

CREATIVITY IN THE CITY: THE NEW MEASURE

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ABSTRACT

Cities are revealed most clearly through their creativity, which prompts understanding of the past and contemplation of possible futures. Sustainable – and creative -- cities are much more than demographics and economic indicators. They are moods and energy, history and aspirations. How can we measure these intangibles and argue for their value in city life?

This paper discusses the development of the Vitality Index™ whose objective is to improve cities through a rethinking of creativity and its relationship to economic development and public policy. The Vitality Index™ can insert the value of culture -- as opposed to cultural institutions or creative industries alone - into the planning process. This approach does not limit possibilities for innovation, but helps create them by engaging residents with the destiny of their city.

BACKGROUND

After the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, New Yorkers vigorously debated the future of the site, none more so than the cultural community. Could a creative approach to planning contribute to the regeneration of downtown Manhattan and the revitalisation of the city itself? Could the presence of cultural institutions on the site be a part of that approach? In international conferences and forums, we talked with experts from cities destroyed, reconstructed and regenerated about how to adapt their lessons learned for New York and cities beyond. Our work in these forums was an exploration of how governance, leadership, a city's culture and creativity, its energy and sense of self could be assessed as rigorously as statistics on population, density, and transportation in the belief that those qualitative indicators are critical to understanding a city's current state and its potential. Throughout this research, we have sought to find a vocabulary not bound by a particular area of expertise but one that would be accessible to the widest possible audience of policy makers, practitioners, and the public.

What we mean by creativity and how we might broaden its meaning, how we can underscore its importance in improving city life and shaping public policy through the adoption of rigorous methods of assessment and analysis to create a new kind of measurement, and how that measurement can be used to implement real change is the subject of this paper.

WHY IS A 'CREATIVE CITY' A GOOD THING? WHOSE CREATIVITY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

In the introduction to his remarkable analysis of some of the most creative minds of the 20th century, Howard Gardner (1993, p. xii) notes: 'By a curious twist, the words *art* and *creativity* have become closely linked in our society...There is no necessary association: people can be creative in any sphere of life; and the arts can be the scene of bathos or boredom, as well as of beauty, beatitude, or bedlam.' This passage calls into question some common assumptions, namely, that art is an unqualified good thing and that creativity is the domain of a privileged few. Both these terms are used in relation to the creative city, but may not help us understand or evaluate what makes one urban environment exciting and another not. Partly, this is because it's difficult to define creativity. As Gardner says, for some people creativity IS art. So there is confusion at the outset about meaning. We need a word with broader scope both in its definition and the broader range of people to whom it may be applied.

But before we leave the search for the definition of creativity, let's consider what we think we know about a 'creative city' and why we want to live in one. What is it we're looking for? It may be, to paraphrase Simon Schama (1995, p. 16)) that the creative city is just another of the landscapes of the urban imagination, which is to say something we conjure up to answer a certain psychic need. The vitality of a creative city distinguishes it from just any urban environment. The exemplar creative city is full of energy, opportunities and interesting people. It must be a bit edgy as well. This combination of factors is comfortable for me. I feel pleasure when I am working with creative people, but I also experience it when I am walking down the street, buying a newspaper, even riding the subway. It is not limited to a particular endeavor, but it depends upon a thriving, bustling diversity.

This comfort or sense of pleasure may have less to do with 'creating' and more to do with what the psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988, p. 8), calls 'flow,' a concept that refers to our ability to find an activity 'rewarding in and of itself.' That activity may be anything from mountain climbing to bird watching to doing an ordinary day's

work. Walking down the street, one of the favorite pastimes in New York, would not be categorised as creative. But it certainly can be a flow experience, which is why street life in New York is so interesting – and restorative. That activities that are not usually considered ‘creative’ can be nevertheless stimulating and pleasurable gives us another way to consider the notion of the ‘creative city’ and how we evaluate it, implement it, or govern it. The broader category of flow forces us to consider factors that we might otherwise overlook if we adhered too closely to creativity in its more restricted sense. It presents the challenge of considering, for example, ALL the people who live in our exemplar city, namely those who would not necessarily consider themselves either non-conformist or creative. I know why I moved to a creative city. Why does everyone else live there? Most people don’t choose their city, of course. They grow up there and stay for reasons to do with work, family and friends, all of which imply for them a relative level of comfort and pleasure. More than any ‘creative class,’ whether homegrown or imported, this is the backbone of the city’s ethos and its identity.

