"THE ART OF CULTURE"

MUNICIPAL WORLD ARTICLE...Gord Hume

The art of bringing life to a community's places and spaces is too often ignored by municipal leaders.

Encouraging and enhancing family fun, pleasure, social interaction, public spectacles and bringing energy to streets, parks, public squares and wherever our private and public realms intersect is of growing importance to communities of all sizes.

It is this vitality that is avidly sought by towns and cities that want to provide a liveable, sustainable and enjoyable quality of life to its residents. It is one of the most critical elements that separate a dynamic community from one that is boring and bleak.

The reason community vitality is crucial is simple: economic prosperity. When a community offers vitality it is more likely to attract young workers, entrepreneurs, job creators and start-up companies that are often in the CRINK Economy (CReative, INnovative, Knowledge-based). These jobs and businesses are highly prized by cities today.

Lessons from Melbourne

Melbourne, Australia has been declared the "most liveable city in the world" for the past three years by The Economist. It is a terrific city, lively, prosperous, great use of its waterfront and has developed a dynamic downtown.

When the global automotive industry determined it would close (by now or in the next couple of years) all its manufacturing/assembly plants in Australia, Melbourne lost about 25,000 jobs. The city didn't even blink. It replaced them with more than 50,000 jobs in the CRINK economy.

A key element in attracting those jobs was the vitality of their city. Over the past 30 years, Melbourne has consciously and deliberately worked to reduce urban sprawl, animate their Central Business District (CBD, or their downtown), and attract new residents to their core.

In an exclusive interview for the upcoming book "Places and Spaces", the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, outlined five specific and critical steps the city took.

"For a long time Melbourne was a low density city. We just kept spreading at the edges," admits the Lord Mayor. "That is not what a good city does. A thinly spread city lacks vitality. It results in a car-orientated community. So we embarked on a program where we encouraged people to come back into the CBD and live here. What's happened is that the density of the core and immediate surrounding districts has risen. There is much greater activation in the city--we have about 50% of journeys in the CBD made on foot."

Succinctly, the Lord Mayor's five keys are:

1. Medium to high-rise density.

2. Mixed use.

3. A high quality public realm.

4. Local character—what is your city all about?

5. Connectivity.

"We've tried to have mixed use in the city," says Robert Doyle. "When you combine that with density, that to me is what creates vibrancy. Everything a citizen needs to find or experience is within easy walking distance in the core. It is more efficient, but it is also more sustainable and more socially inclusive."

Supporting the socializing of residents is a somewhat new role for cities in North America. Part of the reason is the growing tendency in urban areas to build up, not out. People are living in much smaller spaces, and it is unlikely that dynamic 25-year olds are going to spend much time or entertain friends in a 295 sq ft condo.

That is a crucial reason why animating public spaces is so important. They are becoming the new community living room.

People naturally gravitate to public places and spaces. There is a physical response to a city. People look up at the towers. They walk down the main street. They sit on a patio and watch passers-by and feel the vibe.

This reaction to the physical domain, the public places and spaces, the intersection of the private and the public realm, is what composes the city's personality. It helps to form the impression of a community—its image.

People are attracted to beauty. Architecture and design are the foundation of a distinctive urban environment, a suburban community, or a town or village. Public buildings are a critical part of any community.

Public places are the common equation. Public spaces are the great equalizer in society.

"It's the places where you express society," observes Auckland's Ludo Campbell-Reid, that city's Chief Urban Designer. "We like people. We like entertainment, we like crowds, we like the buzz and the public realm is fundamental to that. But if we are thoughtful about how we design the public realm there are also places where you can have solitude and time to think. The public realm needs to be quite agile. For me, it's the place where we all come together, that's why it is fundamental [to a great city]."

In Melbourne, part of its success is measured by a unique reality, acknowledges Lord Mayor Doyle.

"In the inner city, for the first time, restaurants and bars and hospitality places and little grocery outlets overtook the number of retail shops," he told me in early 2014. Melbourne allows tables on sidewalks, which adds to the buzz and activity on the street. It is active socializing.

In the electronic communication world of today, it is human relationships that cities must endow.

The urban lounge concept makes the city's core easily accessible, visually appealing, and highly social. It is a quality place where people can come to share food and drink, meet, spend time together, enjoy and celebrate the public realm. It promotes densification and better use of public spaces. It often involves partnerships with the community and the private sector.

Urban Design

Robert Doyle is clear about Melbourne's urban design standards: "We are much more interested in what happens when a building hits the sidewalk than we are in the building itself. It has to have an active frontage to the street. We prefer podium-style buildings so there is a human scale to the architecture. We protect the best of our [heritage] architecture and we develop the rest, but we don't seek to protect everything."

From parks to libraries, from city halls to museums, from the underground pipes that people never see to the great towers that they admire, public places and spaces make up so much of the impression, character and reputation of a city. They become your civic DNA.

That puts great pressure on local politicians to better understand and push for innovative urban design. It will require public dollars and firm standards and policies to encourage the private sector to reach beyond grey concrete boxes. Municipalities need to lead in the bold design of their own facilities, as well as set clear guidelines for protecting heritage properties, demand creativity and novelty in architecture and design, and support a lively public realm.

Politicians don't always appreciate the need for public investments in public space. They don't see the importance of investments in the urban context, and how that translates into economic benefits. Design elements <u>are</u> important. Public spaces <u>are</u> critical to urban life.

The use of public space, or the intersection of the public and private realm, are things that a local government can impact and even control. There are strong economic and social benefits for developing a vibrant public realm, as internationally-recognized urban planner Larry Beasley knows:

"Cities have to compete with one another. The ambience, experiences and quality of city are often based on public spaces and places. The one thing you can [accomplish] that is very impactful for cities is changing the public realm."

Connectivity—how people move through a city--is another element that makes a great city. Walkability. Social interaction. The width of sidewalks. Tree canopies. Public art. Cleanliness of streets and sidewalks. The need to animate plazas, parks and streets. People must enjoy the public realm and how it is celebrated.

As Canadian urban society changes, new pressures and challenges are being inflicted upon already burdened local Councils. How they respond will be a crucial element in their community's economic success and prosperity.

Understanding these societal shifts, the demands and lifestyles of the Millennial generation, leading in urban design and making wise, long-term investments in local infrastructure and the public realm is an increasing emphasis for Mayors and Councillors.   How municipalities respond to these changes will be a significant determinant of that community's future.

Urban planning, downtown development/redevelopment, rethinking our suburbs, focusing on more sustainable and liveable towns and cities, and elevating our public places and spaces are keys to economically successful 21st century cities that offer a great quality of life for its residents—and can also compete in the new global economy.