

# Essay: Fluid cities create

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What makes a city culturally dynamic? What makes a city the sort of place that people want to visit, move to and explore? What makes a city the sort of place that spits out or draws in artists, musicians, writers and filmmakers? What makes a city culturally desirable and talked about, or a hub of music, literature, media and the arts?

The cultures of cities are far less predictable than their hard infrastructure. You can quantify good transport links, and you can commission public buildings or even the quasi-scientific art of designing successful communities, yet there are few roadmaps to apply to the hard task of fostering a dynamic successful culture. It is much more than placement of monuments, buildings or transport links.

Cultures aren't fixed or fixable. They are barely measurable. While you can identify the preconditions that led to Renaissance Italy, early twentieth century Paris, the San Francisco techno-hippie culture, Hong Kong cinema, the Seattle grunge explosion, Melbourne laneways, the music scenes of Manchester and now Glasgow, or the anarchic wonder of early 'noughties' Berlin, it will never be possible to replicate them.

They are a product of living things and become living things themselves. They're fluids, not solids. Cultures flow. Cultures surge. Cultures stagnate, inundate and flood. Cultures pool and freeze, and in doing so they create another landscape in cities, countries and continents as tangible as the legacy water leaves on smooth plains and jagged mountains on the ever-changing earth. The very act of quantifying these preconditions risks undermining the vitality that produced them.

They aren't transferable. Culture is the process by which we communicate with each other, exchange ideas, explore possibilities, and collect and curate our personal and collective histories. They are the means by which we learn something of each other's lives and experiences, and reflect, respond to and reject inner and outer worlds.

For cities, though, culture takes on another role. Culture is an aspiration. It is a driver of status, and status is bound to wealth and prestige. Global cities increasingly aspire to cultural prestige for its intangible aura and because they believe it will drive economic growth. Wealthy cities race each other to build grander museums and hoard ever more of the world's treasures; poorer cities look to cultural renewal for salvation and rejuvenation.

There is no easy way to buy or build a culture. Culture has properties that defy planning. The more you grab at it, freeze it and attempt to set it in its place, the weaker it becomes. Grand buildings, landmarks or monuments are often the legacies and artefacts of profoundly resonant cultures that echo to this day. But they are not catalysts. Today they are far more likely to be signs of aspiration than achievement, and are no more likely to produce culture than tyre tracks would be to produce a car.

Cultural evolution has more in common with divination than design. A city can't build a culture any more than it can build an idea, a thought process or a polar bear. Cultures emerge from the spontaneous, temporary nature of human motivations, passions, interactions and enthusiasms. They often form in rebellion and opposition rather than by deliberation and design. They are unique and idiosyncratic. They result from adaptation and evolution, and they have a tendency to be strongest in the places where no one is looking or particularly wants them to be.

All is not lost. Once you let go of the idea that cultures are constructed, new possibilities emerge. Cultures can be nurtured. Cities can seed and feed culture. They can give it somewhere to live, to move, to breed, to grow. And when it fails (as it often does), they can provide fertile ground to go to seed in. Cultures are living things – they die as often from ill-thought-out initiatives to preserve, protect or resuscitate them as they do from starvation. They live in a complex ecosystem of regulation, regeneration, tax laws, economic decline and resurgence, subsidy, anarchy, inspiration, history, technology and – most importantly of all – the unpredictable, unquantifiable and subjective fertiliser of human creativity.

Great cultural cities are those which allow their cultures to flow rather than freeze.

I grew up in a city engaged in a long, slow debate about what its culture was or should be. Newcastle, Australia is hardly a world-renowned cultural centre. But it is a place fortunate enough to be blessed with a strong sense of its unique identity. Economics, some distinctive geographical impediments and some unique challenges conspire to make the city anything but complacent about its place in the world.

Blessed only with the advantage of not being Sydney, Newcastle is Australia's second-oldest and seventh-largest city. For decades, Newcastle has been engaged in a long and ultimately losing fight for the title of Australia's largest non-capital city – now the Gold Coast. While both cities are blessed with great beaches, they are cities with very different histories and mythologies. One is an iconic, international, fast-growing by-word for a leisure lifestyle; the other contents itself with a gritty local pride that occasionally manifests itself in shouting down or knocking the teeth out of anyone who'd dare suggest the place is anything less than paradise on earth.

