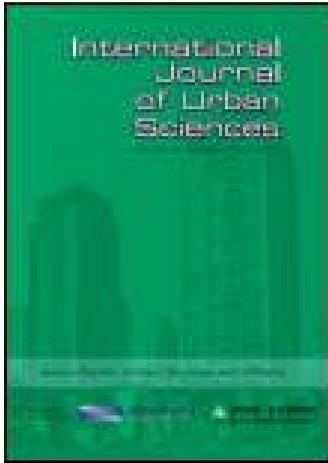


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Urban Sciences

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjus20>

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Published online: 31 Oct 2011.

To cite this article: Christopher E.C. Murray (2011) Driving long-term urban success: culture, creativity, competitiveness, and a psychological perspective on the city, International Journal of Urban Sciences, 15:2, 71-78, DOI: [10.1080/12265934.2011.615903](https://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2011.615903)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2011.615903>

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Driving long-term urban success: culture, creativity, competitiveness, and a psychological perspective on the city

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(Received 16 May 2011; revised version received 12 July 2011; final version accepted 19 July 2011)

The world is urbanizing at an alarming rate, with more than half the global population living in cities for the first time ever in human history. Local and national governments and international agencies recognize that there are severe challenges on the horizon for both new and existing cities, of an economic, social, environmental, cultural and creative nature. This last component – culture and creativity – has often been seen as an ‘add on’ or luxury to be afforded rather than something critical to competitiveness. This paper draws on United Kingdom (UK) urban practice, characterized by post-industrial regeneration and economic restructuring on the one hand, and new towns (or urban extension) development on the other, to understand how culture and creativity can play a critical and central role in competitiveness. Cities have an unquestionable psychological impact, and this paper also asks: whether human psychology has completed adapted to city living; if those responsible for city making and management have fully grasped the significance of this issue; and if a deeper understanding, gained through a stronger psychological perspective on the experience of urban living, might help us to create better places in the long term.

Keywords: creativity; economics; psychology; urban; city; design; management; habitat; regeneration; culture; new towns; placemaking

Introduction

Arguably, we understand more now than at any other time about how to create decent, liveable habitats within the urban context. But ‘placemaking’ is an immensely complex, challenging and fluid process, which can and does go wrong, with costly results.

Where we live has profound consequences for almost every aspect of our physical, emotional and economic existence. In the words of Winston Churchill, ‘first we shape our buildings, but thereafter, they shape us’, and the same can be said for the wider urban environment. Mental and physical health, life and employment chances are all influenced by where we live, so it stands to reason that we should put as much effort as possible into making successful places. Why then are there so many places that clearly do not work, both old and new, and how can we avoid the mistakes of the past?

There are many reasons. Environments can simply become unfit for modern purposes, for transport access or quality of housing. Industry might leave – as has

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happened in many UK cities – and without jobs even a high-quality environment can become a prison. This raises challenges for regeneration. On other occasions it is through either misguided policies, like the UK housing estate tower-blocks of the 1960s and 1970s based on the Bauhaus ‘cities in the sky’, or it is an attempt at false economy, as in parts of some of the UK new towns, where cheap housing has ultimately created a greater long-term cost to the public purse.

There is a further, critical reason for aiming to get placemaking right, particularly in our major cities. Cities are the places that drive national and international economies. Businesses locate and stay in them because of the critical mass of assets, skills and infrastructure they offer, as well as having access to other people and their ideas (Glaeser, 2011). Highly skilled workers, particularly from knowledge- and innovation-based industries, do not want to locate in places that are dysfunctional or low quality. Therefore a high-quality urban fabric is fundamental to economic success.

Challenges for cities in an urbanizing world

Of the world’s population, 50% now live in a city for the first time in human history and in 40 years time it will be approaching 80% (UN Habitat, 2010). Most of the developed world’s movement from rural to urban happened a long time ago, and although there is a decline in rural population as a percentage, what is much more likely to happen in the future is city-to-city migration and internal city growth.

The implication of this is that there will be winners and losers: some cities will grow while others shrink. This has policy implications for city leaders in keeping their city competitive, not only in the face of increased competition for city supremacy among developed countries, but also in relation to less developed countries as their relative position increases.

