3.0 World Cities: Arts & Culture

In recent years, arts and culture have become more and more crucial to urban planning and urban renewal as cities attempt to gain the status of world cities. This chapter investigates the role of arts and culture in relation to how cities attempt to gain competitive advantage within the global system.

If one further examines world city discourse beyond accepting the assumption that world cities are the economic powerhouses within the new global information economy, it is also necessary to examine other accepted criteria of what makes a city a world city. As mentioned earlier, these world cities no longer represent major industrial strength and are not necessarily locations of major manufacturing. In fact, world city economies tend to be based on “the generation of new knowledge and on the access to and processing of appropriate information.” (Castell and Hall 1994 in O’Connor and Wynne, 1996: p. 7) Economies in this post-Fordist, global environment value “cultural capacity – the ability to accumulate knowledge and manipulate symbols.” (O’Connor and Wynne, 1996: p. 7) This new “symbolic economy rose to prominence against a backdrop of industrial decline in the 1970’s and 80’s” (Zukin, 1995: p. 8) Zukin defines this symbolic economy as “the intertwining of cultural symbols and economic capital” (Zukin, 1995: p. 3) and explains that “the word ‘culture’ has become an abstraction for any economic activity that does not create material products like steel, cars, or computers.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 12)

This understanding of culture as being at the heart of the new mode of production for world cities is critical in understanding the new type of city. Within this new economy, so-called culture industries are often the drivers of the economic growth that enables these cities to maintain their dominant positions. Almost all world cities are hubs for international broadcast and print media, and are also the sites of cultural production as well as consumption. This notion of cultural production as a basis for economic growth is based on the global market which now acts as cultural consumers for products produced primarily within world cities. The rest of the world is the consumer in this symbolic economy with the bulk of the symbols, media, and culture, being produced by an elite core within the dominant world cities. According to Evans, Marx’s understanding of “production and consumption as interrelated, each arbitrating and mediating one another, is a relationship never more apparent than in
today’s consumer culture and cultural consumer. Thus, in his view, “new forms of production create new forms of response and new possibilities for consumption (Channan, 1980) and which the cultural industries and ‘symbolic goods’ in particular typify.” (Evans, 2001: p. 149)

The culture producers within this new economy have been dubbed the “culture industries” and their role is powerful in terms of the economic base they generate which enables cities to sit in dominant positions within the world city system. The term culture industry has been defined in a number of ways, from Derek Wynne’s definition: “as including all forms of activity associated with what is traditionally understood as art and popular culture,” (Wynne, 1992: p. 1) to the following definition quoted in Evan’s Cultural Planning:

Cultural industries refer to those institutions in our society which employ the characteristic modes of production and organisation of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the forms of cultural goods and services, generally, although not exclusively as commodities – and more succinctly; the production and dissemination of symbolic meaning. (Garnham 1985, as quoted in Evans, 2001: p. 146)

Evans goes even further and divides these culture industries into 3 types:

1) Cultural Industries: Print and broadcast media, recorded music, design, art markets, digital technology, together rechristened the ‘creative industries’

2) Cultural Tourism: Arts and cultural venues, heritage sites and monuments, events and festivals and visitor attractions

3) Arts Amenities: Arts facilities as public / merit goods, subsides high / legitimate arts, civic arts (Evans, 2001: p. 140)

He goes on to explain how urban planners began to understand the value of the production and consumption of these cultural products as an indicator of quality of life (Evans, 2001: p. 142). He quotes Rustin, “It is curious that in a commodified world it seems to be social and

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3 This term is here used in quotes to emphasise that the terms has been created and defined within the world city discourse. However for the rest of the paper the quotation marks are dispensed with as the term is accepted as per the definitions provided.
not merely economic factors which determine whether capital investment will take place or not.” (Rustin as quoted in Evans, 2001: p. 142) In other words, another defining feature of world cities is the perception relating to their so-called quality of life, perceptions which in turn promote more growth and development in the eyes of city planners and managers. Cities then, in order to encourage investment and growth are determined to increase perceived quality of life, while at the same time adjusting to the new service economy. Developing and supporting the culture industries has become the acceptable way in which this is most effectively achieved.

