

The Creative City

by Joe Berridge

Summary

The creative city is conventionally thought of as the home for thriving arts and cultural activity...but successful cities must also embrace creativity in the way they deliver services, energize their staff and manage their futures. This article explores four international examples of the ways the principles of creativity found in the arts - flexibility, innovation, risk and leadership - have been applied by city governments in London, New York, Stockholm and Blackburn UK.

Sommaire

Conventionnellement, la « ville créative » se conçoit comme un endroit où les arts et les activités culturelles sont en plein essor, mais les villes qui se distinguent doivent aussi faire preuve de créativité dans la façon dont elles dispensent des services, électrisent leur personnel et gèrent leur avenir. Le présent article se penche sur quatre exemples internationaux de façons dont les principes de créativité qui caractérisent les arts – soit la souplesse, l'innovation, le risque et le leadership – ont été appliqués par les administrations municipales de Londres, de New York, de Stockholm et de Blackburn (R.-U.).

Every city now wants to be a centre of creativity, promoting the connection between a vigorous arts and cultural life and economic and community health. The most successful creative city of the 21st century will, however, be much more than that. It will be the creative city, the city government that most imaginatively, efficiently and beautifully provides needed services and infrastructure. That city will be more than just a space in which creativity flourishes; its whole organization and management will be creatively designed.

Some 40% of the economy and a quarter of all employment are in the public sector; yet few would describe our governments as characteristically creative when compared to the revolutions that have spun through most of their private and institutional equivalents. This is a big problem. Government is too important to waste the creative potential of its employees and short-change its citizens in models of organization that have barely changed over the decades.

A view of New York City Hall.



A 'new and improved' Blackburn, UK.



Big cities in the 21st century face much the same challenges – the maintenance of social cohesion, the creation of competitive advantage, the sustainable management of growth, the firm grasping of an ever-elusive urban future – but the effective achievement of those ambitions, combined with the delivery of high quality services to discriminating, cost conscious citizens is what will distinguish them. Since cities are unique among levels of government in their closeness to the real world and their increasing primacy as the crucibles of economic and social change, they have perhaps the greatest potential for creative innovation of any level.

Yet as I look around too many cities, my own included, I am struck by a curious conundrum – of extraordinary creative urban energy outside of government and very little within it. Creativity is typically characterized as individualistic, unique and more than a little chaotic. How can a government, which typically operates as a highly structured, collective, consensus-driven, conflict-avoiding organization – a bureaucracy in short – be creative?

What are the conditions that could give rise to that civic creativity - and how could the principles of creativity evident in the arts be applied to the public management of the city? When you deconstruct artistic creativity you find four principles.

Flexibility – the ability to see things differently and act accordingly.

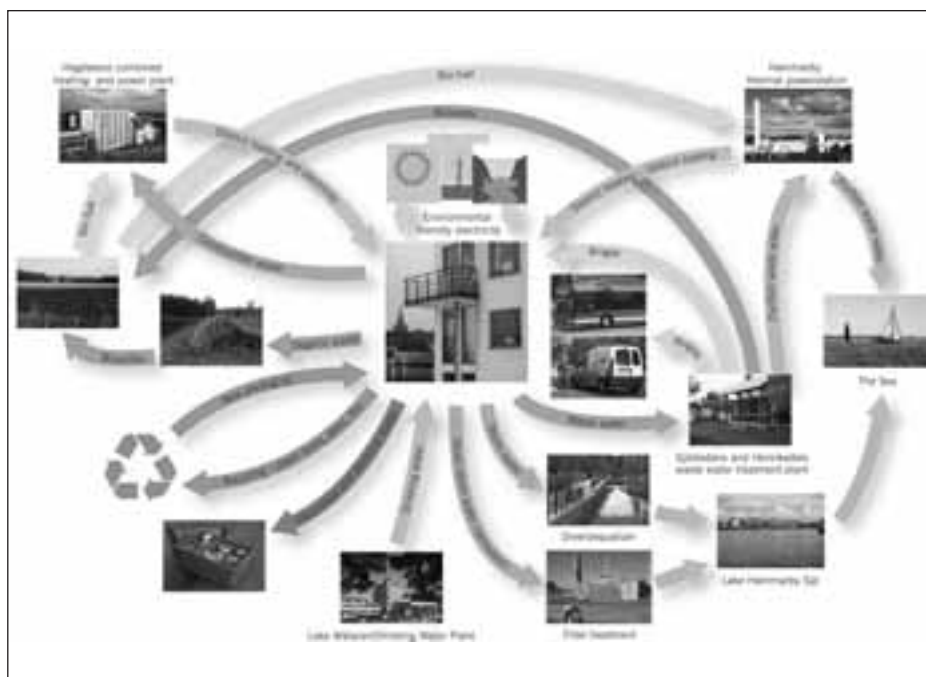
Innovation – the ability to apply an original solution to a long-standing problem.