New ‘megacities’ will develop in many parts of the world – some with populations the size of fairly well developed countries. The size and location of megacities will matter, and there are some lessons in looking at how this picture has, very unpredictably, changed and may continue to do so. Smaller cities will face increasing pressure to retain and grow their highly skilled and talented workers and knowledge-based businesses. But these giant cities of the future will not be the only game in town – some smaller, i.e. not capital, cities will still be very competitive and pleasant places to live, like the English core cities (Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield). Highly mobile knowledge-led business and the ‘creatives’ that drive them want to locate in places that offer a certain set of assets, but that also deliver a high quality of place, life and environment. These will therefore increasingly become the decisive factors in this struggle for city supremacy, and culture and creativity are likely to occupy a central position in creating and maintaining the successful cities of the future (Landry, 2000).

A critical global economic shift, perhaps the biggest since the industrial revolution, is the continued development of strong economies in the Far East such as Korea, as well as in Brazil, Russia, India and China (often referred to as the BRIC economies). It is highly possible that economic flows and even migration might reverse historic trends, running West to East or from developed countries to those currently less developed. This poses further questions for city management.

Climate change, social inclusion, combating poverty, driving new economic sectoral growth, and managing religious and political tensions and shifts all weigh in

with their own complexities to put into this heady ‘intercultural’ urban mix (Wood & Landry, 2008).

Within this set of dilemmas, there are two big opportunities. The first is to make cities really liveable, habitable places to be, going beyond the physical appearance and feel of a city. Some cities will not be pleasant places in the future. This might mean revisiting some of the original thinking behind the concept of the city as the centre of enlightenment and innovation, the place where creativity happens, and the idea of the citizen (literally one who lives in a city) as someone with rights and responsibilities.

The second is for national governments to pass more responsibility to local governments and their partnerships in order to enable these things to happen, to make best use of scarce resources and to get solutions closer to the problem. Where this has happened, the evidence suggests places become more competitive (Parkinson, 2006), but there are other reasons for making this shift. Economically nations do of course compete, but in reality it is their cities and regions that are on the front line of that competition, who stand to win or lose most directly. It is time for national governments to see their cities as at least equal partners who are best incentivized through freedoms, rather than as chess pieces in a national economic game.

Culture, in its broadest sense as ‘way of life’ activities, is essential to defining and delivering these changes, and the application of creativity at all levels of urban development is a critical tool.

In addition, a more thorough psychological analysis and interpretation of the impact of city-living and the urban experience may offer a new toolkit with which to understand more about what makes a city liveable. This is important because such an analysis applied to a city may – as it can when applied to the individual – reveal root causes of joy and distress, and enable unexpected solutions which might otherwise not become apparent. Ultimately the purpose would be to improve quality of life and thereby the competitiveness of a city.

Culture, creativity and competitiveness

Richard Florida (2003) has demonstrated a direct correlation in cities between economic success and tolerance, diversity and openness. Highly skilled creative workers are at the centre of wealth-producing knowledge industries, and these people are very mobile – they can locate almost anywhere. But they choose to locate in places that suit their values, beliefs and lifestyles, and also they like access to a wide range of cultural facilities and experiences, to have a quality built environment and, in short, a high quality of life and of place.

The growth in knowledge-based industries in Europe and other developed countries has accelerated and outperformed other sectors (Brinkley & Lee, 2007). Although not the sole foundation of future urban economic growth, it is a critical make or break factor for many cities.

These cultural factors, and putting creativity at the heart of the city’s development, have become decisive competitive factors in a global urban marketplace that is competing for high-value knowledge industry. Of course other industry is also critical and not everyone can be a highly skilled knowledge worker, but recession has accelerated structural shift towards a knowledge economy in many developed countries, and urban policy has to keep step by creating the right environments and conditions, the right skills within the labour market and the right connectivity to secure growth. The city and its identity also have to be promoted and

interpreted to the world and some of the best place-marketing initiatives have been culturally focused (Murray, 2000).

There is, however, a problem with the way in which creativity has sometimes been understood and applied in the urban context. Iconic, grand projects have been seen as the solution, rather than the evolution of more natural and longer-term creativity at every level within the city. Iconic architecture and other projects certainly have their place, but they are most successful when built upon a broader foundation of regeneration and creativity. The Guggenheim in Bilbao was based on a decade of solid regeneration activity, and Antony Gormley's 'Angel of the North' sculpture in Gateshead, although meeting with controversy, reflects years of creatively focused activity.

Urban regeneration in the UK, which has most notably taken place in post-industrial cities seeking to economically and physically restructure, has a long and broadly successful history. With explicit national policy dating back to the 1950s (and earlier), public funding for regeneration probably reached its height in the UK in the decade between 1995 and 2005.

