



Culture and the City

The next phase of globalisation

Deeba Haider

The 1980's witnessed several critical advancements that altered the course of how we do business, communicate, travel and experience the world. Deeba Haider explores how culture has become central to the development of global cities.

Many people blame the first phase of globalization for the explosion of uniformity across the world - where the same companies, boutiques, consumer goods, films and anonymous skyscrapers are visible from city to city. Twenty years later, we are once again encountering another unique combination of trends that are slowly changing our social and cultural perspectives and how we choose to develop the urban environment of our cities. This time, we are questioning the impetuosity that resulted in so much of the earlier homogenous and soulless development in our cities. The competition between cities for the ever-taller skyscraper as the embodiment and symbol of globalization is becoming tedious and disconnected from real urban or social needs. In this next phase of globalization, culture takes centre stage. There is a new role for culture and cultural heritage in the global economy and city that transcend their current status as only a tourist attraction. What makes a global city competitive now and in the future is what makes them unique.

The Creative Economy

One of the most prominent developments advancing culture in the design of urban space is the creative economy. Diverse and complex outsourcing options and advanced computational technologies have placed a new emphasis on creativity, culture, design and idea generation.

Just as luxurious technologically advanced office space in high rise buildings responded to the needs of knowledge workers and analytical work, modifications will need to be made to the urban strategy to accommodate this new focus on creativity. Creative environments are less simple to define or capture and require a spontaneous yet delicate intermingling of diverse cultural offerings, neighborhoods and people. Promoting local culture while simultaneously embracing foreign influences creates an open and accepting urban environment which is comfortably rooted in its origins yet open to new thoughts, ideas and possibilities.



'Experience' Culture

The rising prominence of culture is also nurtured by the recent fixation on the experience or narrative. 'Experience' as a service offering, initially promoted by the service industry, is now impressing upon urban design considerations. By visiting that elite clothing store or coffee shop and purchasing that special designer sweater or double decaf soy latte, these companies are trying to convince you that you are buying into a special lifestyle and experience that goes far beyond the mere object in your hand. Remote destinations of the world have recently gained much fame as tourist destinations because they offer that life altering, unique eye-opening experience. As we continue to look for events and situations that enrich and improve the quality of our lives, we are going to expect more from what we view and experience in our cities. Animated sidewalks in culturally distinctive and diverse neighborhoods or communities seem experientially preferable over sidewalks that line up against the barren walls of high rises and skyscrapers.

These shifts in priorities have undoubtedly advanced the mantra originated by the knowledge worker to work anywhere anytime. Increasing flexibility and mobility have in fact heightened the desire for individuals to be somewhere. Financial security has also encouraged increasing numbers of people to search for personal fulfillment and self-expression that go beyond monetary wealth or their daily jobs. As our individual identities become more fluid with globalization, the definition of self is becoming more closely connected with the place where we choose to work, live and play.

Culture at the Heart of Global Cities

The result of all these factors is the rejection of the more homogenous appearance of many sections of the global city in favour of more unique, colourful and authentic urban environments. Initially dismissed as a costly trapping of the past, many of us are finally realising the potential of culture and cultural heritage as critical tools to promote economic growth. Emerging global cities that aim only to emulate the nondescript skyscrapers of more established cities do not create the special experiences and creative environments that foster this new economic growth. The ability to compete with other global cities in the future will not be found in another multi-national corporation or global department store or food chain but in what ultimately makes each city unique or different. What can they offer that no other city can? Inevitably the skyscraper while still serving a functional purpose, will lose some of its luster and elite status as a reputation builder and the global ideal.

As the identity of a place becomes more important, cultural heritage and culture can no longer be treated as a separate entity, but must be linked to a greater urban strategy.

The growing complexity of influential forces in the urban environment and the lightening speed of global development is calling for a more thoughtful and holistic approach to urban development. A tiny handful of urban leaders can no longer be solely responsible for guiding the global city into its next phase of evolution. The task has become too involved and complicated. Hasty attempts in the past to force culture and heritage into the design and form of the city has quickly reduced great neighborhoods into the Main Street of Disneyland or a movie set back lot. Urban planning and design for the 21st century global city will require the establishment of extensive networks to address

the layers of inter-relationships between various sectors and industries. These networks should include technology experts, private sector business and economic analysts, politicians, architects, urban planners and developers, those in the cultural and entertainment industries, preservationists, academics and local and global community organizations. These networks will also allow for a checks and balance as to how and whose culture is portrayed and conveyed. It fosters a certain robustness which is critical to a true representation of culture and heritage. Building these networks, however, with organizations and individuals with such diverse backgrounds and knowledge base will not be easy. Critical to the success will be the creation of a common language and tools that allow for an equal dialogue and exchange between stakeholders, organizations, professions and industries to create that shared vision.

Shifts in society and new economic trends are once again compelling global cities to find that delicate balance between the push and pull of globalization. Armed with the lessons learned over the past twenty years, we have an opportunity to create intricate urban environments that engage the global economy yet address our humanity and embrace the wealth of our cultures to provide for a city's local population as richly as it serves the global.



Deeba Haider, Consultant