

What do the Arts Contribute to the City?

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A glimpse into why cities should invest in the Arts, and how they can transform local culture.

I recently attended some of the discussions which went on in Bristol this passing October, listening to academics and politicians from far and wide discuss a range of topics. One of those debates included a talk discussing how the arts contribute to the city and the importance of embracing local culture. It caught my attention, and so I decided to let my brain run off on a tangent from some of the points made.

A special thanks to the speakers, Andrew Dixon, Tristram Hunt, Claire McColgan, Gotzone Sagardui and Lola Shoneyin, who all brought their personal experiences and knowledge of place, space and culture which enabled such an informative and insightful discussion.

The power for a local network to erect a sense of personal being in that place is an indispensable quality. With ever-increasing global trade, communications and dissemination of common values and homogenous ideas, it is essential for cities to embrace the cultural artefacts that make them authentic experiences for both its inhabitants and tourists.

Everywhere has a Starbucks, a Burger King and a Krispy Kreme. Surpassing the endless range of chain restaurants and cafes, each city can encourage and embody their creative classes to inhibit global cultural practice, and persuade the consumption of local ideas, products and practices.

Cities are defined by the persistence of their historical roots in the contemporary context.

The local people, more than anything, are the double-stitched reinforcements in a city's cultural fabric. This toys with the idea that you are moulded by your

environment, and therefore the claim that each place is genuinely unique with its own distinct iconography holds validity.

No two cities are the same and cultures fluctuate drastically.

This should be accentuated as it retains a degree of exclusive entertainment for any place.

Not only this, but a degree of pride is achievable when a city maintains its authenticity, investing in the symbiotic relationship between place and person.

Culture is a powerful mechanism for integration. It employs a sense of community and mutuality through experience.

Architecture, Geography & Branding

Architecture is the most abrupt example of distinction for a city. Traditionally, cities would use the most abundant materials to construct a sense of place, with continuity through construction and the usage of similar resources.

Wealthier places invest in more expensive materials to signify their affluence and establish their significance.

This continuity is significant given its impact on the experiencer; you can know where you are by the pavement you're walking on and the buildings in proximity.

The way a city brands itself is a carefully choreographed venture, either paying homage to historical roots, or establishing a new identity which aligns with its predominant industries and progressions.

The structures of our economy unsurprisingly dictate wealth as the initial feature of branding, with modernist forms of architecture symbolising and correlating with a place's economic predicament.

Wealthier places are branded accordingly, and capital cities where economic growth is exponentially increasing do not shy away from making this distinction apparent. Modern times have allocated taller and taller buildings the symbolic merit of economic prosperity.

Another tangent emerging from the importance of distinction concerns increasing private property, which tirelessly protrudes into the grounds and autonomy of public space.

Ambiguous ownership, and private investment acts to, directly or indirectly, infringe on the rights of public space usage.

Private space enacts limitations on the utility of spaces; what you can do and for how long are coercively limited through the ulterior motives set out by the investors and owners.

This stresses the importance and necessity of integrating and inclusive spaces which cater for, and permit usage by a variety of demographics. They call for mutual utility, co-habitation and a co-operation of ideas and values which must co-exist alongside each other.

This ushers us towards the importance for careful planning by architects and city planners who are ascribed the task to incorporate these integrating features into their works.

The creative industries are predominant contributors to uniqueness and potentiate the possibility for diverse cityscapes and urban environments.

The accentuation of a place's particularities is to embrace that place's uniqueness, and with the innate nuances between different places, we can maintain vibrancy in an increasingly homogenous modern world.