

WORLD CITIES CULTURE FORUM

The New Cultural Agenda: Beyond Boosterism
Policy Briefing 1: Istanbul Summit 2013

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The World Cities Culture Forum is an initiative of the Mayor of London. It was founded in 2012 by London, New York, Shanghai, Paris, Tokyo, Sydney, Johannesburg, and Istanbul. It now includes 22 member cities from around the world.

By bringing together their cultural expertise and knowledge, the participating cities have created a new unique research and policy forum to address the role that culture plays in their cities, and to strengthen their policy responses to the challenges they face.

In November 2013, senior policymakers from partner cities met in Istanbul over a three-day programme for the annual World Cities Culture Summit, which was generously hosted by the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This document is the first policy briefing of the World Cities Culture Forum, based on the collective knowledge and latest evidence assembled at the Istanbul summit.

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The New Cultural Agenda: Beyond Boosterism

The last two decades have seen tremendous economic, cultural and social change, and the world's greatest cities have been at the forefront in experiencing and driving this. The World Cities Culture Summit 2013 was both a result and a response to such change, and an unprecedented gathering of city leaders responsible for culture and the creative industries. From Buenos Aires to Shanghai, from Johannesburg to New York, the cities which have done so much to produce and shape world culture took time to reflect, discuss and learn from one another. The sector has never had such a high-profile or been taken so seriously by government, and there is much to celebrate – from the spectacular success of London 2012's arts festival through to Montréal's ten-year programme to transform the city's public spaces, but this was by no means an exercise in self-promotion. Rather, what emerged from the deliberations was a new agenda for city leaders – going beyond the place branding or boosterism of the last decade, however successful, and setting out a plan to ensure that the cultural life of world cities becomes a cornerstone of this, the urban century.

Global Cities, Local Economies

One of the defining features of world cities is their cosmopolitanism. Over the last ten years, this has clearly increased on almost every front: trade links, tourism, overseas students, ethnic diversity and immigration. Cities should continue to welcome the cultural and economic dynamism that such openness brings, while at the same time championing and nurturing localism. Such approaches are not mutually exclusive. In the past, policies have attempted to resist the forces of globalisation through cultural protectionism or trade barriers, but local creative economies, with the right support, are strong enough to thrive in global cities. In Los Angeles, the capital of the world's media and entertainment industries, distinctive forms of local culture have grown and become integral to the city, such as its Latino music scene, visual arts and Santa Monica's Glow festival.

As host to the World Cities Culture Summit 2013, Istanbul provided a powerful illustration of how this is possible. The original global city, bridging the cultures of west and east, it has experienced unprecedented growth in the last ten years, with its rapidly expanding population, trade and economic significance. And yet Istanbul's cultural richness remains as strong and distinct as ever: in its two-thousand year architectural heritage, renowned archaeological museums, its street cultures of music and fashion and traditional forms of dance and literature.

Positioning + Promotion

In recent years city leaders and influential policy makers have recognised the important role that culture has to play in urban economies. Whether measured in terms of workforce size, export earnings or new business formation, the creative and cultural sector is becoming a vital economic element, and hence political constituency, of a world city's make-up. In London, for instance, the creative industries have grown at approximately double the annual rate of the wider economy over the last ten years.

The contribution that culture makes to a city's economy goes far beyond its direct economic footprint. Rather, as demonstrated by city branding and marketing campaigns such as 'I Amsterdam' or 'Discover LA', the cultural sector has become central to how cities promote themselves – securing inward investment, bringing in tourists, attracting a skilled workforce and encouraging young people to study.

The relationship between culture and international promotion is now firmly established and understood by city and national governments across the world, in large part because of the efforts of cultural leaders and initiatives such as the World Cities Culture Forum. However, the part that informal culture plays is still poorly appreciated. Cities such as Berlin attract investment and visitors not because of its art but because of its artists. It is not cultural institutions so much as cultural space that the city provides – opportunities to live and work, to perform and socialize, to develop sub-cultures within the mainstream and to experiment and innovate. If cities are unable to nurture the new, the radical and the provocative, then they risk losing their cultural vitality and global position, much as if they build over their heritage.

The New Cultural Infrastructure

In the past, discussions about cultural infrastructure have focused on the building and maintenance of museums and galleries, concert halls and public libraries. Today, policy makers are just as concerned with 'human infrastructure' – the assets that enable their creative economies to flourish. Whether it is affordable workspace, independent retail, artists' studios, small music venues, covered markets or broadband internet, the challenge is to provide spaces in which creative innovation can take place, and where artists and entrepreneurs can thrive.

