

IS MALMÖ A CREATIVE CITY?

Malmö is currently attracting a lot of attention. The integration of the Öresund region brought about by the Link with Copenhagen, plus other major infrastructural investments, are putting the city on the map along with the most advanced European regional developments. The blue collar city is now in the process of becoming an acknowledged centre for information technology and biotechnology. This transition, however, does not appear to be an easy one to achieve for a city that still carries on its shoulders the burden of recent industrial decline.

The recession of the 1990s hit Malmö harder than any other city in Sweden, with 27,000 jobs disappearing during a period of three years of economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s. As a port and business city, with roots going back to the Middle Ages, Malmö seems to have a peculiar genetic code that makes it prone to constant swings between periods of growth and prosperity and decades of relative decline.

From an urban sociology perspective, one may argue that this is a cycle often observed in medium-size European port cities, and here the names of Hamburg, Bilbao, Rotterdam, Bristol and Glasgow come to mind. These are all cities that had a great history of commercial and urban development, and then hit the rocks of recession in the 1970s. But, since then, they have all been able, to a certain degree, to reinvent themselves. This successful 'remaking' of cities is often underpinned by a focus on the resilience, creativity and cultural mix of those cities. In the case of Glasgow, it was its internationalism (not often found in other provincial British cities) as well as its urban and cultural heterogeneity that made it possible for the city to successfully begin – in the early 1990s – to reverse the cycle of decline which seemed to have been its fate until then. Similarly, the commercial development of the 19th and 20th centuries brought cultural variety to the city of Rotterdam, so much so that it was precisely this successful cosmopolitan mix that in the early 1980s guided the planners and policy-makers in the design of a new regeneration plan (Binnenstadsplan) for the city,

This notion of urban and social mix, along with the importance for cities of having a creative milieu, are increasingly seen by urban commentators as central in the making of successful and competitive cities. In particular, the argument put forward by economic development experts such as Richard Florida is that today's economy is fundamentally a 'creative' economy.

In his study of what makes cities and regions grow and prosper, Florida observes that, rather than being exclusively driven by companies, economic growth is occurring in places that are tolerant, diverse and open to creativity, because these are the places where creative people of all types want to live. Scientists, engineers, architects, designers or artists are all part of a new creative class that cities need to nurture in order to compete. So by extension, Florida's message is that development policies need to be aware of the benefits of creating an environment in which tolerance of different lifestyles and a good quality of life for everybody living there go hand in hand.

Without wishing to rehearse here all the arguments pro or against Florida's analysis of the economic and urban evolution that has occurred during the past 20 years in the western world, it is clear that the global economy has changed and that production is now more at the level of ideas than of raw materials, and consumption is more dependent on the so called *experience economy*. As a result, we see more and more cities gearing up to attract creative milieux and marketing themselves as the best destination for the next Silicon Valley, with quality of life and cultural buzz attached. This is often done uncritically and through forms of regeneration that pay lip service to the need to attract talent, but continue to pour resources into big downtown malls and prestigious architectural developments, which only manage to scratch the surface of urban living.

Some places, moreover, though superficially claiming to be innovative and original, are often unable to reverse the process of 'institutional sclerosis' that affects them. This is exemplified in the inability of some cities to relinquish the culture and attitudes of a past organisational age and in the difficulty they have in adopting new and more effective forms of open-minded governance. Old ex-industrial towns seem to suffer more than others from this form of cultural inertia.

Is this true of Malmö as well? From my personal experience of living and working in the city, I would say that although things appear to be moving forward in an interesting way, the road is paved with potential hazards. From its 13th century origins, rooted in the herring trade, to the splendours of its Danish period and the great developments of the 19th century characterised by the expansion of the textile industry and the shipyards, Malmö could be defined as a city open to external influences, proud of its achievements and not afraid of taking risks.

However, the many failures the city suffered at different stages of its development somehow weigh heavily on the political conscience of its people and while economic developers and inward investors talk of a burgeoning new metropolis joining Copenhagen with Malmö and creating jobs for everybody, you wonder whether the citizens of this city actually welcome the changes. Now that its once thriving docks are being redeveloped into University Island, refugees from Kosovo and other European war zones have chosen to settle in the city, putting a strain on Sweden's legendary liberal ideals in terms of both employment and social policies. At present, the city is said to have well over 100 different languages spoken, a detail which reflects a pattern of immigration that has become more evident in the city during the past ten years. Changes such as these would be a challenge for any city, small or large, and Malmö is not immune.

The question here is how is Malmö coping with these challenges? Is there a sense among policy-makers and planners of the distinctive resources that make up the code of Malmö? In other words, is there a specific culture and identity for Malmö, which can help the city to revive its fortunes and build a sustainable future?

