THE ARTS AND CITIES

by
D. Paul Schafer

When the city ceases to be a symbol of art and order, it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make more universal the fact of disintegration.(1)

Lewis Mumford

Suddenly cities are all the rage. After several decades of preoccupation with globalization and free trade, attention is shifting to cities as the new spawning grounds for innovative, dynamic and creative activity.

In Canada, bank presidents are speaking out about the importance of cities, newspapers are calling for a new deal for cities, and governments are producing major reports and convening conferences on cities. In United States, concerted attempts are being made to revitalize American cities after decades of decline and neglect. In Europe, competition is keen to become “cities of culture” and “European cultural capitals.” And in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, cities are growing rapidly in size, scope and influence.

Why all the sudden interest in cities? There are many reasons. More than fifty percent of the world’s population is now living in cities. In addition, more and more people are looking to cities to solve their social, economic, environmental, educational, medical and spiritual problems, as well as recognizing that it is the quality of life in cities that is the decisive factor in life. If cities lack the prerequisites for a happy, healthy and secure existence, no amount of national or international development will make up the difference. Then there is the dialectical reaction to globalization. This is manifesting itself in countervailing measures aimed at restoring people’s sense of community, identity, solidarity, and control over the decision-making processes affecting their lives. Finally, there is concern over the present state and future prospects of cities. Many feel cities lack the constitutional powers, financial resources, tax capabilities and institutional mechanisms to deal with a whole host of urban problems - poverty, pollution, homelessness, lack of low-cost housing, pressure on public utilities, declining health care services, gridlock, soaring maintenance costs, environmental deterioration, and the need for greater safety and security.
With this rapidly-escalating interest in cities has come attempts to determine what makes cities “livable.” Why is living in one city debilitating and degrading whereas living in another city is exhilarating and exciting?

Many factors determine this. One is stimulating employment opportunities. Another is excellent educational institutions. Still others are: superb medical facilities; suitable transportation and accommodation; attractive parks, zoos and recreational outlets; a diversity of sports, entertainment and culinary activities, inspiring architectural features and historical sites; fascinating neighbourhoods; favourite haunts and hideaways; atmosphere; pride of place; and captivating ways to idle away the time of day. People take all these factors - and others - into account when deciding where to live.

The arts make a crucial contribution to livable cities. For one thing, they bring fulfillment and happiness to millions of people each year by bringing “the highest quality to your moments as they pass” as Walter Pater so convincingly described it. Many people will not locate in cities that lack high-quality artistic organizations and activities - art galleries, museums, theatre and dance companies, symphony orchestras, art centres, plays, concerts, and poetry readings.

The arts also contribute to the social cohesion of cities. They do so through their ability to engage large numbers of people in the process, both as participants and audience members. For example, in Sélestat, France recently, the whole community was involved in a major artistic undertaking - Two Thousand Sounds for the Year 2000 - organized by skilled animators and the Maison de la Culture and initiated by the mayor. It involved many artistic activities in different locations in the city and culminated with a huge artistic event in the central square.

There is also the contribution the arts make to the economies of cities. They do so through their ability to generate billions of dollars of investment and expenditure on facilities, equipment, hotels, restaurants, tickets, clothing, transportation, tourism and the like. Nor is this all. The arts attract business, industry, and a skilled labour force. The most obvious examples of this in Ontario are Stratford and Niagara-on-the-Lake, where the contribution the arts make to the economies of these cities is well-documented and readily apparent. But what is true for Stratford and Niagara-on-the Lake is equally true for most other cities. Many corporations and industries will not locate in cities that are devoid of stimulating aesthetic encounters and memorable artistic experiences.

The arts also contribute to the beautification and attractiveness of cities. They do so through many different types of activities, not just the activities of large professional arts organizations. Community arts councils and arts centres, neighbourhood arts festivals, murals on the sides of buildings, buskers on city
streets, the environmental and architectural arts, landscaping and the crafts add richness, vitality, variety and originality to urban surroundings. So do the works of children and young people. Is there anything more pleasing than a children’s art exhibition at the local community centre, a high school play, a choir performing at the civic centre, or an annual music night?