Newcastle is gradually emerging from a prolonged period of economic decline and recession. Once home to Australia's largest steelworks, a now non-existent shipbuilding industry and a hub for manufacturing and medium industry of the

kind that Australia doesn't do anymore, Newcastle has been forced to confront its own economic mortality. By my late teenage years, in the early '90s, the unemployment rate was well into double figures and youth unemployment peaked above 40 per cent. Even a booming port and coal industry have been unable to bring life back to Newcastle's long and broken CBD. At last count there were still over a hundred empty shops on the two main streets. Hundreds more empty offices and vacant floors sit above them. Newcastle's entire mid-twentieth century CBD lies fractured by an earthquake and a rapidly changing world.

Growing up, no one would have suggested that Newcastle really had much of a culture. Culture was something that happened somewhere else. Culture was something that other people did. It was mostly something that had already happened. Great dead men and young Americans invented culture. Culture was imported. It was filtered by experts and occasionally brought to the Civic Theatre by the likes of the Sydney Theatre Company, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and big-name artists from far-flung places in Australia and overseas. The closest Newcastle really came to producing culture of any kind was when the Bell Shakespeare Company (led by local boy made good John Bell) would preview work in Newcastle before it got a run in Sydney. Whether this was practicality, nostalgia or because Novocastrians were discerning critics of Shakespeare (or not) was never entirely clear. But school kids got cheap enough tickets that I could afford to go.

As Newcastle sought its post-industrial roadmap, the idea of culture began to figure prominently in it. Cultural tourism, smarter jobs, innovation and the idea of a creative renaissance started to take hold. The Civic Theatre was immaculately and beautifully restored, cutting-edge architects were invited to redevelop the art gallery, massive old rail sheds were repaired and restored with the intent of turning them to cultural purposes, plans boldly proclaimed a large swathe of the CBD a 'cultural precinct', the city's marketing material started to talk about Newcastle as a cultural centre and international consultants were brought in to talk about the rejuvenation of places like Dublin, Liverpool and Manchester.

Millions of dollars were spent. Many millions more were fantasised about or sought for projects that will never see the light of day. Yet the idea that Newcastle actually produced original culture was an afterthought. I did alright personally: some festivals I started brought artists and considerable audiences (fulfilling the tourism side of the equation), but the local creative community as a whole gained little.

In hindsight, cavernous heritage-listed buildings where trains were once built were ill-suited to the needs of artists. Their heritage status required infinite layers of planning permits and exemptions for every nail or partition, for every heavy object you might wish to drag across the floor. Government control meant activities were regulated to death and the entire place was schizophrenically required to convert to a function centre whenever a higher bidder demanded it.

A redeveloped art gallery, while desirable, was a long way down the list of potential creative catalysts. Though more impressive and less ugly than its predecessor, it wasn't much better for local artists than the current one. In any event, to date it has never happened.

Even the Civic Theatre's grand makeover was something of a mixed blessing. While the space was immaculately restored to accommodate major touring companies, its sheer scale meant that it was out of the reach of the innovative and adventurous, the local and low budget. The unglamorous and barely functional smaller theatre alongside it was not part of the renovation. It was quietly closed. It had not been kept up to date with ever-tightening Occupational Health and Safety requirements – a situation that remained until comparatively recently.

Drawings dotted with precincts marked 'cultural use' remained plans. Practical attempts to kick-start or bootstrap cultural innovation were thwarted by increasingly complex regulations and requirements, tax breaks that created incentives for buildings to remain empty and an attitude that thwarted initiative and deterred all but the most belligerently persistent.

A decade later, Newcastle remains a net exporter of artists and a net importer of culture.

Newcastle is actually pursuing a pragmatic approach to cultural development. Cities awash with petro-dollars, status anxiety or a novelty-driven approach to economic development have turned to museums in the same way an earlier generation turned to theme parks. Abu Dhabi alone is spending billions to build both a Guggenheim and a Louvre. Cities the world over are allocating public funds to grand art museums to boost their economies by raising cultural status. Designed by brand-name celebrity architects, the world's major museums are slowly creating Disney-meets-Prada lifestyle brands.

By doing this, cities keen to project dynamism and confidence instead flout their insecurity. Cultural cringe is alive and well in the cities of the Middle East and East Asia. They look longingly to European palaces, monuments and art collections for cultural signs to clone. It is one of the ironies of the age that authoritarian states collect and celebrate the artefacts of Western rebellion, decadence, liberalism, tolerance, religiosity, conquest and conflict with almost no comment on the irony of it.

The brand-name museum competition is driven less by authentic local culture or the needs and aspirations of a city's artists or citizens, and more by the commercial instinct that drives a bid for a grand prix, Olympic Games or the world's tallest building. No one suggests that a grand prix boosts the local automotive industry or a mega skyscraper is about office space. Sporting events are sold as tourism; only a fraction of the recurrent expenditure is passed off as investment in grass-roots sport.