Instinctively one would say yes, but only if *city culture* is understood not merely as art, not as prettification, not even as the postmodern pastel collage interlaced with steel, but as the patterns, textures and routines of daily life, culture as the 'everyday'. Michel de Certeau argues that cities are the places where we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of creativity and alliance, a new politics of the local which is forcing an end to some of the older collectivities and solidarities. These are new forms of association which no longer obey the rules of the old divisions and collectivities, and it is rarely purely economic questions which incite these new allegiances. Rather, they are more likely to be cultural ones defined in terms of consumption, identity, lifestyle, leisure, the environment, heritage and general levels of amenity.

Malmö is Sweden's third largest city and the commercial centre of southern Sweden, with many young people being attracted to the city. The expansion of the Malmö University College, moreover, has brought to the city an atmosphere of youthful creative energy, which has allowed the establishment of a number of clubs and informal meeting places. Cafés, open spaces, galleries and shopping areas are dotted all around the city and the overall feel is that of a compact, lively place.

Yet, somehow, the young population of Malmö is viewed as a potential threat to the social order and a menace to other sectors of the population. The influx of young people to the city, coupled with the increase in the student population (attracted by the quality of teaching and by the innovative courses offered by the new university), would in any other context be seen as an asset, irrespective of the fact that nearby Lund has a more established reputation as a seat of learning. Young people and students are attracted to Malmö precisely because this is a city that is not lumbered down by academic traditions and rules. They come to experiment and to discover their creative potential. This creative energy is channelled in the many forms of cultural expression (music, poetry, fashion, design) which has at times – and informally – been translated into products unique to the city (see for example the music and fashion scene).

Malmö is also a cosmopolitan and multicultural city where more than a quarter of the population has foreign roots: from countries such as Poland, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Finland, Hungary. The capacity of immigrants to contribute to the culture and to the economy of cities is well documented in urban history. The biographies of cities such as Berlin, Paris, London, New York, Vienna, Buenos Aires clearly shows the enormous contribution made by outsiders to their development. Malmö needs to be aware of this potential. Cities are where the fundamental spaces of authority – governmental, juridical, economic – get constituted and where they also sometimes get written on, painted on, danced on, sung in, pulled down, transformed, renamed, decorated: in short, *negotiated*.

If Malmö wants to project itself into the future, this negotiation needs to become a systematic, conscious effort. One way to nurture the talent that is emerging across the city is to support it with financial, educational, and cultural planning specifically aimed at young people. The creation of sustainable, cheap accommodation for young people, or the setting up of incubators for creative entrepreneurs and the provision of artists' studios are all possible steps to be considered. The new University (with its research centres) has a pivotal role to play. This, however, needs to open its doors to students from all backgrounds and to make a special effort to

recruit ethnic and cultural minority students. Also, the launch of a city-wide profile of the skills and abilities offered by the immigrant population would help Malmö in identifying the potential offered by its new citizens. The assumption is often that immigrants are just 'economic migrants' looking for a job. This may not always be the case and one way of challenging this assumption with practical actions could be that of launching an *idea competition* targeted at ethnic businesses or at minority cultures.

What needs to be consolidated in these circumstances is not homogeneity but diversity. In the case of Malmö, we need to think of ways of organising the 'trellis' of the new city which is superimposed on older structures of power, authority and allegiance. This will mean rethinking current zoning provisions, for example, and working out, from the point of view of the built form, new strategies for both mixed-use and adaptive use development. The redevelopment of the Harbour, for instance, offers a unique opportunity for Malmö to put into practice a more creative use of space that takes into account the mobile and flexible forms of association, and the different types of consumption of space and amenity mentioned before. To succeed in this development, mixed-use and adaptive use developments must be enshrined in the planning from now. The Harbour area of Malmö can become the thriving heart of the city only if the planners are mindful of the true resources of the city. This is how the best parts of established cities work and is what both locals and tourists find most attractive about cities.

So for instance, if we were to take the themes of youth creativity, diversity of cultures and the ability to take risks and to reinvent itself economically and socially as the main characteristics of Malmö. (its resources) then, *ideally*, the new Harbour area should be built around high quality, cheap student and young people's accommodation; new and exciting formal and informal cultural and meeting spaces; incubators and start-up spaces for creative businesses (linked to the university, or to the other research institutions of the city); open green spaces adaptable and usable for open air events such as festivals and ethnic markets and, finally, a number of good quality ethnic restaurants capable of reflecting the cultural mix present across the city. Can Malmö rise up to this challenge?

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