Can a term broader and better defined than ‘creativity’ help us understand and tap the greater potential of a community or city? The concept of flow gives value to a wider range of experience and its contribution to the creative milieu of a city: ‘Flow is a useful concept not so much because it accounts for rare and exotic activities like rock climbing or ocean sailing, but because it helps explain the texture of everyday life, *the rise and fall of motivations that follow one another as normal people respond to the human and inanimate contours of their changing environment.*’ [Italics mine.] (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 251)

Those motivations account for both the creator and the one who appreciates the creation, the actor and the audience. The theatre patron is not the artist who wrote, directed, or acted the play, but without the patron, there is no performance. Acknowledging the transactional aspect of the city is critical to understanding its creative milieu: ‘...the significance of enjoyment is not trivial. It is vital to the survival of society. An essential quality of any social order is the way opportunities for expressive experience are institutionalized.’ (Mitchell 1988, p. 57)

Although there are no guarantees about why or where creativity comes about, we can broaden the field of study, and look at not just the top-tier of creative industries, but also the flow experience in another kind of network – how people live in and enjoy their city. That backbone of the city, the ‘inner tourist’ who enjoys going to the theatre, the ballpark, the museum, throws Frisbees and picnics in the park with the kids and friends, supports the neighborhood bar or restaurant, and ‘inhabits’ the city, is the crucial energy, the ‘good messiness’ that we need to explore.

Since October 2001, Creative Cities International has been grappling with this challenge, i.e. how to assess hard factors in the context of human experience. Throughout the course of a series of international conferences, public forums, and case studies, we continued to ask difficult questions: How can we understand the ways in which people actually live and participate in a city as crucial to its development? What is the interplay between city structures – government, architecture, infrastructure – and how people live in the city? How can we build consensus and goodwill among stakeholders? The answer was that criteria and specifically cultural criteria are needed to assess projects, that these criteria must have the support of a large number of agencies and the public alike, and that they are not a checklist but factors that assist in evaluation.

What emerged is the Vitality Index™, a ranking and assessment which applies the same level of rigor to qualitative factors as it does to quantitative ones. It brings to life a city’s human strengths as it respects its complexities: a vibrant downtown, an engaged populace, educational opportunity, economic sustainability, good transport, diversity of population and opportunity, and a citizenry that embraces its history and culture. It provides

the basis for a comparative analysis of 'lessons learned,' and yields vital information that helps to reconcile differences among stakeholders. The VI is not absolute and as people's outlook changes or desired goals change or merge, it can respond. Its methodology and analysis offer a process that is global in its perspective, accountable in its analysis, and creative at its core.

Fully activated, it is divided into three levels:

1. Gathering quantitative data such as demographics, trends, costs and measures of typical and creative infrastructure modeled to produce a ranking that benchmarks the city against competitor cities;
2. Fieldwork with residents and other stakeholders that includes surveys, questionnaires, interviews that examine people's habits, how they actually live their lives, where they go, what they do, their concerns, and their aspirations. This provides additional analysis, refined recommendations, risks and opportunities, and essential indicators of what people want and care about.
3. High-level rigorous analysis from a *cultural point of view*.

GETTING CREATIVE ABOUT PROFOUND CHANGE

We cannot rely on the traditional analysis of economics and politics or even culture on its own to give us sufficient guidance. There is no lack of measurement in these areas, but what is missing in these analyses is crucial: the intentions and values of the community. The examples of the Tate Modern (positive) and the World Trade Center site (negative) and CCI's own experience in West Harlem (both) make clear that we need a means to respond to the important indicators of what people want and care about and then communicate those results to leaders and the public alike. How can this be done? The process must be holistic, balancing quantitative and qualitative factors, but defining and evaluating these in light of human concerns.

