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# The Art of City-Making

By Charles Landry

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Is regeneration an art or a science? With a profusion of books on how to design cities, usually drawing on the same old models and thinkers, it is refreshing to read a passionate set of arguments for cities as living places that are formed by the way people think and behave, not just by the rules laid down by planners and engineers. Charles Landry's previous book *The Creative City* set out to provide a toolkit for developing a 'creative milieu'. This time in 462 pages plus some inspiring colour pictures he offers a different way of looking at cities, as well as an extraordinary range of examples from Curitiba to Singapore. It starts with a short 'overture' to get you thinking outside the box, which contains intriguing titbits like the Mayor of Tirana in Albania spending 4 per cent of the city budget to paint several hundred old buildings in an attempt to change the way that citizens looked at the city.

Some of the most influential books have been by writers like Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford and Ebenezer Howard who started with what they observed created good places, and who then sought to identify why what we built was so different from what we admired. Charles Landry has had an even broader education, as he must have visited almost every major city, and interviewed hundreds of practitioners, as well as making over 250 major speeches. He therefore has a very rich menu of options to draw on.

## NEED FOR NEW THINKING

Much of current thinking, for example laying down design codes, is sterile because it is essentially trying to set rules without understanding what leads to the growth of a successful place. By focusing on places that have successfully reinvented themselves, such as Helsinki or the Emscher Park area in the German Ruhr, Charles Landry shows that it is possible to appeal to people's hearts and minds through a process of cultural, as opposed to physical planning.

His thesis is important because large numbers of towns and cities that grew up to meet the needs of industry, such as Manchester or Oldham, are having to find new roles and reasons for existing. This, as Charles is keen to stress, goes far beyond simply adding another cultural attraction, the flawed 'Starbucks and Stadiums' approach to regeneration, which unfortunately still tends to prevail among our political leaders. He is therefore interested in the creative ideas that have enabled some cities to get on top of their problems, whether it be congestion or rubbish, while others have floundered.

## THE ORGANIC MODEL

Unlike conventional planning, which seems doomed to focus on weaknesses, the organic model seeks to build on strengths and niche opportunities. It is greatly influenced by marketing, and it is

not surprising that the concepts of image and identity feature heavily in the book. The current planning system, with its stress on community engagement and environmental impact assessment, should welcome this approach, but it does depend on politicians being able to see the 'big picture'. This is much easier when there is a clear threat or crisis, for example the IRA bombing of Central Manchester, than when there has been gradual decline, many competing calls for attention, and a centralised funding system that turns cities into beggars.

Turning visions into reality depends on overcoming sceptics, which is where home grown examples and models are so important. Whereas Lord Richard Rogers, in a private conversation, could not think of any good British examples of creating high density housing schemes (which made me doubt their applicability) Charles Landry is able to quote large numbers of regeneration success stories, including places where his consultancy Comedia has played a leading role, such as promoting Huddersfield as a creative city. For creativity, unlike finance, is not in short supply, and so deserves to be applied much more widely.

Charles provides some useful exercises, like thinking of the smell of the city, though I personally prefer to think of the sounds. A local politician from Cambridge on a study tour to Freiburg pointed out that you could hear the birds sing in the new suburbs, which seemed an excellent principle to build into a charter for creating new communities, and using all our senses is one of the ways we can develop creativity, and put good ideas into practice.

### **LESSONS FOR URBAN DESIGN**

A number of sections specifically deal with urban design and the way places

are laid out. The Congress for New Urbanism is having an influence on development in the USA because it not only has an excellent charter, with nine principles each for the block, sub-region and state levels, but also can point to examples where the principles are being applied. Cities like Portland, Oregon have a much greater influence than any individual building because they seem to have shifted attitudes and behaviour. So too has the London congestion charge.

Hence it is a pity that the bulk of the examples that tend to get publicity are metropolitan cities, and their centres, whereas the bulk of people live in their suburbs or smaller towns. The state of the local environment is a product of economic forces, such as the growth of superstores and retail parks, and the decline of small businesses and practices such as supporting local shops, and so change is going to depend on shifting attitudes and behaviour rather than a few grand projects. There are enough examples, however, to provide something for everyone. Having just come back from speaking at a couple of conferences on the future of Indian cities, I was particularly inspired by a case study of an initiative in one of Delhi's main slums, where they are using ten concepts, all starting with the letter C, just like the urban design protocols in New Zealand and Western Australia, which shows the universal power ideas can have.

### **APPLICATIONS**

So though solutions must be matched to the context, there does seem to be something fairly universal about the process of urban change, and therefore with the tools that can be used to manage it. The book ends with ten ideas to start the creative process, which in summary are:

- Precipitate a culture of crisis
- Identify a group of project champions
- Undertake an audit of creative potential and obstacles
- Identify key projects that stand as examples of good practice
- Develop the supporting evidence
- Influence the 'master' strategy
- Create pilot projects
- Devise the 'story'
- Create an advocacy lobby
- Do not call yourself a creative city.

Regeneration practitioners and urban designers badly need to get away from seeing the world in physical and visual terms alone, or even worse, assuming everything can be reduced to some form of 'spatial syntax' and a set of measurable outcomes. This book is therefore a useful antidote to the usual tomes that seek to make a science out of cities, or to impose the ideas of a single designer or planner. Charles Landry concludes by saying 'Just as Barcelona spurned the idea of a master plan, so should a city organically follow a path to becoming a better, happier place.'

If the book has limitations, it is probably that it tries to cover too much (though the other side is that you get at least two books for the price of one!)

You need a long journey (in my case a flight to India) to get through it. Also some of the prose can be quite heavy going, and the main pictures are reserved for the middle. However, as a source book to dip into when faced with an intractable problem, or as a reminder that cities outlive politicians and plans, it is invaluable, and you can start with the overture or the end piece! In writing this review I was reminded that some of the best achievements and spaces are the result of a great idea and masses of individually small projects, like London's South Bank for example, where Abercrombie's idea of a riverside walk has finally been completed without any overriding organisation or design guide. By contrast politicians tend to go for big projects and small ideas, like the Millennium Dome in Greenwich, or the new casino proposed for East Manchester. If more people followed the leads in this book, some of our towns and cities could be helped to heal themselves without brutal surgery.

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