

Performing Community:

Short Essays on Community, Diversity,
Inclusion, and the Performing Arts



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INTRODUCTION

The Woodrow Wilson Center's Urban Sustainability Laboratory began posting short essays concerning the importance of inclusion in an era of urban diversity in 2012. This brief collection features several of those essays by Urban Laboratory Director Blair A. Ruble, with particular attention being paid to the role of community, diversity, inclusion and the performing arts.

Contemporary British theologian Philip Sheldrake writes that, "cities have always produced vibrancy. They not only have a particular capacity to create diverse community but, historically, they have been the primary sites of human innovation and creativity."¹ However, he cautions, "human community in a fully-developed sense is not something that is simply automatic and unconscious. It

demands our commitment, a quest for shared values, and a measure of self-sacrifice."¹ This is where the performing arts, governance, and planning enter into the equation.

The essays presented here have responded to the challenges of diversity and inclusion through the lens of the performing arts, governance, and planning as the events of urban life have played out around us. They are intended to encourage readers to think a little differently about how cities are evolving.

While the essays are by Blair Ruble, this collection has benefited enormously from the support and contributions of Urban Sustainability Laboratory colleagues Allison Garland, Thea Cooke, Genevieve Pagan and Isabela Lyrio.

Endnotes

1 Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban* (Chinchester: Wiley/Blackwell, 2014), p. 13.

Performing Community Engagement



The Sound of Music Is The Sound of Community Resilience

On a recent pleasant summer evening, my wife and I found ourselves at Washington's Southwest Waterfront listening to a free sunset concert by one of the fabulous jazz divas of our times, Washington's Sharón Clark. Sharón, who packs important clubs from Broadway to Irkutsk and is frequently compared by critics to Sarah Vaughn, was performing before people who know and appreciate what a special singer she is.

Many in the audience were enjoying the delicious ribs served up by a nearby barbeque stand, and most knew at least one of the stellar musicians on stage. Sharón was joined by her long-time collaborators, Chris Grasso on keyboards, Tommy Cecil on bass, Lenny Robinson on drums, and sax-master Marshall Keys on alto. Another familiar Washington musician – drummer and trumpeter DeAndrey Howard – worked the equipment mixing the sounds perfectly. Everyone on stage had grown up and studied in Washington and near-by Baltimore before heading out around the world to play with some of the biggest names in contemporary music;

and all were back in D.C. adding a special magic to the gentle Washington twilight.

There is nothing particularly noteworthy about folks enjoying an outdoor concert on a summer's eve. Humans have been gathering together to listen to music for millennia, and, in doing so, have created the sorts of connections among themselves we now speak of as "social capital." The warm communal vibe surrounding this patch of Washington waterfront is repeated whenever rich and poor *porteños* gather at a Buenos Aires *milonga* to enjoy tango; Bluegrass musicians bring their banjos and fiddles to a nearby Smokey Mountains general store to play together and tell fanciful tall stories; township *marabi* masters gather in the corner of a Cape Town *sheeben*; and, opera singers mysteriously descend on the same central Moscow coffee shop at a time appointed by some force greater than themselves. What makes such gatherings so important is that the musicians – no matter how accomplished and renowned – are creating a moment of beauty that is shared with a community.

Researchers and policymakers have noted that communities which are more thoroughly integrated before a natural disaster or an outbreak of conflict and violence rejuvenate faster than those communities in which people remain distant from one another. Hefty scholarly tomes and snappy policy briefs are being churned out musing over just how the social capital necessary for sustainable community resilience can be secured. As a lazy summery evening listening to Sharón Clark — and enjoying the company of others who share their love for her music — demonstrates, the arts can play an indispensable role in connecting people so that they can live together in resilient communities.

The notion that the arts enhance a community frequently finds expression in calculations of the number of jobs cultural activities bring to a community, or of the monetary value they add to local real estate. Planners from cities around the world long to replicate the success of Soho in New York where, a generation ago, artists proved to be the cutting edge of renewal, higher tax revenues, and gentrification. Even less spontaneously, politicians speaking any number of languages can't seem to wait for star architects to build some local version of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. No one can keep track of all the proposals for "arts districts" and "cultural centers" that are celebrated around the world.

In the end, Soho and Bilbao remain noteworthy because their successes can't be replicated based on a blueprint alone. The arts, just as any other aspect of a city, can be nurtured, encouraged, and promoted but not invented whole cloth from a glossy brochure or promotional pamphlet.

The lesson offered by Sharón, Chris, Tommy, Lenny, and Marshall isn't that grand arts projects are unimportant. They all perform, after all, in places like the Kennedy Center and Lincoln Center as well as the D.C. waterfront. Rather, they remind us that community resilience is about shared communal experience. From the beginning of humankind, the magic of music has been shared by people who might not have much else in common. The sound of music is the sound of community resilience.

Such concepts of community are not fairy-tale-like musings, but have real practical meaning. When thinking about building community and securing place in order to enhance societal resilience, policymakers and social scientists need to bring the arts into their notions of how to move ahead. They need to think about the arts not simply as monetized spectacle, but as shared experience creating and reinforcing social capital.

A few years ago far away from Washington, I found myself on an escalator leading from the platforms to

the exit of one of the Kyiv metro system's major transfer stations. About half-way up I began to hear the strains of joyous music, raucous laughter, and singing punctuated by uninhibited whistling. My imagination failed me as I tried to understand what awaited once the escalator reached the top. I stepped off into an entry hall full of dozens of seventy- and eighty-year-olds folk dancing their way to ecstasy.

The next morning I asked a colleague about what I had seen. He explained that pensioners from all over Kyiv gather every Monday evening in the station's expansive marble-lined entry hall to dance the hours away. Centrally located, old folks from all over the city could easily meet just by hopping on the metro which retirees can ride for free. Nothing more was needed than an accordion and a *bandura* or two. My colleague's own grandmother came every week to catch up with lifelong friends who had dispersed too far away to visit any other way. The retirees danced, shared stories, and offered help to one another.

In subsequent years Kyiv has been home to two revolutions, social and political upheaval, and massive economic dislocation. Somehow, though, the city continues to function and people are able to live their lives. How can this happen?

Part of the answer is to be found in the Monday evening metro dance club. Unlike many post-Soviet cities which suffer from lingering government-manipulated social anomie and alienation, Kyivians have managed to knit social support networks which help them through disruptions unimaginable in most European and North American cities.

Such social capital begins with the sort of casual familiarity found whenever humans come together to enjoy the arts. The arts are not at all frivolous in an era when generating and preserving social resilience is central to community well-being. Indeed, music and other arts may just be where resilience begins.

July 29, 2014

Making Community Work: the Importance of the Performing Arts

Originally published on American University Metropolitan Policy Center webpage

More than two decades ago, in 1993, Harvard Government Professor Robert Putnam published his now classic study *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Trying to answer the question why northern Italian cities developed vibrant civic traditions which came to support the growth of democratic institutions and southern Italian cities did not, Putnam was surprised to find a strong correlation between civic health and choral societies. Putnam masterfully argued that choral societies emerged from the same broad reservoir of social capital that is required to support civic vitality.

Appearing just as countries throughout the former Communist world were struggling to create new democracies, Putnam's work became something of a Holy Grail for promoters of a new political order. The problem, however, was that Putnam's work failed to sufficiently explain how such civic virtue and social capital could be created in the first place.

Perhaps hard-nosed democracy advocates pursuing measurable advances towards institutionally-bounded representative institutions considered music little more than white noise. If so, they may have missed part of a solution

to Putnam's seemingly unanswered challenge. Song, after all, has bound humans together for millennia and the social interaction required to create vocal beauty can be transferred to other activities. Choral societies are not just a reflection of civic health, but may be central to its origins.

The significance of social capital for civic well-being is more than theoretical conjecture. A growing body of evidence drawn from the responses to such recent disasters as Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy suggests that those communities with the highest stores of social capital before communal trauma recover most quickly following both man-made and natural disasters. Such capital, in turn, does not require deep knowledge of one another so much as a casual sociability which allows neighbors and colleagues to turn to one another in times of crisis. The performing arts encourage just such a geniality by bringing together audiences and performers to share a moment of conviviality.

The power of the performing arts to create a sense of shared community can be seen in contemporary Washington, D.C. The city has suffered throughout its history from a stark, deeply embedded racial divide; class separations between those who have, and those who have not; and most recently, tensions between long term residents and newcomers who

increasingly displace those who have come before. Moments and places shared by Washingtonians of all races, ages and beliefs remain unhappily rare. Those pauses in city life where they exist — as is evident in three particularly successful performing arts centers — deserve celebration.

Dance Place: During the mid-1970s, native Washingtonian and aspiring dancer, choreographer and teacher Carla Perlo was searching for a way to pursue her love of dance while remaining in her hometown. Renting a loft in 1978 in the as-yet-emerging Adams Morgan neighborhood, she joined forces with Steve Bloom to open Dance Place, a touring educational and Performing Arts Company that performed at the region's public schools. Immediately becoming a friendly hub in an increasingly vibrant dance community, Dance Place became an energetic catalyst both teaching studio

and creative dance and bringing renowned national and international performers to the nation's capital. In 1986, as a fresh wave of gentrification swept across Adams Morgan, Perlo lost her lease. Concluding that she could only protect her company by purchasing space, she scoured the city for an inexpensive yet spacious home. Dance Place eventually ended up in an old industrial building squeezed between auto repair shops that backed up on a heavily-used rail line that had recently provided the right-of-way for the Washington Metro's Red Line. Just a couple of minutes' walk from Metro's Brookland – Catholic University Station, Perlo had secured her future, albeit in a rough and tumble neighborhood that frightened many of her students. Working assiduously to reach out to neighborhood residents and children, Perlo emerged as a focal point for community activities reaching far beyond dance. Booking leading dance companies from around the world — and establishing



African Dancers, by S Pakhrin/flickr

a ground-breaking annual DanceAfrica DC festival – she put a previously unknown corner of Northeast DC on the international dance map. When the gentrification tsunami reached Brookland a few years ago, developers had to deal with her rather than the other way around. She masterfully converted a massive real estate development down the street into an opportunity to upgrade her performance studios and education center.