World cities have been able to adapt from the Fordist industrial model, to a more flexible, service based model premised on the growth of cultural production. World cities are economic powerhouses, yet they are also the sites of cultural production which enable them to maintain their symbolic dominance within the global system. The process whereby cities have managed to retain or regain status within the world city system has been a process of renewal based primarily on the complete overhaul of their economies. The importance of culture industries within this renewal process cannot be overstated as it has been seen again and again in Western cities. The role of the culture industries within this process is understood as twofold; firstly these industries are seen as economic catalysts for growth whereby they will spark renewal within urban centres. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly however, these industries are seen as powerfully symbolic ways to recreate and redefine the identities of these cities as to make them more attractive and to appear to have improved the quality of life.

In fact, many of these world cities have re-invented themselves as “creative cities”, a term used by Charles Landry to describe cities that “will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation.” (Landry, 2000: p. 4) Landry sees creativity as a way to re-invent cities and as a way to address a host of social ills. In light of the decline of traditional industry, the rise of the culture industries has become the hallmark of Western world cities. The culture industries and cultural planning have been at the heart of many of the urban regeneration projects undertaken by cities currently considered to be world cities. During the period of industrial decline, many major Western cities developed serious urban problems of poverty, crime, and decay. Therefore, many Western cities found that “urban policy and urban political processes increasingly became dominated by the need to deal with
economic restructuring and the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. …..by the late 1980’s there were pressing reasons for them to adopt the language of ‘culture’.” (Lovatt, 1996: p. 147) Graeme Evans also explains,

The growing affluent Western society with time and money to spend (and invest) provided the demand, whilst the developing culture and leisure Industry saw a major opportunity in expanding its range and scale of activities. To cities seeking to revitalise and retain economic activity and life, the culture industry was a timely (re) discovery and which a series of impact studies sought to measure and promote. (Evans, 2001: p. 139)

Cultural planning in the last twenty years has driven many of these urban regeneration projects in Western cities. According to Bianchini and Parkinson, “[that] innovation in the cultural sphere is one of the driving forces of urban economics was clearly grasped by cities such as Glasgow, Paris, Rennes, Montpellier, and Barcelona.” (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993: p. 14) There are a number of examples of this transformation that are often quoted, but that of Manchester, in the United Kingdom, is a primary example of how the culture industries and cultural planning were systematically put in place to increase quality of living and transform the city. While it is not necessary to go into too many specifics of how this renewal took place, it is critical to understanding the thinking and context within which this process took place.

According to Andy Lovatt, Manchester adopted policies “designed to enhance cultural production and consumption in the city.” (Lovatt, 1996: p.148) These policies did not simply focus on “high culture” but rather on popular culture, and mass market production and consumption of culture. These included record labels, bands, nightclubs and related industries. Based on Evan’s definition of the culture industries as basically mass produced and disseminated, Manchester focused both on the production side by subsidising and assisting various culture industries, and on the supply or consumer side, by creating spaces and environments, such as bars and nightclubs, for these symbolic products to be consumed. The creation of the “cultural quarter” is seen as a pivotal base for urban regeneration based on the culture industry.
This focus on both the supply and consumption side of the culture industries had specific implications for the approaches taken by urban planners. On the production side, Manchester chose to give financial support to a number of industries, from fashion to recorded music. Loans for cultural producers were enacted to “stimulate production and enterprise within the sector.” (Wynne, 1992: p. 3) Studio workspaces were also provided for these businesses amongst other forms of marketing and support.

Perhaps even more important in terms of urban policy however, are the ways in which cultural planning has physically impacted city spaces. The use of arts and culture as a catalyst for urban regeneration has a very physical reality which has manifested in the creation of so-called cultural quarters. Construction and development led-regeneration projects worked hand in hand in Manchester with the cultural regeneration project. (Lovatt, 1996: p. 149) A cornerstone of this urban regeneration project is the creation of “cultural quarters” where space for both the production and consumption of cultural commodities is set aside. In making decisions around these cultural quarters, cities such as Manchester decided to focus on popular culture, including restaurants, concert venues, coffee shops, theatres etc. These areas were designed to attract visitors day and night, both locally and from further afield. Wynne defines these cultural quarters as “geographical areas which contain the highest concentration of cultural and entertainment facilities in a city or town.” (Wynne, 1992: p. 19) He goes on to state, “most of the ‘great; cities of the world possess such quarters,” (Wynne, 1992: p. 19) and that these quarters can encourage urban revitalisation through three interrelated strategies. First, residential development of no longer used industrial premises to encourage population growth in downtown areas. Second, new forms of retail development to combat the growth of out of town shopping. Third, measure to aid the development of the city centre ‘night time’ economy. In short cultural quarters have become one of the main strategies of arts led attempts at urban regeneration. (Wynne, 1992: pp. 19-20)

