The Intercultural City

Planning for Diversity Advantage

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London • Sterling, VA

City-making through an intercultural lens[5]

The built city is the most complicated cultural artefact humankind has invented. Cultural preferences and priorities are etched into the mindscape of the professional urban experts who determine what the physical fabric of our cities looks like: engineers, surveyors, masterplanners, architects, urban designers, cost accountants, project managers and developers do not make decisions that are value free and neutral. What, at first sight, looks like merely technique and technical processes – whether a building will stand up, whether traffic can flow, what uses should be brought together – are shaped by value judgements. The look, feel and structure of the places that planners encourage, help design and promote, reflect their assumptions about what they think is right and appropriate. This is etched into codes, rules and guidelines. Even the aesthetic priorities people choose themselves have their cultural histories. It is inevitable, therefore,

that planners and designers apply their own cultural filters to their professional work, cultural filters based on their upbringing and life experience. Without a policy mechanism that requires the gaining of cultural literacy, the professions will remain locked in a very narrow understanding of culture and the built environment. Active cultural literacy programmes are needed that help built environment professions understand that every planning and design decision they make has a cultural consequence.

At a more fundamental level, the city is built to respond to landscape, weather, location, available materials, the function the city seeks to play, exploitable resources, the talents it can develop and attract, and how it makes its living; and the interplay of these continues through time. At each point, the choices the culture makes about what is important, valued and what seems right to them can be seen in the physical fabric. And, interestingly, our perception of things changes along the way. Inevitably the relatively cold, rainy, windblown UK builds with weather protection in mind. The trading city makes space for warehouses and the business services city hubs for offices. So much is obvious.

More interestingly we might ask, how do social values play themselves out? What is our view of being public and private? How do we display this? Do we promenade and hang about listlessly in idle conversation in public spaces or are we more coy? Is this different for women and men? For some, ambling in public places is an intrinsic part of life; for others such socializing takes place in greater privacy at home or in a club. In some cultures women are confined to the domestic realm; in others their role is more public. Do we hide behind net curtains or, rather like the Calvinist inspired Dutch, is private life displayed through large windows because you have nothing to hide? What is our view of learning? The older libraries projected themselves as temples of knowledge where you, the learner, entered humbly and with respect to explore a prescribed, given canon of knowledge. Today, by contrast, with our goal to democratize knowledge, we look for a more open, transparent and welcoming feel. So the look of libraries is different. Things change. The factories, especially 'the satanic mills' of old, are transformed into aspirational housing and loft living. What once was gloomy is now very classy.

What happens then when different cultures meet and coexist in the same space? There have always been borrowings and graftings; they have been there so long we cannot see them. For centuries building styles and fashions criss-crossed Europe: English and French baroque, or German and English gothic. Exceptions apart, the architectures of Arabia, India and China are not visible in exterior design; they have influenced the interior much more. One only sees the mosque, the gurdwara and Chinese gateway arches in Chinatowns. Can and should we learn from the great traditions of Arab and Indian architecture and their aesthetics?

Are the basic building blocks of the city the same when looked at through intercultural eyes? Think of street frontages, building heights, set-backs, pavement widths, turning circles, the number of windows and their size, how architects and planners deal with enclosure, privacy or sight lines. Think too of the materials used, colour, light and water. Are streets and the colour palette used different when produced interculturally? Should architects and planners structure space to reflect different cultures as they might see and use spaces in varied ways? Or should open-ended spaces be created that others can adapt to, such as the Kurds who gather around the steps of Birmingham's Chamberlain Square?

You already see day-to-day interculturalism in the sign and symbol world of every British city: Chinese-run takeaways that double up as fish and chip shops, or kebab/curry/burger houses. But imagine a city in the UK that had more than the foreign-sounding restaurant names or shop signs and the cultural aesthetics to match. What would the city look like? We know the experience of seeing restaurants with names like Lee Ho Fook, The Great Wall, Golden Dragon, Lakorn Thai, Aphrodite Taverna and Cantina Italia. All of these signs of multiculturalism and business diversity are predominantly superficial 'cultural cross-dressing' (Brecknock, 2006) that demonstrate the adaptability of migrant communities and their ability to work within the existing built form. But there is more to interculturalism than this.

Masterplanning interculturally

The question of how city planners can balance the seemingly contradictory cultural priorities of differing communities and how different cultural values should be reflected in space was the challenge explored in our case study of the London Borough of Lewisham on 'masterplanning through an intercultural lens' (Comedia, 2007). In surveying the built environment professionals and their national professional associations, it became clear there was great sympathy and desire to understand how different communities work. Yet the day-to-day procedures of the professional life of, say, the engineer or planner did not predispose them to understand the details of how diverse communities think about their space.