Regeneration in the UK has generally focused on a combination of economic, physical and social renewal and, with some exceptions, early examples would typically include culture and the application of creativity as something added on to a programme, rather than central to it. This has shifted in recent years, with an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of culture and the creative industries to places like the English core cities, and with programmes such as the Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative, which brought new media companies into the local economy.

Based on such early examples, culture has increasingly played a role in regeneration in both the UK and Europe, exemplified by the 'Cities of Culture' programmes. The broader environmental sector and the 'green agenda' are also now viewed as having regenerative potential.

Therefore, although still regularly questioned by the media, investment in culture and creativity have become fairly mainstream for England's leading cities, but it is essential to distinguish between superficial creative hype and properly embedded creativity which applies creative thinking as a commitment to the long-term future and prosperity of a place. Genuinely iconic projects should be the product of a city's embedded creativity, rather than the odd creative spike on an otherwise level graph of urban monotony.

This happens best when we define creativity generously, helping many voices to be heard. Too often, cities are still seen mechanistically as broken machines, problems that need to be fixed or infused with an outside-sourced 'creative class' rather than viewed organically, as complex, adaptive, living cultural systems that can be nurtured and can themselves provide solutions.

Therefore, culture taken in its broadest definition can be seen as a kind of fourth dimension in which the other policy pillars of regeneration (economic, social and environmental) take place and interact, and in this sense urban issues are in fact cultural issues. This perspective can help in integrating regenerative policies and in putting people and their ways of living at the heart of urban improvement. As well as enriching the urban experience directly with their products, culture and creativity are therefore crucially also a part of the processes of urban development.

One of the myths of creativity is that it is the preserve of mysteriously clever individuals working in splendid isolation. Clever people are important, but they do

best in a creative milieu, which is why people still want to live in cities in a digital age: to interact (Ghillardi, 2009). We should also nurture the creativity that is rooted in the daily grit and reality of our cities. This includes the ability to collaborate within and between urban areas, taking a creative approach and finding new solutions. Building on strong roots, the ultimate success of cities depends perhaps not only on their ability to compete with each other but also on their appetite and skills to collaborate with their immediate hinterland, with adjacent towns and cities and in specialist networks across the globe. Such complex degrees of practical and political partnership require creative pragmatism and the capacity to think beyond short-term gain. It has to be kept in mind that creativity is not the preserve of any one sector or just those acknowledged as ‘creatives’. It is as present in local politics, community development, economics and business as it is anywhere else.

A psychological perspective: the mind of a village in the body of a city?

New towns have a long history in the UK urban experience, and have often been explicit attempts to create ‘urban villages’, to combine what was perceived as the ‘best’ of urban and rural environments.

UK new towns began perhaps with the industrial philanthropists building high-quality accommodation for their workers, known as ‘model villages’ (1805 almost to the present day). Bourneville near Birmingham (built by the Cadbury chocolate dynasty in the 1900s) is still run as a private trust today and was recently voted one of the most pleasant places to live in England. Saltaire, near Bradford, and Port Sunlight, near Liverpool, are other outstanding examples. Great attention was paid to design quality and the result is places that have stood the test of time. As well as providing quality housing, these ventures usually had an element of social engineering behind them, and were often attempts to also moderate behaviour, motivated by the religious and political convictions of their philanthropic founders.

Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City in England are both based directly on the ideas of Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928), founder of the highly influential Garden City Movement. Many of the base concepts were adopted for much later new town development.

The late twentieth century Urban Village Movement in the UK built on many of these ideas, championing the concept that the village was the best kind of living environment, and that it is possible to build ‘urban villages’ within cities that have the best characteristics of both the city and the village.

This suggests that there is a peculiar fondness for the village in the English imagination which may or may not exist in a similar way in other countries, and which perhaps in part explains the continuing ‘village’ based urban movements. Although initially this yearning for a return to the village probably grew out of recognition of the disastrous human consequences of industrial city life for most in the nineteenth century, it has persisted to the present day and therefore cannot be wholly explained away by this factor. It appears to be based on nostalgia for a ‘golden age’ of closely knit communities where everyone had a secure and understood future, the ‘Arcadian dream’. In reality, village life has rarely been like this in the UK or elsewhere, and was for much of our history something close to feudal bondage for all but the wealthiest, and the scene of widespread rural poverty and unrest.

This is not to say that alternative approaches to urban development in the UK have not been successful or popular, indeed they have been both. In particular the

city-centre regeneration of recent decades has fuelled a genuine renaissance in many cities, and high rise, when placed in specific urban and economic contexts, can work well.

