

SESSION I

DEFINING A HEALTHY CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN GLOBAL CITIES



Why does having a healthy arts and cultural environment in global cities matter?

How do we define success in developing cultural strategy beyond economics, and for whom?

What are the barriers in developing a successful system?

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Sàn Art



TOWARDS A HEALTHY ARTS AND CULTURE ENVIRONMENT

Dinh Q. Lê — Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

I found it difficult to prepare for this session, especially with the subject being a ‘healthy cultural environment’ for arts. I asked myself, what do I know about a healthy cultural environment for arts? Because living in Vietnam, it is not exactly the right place to ask that question. So, instead, I will narrate a short story.

I live in Ho Chi Minh City, which is a global city with a population of twelve million. Vietnam is one of the last Communist countries in the world. There is little freedom of press and freedom of expression. During the war against the French and the United States later, the Socialist government controlled and effectively used the arts to mobilize people.

So I cannot complain that my government does not understand the importance of the arts. The problem is that they understand it only too well. Thirty-eight years hence, they still maintain a tight grip on the arts—given paranoia and fear that it would be used against them. Thus, we can safely assume that Ho Chi Minh City has one of the unhealthiest cultural environments in the world.

Under these extreme conditions, I ask myself, what do I know about a healthy arts and culture environment? The answer is, not that much.

What is a healthy arts and culture environment?

I asked my colleagues in Ho Chi Minh City to help me define a healthy arts and culture environment that they might wish for.

Some of the conditions that they came up with are:

- 1) An open and free environment for artists and cultural institutions;
- 2) An environment that allows artists and cultural institutions to experiment and push boundaries;
- 3) A vibrant public discourse that is free from censorship;
- 4) A healthy education system that is open to experimentation, innovation, and diversity. Schools today become the producers of the next generation of cultural workers;
- 5) A healthy and diverse number of cultural spaces from big museums to small non-profit art organizations;
- 6) A city with an economically viable environment for artists, not only in which to live but also to have time to focus on their work. A healthy cultural environment in any global city needs a healthy community of cultural workers;
- 7) Lastly, a government policy that invests in the arts but does not require the arts to serve its agendas.

After we came up with all these conditions, I asked my colleagues if these conditions would materialize in Ho Chi Minh City in the near future. They all laughed. None of them think any of these conditions will be achieved in their lifetime. For them it was a good exercise of dreaming. The answer was depressing so I asked again, what was the one condition that they wish for the most? The answer was freedom. Freedom is all that they needed and everything else was a luxury.

Why did I go to Vietnam despite the unhealthy conditions?

I started Sàn Art seven years ago. The Vietnamese government runs the Fine Arts Association. They do not recognize new forms of art practices. Also, the schools are so heavily controlled by the government that new ideas and thoughts were not allowed to enter because they fear it will corrupt the young minds there. These are extreme conditions. Artists know what is happening through stories. We started Sàn Art in order to support these artists and to encourage international exchange and to bring information from outside into Vietnam.

This is not easy because the government is constantly trying to limit cultural exchange. But so far it has been seven years and they have not shut us down. At some level, they think that we are doing something that the community needs, but they don't know how to do it themselves. Of course, they are nervous about us. Although visiting artists can come and go, in order to have an exhibition, they require permits, which take about one month to process.

The Sàn Arts Model

“If we try to abstract this situation a little bit, then we can say that the concept of Sàn Arts is not simply a cultural institution or a received model. That is, it is not a typically Euro-American institutional model. Rather, it is a model that is embedded into the context. It has invented itself through the situation on the ground. As far as we see, it is not trying to normalize the situation.”

To elaborate on the model, we started off building a community. There was no community for the arts where people could gather. Owing to the poor condition of the educational system and the art schools, we ended up doing a lot of educational programs that we didn't intend to when we set out. Currently, we have a laboratory program where we take in six artists per year. We fund everything from living space to studio space as a six month graduate program and provide each artist with a mentor.

