

## URBAN EDUCATION – CREATIVETOOLS IN THE SERVICE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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The diverse population of big cities raise several interesting social issues which establish a need to re-think urban development and a demand for new practices, governance and socio-cultural management. Urban education is a generic term constituting projects that aim to boost communication and interaction amongst the community members, furthermore, to increase tolerance and sense of ownership in the communities which are essential features of a peaceful co-existence within the urban environment as an organism. These educational projects are organized in public spheres, in places where people live their everyday lives.

### *Urban spheres and identity in the globalized world*

Cities are complexes of production of goods and information and are centres of bureaucracy. Almost everything that bears a major role in global economy is managed in the populated cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (with a population of over 2-3 and 4 million) and therefore they are in the frontline of global decision making processes. Saskia Sassen, one of the most influential urban thinkers of our days has also emphasized the important status of cities in the global economy (Sassen, 2011). In addition, 'mega-cities' are the centres of international corporations with a legislative system and economic power that makes their role grow beyond national boundaries. Cities are rich, reactive, flexible and innovative and for these reasons city leadership gains a great decision-making power in the social, economic and cultural sphere as well. Especially in global cities, like London or New York, cities become 'de-nationalized' zones within national territories. They are characterized by the presence of numerous multicultural communities; they become melting pots of different cultures and subcultures.

Cities can also be seen as the brain in the body as all the knowledge is concentrated there; the manoeuvres of the movements to the transformation of thoughts into words are managed by this organ. This is where new ideas are produced too and materialize in innovations and infrastructure. However, to perform well, the brain has to learn. That is why knowledge-based societies, or as others refer to it, knowledge-economies, gain such an importance nowadays in developed countries.

The elements that enliven and animate cities are the individual citizens. According to the UN's document on World Urbanization Prospects, the population of urban areas in less developed regions has grown from roughly 1.7 to 5.7 billion in the last fifty years. This number is about 0.8 to 1.24 in developed regions (United Nations, 2012). Predictions show that in a short twenty years the population will already hit 7 billion, while not significantly changing in the developed areas. It would be interesting to examine the main reasons for the difference between developed and less developed regions, but that is not within the scope of this paper.



Apart from native urbaners, a large number of people have left their rural homes in the last decades to live in the cities and they have also brought their culture with them. (Here by ‚rural‘ is meant, for the sake of simplicity, everything which is non-urban). The general belief is that communities and local identity tend to fall apart when they meet cultural uniformization and the accelerated life-style produced by globalization. Apparently we no longer practice the traditions of our ancestors; the ties and bonds we used to have in traditional societies dissolve in the post-modern milieu of the new era and we, children of the city, become rootless in the cauldron of globalizing urban life.

Jörg Dürrschmidt, an urban sociologist and researcher of the everyday life in the globalizing cities has a more optimistic way of seeing globalization. He describes how global cities (world cities like London, New York) are going through a process of ‚microglobalization‘; „the integration of global differences and variety into a distinctive social environment“ (Eade, 1997, p. 57). That is how world cities become condensed versions of the world, with an extremely high socio-cultural and economic diversity. In the ‚microcosm‘ of these cities a great number of diverse people inhabit the same local environments (Eade, 1997). They are individuals who, having been socialized in different socio-cultural conditions, live in different personal realities, while living in the same physical world, in the same urban environment. As members of these newly emerging and diverse environments they themselves shape of the local culture, their ‚original identity‘ is not lost but slowly merged with this unique vividness of the microglobalized culture. Consequently, their identity is constantly challenged by the diversity of their surroundings.

From this diverse social and cultural diversity of inhabitants (the aggregation of personal realities), the urban environments gain great potential to develop a colourful milieu of creativity and innovation. Taking further Giddens‘ theory about the relation of localities and inhabitants (Eade, 1997) in a well-managed and open urban area individuals can become generators of the local climate as an always-changing environment; they become designers of their own localities, the place they live in. This may sound slightly utopian as we rarely think about urban areas as ones that are, on any level, created by its inhabitants; they are seen more as areas that are designed and controlled by their local governments.

However, making citizens interested in becoming involved in the life of their environment might be very useful for the performance and well-being of the organism of the urban area.

### *Towards the city as an active organism*

The most important features of a well-functioning organism are its weak-connections. A Hungarian biologist, Péter Csermely found similar algorithms in the functioning of cells and other networks like the human societies (Csermely, 2004). He observed how cells connect with each other in order to achieve maximum efficiency and good energy management within the organism. In cell biology, these are temporary connections established among members of the cell to transmit information, or energetic tension. When strong connections are rigid, they tend to make the system unresponsive to impact because the members are tightly bounded together; weak connections are established in order to achieve a certain temporary aim and can easily be released when the connection has achieved the goal it was set up for. Thus, these connections



play a great role in solving emerging problems, transmitting information and tackling energy flow within the organism. For example, a system will be resistant to the challenge of lack of resources if it has flexible weak connections. The motivation of networks (here, the organism) to create these connections is symbiosis and mutual benefit. Networks cannot exist without weak connections; their stability is dependent on the capacity of creating a multilevel, complex and integrated network.