THEARC: In the spring of 2006, a coalition of major Washington companies, non-profit organizations, and businesses opened the doors of the Town Hall Education Arts and Recreation Campus (THEARC) in one of the city's poorest “east of the [Anacostia] river” neighborhoods in Ward 8. Led by inspiring educator and community developer Edmund Fleet, THEARC provided a \$27 million state-of-the-art performing, rehearsing, and teaching facility to Washington's most isolated residents. Working with William C. Smith & Co. as well as such partners as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington, Covenant House Washington, NFL Playground, KABOOM!, several dozen foundations and major corporations, and the DC Department of Housing & Community Development, Fleet has created the city's liveliest arts center in its least likely location. In addition to working with community residents, THEARC has become a favored performance venue for local standout ensembles such as The Washington Ballet and National Symphony as well as touring companies

from around the world. On any given day, THEARC hosts performers visiting from the four corners of the globe while offering underserved children and families dance classes, music instruction, fine arts, academic, and recreational programs as well as social services, mentoring, and after school care at no – or affordable – cost.

Westminster Church: A decade-and-a-half ago, the Reverend Brian Hamilton asked the Congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church, a few blocks from the waterfront in Southwest DC, if he could organize weekly jazz performances every Friday evening. His goal was to provide an entertaining night out for the community's retirees and to attract an audience from the diverse corners of an all-too-divided city. Charging a minimal \$5 admission fee – and offering scrumptious down-home dinners in the basement – Hamilton made music available to all. Under the direction of former Redskin and singer Dick Smith, “Jazz Night in Southwest” quickly became a favorite venue for musicians who valued the enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience, the comforting meals, and a three hour gig that stimulated improvisation. A few years later, Hamilton initiated a similar “Blues Monday” series. Performances include aspiring students and world-recognized veterans, school teachers and military band leaders. The audiences attract as diverse an array of Washingtonians as can be found anywhere, with identities being checked at the door. The daughter of a Wall Street titan may

find herself sitting next to Billie Holliday's drummer; the chief of staff of a powerful Congressional committee might be exchanging stories with a retired dancer who hoofed across the celebrated stages of the Apollo in New York and the Howard in DC; while a twelve-year old trumpet prodigy discovers the wisdom of James Brown's drummer. More than any other moment in the week, DC becomes an unpretentious community overflowing with social capital from six to nine every Friday and Monday evening.

These remarkable Washington institutions reveal partial answers to the question of how the social capital required to make democracy – and community – work comes into being, including: leadership; bringing global and local together; and recognizing that assets are different from profits.

Leadership Matters: The stories of Dance Place, THEARC and Westminster Church begin with their visionary founders and the sustaining leaders they have nurtured around them. Social capital must be created and promoted over time, requiring the long-term engagement of civic leadership.

Link Global and Local: Dance Place, THEARC, and Westminster Church take

great pride in presenting performers from the District of Columbia and the Washington metropolitan region. These are not just “local” artists as many appear around the world and around the country bringing together global and local into a single continuum.

Assets are Different from Profits: Dance Place, THEARC, and Westminster Church are not commercial venues – and could not succeed commercially. All three nonetheless add great value to Washington, including the very social capital that will be so necessary should the city and region confront calamity.

Resilience and adaptability increasingly are seen as essential for community well-being, particularly in the face of growing challenges and dilemmas posed by natural and man-made misfortune. Resilience, in turn, requires expansive social capital and vibrant civic life. Community vitality requires that increasingly diverse neighbors come to know one another, even if only casually. The shared enjoyment provided by the performing arts, as these Washington examples demonstrate, promotes a virtuous cycle that would enable communities to move forward in the face of adversity.

December 5, 2014

The View from the Bus: Rethinking Cities through Performance

I was invited in early March to attend the *dunaPart3 – Hungarian Showcase Arts festival* in Budapest celebrating the city's vibrant performing arts scene. The festival became an opportunity for the international theater community to show its support for Budapest colleagues who are beleaguered by an increasingly authoritarian government prone to using political, bureaucratic, and financial levers to enforce compliance with their nationalist-oriented agenda. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after all, has spoken with admiration about the accomplishments of Russian President Vladimir Putin and recently hosted his Russian colleague despite European Union sanctions. Putin hardly provides a role model for democratic leadership.

DunaPart3 brought more than three dozen leading theater professionals from the United States alone — organized by the Center for International Theater Development with support from the Trust for Mutual Understanding — to see nearly three dozen productions by over 25 companies together with multiple panel discussions. For my part, I viewed nine performances ranging from contemporary dance by youthful companies to highly polished theater productions, and heard three panel discussions about the state of the arts in Hungary. Overall, I departed impressed with the professionalism and creativity of the Budapest scene, and concerned with the constraining power

of the state to subvert the arts to their own purpose. What is happening in Budapest is important; all the more so as it is happening in a member state of the European Union which needs to stand for freedom of expression in deed as well as refrain.

I was especially inspired by the work of a new cohort of rising arts professionals in their twenties and thirties who are enlivening the arts at home and, increasingly, abroad. As a person who thinks about cities, I was particularly taken by the performance of STEREO Akt's *Promenade - Urban Fate Tourism*, which made me think about the city in new ways.

STEREO Akt is the creation of an exciting twentysomething director Martin Boross who has been recognized as a rising talent for some time. His high school classmates, for example, fondly recall his productions from just a few years ago when he was a teenager. Well beyond schoolmate fans, his work has won enthusiastic reactions far and wide, with STEREO Akt becoming integrated into various European networks promoting performance in public space. These ties are critical as few funds are available at home in Hungary to keep the company — which already has half-dozen productions under its belt — moving ahead. By co-producing with European partners Boross is able to cover costs at home and take

his talented team on the road to more conducive venues across the continent.

In *Promenade - Urban Fate Tourism*, the audience gathers in a late-Communist era community center at the edge of historic Budapest that retains the seedy ambiance of an underutilized transportation hub before climbing onto a non-descript city bus. Once on the bus, the passengers put on sound-blocking earphones and, over the course of the performance, listen to a mixture of soothing music and narration. The effect converts the communal involvement of being on a bus into a deeply personal experience in which every viewer is caught between the most public of environments – the bus and city streets – and the most internal – the space between the earphones of a headset.

The bus departs, eventually ending up in a down-on-its-luck pre-World War II planned garden city district that becomes a self-contained city within the city. Eight actors play out various vignettes around the theme of escape: a foreign tourist escaping home on a vacation; a mental institution patient running from a doctor; a

husband and wife leaving one another; an apartment maintenance worker quitting his job over a dispute with an angry resident. Over time, the audience begins to scour the vistas from their seats trying to identify the actors. Simultaneously, the mundane actions of people on the street – neighbors smiling into baby carriages pushed by mothers, a homeless gentleman rifling through garbage for food, beleaguered bus riders waiting too long at their stops for the next bus to come, children on a playground waving at a bus full of people wearing headsets – become performances in and of themselves.

Some of the interaction is purposeful. Boross and his team have invited community members to add their own stories to the narrative while volunteers join in the action with the eight company actors. Serendipity adds spontaneity to the performance as the city becomes implanted in the action.

The notion that the entire world's a stage is perhaps trite. The use of urban spaces as platforms for performance has become



Photo courtesy of STUDIO Akt

the subject of enough learned tomes to fill a library. STEREO Akt achieves a different and unique window onto the interaction of urbanite and urbis. The combination of the mundane ride on a bus with the internal realm amplified by the narrative and music on headsets encourages audience members to perceive a city in different ways. We are all tourists in our own lives, Boross proclaims; and he expands inner knowledge by accentuating that external reality.

Getting off the bus audience members can greet the performers, who have gathered to meet them. Everyone sets off in their personal direction perceiving

the city in new ways. Suddenly, a maintenance man working on a gas line becomes a performer; a young couple embracing outside a college entrance becomes actors. The city is more alive with possibility than just ninety minutes before. Budapest – and the Hungarian arts scene – becomes full of potent imagination, appearing to be less furrowed by an unfriendly government. Boross and the dozens of younger performers participating in the *dumaPart3 – Hungarian Showcase Arts festival* reveal that, despite everything, Budapest remains a hot spot of artistic invention.

March 16, 2015



The National Opera of Ukraine, by thisisboss/flickr

Dancing towards Revolution in Kyiv

Originally published by the Kennan Cable

The rhythmic hip-hop-like chants of protest exploded just as the final curtain came down on the flower-laden ballet dancers and the musicians who had performed with them. Within seconds, the bright lights of TV crews who had forced their way into the orchestra seats overwhelmed as-yet dim house lights when suddenly – as if on a cue from a cameraman – four white banners poured out of the fourth balcony enveloping the hall below. To ever louder chants of “Handba! Handba! Handba!” (“Shame! Shame! Shame!”), the banners demanded that the National Ballet of Ukraine retain their artistic director Denys Matvienko. The sumptuous Kyiv Opera House exploded in chaos after a stunning performance on April 13, 2013.

