

Global Parliament of Mayors Annual Summit 2025

“Empowering, Engaging, and Caring Cities: Delivering Democracy and Development with the Next Generations”

Position Paper The Power of Culture & Art

Why culture? And why is it the fourth pillar of GPM's focus? Culture lies at the heart of every aspect of a city, its planning, its building, its economy and its ongoing social life. An urban culture is shaped by how it got to where it is – its history, its resources and its people. It conditions and determines what individuals, organizations, the city as a whole or the country it is part of can become.

Too often culture and within its central expressions – the arts - are seen as an add-on or afterthought, whereas cultural literacy should be central to urban strategy making as it is the ability to read, understand, find significance in, evaluate, compare and decode the local cultures in a place. This allows one to work out what is meaningful and significant to people who live there. We understand better the lifecycle of the city in motion.

We understand more from what we see, feel, smell and hear. We sense the history and potential in how the city goes about its business. We feel the city's economy viscerally or identify the social consequences of that economy.

Five aspects, in particular, help us grasp a city's culture: The ways it behaves or its attitudes; the underlying values that condition assumptions or expectations of each other, such as is it more closed or open minded; how the city is physically put together; the economic, political, religious and social institutions the city has nurtured and finally the social structures that have evolved.

So the scope, possibilities, style and tenor of social, economic or environmental development is culturally determined. Crucially cities are dense and so its diverse cultures meet either to cross-fertilize and benefit from the diversity dividend or to separate out and to ghettoize.

If an urban culture is more closed minded, strongly hierarchical or has hardened views and is less trusting of outsiders it can make that local culture inflexible so making adjusting to the major global transformations more difficult. It might make communicating with different groups tense, it might hold back international connections because obstacles can be created to the free flow of exchange and ideas, it might deter dialogue or create mixed partnerships to solve problems. Those places are less dynamic.

By contrast if the traditions value tolerance and openness, the position GPM holds, adjustments to a changing world and its urgencies may be easier. Those places in which local communities can share ideas or have the capacity to bring differences together are more effective. This does not mean their culture becomes subsumed, identity is still shaped by where you came from. There is, however, sufficient mutual influence and counterinfluence, coalescing and mixing that over time creates a special fused and dynamic identity not one hardened into an ossified shell. This is what most vibrant urban cultures are.

Cultures where openness allows varied publics to come together to co-create a civic realm are a precondition for a confident civic society to uphold rules and justice. This is where citizenship is more important than ethnic group, clan, tribe, religion or ex-party cadre allegiance, such cultures and societies are likely to be more resilient, flexible and ultimately prosperous.

Appreciating culture is crucial even more so in periods of dramatic transformation, because it is then that the culture needs to absorb, digest and adjust. Periods of history involving mass transformation, like the Industrial Revolution, the technological revolution of the past fifty years or the polarized world now, can produce confusion with a feeling of being swept along by events. They are uncomfortable times. It thus takes a while for new ethical stances to take root or to establish a new and coherent worldview.

Culture when acknowledged and appropriately celebrated gives strength in moving forward and feels stronger in rejecting its negative expressions in a place. It then becomes a backbone that can create the resilience that makes change and transformation easier. That confidence is key for creativity, innovation and renewal. When cultures feel threatened or weak their cultures go into their shell. Culture then becomes a defensive shield not open to change, imagination and creativity.

Most of the cities are in a period of profound change: many newcomers, domestic and from abroad, bring new cultures and a lot of diversity. The urban needs to innovate and invent ways to integrate and combine these differences into one citizenship. That is why cultural policies are at the center of the urban project. Building a common narrative and imagination is a basis for developing new solutions for the urban agenda.

These activities fuel an ever-evolving urban imagination, a narrative of social development. That has to be actively invested in education, media, cultural centers, festivals and events. An urban population cannot only survive within communitarian traditions, within the formats of diversity. To make a city together it is also necessary to work on bridging, on transversal communication, on hybridity and cross-fertilization, on creative innovation. That is why innovative culture becomes a core element of urban development.

