

The Soul of the City

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I am delighted to be here, with Mayor Iorio, Peter Kageyama and so many luminaries of Tampa's Creative City – a city that has inspired quality of life with its leisure, its sense of the good things of life, its history, a city that represents a gusto for living. I bring greetings from Toronto's Mayor David Miller who has revitalized our city with a sense of civic aesthetic informed by a moral beauty that the contemporary city strives for. For that is the project of the physical city, to be witness to the moral beauty distilled from the dreams and desires of its citizens. It is in this sense that I speak today of “the soul of the city.”

The soul of the city perhaps begins with the avoidance of the global soul, or shall say we the “soul-lessness” of the global. We are in danger of letting the multinationals and the corporate zeitgeist get the better of local flavor. There's no escaping the virtual project of the planet; keeping in mind that information technology enriches, extends our domain, generates wealth and makes life easier if not profound, we also recognize that it robs us of the indigenous, the flavored, the local. And that is the challenge of the contemporary city; the question of how to be international and at the same time unique.

It is hard to remain unique in the global arena; hard to build a city that reflects one's heritage, one's lived ethos; hard to foster an urban rhythm faithful to the heartbeat of one's town.

We don't want to be swallowed up in that formless thing called the “global”. We need to compete, but we want to stay true to the character and signature of our cities. We have to cherish and safeguard our own urban experience.

How do we safeguard that urban experience? A city first must be on guard against those things that corrode its humanity. It must stay clear of unnecessary proceduralism and shun the endless protocol that is the child of global paranoia. Global security is the mammoth concern that urges the civic individual to want to escape by “barrier” construction and public and private space that is negotiated; i.e. safe and consequently poor in the resource of adventure. Let us be clear; safety and adventure are philosophically at odds. And finally, it looks like the civic creature, for all the lip service to “buzz”, is opting for safety. And this amounts to a need to withdraw. Yes, *withdraw*; those who of us who have been on the planet for a while know that the instinct for human encounter is under siege. Beleaguered in the theme park of ideologies and irreconcilable diversities, the global citizen, stunned by the loss of a cohesive ideological fabric, has responded with boundary laws, privacy regulations and gated communities.

A civic distrust has permeated our cities, as a response to fragmentation and inventories of discredited institutions. The result has been an increase in crime, mental unhealth, and violence that is inversely proportional to the joylessness of the urban experiment. A general “sullenness” has pervaded the citizenry as a response to the lack of social cohesion. Instead of being a forum of delight, the city has become a forum of distrust.

The soul of a city speaks the absence or presence of civic trust – that robustness without which creativity is impossible.

The “creative city”, nonetheless, is the rallying cry of a city concerned with “soul”. Creativity is that expression by which the citizen recognizes an existential that completes its destiny through other people. The premise of encounter alone justifies the city. It assumes that by discovering each other we discover ourselves.

The creative city is taken to mean different things. It means to prosper and to assert one’s heritage in a climate of adventure. It means innovation to those who would marry commerce and imagination. It means a welcoming city with places in which to relax, with people free to invent and encounter, through the arts, in public spaces and through architecture. But architecting a city is first about constructing the space between people – the metaphysical space...they way the feel about each other and for each other. This conjoins the physical space with the spiritual in an area that I call “civic aesthetic”. For until we have architected the civic space between each other, we will inevitably put up bad buildings, confused infrastructure and obscure the project of city spirit.

The question of architecting the space between people preempts the building of the physical city. The space between people (the notion of social capital) is the hot, relevant item on the urban agenda. In the understanding that patch-ups and fix-it strategies won't do, governance and thinkers are coming around to the notion that a city cannot be built unless the city soul is predicated by congruent aspirations and social commonality— social capital, in its harmony or discord, makes or breaks a city.

We can call this “city spirit”.

The truest thing about city spirit was told to me, ironically, by a developer. Deservedly or not, developers are known for their market enthusiasm, not their philosophic bent. Yet it was a developer who gave me the most sublime thought on cities. We were speaking of great historical cities, cities with electric glamour useful to the project of “buzz” and dynamism. And we were speaking about the historical Florence, the city that fuelled the renaissance and regenerated a civilization by an ethos of civic care and cultural standard. We wondered at its purposeful vision, its exemplary aesthetic grace and prosperity. My friend remarked: “you know, Florence was already there, before a building ever went up.”

Translation: a dream builds a great city.

That dream is proactive to any building. That dream stems from the primal desire of persons; the desire for a livable city made happy by a common meditation on the good, enacted by a literacy of grace, in a forum where the transaction of mutual delight results in prosperity. And construction?

Construction is the expression city soul. An ugly city speaks of a soul that has become derogative of itself. A lovely city speaks of a people who seek a higher version of themselves, with self-regard. The cure for a city anemic to itself is to understand that vision predicates prosperity. Money alone does not make for livability.

