to be useful

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2. incorporate case studies of lessons learned globally so that cities can adapt these lessons for their use
3. be culturally sensitive and flexible in approach and in practice
4. work from a vocabulary that the public can understand the decisions being made in their name
5. posit creativity as a universal component of cities - and people - not limited to a privileged few.

We looked for examples of good planning like the Tate Modern in London, a model of “what to do” to counterbalance the Ground Zero “what not to do” and we dissected how they went about that process from start to finish.

The Vitality Index™ is groundbreaking because it gives us the tool with which to rethink creativity and its relationship to economic development and public policy and to insert the value of culture into the planning process.

THE VI

Last year, we published the first iteration of the Vitality Index™ (VI), a report and ranking of 35 cities in the United States. It is not the end result of our thinking and our ambitions. It is the beginning. First of all, it contains a level of cultural data never attempted before in the US and it is the first index anywhere as far as we know to value qualitative data equally with quantitative AND with equally rigorous analysis.

The quantitative data covers a full range of demographics, trends, costs and measures of typical and creative infrastructure which was then modeled to produce a ranking.

What is particularly notable in the VI is that we succeeded in gathering first-hand information from individuals in all the cities through an on-line survey. We focused our questions on areas that would help a those in city government, developers, or civic groups and individual citizens understand how people felt about their community, what was going on on the ground, and what they felt would improve their lives. The analysis of these answers could eventually assist in making planning decisions and attracting tourism or new business to the city.

We asked seven questions most of which were either open ended or had an open ended component.

We asked people to focus on areas that would tell us

1. what they thought was working well in their city
2. what did they appreciate about their city and what was specific to it
3. its cultural history, its contemporary life, its parks or performing arts, its natural beauty, sports, etc.
4. did their city have a vibrant downtown

INNER TOURISTS

We wanted to reflect as accurately as possible a sense of the city from the perspective of the people who live there, the “inner tourists,” not the visitor.

Why the term “inner tourist” and why is it important? We think of tourists as outsiders arriving from another place. But what about how we “visit” our own city? How we interact with each

other and the cityscape through the arts, or in parks and public spaces, in restaurants and bars, creates a kind of central nervous system of the city. It's what gives a city its jolt, its bounce, its sizzle. This sizzle is what "outside tourists" want to share.

As I say about New York City, people do not travel thousands of miles on an airplane to visit the city only to spend time with the people who were on the plane. They want to rub shoulders with New Yorkers, feel the energy of the city, and as we say, "take a bite of the Big Apple." Remember, the energy of a city is not inside the buildings, but between them with the people in the streets.

Finding out what New Yorkers know about their city, what they like and where they go, is cool information. Certainly, there are the icons of a city that most people want to see, whether they are museums or in New York City policemen. But what we all want is "first hand" knowledge: where do the locals go and what do they do?

Even a small city has special places - the places where the locals go, where the energy is good, and people hang out. It can be a restaurant or an art gallery, a bar or a bakery.

We think that nearly every city - and it need not be a world city by any means - has elements that are specific and interesting about it and that finding out what those are, in fact, identifying the energy of the city that the residents themselves have created is important to point out. We are often so caught up in our narrative of woes as I said at the beginning of this talk that we overlook what we like about our city and what is working.

So we asked people this: What are your three favorites places in your city and why. We found out about the cool new club in LA, or the great bakery in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which has become a community hangout, or how the Eastern Market section of Detroit has become a vibrant home to immigrants. This was an opportunity for people to express their enthusiasm for their city and in some cases that enthusiasm was off the charts.

Take Memphis, Tennessee for instance, home of Blues music and birthplace of Elvis Presley. Memphis is now also know for a high crime rate and a failing school system. Yet, Memphis scored 18 on the Vitality Index™ out of 35 cities. They were shocked, and I received a number of calls from local reporters wanting to know how they were able to score so high, particularly ahead of cities known to be much more "hip".

The answer I told them was that the enthusiasm of Memphis residents for their own city, the excitement about Memphis' neighborhoods, music, food, and culture, pushed Memphis up the chart. The editor in chief of The Commercial Appeal, the main paper in Memphis, wrote an editorial citing the Vitality Index™ and reminding residents that in fact crime rates are at a 25 year low and there are more good things than not about their city. He encourages residents to "do your part to get the word out."

A cultural perspective makes a difference. Rather than basing their opinion of their city on data points, whether the heat and humidity, or the crime rate, they can notice what they are enjoying about their city and why they love it. As one of the paper's reporters wrote about the Vitality Index™ ranking: "It also indicates the old Memphis self-loathing may be giving way to self-loving."

Isn't that a better starting point for positive change?

THE FACTORS

We organized the responses to the Vitality Index™ survey according to ten qualitative factors.