We work intensively with artists. We push them to ask deeper questions. We ask them to do research. For the first time artists are asking questions about history. They feel like they do not know enough because history is so controlled by the Vietnamese government.

We are working with two private universities, six cultural workers, six international thinkers, from mathematicians to anthropologists. We are trying to cut across disciplinary thinking and we also need to branch out.



THE GLOBAL CITY AND THE PROVINCIAL CITY

Saskia Sassen — New York City, USA



I will focus on the differentiation between the global city and the provincial city. I think of the global city as an analytic concept, a constructed concept that can be used as an analytical tool. The whole of New York City cannot be defined as a global city.

One of the interesting issues here that differentiates the provincial city and the global city is, for example, in big cities (such as Mumbai, São Paulo and even New York) the powerless can make a history. These 'powerless' make a presence, that is, they can make a history and they can make a politics. It does not necessarily mean that they can get empowered because the word 'empowered' has a different connotation. There is a zone between the words 'powerlessness' and 'empowerment' that is undefined, that is, there is a gap. In a provincial city, 'powerlessness' does not have the chance to become complex in the way that it can in the global city with its vortexes of energy, newcomers, and immigrants.

Let us consider the artists. Looking at the global city, it is a place, analytically speaking, which has an economic production function and a political production function; and arts and cultural practices have a place in both. The global city is also a place where the immigrant community and the artists develop these production functions. That is, there is a making where immigrant communities occupy space where nothing existed before.

The global city allows for such a function. The political production function is a bit more complicated. The corporate sector, or much of what is known as the neo-liberal project, has been made by the corporate sector in global cities. They made or innovated the rules and then sent it back to the capitals of the cities into what gets dressed as public law. This making of new laws happened in global cities through the corporate sector. Thus, what emerges as the public law is the informal political production of the global city.

When we look at the ‘politics of the disadvantaged,’ one also sees a political production function. It would be interesting to look into how artistic and cultural practices also feed into that.

We can take an example of 500 undocumented people from low income groups in a corporate farm located in a small town or a suburb. They stand with signs saying, ‘I have rights.’ Nothing happens and they may go unnoticed, but if the same people perform the same act of protest in a city like Chicago—or any other global city—something happens.

There is something about the kind of space, and its multiplicity of the space, along with the multiplicity of norms, rules and laws that enables some kind of making; and it creates also a political production function.

Global Street as a Space of Indeterminacy

I have started a small project called Theatrum Mundi-Global Street. This project has two components.

One is the notion of the global street as a space of indeterminacy—not a piazza with its own rules, or norms, but as embedded codes in space. For example, in rush hour traffic in the city, when you get bumped into or someone steps on your foot you don’t complain and you don’t take it personally.

These same embedded codes in a smaller neighborhood are considered acts of aggression. So the way urban space recodes, the global street for instance, is precisely a space for making, especially for those without access to formal instruments of making—whether those are political or cultural.

This brings us back to the importance of indeterminacy in a city. When we over build or do mega projects, we are really at risk of killing, if we were to call it, that indeterminacy.

The second component of this project is the hypothesis that starts with a notion that the urbanity of the center (here, the center does not mean literally in some geographic sense) is usually understood in juxtaposition to the thick cultures of the neighborhoods. I want to unsettle that duality.

I am interested in understanding what elements constitute that urbanity of the center that we all like so much. But they actually get transformed, there is a metamorphosis, reverting to the provincial city. I think it would not have all those properties, it would be more homogenous than a global city.

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I am not an artist and do not claim to know much about art, but time and the indeterminacy of a city are good grounds for artistic practice to thrive. I think ‘city-ness’ is very important. A city that knows itself, a city that has great histories and is made of diverse cultures has a capacity to ‘talk back.’ Here I refer to an essay I wrote, *Does the City Have Speech?*

The creation of standards, the making of state-of-the-art projects always let you know which city you are in, which means there are unique markers, which are important to maintain.

