

The City as a Stage – but for whom?

The challenges of the experience economy to cultural and urban planning

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TOPIC: DESIGNING THE EXPERIENCE CITY

Abstract:

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The challenges of the experience economy to cultural and urban planning.

The way in which the experience economy capitalises on the need for experiences presents new challenges to the cities. Regardless whether one designates these new experience cities as *experiencescapes* or *fantasy city*, the crux of the matter is that they marginalize the actual inhabitants of such cities and create stereotypical images of the characteristics of the place. Taking its point of departure in a concrete example (the Holmbladsgade District in Copenhagen), this article discusses the potential for developing the diverse city.

Keywords:

Experience economy, diversity, experiencescapes, fantasy city, cultural planning, urban planning

”Time for *experiences*. The winter break was made for family *experiences*. Everything that the time constraints of everyday life prevent you from exploring is now on hand. And there are plenty of opportunities to let your hair down and *experience* something new...Jump on the bus or take the train/metro heading towards new *experiences*... But remember that when the winter break is over, the entire capital area still offers *experiences*.”

HUR's pamphlet "Take your children on a winter break adventure".

Focus on experiences

The issue of experience is an increasingly important part of our everyday lives, identity formation and consumption. We expect more of experiences. There is an explosive growth of experience products in the form of leisure equipment, entertainment and travels. We spend more and more on getting away from the humdrum of everyday life, or, rather, every day has to present something new.

We pursue experiences from the personalised experience gifts where a ticket to the opera or a gift certificate to a spa have replaced the material birthday present to the large experience events where being there is just as significant as the event itself. We *were* at the Depeche Mode or Madonna concert, and part of the experience is telling about it before and afterwards. Call it events, event culture or festivalisation of the urban space where the relationship between consumption, social community and intensified experiences are significant elements (Waade, 2002, 25). In any case, the point is our increasing tendency to find our identity through personal orchestration, and that the experience – and our telling of it – is on such orchestration.

The experience has come to represent a growing need in a society that guarantees survival and information is readily available. According to the German cultural sociologist Gerhard Schulze (1992), the emergence of the experience society as the dominant model of society occurred as early as the 1980s. He bases his theory on extensive data from the West German society of the mid-80s, and the basis for his argumentation is the assertion that during the 1960s and 1970s, we evolved from being a shortage society to being one of excess. Now, it is no longer the financial capability of the individual that defines the cultural

field of possibilities, but rather a quest for experiences and the immediate satisfaction of needs. According to Schulze, it is neither fundamental value definitions in the form of "life philosophies" nor distinctiveness that make up the central aspects of the experience. Now, pleasure, defined as "the psycho-physical reaction to the good experience," is emphasised. Pleasure must also be viewed as an entirely subjective feeling that cannot be articulated or measured.

In continuation of the above, experience is thus defined in the book *The Experience Economy – A New Perspective*:

"An immediate, relatively isolated occurrence with a complex of emotions that make an impression and represent a certain value for the individual within the context of a specific situation".

(Boswijk et al., 2007, 22)

A cultural turn

The focus on and need for experiences can be seen as being part of a larger "cultural turn" in which economic and symbolic processes are more intertwined than ever before and are expressed in a common language: To a greater extent than ever, the economy is influenced by culture, and culture is influenced by the economy (Lash & Urry, 1994, 64).

According to the Swedish ethnologists Orvar Löfgren and Robert Willim, this development is tied to "the new economy" that emerged in the 1990s. Now it was no longer a question of commodifying culture, but of entirely new ways of using culture. Culture was stretched into brand new activities and territories, and immaterial and fleeting qualities were actualised in material elaborations. As they argue:

"In such transformations we can follow what happens when a cultural heritage becomes a brand, when a city is turned into an event, when merchandise turns into experience, when a way of life becomes a style, when ethics turn into icons or when everyday life becomes design. A lot of energy is devoted to producing not only material commodities and services, but also atmosphere, symbols, images, icons, auras, experiences and events. In this process, cultural technologies of ritualization, narration, imagineering and aesthetization are put to work."

(Löfgren & Willim, 2005, 13)

This development has only escalated in the new millennium. Experience has become a focal point in the *experience economy* and in marketing. Commodities are fused with emotions in what is labelled experience economy and has the capitalisation of emotions and experiences as its purpose. With the fusion of culture, experience and economy, it is no coincidence that the theatric stage is used over and over again as a metaphor for the development that everyday life is currently undergoing. When the American economists Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore in their book *The Experience Economy* (1999), chose the subtitle *Work is a Theatre & Every Business a Stage* it is because commodities and services are no longer sufficient in order to attract customers:

"The company – we'll call it an *experience stager* – no longer offers goods or services alone but the resulting experience, rich with sensations, created within the customer. All prior economic offerings remain at arm's length, outside the buyer, while experiences are inherently personal. They actually occur within any individual, who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level (...) Those companies which capture this economic value will not only earn a place in the hearts of consumers, they will capture their dollars."

