

European Workshop
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Opening Speech

"Planning for the Intercultural City" **by Phil Wood**

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My presentation falls into five main sections:

- What is a city?
- Is there a right to the city?
- How does growing diversity impact upon the right to the city?
- What are the threats to this right?
- The emergence of intercultural cities.

I need not rehearse here the factors of globalisation which over recent decades have transformed our world, its economy, cultures and social structures, suffice to say that we are undergoing a period of dynamic movement and flow – of people, of capital and of ideas. National governments and transnational agencies debate this endlessly and have evolved an orthodoxy of opinion which presents us with an apparent menu of advantages and opportunities of the free market whilst also alerting us to some of the collateral threats which might emerge.

There is much I might wish to challenge about this contemporary orthodoxy but, as an urbanist, I will limit myself to one. The discussion seems to exclude the voice and perspective of the very places in which the impact of globalisation is being felt most intensely – our cities. I wish to redress that imbalance because, for all the posturing of national and transnational bodies, it will be decisions and actions taken in cities – by policy-makers but also by ordinary people like you and I in our daily transactions – which will determine whether we can build a world in which we can all live together, or one of fear, mistrust and strife. The city is the place where we could get it so right ... or so wrong.

So I will begin looking at what is meant by a 'city' and I will take my lead from the controversial but always insightful sociologist David Harvey. If I may simplify his position rather crudely, he argues that a primary characteristic of capitalism is the creation of surplus product and the constant requirement to find ways of investing or applying this. At different times in different conditions it may be turned towards human capital or innovation and in others towards the pursuit of aggression and warfare. But one constant however is land and property. Harvey argues that the waves of urbanization over the last century or so have been driven, more than anything else, by the need to translate surplus product into other forms of value, power and status – indeed, that cities are essentially spatial and social concentrations of surplus product.

By way of illustration he cites the first great example of this – Paris in the nineteenth century. In France, the political and economic elites had been shaken and scared to their foundations by the uprisings that swept Europe in 1848. Subsequently under the rule of Louis-Napoleon, France saw an unprecedented period of expansion of industrial and economic output, and he evolved a vision for a capital city which would embody this. Georges-Eugène Haussmann was engaged with a gigantic plan to destroy most of the mediaeval city and replace it with the city we now recognise of wide boulevards and monumental spaces. This not only created surplus product investment opportunities and living spaces for a triumphant and self-confident bourgeoisie, but also left a city much easier to police should future unrest arise. In order to finance the realisation of Haussmann's plan there was a frantic period of innovation in which ever more complex financial institutions and credit instruments were devised by an opportunistic banking and property industry. But, following a pattern which has now become all too familiar to us, the bubble in property prices and debt spectacularly collapsed in 1868 leading to a wider financial crisis across the city. The response was public anger eventually producing the Paris Commune, which was followed by a disastrous war with Prussia and the downfall of the Second Empire in France. Harvey argues, that unless we move beyond this simple understanding of the city

as a machine for endlessly creating and recycling surplus product, and evolve a more rounded notion of the city and citizenship, we will be condemned to keep making the same mistakes.

The omens are not good. I bring you back to the 21st century and present a tale of three cities: Dubai, Manchester and Barcelona. Given that the minds of much of the world are currently focussed upon football, I will present them within a sporting metaphor. The Financial Times is typical in describing Dubai in 2005 as 'the city of the future'. Yet, only four years later, the same journal was announcing a financial crisis of unimaginable proportions which might see the city fall into a black hole of debt. It was with interest, and not without a hint of *schadenfreude*, that I read how many of the super-rich footballers of the English Premier League had been investing their wealth in Dubai and stood to make enormous losses in the crash. And this started me thinking about who invests in cities, why they do it and what this says about the nature of citizenship. The case cited in the news was of the Manchester United star Michael Owen and this led me to contrast him with his predecessor of an earlier generation, Bobby Charlton. I found a lovely black and white picture of Charlton kicking a ball around in a poor industrial street with a bunch of small kids and was struck by the starkness of the contrast. Here was one Manchester star of the past making an investment of *himself* in the streets and the kids of *his* city. Move forward 40 years and you won't find Michael Owen going anywhere near those streets or those kids, his time and attention being far more focused on the investment he is making in 'the city of the future' on the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the club of Charlton and Owen (these *first citizens* of Manchester) is no longer owned by anyone with any association with Manchester – or indeed any knowledge of or interest in the game of football. The American Glazer brothers have bought it as an investment opportunity and saddled it with a mountain of debt it can never pay off.

