Concept Paper

“...we need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. It should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations, and their historical traditions, of the natural setting and of the complicated functions and movements of the city world.”

Creativity for sustainable cities of the future

Presently, the Earth’s physical-structural and eco-environmental systems are under strain owing particularly to commercial-industrial priorities and malpractices that are not compatible with the well-being of our planet. The carbon-based economy and prevailing consumption patterns have brought about the perils of global warming and climate change causing drought, desertification, deforestation, environmental degradation, floods and tsunamis – all producing disastrous impacts on food chains, water supply and sanitation.

Due to rapid growth, cities are increasingly at the center of debate concerning the impact, scope and inclusivity of development, requiring innovative strategies and new paradigms of understanding urbanized living. Standing at the intersection of the past and the future – cities are places where tradition meets modernity, where the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ interact, where the economic, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability interweave most tightly.

Therefore, it is important to support cities in becoming ‘loci of innovation’, spaces which support wide communities of practice, where new knowledge is generated, articulated and integrated as new designs and technological artifacts. Creativity, understood as a special kind of resource and human talent, becomes an essential component of knowledge creation, innovation and adaptation. In a world facing limits, creativity may be, indeed, the ultimate renewable energy.

2 The discussion around “spaces of innovation” is presented in detail in: Ilkka Tuomi, Networks of Innovation: Change and Meaning in the Age of Internet, Helsinki: Oxford University Press, 2002, 104-121.
The immediate task facing all urban centers may be to reflect on redesigning of infrastructures, and to address a more efficient delivery of goods and services to citizens. These trends call in rapidly changing and growing societies for new approaches to problems of urban living, such as highway congestion, local transportation bottlenecks, lack of clean and green energy industries, the need for ubiquitous connectivity, or clean water supply. How can urban leaders adopt constructive courses of action for a viable life and a sustainable future in harmonious approach with cultural trends and the well-being of humanity. Innovators, planners and decision-makers must reconcile the challenges resulting from an exploding urban population, their increasing needs and shrinking resources.

Making urban development more livable, sustainable, inclusive is a major challenge for every city in the world. While adequate services have to be provided in cities in terms of access to water, sanitation or social services, it must be underlined that making sustainable and creative choices for a city is essentially a social process, not only a technocratic or bureaucratic exercise. Innovation cannot emerge separated from the social context and local culture.

At the heart of the city stands the idea of community, of collaboration and solidarity. Cities are made of buildings, roads and infrastructure – but they are sustained by human ingenuity, by the power of shared values, by the renewal of aspirations, by the integrative and connective capacity of groups. Therefore, education and retraining of citizens based on cultural heritage, belief and value systems can serve as a pivotal link in bringing about social transformations and practices. “Creative cities” should be capable of mobilizing the potential for global impact, highlighting existing cultural assets and making creativity an essential element of a city’s multidimensional economic base, growth and development path.

Culture is as a source and resource for creativity – an important component in finding innovative solutions to cities’ challenges and an effective tool for addressing the open questions that rapid technological development inevitably poses. Creativity will inject vitality to the city itself and will serve as a foundation for a city’s competitiveness. Design lies at the heart of the strategic nexus linking culture and sustainable development and innovation, playing a paramount role in today world’s creative economy.

Culture is, as the 2013 Creative Economy Report put it, an enabler and driver of development, a force for and a vector for social inclusion. In May 2013, the ‘Hangzhou Declaration’ highlighted the critical role of culture as a resource for achieving sustainable urban development and management, by recalling that “a vibrant cultural life and the quality of urban historic environments are the key for achieving sustainable cities.” The contribution of the arts, music and culture to income generation and jobs creation has convinced many cities to capitalize on culture and the arts as an activity to drive local development. Today, many cities use cultural heritage and artistic, musical and other cultural events and institutions to improve their image, stimulate urban development, and attract visitors and tourists as well as investments.
As the Beijing Consensus, adopted at First Beijing Forum on Arts and the City (October 2013) stipulated: “Sustainable urban development demands a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder approach that engages the private sector, civil society, foundations, local authorities, all levels of government, the media, academia as well as regional and global networks of cities. Local governments are closest to citizens and therefore best placed to promote cultural diversity, including support to safeguarding the living cultural heritage of communities.” The potential of public-private partnerships can provide alternative and sustainable models for cooperation.