The arts contribute a great deal to peace, harmony, and cross-cultural communication, understanding and respect. They bring people together in peaceful rather than violent ways, making it possible for them to communicate across ethnic and linguistic divides in profound, moving, ritualistic, and human ways. This will be increasingly important in a world where racial and religious pressures and tensions are mounting daily.

Then there is the contribution the arts make to the uniqueness, distinctiveness and personalities of cities. As Amos Rapoport puts it, “Cities look, smell, sound and feel different; they have a different character or ambience.”(2) Seen from this perspective, what would Paris be without the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre, New York without Broadway, off-Broadway and the New York Philharmonic, Beijing without the Forbidden City, and Bilbao without the Guggenheim Museum? Talk about uplifting people and celebrating the human spirit.

While the arts make significant contributions to cities in all these areas, their contribution does not end here. Far from it. Recent research reveals that the arts contribute to the development and livability of cities in other vitally-important ways.

One of these ways is through the creative energy and synergy they inject into all aspects and dimensions of city life. By creating many of the concepts, contents, contexts, styles, methods and techniques that are needed to institute change, artists and arts organizations pave the way for many other types of developments. It is not surprising that more and more civic planners and policy-makers are focusing on the role that “the creative industries” play in urban development - creative industries like the arts, education, the mass media, communications and micro-enterprise that produce “clustering effects” and “convergent capabilities” that link different sectors and segments of the city together.(3) While there is a great deal of talk these days about “creative cities,” this is not possible without the arts. The arts make it possible for cities to be diverse, balanced, harmonious and integrated wholes rather than just fragmented and disconnected parts.

Equally important is the contribution the arts make to the revitalization and revival of cities. This has been discovered in many cities in recent years - cities as
diverse as Pittsburgh, Kelowna and Cleveland - where cultural districts have been created which have injected new life into cities after decades of disintegration and decay. These districts involve constellations of artistic, athletic, heritage, media, entertainment and commercial activities in key locations in the city, often the downtown core. Inspired by corporate executives, arts administrators, educators, politicians and citizens, these districts have done a great deal to rejuvenate cities dying from the inside out. This helps to explain why Toronto is searching for artistic developments that are capable of triggering other possibilities and breathing new life into the city - far-reaching renovations at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ontario College of Art and Design and the creation of an artistic corridor along Bloor Street capable of linking the Royal Ontario Museum, the University of Toronto, the Royal Conservatory of Music, and other organizations and activities together. Many see this as the key to a cultural renaissance in Toronto - a renaissance capable of providing significant social, economic, educational, aesthetic and tourist benefits for residents and visitors alike.

Philadelphia reaped the profuse benefits that accrue from this “triggering effect of the arts” when it created its Avenue of the Arts on south Broad Street in the 1990’s. Initiated by a group of local businessmen and overseen by a dynamic and innovative mayor, the Avenue of the Arts linked the Academy of Music, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and many other theatrical and musical venues and institutions together. As Ed Rendell, mayor of Philadelphia at the time, stated it, “We couldn’t have done this without our Avenue of the Arts. It was the first big project, the catalyst for everything… If we could do this, it would be brilliant. It would revitalize downtown, bring investment downtown and, most importantly, bring people downtown - first to visit, and eventually to live.”(4)

Given all the multifarious contributions the arts make to cities - many of which strike at the heart and soul of what life in the city is really all about - the role of the arts in the development of cities must be seen in a totally new light. Rather than viewing the arts as an “after thought” or “the icing on the cake” as has traditionally been the case, the arts must be seen as the centrepiece and spearhead that is needed to propel cities to higher and higher levels of accomplishment. This is particularly important for governments, corporations, politicians and business officials who tend to see the challenge of urban development as one of squeezing all the economic, commercial, recreational and tourist potential out of the arts while providing as little as possible in return.