This is by no means easy. Rapid economic growth, residential developments and rising property prices have been a feature of urban centres in recent years which, in the familiar cycle of gentrification, threaten the very creativity that helped bring the city to life in the first place. But leaders can and are responding to the challenge, working to maintain the assets and public realm that support creativity, while also ensuring that culture is central to the major developments and regeneration initiatives that are reshaping cities. In Toronto, partnerships have been brokered between property developers and artists, moving beyond the old adversarial tensions and integrating studio space, cultural institutions and public art in private developments. In New York, public buildings such as libraries and health centres have been revitalized by incorporating creative workspace, and providing studios for artists who participate in engagement programmes, helping to embed arts and culture in the life of communities.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, both cities to have experienced rapid urban development in recent decades, culture is now at the heart of major planning initiatives. Crucially, this is much more than simply inserting cultural institutions and venues alongside offices, utilities, transport and other infrastructure elements. Rather it is about an entirely new approach – one that favours organic instead of top-down growth, a genuine process of community engagement, and a commitment to working with artists and cultural organisations not as an after-thought, but from the outset of the planning process.

Culture for All

The role of culture and the creative industries in driving growth and promoting cities is now widely accepted by politicians and city leaders. But those participating in the World Cities Culture Summit 2013 were just as likely to be discussing measures of inequality and levels of access as they were economic growth. Given the increasingly multicultural populations of world cities, so the urgent need to promote diversity and cultural inclusion. This democratization of culture is one of the most important objectives for a world city, but a culture of democracy is crucial for this. It is about much more than city elections or transparent governance – it is about building the right infrastructure and public realm, artistic programming for all citizens, engaging with hard-to-reach communities and working with, rather than dictating to, cultural organisations.

World city leaders are achieving this in a variety of ways, and there is much that can be learnt from one another. In Buenos Aires, a strategic priority for encouraging access and participation has resulted in an ambitious cultural programme of open-air festivals, street art performances, free concerts, the showcasing of new musical talent, cultural inclusion projects and dance events. The focus has been as much on inter-generational engagement as cultural diversity, with events specifically designed to bring all citizens together, whether learning to tango dance or attending a Shakespeare play. In Rio de Janeiro, the paucity of cinemas and access to film in the poorer parts of the city led to the CineCarioca initiative, in which the city government installed a cinema in one of its favelas, giving many young people their first cinematic experience and in the process helping to develop a new cultural quarter, as a commercial leisure economy grew up alongside it.

Education is an important means by which the experience and appreciation of culture can be widened across the city. The Paris Ile-de-France region has implemented a programme of 'cultural mediators' in its local schools aimed at developing young people's creativity and artistic expression across the city region. Each mediator for a group of local high schools is in charge of developing and coordinating regional cultural programmes targeting young people such as a 'cine-club' and 'theatre-club', and bringing well-known cultural practitioners to talk about their work to students. In Amsterdam, the city has taken similarly bold steps to embed culture in the school curriculum, building links between schools and institutions and making a commitment for every child in the city to experience at least three hours of arts and cultural education every week.

Challenges + Issues

In order to achieve the above, there are a number of challenges and issues which city leaders across the world are facing. Of course, every city is different, with its own historical and economic context, political circumstances and institutional complexities, but there is also recognition of the common concerns and barriers that need to be tackled, and the value in describing and sharing these, and thus addressing them with greater knowledge and confidence.

New funding models

The financial crash and economic downturn, leading to public spending cuts in many cities, has presented profound challenges for cultural policy leaders. In the face of budget reductions to core services, it has not been easy to make the case for maintaining public investment in culture, and there is a new impetus in unlocking other sources of revenue. This can be through both the private and public sectors, and requires imagination and considerable effort. As with New York and Los Angeles, philanthropy is an important part of the mix, but there are many models and approaches. In Toronto, the introduction of a 'billboard tax' has raised much-needed income for cultural projects, while in Seoul recognition that public investment alone is insufficient has led to new 'crowd sourcing' models of finance, in which citizens are helping to directly contribute and shape their cultural provision.