This transformation of a city has implications that are important both on a physical and on a symbolic level. The creation of cultural spaces within a city begs the question as to whose culture is promoted and presented. The decisions made by urban planners as to what cultural spaces to create, in turn determines what is expressed as the public culture of a city. As
Zukin points out, “there are many different ‘cultural’ strategies of economic development. Some focus on museums and other large cultural institutions…others call attention to the work of artists, actors, and dancers.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 271) She asks the question, “whose representations of whose culture are going to be enshrined in what institutions?” (Zukin, 1995: p. 272)

Zukin sees culture as a way of framing space, therefore “linking public culture to commercial culture has important implications for social identity and social control.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 19) She points out that the culture industries are actually involved in the production of symbols which in turn “construct both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 24) In other words, the fact that cities such as Manchester are using the culture industries to produce symbols in aid of urban renewal within a world city capitalist system has strong implications for which culture and what symbols are going to be produced and consumed.

It is safe to conclude that urban planning based around the support of the culture industries is typically based on supporting the production of symbols that benefit the capitalist and commercial goals of the urban renewal project. Issues of authenticity and control will therefore inevitably arise out of such projects. As Zukin points out, “culture is a powerful means of controlling cities” (Zukin, 1995: p. 1) and is a site of “conflict over social differences and urban fears.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 2) Cities that support the culture industries are doing so to promote a certain symbolic value of the space and to encourage further tourism and investment. As she explains, “the look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what and who should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 7) She goes on to state, “modern cities owe their existence to a …symbolic economy devised by ‘place engineers’ (Molotch 1976), officials and investors whose ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields ‘real’ results in real estate development, new businesses and jobs.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 7)

One of the core complexities of current urban cultural planning is that in using the culture industry as a means to an end, issues of representation, identity, and power are thrown to the fore. It is impossible simply to look at urban culture planning in terms of urban regeneration without looking at the underpinning neo-liberal agenda and how this agenda impacts on the
decision made and the resulting outcomes. The ultimate goals of projects such as this are to ensure a city’s place within the capitalist world city system, and to perpetuate development and growth within a very specific framework. At the very least, many city planners are attempting to utilise the culture industries to produce the appearance of a world city symbolically. In fact, one of the key objectives of urban renewal through culture production is to create the impression of increased quality of life, seen as a strategic advantage in the global competition for capital investment. Thus the use of the culture industries to promote tourism and investment in cities is often about the creation of a symbolic city. As Zukin points out, this route is often taken by cities with “few cards to play, [which] use cultural strategies in the absence of any other industrial strategies for growth.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 274) But as she points out, these strategies “do not reverse the hierarchies of place that lead to competition for distinctive segments of capital and labour – competition that is often perceived in terms of image.” (Zukin, 1995: p. 274)

Cities around the world are in competition with each other within the capitalist system; competition for capital investment, growth, and jobs. What we learn from the literature is that often the way in which a city is perceived, its standard of living, quality of life, and its image within the global context have become crucial indicators as to how they will fare within this global competition. Cultural strategies have become a common and effective way for cities to position themselves as primed for growth and investment.

The fact that a city’s perceived image within this Western ideology has become critical for a city’s growth relative to other cities, poses enormous challenges for developing cities that are determined to operate within this world system. Already perceived as “left behind” or underdeveloped, these cities now need to compete with advanced capitalist economies for the same scarce investment resources. African cities in particular have been stigmatized for decades based on their almost permanent status as periphery to core modern Western cities. For African cities to compete within this system, their image problem poses a fundamental challenge. African cities that want to obtain a competitive advantage for investment are finding that they need to mould themselves in the image of Western cities, not just from an economic standpoint, but also in terms of these cultural and symbolic strategies. What this means for African cities can lead to a fundamental change in the physicality and identity of space of the urban environment.