

This Is Our City: Place-Making Through Cultural Planning

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The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.¹

This quote from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, has always fascinated me because I feel it conveys poetically, and yet effectively, the intimate bond between social processes and the spatial form of cities. Cities are a product of time, and time, in turn, is shaped by the people who live there. It is this continuous cultural forming and re-forming of place that is fascinating. In *The Culture of Cities* the urban historian Louis Mumford wrote:

The city is a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition the mind.²

Thus, for Mumford, the city fosters art and at the same time *is* art; it creates its own theatre in time. Earlier, the Scottish botanist and polymath Patrick Geddes had maintained that what determines the quality of life of a place is the interaction between its spatial form and the culture of the people who live there. This is why planning, according to Geddes, had to be a highly creative activity involving artists, writers, designers, architects and all sorts of skills and disciplines.

The same approach to place-making was espoused by those early 20th century utopians behind the ideal of the Garden City in England. Geddes, however, went further when he saw the chance of redirecting change away from the late Victorian excesses of industrialization and

¹ I. Calvino (1974) *Invisible Cities*, Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace, p. 11.

² L. Mumford (1938) *The Culture Of Cities*, London: Secker & Warburg, p. 5.

urbanization (which he deemed destructive to the individual, to the community and to the human spirit) and towards a new ideal of progress 'from an individual race for wealth into a social crusade of culture'.³

He chose to rise above the discussions about capitalism and its social consequences, and proposed a cultural evolution alternative — an approach to place-making which would result from the interaction of environment, modern knowledge and the historically determined values of the people. Here, people and place, organism and environment, would be brought into a closer and more fruitful relationship, a relationship which would, ultimately, foster citizenship and a better society.

At the turn of the 20th century, town planners turned to Geddes because he seemed to have the answers to the vital urban questions and had, thanks to his botanist's skills, developed the tools to investigate closely the social dynamics of place. He offered a holistic approach to the city as a living organism, explaining problems in terms of the process of growth, blossom, decline and decay of natural evolution, and the levels of adaptability of the social organism and human society. Town planning, he maintained, was not simply about ordering the physical environment, but had to be about folk-planning (i.e. people planning).

Geddes imagined the task of the newly established discipline of town planning as that of finding the right places for each sort of people, places where communities would be able to flourish and live together in harmony. The way to get there was through *survey*, and he argued that what was needed was a full appreciation of the cultural, historical and geographical antecedents of a community together with a capacity to enable that community to be fully aware of those antecedents.

In 1909, when reviewing the benefits of Geddes's survey method, British pioneer planner Raymond Unwin observed:

In desiring powers for town planning, our town communities are seeking to be able to express their needs, their life, and their aspirations... they are seeking, as it were, freedom to become the

³ P. Geddes (1886) 'On the Conditions of Progress of the Capitalist and the Labourer', *Claims of Labour' Lectures*, no. 3, Edinburgh: Cooperative Printing, p. 34.

artist of their own cities portraying on a gigantic canvas the expression of their life. ⁴

A century later, radical thinkers, cultural planners, artists, architects and urban designers are still making use of Geddes's insights, adapting them to the social and economic challenges of city making and urban regeneration today.

In my work I use a definition of cultural planning which sees it as a process, first and foremost, of getting to know a place by grasping its many cultural facets before planning is allowed to intervene. ⁵ The reason why I think this is important is that, today, in most of the West, the transition from heavy industry to post-industrial modes of production and consumption has left little choice to cities large and small but to rely on often formulaic, somewhat short term, models of culture-led urban transformation. During the 1990s, in particular, buzz words such as the 'network society', the 'experience economy', 'creative cities' and the 'creative class' were used to define new modes of production and consumption within a 'new economy', while a new emphasis was put on the interplay between the economy and culture, as well as on creating crossovers between media and the new technologies.