And this brings me to the third of my cities and a very different concept of citizenship. The Club de Fútbol Barcelona is not owned by three foreign financiers but by 150,000 citizens of Barcelona because it is a mutual company. And it seems to work because they were champions of Europe last year.

Yes, cities are built upon productive capacity, profit and investment, but they are also built of people, identity and a deeper sense of ownership and citizenship than either Michael Owen or the Glazer brothers could ever understand.

Staying with the topic of Barcelona (the city in which we now meet) I was thrilled to see thousands of local people – Catalans, Spaniards and people of diverse origins – celebrating in the streets and beaches in the early hours of this morning celebrating the fiesta of Sant Joan. This started me thinking about the work of the French thinker Henri Lefebvre and his notion of the *right to the city*. These people in their thousands very definitely regarded themselves as having a right to their city and to celebrate the fact in a wonderfully expressive way.

Lefebvre taught us that there was a right to the city *as a whole* that went beyond our basic human rights *within* the city. This includes the right to participate in the life and shaping of the city and to the appropriation of its space and resources to define identity and citizenship. UNESCO AND UN-Habitat have adopted this by championing a formal right to the city. They define it as the:

- Distinction between human rights, *formal* citizenship of the nation state and the *exercise* of urban citizenship through democratic participation
- Public realm as space of political, social, cultural and economic self-expression
- Counteracting of the over-bearing influence of state and corporate commerce.

Presently we are seeing too few cases of this right being enshrined into national and civic legislation but there are some. I recently returned from a first visit to Brazil where I was greatly impressed by aspects of urban citizenship. The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 was the first ever to guarantee a specific right to the city. Through the 1990s this was elaborated by a National Urban Reform Forum and illustrated in particular cities such as Curitiba and Porto Alegre with such innovations as participatory budgeting. Finally the National Cities Council was formed leading to the City Statute of 2001 which defines what it means to be a citizen in Brazil, including the social dimension to land ownership, participation in urban management and the regularisation of informal settlements.

We need to see more examples of this.

So what does it mean to have the right to cities which are becoming increasingly more diverse in ethnicity, language, religion and lifestyle? I have made a study of this in my book *The Intercultural City*. I began by trying to define intercultural citizenship by contrast to other models which have been variously tried out in Europe over the years. The Guest Worker City was a closed city in which foreign labour was engaged purely on the basis of an economic transaction, with no rights of citizenship and no presumption of the need for lasting relationships. In contrast the Assimilation city model accepted foreigners into the marketplace and into citizenship, but on the strict condition they abandoned 'at the door' any aspects of their cultural identity which did not accord with the resident majority. The Multicultural city model with which I grew up in Britain awarded a robust framework of legal protection and citizenship rights to foreigners, but has been criticised for not matching this with an equivalent set of responsibilities – on behalf of minorities and majority – to interact and empathise with each other, leading in extreme cases to segregation and the creation of 'parallel lives'. My conception of the intercultural city grows out of a multicultural model. However, I would portray the latter as a static model in which citizens are ascribed to a rigid ethno-cultural box which they may not leave. In contrast the Intercultural city acknowledges that we are all complex beings with multiple identities and communities and that these change and evolve through time. It is a dynamic model in which diverse elements are constantly brought into direct contact (in contrast with the avoidance practiced under multiculturalism) and must engage, must explain, listen and be listened to.

My model is no Nirvana. All this rubbing up together will inevitably create some friction. The Intercultural City is not always an easy place in which to live. It requires effort on the part of all to make it work, and this will include disagreement, negotiation, the potential for conflict, the need for compromise but also the possibility of beneficial surprises and social innovations emerging from this process.