Risk-taking – the ability to accept the consequences of failure.

Leadership – the ability of one person to set a direction for the whole.

These principles equally apply to the creative city and can be illustrated by a real life urban example in a city with which I am familiar.

First Blackburn, Lancashire, a northern English mill town that had completely lost its way with the retreat of the textile industry. It is a town of about Hamilton's size, in much the same relation to a burgeoning metropolis – in this case Manchester – about an hour



An illustration of Stockholm's integrated district energy system..

away, and characterized by unemployment, high levels of income support, decaying housing, social dysfunction, retreating city centre, empty mill buildings – and a not-so-below the surface stew of racial and class tensions.

The city knew it had to reinvent itself. It saw a plausible future as a back-office and lifestyle service centre to Manchester with great countryside and much lower house prices. But given the dismal state of the city this future was not going to happen by itself. The city had no great financial or other resources to effect change at the scale required.

Hence, the strategy...

Five years ago the City transferred 500 civic staff – both professional and clerical – to an independent private sector company – Capita. The transfer, which involved maintenance of all collective benefits and union membership, was voted on by staff and carried – albeit narrowly. Capita in return had to construct a large distinctive office building in the city centre – where no private office building has been built in recent history - and to manage the restoration of the surrounding historic district. They also had to guarantee significant additional employment creation, with targets set for minority and disabled hiring and for women in senior positions – targets which could not be met in the static environment of

the old town hall. Those targets have been significantly exceeded. Indeed, the transferred group now provides public services for several other cities in the extraordinary free market in municipal service delivery that exists in the UK. Capita are able to generate cost savings in service provision of about 15% through better management and through the introduction of technology the city couldn't previously afford, savings directed to increased social spending.

What's creative here is the refusal of the town to accept the inevitability of decline, turning an expense into a revenue, and achieving previously unattainable social equity goals in original ways. They have sparked a city centre renaissance that is attracting new back office and retail activity. It demonstrates the first principle of urban creativity – flexibility... of service delivery, business practice, social development and ideology. What is important is that the people of Blackburn be provided with the best possible public services, that new employment be created and distributed on an equitable basis and that the city centre renaissance get kick-started. To do that they had to think about delivering public services in a completely original way, focusing on outcomes, not process.

Next, to Stockholm. The city of two million people is served by seven energy

plants – one a conventional plant using coal, the other six using a combination of anaerobic digestion of sewage sludge and other organic material to produce bio gas to fuel power plants and municipal vehicles. High-tech incineration of non-recyclable, non re-usable garbage (about 40 – 50% of the solid waste stream) powers district cogeneration plants. Additional energy is created using exchangers to strip heat from waste water. Sweden is the leader in integrated district energy systems. One of its major cities, Malmo, generates about 40% of total city energy demand from waste-to-energy plants.

Stockholm is developing a major new waterfront city - Hammarby Sjöstad – in its former Portlands, setting themselves the goal of being 'twice as good as today' in energy reduction, creating an 'Eco-Cycle Society', in which the new city is effectively energy self-sustaining without dependence on external fuel sources. The entire development, now partially complete, of some 30,000 living and working population, uses a combination of bio-gas and waste-to-energy to fuel the public transit system, ferries, cars and for domestic use. To allay what technology has now rendered unfounded but nonetheless understandable fears about emissions, these district energy plants are located as compatible neighbours within the urban development itself, operating at one-tenth of European Union permitted standards.

What's creative here is taking a municipal cost – sewage disposal and waste management – and turning it into an asset by making it a replacement fuel for increasingly expensive conventional carbon-based or nuclear energy sources. The city becomes an entire energy system with all its inputs and outputs matched. It demonstrates the second urban creativity principle, innovation. Innovations in technology – regarding anaerobic digestion and waste-to-energy systems in this case – are actively embraced and reflected by innovations in attitude and organization.

The third creative principle is that of risk – because risk is what governments have most difficulty with; their attempts to avoid it the principal reason for their ineffectiveness. The creative city understands the huge risk in not taking risks.