1. small things count
2. bottom up
3. public access
4. parks, public spaces, waterfronts
5. desire for connection, street life
6. sense of place
7. lively neighborhoods/rubbing shoulders
8. joint cultural/community projects
9. the unexpected
10. good messiness

Small things matter because they begin at ground level. We want to look at the city from the bottom up. We want to see what people see in their neighborhoods as they are and what they would like to see that would make those neighborhoods better.

Bottom up is fairly obvious. We were sensitive to those activities initiated at the community level or that happened spontaneously. Often we are unaware of what is happening right around the corner from us.

Public access: There can be many great things in cities but it's hard to get to them. In Manhattan, for example, which is an island, it can be extremely difficult to get to the water.

Parks, public spaces, waterfronts: These three are very important so we are told by respondents. Are there enough of them? Are they maintained well?

Desire for connection, street life: Nothing is more important. The city is its people and overwhelmingly they told us that they want to be together. They want opportunities to gather and the space to do it in.

Sense of place: What is unique? Again, this need not be the grand building, but rather the corner coffee shop that holds the neighborhood together. All together, these bits and pieces make up the texture of the fabric of the city. These are often the small places, but more loved for that.

Lively neighborhoods/rubbing shoulders: Whether you live in one or you have to drive to get to one, lively neighborhoods are the life blood of a city. People can feel connected even in sprawling cities.

Joint cultural/community projects: This was a surprise. We threw this in but thought it would not really register with people. We were wrong. It scored among the highest in most cities. Evidently people like to see their institutions working together and for the public good.

The unexpected: Two examples from the Vitality Index™ survey:

From Oklahoma City, a respondent writes about a neighborhood restaurant called Ludivine. It's notable because

“...they integrate local farmers into all of their food and no one would expect it to be in Oklahoma City”

Another from St. Louis, Missouri, a conservative city in the Midwest:

“Cherokee Street - an unstable coalition of Mexican immigrants, anarchists, and artists that has managed to revive a once forgotten commercial strip.”-St. Louis

You can't “plan” the unexpected so you must give it space to happen.

Good Messiness: Our highest value and in a sense the accumulation of all the others. The exemplar creative city is full of energy, opportunities and interesting people combined with a bit of edginess. That creative tension, which is the result of an entrepreneurial spirit combined with restless talent wanting the city to be more remarkable or provide better outlets for ideas and energy equals what we call “good messiness.”

Good messiness is that energy and excitement that is the essence of the city, what makes them tick, and what makes us what to be there.

LANGUAGE

How we talk about cities also matters. We want to communicate directly and clearly to the general public so we have tried to reflect the real experience of the city in the names of the things we value. We like “rubbing shoulders” better than “density” as a descriptive of the experience. The unruly energy of an exciting neighborhood we call “good messiness.” We note the “desire for connection” because that was clear from what people told us, not the other way around.

There is another imperative for thinking differently about language. As the UN's document on Planning Sustainable Cities states: “Urban plans should also explicitly put in **plain words** their monitoring and evaluation philosophies, strategies and processes.”

It is not enough for the experts to understand what is being planned and implemented. The people who are impacted by their ideas must understand as well.

THE NEW MATH = CULTURAL IMPACT STUDY

Culture counts. It matters. But it can also BE counted. It can be researched, assessed, quantified, and analyzed. That is the new math that counts for cities. The Vitality Index™ is a cultural impact study that models the human experience of the city at its heart. Whether it is used as a comparative study or as an assessment of an individual city or project, it can provide solid information about the felt or perceived impact of urban projects. It can translate people's desires into civic action and help build consensus.

What if the top-down planners that allowed for short-sighted public housing projects in London, New York and other major cities around the world had access to the kind of information contained in the Vitality Index™? Could Robert Moses, for example, have been persuaded with the help of a Vitality Index™ survey to alter his plan of destroying neighborhoods to build a major expressway through the South Bronx? Can urban planners and city leaders today be encouraged to re-think the direction and goals of their urban development with the help of a Vitality Index™ that balances the input of citizens with examples of lessons learned in comparable cities?

CONCLUSION

The Vitality Index™ encourages all of us to think more creatively about cities. It allows us - even forces us - to use our strongest and most versatile asset, our imagination.

Several years ago at a conference in Washington, DC, a distinguished American public servant, Elliot Richardson, commented that “Imagination is the only tool we have with which to grasp reality.”

He wanted to emphasize the critical role that culture and the arts play in understanding the complexity of world issues. His comment is equally true for cities. To discard the inherited assumptions and allow another way of looking at the city to emerge requires a leap of the imagination. It is one we all need to take.

The future of cities is too important to leave to politicians and bean-counters. The Creative Cities challenge is to ensure that the 21st century will be the century of cities and that all of us have a hand in that future.

Thank you.

Notes:

*http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Documents/WUP2009_Press-Release_Final_Rev1.pdf

**<http://www.unfpa.org/pds/urbanization.htm>

The Vitality Index™ can be found at the Creative Cities International website:
www.creativecities.org

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