The Kyiv theater has seen more than its fair share of politics-inspired disruptions since opening in 1901. Most notoriously, on September 12 (September 1 Old Style), 1911, Nicholas II’s unforgivingly conservative Interior and Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin stood up after the second act of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, turning his back to the stage next to a ramp between the parterre and orchestra seats. Perhaps the Prime Minister had decided to use the intermission to check out the Royal Box, where Nicholas and his two oldest daughters, the Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana, had been watching the

luxurious production. His personal body guard evidently viewed the break as an opportunity to sneak off for a surreptitious smoke. More than two score security guards posted around the hall similarly disappeared just as Dmitry Bogrov – the son of a local Jewish merchant family, secret police informer, and self-proclaimed anarchist revolutionary – determinedly approached Stolypin. Bogrov raised his gun and fired; two shots hit Stolypin in the arm and chest. The Prime Minister died a few days later with the assassin’s execution coming shortly thereafter, leaving behind a tangle of conspiracy theories which continue a century later.

Nothing so dramatic or lethal occurred after the ballet performance in April 2013; yet an act of intrigue once again presaged regime collapse. In this instance, a weak, incompetent, and corrupt Ukrainian regime would be run out of the country a scant ten months later.

The National Ballet of Ukraine has managed to remain a national treasure despite all of the political, financial, and artistic upheavals of the past quarter century. Like many other Soviet companies, the Kyiv Ballet needed a dusting off once the country fell apart and cultural institutions long dependent on state munificence were tossed into the international arts marketplace. The company’s ballet school continued to produce a steady stream of world class performers – especially male dancers

– who headed out across the globe. Oftentimes they signed with international companies. New York’s American Ballet Theater has hired numerous Kyiv trained soloists and Corps members of note. Kyiv dancers nonetheless return home whenever their schedules permit them to take time away from leading companies in Moscow, St. Petersburg, London and New York. The company has become, as former US Ambassador to Ukraine William Green Miller once quipped, “the best company money can’t buy.”

Denys Matvienko was among those who chose to return. A native of Dnipropetrovsk, Matvienko spent his career dancing in Kyiv, while also serving as a leading soloist in Moscow, St. Petersburg, New York, Tokyo, and Milan. Approaching his midthirties, he was lured back to Kyiv in November 2011 to serve as the company’s Artistic Director and to perform whenever possible. He quickly set out to introduce more contemporary ballets to the company’s repertoire. Moving on two fronts, Matvienko added new verve to the company’s standard repertoire. For example, he replaced the Pitipa’s well-worn choreography for Minkus’ *La Bayadère* with a more modern and energetic 1980s version choreographed by the incomparable Natalia Makarova for London and New York audiences. Simultaneously, Matvienko invited exciting contemporary artists to bring their works to Kyiv, including Edward Clug, a Romanian dancer whose striking choreography has made the Slovene National Theater one of the most exciting companies of its size anywhere. Clug

quickly added the Ukrainian capital to his global network of partner companies.

The April 13 program combined two of Clug’s most successful and beloved works: *Radio and Juliet*, a retelling of the Shakespeare love story to the music of Radiohead; and *Quarto*, a striking abstract chamber piece featuring two pairs of male and female dancers on stage with a pianist and cellist. Matvienko and his wife Anastasia, who was born in Crimea, made *Radio and Juliet* their signature piece, while Kyiv’s astonishing young dancers performed *Quarto* (a piece which has won praise from around the world including a prestigious Russian Golden Mask Award) as handsomely as any company to be found. Kyiv audiences embraced Matvienko’s vision, making the ballet a magnet for the expanding younger post-independence generation of professionals and entrepreneurs.

Local audiences were not alone as the excitement surrounding Matvienko’s presence electrified some of the world’s leading stages. In February 2005, for example, Jennifer Dunning wrote almost breathlessly in *The New York Times*, that:

Denis and Anastasia Matvienko, married dancers from the Kiev [sic] and Bolshoi Ballets, provided more than enough excitement. She is a stylish dancer, but it was he who stirred the crowd to noisy delirium in the “Diana and Acteon” pas de deux, hurling himself about like a throwback to the days of wildly exhibitionistic star dancing by the likes of Rudolf Nureyev and Alexander Godunov,

whom Mr. Matvienko resembles slightly. Dressed in what seemed to be an animal-skin loincloth, blond hair flying, he partnered his ballerina as if she were prey whose flesh he was about to devour and ended the piece by looking as if he were going to jump into her arms for a final, unconventional ballet catch.¹

Matvienko's leadership symbolized everything that post-independence Kyiv youth wanted for their country: something that was fresh, high energy, edgy, and internationally appreciated, especially in the West. They embraced his regime as a symbol of a new Ukraine that would be within their grasp if only their country's boorish, traditional in a Soviet sort of way, and corrupt leaders would just get out of their way.

A couple of days before the April 13 eruption inside the Kyiv Opera House, the leadership of the theater and their masters at the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture – run by particularly distasteful cronies of the country's convicted criminal-turned president Viktor Yanukovich – “fired” Matvienko as the company's artistic director. Citing artistic and personal differences, the Opera Theater's management revealed in a bizarre announcement that Matvienko had never been “hired” at all. Evidently, once Matvienko signed his contract in November 2011, management sent his employment documents to superiors who never had been bothered to countersign.

In a press conference on the eve of the April performances Matvienko told reporters:

At the beginning of February, I found out that I am not the artistic director of the ballet company of the Kiev [sic] Opera and never have been. It was just before the premier of La Bayadère and I did not say anything immediately to not cause a stir. The Director of the Kiev [sic] Opera confirmed this fact. It turns out that my contract, submitted in November, is not signed. During this time I was leading the company, giving statements on tour, while not knowing that I didn't hold the role. This is a flagrant violation, cheating me and my artists.²

The Matvienkos decamped for St. Petersburg, where they continue to dance as among the renowned Mariinsky's most popular Principal Dancers. But they did not do so before Denys Matvienko appeared



Wilson Briefs | June 2014

How Cities Can Foster Tolerance and Acceptance

by Blair A. Ruble

SUMMARY

Cities throughout the world face ethnic, racial, religious, and national diversity as a result of widespread migration. Despite instances of communal strife, diversity can be accommodated and even acknowledged as beneficial to the city. To achieve this, cities should create public spaces—both real and symbolic—to be shared by all and should reinforce the common necessities, especially commercial ones, that have brought the city together.

We live in a time of cities, as well as in a time of migration. A new urban reality has arisen with the influx of mobile populations often related to the globalization of economic and communication flows. Cities around the world have become agglomerations of ethnicities, religions, classes, and nationalities.

Creating socially sustainable cities that can accommodate migrants and their diversity requires policies that nurture shared identity and maintain spaces whose use can be shared by everybody, promoting a pragmatic pluralism and a culture of tolerance.

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in the mutinous audience assembled on April 13 to watch substitutes Aniko Rekhviashvili and Anastisia Shevchenko (the latest in a long line of Kyiv-produced rising global ballet stars) exquisitely perform in the Matvienkos' signature roles in *Radio and Juliet*.

The world of post-Soviet ballet has been marked at times by as much drama off-stage as on. Just weeks before Matvienko's "dismissal" in Kyiv, the Bolshoi attracted its share of unwanted headlines after an attacker paid by disgruntled soloist Pavel Dmitrichenko threw acid into the face of artistic director Sergei Filin in a dispute over performance assignments. Only a few years earlier the Bolshoi attracted further notoriety when management terminated the contract of prima ballerina Anastasia Volochkova for being too tall and heavy. Matvienko's conflicts with management, however, assumed meaning beyond personal and artistic differences.

Under President Yanukovich, a number of key educational, scientific, and cultural appointments had been turned over to strikingly incompetent supporters and party members who appeared to be more interested in collecting tribute than enhancing standards. Within this context, the public humiliation of a hero of Kyiv's western-oriented youthful elite instantly became entwined with growing anger over what they saw as an illegitimate regime. The shouts from the top balcony of the opera house, the flying banners, and carefully orchestrated

appearance of television cameras to record the fiasco – and its retelling in social media and at city coffeehouses in the days and weeks to follow – was about more than the ballet. It was an early salvo in a growing rebellion against the Yanukovich regime itself. Protests erupted a few months later in November 2013 after Yanukovich refused to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union, touching off weeks of at times bloody civil strife which ended with the President and many of his minions fleeing the country in February.

The history of the performing arts overflows with demonstrations and conflicts which often are about clashes well beyond the interior of any theater. Paris was rocked between 1752 and 1754 by the *Querelle des Bouffons*, a struggle between proponents of comic Italian opera buffa and defenders of French *tragédie lyrique*, a genre favored by supporters of the royal court. The conflict began with a riotous attack on itinerant Italian comic actors (*buffoni*) during a performance of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* at the Académie royale de musique. Paris quickly divided into defenders of a national French style led by Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Friedrich Melchior Grimm, and Christoph Willibald Gluck, and champions of Italian music such as Niccoló Piccinni. Opera served as a surrogate for a conflict between an emerging new French statist-nationalism

on the one hand and cosmopolitan embrace of European cultural styles on the other.

About a century later, in May 1849, one of the worst riots in New York City history exploded as Irish and American working class supporters of the native actor Edwin Forrest surrounded and attacked the Astor Opera House where the English actor William Charles Macready was performing *Macbeth* before an audience of upper class Anglophiles. The three sided-melee pitting immigrant, nativist, and upper class New Yorkers against one another left some 25 dead and 120 injured before the city police and state militia restored order. The immediate cause may have been the serendipitous appearance of the era's two leading Shakespearean actors performing the same role in theaters just a few blocks from one another on the same night. More importantly, New York was a city increasingly divided by class, race, and national origin; divisions that would continue to disturb public order in the decades ahead.

More legendarily, the premier of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* by Diaghilev's Ballet Russes at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on April 2, 1913 erupted in shouting and derisive laughter even before conductor Pierre Monteux took up his baton. Protests became ever more intense as the dancers on stage began to perform Vaslav Nijinski's choreographed rites

of maiden sacrifice. Anger grew as mockery turned into physical attacks throughout the evening. The uproar lasted until Maria Piltz's final "Sacrificial Dance," spilling over into the city's most fashionable neighborhoods. Class and incompatible visions of the future collided; pitting fashionable traditionalists against modernists wishing for a new order throughout a Europe perched on the edge of a cataclysmic century ahead.

