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Toronto's Poet Laureate Pier Giorgio Di Cicco recently joined a delegation of city officials on a one week mission to Europe to find out what makes cities attractive to tourists and investors.

### Chasing Buzz

Everyone's looking for a "buzz". Cities too. In the fever to compete with global economies, in the panic to counter the Chinese with some kind of "software" to match their "hardware" of productivity, the craze has hit Western cities in the last ten years-- the craze to be a "creative city". Municipal governments want to lever the principles of "creativity" into the marketplace, to kick-start industries bogged down by "steam-engine" notions of capitalism into a sense of cutting-edge thinking, where invention and innovation are fuelled by something deeper than ledger-ambitions, or short-term vision. And we've been besieged by short-term visions, in development, in urban planning. Look at our cities...hodge-podges of skyline, smothered in bad air, zoning laws bungled by infrastructures we can't afford. "Sustainability" has become the new catchword of city thinking; how to render cities livable and profitable. Somewhere, the quality of life has crept back into the discussion; how to compete, without making ourselves unhappy in the means of competing.

Enter the word "buzz"; that thing that makes cities attractive and makes people want to move to a city. Lots of cities offer opportunities, but a city that offers excitement, livability, culture, will always have a better drawing card. Industries are becoming aware that the showcase of the town they thrive in is best insurance of continued profits. And they're aware that cutting-edge thinkers and really creative people will offer their skills only to a city that looks and feels creative.

Such is the thinking of a Richard Florida, American economist and city guru, whose notion of the "bohemian index" measures the factors contributing to a creative city, factors such as ethnic diversity and bohemian presence. Cities, says Florida, must dispense with stale theories of economic development and spend more on cultural amenities. They must become trendy, happening places to become economic powerhouses. The glamour of Florida's ideas has become gospel to city thinkers. And the same wildfire has spread across Europe through exponents such as Charles Landry. Major cities are in a race to draw tourist dollars and creative citizens.

So we are on the move; The Ontario Government and The City of Toronto have spearheaded an initiative (together with London, England) to see how Toronto and London stack up to major cities. We are a delegation of some fifteen planners, movers and dreamers, flying to Barcelona, London and Berlin to compare "buzz", to find out how "creative" these cities are, to learn if and how their industries speak to the "creative", the soul of a city. For that's the measure and resource of a city--it's soul--the product of a way

of life, without which a city produces nothing. We know New York and Paris have a soul (history helps). We are sure that Barcelona and London and Berlin will have a soul. We're not too sure if Toronto has a soul (we have "Torontonian" doubts). We are eager to find out. And on board we have a poet laureate reputedly expert at sniffing out the productions or absenteeism's of "culture".

We arrive in London; London regales us with showcasing of regional skills and "creative hub" communities, ingenious urban strategies and serious funding for the arts. They're trying to break down the separate silos of the industrial and the creative. They are listening closely to what their immigrants offer, and plan intelligently. They see their communities as creative resources. It works. History and tourism don't hurt either. Buzz? How can London not have it? The tower of London, next to gherkin-shaped skyscrapers, the cluster of theatre districts, the mix of ghettos, the regal palaces. It looks a little like the epochal theme park that is Las Vegas; coherence is something the global city doesn't have. But it has "buzz", or at least the excitement that camouflages what tears at the seams of any global city-- the awesome diversity and the ideological factioning that must lead to such tragedies as the recent bombings. London meets these global challenges with resolve.

We move on to Berlin, bold and bankrupt; its citizens recovering from the dim of a communist nightmare. It has built wildly, freshly; but a weird exodus has left the buildings as the cheapest real-estate that a street-artist could hope to afford. It has strategies and bohemia, banks and tourists, world-class designers, and an awful grief for its twentieth century. Buzz is not what is happening, so much as hope. Berlin is on hold. And it's multicultural problems are unmanaged and their top-notch architects are aloof from the local arts and crafts shops and the cabarets. The cultural strands don't mesh. Special interests visit Berlin, and can't get together.

Barcelona, confident and opulent; the "Gaudi" gem by the Mediterranean, with avenues that are corridors of cafes, and wide-eyed tourists and officials that are big on "high art", with CEO's savvy on the continental trends of information technology, with curators and cultural sheiks who boast great museums and design institutes. Barcelona plays it up; history, and the confidence of being Spanish (or Catalanian). Finally, we see something Toronto can use. Confidence exudes from the streets, the manner of walking, the ritual of coffee, the way a building goes up. Barcelona has statement without self-consciousness; it has fiscal ambition with a flair for the good things of life; more importantly, it takes "pleasure" in the good things of life. Still, Barcelona is not a creative city. It lacks the restlessness of the North American. It lacks that sense of the "newly arrived", that sense that people have of building a world freshly. It lacks that sense of danger that doesn't take refuge in historical narrative. History disempowers the cutting edge. It intimidates the recklessness that creativity thrives on.