This new approach – the Vitality Index™ – is a cultural impact study that helps to ensure that the planned design of an area makes a positive contribution to the community and the city by taking into account – and valuing – what isn't usually considered. It takes into account a broader array of factors: assessing historical issues, cultural and artistic; analysing the present status of a city (what is working right and what would enhance it); measuring quantitative and qualitative factors; and establishing benchmarks. For we also don't know where and at what point new sparks of creativity may emerge. With this information, a city can pose a question about a goal or project. Maybe a city wishes to attract business by enhancing its business climate or its amenities, by altering its tax and zoning laws, etc. Those values can be reflected in the factors the VI chooses to review and the analysis can point to the city's objectives. Solutions may lie in the creative industries, but not necessarily.

Another city might want to attract cultural tourism as a boon to economic regeneration and sustainability. How art and cultural activities contribute to the current state of the city and how they might be enhanced would certainly be a major priority of the analysis. In both cases, the cultural assessment evaluates the information from the VI on the basis of the project goals and the values the city thinks it has, or wishes to enhance or attain. It is a living subjective analysis and has the ability to change with increasingly complex goals or ones that change radically. Or perhaps the city's goals are less clear or its problems more profound. For cities like Toledo or Detroit, changing zoning laws or building a cultural center will not be enough to make a dramatic difference in their future. Even large infusions of cash won't matter if they still lack that vitality, energy or 'good messiness' that are critical to a city's economic and cultural viability. Here, the VI can examine what is already working and why, e.g. its

street life, the marketplace, and its complex mix of people. Identifying what is specific and interesting to the area is a first step in building confidence among residents and attracting commercial investment. Often, the citizens of blighted cities and their leaders assert that their cities offer much more than outsiders can see or understand and that they should not be allowed to die. Finding answers to what seem intractable problems requires an analysis and understanding of a city's culture from the bottom up and a focus for planning, design and economic regeneration rooted in a city's uniqueness.

Which brings us to an interesting question: where do we find this analysis and understanding? As the American sociologist Marc Miringoff commented, 'A democratic society must continually seek ways to understand its progress. This is essential if the general public and the makers of policy are to have a clear picture of the state of the nation and its people.' He goes on to say that in the U.S. we track the economy better than anyone, but we do not do the same in the social sphere: 'Most significantly, social data are not generally thought of, collected or released as *indicators* that chart the performance of a larger condition like the "social state of the nation," nor are they combined into accessible indexes or barometers designed to keep track on a regular basis of what is considered important.' (2003, n.p.)

While the residents of struggling cities are screaming for help to hold together the social fabric of their lives, government bodies respond by citing the kind of dire economic numbers and forecasts of failure that rationalise their inability to find solutions. More social and cultural data are needed to counter these doom and gloom assessments. There are no statistics that track what happens to people who live in these communities – how the loss of jobs, social cohesion, and sense of place affects them. And there is no attempt to search out and adapt success stories of cities elsewhere that have faced down their critics and survived.

Dayton, Ohio is currently enduring the worst of the economic slump. A 'car' city, dominated by General Motors, it now has an 11% unemployment rate, the highest in the region. It also has an historically vibrant arts scene with some organisations dating from the Depression Era. Dayton long ago connected the dots. The city recognises how much value the arts add to community life and in attracting new business to Dayton. But unemployed people don't go to the opera. Those who have money are now making hard decisions about where to give it, the food bank or the ballet. There is nevertheless a success story here, which needs to be shared. Bureaucrats and arts advocates like Denise Regh agree that the arts must survive in Dayton: 'I often like to tell people, you know, the Dayton Art Institute, which is a bastion of culture in this region, was built in 1930. How many people must have thought that was crazy? But how much more people must have thought it was crazy in 1933, when the Dayton Philharmonic began? So when you look now back over 75 years, and all they've brought to our community and the great city that Dayton became, you know, the arts are to some degree an investment in not the here and now necessarily, but the future of who and what will be.' (Regh, PBS TV, 2009)

Many cities might benefit from knowing about Dayton's relationship to the arts. But where is the data that could make that case? Miringoff concludes that 'social indicators and the vital aspects of life' can contribute to a more informed dialogue: 'What is most important is that this dialogue rest on a foundation of data and analysis that is as strong, durable, rational, and precise as that which supports our discourse about the economy.' (2003, n.p.)