The raucous upper balcony protestors in Kyiv and their sympathetic supporters in lower tiers of the Kyiv Opera House were going far beyond showing support for their dismissed idol, Denys Matvienko. They were proclaiming their collective disgust with the incompetent and corrupt state officials who forced him to leave. Unlike other more famous theatrical clashes, the audience warmly embraced the evening's performances of both *Radio and Juliet*, and *Quarto*. Instead, they saved their ire for, to their minds, the illegitimate decision-makers who were stealing their world from them. While there is no way of knowing for sure, many if not most of the evening's protestors undoubtedly appeared on the city's streets during the Euromaidan protests that eventually dispatched Yanukovych and his foul hangers-on from their country months later.

French economist and former President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Jacques Attali has written that music often has presaged

broad social, political, and ideological shifts.³ Music and other performing arts, he argues, reflect a future that is being born because they give form and structure to people's deepest fears and hopes about the world around them.

The Matvienkos continued to thrive in St. Petersburg despite a string of nasty injuries and the growing Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In November 2014, Denys Matvienko had a triumphant return to Kyiv to lead a reformed National Ballet of Ukraine in an imposing new production of *The Great Gatsby*. Described as the most ambitious ballet project ever undertaken in Ukraine, Matvienko managed once again to place his artistry at the center of the on-going drama of Ukrainian transformation.

December 15, 2014

Endnotes

- 1 Jennifer Dunning, "A Night of Fun as the International Stars Turn," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2007.
- 2 "Denis Matvienko is 'fired' as artistic director of the Kiev ballet," Gramilano. Ballet. Opera, Photography, April 9, 2013.
- 3 Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France], 1977, as translated in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Theater and the Heart of a City: Moscow's Teatr.doc's Confrontation with Authority

On the evening of December 30, 2014 — just as two dozen or so patrons were settling into their seats at a purposefully ramshackle basement theater in central Moscow to watch a film about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine — police officials and a television crew entered the hall, declared a bomb threat, and asked everyone to evacuate. Despite the declared urgency that a bomb might go off, the police checked and recorded the documents of everyone in the audience and requested that they wait in paddy wagons parked outside for their own protection. When questioned about the wisdom of taking 45 minutes to evacuate the site of a possible explosion, the police began to change their story without even a pretense of veracity. Eventually three of Teatr.doc's animating figures — Maksym Kurochkin, Stas Gubin, and Seva Lisovsky — were taken off to a nearby police station for questioning.

All three would be released before sunrise. Much of the scenery for the company's productions fared less well, being destroyed by the raiding police. Summoned to the Ministry of Culture the next day, Kurochkin and Teatr.doc dramaturge and company leader Elena Gremina were told that the raid could have been worse and, if they like, the Ministry could call the police and have them return.

The arrival of a swarm of investigators accompanied by an NTV television crew is but the latest in an increasingly aggressive game of cat and mouse which began during the autumn between Moscow authorities and the tiny Teatr.doc. Threatening closure, increasing rents, and relocation to a forsaken outer corner of galaxy Moscow, those in power are making clear that they want Gremina's diminutive theater to go away. In fact, the film screening was to have been the last event before the company relocated to Bauman Street on the other side of central Moscow.

The December 30 raid becomes even more disquieting as the police were already quite busy that evening arresting nearly 300 of the thousands of demonstrators who had converged on the Manezh Square next to the Kremlin, just a couple of kilometers away from Teatr.doc, to protest the conviction of opposition leader Alexei Navalny on fraud charges earlier that day. One might have thought the gathering of a handful of theater patrons would constitute too small a challenge for the regime at such a moment. Indeed, the mystery is why does Vladimir Putin's government fear a minuscule drama company operating from a Moscow basement?

Teatr.doc represents much more than it might seem at first glance. Founded by a group of rising playwrights in 2002, Teatr.doc quickly established itself at the center of the “New Russian Drama” that took shape in the late 1990s. Prompted in part by support from the British Council, dozens of talented young Russian playwrights embraced “documentary theater” which draws inspiration from people and events witnessed in everyday life.

For much of the new millennium’s first decade, dozens of theaters sprang up across Russia, often in economically traumatized industrial cities such as Yekaterinburg, Togliatti, and Perm. A score of young writers garnered the attention of the international theater community as their plays were translated into several languages and performed on stages in London, Washington, Chicago, New York, and other major world theatrical cities. Rooted in the British in-your-face theater tradition, the Russians made the genre their own. Unlike European documentary productions, Russian playwrights and directors managed to identify transcendental moments of embedded humanity which lifted their stories above superficially mundane tales of rape, pillage, crime, and corruption.

Moscow was somewhat late to the party, though the establishment of renegade companies such as Praktika and Teatr.doc quickly closed the gap between capital and province. Teatr.doc in particular demonstrated courage by producing Gremina’s powerfully unnerving *One Hour*

Eighteen Minutes based on the transcripts of the investigation into the death of Russian whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky while in police custody. By touching on such taboo subjects as the Magnitsky case – and, more recently, the unfolding tragedy in Eastern Ukraine – Teatr.doc established itself as a prominent voice of measured criticism against a regime seemingly allergic to all that it cannot control.

Teatr.doc has assumed far more meaning than its tiny basement venue and limited audiences might suggest. The past decade has become recognized internationally as one of the most productive in the long, esteemed history of Russian theater. Plays that powerfully reveal and challenge society’s conventions and deceptions have caught the eye of the international theater community, which has embraced the Russian stage as among the most innovative of our time. That notoriety, in turn, made theater companies such as Teatr.doc especially vulnerable to an assault by the defenders of Putin’s vision of moral imperative. With leading international figures such as *Moscow Times* critic John Freedman and Center for International Theater Development director Philip Arnoult closely following the rise and now threatened New Russian Drama renaissance, the whole world has been watching what transpires at Teatr.doc.

A distinctly local historical dimension to the story might be as significant for amplifying Teatr.doc’s importance. Throughout the past century, Moscow has witnessed

humanity's most toxic pathologies on an extravagant scale beyond rational comprehension. Sites of mass arrest, brutal executions, and mundane betrayals lurk behind the city's recently shinning facades at every turn. Like the ghosts of Berlin, the troubled spirits of Moscow create a phantasmagorical substructure just as real to those who know it as any metro map or post-Soviet office tower. Teatr.doc's basement sits in the middle of one of Moscow's most scorching otherworldly hot spots, located a block away from Patriarch's Pond in one direction and a five minute walk from the apartment of Soviet writer Mikhail Bulgakov in the other.

Kyiv-born Bulgakov was trying to combine a medical career with writing as World War I broke out. Sent to the front with a medical unit, Bulgakov began using morphine. While he stopped using the pain killer after the war, his writing — beginning with an account of his own addiction—*Morphine* — became infused with a fantastical quality that eventually placed him at odds with the Stalinist regime. Relocating to Moscow following the Russian Civil War, his accounts of early Soviet life, including *The White Guard* about a White Army officer's family in Kyiv and *The Heart of a Dog* in which sensitive male organs are transplanted from a human to a dog who is transformed into a pitiless Commissar, challenged many of the Soviet government's fundamental precepts. Working with the famous Moscow Art Theater, Bulgakov inevitably tangled with censors, leading

him to turn directly to Stalin for permission to remain at the Theater; a request that the Great Leader granted. Unable to publish, Bulgakov joined the Bolshoi Theatre staff for a while. During this period Bulgakov began writing his best-known work, *The Master and Margarita*, which was published in 1966, twenty-six years after his death.

The Master and Margarita and the limited circulation of Bulgakov's other works made the writer a hero for generations of late Soviet youth. His apartment, a walk-up in a courtyard just off the manic Garden Ring, became a site of pilgrimage for Moscow students. Impromptu stairway concerts and ubiquitous graffiti turned the otherwise ordinary building into a makeshift shrine subject to constant skirmishes between authorities and disaffected youth. Searching for an explanation for the absurdities of Soviet life, young Muscovites embraced and celebrated Bulgakov's anti-rationalism. Now cleaned up and converted into a small museum for Moscow denizens of a certain age, Bulgakov's apartment is one of the city's most potent spiritual monuments.

Bulgakov set the opening of *The Master and Margarita* at Patriarch's Pond Park just around the corner. This is where his fictional literary editor Mikhail Berlioz and young poet Ivan Ponyrev (whose penname is "Homeless") encounter the Devil in the form of a foreign tourist. Their chance meeting famously ends with a streetcar severing Berlioz's head, which rolls down the cobblestoned street before

the knowing eyes of a giant black cat, Behemoth. The remainder of the novel tracks the Devil's course around Moscow with Behemoth coming to represent an evil that has descended on an unknowing city.

For contemporary expatriates living in Moscow, Patriarch's Pond is a charmingly gentrified neighborhood that has climbed to the apex of the city's outrageously expensive real estate market. For knowing Muscovites, however, Patriarch's Pond is where the Devil arrived in town with every stray football seemingly becoming Berlioz's head and every black cat growing to gigantitude. For those Muscovites, *Teatr.doc* – located more or less halfway between Bulgakov's apartment and Patriarch's Pond – sits in the center of a quarter that exists in a mythical Fifth Dimension. Within this local urban context, *Teatr.doc* is a living link in an ongoing confrontation between art and power. By forcing the company to relocate to the opposite side of central Moscow, the authorities have shown

that they too appreciate the theater's symbolism.

The police assault on *Teatr.doc* the night before New Year's Eve is about far more than a small basement stage unknown to seventeen or eighteen million Muscovites. *Teatr.doc* represents a commitment to truth and beauty leavened with international respectability and local consequence in the face of a rapacious and vicious regime.