For cities not awash in ludicrous sums of money, another template has emerged. Growth centres like Brisbane, Singapore and my adopted home of Melbourne chose from a common cultural menu: an 'iconic' (if not brand name) gallery, museum or performance centre, a 'flagship' art or film festival (ideally both), bringing great work from around the world, a 'world-class' theatre and/or dance company and/or orchestra that can present the greatest hits of Western culture. The relative size of these offerings is mistaken for the vibrancy or otherwise of a city's cultural life.

I have no objection to any of these. I've directed arts festivals, attended film festivals, and am partial to live performance. I love ambitious architecture, and regularly visit galleries at home and away. But I reject what they implicitly suggest about the cities that build and promote these limited set-piece choices. More often than not, they represent the same assumptions I grew up with in Newcastle: culture happens somewhere else; it is something a professional elite does for you; it is something that has already been created and a world city must archive it, present it and freeze it. Culture, as defined by a narrow model, is in need of constant investment, authorisation, attention and the intervention of a small army of bureaucrats, curators, professionals and middle managers who protect and sustain it.

Our arts agencies and governments spend much more money on this archival culture than on living culture. A single gallery can receive hundreds of millions of dollars of capital investment, over \$40 million a year in government subsidies (with half spent on wages and a third on promotion), while artists in most Australian states compete for a collective pie of less than a million dollars to develop and present original work.

I'm a daydreamer. I love the idea of designing cities.

As a child, I drew maps of places that never existed. My shelves are full of books of architecture and urbanism. I've sketched ill-thought-out ideas and made sandbox cities to resemble the ones that I live in. I love the intricacies of how cities grow, evolve and change. I am part frustrated architect, part an under-capitalised property developer, part a great town planner of fictional utopias, and part the most petty of petty dictators.

I've played hours of *Sim City* – a computer game where the player assumes the role of all-powerful mayor and urban planner. I've patiently and gently tweaked land zonings and densities to make imaginary metropolises or boutique utopias and when that hasn't quite created the cities of my dreams, I've gone to the internet for cheat codes, downloaded the architecture and plonked a whopping big Guggenheim Bilbao right in that awkward spot that wasn't doing it for me.

In the real world, cultural institutions are the last place left where politicians and bureaucrats can play the central planning game. The last remnants of the grand 'nation-building' exercises of the black and white era. A throwback to a time when

you might determine a public good, marshal massive state investments, and damn the years of recurrent funding and freeze a vision, an aspiration, and hold it out to the world.

Even conservatives of the kind who elevate competition and small government into a self-evident truth are often to be found among the most passionate advocates for this particular kind of cultural nation-building, subsidy and protectionism. Their passion for large, centralised, hierarchical cultural forms and approaches somehow overrides their ideological objection to large, centralised, bureaucratic hierarchies. They get outraged not by the day-to-day protectionism, but by when the walls are breached and someone actually creeps into the palace or on to the program with something that initially found its relevance in the competitive world outside.

My imaginary cities have people in them, but mostly they are there to stare at the awesome buildings and admire the ingenious planning. In reality, the ambitious scale dwarfs the idea that people might make culture in them. It draws to mind images of Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer standing over the massive model for their new world capital. Welthauptstadt Germania – with its grandiose edifices, sweeping boulevards and utter disregard of the human-scale consequences – was to be the fixed and immutable capital of the thousand-year reich. It is a vision of culture almost without people in it at all. It's a great irony that one of Hitler's last legacies is found in the city it was designed to replace. The anarchic, vibrant, culturally rich, robust and chaotic allure of post-reunification Berlin is alive to fluid possibility. It is the antithesis of his imagined city. Welthauptstadt Germania would have been fixed, grand, ambitious and barren.

I suspect the appeal of the grand institutions is as much to the desire in all of us to leave a legacy as it is to a rational and grounded response to the needs of culture. As the Sydney Opera House shows us, soaring ambitions create great narratives and compelling legacies for those who envisage, design and plan such an institution.. They leave fabulous legacies for those who open it and have their name on the plaque. They create jobs for those employed to run it and validate it and publicise it, do its paperwork and write reassuring reports that it has met its performance targets. They freeze culture long enough to quantify it.

Yet they ultimately mislead us into believing that culture is permanent and fixed, that culture stands steadfast against time and history. They lead us to believe that culture actually lives in buildings designed to stand for the ages. Yet, to all intents and purposes it dies there. The great arts are laid to rest and are archived there. So much energy and money are spent attempting to fossilise cultures that we have entirely forgotten to farm them.