**The Conference**

Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the City of Shenzhen and in conjunction with UNESCO’s Creative Cities Network, the International Conference on Creative Design for Sustainable Development will provide an opportunity to share lessons learnt, best practices and information regarding the transformation of urban centers into efficient, sustainable green cities through creative thinking and innovative strategies and policies.

By gathering the representatives of the Creative City Network and experts in city designs and planning as well as policy-makers, renown architects, and private sector contributors, the Conference will be a platform for exchange and multi-stakeholder dialogue on key global issues.

During five sessions, the participants will address a number of essential issues such as innovation and conservation for sustainable urban living, the role of cultural and creative industries in sustainable cities of the future, the importance of creative technologies and infrastructure (water, sanitation and food security) for sustainable city development and the limits and challenges associated with designing innovative transportation systems.

Technology and innovation, as expressions, tools and enablers of collective imagination, are critical components in driving economic growth in future cities. The relation between design and technology is therefore a key to sustainability. This is why its analysis and strategic development should be part of the international development agenda and has an important role in strengthening the Creative Cities Network.

To do so, many questions require to be posed and issues need to be discussed by social stakeholders in multiple fields and competence areas.

How do design processes scale to address social behavior and accessibility of systems and objects over time? Can digital mechanisms for city infrastructure such as waste management, water, sanitation and power supply be designed for future platforms? And how can the UNESCO Creative Cities Network stimulate strategic and innovative thinking in this respect among decision-makers and stakeholders concerned? What are the models, best practices and working hypotheses that may underpin strategic improvements and collaboration in this area?
Urban infrastructures are increasingly being equipped with sensors and other means of collecting information and channeling everyday activities of citizens, from energy use and driving habits to parking patterns, to software and networks that analyze and process data. As a result, cities -- and communities -- are becoming “smarter”. More and more people, objects and components of our environment, such as parking spaces are becoming connected, paving the way for future models of traffic and energy use. In reviewing some of the present and upcoming practices and innovations, we hope to generate fruitful exchanges on a number of key questions: What are the good practices and the models, for sustainable cities in terms of transport systems and infrastructures, including roads, rails, airports and shipping lines? What are the possible roles and impacts of technical and social innovations and creativity?

One of the main challenges for cities today is to address the political, cultural, social and economic barriers that prevent large-scale adoption of sustainable and socially integrated development models. What should cities keep what should they discard and change, to ensure sustainable positive transformation? How can they promote a sustainable environment shaped both by innovation and by their diverse heritage?

In particular, the Conference will focus on experiences and proposals underpinned by innovative and inclusive approaches to culture and development, through culture-led revitalization of urban areas and public spaces. Advanced technology, a diversified culture, enhanced linkages between design and other industries, and an international integration and networking – all this has enabled the UNESCO cities of design to transform themselves into global design centres and hubs.

By showcasing successful environmental and cultural sustainability through design, the conference will help identify options for growth and participation in the fragile context of present-day crises and global risks.

**The UNESCO Creative Cities Network**

Including an important group of cities particularly active in the field of design, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network addresses key challenges such as the need to make urban development more livable, sustainable, inclusive and creative, which is important for every city in the world. Contemporary cities share common challenges of planning, infrastructure and resources, housing and environment, welfare and health. And yet every city is different, and every solution must be tailored to specific needs and contexts. To this end, effective policies remain strategically important. Success in attracting creative industries or creative actors is an outcome of long-term policies affecting soft infrastructures, directly involving UNESCO’s domains of expertise: education, the sciences, culture and communication and information.

UNESCO Creative Cities active in the field of design are well-placed to engage with other cities, exchange experience and knowledge, draw on best practice and inspiration from other world centers, and promote cross-fertilization of the best and brightest minds and
ideas. These cities - Berlin, Buenos Aires, Graz, Montreal, Nagoya, Kobe, Beijing, Shenzhen and Shanghai, Seoul and Saint-Etienne (France) – have already a significant story of interaction and joint programmes, whose last episode is the organization, upon initiative of Shenzhen of an important international contest for young designers.

Those Cities of Design can build on the Conference to launch a think-tank that, by focusing on the collaborative potentiality and connectivity of their creative industries, could function as a do-tank and engine of new design and sustainability models with global impact.

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