(Pine & Gilmore, 1999, 12-13)

If one was to replace the word "companies" with "cities", experiences can be perceived as a strategic tool where the numerous flagships and experience events compete with one another in the tightened competition between cities. The urban space is staged as an arena for experience via time-limited festivals and events and through the more permanent orchestrations of the "historic city".

Contesting cities

The tendency to use culture and experiences in urban development is not new. Already in the 1960s, the Danish provincial town of Holstebro used its culture as the focal point of its development of a new image from the sleepy, left-behind provincial town to the vivacious and modern city. Holstebro anticipated the increased importance of culture that has been the mark of cultural policies since the mid 1980s and it became synonymous to urban development based on cultural investment. With the purchase of the globally acclaimed artist Giacometti's sculpture "Woman on chair", the

politicians achieved the media breakthrough that was needed in order to draw attention to an unknown provincial town, and the skinny, ethereal girl became a symbol of a new spiritual dimension of the commercial town (Skot-Hansen, 1998, 1999).

However, where Holstebro by virtue of its image makeover held the advantage of keeping abreast of the development, the competition for exposure and to attract tourists has tightened in a more and more globalised world. Today, cities are increasingly planned and designed to affect us in specific ways, and they fight for exposure through staging, place marketing and city branding.

Experiencescapes – new experience spaces

The space of the city itself can be defined as an *experiencescape*, a space between tourism, culture and economy (O'Dell & Billing, 2005). Such spaces are, according to the Swedish tourism researcher Tom O'Dell, spaces for pleasure, joy and entertainment, and they simultaneously function as gathering points where various groups move about and get into contact with one another. It is not all about fun and relaxation, though.:

"... experiencescapes can also be places in which the local and global are entwined and where power relations are played out, political interests are materialized, cultural identities contested and dreams are redefined. This is important to bear in mind, because to a large extent, the offerings of these experiencescapes are as elusive as they are intangible, even though their cultural, economic and political consequences are real."

(O'Dell, 2005, 18-19)

Malmö is a typical example of a city aiming at experience as its centre stage. In 2001, politicians and public servants presented a vision for the future of the city with plans for the construction of nothing less than a theme park in the outskirts of the city, an experience centre in the city centre, an event complex that included the tallest hotel in Northern Europe, an event stadium and a new shopping centre. The purpose was to create new sources of income and new workplaces for the inhabitants of the city, but if the plans are carried out, many groups might be forced to move against their will, and, consequently, their feeling of belonging in the city will diminish (O'Dell, 2005).

Whereas these plans are aimed at general experience tourism, another idea that actors in Malmø have been working with focuses on a narrower segment of privileged global tourists that emphasise design and exclusive architecture (Christerdotter, 2005). These plans include a hotel drawn by the world famous architect Frank Gehry, and the objective is thus to getting into the slipstream of the Bilbao Guggenheim-effect. The hotel will supposedly be situated by the Øresund Bridge as a visible symbol at the access point from Europe to the city and the region of a new cosmopolitan spirit. What makes this hotel interesting is not whether or not it will ever be built, but rather the symbolic power struggle that the very idea of the hotel has started; whereas some see the hotel as a playground for the rich, a symbol of disparity and a monument to the elaboration of social distinctions, others perceive it as an icon of Malmø as a cool and up-to-date city.

The two overall experience economical strategies – the general experience tourism and the narrow global elite based – can be viewed as opposing tendencies that may prove difficult to reconcile in the long-term marketing of the city. But, at the same time, they both show how the staging of cities as experiencescapes contributes to political as well as symbolic power struggles, and how urban development aimed at attracting tourists by making the place interesting in terms of experience and consumption runs the risk of marginalizing the politically and economically weak groups.

Towards Fantasy City?