Great cities are places where cultures are born, not their graveyards. A city is a unique set of possibilities. A city is a unique collision of ideas, catalysts for cultures to breed for people meet and interact, where possibilities are nurtured and integrated.

The truly great culture-producing cities may not have grand institutions. The art and cultural innovation they foster are more likely to emerge from the edges, not the centre.

Cultural planners may be best not to play too much *Sim City*. To really model the culture of cities, you would probably need a very different game where the city is not viewed as zones and grids, but as a series of tasks to be completed at street level – tasks such as finding somewhere to play, somewhere to rehearse, somewhere to exhibit, hang out and discuss with relatively limited capital. Finding somewhere to make mess and make noise. Somewhere to sell your work or somewhere that has enough flexibility that you can afford not to. Finding somewhere affordable and available at short notice, not bureaucratised and regulated to the point where your limited resources disappear before you have a chance to make the work or stage the production. Finding somewhere cheap enough to socialise and embrace or argue about ideas, even if you can't afford to pay for lunch and don't want to play the poker machines. Finding somewhere just far enough off the map to allow for experimentation, but close enough to others so you can get enough feedback to ensure that mistakes aren't perpetually repeated.

Cities look very different from street level than they do from the models of politicians, planners, dictators and computer game players. Culture looks very different from the point of view of the people making it than from the places where it is collected. Very few of the makers would prioritise grand palaces to their work, and even fewer will actually get into them. Artists in my experience generally want the reverse – they want to be able to take risks in places that are appropriate to take them in.

Artists need infrastructure that is fluid. They need places that are adaptable, accessible, breakable, spontaneous, flexible and capable of evolving quickly with their needs. They need spaces that are cheap, and more often they are willing to take all that goes with that and pay their own price in lack of facilities, endless working bees and leaky windows to compensate for it. Creative cities can build all the monuments they like, but accessibility rather than grandiosity is the key to living cultures.

Most cultural innovators and entrepreneurs don't need thousand-seat theatres. They don't need massive financial subsidies. They may fantasise about them, but their immediate concerns are generally much more basic. They need economic models that capitalise on their strengths and limit their weaknesses. While government grants and subsidies are vital and rarely refused, they're actually a second- or third-order issue in many cases – for anyone outside the world of recurrent funding grants, they are a way of solving practical problems rather than a source of income. Much more mundane questions like whether you can afford insurance, the availability of appropriate venues, whether you can have a bar and who gets to make money out of it are as profoundly important cultural questions as any philosophical aspirations.

In my experience, most artistic endeavours, from bands to exhibitions to theatre companies, short films, websites, festivals, conferences and installations, begin life as the results of pooled funds, sweat equity and very little cash. The ratio of things that creators can provide in kind (primarily labour, skill, sweat and enthusiasm) to the fixed costs that they cannot avoid is probably the major question that propels or thwarts cultural initiative.

The tangled minefield that stretches from public liability insurance to risk assessments, to liquor licensing, legal costs, copyright compliance, noise regulations, place of public entertainment licensing, is a formidable barrier to creative initiative. Collectively, these issues have been known to consume the resources of even a professional arts company and kill a not yet professional one much more quickly than a bad show. Obligatory consultants, large fees and the threat of heavy fines have clipped a lot of cultural activity before it ever started. Without a personal willingness to act responsibly but not necessarily thoroughly (or legally) in the face of these questions, I would never have got started. Culture is not so much what you plan but what you get away with.

The single largest area of expenditure for most small-scale cultural activities constitutes fees, insurance, infrastructure and reporting requirements that are either paid directly to government or as a result of a government requirement. For companies that are funded enough to cover those, the highest costs are most likely the administrative wages – with much of the bill spent on the additional cost of servicing government funding and meeting reporting requirements. Resourcing culture becomes little more than resourcing regulation. It is the norm in Australia for arts organisations to turn over hundreds of thousands of dollars and yet leave the artists themselves unpaid or barely paid. Very few companies in Australia would be in a position where the costs of artists, their tools and materials and the direct costs of putting on their work exceed their compliance and administration costs.

If cultures are fluid, each of these impediments is a dam wall that stops a fluid, living culture in its tracks.

Cities wishing to step ahead of the pack need to think beyond simply copying the ‘world’s best practice’ cultural template. Cultural planning needs to think less in terms of hard infrastructure and subsidised companies and much more in terms of fluid communities and constantly changing opportunities. Beyond iconic buildings, flagship events and world-class companies lies an entire creative ecosystem largely ignored and an opportunity to foster a culture of creativity and not simply layers of bureaucracy.