I have been very grateful to the Council of Europe for taking up my ideas and adapting them into an international programme. During a pilot phase of two years involving 11 cities from France to Russia we have been experimenting in designing practical new intercultural policy concept models. The programme is now set to expand, including the inclusion of cities from other continents¹.

I am under no illusion that in the attempt to create a new model of intercultural citizenship and rights to the city we face a number of challenges and obstacles. Here are five:

Inequality – Recent research has shown there is a hard scientific connection between the quality of life and the degree of inequality². Choose almost any indicator of social dysfunction you like: physical illness, mental illness and the extent to which people trust strangers, and you will find a remarkable correlation. The more unequal the society, the greater are its social ills. And the process is accelerating.

Injustice – And inequality impacts upon a society's attitudes to the law, and to crime and punishment. The most unequal societies (such as the United States and Britain) imprison a far higher proportion of their population than do the most egalitarian.

Detachment – As our societies have become more prosperous and we have become more individualistic it seems we feel we have more to protect and we have greater fears of strangers who might take it from us. Therefore we see more clustering of like-minded people into separate and even fortified homes and neighbourhoods – the gated community.

Displacement – As we take a more consumerist attitude to our citizenship we expect the public services and forces of law and order to respond to our demands and deliver instant solutions. This does not make for good and sustainable public policy but increasingly leads to short term measures which might gratify the complainant but simply displace the problem elsewhere, unsolved. Take the case of delinquent children who are ignored or neglected by parents with selfish interests, who loiter in streets and public places engaged in low level 'anti-social behaviour'. In Britain, rather than embark on the long-term process of trying to rebuild a collective sense of responsibility for children in communities, we have seen a stream of ingenious but ultimately nihilistic innovations. For example, the Mosquito, a piece of technology purchased by shop-keepers troubled by groups of young people.

¹ For more information see www.coe.int/interculturalcities

² See *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (2009) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. London, .Allen Lane.

It emits a high pitched and unpleasant sound which can only be perceived by the ears of young people. It drives them away from the shop, but does nothing to tackle the underlying problem.

Indifference – In Europe we talk with pride of our culture of ‘tolerance’ towards people whose lifestyles differ from that of the majority. However, I sometimes wonder whether this simply boils down to an attitude which says “I don’t mind what the stranger does, as long as it doesn’t stop me from doing what I want to do, and as long as I don’t have to engage with it”. In other words this is indifference (without empathy) which, for the most part is benign, but under conditions of stress or competition for resources could become malignant.

But there are grounds for hope and optimism. Here are some examples of people and places where the right to the city is exercised and where an intercultural city is being built.

Reclaiming space – Cities have surrendered so much of the public realm to the car, to commerce and to security. I am seeing growing numbers of examples of people acting in an informal way to appropriate parts of the city. It could be the emerging ‘Guerilla Gardening’ movement³³ or the people in New York who blocked Broadway and filled it with cheap deck chairs and waited to see what happened as pedestrians gradually populated this car-dominated street. This is always an ongoing and dynamic process involving contention and negotiation and there is no better contemporary example of this than the neighbourhood of Raval in Barcelona, which wrestles with the need to accommodate many different communities and uses.

Recycling the city – Cities are not museums and so they need to retain memory whilst always remaining open to change. Some might say the Anglo-Saxons take a rather more pragmatic approach to this than some of their continental cousins.

Take for example the large building in Brick Lane in east London. It began life as a protestant church built by refugee French Huguenots, but in the 19th century converted to being a Synagogue to reflect the high number of Jewish settlers. Now it has converted again into a mosque for Bangladeshi residents and they have recently erected a minaret to reflect this. What in other countries might be met with accusations of sacrilege has been accepted as the natural way of things. The Americans are even less sentimental. They pretty much invented the concept of the ghost town and quite prepared to see whole cities go through complete transformation. Take Detroit which, having been made by the car was destroyed by it. Its downtown has been largely abandoned, destroyed and allowed to return to nature (or ‘urban prairie’) with the notorious case of a theatre being reused as a parking lot. But now we are seeing a new breed of pioneer citizen moving into Detroit, attracted by its very openness, to try and create a new kind of post-crash city based upon more sustainable forms of wealth creation and social relations.