Similarly, a city can function well if among the elements of its cells' (in this case different forms of social organizations and people) a connection can be easily established making the flow of communication and fast problem solving possible by transition of information and dissemination of tension. No connection between the elements of the community (the members of a given area) can lead to paralysation and accumulation of tension within the network as an organism. For example a community with the right sources of knowledge (cultural capital) and social connections (social capital) is much more resistant to an economic recession (lack of resources) than one where people are ignorant and disconnected. In those cases, chaos and depression is much more likely to persist on the long term, and the structure of society as well is more likely to break down, for example, to shift hierarchies.

The establishment of connections between members of a group of people can be extremely useful if the aim is to create a productive, well-functioning community. The establishment of these connections cannot be forced but facilitated in many different ways in a city in order to maintain the reactive capacities and stability of the organism; and this is exactly what the city governments are established for. In this sense, the managers of the city have a great role and power in maintaining the health of urban areas and communities. The following section I will discuss some ways of achieving this state.

### *Urban education*

We know that education is the key factor for creating responsible members of a society, agents of social and economic development. Providing quality education to the young generation can be thought of as an investment in the future. However, what about the majority, those masses of busy adults whose views and beliefs are already deeply engrained in their mind and defining their social behaviour? Or those who immigrate from different cultures, bearing diverse backgrounds and levels of education? Each and every member of the urban community contributes to its life in a way. All our personal actions cause effects consequences: we contribute to and shape our environment but we are also determined by the milieu of a given place.

As an introduction to education, it seems to be useful to examine the concept of 'milieu' and how it comes to play. Milieu is, as Max Scheler defines it, is a pre-given world that frames our practical actions. It is the result of the incidence of our common history, social life and culture that makes us „be committed to a relatively stable set of intentions”, that „navigate and control, our' world" (Eade, 1996, p. 30). A milieu helps us to maintain 'normality' in our co-existence as common knowledge and perception of certain things makes co-existence easier. Scheler made a distinction between 'milieu structure' and 'actual milieu'; the former remains stable as it is rooted in the deep structures of local institutions and world views of the members of the community (Eade, 1997).



„Actual milieu’, on the other hand, shows a great tendency to follow the actions of the current, practical world’. A good example might be when in a rigid socio-political milieu a revolution suddenly bursts out. In deep structures matters remain the same or start to change only very slowly, assuming that values, beliefs and attitudes cannot change from one day to the other. Meanwhile, on the surface, the actual revolutionary milieu stirs up boundaries, washes away old customs and for a relatively short period builds up an image of a ‚brave new world’ (Huxley, 1998). Usually, as the revolution calms down, matters apparently remain the same but the storm on the surface also affects the roots; change persists and modifies the deeper structure as well. How fast the change becomes tangible on the surface depends on the reactivity and adoptive capacity of the holistic system and of course, it is also a question of how great the need for a change in society is.

We have seen that loose connections can be useful in the life of networks because they make them more resistant and flexible. Loose connections also facilitate the flow of information that is equally considered useful when it comes to, for example, the creation of new knowledge or to problem solving. In order to make connections happen, members of the network have to be willing to establish them by being open and reactive. They will be open if their attitudes allow them to do so: if they believe that establishing contacts with other members of the network (community) will be beneficiary for them because their commonly shared milieu of time and place (structure, or actual) makes it possible to do so by being open and supportive.

To present the role the milieu can play in the life of people and organizations, let’s take the example of a city that is often described of one of the ‚coolest’ cities in the United States; Austin. One description we can find on the internet explains why it is so popular;

„The city is a “crazy quilt” combination of environmentalism, art, improv, and tech companies. Noted for its quirkiness, Austin is proud of its diverse population, as its unofficial slogan is “Keep Austin Weird.” It stays affordable, too: its cost of living is 2.4% lower than the national average.”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently the milieu of Austin is characterised by diversity, creativity and innovation. It appears to be a place where the general attitudes that create the core of a milieu-structure are turning around openness to be quirky and different. Indeed, difference is a concept that carries the potential of learning and also comes close to urban education.

If a city or an urban area bares a milieu of creativity, the people who live there are affected by it because, as stated above, a milieu affects people’s lives by establishing a relatively stable set of intentions. But who are the stakeholders who have the power to create the milieu, in other words, who are setting the status quo and determining the values and the ‚style’ of localities in a city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? They are the institutions who determine the life of the people: employers like firms, enterprises, governmental and non-governmental organizations. In particular, it is the one who sets the policies: the local government. But why would local governments want to create open, active and diverse environments?

Richard Florida, a popular sociologist and urban studies theorist from the USA and the British urban planner, creative and writer, Charles Landry came up with influential ideas concerning urban development and creative cities. Although their theories differ and both have been exposed to a great amount of criticism, they had a great



influence on urban managers and policy makers in the last decade. They have been invited by numerous urban governors to share their views and give advice for one important reason: to teach how to boost a city's economic productivity by engaging in creative strategies and creative class attraction. According to Florida, the creative class covers the „people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content.” (Florida, 2000) These creative people are the movers and shakers of the creative industries, often referred to as the ‚creative economy’ (Florida, 2000).