Cultural data can never be precise, which is why it is either avoided entirely or reduced to simple statistical samplings, e.g. Richard Florida's 'gay index,' 'bohemian index,' etc. The complexity and subjectivity of dealing with culture (both big 'C' and little 'c') are off-putting to urban planners and politicians alike. They want proof that culture counts. The creative industries calculus is very helpful in this way. But it is only one snapshot of

creativity in the city. We must go further and look at the transactional aspects of culture and its impact on the present and future sustainability of cities. The Vitality Index™ intends to provide measurements and analysis that can also serve as a *persuasive means of moving ideas and vision into the public realm of politics and responsible decision-making.*

As the public has become deeply skeptical of anything proposed, they have become skilled at opposing. The VI provides ways of sounding out people about their concerns, accrediting developments to make sure they have met basic indices, and putting on the table the issues that need to be resolved with this in mind: Much like the Bilbao and Turin strategies, the successful project is one that has understood the history, the situation, the marketplace, and engenders a good feeling in as many people as possible. The message to all stakeholders is 'we have listened to you.'

WEST HARLEM, 2008

Creative Cities International was part of a team whose task was to draw up the second phase of a plan for regeneration in West Harlem on the Upper West Side of New York called Take Me to the River (TMTTR). The area encompasses 135th Street to 155th Street, Broadway to the Hudson River. It is bordered on the east by historical sites, including the home of Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury and a signatory of the US Constitution, and the historic area designated as Hamilton Heights. Its long list of cultural assets includes the landmarked Audubon Terrace, the former farm of naturalist John James Audubon, Trinity Cemetery, and two architecturally notable churches. Audubon Terrace, a complex of Beaux Arts buildings dating from the early 20th century, is now home to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Hispanic Society of America, and Boricua College, a private bilingual college. Part of Trinity Church-Wall Street, one of New York's oldest churches, Trinity Cemetery, which marks the final resting place of many notable Americans, also commemorates two fiercely-fought battles of the Revolutionary War as American troops waged their last defense of Manhattan against the British.

This area, so culturally rich and diverse, is nearly unknown both to its own residents and to other New Yorkers. At its request, and with the help of state funding, it was attempting to define its evolving identity, build community, and attract tourism and growth in sustainable ways. Our specific objective was to 'brand' the cultural hub as part of a campaign to bring renewed interest in its cultural assets among its residents and other New Yorkers, vitality to its streets, and add appeal for responsible commercial investment. The goal was to identify a single brand and marketing strategy that could channel all the resources towards a more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable future. The project's scope gave us the opportunity to use the assessment portions of the Vitality Index™.

The team pursued a 'cultural audit' of both quantitative and qualitative factors – through cultural and demographic research, community surveys and interviews – to analyse and assess the community's *raison d'être* and those inherent assets that are distinctive and interesting. Rather than focusing on what doesn't work, the cultural audit emphasised what does. We wanted to know what residents liked and felt was 'special' about their community. That sense of self-identification would become the core of its public image.

The cultural audit was successful. It provided a foundation and framework against which the community surveys and interviews could be calibrated. Working meetings with the community gave us the opportunity to test

conclusions as the process evolved. We focused on the existing cultural attributes, energy, and current leadership to formulate a plan that could best use the community's resources and realize its aspirations.

In the end, the community embraced our proposals and today various groups continue meeting and pressing the city to help them implement the plan. Funding for the next phase has now, of course, become a bigger than expected problem.

The institutional obstacles were revealing. Because the state and city authorities had political priorities linked to this study, our ability to move implementation further was frustrated. The state required us on the one hand to consult with the community, which we gladly did, and on the other pressed the team to deliver a product that did not completely reflect the public consultation or its conclusions. The community was eager to embrace their identity, the political operatives less so.