However, such processes of mobilizing culture for regenerating cities have not been unproblematic. In some cases, the promised investments in (for example) iconic cultural projects have not materialized, or at worst have engendered feelings of exclusion and dislocation among local communities, while in other cases artificially created cultural quarters have ended up by feeding real estate's hunger for yet more revenue while starving home-grown creatives of those rough-and-ready spaces that once made that quarter (or city) unique. Such displacement of talent, cultural capital and hopes can spell disaster and decline for some of the more economically vulnerable cities (e.g. the shrinking cities).

City making is not just about putting dots on a map, but it's about making and growing lives, and providing opportunities for increasingly diverse communities to come together and contribute to the public good. Places demand specificity and memorability, and must provide comfort

⁴ R. Unwin (1909) *Town Planning in Practice: an introduction to designing cities and suburbs*, London: Ernest Benn, p. 9.

⁵ L. Ghilardi (2001) 'Cultural Planning and Cultural Diversity', *Differing Diversities: Cultural policy and cultural diversity* (ed. T. Bennett), Strasbourg: Council of Europe, p. 125.

and belonging. A place that is good to live in is also a good place to visit, and a good location for meaningful employment.

What follows then is a need to re-interpret the tasks of city making and cultural planning for the 21st century by focusing on putting people and their relations with space and place *first*. In essence — and not unlike Geddes a century ago — we need to see cities as ecosystems, each with their own unique texture of interconnected social, cultural, spatial and economic dynamics in a constant state of change. This is why I believe liveable cities cannot be merely the product of top down, expert-led decision-making but, instead, demand processes whereby the local community's cultural attitudes, habits, needs and desires find common ground for expression and co-creation.

As a holistic method of city making, cultural planning can lead the way towards the creation of more transparent and agile mechanisms of local governance by, for example, testing out collaboration and partnership between different levels of local government, or by establishing mapping initiatives capable of acting as *laboratories in real-scale* for piloting incremental and adaptable planning frameworks, neighborhood plans, and cultural or tourism strategies.

As a cultural planner, my emphasis is above all on the process of *mapping*, which I see as a methodology for interpreting the city through the lenses of the collective.⁶ In my view, mapping processes provide ways of publicly articulating diverse perspectives and meanings in a non-hierarchical way so that the result is a shared understanding of what should change in a place, and why — ultimately giving power and legitimacy back to those who live there. In this way, by enabling the distinctive voices of local cultural identities to emerge, and by connecting them to strategic decision-making, cultural mapping provides an opening for social justice. In other words, in an era in which social movements are increasingly shifting the core of collective action from a grand-narrative style of politics typical of the 1960s to the ethics of single-issue politics, mapping imparts a new and more transparent *political* perspective onto policy making from the start.

In my professional experience, cultural mapping can be instrumental in helping a city whenever it decides to embark on town-centre or

⁶ L. Ghilardi (2011) 'True To Place: Embedding cultural distinctiveness in place making in European cities', *Municipal World*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 21.

neighborhood regeneration, tourism plans or cultural plans. Through the mapping process time is given at the beginning to design bespoke creative ways of rediscovering the resources, whether physical or human, that are already there, and then to explore new avenues and opportunities for making better use of those resources for the long-term benefit of all. Over the past twenty years I have worked with a variety of cities across Europe and outside, often as part of multidisciplinary teams, on tasks ranging from cultural strategies, to masterplans, strategic development frameworks, cultural tourism or branding campaigns. In each of these assignments the application of cultural mapping has been instrumental in generating fresh perspectives on local challenges, and crucially it has brought new stakeholders from a variety of disciplines and professions into the decision-making process.

In each case the questions we asked were: which is the best way to provide local policy makers, civic leaders, creative practitioners and communities alike with the tools for improving understanding and awareness of their city's unique creative capacity and potential? What relations can be established between those cultural and creative resources, the people who produce and use them, and place? What kind of holistic solutions can we offer to help these cities to function more cohesively?