One researcher who has worked critically and thoroughly with the role of entertainment in urban development is the Canadian sociologist John Hannigan. In his book *Fantasy City – Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis* (1998), he surveys the development from the 20th century to today. Even though his background material is primarily North American, parallels can easily be drawn to the Asian cities that at the moment of writing are overtaking the Western cities on the inside with their soaring supply of theme parks and experience resorts. Hannigan perceives this development as a sign of a new urban economy rooted in tourism, sports, culture and entertainment (cf. Experiencescapes above), and he characterises the concept of Fantasy City as being:

- *Theme-o-centric* – anything from individual entertainment venues to the image of the city

itself is subjected to *one* clearly defined theme taken from sports, history and popular entertainment or from an historical era or a type of cultural activity

- *Branded* – the city as entertainment destination is marketed both for its abilities in consumer satisfaction and experience in itself, but also for its potential in terms of selling licensed merchandise on site. Further, companies have been known to connect their brands directly to attractive locations, such as Continental Airlines' sponsorship of the New York Theater District which changed its name to "Continental World"

- *Day and Night* – the spirit of the casinos in Nevada is pursued in order to attract the now grown-up "Generation X", the members of which seek social interaction and entertainment around the clock

- *Modular* – by mixing and matching an expanding standard line of components I changing variations: one or more theme restaurants, an IMAX theatre, a record and book megastore and virtual reality gaming arcades, perhaps with a publicly supported theatre and a museum to boot

- *Solipsistic* – physically, economically and culturally isolated from the surrounding neighbours, such as the sparkling strip of casino hotels in Atlantic City that stands in stark contrast to the decaying city that surrounds it

- *Postmodern* – constructed around simulation technologies, virtual reality and spectacles that reduce the distance between authenticity and illusion in a state of hyperreality as described by postmodern writers such as Eco and Baudrillard

It is Hannigan's assertion that until now we have only seen a small glimpse of the Fantasy City of the future. Today, virtually all multinational entertainment companies boast development teams that evaluate, plan and implement "urban entertainment destination" projects. Among other things, this takes place on the basis of synergies between the entertainment industry and the development industry as exemplified by the notion of *shoppertainment*, which combines commerce and entertainment in new ways, *eatertainment* where the food is consumed in new, thematised restaurants, and *edutainment* where "learning is fun".

Cultural politicians and urban planners must ask themselves if it is this form of leisure and this form of city we want? Hannigan ends his odyssey of cities past and present on a somewhat dystopian note:

"Are we prepared to overlook the cultural diversity in the community in favour of pre-packaged corporate entertainment destination? Will there be room for leisure activities other than those which can be branded, licensed, franchised and rolled out on a global scale? And, finally, are we prepared to designate our inner cities no-go zones except for the heavily fortified themed attractions which welcome a constant flow of tourists embarked on leisure safaris into the depths of the post-modern metropolis?"

(Hannigan, 1998, 200)

City Branding

The tendency towards place marketing and city branding has been escalated by the experience economy. Place marketers and city branders are likened to modern day alchemists who "mix catchy slogans and airbrush pictures with a flair for event management and a keen nose for the hottest new trends in order to create an aura that will attract tourists and generate economic wealth" (O'Dell, 2005, 25). Or, as Naomi Klein puts it in her book *No Logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*: "No place has been left unbranded" (Klein, 2000, 93).

In an historical context, big cities have marketed themselves through myths, world expositions, pregnant buildings or leaning towers. As early as in the 1950s, "Wonderful Copenhagen" was marketed in a campaign in which the famous poster of a policeman holding back traffic for mother duck and her ducklings on their way across a pedestrian crossing yielded an image of an idyllic fairy tale city free of any danger. A naive, albeit ingenious concept that became famous world wide, and American tourists in particular flocked to the city to buy Royal Copenhagen and Danish Design. But whereas "Wonderful Copenhagen" the Danish Tourist Board's own campaign, place marketing and city branding have since become a market for professional advertising or design firms.

City branding consciously works towards establishing unity in the marketing of a city through a clear-cut profile and consistent communication about the city. The city is viewed as a commodity. But it can be complicated to transfer the concept of branding from brand products to geographical locations. The Danish city branding researcher Søren Smidt-Jensen perceives city branding as an effective means of attacking some of the image and identity problems

that confront cities in the wake of the intensified competition between places, but he also warns about the potential difficulties of branding a city "because the qualities, soul and identity of a city are often complex and difficult to grasp whereas the essence of branding is relatively specific and delimited" (Smith-Jensen, 2005, 11).

Branding through diversity?

A sharper critique of the transfer of marketing strategies to places is found in the book *Kunst og Kapital* (2005) by the Swedish cultural economists Anne-Britt Gran and Donatella De Paoli. The perceived danger of branding cities and regions is that one risks excluding parts of the existing population – ethnic and religious minorities, the poor, the gay community or subcultures. For where traditional product branding deals with products and services, geographical places are inhabited by people with many different identities and self conceptions. They argue:

"This form of branding – stereotyping the qualities of the place – has some ethically dubious implications that have not in any way been included in branding theory or in new theories concerning business communication. Consequently, these theories should be handled carefully when applied to place marketing. Indeed, one might actually consider leaving some places alone from strategic branding."