LESSONS LEARNED

The 'objective reality' pictured by demographic factors gave only a hint of the real issues, tensions and aspirations of this community. The census figures, for example, showed that there was a major shift in the ethnicity of the population, from predominantly African-American as recently as the 1980s to Hispanic today. But figures alone could not tell us how deeply felt that shift was. We encountered degrees of resistance among community groups and toward us initially as outsiders, but because of the 'cultural audit' process, its respect for community history, attitudes, and opinions, these vanished over the course of the study and we were able to build a strong consensus.

While quantitative data pointed to certain kinds of cultural activity, the surveys, questionnaires, and working group meetings were a better connection to the nature of this community and what it valued. Whether or not these residents considered themselves 'creative', they certainly had a sense of 'flow' with their environment. They knew what mattered to them, what they enjoyed or didn't. Barbershops and hair salons carry great cultural importance in this community. Would they be listed in most indices as 'recreational' or 'cultural' activities? The corner gas station that on paper could be turned into an expansion building for the Hispanic Society museum turned out to be a rallying cry for everyone because it has a great juice bar and serves good coffee, both of which make it a neighborhood meeting place. It was immediately off the table.

These are flow experiences that help 'explain the texture of everyday life.' (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 251) Over time, the hair salon, the barbershop, and the gas station have taken on a significance beyond their basic function: 'It is the sum of these momentary motivational states that shapes the life of the individual over time, and it is the sum of these individual lifetimes that shapes the evolution of social and cultural forms.' (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 251)

When this information is added to the quantitative data, the result is a really comprehensive picture of community concerns that can also bring to light adjustments that might be needed in later stages of a plan or strategy

Our objective was to find out what the community valued, support it with a plan that could be implemented, and communicate that information to the public and political leaders. This is where the VI can help government

understand if and what kind of intervention may be needed and sustained: Strategies that are not self-determined, politically sensitive and unbiased will not succeed.

MESSY DEMOCRACY AND THE TATE MODERN

In May 2002, Creative Cities hosted an international conference dedicated to a discussion of the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site. Three panels were invited from London, Berlin, and New York City respectively. The London panelists focused on the Jubilee Line Extension (JLE) underground train that connected the South Bank and points east to Central London and was essential to the construction of the Tate Modern. They emphasised the importance of design in relation to function and how we need not give up one for the other. The JLE is a tribute to a bold design idea, which has changed the daily life of millions of working people. The lead architect, Roland Paoletti, and those he hired believed, as the conference report stated, that 'Questions of design are not just elite issues. People actually notice what's going on and they notice when these attentive details have been taken to heart.'

That beauty was always a part of the original concept and not an afterthought. It resulted in a project that has been embraced by the public and enriched the public purse. It functions efficiently, the major criterion, and continues to be an attraction for the architectural tourist. The eleven stations each stand – under and above ground – as a testament to the architects who created them. The public now has a way to access jobs in Central London, which supports economic development there, along the South Bank and in their own communities. Traveling on it is a delight. (One commuter commented shortly after it opened that the JLE was so beautiful that just riding to work on it made her happy and improved her self-esteem.)

The story of the Tate Modern is a blueprint for successful cultural and economic regeneration. Where it could have been taken as an elitist project that overwhelmed its adjacent community with its money and reputation, the Tate instead entered into the planning process determined to engage with the community and its interests.

Just as 'the messy process of democracy' produced in the JLE something that was profoundly important to the shape and future of London so it produced in the Tate Modern a project that engendered enormous goodwill among the community in the South Bank. The long process that resulted in broad consensus among all the stakeholders was no accidental affair. The Tate's goal at the outset was that economic benefit derived from the Tate should filter back to the community and they assured that this would happen. It has indeed provided substantial economic benefit to its home borough of Southwark including jobs to local residents.

The Tate Modern has been a responsible guardian of the public trust. When it opened in 2000, visitor numbers were projected at a maximum of 1.8 million a year. Nearly a decade later, the figure is 4.6 million and growing. An extension to the Tate Modern has just been approved by Southwark, another witness to their ability to get things right.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE VITALITY INDEX™

The JLE and the Tate stories are profound lessons in successful regeneration. Yet, we tend to think of these stories as exceptions. Why do cities – developers, politicians, and communities alike -- keep making the same mistakes? Examples of regeneration schemes gone badly wrong abound. The knee jerk response would be to blame the usual corruption, greed, and political ambition we have come to expect and often, sadly, accept.