We are beleaguered. Three cities in one week; flow-charts, briefings on cultural "levers", "strategies", "infrastructure", terrible heat-waves, late nights hunting the "bohemian index"; endless notes on what makes these cities "buzz". How does Toronto measure up?

What doesn't measure up is what we see as we drive back from the airport-- those box-like testimonies to the quick dollar called out-lying industries and house farms. It's as if a little imagination were too high a price to pay for mixing business with a cheerful way to live-- a sad introduction to a metropolis with a skyline that is the signature of prosperity. We ignore the travesty of a lovely lake hidden from its citizens by the hammer of condo high-rises. The Gardiner looks more like a drawbridge over a concrete moat Leave architecture alone; it's just the expression of the space "between" people; the way they live, love, or don't love-- the way they encounter, and dream; and Toronto's dreams are just vexed by the nightmares of any global city; ruthless business ethics, de-humanizing cyber-technology and the sheer confusion of diversity in every form.

As we settle into Toronto it stuns us to realize that Toronto lacks for nothing in the pageant of the global; except perhaps for the scarcity of dollars directed to cultural enterprises. With that in mind it's amazing that Toronto bristles with artistic life fuelled by the resources of artists who manage their enthusiasm into public delight. Queen Street, Kensington Market, theatre companies, galleries, poetry readings, street art, mixed-media events, festivals; there is a "grass roots" vitality here that will not be repressed; and it is "home-grown", not strategized. Our industries have the knack of making useful whatever catches the popular imagination, and our street commerce quickly absorbs the unique, the fanciful. Inventiveness dialogues rapidly with business, and the "creative class" is everywhere becoming the middle class. The risk of being "gentrified" is at every corner checked by the antics of creative and young minds, impatient with the comforts of globalization, and eager to "not" conform. Where the random of "punk" and "alternative" become tiresome, the easy neighborhoods of conviviality cut in; the Annex, Cabbagetown, the Little Italies, Little Portugals. The ethnic ghettos are not ghettos but places to wander in if one has a mind to treat multi-culturalism as exotic. And yes, even the protocol that annoys Toronto in its presbytereanness makes the traffic of curiosity run smoother.

Buzz? If you can make out an excitement from the civic grace with which Toronto visits itself, you have something more than "buzz", or "sustainability". You have a texture of life that Torontonians have failed to see as glamorous, as they waste their time ogling the myths of London, New York or Paris. The final word on "buzz" might belong to a couple of eminent London planners who secretly told me they were thinking of moving to Toronto. And why? All "creative" cities being equal (in terms of assets) there is one thing Toronto does in the multicultural forum that dumbfounds other cities. Toronto sidesteps the matter of "culture" in the business of daily life. This is the best kept secret in Toronto; that the people get along with each other because they have jumped to the "universals", with the understanding that cultures will just snag them down. And this has nothing to do with becoming Canadian, or learning about other cultures (who has the time to do more than "visit" another culture?) What the citizens of diversity do here is understand that a code of common humanity is all that will keep them from tearing each other apart. The alphabet of this humanity has nothing to do with social strategy, policy or the branding of cheap notions of "tolerance". The alphabet is made up by the native sense of the universal heart--an instinct that says we are "all in this together", and that the only way to survive in a globalized environment is by identifying with "another"; not by

claiming your identity, but by identifying with the next person. No one knows by what weird alchemy this takes place in Toronto, but it is becoming a matter of fact among other cities--that Toronto has this odd elixir that might keep global multiculturalism from the "explosive". Wishful thinking? This might all change with a subway bomb. But if the chances are good that we as Torontonians have discovered universals as a means of living together, we might do well to glamourize it, and even call it something like "soul".

Finally, that's what we fail at in Toronto. We fail to glamourize the production of soul. Guru Richard Florida lists Toronto as one of the top four "creative cities" in North America. How much more creative could we be if we relaxed into a confidence about it? "Passion" might be useful. Passion might be the style of our creativity if we turned our mealy-mouthed criticisms into endorsements of self-love. We're getting closer to passion judging by the up swell of disdain over the recent branding of Toronto as "Toronto Unlimited". Torontonians seem to be clear on what they are not. Now it's just a matter of being clear on who we are. We are a world class city, like it or not, with a defiance that must change into casual grace, with no need to define ourselves against Americans, with no need of the entrenched myths of Continental cities, with no need to rally ourselves with the virtues of inclusivity, diversity and reform. We do things very well. And it may be time to put that fact behind us and simply turn to our enthusiasms, and lose that self-consciousness we call "Toronto". For the city has outgrown our questions about ourselves, and it may be time to inhabit it.

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