A recent example of an assignment in which we successfully applied cultural mapping in the context of urban regeneration is in the Swedish city of Helsingborg. Here, in 2009, the municipality launched a design competition for the regeneration of a vast area, which includes the south side of Helsingborg's harbour and two surrounding, culturally mixed, neighbourhoods (the area is called H+). Here, we proposed to use mapping as a form of *Open Source Place-Making*. In practice this meant that, as well as working intensely with the architects and designers selected through the competition to grasp the cultural, urban and social texture of the local community, local planning stakeholders benefited from ongoing mentoring by experts from a variety of disciplines and professions, ranging from the arts and culture to education and learning, community planning and creative thinking.

The mapping and mentoring was coordinated by the *Liveable City* working group which, as well as having representatives of the local community, included key stakeholders from city departments such as planning, education, culture, transportation, welfare and housing. The group, which met regularly for more than a year, oversaw the mapping

process and at each stage brainstormed ideas and, inspired by the evidence gathered through our open source mapping exercises, drafted a five-year action plan for the regeneration of the H+.

Such notion of collaborative place-making was tested again recently, this time at sub-regional level in the Skaraborg area of West Sweden. The mainly small and rural ⁷ municipalities of this region are facing a set of challenges derived partly from deindustrialization, shrinking population and a lack of leadership among local civic leaders in the areas of urban and social sustainability. Here, we were asked to join a team of urban specialists who had already been engaged for six months in working out proposals for major spatial transformations due to take place in the two pilot cities of Skövde and Grästorp.

In our role as cultural planners — as well as investigating the results a research conducted by an international team of academics in 2014 which showed evidence of clusters of strong creative industries potential ⁸ in this part of Sweden — we were also asked to brainstorm targeted cultural initiatives to kick-start local regeneration. Our approach was, first and foremost, to interrogate the evidence (which somewhat lacked qualitative depth) from the 2014 report on creative industries, and then look for ways of providing a holistic perspective on local regeneration by connecting the creative resources identified with communities on the ground, their needs, aspirations, and the quality of life agenda.

In this case (like in many other projects we have worked with) our cultural planning perspective allowed us to focus in the first instance on *'what is already happening'* underneath the surface in these places rather than on *'what needs to happen'* (which would be the default position of those policy makers who don't take the time to understand the context in which they operate). Instead, by encouraging people's imagination, and by enabling a dialogue across departments, disciplines, professions and communities, we planted the seeds of a more balanced approach to place-making in these two cities.

In practice we made the case for culture being neither an extra cost nor the cherry on the cake that is put in place only after the main urban

⁷ With the exception of Skövde, which has more than 30,000 inhabitants and is still an important industrial centre within Skaraborg.

⁸ Pier Luigi Sacco and Christer Gustafsson (2014) *Kreativa Kraftfält i Skaraborg* <http://www.skaraborg.se/globalassets/kultur/slutrappport-kreativa-kraftfalt-i-skaraborg---kopia.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2016)

elements are deemed satisfactory. We argued instead that cultural initiatives and cultural production facilities are the new raw resources that cities have at their disposal in order to become attractive, resilient and sustainable. In both cities we also worked with the planners and together we prepared a series of strategic documents outlining the fundamentals of holistic masterplanning and regeneration. In these documents we reasoned that planning should be a function of livability and community building, and that at present too much of the urban fabric is left to the specialists, or professionals who are set in their views (e.g. when thinking about growth they just want numbers and increase in revenues for their city). We suggested that they should focus instead on the quality of growth by putting people at the centre, and by finding creative ways of harnessing their talent. Finally, when dealing with masterplanning, we suggested that an appreciation of the culture and social dynamics of a place would also help to see uses in a relational way, and not as separate functions within place-making.

These are only two examples of what cultural mapping and planning can achieve, yet they teach us some lessons. They show us that if we want to be successful in the task of making places that are more humane we need: visionary leadership coupled with a style of governance rooted in community needs and aspirations (the culture of the place); a 360 degree take on how a place works; and an incremental perspective whereby a variety of initiatives in different fields of local development are tested out on a step-by-step basis, so that lessons are continuously learned. I believe that it is only through such *open* processes of collaborative urbanism that we can kick-start change while taking manageable risks. But it all takes time. It is not a quick fix!