There is a more complex answer. Currently, governments and communities do not demand studies that show the cultural impact of projects. The efficacy of projects is debated in newspapers and legislatures. But there is little analysis that tries to take up factors beyond the financial, although environmental impact studies are now required. The debate can quickly descend into political posturing on all sides. The general public, who will also gain or lose from these projects, even if they are not motivated to take to the streets or the public forums, is usually left in the dark about what is at stake. Political leaders are not inclined to educate them. A struggle then ensues between the various sides usually leaving the power and money interests who have the most staying power to win the day.

To be fair, local governments often come up with these policies with good intentions and fail to think through to the consequences because they are not required to do so. They struggle to realise some loose concept of a creative city -- and make a grab for the shiny object -- without any idea of what that means.

Tony Travers, director of the Greater London Group at the London School of Economics, and moderator of the 2002 New York conference wrote in *Tate Modern: The First Five Years*: 'As a result of the economic success of Tate Modern, other cultural projects in Britain and overseas have been able to proceed in the knowledge that, if they are effectively planned, they can create an economic impact that will benefit an area wider than the gallery itself. However, the choice of location and the management of the project were crucial in securing the economic benefits that have flowed locally. A different approach might have failed.' (2005, p. 27)

Travers' conclusion is certainly on target. But how does he define effective planning and how can the step-by-step process that worked so well for the Tate Modern and its partners be replicated elsewhere? Can it be applied beyond UK shores in different cultural and political settings? Can it help a small city in Upstate New York? Or Dayton, Ohio?

THE WORLD TRADE CENTER SITE: WHAT NOT TO DO (DEFINITELY)

By now, the World Trade Center site is one of the most widely known and discussed construction sites in history. The trials and tribulations of architects, developers, public officials, the victims' families and the residents of New York City in general have been inscribed in thousands of print inches and television newscasts in the last eight years. Perhaps there has never been a place where so much was expected and so little has been achieved.

In 2005, Frank Rich, a columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote: 'And so ground zero remains a pit, a hole, a void. As The New York Post has noticed, more time has passed since George Pataki [New York State governor] first unveiled the final design of the Freedom Tower than it took to build the Empire State Building. For New Yorkers this saga is a raucous political narrative whose cast of characters includes a rapacious real-estate developer, a seriously irritating architect with even more irritating designer eyeglasses, a governor with self-

delusional presidential ambitions and a mayor obsessed with bringing New York the only target that may rival the Freedom Tower as terrorist bait, the Olympics.'

Not much has changed since then. Four years after Rich wrote this, the WTC site is still a mess. Rather than a symbol of courage and vitality in the face of death and destruction, it has become a symbol of failed policy, political expediency, and everything that is wrong with the way planning is done in New York City. What it revealed about money and power in the city was an eye-opener for most New Yorkers, but not in a good way. And this is not a story relegated to the past. Yet another depressing headline appeared in *The New York Times* on April 15, 2009: 'As Finance Offices Empty, Developers Rethink Ground Zero.'

'NEW YORK TALKS TO LONDON AND BERLIN'

One clear outcome of the first Creative Cities conference in October 2001, one month after September 11, was the surprising realisation that although there are networks of theoreticians talking about cities, there is no network of practitioners sharing knowledge. How much useful information, time and money are being lost, we asked, because there is no mechanism to gather and disseminate lessons learned?

What the WTC planning process had always lacked was legitimacy. The 'New York Talks to London and Berlin' conference in May 2002 was further evidence why. Even then neither the governor nor the mayor had articulated any vision for Ground Zero. Already the public was confused and skeptical about how decisions would be made despite the claim that lead planner Alex Garvin made at the Creative Cities conference in 2002 that this would be 'a listening process' and that 'thousands of people would be involved in helping to make decisions.' (Conference Report, n.p.)