The two models aren’t mutually exclusive, but the reality is that the most efficient allocation of resources is to be found by brokering artists and creative communities with opportunities. Cities should find ways for artists and creative communities to

invest their sweat equity in making and remaking their cultural infrastructure – be it temporary, commercial or publicly owned. It's cheaper, easier and allows for the kind of evolving and redefining that keeps cultures fluid as needs change.

In international cities, this is achieved through tax incentives for artists to use vacant or transitional buildings. In Australia, it is stifled by the tax deductibility of loss-making buildings and the fear of liability. More than anything, it is stifled by lack of prioritisation, direction and imagination.

Cities should embrace transition and transience, and let go of the idea that cultures are fixed. I come from an entire city in transition, but even the most prosperous Australian cities are full of empty blocks, vacant buildings and under-utilised government sites that have reached the end of their economic life. Their very transience provides unique opportunities that would never be possible in a glossy arts centre.

In virtually every suburb in Australia, there is a building that has been boarded up for years, while its permanent use is debated or deferred or a consultant is brought in to determine just how much it would cost to fix. Each passing day is a lost opportunity for a temporary art gallery, for a business to incubate, for a community to form, for a performance space, for a meeting point for social or cultural experimentation.

But cities also need permanent infrastructure of the practical kind. Cities need continuing places to play, to exhibit, to sell, to perform in, and around which to develop lasting and ongoing communities and audiences. Traditionally, government has only taken responsibility for these by owning them – either top-end institutions or community centres. In between, they have left all the other layers of informal infrastructure to the market – and the market in many places has failed. The reality is that we build our cities driven largely by commercial formulas and we subsidise our culture. In between, we have no mechanism or strategy to stimulate niche uses that may be profitable but not obscenely profitable. In New South Wales, with its obscene convergence of poker machines, political donations, property developers and a culture of conservative risk management, this has meant there are few remaining pubs used as live performance spaces. A flagrant disregard for community and cultural consequences has led to buildings, cities, suburbs and communities that are ludicrously profitable and culturally barren. A city requires the niche and the experimental, the commercial and profitable, the grand and the worthy, and as wide as possible a variety of the things in between.

To reach them, planning for culture needs to break out of the old paradigms of infrastructure, capital and subsidy, and to begin to look at the subtleties of cultural opportunities that the community itself might provide if the opportunities were encouraged.

Newcastle isn't where it used to be. Even since my own childhood the geographical isolation has changed. *That* Newcastle felt as far from the cultured

world as was possible to be in an English-speaking country. But no city – even Newcastle – is truly and entirely on the edge anymore. Whereas once most media and most transportation came via Sydney, today Newcastle plugs into a hundred channels and cheap daily flights to Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The people of Newcastle are plugged into hundreds of thousands of global conversations – on blogs, websites, forums, mailing lists and bulletin boards. Newcastle exports a little culture now, and speaks directly with culture makers. Novocastrians post their photos, share bands they have seen, the events they have attended across networks of parallel global communities.

Newcastle's cultural connections are no longer scholarships, study tours, sabbaticals, reciprocal exhibitions or the passive receipt of culture broadcast from the great cultural centres of the world. Newcastle connects via the spontaneous, organic interactions that take place weekly, daily and hourly. Local artists and musicians have global communities with like minded people around the world.

Newcastle is part of the fluid forces of global cultural exchange – not as the top of a global pyramid but as part of a network of point-to-point cultural connections. Its cultural significance is measured less against whether it impresses Sydney, Melbourne, London or New York than who it connects directly to. Whether it prospers culturally will not be measured by purely by international art and style magazines, but by whether it is a hub or just a spoke, a consumer or a producer, an innovator or an afterthought in the global cultural milieu. That is a far more vital cultural measure than whether you have a landmark museum and a collection of Old Masters.

In a world made up of thousands of diverse subcultures or niche cultures, it is madness for a city to aspire to be just like other cities. Cities need places to celebrate the nature of culture that we have *now*. They need places where people uploading videos to YouTube can meet each other, and venues small enough to cater for the new diversity of contemporary music scenes. They need bars, galleries and performance spaces designed to capture the new paradox of communication: local work of international significance and international work of local significance.

Cities must trade in cultural cringe for a growing sense of confidence in our distinctiveness. They must try to be somewhere, not anywhere in the extended global sprawl of electronic suburbia. Cities must wilfully believe that the unique combination of events that may fuse here is just as compelling as those that may fuse somewhere else. Cities need to involve their people in making and remaking their own mythology, and create something that is truly unique.

Cities the world over need to contemplate the impossible long enough to see the possibilities emerge. ■