Co-ordination and collaboration

Reductions in cultural budgets have given added urgency to the need to work in partnership, something that in any case is becoming increasingly necessary as cities, and city governments, grow in size and complexity. A more long-term and strategic approach to partnership is needed if culture is to really achieve its potential. If cultural leaders are unable to draw on anything other than their own resources and budgets, then the cultural life of their cities will never truly flourish. Whether it is installing public art in transport networks, embedding culture in school curriculums, holding festivals in streets and squares, or providing artist studio space in housing developments, then cultural professionals must come out of their own sectors and departments and be prepared to engage across city government. In partnership with civil society and the business sector, the district government of Bogotá has successfully implemented several new programmes integrating culture across many other policy areas - notably in education, public transport, social development, health and environmental sectors. A willingness to collaborate, to allow for a multiplicity of competing priorities, to persevere with bureaucracies, and to be effective advocates for culture at the highest political level are all required.

Overcoming legacy barriers

Heritage is a vital element of a city's cultural life and identity, as Istanbul as much as any city in the world reminds us. But many of the legacies that city leaders are faced with are less welcome. In many cities, the infrastructure, cultural and otherwise, is outdated, not-fit-for-purpose and inhibiting its cultural vitality. High quality work is being done in Johannesburg, but the institutions of the Apartheid era struggling to find a contemporary purpose or audience are a pointed demonstration of how cultural policies of the past, often associated with colonial or discredited regimes, can still hang heavy on the present. The tensions are not always easy to resolve: the preservation and protection of heritage is crucial to maintaining a city's identity and beauty, but world cities also need to be able to innovate, to embrace modernity and allow each new generation to artistically express themselves and have ownership of their cultural lives.

Building the evidence and measuring outcomes

For cultural leaders to achieve their ambitions, then new kinds of argument, research and advocacy are required. City governments around the world have shown that they are prepared to invest in culture, but they demand rationale and evidence for doing so. The World Cities Culture Report published in 2012 and extended in 2013 was a milestone in just this, providing the cultural sector with vital evidence and policy ammunition, attracting widespread media coverage and impressing upon governments around the world of the rewards from investing and supporting the cultural life of cities.

But the World Cities Culture Report is only the first step. The next edition planned for 2015 will need to incorporate more, and more fine grained, metrics, and achieving this will be a major task for the World Cities Culture Forum over the next two years. In addition, more sophisticated tools for measurement, definition and outcome will need to be developed. These tools will need to be robust enough for policy makers and budget holders, without reducing and narrowing the creative experience. The exhilaration of a crowd participating in a Montréal street festival, or the smile of a young boy in a Rio favela as he emerges from a cinema for the first time may not be measurable, but somehow it does need to be captured.

The Need for Leadership

As global cities have increased in size and importance, so has the need for strong cultural leadership. Commentators have speculated as to how the global economy is resulting in diminished nation states and more politically active cities, and many of the great policy challenges of the age, from tackling climate change to promoting equalities, are being led at the city rather than the national level. This is especially the case with culture – with so much cultural production concentrated in the major cities of the world, it is vital that city government is able to show leadership and respond to challenges with as much speed and innovation as the sector itself.

The stakes are high. The destruction of so much cultural heritage over the last fifty years is a stark reminder of what happens if cultural leaders do not take the initiative, while in many of the new cities emerging in Africa and the Middle East, the disconnect between cultural policy and urban planning is leading not just to gated communities but to ‘gated cities’, in which residents exist in physical and cultural isolation from their fellow citizens. Economic globalization, unchecked property development and fiscal austerity can threaten the cultural ecosystem of our great cities. The World Cities Culture Summit 2013 showed that none of this is inevitable, that world cities can flourish in the 21st century, but only if city leaders have the confidence, imagination and strength of will to make it happen.

World Cities Culture Forum Future Agenda

From 2014 onward the World Cities Culture Forum will evolve by widening the circle of participating cities (while still keeping the group small enough to allow for a high level of contact) and by developing strategic partnerships with key international organisations of common purpose.

The Forum aims to build a stronger evidence base about the wide-ranging ways in which culture impacts on a world city and its inhabitants through its continuing research programme. The research programme will now focus on developing new sets of indicators to highlight the critical contribution of culture to their economic and social success, and on reporting on the most transformative cultural projects implemented in world cities. In addition to future recurring online publications, the 2015 edition of the World Cities Culture Report will go one step further and include the new sets of analytical and evaluation tools collected over the next two years.

The Forum plans to foster learning between partners through its annual summits but also through smaller regional events and workshops. The annual summits will not only act as knowledge exchange platforms for city leaders but will also help member cities collectively define a common actionable agenda to unleash the full potential of culture at the global urban level.

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