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THE
CREATIVE
CITY

A TOOLKIT FOR URBAN INNOVATORS



Recombining the Old and New Imaginatively

History can be mined for the future in myriad ways. The presence of the past in the present gives a sense of weight and significance to any urban endeavour and the constructive clash and recombination of past and future reaps unusual rewards. It is as easy to go overboard with an infatuation of the new as it is with pining for the past. In certain places there is too much obsession with the past in others too little appreciation. Erasing memory is like throwing an asset away. Yet the past is too often left exclusively to antiquarians, nostalgics and historians. The exciting challenge is to bring into a coalition for urban strategy making those with a historical perspective and those dealing with the here and now. The result is enriched decision-making. The art of blending the old and the new requires refocusing to see history as a resource. An equally rich potential can emerge from the historical ideas bank and asking old questions afresh, such as about democracy or the good life, or what enlightenment or being a rational person would mean today. Easiest and most visibly impressive are the interventions in the built fabric, such as inserting the Pei pyramid into the Louvre, placing an intricate wire structure on top of the Tapies museum in Barcelona or the conversion of a munitions factory in Karlsruhe into a massive Centre for Media Technology.

TOWARDS THE LEARNING CITY

In the future the 'learning city' notion will be a more powerful metaphor than that of the 'creative city'. Yet I believe the focus on creativity is more crucial now to ensure an ideas bank is generated from which innovations emerge and a city can learn in the first place. Responding creatively to urban needs is not a once and for all activity. The city of the future needs to take things further by becoming a learning city. It needs to reflect on and respond to achievements and obstacles, continuously assessing as part of a structured programme. An analogy is how aircraft maintenance is based on schedules of the life expectancy of each component part. Only by embedding reflexivity into every crevice of a city's inner workings can it sustain its creative momentum. Creativity and leadership need to be treated as a renewable, developable resource that can be depleted when unwisely used.

A true learning city is one which develops by learning from its experiences and those of others. It is a place that understands itself and reflects upon that understanding – it is a 'reflexive city' and self-evaluation is a defining feature. The key characteristic of the learning city is the ability to develop successfully in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. Where the unconcerned city flounders by trying to repeat past success for far too long, the learning city is creative in its understanding of its own situation and wider relationships, developing new solutions to new problems. The essential point is that any city can be a learning city. It is not a factor of size, geography, resources, economic infrastructure or even educational investment (though this will play an increasingly important role if a city is to sustain itself as a learning organism in the emerging knowledge economy). To some extent, it might be argued that the fewer natural or historical advantages a city enjoys, the more important it is that it should re-think itself as a learning city. The learning city is thus strategic, creative, imaginative and intelligent – it looks at its potential resources in a far more comprehensive way. It sees a competitive edge in the seemingly insignificant; it turns weaknesses into strengths, it makes something out of nothing. It is a rich and complex place (see Landry and Matarasso, 1998).

Only if learning is placed at the centre of a city's daily experience can individuals continue to develop their skills and capacities; organizations and institutions harness the potential of their workforce and respond flexibly and imaginatively to opportunities and difficulties; cities act responsively and adapt flexibly to emerging needs; societies understand that the diversity and differences between communities can become a source of enrichment, understanding and potential. The challenge is to promote the conditions in which a 'learning city' can unfold. A learning city is much more than a place whose members are simply well-educated; it goes well beyond learning in classrooms. It is a place where individuals and organizations are encouraged to learn about the dynamics of where they live and how it is changing; a place which on that basis changes the way it learns to grasp the opportunities at work and leisure, formally and informally; a place in which all its members are encouraged to learn; finally and perhaps most importantly, a place that can learn to change the conditions of its learning democratically.

As our cities face unprecedented and continuing change it erodes the possibility of ever recovering the traditions of stability.

In the current period of transformation stable views of occupations, economies, religions, organizations and value systems have been lost. We must learn to live 'beyond the stable state' (Schon, 1971) in continuing processes of transformation and cannot expect new stable states that will endure even for our own lifetimes. We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations and make the capacity for undertaking change integral to ourselves and to our institutions. In other words, become adept at creating and learning. We must be able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions, networks or partnership forms which are 'learning systems', capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation – and we must learn about learning (Cara et al. 1998).

FROM PLANNING TO URBAN STRATEGY MAKING

Everything said affects planning and I am aware of the complexity of the debate on the future of planning and will not cover it in detail. Some say planning should be more consultative and participatory as the discipline is too technocratic and incomprehensible to citizens because it expresses itself in a form that has little meaning in terms of day to day experience. For example, Patsy Healey (1997) believes in collaborative planning, which views planning as a system of communication with planners skilled in creating debate and communication. Planning is then an active process which looks for and values different types of knowledge and understanding of a given city. Others believe that planning's role of control embodies a mindset disposed to saying 'no'. This lies uncomfortably with the needs of changing cities where a flexible, anticipatory mindset disposed to saying 'yes' within a framework of principles is called for. These may include the need for distinctiveness, mixing the old and the new, sustainability or development that does not erase memory yet innovates. This lack of balance, critics say, leads to exaggerated responses either thoughtlessly dismembering places or over protecting cities so they are locked into a time warp. Critics also claim planners underestimate social dynamics, which are as significant as land use or property prices. Some argue planning should be more culturally sensitive. Increasingly multi-cultural cities should reflect diversity as Italian, American, Spanish, Asian or Islamic planning has different priorities. Finally I argue that