Why creativity? To become resilient, cities need a culture of creativity to be embedded into how their urban stakeholders operate. By encouraging and legitimising the use of imagination in all spheres the ideas bank of possibilities and potential solutions broadens. This is the divergent thinking that generates multiple options and ideas. It needs to be aligned to convergent thinking that narrows down possibilities and that sorts out the good ideas from the bad. In short, going through the reality checker.

Yet, urban creativity needs a purpose, an aim and an ethical frame. This includes giving back to its community and even to the world. It is better to be the most creative city for the world rather than in the world. The aim is to help a city region to future proof itself, to be more socially responsible, become more prosperous and to enhance the wellbeing of citizens. Humanity is confronted with similar problems in all cities: climate change and our relationship with nature, social inequalities and multicultural and multireligious challenges. They all need creative solutions.

The city has always been a source of problems as well as a laboratory for finding inventive solutions to any problems it creates. Now the special focus should be on creating innovations to heal the environmental distress in cities, second to find ways that the diversity of people in cities can co-exist in better harmony and to encourage a 360° holistic perspective in urban management to ensure the complexity of the city is fully understood.

There is, therefore, a need to switch the question: Not 'what is the value of imagination and creativity or cultural understanding for city development', but instead, 'what is the cost of not thinking of imagination and creativity'. Name a city that is compelling, resilient, sustainable, attractive and important, but has a weak culturally understanding of itself and is fearful of creativity.

Why the arts? The arts can help create an open-minded culture that is more resilient and adaptable to the changes brought about by political ructions and globalisation. Think of any problem or opportunity and GPM believes the arts can help. What other activity can better deal with dialogue between cultures, ethnic conflicts, allowing individuals to discover talents, to gain confidence, to become motivated, to change the mindset, to involve themselves in community. What other activity can help us imagine a future viscerally and with depth?

This challenges the artists and the artistic sector. They can no longer remain at the margins solely expressing individual insights. An important part of its activities need to become central confronting the great questions of our time.

What is special about the part of culture associated with the arts: singing, acting, writing, dancing, performing music, sculpting, painting, designing or drawing especially in relation to the development of cities. Participating in the arts uses the imaginary realm to a degree that other disciplines do not such as sports or most of science. Those are more rule bound and precise. The distinction between the arts and writing a computer programme, engineering or sports is that the latter are ends in themselves, they do not change the way you perceive society, they tend to teach you something specific.

Yet even consuming the arts can have these wider benefits by focusing on reflection and original thought, they pose challenges and want to communicate (mostly). If the goal of cities is to have self-motivated people they need engaged individuals who think. Turning imagination into reality or something concrete is a creative act, so the arts more than most activities are concerned with creativity, invention and innovation. Reinventing a city or nursing it through transition is a creative act so an engagement with or through the arts helps.

Engagement with arts combines stretching oneself and focusing, feeling the senses, expressing emotion, self-reflecting and original thought. Essential to it is mastering the craft through technical skill on top of which is layered interpretation that sums up something meaningful to the listener or viewer. The result can be: to broaden horizons, to convey meaning, with immediacy and or depth, to communicate iconically so you grasp things in one without needing to understand step by step, to help nurture memory, to symbolise complex ideas and emotions, to see the previously unseen, to learn, to uplift, to encapsulate previously scattered thoughts, to anchor identity and to bond people to their community or by contrast to stun, to shock by depicting terrible images for social, moral, or thought-provoking reasons, to criticise or to create joy, to entertain, to be beautiful and the arts can even soothe the soul and promote popular morale. More broadly expression through the arts is a way of passing ideas and concepts on to later generations in a (somewhat) universal language. To have these effects the arts have to be communicated and then they affect how cities or societies develop.

Arts and science are important creators of new insights, of innovation, of changing perceptions. They install new cultures, new practices, new ways of living. In an urban world arts and cultural workers have to be put in the center of the urban project, they are not just reproducers of an existing repertoire. Cities and metropolitan regions understand the vital importance of maintaining a vibrant artistic and creative activity.

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