Political scientists heatedly debate the nature of Putin's Russia. Is it a throw-back to the Soviet era? An authoritarian nationalist regime? A kleptocracy engaged in little more than racketeering on a large scale? Yet Russia often offends a rationalist mind bent on categorization. Walking to a performance at *Teatr.doc* in winter's darkness prompts other thoughts much more connected to the neighborhood's streets. Bulgakov's colossal malevolent black cat Behemoth is loping across the Moscow cityscape yet again.

January 7, 2015

Porgy & Bess at 80: Rethinking Russian Influence on American Culture

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Eighty years ago, on October 20, 1935, New York's Alvin Theatre hosted one of the most important performances in the history of American musical theater: the Broadway premier of George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward's "American folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* based on Charleston literary notable Heyward's 1925 best-selling novel *Porgy*.¹ The Alvin has opened just a few years previously at the height of Broadway's most prolific season in 1927 and sits (now as the Neil Simon Theatre) on the south side of West 52 Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue in the heart of New York's raucous theater district.² A survivor, the landmark playhouse has, over the years, witnessed many a memorable evening since Alex Aarons and Vinton Freedley (ALex & VINTon = Alvin) launched their new stage with Fred and Adele Astaire hoofing their way through George and Ira Gershwin's *Funny Face*. Ethel Merman, Lucile Ball, and Liza Minnelli made their Broadway debuts on its famous stage while Cole Porter and Neil Simon opened some of their most successful productions at the historic auditorium. But no evening has as lasting an impact on American – and indeed world – musical theater as *Porgy and Bess*'s gala premier.

Those present knew they were witnessing history. Gershwin's reputation and ambition suggested that his opera possibly was a work for the ages. An earlier play *Porgy* that Heyward and his wife Dorothy had based on the novel had been a hit in 1927. The opera's tryout opened to rave reviews in Boston just days before.

Everyone who was anyone on the New York culture and social scene wanted to be seen; and many were. Major newspapers dispatched their most important drama and music critics such as Alexander Woolcott, Brooks Atkinson, Virgil Thomson and Olin Downes.³ Hollywood film actors Leslie Howard, Joan Crawford, and Katherine Hepburn joined opera singer Lil Pons and playwrights Elmer Rice and Ben Hecht, novelists Edna Ferber and J. B. Priestly, as well as musicians Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifitz, Paul Whiteman and Fred Waring. Boisterous curtain calls seemingly lasted for ever. The all-night cast party at Condé Nast's Madison Avenue penthouse attracted the likes of William Paley, Marshall Field, and Averill Harriman.

For the next three-quarters of a century, one question has hung over everything that transpired on stage that evening: What, precisely, is *Porgy and Bess*? A musical? An opera? High—or middlebrow – culture? A sympathetic and

path breaking treatment of African American life; or a racist regurgitation of demeaning stereotypes? Enthusiastic audiences aside, critics were divided about the show, often disparaging George Gershwin as little more than an overly ambitious pop music parvenu. If he had written an “opera,” why was it being staged in a music hall? Given its large scale and decidedly mixed reviews *Porgy and Bess* unsurprisingly lost money during its 124 performance New York run. Its investors only earned back their money from a successful national tour to follow.

Careers have been made as scholars, critics, musicians, politicians, and social commentators have struggled to define this “American Classic.”⁴ One undeniable dimension of the *Porgy and Bess* tale was answered definitively as soon as Abby Mitchell launched into the opening notes of the show’s first melody “Summertime.” No matter how one responds to the questions swirling around *Porgy and Bess*, no one can deny the transcendental beauty of George Gershwin’s score.

The opera’s creators sat nervously towards the back of the orchestra – or ground floor – that first night trying to discern how others were reacting to their creation. George Gershwin was next to Kay Swift, the leading woman in his life who was herself an author of musical dramas. The paths bringing Gershwin together with his co-creators – including his brother Ira, the Heywards, a number of Russian-trained musicians and directors, and dozens of

exceptionally talented and highly skilled African American performers — constitute a prototypical tale of how twentieth century America transformed world culture by mixing and matching previously unblended traditions into a vibrant and innovative entirety.⁵ It is a story of how one city — New York — enabled immigrants and their children to transform how Americans viewed themselves and the world around them.

Theater is a product of collaboration among many artistic associates. This was especially true of *Porgy and Bess*.⁶ The story’s first creator — the sickly DuBose Heyward — inherited considerable social prominence and little wealth from his distinguished Charleston family (his great-great-grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence). Deciding to become a writer, Heyward tossed aside selling insurance to devote time to his new craft. Looking for a tale to tell, he picked up a local *Charleston News and Courier* on his way to have breakfast one morning at his sister’s place down the street from an eighteenth century courtyarded building inhabited by African American workers and servants known as “Cabbage Row.” He read a story about how a memorable crippled beggar Samuel Smalls — well-known for getting around town in a cart drawn by a goat — had been arrested for aggravated assault after having attempted to shoot Maggie Barnes.

DuBose and his wife Dorothy — an Ohio-born playwright whom he had met at

New Hampshire's MacDowell Writers' Colony — collaborated in writing what became one of 1925's top literary hits, the novel *Porgy*. Dorothy saw *Porgy's* theatrical potential and adopted the tale for the stage. Produced by New York's prominent Theatre Guild and directed by a gifted young Armenian Rouben Mamoulian, *Porgy* the play proved to be one of the great successes of one of Broadway's most successful seasons in 1927-1928. That remarkable year witnessed an all-time high of 264 plays and musicals, including arguably the best traditional musical of all times, *Show Boat*.⁷

Porgy's success rested on more than a compelling, if melodramatic, story. DuBose had been fascinated since childhood by the African Americans on whom every white person in Charleston depended in any number of ways. His mother Jane had become something of an amateur specialist on the region's distinctive "Gullah" language and culture that had been handed down from generation to generation among the descendants of West African slaves brought to South Carolina to farm rice. Probably derived from the word "Angola," "Gullah" refers to a form of English infused with vocabulary and grammatical structures preserved from several West African languages. African inheritances marked their communal arrangements and religious practices. Like all Charleston children of his social station, DuBose grew up surrounded by Gullah-speaking nannies, servants, and workers.

DuBose's stories — he wrote other African American oriented works as *Jasbo Brown and Other Poems* (1924), *Mamba's Daughters* (1929) and the screenplay for Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933) — appeared at a time when white Americans knew little or nothing about African American life and culture.⁸ While now dated and long open to charges of promoting derogatory stereotypes, DuBose works stand out among other white writings of the era as unusually knowledgeable about and sympathetic to African American culture.

The animosity of native born whites towards African American cultural achievement is difficult to grasp from the distance of decades at a time when American culture has been thoroughly infused by blends of black and white, "high" and "low." It ran deep. As critic-historian Joseph Horowitz has noted, many white Americans at the time believed that African American music was "essentially white melodies appropriated by ignorant slaves."⁹ White interest in black music usually took the form of a white performer appropriating black music for himself and earning money from it rather than anything approaching cross-racial collaboration. Significantly, prominent European observers of American music had no difficulty appreciating how any American "national" musical style must blend indigenous, European and American traditions. As Horowitz tellingly adds, the act of immigration afforded "a clarity of

understanding unencumbered by native habit and bias.”

The accomplished Czech composer Antonín Dvořák presciently captured this future most succinctly when, during his time in New York in the 1890s, he declared that “Negro melodies” would create a distinctive “American school” of operas, symphonies, art songs, and chamber works.¹⁰ Perhaps Dvořák, a butcher’s son, was more open to the accomplishments of outsiders; perhaps as an outsider he simply could hear what prejudiced native ears could not.¹¹ What he said was unwelcome. Native-born American white musicians and critics dismissed Dvořák as hopelessly naïve. The imposingly authoritative Boston music critic Philip Hale went so far as to call the Czech composer a “negrophile,” which is how a proper Brahmin would have mimicked the Redneck “n_____ lover,” and is no less repugnant for Hale’s unmatched erudition.¹²

Dvořák was hardly alone. Any number of the immigrant artists who transformed twentieth century performing arts enthusiastically collaborated with African Americans. To cite just a handful of examples, celebrated Georgian-Russian choreographer George Balanchine, who had danced with Josephine Baker in Paris, worked closely on several projects with Ethel Waters, Katherine Dunham, the Nicolas Brothers, and Todd Duncan.¹³ Master songwriter and son of German immigrants Jerome Kern, together with

Oscar Hammerstein II, joined with African American performers to tackle such taboo subjects as inter-racial marriage in *Show Boat*.¹⁴ German-born composer Kurt Weill partnered with African American poet Langston Hughes on the musicalization of Elmer Rice’s play *Street Scene* and wrote the “black” musical *Lost in the Stars*.¹⁵ One among immigrants and immigrant children who saw value in African American culture was George Gershwin, a Brooklyn-born son of poor Jewish parents from St. Petersburg, Russia who soaked up the sounds of his hometown as his family moved around from Brooklyn’s East New York to Manhattan’s Lower East Side and Harlem.¹⁶

Gershwin demonstrated his musical acumen as soon as he sat down at a newly purchased second-hand family piano for the first time at the age of twelve and immediately started playing songs. By fifteen, he was playing in bars and took jobs in “Tin Pan Alley,” the hub of New York’s music industry. He connected with the legendary Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern among many and soon began writing popular tunes for Broadway shows.

All the time he frequented the city’s emerging jazz scene uptown in Harlem, he also scouted New York’s vibrant Yiddish musical theater on lower Second Avenue. Early twentieth-century Yiddish theater set standards for innovation unmatched on Broadway. Often more accessible to highly trained East European

professionals than the English-language stage, innovators such as seminal stage designer Boris Aronson, the son of the Grand Rabbi of Kyiv, and Odessa native director Jacob Adler conducted their most protean experiments on Yiddish stages from the upper Bronx to lower Manhattan.¹⁷ Gershwin thus drew on multiple influences as he tried to define for himself what it meant to be an “American” musician.