In fact, very little of the workings of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, tasked with oversight of the planning process, were transparent and there was much back room negotiating on every aspect of the site development. The public, preoccupied by the tragedy, left it to these politicians to do the right thing.

By November 2002, when Creative Cities hosted a second conference on 'Sustainable Creativity,' we had passed the one year anniversary of 9/11 with no progress at the site. The opportunities that we had envisioned in the spring, along with many New Yorkers, to build something great in Lower Manhattan, to regenerate the area culturally and economically through a reconfigured transport plan, and to build greater public confidence in vision and implementation were not on the LMDC's radar. Where there was clearly a need for courageous political leadership, no one rose to the occasion. As they started, so they continued. News of the WTC site was in the papers daily, although few New Yorkers could keep up with the intricacies of the mainly political, and mostly hidden, developments.

The city's – and the world's – hope for this site and the brazen disregard for that hope were a radical turning point for CCI. It is safe to say that we would not have thought through the concept and implementation of the VI as systematically had there not been the WTC nor would we have realised the need for it. The genesis of the Vitality Index™ is inextricably intertwined with the story of Ground Zero. We were now actively searching for a new way of assessing the urban environment that was not based on abstract theorising but on the necessity and complexity of a real-life event.

OPPORTUNITIES SEIZED AND LOST

The attack on the World Trade Center left the city reeling and the arts and political communities locked in a debate about what should be done there. How could the site support the regeneration of Lower Manhattan and also be connected symbolically to what happened there? Surely, the arts must be a part of this revitalisation and play their role as a mediator of experience? These questions and, admittedly, the profound frustration at the lack of credible solutions at the site, led us to take a step back and examine the issues behind the raging political battles. We sought new approaches to the problems so starkly raised by New York's example but which could be adapted to other cities as well.

More questions followed: When cities are compared one to another the term 'creative' is often a marker. At the outset of this paper, we asked if we could name the components of a 'creative city.' Can public policy play a role in promoting a thriving cultural sector? Cultural industries are undoubtedly fashionable, but can they also play a role in ameliorating class issues that feed on poverty and social exclusion? Can the creative factor reverse the disintegration of community that seems built in to so many current political and civic engagements in the U.S?

These provocative questions, however, could only be useful if there were a way to take the answers out of the anecdotal and put them into something that could be more widely applied. We needed a mechanism that could provide an assessment framework for better decision-making globally. What finally emerged was the notion of an index - something akin to a cultural impact study – that could create criteria with community input, benchmark and assess projects, their successes and failures, and use that information to inform the public and government officials.

The opportunity seized at the power station on the South Bank and the opportunity lost at Ground Zero could not be a more telling story of how to get decision-making right and how to get it desperately wrong. The British architect, Will Alsop, one of the London panelists, said at the Creative Cities May 2002 conference: 'If New York could stand up at the end of this process and say that this is extraordinary, that this is a model for other cities around the world, then that is its main contribution as a world city.' (Conference Report, n.p.)

It often happens that looking back we project a kind of inevitability to rationalise where we've ended up today. Had there been transparency and a process that valued consensus and goodwill, the building at Ground Zero would not be at the mercy of fractious groups who claim special consideration at a site that is witness to a national tragedy and not 'owned' by anyone. The success of the Tate Modern makes laughable the 'general wisdom' architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, expressed in the same May 2002 conference, that the risk of public consultation is that a 'mediocre consensus might force out daring and innovative solutions.' (Conference Report, n.p.)

Where this process could have pointed the city outward, making the WTC site comprehensible as a symbol of the city's extraordinary position as a home for the world, it failed completely. It has succeeded in reinforcing our cynicism instead.

Could this story have turned out differently? Perhaps not – perhaps the stakes were always too high. But the extraordinary interplay of money and power was a revelation and a learning moment. Is this how New York *always* does business?

LANGUAGE AND GOVERNANCE

'Flow is not a luxury; it is a staple of life,' according to Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 366). If this is so, then we need to pay much more attention to it. Particularly because, the psychologist argues, the 'flow model can provide a framework for beginning to talk with greater precision about elusive concepts like the "quality of life"' (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 377). It can also focus us on the qualities and strengths that every city possesses: its people. Instead of embracing false claims of miracle cures through importing a 'creative class,' it looked to its own historical culture: its 'people with a deep understanding of production and design.' (Katz & Bradley 2009, p. 3) Add to that 'dramatic reform in local and metropolitan governance' and they managed an economic upturn. (Katz & Bradley 2009, p. 5.)