In February 2003 the Greater London Authority introduced the Congestion Charge – an electronic toll gate around the central core of London. No lengthy community process, EA or planning approval was undertaken. It had been a part of Mayor Ken Livingstone's election campaign, and he had won. That was mandate enough. Everyone predicted disaster, the community groups from all the neighbourhoods inside and outside the cordon line screamed about too



A sign of the times in London since February 2003.

much traffic, business people about too little. All political parties gleefully predicted the end of Livingstone's political career. It was a huge risk.

A few months after introduction of the congestion charge, traffic settled into a pattern that has been remarkably stable for the last three years – about a 20% reduction in traffic, with congestion levels and transit journey times reduced by about 30%. Some \$220 million a year is generated for transit improvement. The quality of street life in the centre has markedly improved, with no other obvious negative consequences, and the initiative has broad support by citizens and business groups and all political parties. Not only have the charges been significantly increased, but the charge area looks to be expanded. When the UK Minister of Transport recently announced that road pricing is coming to the entire country, there was scarcely a murmur of dissent. Livingstone's risk-taking changed the urban world. Every major city has been beating a path to his door to see how he did it. Creativity is infectious.

The creative urban act here was the open embracing of risk – which means accepting the possibility of failure. But that risk-taking, when successful, sets off such an energy of response. In all these examples you can see the same chain by which some creative destruction of the constraints of the ordinary creates a virtuous cycle of financial, social and quality of life improvement.

The last principle is that any creative act requires leadership. Each of the examples quoted required someone to decide



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that he/she was going to get something done - usually having to run very hard against the established order both within and without the governmental organization. What is fascinating is that in each case the organization that went through the resultant creative transformation was one that can clearly be characterized as left wing – core Labour Blackburn, social democratic Sweden, and Red Ken – in each case tackling a traditional left shibboleth about outsourcing, waste-to-energy systems or community power in order to advance the public good. It is not enough just to plan for downtown renewal, environmental improvement, public transit or social equity. You have to show how real results can be achieved within the resources available. Perhaps urban creativity is best characterized as the resolution of conventional opposites with an utterly original solution, a solution that frequently involves some new technology.

The last example is from New York. Mayor Bloomberg, re-elected last year, is a self-made billionaire who stood on a platform of re-inventing city government. New York City employs some 300,000 people and commands a budget only slightly less than the Province of Ontario. His greatest achievement has been to generate a sense of excitement and possibility within that bureaucracy. He has attracted a staff of energetic, bright 30-somethings, along with a cadre of remarkable deputy mayors with proven resumes in the outside world, each with responsibility for a different city function. One thing is common to all great cities; they are run by people in their 30s and periodically invigorated by a rush of fresh talent, with a system that allows those young newcomers into positions of power and influence quickly.

Bloomberg is not a conventionally charismatic political presence, but he is a team builder, with his roots in the creative chaos of a New York trading floor. He has given up the office occupied by generations of New York mayors, installing himself in a former hearing room inside City Hall – about the size of a high school gymnasium – along with his deputy mayors and about 100 senior

and support staff in a huge open plan space with no walls and no distinctions as to rank or privilege. Bloomberg's office is right in the middle, a half-height carrel consisting of a desk and two screens, shared with his secretary. Nobody has an office and all the former offices have been turned into meeting rooms with glass walls – the real meaning of transparency. The Mayor has to walk by half the room to get a coffee or go to the bathroom.

All the government reorganizations in the world, the reporting hierarchies and structure plans are rendered redundant by such an initiative. The fundamental things apply. Get good people to work together following the lead of a bold individual. That's leadership. That's urban creativity.

Flexibility, innovation, risk, leadership. Focus on outcomes not process. Embrace technology and find its leading edge. Act boldly. Get the best people you can find, because people are everything. Move young people into power early. Replace meeting together with working together. Give an inspiring direction. That's all it's about.

This is the standard working mode for everyone in the creative class – in fact, for almost everyone outside the great public bureaucracies. Shouldn't we expect the same from city government? ■

Joe Berridge has played a key role in some of the world's largest urban regeneration projects, helping to reshape waterfronts in Toronto, New York and London and revitalizing the downtowns of Manchester, St. Louis and Detroit. He is currently preparing a concept plan for Governors Island in New York Harbor and advising Manchester and Salford on a new vision for their riverfront and central city areas. He helped prepare Ontario's growth management plan and is a regular conference and media commentator. He can be reached at (416) 340-9004, ext. 231 or at: jberridge@urbanstrategies.com



URBAN STRATEGIES INC. PLANNING & URBAN DESIGN

197 Spadina Avenue, Suite 600
Toronto, ON Canada M5T 2C8
tel 416 340 9004 fax 416 340 8400
www.urbanstrategies.com