Responding to a commission from Paul Whiteman for a concert piece bringing together jazz and classical forms, Gershwin wrote his now iconic *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), which he followed with *Concerto in F* (1925) and the concert piece *An American in Paris* (1928). These works, to cite Horowitz once more, contributed to a growing American “vibrant piano repertoire, deeply inflected by slave song, and ranging from [Louis Moreau] Gottschalk’s *Banjo* and [Scott] Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* to the Transcendental profundities of Ives’s *Concord Sonata* and the jagged urban rhythms of Aaron Copland’s *Piano Variations*.”

Set on writing an American opera, Gershwin began looking for a story to put to music. One night, unable to fall asleep, he picked up a recent best-seller, *Porgy*. The next morning he wrote to the Heywards, initiating a creative journey that would last nearly a decade.

By the time he had completed *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin – the toast of Broadway and Hollywood – was a wealthy and

respected man. Moving from success to success on the Broadway stage, the Hollywood screen, and saluted at the most famous European concert halls, Gershwin was nothing if not musically ambitious. He cared deeply about creating a distinctive American classical tradition. It was in this context that he had set out to write the “Great American opera.”

The term used by Gershwin in labeling his masterpiece a “folk opera” has deeply confused American critics. Dvořák and other Slavic creators would have needed no explanation as they simultaneously drew on local “folk” music and traditions to create distinctive national operatic traditions. Gershwin was well aware of these connections, comparing *Porgy and Bess* to *Boris Godunov* and *Carmen* (indeed, the Gershwin opera closely tracks Bizet’s *Carmen*). Such comparisons made little sense to insecure Americans who measured cultural accomplishment against what they romanticized to be Germanic and British standards. Those more familiar with national operatic traditions emerging in Southern and Slavic Europe better appreciated the close connections between opera and folk traditions.

Unsurprisingly, *Porgy and Bess* gained recognition as a major operatic triumph throughout Europe. Americans eventually could no longer deny the significance of a masterpiece that had been validated enthusiastically on the stages of Milan, Venice, Vienna, Berlin, Copenhagen, London and Paris. After circling the globe

and being performed across the United States, George Gershwin's monumental "folk opera" finally entered into the repertoire of New York's exalted Metropolitan Opera in 1985, more or less simultaneously with its first performance in Charleston and a full half-century after it premiered at the nearby Alvin Theatre.¹⁸

In bringing their libretto and music to stage Gershwin, his brother lyricist Ira and the Heywards enlisted scores of tremendously talented people. George Gershwin insisted on an all-African American cast, a stipulation that has remained central to the granting of performance rights. The composer's demand both made *Porgy and Bess* a launching pad over the years for prominent African American singers and performers ranging from William Warfield (*Porgy*) and Leontyne Price (*Bess*) to Maya Angelou (*Carla*) and Lorenzo Fuller, Jr. (*Sportin' Life*); and kept such white performers as Al Jolson from performing the role of *Porgy* in blackface.

While many white critics questioned whether there were sufficient numbers of African American performers to fill out an opera cast, Gershwin had little doubt as he sought out his singers and actors. The legendary original cast featured Howard University music professor Todd Duncan as *Porgy*, Baltimore-born Julliard student Anne Wiggins Brown as *Bess*, Mississippi-born Julliard graduate Ruby Elzy as *Serena*, classically trained Abby Mitchell as *Clara* and New England Conservatory of Music product Warren Coleman as *Crown*.

They were joined by veteran Vaudeville star John W. Bubbles as *Sportin' Life* and were backed by Harlem's Eva Jessye Choir and Charleston's Jenkins Orphanage Band. The presence of so many talented and highly trained African Americans came as a revelation to many critics and audience members; one that helped to transform how white Americans and Europeans viewed black American talent.

Americans born in the Russian Empire similarly played a pivotal role in bringing Gershwin's score to production. Rouben Mamoulian, who had directed the Heywards' earlier play *Porgy*, grew up in a prominent Armenian theatrical family in Tiflis (today's Tbilisi). As a young man he moved to Moscow where he studied with the legendary Evgenii Vakhtangov at his Studio Theater of the Moscow Art Theater.¹⁹

Smolensk native Serge Sudeikin had become a prominent stage designer in St. Petersburg before joining Serge Diaghilev and his legendary *Ballets Russe* in Paris. He is remembered still in St. Petersburg for his wall paintings at the famous futurist watering hole The Stray Dog Cabaret, where he would have spent time discussing emerging cultural fashions with such Silver Age notables as writers Nikolai Gumilov, Mikhail Kuzmin, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Boris Pasternak, Maria Tsvetaeva, Sergei Esenin, Alexander Blok, and dancer Tamara Karsavina.²⁰

St. Petersburg native Alexander Smallens, who was brought to the United States as a child, conducted the original 1935 production of *Porgy and Bess* as well as Broadway revivals in 1942 and 1953 and a 1952 world tour. Gershwin studied composition with Kharkov-native Joseph Schlinger — and regularly sought counseling from Kyiv-born psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg — throughout the period when he was writing the opera.

The production's "Russians" were connected directly and indirectly to the artistic explosion of early twentieth century Moscow and St. Petersburg that turned so much of the creative world on its head. Their influence on Gershwin's folk opera, though often discrete, proved to be notable.

Igor Stravinsky reported that he conversed with Gershwin in Russian from time to time, adding that George had picked up the language growing up in his Yiddish, English, and Russian speaking household. Gershwin regularly spent time with a number of other Russians including composer Sergei Rachmaninoff and violinist Jascha Heifitz. All were familiar with the Russian tradition of opera-*skazka* (folk tales) — initiated by Catherine II (who wrote four librettos herself) and reaching maturity in the great Russian operas of the nineteenth century — that define a vibrant operatic tradition combining orchestral music and folk traditions.²¹ For Gershwin, the notion of an "American folk opera" had precise

meaning, even if his American critics couldn't grasp the concept. It represented the fusion of European and American traditions that immigrants trying to find their way in a new home would understand far better than pretentious native cultural gatekeepers.

Together, these artists brought American musical theater closer and closer to the Russian concept of "total theater," which is not surprising given how many gifted immigrants working on the New York stage during the first half of the twentieth century had worked or trained with Moscow theater giants such as Vakhtangov (producer Mamoulian), Konstantin Stanislavsky (actor Michael Chekhov), Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (actress Alla Nazimova), and Aleksandr Tairov (designer Boris Aronson).²² Stanislavsky's influence solidified when the master himself visited Gotham with a troop of Moscow Art Theater actors in 1923 and again in 1924.

Porgy the play, and *Porgy and Bess* the opera, were hardly the only successful collaborations among African American and Russians on the New York stage. The seminal 1940 Broadway production *Cabin in the Sky* (which later moved to the Hollywood screen), brought the towering Russian-born trio of composer Vernon Duke (Vladimir Dukelsky), designer Aronson, and choreographer Balanchine together with Richmond-reared lyricist John Latouche and a stellar African American cast including Ethel Waters, Todd Duncan, and Katherine Dunham

under Balanchine's direction. The American actors were bemused and confused by the constant bickering in Russian among Duke, Aronson, and Balanchine who, it seemed, could not make it through a rehearsal without arguing "a half dozen times" over everything and anything. The play, which told the story of the Lawd's and Lucifer's agents fighting over the soul of a southern scamp, drew heavily on African American folklore. Its modest Broadway success – a run which lasted 156 performances – led to a successful road run and an even more notable film directed by Vincinte Minnelli.

The Russian influence on American theater is not unique. Joseph Urban, for example, achieved noteworthiness as an architect and designer in imperial Vienna before arriving in Boston in 1911 to work for the Boston Opera. He moved to New York once his Boston commissions had run their course. Introducing new aesthetic textures and lighting effects, Urban's stage work – which included sets for Ziegfeld's famous showgirls, the epical musical *Show Boat*, and some fifty productions at the Metropolitan Opera – and sleekly erudite *art deco* architectural designs brought Viennese elegance and sophistication to the New World.

The Gershwins, Heywards, and other creators of *Porgy and Bess* together with the Aronsons and Nazimovas and their creative partners worked in New York during the "Golden Age" of the Broadway musical theater. Their connections to Russian theatrical culture ran deep as they reshaped American culture in the image of

what they had learned half-a-world away in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kyiv, and Tbilisi.

February 4, 2015

END NOTES

- 1 Among the numerous accounts of *Porgy and Bess*'s opening night, one of the most complete is found in Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess. The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), which is used as the basis for the discussion in this article.
- 2 William Morrison, *Broadway Theatres: History and Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), pp. 154-155.
- 3 Their reviews would prove to be decidedly mixed with drama critics tending to write more favorably about the production than music critics who were often confused by how to categorize this unprecedented work. Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess. The Story of an American Classic*, pp. 113-122.
- 4 *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.
- 5 A point argued by Joseph Horowitz, in "On My Way." *The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin and Porgy and Bess*.
- 6 Alpert's account of *Porgy and Bess*'s creation and subsequent "life" provides a comprehensive overview of how the opera came into being and evolved ever since. Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess. The Story of an American Classic*.
- 7 Larry Stempel, *Showtime. A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), pp. 192-201.