There is no reason not to weigh the so-called 'soft' factors equally with the 'hard.' The Tate Modern among other examples indicates that a better understanding of the social and cultural aspects of a project and place make for a more popular and profitable result. But for many experts and bureaucrats it is easier to talk through statistics, flow charts, and credit and debit columns, thus extracting the human variables from the discussion, than to deal with the complexity of city life as it is lived and speak directly to it. Adam Gopnik, examining the endangered soul of New York City in the New Yorker magazine in 2007, noted that the Mayor Bloomberg has difficulty talking about these things because they are 'a little metaphysical' and 'resistant to oratory.' (Gopnik 2007, n.p.)

Building consensus in public life, however, depends on navigating just these waters. Whether it is cross-cultural among nations, neighborhoods, or next-door neighbors, finding the right words and the right meanings can be challenging. Can promises be kept or leaders be held accountable if we are not clear about meaning?

Communicating across this divide is critical if leaders are to know what citizens are thinking and if government is to be transparent, legitimate, and accountable. The sense that statistics and flow charts tell the truth and words that relate to human experience do not is ridiculous. Yet, this premise, which privileges the technical over the human, dominates our discourse.

With the Vitality Index™, we are attempting to posit a framework that can encompass both the language of the technical specialist and the everyday language of the citizen. Somewhere these two need to meet. The goal of the VI is to interpret quality of life information, particularly cultural information, with the same kind of rigor that is applied to quantitative data.

Can this grassroots approach change people's perception of how government works? And can participatory democracy become a flow experience? At the very least, public consultation that asks people real questions about what they want and then reflects those answers honestly in its decision-making, i.e. 'we've really listened to you,' is the best start to reconciling differences. Politicians who don't respond can then be held accountable.

THE VITALITY INDEX™ AND THE QUALITY OF CITY LIFE

Our business ideas are about taking ownership of where you are and what you have, (said Jennifer Willemssen, 29, of Curl Up and Dye [a hair salon]). We want to do right by our neighbors. (Saulny 2010, p. A 18)

An entrepreneurial spirit has descended on the City of Detroit, long associated with everyone's definition of urban failure. But not for those who feel a passion for their work and for the city. Small shops and a theatre, even a rickshaw business, have found a new home and inspiration. They may not be able to turn the city around but they can make it more exciting and livable.

If there are to be sustainable and even transformative changes in the quality of city life, all stakeholders must be engaged in the process. Culture must be considered the right of all citizens. Those things that give people pleasure – the 'flow experiences' of life – must be counted and valued for they are themselves potent sources of creativity. Entrepreneurs like Ms. Willemssen have embraced the opportunities Detroit presents. But they are there less for the money, they say, than making it a 'more livable community.' A rickshaw cab owner remarked, 'I haven't made much money, but the experience has been priceless. I had no idea Detroit had so much love.' Where do these expressions of civic industry and commitment fit in the picture of Detroit's future?

CONCLUSION

For some years the notion of the 'creative city' has been embraced as a new way to deal with old urban problems: dying city centers, loss of jobs (or whole industries), flight to the suburbs. While the idea that creativity itself - particularly as embodied in a 'creative class' – has been attractive to many cities as the magic bullet that will solve their seemingly intractable problems, there is little evidence that any class of people can bring a city back from the brink. (McGillis 2010, TNR, *ibid*) While a creative 'class' may be a bogus claim, creativity considered more comprehensively as a cultural asset, which every city possesses is not. Successful and sustainable regeneration must be anchored in the working parts that already exist in a city including the industry, loyalty, and will of its citizens.

The Vitality Index™ can make a contribution to this. The notion of a cultural impact study that sets the human experience of the city at its heart may seem far-fetched, but thirty years ago, skeptics scoffed at 'tree-hugging' environmentalists.

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