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How cities renew

Welcome to the age of the authentic. The roster of global cities profiled in this issue testifies to the need to refine our ideas about quality of life.

In fact, I’m starting to think we need to dump that term altogether. What matters now is quality of place. I define it as the intersection of three key elements of our cities: what’s there (the natural and built environments); who’s there (the people); and what’s going on (what people are doing, our relationship with the natural and built environments).

The key factor today revolves around the ability of places to attract talent and unleash it in a broad cross-section of the population. An energised city is the place where creative, entrepreneurial, and forward-thinking people from every walk of life, every class, every lifestyle want to be. And people with abundant creative energy don’t want to be safely tucked away somewhere. They want accidents to happen, look for the rough edges and seek the authentic. As urbanist Jane Jacobs said, new ideas really do require old buildings.

Some of my very own critics like to say I am an advocate for urban areas populated solely by “yuppies, sophistos, trendoids and gays”. But that misses a crucial part of the equation. Quality of place is not just about consuming. Yes, nice apartments help, as do good cafés and bars and football in the park. But the real energy of a place comes from the edges, the clashes that happen when ethnic neighbourhoods rub up against hipster quarters, where gay ghettos impinge upon “strollervilles”. It’s the real, authentic experiences and the jagged edges between neighbourhoods that create the energy that attracts the people who are today’s economic drivers.

This is what New York did extremely well in the past, but now that’s threatened by escalating rents and a malled-over

Manhattan. London, too, as rents rise into the stratosphere – where’s the next Hoxton Square going to be? Like Jacobs once told me: “When a place gets boring even the rich people leave.”

The conventional stuff still matters: a place needs to be clean and safe and have good schools and pipes that work. It needs to have economic opportunity, especially since so many of us are no longer tied to one job for life. A good mayor helps, as do business and cultural communities that care and invest. Yes, the old is new again, but only if it is really new.

The new quality of place adds two factors to the mix – openness to diversity and the aesthetic dimension. It’s the urban equivalent of Maslow’s old hierarchy of needs. People need to feel safe and secure. We need to have opportunity, and we need leaders that get it and resonate. But today, more than ever, we need to feel welcome and be able to self-express. The energy of the city comes from this capacity to express, to think and act outside the norm, to be ourselves, to forge new identities, to create. A closed city is a dead city. Open cities thrive.

The aesthetic dimension – the beauty of a place – is critical. The cities with the deepest and truest hold on people have long been those with a strong aesthetic dimension. Think of the cosmopolitan charm of Amsterdam, the history found

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Preface

Alain de Botton, Richard Florida, Jonathan Raban, Ricky Burdett, Roope Mokka and Richard Alston – six leading writers, thinkers and academics give their view on the state of today’s cities, and their vision of the urban future.

ILLUSTRATOR
Martin Mörck

around every corner in Berlin or Vienna. The rose gardens of Portland, the minarets of Istanbul and the crumbling mosaiced pavements of Lisbon. This is what really draws people in – it’s what draws residents in. Not just tourists.

If this all sounds emotional, well it is. In an economy where talent comes in all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, where the best places in their fields have to compete for the best talent in the world, the only way to retain talent is to offer the kind of place that provides emotional attachment.

In today’s world, the ranks of global nomads get to pick their place. And we are tired of the smooth, generic, flattened-out worlds, where cars, foods and fashions are the same in whatever blanded global city you may be in. They blanch when another politician or pop star becomes the new face of another luxury brand. They’re over it. They want real places – the unique and authentic. — (M)

MONOCLE tonic I:

Toronto, Richard Florida’s new home, has all the assets to lead a quality of place revolution in the Americas – good international flight connections from the city’s main hub and short hops from its downtown airport, a well educated, diverse population and a thriving city core. What’s the problem? Toronto suffers from a severe case of the “comfies” and needs to up its game. Hopefully, Florida and his host school can place a rocket in the right place.