- 8 James M. Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).
- 9 Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts* (New York: Harper's, 2008), p. 3.
- 10 John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and The Flame. The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), p. 23.
- 11 Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, p. 20.
- 12 Joseph Horowitz, "On My Way." *The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin and Porgy and Bess*. pp. 2, 26-28.
- 13 Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, p. 42; and, Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 692-693.
- 14 Larry Stempel, *Showtime. A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, pp. 195-291.
- 15 Ibid, p. 299; Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, pp. 138-159; and, Joseph Horowitz, "On My Way." *The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin and Porgy and Bess*. pp. 53-64.
- 16 Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess. The Story of an American Classic*, pp. 25-30.
- 17 Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, pp. 340-342.
- 18 Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess. The Story of an American Classic*, pp. 143-230, 319-329.
- 19 Joseph Horowitz, "On My Way." *The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin and Porgy and Bess*, pp. 160-165. Mamoulian subsequently would direct the landmark musicals *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945) as well as several seminal films including *Applause* (1929), *City Stories* (1931) and *Love Me Tonight* (1932). Ibid, pp. 13-17. Concerning the importance of Yevgeny Vakhtangov for the Russian and world stage, see Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet theater, 1905-1932* trans. Rozane Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988); Andrei Malaev-Babel, *Yevgenyy Vakhtangov: A Critical Portrait Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2012); and Andrei Malaev-Babel, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 20 Catriona Kelly, *St. Petersburg. Shadows of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 259.
- 21 Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera. The Tsarina from State to Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 22 Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, pp.331-336, 342-343, and, 367.

Performance and Power from Kabuki to Go Go

Just eight years after establishing a powerful military regime that would last 26 decades, Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu became so disturbed by a troupe of itinerate actors that he expelled them from his Suruga military base. The group performed in a popular new style known as “kabuki.” To critical observers such as Ieyasu and his coterie of military strongmen, kabuki dancing consisted of women of ill-repute showing themselves off to potential customers. While an overly simplistic characterization, early kabuki performance seemed to many to be

primarily about selling sex. Ieyasu himself became increasingly disturbed by the general drunkenness, insubordination and licentiousness that accompanied kabuki performances. Shortly after expelling the actors from Suruga, Ieyasu became enraged when courtesans and courtiers associated with his household caroused and publically engaged in sex acts while strolling around Edo (now Tokyo). The miscreants paid a heavy price – execution and banishment. Such scandals continued until imperial authorities lost patience and banned women from performing on the kabuki stage altogether in 1629. They would not be allowed back on the stage until 1877.

Young boys took up where the women had been forced to stop. They created a new type of actor — males who specialized in female roles, distinguishing a new “young men’s kabuki” from anything that had come before. Kabuki audiences continued to grow, especially among the increasingly prosperous townspeople of Osaka and the young samurai in Edo. Authorities came to see Kabuki performances as threatening the public order, with homoerotic suggestiveness replacing heterosexual lasciviousness. Officials banned the new art form yet again in 1652 after two samurai fought publicly over the favor of one of the boy actors. While Shogunal authorities gave in and lifted the ban the following year,



Children Kabuki Theatre in Nagahama (Warrior Kumagai, 12 Y.O.), by Lens on Japan/flickr

they restricted theaters to only a few areas in Edo, Kyoto, and in Osaka where they remain today.

Such periodic outbursts of regulation – both petty and expansive – reflected general discomfort with an art form that represented the evolving social norms and values of a class – townspeople who were not seen as honorable by the aristocrats and military men who ran Tokugawa Japan. Authorities tried to regulate who would perform, and where; to determine appropriate dress and make-up; to prohibit private passages which led directly from theaters to adjoining tea houses and other places of assignation; and, to censor dialogue fraught with indecency as well as even more explicit movements on stage.

Fortunately, contemporary Washington, D.C. has no authorities with the power of a Tokugawa shogun. But the tensions between vibrant popular culture bubbling up from a beleaguered social class and authorities claiming to defend public decency are every bit as acute. During the late 1960s, local musician Chuck Brown created an infectious musical style combining a distinctive Latin-tinged beat with a call-and-response vocal track that came to be known as Go Go. A sub-genre of funk and a distant cousin of hip-hop, Go Go emerged on Washington's streets and in its rough and tumble night clubs just as the city was reeling from crushing economic decline, massive civil unrest, and the arrival of crack cocaine. Go Go quickly became the anthem of D.C.'s African American working class.

For many, the Go Go scene was marked by the same sort of distasteful and offensive behaviors that had so concerned Ieyasu a world and several historical epochs away. Alarmed at the disorder and crime often seen to be associated with Go Go venues, the city's police carefully tracked performances, working with various licensing authorities to shut down clubs following violent incidences. Several popular Go Go haunts along the Anacostia River waterfront were demolished to make way for a new baseball stadium for the Washington Nationals which opened in 2010. There even have been reports that an Advisory Neighborhood Council in Northwest Washington's rapidly gentrifying Petworth area voted to recommend that the Liquor Control Board grant a liquor license provided the club in question not allow Go Go to be performed. Such a provision would be particularly ironic as the Petworth neighborhood had been home to an especially vibrant Go Go scene just a few years before.

The stories of kabuki and Go Go have other similarities. Emerging during periods of profound economic change, these art forms were products of the social vacuum left by conflicts over power. They expressed the frustrations and struggles of social groups that were on the losing end of those skirmishes; and they did so in ways that were unvarnished and potent. Their practitioners meant to offend; and they did. Their challenge of public sex and drug-tinged violence was real. The difficulty, however, is that sex, drug use, and violence were not limited to kabuki

and Go Go players alone. Those with power managed to tar these emerging performance genres with the broadest of brushstrokes. Authorities presented themselves as preserving public safety and virtue by insuring that such in-your-face forms of cultural expression were removed from view.

Kabuki, of course, survived to the point that it became frozen in the amber of having been declared a “national treasure.” Kabuki theater has recently been re-invigorated by a new generation of performers intent of re-asserting some of the genre’s original edgy spirit. Go Go is far too new to know if it will endure or not. Like many American musical forms – such as jazz, bluegrass, opera, and chamber music – critics are certain to write its obituary long before its actual death. Nonetheless, Go Go will live; just as kabuki endured the authoritarian Tokugawa Shogunate. It will find fertile ground for renewal; as it has already done, pushing

out of D.C. to Prince George’s County, Maryland; and beyond.

The advent of both kabuki and Go Go amplify a broader point. Struggles over new urban cultural forms – which often play out through conflict over public propriety and safety – are often more about outsiders using the arts as a way of forcing themselves inside. As already noted kabuki would become accepted as one of Japan’s most distinctive and valued national art forms. Chuck Brown – the “Godfather of Go Go” – similarly has become treasured. In August 2014, the D.C. government dedicated a monument, amphitheater and memorial park honoring Brown in Northeast D.C.’s Langdon Park. Bodies swaying to a kabuki narrator’s rhythmic chants or a Go Go beat, it seems, outlast politicians asserting control through their own notions of respectability.

September 29, 2014

Acting Out Gentrification: Theater as Community Engagement

Communities undergoing gentrification often fail to find ways to talk across the fault lines running among newcomers and old-timers. Neither group shares the reference points that are necessary to engage in shared conversation. At best they talk past one another – each side claiming to speak for the community’s best interests; at worst, exchange becomes a shouting match – each side blaming the other for destroying all that makes a community harmonious. Performing arts can provide the context for meaningful dialogue to begin as it gives expression to hidden passions in ways that can be understood and cannot be denied. A new play about young professionals moving into once working-class “Mid-City” Washington neighborhoods, *Districtland*, by Wilson Center scholar Cristina Bejan, demonstrates how powerfully theater can bring a community’s most aching trials into view.

The premier performances of Bejan’s *Districtland* at the Capital Fringe Festival (July 11, 13, 16, 19, 23, and 27) by the Bucharest Inside the Beltway Art Culture and Arts Cooperative signifies something of a coming-of-age in Washington theatrical life for the city’s “Millennial bulge.” According to some counts, Washington theaters attract a larger audience than any other American city outside of New York. Those ticket holders tend to be older and prone to watch dramatic classics,

musical theater, as well as some edgy contemporary American plays largely written elsewhere about someplace else. For all the fine performers and companies in the Washington metropolitan area, homegrown plays looking at local stories – which abound with the major themes of human existence – remain strikingly rare. Bejan’s cutting examination of the intersection among a dozen twenty-somethings in gentrifying mid-city Washington deserves a look from all of us who care about the fate of our city.

Bejan, an American of Romanian descent, is a widely recognized specialist on intolerance in inter-war Romania. A Rhodes Scholar, she holds a Ph.D. from Oxford and has held appointments at several major U.S. universities, including Duke and Georgetown. More relevantly, she is an actress, director and playwright who connected with the Bucharest theatrical scene while conducting her doctoral dissertation research as a Fulbright Scholar. Importantly for *Districtland*, she brings an East European sensibility to the absurdities of life in contemporary D.C.

Bejan’s play is about “types” – “Afghani cabbie” (Russell Max Simon), “random sleepover girl” (Kathleen Mason), “waiter” (Carson Gregory), rather than fully developed characters – even when they have names such as sleazeball

Congressman Richard (Peter Orvetti), Rhodes-soon-to-be-Yale-trained lawyer Maria (Aaren Keith) and the once-idealistic-now-disillusioned-Hill-intern Frank (Andrew Quilpa). Indeed, one of the most telling aspects of *Districtland* is that the play is inhabited by people who never really connect with anyone, including themselves. They are all much more interested in enhancing their “D.C.-CV” as Congressman Richard declares while trying to hit on “Rhodie” Maria.

As in great East European satire, pathos constantly bubbles up amidst knowing snarks and chuckles. Director John Dellaporta builds off of a good satire’s reliance on familiar categories by drawing the performance to a close with a real conversation between Hipster Peace Corps volunteer Charity (Ruthie Rado) and intern Frank on the back porch of their shared house. Charity and Frank are

more than their resumes. They become human beings, alone in an alien and alienating world, hiding behind the masks of enforced stereotypes, disillusioned and fearful of their own failures. Millennial Washington has become something of a caricature of itself except that, as Bejan and Dellaporta remind us, Millennials are real people too.