Florida believes that industry and firms move where creative people are. Therefore, in order to attract firms and catalyse economic growth, creative workers should be attracted first of all. As he argues, creative people go to innovative and inspiring places, so cities have to develop such places with a lifestyle suitable for that kind of people.

According to a study lead by Atkinson and Easthope, when policy makers and city planners aim to bring creativity into an urban space they aim to bring in a creative professional population and industries for the sake of economic development, not for a social one. (Atkinson and Easthope, 2009). Thus, the process of gentrification (the replacement of economically underprivileged members of society with ones with economic potential, like young professionals) often implies complex social problems.

Landry is more ‚naïve’; he focuses on applying creativity in urban renewal for a social benefit that tends to imply economic development in the long run. He sees creativity as a new tool in strategic urban planning, that can be and should be used first of all to achieve social development. According to his concept, creative cities are those which „identify, nurture, attract and sustain talent so it is able mobilize ideas, talents and creative organizations.” (Atkinson and Easthope, 2009, p. 66) Research interviews with NGO and community organization leaders point out that the economic growth of the last decades tend to ignore the communities they work with, and exclude the less capable from the ‚new prosperity’ of the economy.

Urban education is a concept that follows the theories of Florida and Landry, and it is mainly based on the values of the latter. The application of creative-industry products in urban environments seems to be an effective educational mean to enhance community building in urban development. By these products we can mean the tools of science, arts, design, entertainment and whatever project, object or action that can lead to the generation of new perceptions, interactions and new ideas in the receiver.

For instance, applying visual art in urban sphere can be used as an effective tool when it comes to educational intentions. One of the practical features of a piece of art is its capacity of presenting an already familiar thing from a new, a different point of view. Thus, art can offer the receiver additional information about certain subjects and issues. The experience of difference creates a learning situation by discovering a new variation for an already set image in the mind. Creating projects where citizens are exposed to art means providing an opportunity to meet something new and learn from the experience. But this is still just the level of learning. Education comes it when these tools as creators of learning situations are managed intentionally in order to put through a message or achieve a certain goal.



The following examples illustrate the core of this concept. The government perceives that there is a vacuum between diverse cultural groups of a certain urban area. Therefore, they decide to make them approach each other by exposing pieces of art in common public spaces created together by artists from the diverse groups, or with the involvement of artistic groups they launch a competition based on common passions (such as sport, music, etc.). Another way to involve individuals in the life of the city is, to use the tools of the technology; for example, when interactive screens are set up in public spaces where, while they are waiting for the bus, people can express their opinions about something, or they can complete a missing part of an image, to keep themselves entertained. These actions of the inhabitants can not only be entertaining and activating for them but also can provide data about the state of the citizens and give feed-back to the urban ‚managers‘ that facilitates the development of further projects. The aim of these projects is to create an information-flow, to encourage inhabitants to reflect on their environment and its stakeholders, furthermore, to create the general ambiance of a creative urban community. On the long term these pursuits can become part of the local milieu which implies more participant and active inhabitants, or at least more satisfaction with the living environment and personal life.

#### *Urban education as an innovation in urban management*

Urban education can be understood as a theoretical framework which contains diverse creative projects in a given urban area. It is a concept of creating an expanded learning environment that is beyond the ‚classic‘ understanding of formal and non-formal education. We still tend to associate the notion of learning with educational institutes, not considering the importance of informal learning that can happen and should happen more actively in all the scenes of our lives. The concept of urban education raises a need for re-thinking learning and education in the ‚microglobalized‘ world we live in, which city management and urban planners play a great role in.

Learning should be an essential part of our everyday lives and an attitude towards the environment that presupposes the constant possibility of interaction with it and gaining new knowledge. In today's vivid cities all possibilities are given to become learners, participators, moreover, creators of new content.

We know that changing deeper structure is a long-term process, but at the same time we also know that the actions happening on the surface can affect the roots if they are repeated frequently. How can urban education achieve significant improvements in the social spheres? If the core management of the local government wants the city to have an open milieu-structure, they can decide, for instance, to boost a given urban area, enhance the activity of its members and attract innovation. However, this requires a focused policy-making process and a high level of agreement between the stakeholders of the communities. For realizing urban education, the well-managed and active cooperation of sociologist, creative professionals and city management is needed. Poor and rarely organized projects will not lead to any result; urban education has to be a chain of frequent and diverse projects to make people get accustomed to and ever challenging, opened and supportive environment. It is a way, in Saskia Sassen's words, to create a city that ‚talks back‘, where people are creators of their own living spheres and where they can improve their own and each other's well-being by being contributing and being proactive.





## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Austin [http://www.bestplaces.net/docs/studies/americas\\_top\\_relocate\\_cities.aspx](http://www.bestplaces.net/docs/studies/americas_top_relocate_cities.aspx)

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