Within the local authority it is more often those dealing with issues such as social inclusion that require a better understanding of the texture of their communities. This highlighted the significant need for interdisciplinary approaches to urban planning to be developed, where social inclusion and land use planning might work collaboratively rather than in isolation. Breaking down the professional boundaries and silo mentalities of organizations is one of the most significant challenges of developing a truly intercultural approach to urban development and city management.

Part of this challenge is the need for increased cultural literacy. Our report, '*Knowing Lewisham*' (Comedia, 2007), proposed that a series of *knowledge questions* become part of the *listening and learning cycle* consultation procedure of any major projects. Our questions included:

- Do extended families share or wish to share houses?
- How well do existing houses meet the needs of community members in terms of family size, community gatherings and room layouts?
- What are the cultural, gender and generational sensitivities associated with public life that need to be understood by council planners?
- Are young people respected and catered for in the planning and design of public space?

The importance of these knowledge questions lies in the gradual build-up of cultural literacy among the council officers in planning and urban design. As a result of increased cultural literacy, officers are better equipped to understand cultural diversity in their communities and therefore make culturally informed decisions with an understanding of the possible impacts developments might have on existing cultural life.

Unfortunately, addressing these was generally regarded as a task best dealt with by someone else whose job gave them a better understanding of the texture of their communities.

A new skill set

The implication of the response of the professionals to these questions is that professional practice needs to be reassessed. This is timely given the recent Egan Review of New Skills for Sustainable Communities, which led to the setting up of an Academy for Sustainable Communities for the UK. This has been helpful in shifting the debate and setting out what new skills are going to be required in making modern cities work. These centre very much on understanding communities from a 360-degree perspective and applying a set of generic skills, behaviours and ways of thinking that are requirements for moving forward, such as inclusive visioning, team working, leadership, and process and change management.

Consultation means a continuous process of informal discussion and engagement with people, as opposed to formal discrete public participation required by regulation. Clearly a highly diverse cultural mix makes it impossible for individual urban professionals to accumulate an in-depth cultural knowledge of every group represented in their city. We therefore need to evolve new forms of intercultural dialogue.

Diversity in its many forms is the primary element of a vibrant place – diversity of business, diversity of activities and a diversity of built form creating visual stimulation. Taking street markets as an example, they often exist in unremarkable settings but their vibrancy comes through the interaction between the people and products. The most successful markets are those where there is a wide diversity of

products and suppliers. Sadly, cities often seem to overlook these factors, being far more concerned with the physical form of public places. They put the responsibility on the urban designer to transform a place through cosmetic factors such as new paving, elegant street furniture and improved lighting, when the reality is that many places are unattractive or underperforming for other reasons such as failing business, traffic domination and anti-social behaviour.

The intercultural city depends on more than a design challenge. It derives from a central notion that people are developing a shared future whereby each individual feels they have something to contribute in shaping, making and co-creating a joint endeavour. A thousand tiny transformations will create an atmosphere in public space that feels open and where all feel safe and valued.

It also relies upon a deeper and richer knowledge on behalf of the city-making professions of the communities in which they work. In the Appendix we have designed an exercise that could be conducted to begin a process of intercultural masterplanning that we term the *Knowledge Questions*. The findings from these questions, as indeed the whole process of the inquiry, will gradually change the relationship between the professionals and the communities. Ultimately, there may even be the need to establish local 'observatories' to manage this process.

Making intercultural spaces

In our survey of residents in Lewisham and Bristol to identify popular intercultural spaces, the places mentioned with most frequency were not the highly designed or engineered public and corporate spaces but rather the spaces of day-to-day exchange such as libraries, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs, specific cinemas, the hair salon, the hospital, markets and community centres. These are the 'spaces of interdependence and habitual engagement' where (what Ash Amin (2002) calls) 'micro publics' come together and where (according to Leonie Sandercock, 2004) 'dialogue and prosaic negotiations are compulsory'. In these places, 'people from different backgrounds are thrown together in new settings which disrupt familiar patterns and create the possibility of initiating new attachments' (Sandercock, 2004).

Where are the British cultural institutions or public spaces that achieve this kind of synthesis? The city-making professions of the UK face an enormous challenge to fashion a built environment that reflects the country's growing diversity.