(Gran & De Paoli, 2005, 18)

The question is: Can a city be branded as being a diverse city? When the English town of Norwich profiles itself as the "City of Literature", this might seem narrow and maybe even elitist. Nevertheless, in 2005 this was carried out as a large scale forum, New Writing Worlds, where a new type of creative process and intercultural dialogue was developed with creative writing as its focal point. The Millennium Library participated in the project in collaboration with BBC, University of East Anglia and Norwich School of Art and Design, and literature marked the agenda for the entire town. Through workshops, local amateur writers came into dialogue with the approximately 40 famous authors of various ethnicities and nationalities who had been invited to the town, while local newspapers published the results on a daily basis. Thus, all groups in the town were included and the town received a positive, diverse image.

London, too, has an image of diversity wherein the numerous ethnic groups contribute to the air of intensity and innovation that characterise the city. The multicultural citizenship of Barcelona is marketed through large scale festivals that are carried out to the joy of inhabitants and tourists alike. Not least the annual Mercé Festival that grows larger every year. In 2004, more than two million people took part in the 758 activities that spanned six days and included more than 800 artists performing at 20 festival locations throughout the entire city. Barcelona Street Arts Festival is a part of the festivities that emphasises innovative circus, dance, music and theatre with ties to new metropolitan movements. Thus, diversity has to do with ethnic groups, cultures and artistic expressions, which, in terms of marketing, supplement Gaudi's surreal and ambiguous buildings. Barcelona is currently a city with a strong and vivid image that, in relation to tourists, holds the advantage over e.g. Bilbao that it is not branded by one, singular flagship.

Other means ...

The question is how can a city be turned into an experience space for its own citizens, including the marginalized and weak groups? I am not referring to the development of actual theme parks or Tivolis here, even though they are also a source of joy for locals, but rather to the development of public, non-commercial spaces with qualities in terms of experience and aesthetics that challenge the citizens in their everyday lives.

*The District House in Holmbladsgade-district with architect Dorte Mandrup's award-winning annex.
(Photo: Nan Dahlkild)*



A good example is the development of the neighbourhood around Holmbladsgade in Copenhagen; a former labour district which only a few years ago was worn down, fragmented and without any common points of reference or identity. Via the district boost project, its residences have been renovated in a bout of urban renewal, and, additionally, it has received an infusion of experience qualities through a conscious planning of the urban space based on citizen participation and architectural and cultural consultancy. I myself had the role as cultural consult in this process which resulted in a *Culture and Sports Plan for the Holmbladsgade District* (1999) and the following is based on this plan. The aims of the culture and sports plan were:

- Improved opportunities for district inhabitants of all ages to express themselves creatively and physically
- Enhanced options in terms of cultural and artistic experiences in the local area
- Creation of meeting places for social interaction, play and the exchange of opinions
- Improving the possibilities for modern, big city life to unfold in the neighbourhood
- Strengthening the visibility, image and identity of the district

It was an overarching goal that the idea of the local community be fused with the metropolitan tendencies from the perspective that "the local anchorage must still be the driving force, but the district must also make room for metropolitan life with the variety of subcultures and lifestyles it entails. (...) the neighbourhood must to an increasing extent to the impulses and challenges that the new big city environment may yield" (Hasløv, Thomsen & Skot-Hansen, 1999, 6).

The answer to the question of local areas vs. metropolises is therefore not necessarily one of either/or, and the successful planning process must take both these ideal types into consideration. But in order to shed light on the two extremes, the following two contrasted scenarios were presented in the plan:

THE LOCAL AREA	THE METROPOLIS
Local	Global
Anchorage	Flow
Harmony	Differences
Order	Spontaneity
Tradition	Innovation
Culture	Art

If one opts for the *idea of the local area*, one must emphasise the *local*; i.e. ones roots must be found in the neighbourhood itself, and proximity and intimacy are important in gradients in activities, be they in the context of the family, the sports association or club. The *anchorage*, i.e. awareness of ones origins, is important, and the wish is to be able to proudly exclaim: I come from Holmbladsgade! The everyday should preferably unfold itself as a *harmonious unit* that promotes the community and the similarities between the neighbourhood residents and bridging the gaps between potential differences among people must be emphasised. This is most likely to be achieved in contexts characterised by *order* and a clearly defined set of rules, as exemplified by the annual general meeting of the yachting association. *The tradition* is central to the solidarity of the local area, and the historical aspect is of great importance to its identity. It is the narrative of the background of the neighbourhood in the industrial labour *culture* that needs to be strengthened as the Local Historical Archive and the Local Historical Association are currently working towards by documenting the development of the district. The efforts to characterise the neighbourhood in terms of a common culture with a point of departure in joint activities and values become the focal point in planning the local area of the future.