Reinventing institutions. For example the libraries in Tower Hamlets east London which are being rebuilt and reconceived as Idea Stores. Designed especially by the architect David Adjaye to stress, accessibility, transparency and flexibility they are located next to major shops and keep the same opening hours (including Sundays) to encourage maximum usage. They have high staff numbers including ‘meeters and greeters’ there to encourage first time users to feel welcome and comfortable. Although still holding large book stocks they also have space available for a wide variety of other usages, to ensure they are seen by people in the neighbourhood as the centre of their community.

Bringing the city back. Many parts of our cities feel monotonous and abandoned by the rest of the city. Devoted to a single purpose of housing and through accident or design, populated by people with little stake in the prosperity of the city they are left to rot on the edge of the nowhere – out of sight and out of mind. One thinks of the French banlieues, the outskirts of Glasgow, or of many post-communist cities. But one does not perhaps think of Amsterdam, and yet a few years ago Bijlmermeer was one of the most desolate and hopeless places in western Europe. Since then, it hasn’t simply had the quality of its housing improved enormously but the rest of the city, in all its diversity of functions, has been brought back in. A bank headquarters, employers, well-known shops, a major transport hub have moved in, but not as part of a process of gentrification in which the poorer residents are displaced. The old residents remain, reconnected to and re-engaged with their city.

³³ <http://www.guerrillagardening.org/>

Active citizens. Jakub Polewski is a street campaigner in the Polish city of Łódź. He is too young to remember its noble history as a centre of the textile history for eastern Europe or its grimmer history of war and holocaust. He has grown up in a city of grand but empty buildings which are gradually falling prey to illegal demolition, rampant land speculation and profiteering and cheap and nasty architecture, whilst the responsible authorities seem to turn a blind eye. He and a team of colleagues monitor these activities, covertly film them, expose them through media such as Youtube and Facebook and then hold the politicians and officials to account. Every city needs its Jakubs.

Finally we need to celebrate the public space. My thoughts turn to the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro which is far more than a four day festival of scantily-clad bodies it is generally portrayed as. Firstly it is able to absorb and reflect all the diverse cultural roots of the people of the city and provides a unifier of their identities. Secondly it is a powerful economic driver keeping many people, particularly in the favela, employed for much of the year. In a country often troubled in the past by corruption, informality and arbitrary government, Carnival provides a strong normative framework of rules and responsibilities, which builds social trust. Also it finds a role for everyone regardless of age, ability, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Finally it provides institutions throughout the city neighbourhoods which provide valuable social services and adds glue to the social fabric. And of course, it celebrates the freedom of all to use the public space.

And it is appropriate I should end with Barcelona. I recently visited Sants, a neighbourhood of the city where I discovered the Catalan custom of Castellers, whereby large numbers of people come together to form human towers or castles which can reach 10 or 20 metres in height. So what, you might think. Are there not many ways around the world in which young men can demonstrate their machismo and recklessness? But this is much more than that. Firstly because it welcomes all from brawny older men to slender women and young kids who can all find a place in the structure. Whilst I was there at the rehearsal they were recruiting resident Pakistanis and eastern Europeans to join in this most Catalan of activities. They even allowed me to add my ample body weight to the base of the structure and, if I had been a new resident of Sants, I would certainly have returned, because it seemed to offer a very open and democratic way of joining in with the rest of the community, meeting new people and ultimately engaging in an activity in the streets of the city which would bring enormous sense of collective pride and achievement. Sad to say that back in my native Britain, if I tried to start a Castellar club, the authorities would probably ban it on the grounds of health and safety, which reminds me that excessively cautious and intrusive bureaucracy is another obstacle to the intercultural city. But who knows, I may just try!