The infrastructural components are necessary but indeterminate. For example, trains can be used to carry bombs and the same could be used to carry food, or even refugees. Cities can prosper when more of the built environment is actually infrastructure, rather than buildings. How it gets used is what matters.

KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS RAISED IN DISCUSSION

Is the example of Vietnam an extreme case or is it the norm? Is the notion of freedom contextualized?

Even in countries where the governments encourage a healthy environment for arts and culture there is a shift in their stance on supporting creative economies. Even where governments are passionate about the creative economy, for example, the United Kingdom, they do not see the point of ‘creative people,’ that is, of people doing things that are deeply uncomfortable, radical or challenging. Governments believe that creativity can be constrained within a box or can be controlled.

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What does freedom mean to a community that is oppressed and pushed? What does freedom mean to a community say in Vietnam, Guatemala or San Diego where there are differences in economic, political situations, and cultures? Would it be possible to distinguish between free imagination and urgent imagination?

What is the value of networks in a global city?

What are the ways to guard against or avoid becoming a victim of the ‘complete ecology’ of the art world, i.e. where the art world becomes its own small ecology leaving out the public? There is a restructuring of endowment policies of many funding institutions, endowments, and dependence on markets and creation of networks in countries of the global south.

How does one set parameters for the development of art and culture given the ever changing market conditions?

A city like Mumbai is a series of communities and neighborhoods, which are bound together by adjacencies. The city develops through natural selection. When the Indian art market was booming a few years ago and everyone was buying everything, valuations went through the roof. When the market crashed, everyone stopped purchasing art.

People are still not buying art. So the artists who were purely commercial have not grown and thus are stuck in stasis. Whereas, artists who are ideologically focused on a series of concepts were constantly moving and they ‘chameleoned’ their own art practice to turn the market around and to focus instead on the conditions and the problems of the city. That is the difference: how different urban relations develop into arts and culture.

The question is not about aestheticization, but rather how one understands a cultural or social issue and revitalizes the idea of art. Thus, the form of art has evolved, as the conditions of market have not stopped the artists from working. However, their art form has taken a different route of aesthetics as they become involved in social and urban issues plaguing the city. Neighborhoods have an inbuilt sustainability and resilience.

In the subject of ‘creative economy’ is the emphasis more on ‘economy’ rather than its ‘creative’ component?

Is this the dilemma of the provincial city versus the global city or the challenge that any industry faces—of local going global? The same can happen in an art industry. There is a need for qualitative research that is rigorous. We cannot run to the numbers all the time.

On the Impact of Arts and Culture

It is difficult to measure with conventional quantitative tools the impact of arts and culture on cultivating collective capacity at the scale of the neighborhood. And yet funders and governments demand accountability; they want to know that their investments make sense. One solution is to think about impact less as a matter of quantifying outcomes and ‘deliverables’ and more as a rigorous qualitative and analytic approach to evaluating processes. How do arts and culture change communities? How do they cultivate a sense of collective agency? How do they stimulate civic engagement?

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An emphasis on process in our grant writing and reporting should rest on the best research today in the fields of cognitive science and social psychology on how communities learn and the transformative power of arts and culture.



On Creating More Equitable Cities

There is growing consensus that engaging urban inequality today requires new experiments in public space, arts education, and cultural infrastructure, supported by cross sector collaborations to mobilize a new civic imagination. In recent years, many cities around the world, from Portland to Seattle, from Copenhagen to Medellín, have prioritized citizenship culture, public participation, and innovative cross-institutional collaborations to produce dramatic urban and economic transformations that have caught the attention of the world.

Many of these urban success stories began with a political leadership committed to integrating the knowledge and resources of universities, neighborhood leadership, civic philanthropy, the private sector, and government to creatively rethink urban policy and produce new models of public infrastructure.