The healthy city recognizes a desire in the citizen that runs deeper than the utilitarian, beyond and deeper than the backwater of consumer calculation. There is in the citizen a desire for a passion that demonstrates and accelerates an appetite for life, a desire to fall in love with a city, beginning with a loyalty for what that city has been and culminating in an excitement about what it can be. We may call it a “romance” with a city; a romance that the citizen craves and labors for. When citizens recognize this, they work together to make a great city.

A city develops by the blue print of what it loves, or disfigures itself by monuments to its self-loathing. People will always build amenities; but what they must first build is a vision of the beautiful city, based on a shared legacy and a cherished destiny. It is how a town prospers. Not unlike the way one love’s one’s family, one’s love infuses the civic habitat, and its inspiration is called “civic delight”.

Delight is the key to the urban romance. It is the cry of the global citizen. “Delight me in a way that will give me a reason for doing things well”. When the citizen is delighted with a city, that city is unstoppable and irresistible in the charisma of self-worth. It is what finally draws tourists and stops the exodus from the metropole; it is what keeps generations loyal to a neighborhood; it is what entices the imagination of the global pilgrim. The charm of such citizenship is profound and seductive.

The soul of a city, then, has to do with romance. The finding of intimacy and stimulation in the streets that are a wardrobe and not just place of business; on shorelines seen as lyrical movement, not just as a defining feature; in residences that speak conviviality, under skylines that don’t intimidate, but invite aspiration.

How does one build the creative city, as an expression of “soul”? First one cultivates a climate of trust, innovation and adventure. Spontaneous thinking does not emerge without a climate of trust. Trust begins in the assumption of every citizen that he/she will be met by an ethic of “welcome and response” and not an ethic of “boundary and protocol”. More importantly it begins in the desire of each citizen to recognize another as a resource of sacrifice. Why sacrifice? Nothing seduces the human heart like the notion of mutuality; the notion that we can sacrifice what we know to the adventure of the unknown in each other. It is a great sacrifice to abandon one’s fear, believing that one will meet a welcoming response, rather than boundary and protocol.

This is where a city becomes a “yes” city; with the encounter of citizens that generate an atmosphere of allowance. This allowance is a precondition of creativity. This allowance, volunteered, creates an atmosphere in which the willingness to share ideas becomes commonplace, where the citizens become stewards of allowance. When we know our ideas will be met with responsiveness and hospitality, ideas flow. Prosperity is then not dependent on brute policy and strategy, but merely assisted by policy and strategy. The job of governance is to glamorize an alchemy of mutuality, by example and by the dissemination of a creative ethic; by removing the caveats to mutuality; by being aware of crippling proceduralism, hyper-regulation, ritualized bureaucracy and protocol—those things that make for a sanitized city, not a creative city.

Which is to say: regulation is essential, but the intelligence of city-building is about knowing the futility of regulating the human heart. The task is to inspire the human heart it, and invite it to a civic eros for which laws are an expression, not a generator.

Fear is the unseen index of an enfeebled city. And its dread is the fear of the random. A romance with town means that a town must learn again the art of engaging with the random, of seeing the random as an area of possibility and growth. Embracing the random may be as simple as risking before all the evidence is in. The line between folly and enterprise, if watched too closely, becomes paralysis. Civic bankruptcy begins with the bankruptcy of civic courage--the inability to gamble in a world of possibility. Such risk begins in the encounter of citizens, who collectively risk and, most importantly, appreciate each other for it. This is the spine of civic grace, without which creativity is not possible.

Toronto is at a cross roads at the moment; it is moving from being a world-class city to a global city. It is the premiere test case for diversity in the global arena; diversity of life style, religion, ideology and ethnicity. The global citizen is emerging there, as a civic being unfettered from cultural alliance and prompted by universal loyalties. The soul of a city is not in its cultures, but in its ability to learn the alphabet of the universal; laughter, a sense of wonder, empathy and the gospel of creativity. For when people are creative together, they get along.

Tampa has a natural gusto for creativity, an adventuresome ness aided by climate, location and a primal sense that life is to be enjoyed; this is a treasure of a resource. The enjoyment of life is not manufactureable; it is an appetite that is chief resource and guarantor of city building.

The challenge for Toronto, Tampa and all creative cities is to rejoice in things as they are accomplished. As a city is built, it is not a question of congratulating oneself at every step, but of acknowledging the delight in the shared enterprise that made it possible. The style of delight is the character of Tampa, or any city; its expression is the way a city looks and the way the city breathes as you watch its citizens moving with and between each other and towards each other; you won't see this resource on any index, but it's a resource without which a city fails

Finally, we have to become students of the civic heart; listening for what it desires, not what it wants; what it misses, not what it has; what it yearns for, not what it can consume. Without reading this heart, joy will not yield itself in the civic forum. And without joy, the city soul shrivels. The salvation of the modern city depends on this; the notion that a great city is not just a sustainable city, but one that justifies itself to the business of happiness.

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