However, this marked – if incomplete – association with the village in the English psyche or ‘collective mind’, expressed clearly in cultural products from TV to literature and ‘ideal’ life choices, begs the question whether urban professionals and policy makers have properly understood its root causes. Going further, it is important to ask whether the psychological implications of city making and management are themselves well enough understood. When commonly applied to the individual or group, psychology seeks to determine and influence the root cause of behaviours, both positive and negative, and therefore a further analysis of city-living and the urban experience, from a broadly psychological perspective, could significantly compliment the urban toolkit.

A further, more fundamental, question for policy makers and planners is to what extent humans have adapted socially and psychologically to city living? The city is relatively recent. For most of human history we have lived with no more than a few hundred or thousand people at most in one place. Even though cities can be said to have existed at least since the Mesopotamians a remarkable 9500 years or more ago, very small numbers of the total human population have ever lived in them, and only now do more than 50% of people live in a city. Our bodies are adapted to a stone-age diet and cannot cope with processed foods, fats and sugars of modern consumption. Perhaps in a similar way our psychology and our ways of living are not properly adapted to the modern city. Perhaps we still have the mind of a village in the body of a city? Such an analysis might begin to suggest reasons why villages occupy such a special place in many people’s minds and, at the least, it may raise important further questions for the design and management of cities and city living, and particularly for the way in which neighbourhoods are created. Issues of liveability – of quality of life and environment – are fundamentally issues of competitiveness. For a city to sustain itself, its economy and its residents, it must understand how best to meet their needs.

The neighbourhood is the basic building block of the city (including the city centre as a kind of neighbourhood) and, although it requires good connectivity to function properly, it is the scale we can most easily comprehend and interact with in our daily lives.

Cities are here to stay. The return to the village will not be possible for most. Our cities reflect us, their creators and inhabitants, and perhaps our own psychological make up, for better or worse. Is it conceivable that, as well as the city that we create consciously, alongside or beneath it we somehow unintentionally create an unconscious version, which contains our hopes, but also our darkest fears? That is perhaps too poetic, but what it is possible to say, with some certainty, is that the way in which cities and their neighbourhoods are designed, built, managed and then interconnected (or not) has a profound and lasting physical and psychological impact. This in itself becomes an economic and competitiveness impact. Therefore a closer inspection of the city and the urban experience through a psychological filter – an ‘analysis’ of the city if you like – could not only lead to new tools with which to interpret and interact with the urban experience, it might also support further local economic growth and stronger long-term competitiveness. This is not to suggest replacing the existing toolkit, only to add to it, to explore how techniques used to understand psychological health, pathology and resolution within us as individuals

and groups might help us to create environments and circumstances that lead to better collective outcomes, socially and economically.

Conclusion

Western Europe has been through a thorough, sophisticated and conscious regeneration and post-industrial economic restructuring programme over the last few decades, which has used a wide variety of local, regional and national structures to achieve its aims. This has largely been a centralized operation in the UK and mostly highly interventionist in its approach, focusing often on market failure. In many cases the results have been very successful, although some structures worked better than others, but as a 'national project' it is also generally regarded as incomplete. The picture for UK new towns is similar, and those responsible for them would also argue that many are not yet 'finished products'.

The policy narrative for urban development in the UK is changing, and is being re-written largely in the context of a reducing public sector and an expectation of growth in the private sector. Regeneration and new town development also face considerable challenges from global socio-economic influences, which will require new solutions due partly to the nature of new challenges and partly to large reductions in the availability of public finance.

But the post-recession economy in developed countries has also shifted quickly towards high-value knowledge-led industry, which requires a particular set of assets and experiences to be available within the context of a high quality of urban life and environment. This puts culture and creativity at the forefront of investment strategies to increase competitiveness, attracting, growing and retaining these industries, and in staging global events to support increased profile (Clark, 2008). In addition, seeing urban issues as having a cultural dimension can help to integrate the different policy pillars in a way that accounts for how people choose and want to live both now and in the future. Therefore explicit policies relating culture and creativity to economic competitiveness for cities are likely to produce better long-term results.

In addition, further analysis of the psychological impact of city making and management, and particularly of neighbourhoods, could help to strengthen the toolkit available to urban policy makers. This could usefully seek to apply the disciplines and techniques of psychology to the experience of city-living, but might also include primary research to determine how well human psychological processes are or are not adapted to different kinds of urban and other habitats. The conclusions could have profound lessons and consequences for positively improving the urban environment and experience for the long term, therefore making that experience more sustainable economically.

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