If one emphasises the further development of the *metropolitan tendencies*, the neighbourhood must be viewed in an entirely different light. In this context it is important to highlight the multicultural neighbourhood and enhance the exchange with the *global* society; regardless of whether this is achieved through projects devised to attract tourists or big city participants or through net cafés in cyberspace. Rather than anchorage, *flow* becomes an identity generating factor, particularly for the many youths of the district – where I am going is more important than where I come from. Now it is no longer about cultivating homogeneity and commu-

nity. On the contrary, it is about cultivating the *differences* of various subcultures and lifestyles. Hip-hoppers and trendy café customers do not wish to blend into the crowd – it has to do with drawing borders by using symbols and image. This will not be achieved in the traditional association, but *spontaneously* through informal networks in cultural factories or at cultural points.

Here, the big city becomes a stage for the innovative where diverse and composite cultures interact with each other, where one can display and emphasise oneself. It is not the common culture, but the points of difference that must be given room. *Art* – whether you create it or observe it – becomes the area with the greatest potential for standing out. Therefore, art is more prone to be created in a metropolitan than in a local context, the latter of which threatens it with its common values and emphasis on processes rather than works.

The majority of the objectives of the sports and culture plan have thus been achieved, and the Holmbladsgade district has gained new experience spaces combined with artistic and architectural qualities. The run down worker district has been given room for flow and spontaneity, and anchorage has thus been combined with change and a more contemporary, metropolitan image. Today, the district has got a unique “playground” by the old Prags Boulevard with opportunities for unfolding oneself, regardless of age, in parks and on skating rinks. A new district house with a library in the old industrial building from 1880 opened with an award-winning annexe with conference facilities drawn by the architect Dorte Mandrup. A new artistic lighting arrangement makes negotiating the neighbourhood at night an experience in itself and in the new sports and culture house (drawn by Dorte Mandrup et al.), the district has gained a shining crystal of a landmark. The untraditional elaboration of the rooms of the house promotes a rethinking of sports as a site for mutual inspiration between sports and culture mirroring the diversity of the surrounding environment.

The city as at stage – planning for diversity

If the cities are to continue to simultaneously assert themselves and function as a framework for the urban and cultural life that is unfolding, they must go to greater lengths in

protecting and contributing to the development towards a diverse city. In the long run, sustainable cities cannot survive on *one* flagship or *one* event, and the vivacious city cannot be planned from the top down as a calculated experiencescape, an experience space stretched between tourism, culture and economy, or, narrower yet, as a thematised and modular "fantasy city".

When experience is used as *staging*, it is important to provide a framework for experiences; i.e. to stage the urban space to facilitate opportunities for experiences and displays. In this context, the novelty quickly wears off if the content does not match the declaration. Whether this staging takes place for the benefit of the city's own inhabitants or the cities turn into set pieces for visitors is absolutely crucial. In her book *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (1982) the American urban sociologist Sharon Zukin criticises cities that seek to re-establish their historical core for the middle class as "pacifying through cappuccino". By cleansing the urban landscape of authenticity, the original inhabitants are excluded from the public places they used to consider their own.

When cities work towards enhancing the quality of the experiences on offer, thinking in terms of experience tourism and events will not suffice. The urban space must be thought of as a whole that includes the needs of the various social groups and segments within the city, and in which the possible experiences unfold on many different levels – aesthetically, physically and socially. Here, the district boost of the

Holmbladsgade District serves as a good example of an urban environment where the optimised framework for experience benefits the neighbourhood's own inhabitants. However, staging can also benefit citizens as well as visitors as exemplified by Barcelona, which is marketing its own cultural diversity by supporting the many festivals.

The cultural, ethnical and social differences of the cities must be mirrored and rendered visible in the cities' spaces and offers, and the better the possibilities for citizen participation in a diversity of cultural and artistic offers, and to express themselves aesthetically and culturally, the more dynamic, complex and rich in experiences the city will appear to citizens and visitors alike. Therefore, the diversity of experiences ought to be strengthened through:

Diversity of organisation – that the artistic and cultural life is staged in many different contexts, such as in public, private and volunteer organisations and through partnerships and networks among them

Diversity of culture – that a diversity of artistic and aesthetic experiences is expressed through many different genres and styles within many different media and at many different levels, also the more challenging and complex ones

Diversity of voices – that the arts and culture scenes are influenced by global as well as local expressions and that the cultural, social and ethnic groups and subgroups are given the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard.

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