Consistent with the experience of most cities in the world and contemporary research, it is essential to recognize that there is an interactive and reinforcing - rather than unilateral and parasitical - relationship between the arts and cities. The arts energize and enrich cities. In return, cities broaden, deepen,
and intensify developments in the arts. Both the arts and cities reap the considerable financial and non-financial advantages that accrue from this.

Recognition of this fact should open the doors for a dramatic increase in funding for the arts at the local level. This funding should come from all levels of government - federal, provincial and municipal - as well as corporations, foundations, and the private sector. While funding from building programs, partnership arrangements and special reserves is important, funding should come primarily from annual appropriations and general revenues. And it should be for operating as well as capital purposes. Funding that produces artistic infrastructure but does not provide for on-going activities will never do the job.

A great deal of “strategic thinking” is needed here. Rather than viewing funding of the arts as an expenditure, funding of the arts should be viewed as an investment. It should be designed to produce cumulative, multiple, and long-term benefits, as well as elicit and induce other possibilities. Funding that generates clustering and integrative capabilities and ignites other possibilities - such as funding for urban revitalization and renewal, the creation of downtown cultural cores and districts, the creation of new experimental and experiential works, the training of skilled personnel, and opportunities for artists and arts organizations to play a central role in urban planning, policy and decision-making - are imperative if the objective is to inject vim, vigor and vitality into the development of cities in the future.

Arts animators and administrators capable of opening up new opportunities, initiating change, and engaging large numbers of people in the process have a pivotal role to play in this. There is simply no substitute for well-trained individuals who are skilled at getting people involved in the artistic process and stimulating other possibilities. As Charles Landry, one of the world’s leading authorities on the development of creative cities, states it, “wealth in cities is created less by what we produce and more by how we use our brains and add value through knowledge and imagination. Cities now have one crucial resource - their people. Human cleverness and creativity are replacing location, natural resources and market access as urban assets. We need to provide the conditions to unleash this imagination.”(5)

Nothing achieves this better than arts education. This is why investments in arts education are imperative – surely the most imperative of all. Arts education provides the foundation on which all other developments take place.(6) If arts education is decimated by funding cuts, course cancellations, apathy and neglect, the arts will not be capable of making their full contribution to the development of livable, healthy and civilized cities in the future. Not only does arts education unlock people’s creativity and imagination more effectively than any other
discipline, but also it helps to ensure that people engage in constructive rather than destructive forms of behaviour and learn other subjects and disciplines more readily. It also provides the training opportunities for future generations of musicians, actors, actresses, painters, dancers, designers and filmmakers - as well as discerning and discriminating audiences - that are needed to create vital and viable cities in the future. Without a comprehensive and compelling education in the arts - judiciously designed to produce concrete outcomes and achieve effective results - it will not be possible for people to live decent, humane and fulfilling lives in cities anywhere in the world in the future.

This is not limited to large cities like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Paris, New York, London and Berlin. It is also true for smaller cities, communities, and other forms of urban agglomeration. Just as contemporary research is revealing that the arts possess numerous clustering, integrative and triggering capabilities, so it is revealing that many smaller towns and cities are ideal places to live. Places like Oxford and Cambridge in England, Strasbourg and Grenoble in France, Ann Arbor, Berkeley and Princeton in the United States and Kitchener and Peterborough in Ontario are coveted places to live, work, raise families, and visit because they possess many high quality educational institutions and a panorama of dynamic and exciting artistic possibilities.

Regardless of where one decides to live, however, one thing is clear. Without the arts securely fastened to the masthead of urban development, life in the city will fall far short of the mark. Presumably this is why Lewis Mumford said cities are humanity’s “greatest work of art.”

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References


6. I am indebted to Walter Pitman and John Mergler for their help and advice with this and other sections of the paper.