D.C. is inhabited by tens of thousands of real families and has been ever since its founding. The Millennials – and their forefathers and foremothers such as the New Dealers, the Kennedy people, and the Reagan wavers – have always ignored hometown D.C. One recurring comment heard over and over in fancy cafes and in cozy coffee shops has always been, “no one is really from D.C.” But thousands of multi-generation Washington families live here. All too often, they are African American and thus invisible to whatever



Capital Fringe- Washington DC, by David Gaines/flickr, adapted and cropped from original version

new wave of hot shots comes to town in search of fame and power.

Bejan is smart enough to include those who were here before her Millennial Columbuses ever even knew Washington existed. They appear in the person of A'isha (Robyn Freeman). A smart, young D.C.-born African American poet, A'isha dominates one of the city's famous poetry slams (in this case the knowingly titled "Sparkle," a name always pronounced together with a cynical snapping of the fingers). Why does gentrification so consistently cause deep bitterness? Just listen to A'isha's poem:

Waiting for Shawn on 9th and V to go to an indie music festival.

My great-grandfather's name is on the African-American Civil War Memorial two blocks away

which was meant to be "in the community"

but I don't see any black people at the festival.

Just white kids in t-shirts and dreadlocks....

In less than a minute Bejan and Freeman capture the deepest tensions dominating D.C. life today.

The play seizes on other classic moments of contemporary Washington such as: the lecherous member of Congress hitting on a young staffer at an upscale downtown restaurant; the furtive "my boss is an idiot" gripe session at a

Starbucks near the World Bank; and, the "Progressive Leadership Network Happy Hour" filled with young D.C.-CVs on the prowl for career-making connections, meaningless hook-ups, and free grub. In the best tradition of eighteenth century English social satire, *Districtland* casts an ever more caustic eye at local life by putting many of its most prototypical moments on stage.

Audiences across time and place are always looking to see and hear themselves. A rising wealthy-but-crude Neapolitan merchant class streamed into eighteenth century theaters to hear a new form of *Opera buffa* often sung in their own dialect by characters every bit as stereotypical as those in *Districtland*. Similarly Kabuki and its parallel puppet theater gained great popularity among Osaka's Tokugawa *nouveau riche* because they saw their own lives being played back to them. If Washington theater is going to build audiences that will fill seats long after current occupants have moved on, *Districtland* is precisely the sort of play the city needs.

Any city as divided by class, race and ethnicity as Washington desperately requires the shared conversations that the arts can provoke. *Districtland* tells us a lot about who we Washingtonians are. By doing so it has the power to open up the sort of dialogue we all need to have if our city is to continue to grow and thrive in the years ahead.

July 8, 2014

“Beauty and the Beast:” A Tale of Entrepreneurship and Community

Synetic Theater has another hit on its hands with its new production of *Beauty and the Beast*. “It gives you goosebumps,” writes the website *Broadway World*; “A lush, almost feverish theatrical experience, impressive to see and satisfying,” gushes *Talkin’ Broadway* blog; “fresh and frightening,” declares the *Washington City Paper*; and “graphically clever” as well as “bewitchingly ideal conveyance,” notes the doyen of Washington critics Peter Marks in the *Washington Post*.

Now over a decade old, Synetic – which is based in Arlington’s Crystal City – has joined the upper ranks of the Washington theater scene with hauntingly scored, visually striking, and physically demanding performances that have made the company among the most widely praised practitioners of physical theater anywhere.

Synetic’s success didn’t just happen, of course. First and foremost, compelling art requires a compelling artistic vision. Synetic’s story to a considerable degree is a tale of driven immigrants pursuing their American dream against all odds. Nothing would have been possible without the founders’ determination to transform powerful artistic vision into very physical reality. To take root, attainment also required fertile soil. The Synetic story is as much about the transformation

of Washington’s theatrical scene over the past three or four decades as it is about the company itself. That relationship, in turn, sheds light on how communities and arts nourish one another.

Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili arrived in Washington after abandoning their war-torn post-Soviet homeland of Georgia. Irina, a top student at Tbilisi’s national ballet company, fell in love with Paata, a rising star at the city’s famed pantomime theater. Grasping at every opportunity to find security, Irina drew on family connections to immigrate to the United States while Paata set off for Germany with a pantomime troupe. The family knocked around the United States throughout the nineties – performing, at times, for a Russian restaurant in Baltimore. When Irina’s father accepted a position as assistant gymnastics coach at Ohio State, he took the couple’s son Vato to live with him in Columbus. The stars eventually aligned giving Paata and Irina an opportunity to launch their own company in Washington.

Initially working in collaboration with other stranded members of the post-Soviet theater world within the Stanislavsky Theater Company—a struggling group that had secured a toehold in Washington at the diminutive Church Street theater near Dupont Circle (currently the home of another noteworthy company, the Keegan

Theatre specializing in Irish drama) – the Tsikurishvilis blended the concepts of SYNthesis (for the coming together of distinct elements to form a whole) and KinETIC (pertaining to or imparting motion, active, dynamic) to name their new group SYNETIC (a dynamic fusion of the arts). The company staged their first performance in 2002.

Paata’s compelling wordless performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* immediately caught the attention of Washington cognoscenti, and the company was launched. Within a few years, Synetic found a home in Arlington, Virginia with help from Arlington Cultural Affairs’ Arts Incubator program, and entered into a productive five-year partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and, later, with The Shakespeare Theatre Company. Synetic would take home armfuls of Washington’s prestigious Helen Hayes Awards and, in 2013, Paata and Irina gained coveted recognition from Washingtonian Magazine as “Washingtonians of the Year.” Their immigrant dream has been validated many times over.

Paata and Irina have shared their success with a compelling group of other immigrants largely from Eastern Europe. Fellow countrymen master actor Irakli Kavsadze and composer Konstantine Lortkipanidze joined with partners such as designer Anastasia Rurika Simes (from Moscow, Russia), actors Irina Koval (from St. Petersburg, Russia), Renata Loman (from Kaunas,

Lithuania), and Dan Istrate (from Romania) as well as master administrator Yulia Kristovets (from Kaliningrad, Russia). The Tsikurishvili’s powerfully athletic son Vato and Kavsadze’s luminescent daughter Irina stepped center stage as the leads in today’s *Beauty and the Beast*. The Synetic story, however, is about much more.

The Tsikurishvilis arrived in Washington just as its theater scene was taking off. With what is now the second largest theater audience in the country and a dozen or so notable resident companies, the Washington region has emerged as a vibrant center for the stage. With fortuitous timing, Paata and Irina came to town just as the burgeoning Washington scene was mature enough to offer support yet not so embedded as to shut out talented outsiders. Synetic benefited in numerous ways from unique dynamics in Washington that enabled the performing arts and community to re-enforce one another:

First, the Washington theater community embraced knowledgeable audiences and generous donors who responded well to the new genre of movement-based performance developed by the Tsikurishvilis. Indeed, without people investing time and money into Synetic their venture never would have survived. Beyond time and money, a number of leading notables in the city’s theatre world – such as the Kennedy Center’s Michael Kaiser and the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Michael Kahn –

offered the Tsikurishvilis sage advice and opened doors enabling them to succeed. Reviewers at major media outlets immediately recognized their special talents and responded favorably. As a result, a welcoming community engaged and supported their artistic vision.

Second, a dynamic and growing community of theater professionals grew enamored with Synetic's vision. The company quickly built up a circle of American performers, designers, choreographers, and budding directors who added verve to Synetic productions. Paata and Irina were able to draw on new talent from a widening circle of young performers who were inspired by having participated in the theatre's numerous educational programs and summer acting camps. Many Synetic "alumni" now appear on stages throughout Washington and the country. A core of Americans has stayed, often developing new talents. Actors Scott Brown, Joseph Carlson, Philip Fletcher, Alex Mills, Jodi Niehoff, and Kathy Gordon have been mainstays of Synetic productions even as their careers are carrying them further afield. Matinee idol Ben Cunis moved off stage to choreograph and direct productions (Ben and his brother Peter directed and adapted the current production of *Beauty and the Beast*); actor Nathan Weinberger – who has been with the company since its founding – serves as Resident Dramaturg; Stage Manager Marley

Giggey and Production Manager Ann Allan bring considerable skills from other theaters to Synetic. In other words, the Tsikurishvilis found a pool of homegrown talent on which they could draw.

Third, Synetic has been able to rely on the support of numerous programs developed by local jurisdictions to sustain the arts in their communities. Members of the Arlington (County) Cultural Affairs group (including state, county, and local agencies promoting economic development and the arts) have made performance and rehearsal venues available, have supported teams of managerial consultants to improve internal operations, have invested in education and outreach programs, and have financed productions through multitudinous partnerships and grant opportunities. Crystal City Business Improvement District, Vornado/Charles E. Smith and Konterra Realty companies have been instrumental to the success of Synetic in Crystal City and helped to grow its infrastructure to include modern theater, studio, and offices.

Washington's relatively recent transformation from cultural backwoods provinciality to vibrant supremacy rests in no small measure on the vision, determination, and enterprise of exceptional leaders who have created new theaters and promoted innovative stagecraft. Lone Ranger tales of

entrepreneurial heroism, however, are insufficient for explaining how Washington and its region have emerged as a major cultural epicenter. Even artists of such exceptional gifts and insights as the Tsikurishvilis require communities that appreciate their imagination, with sufficient wealth to support it, sufficient breadth to generate audiences, and robust institutions to secure their accomplishments.

In August 2004, New York critic Brian Rogers responded to Synetic's performance based on Vazha Pshavela's nineteenth century poem *Host and Guest* – a story about sworn blood

enemies Muslim and Christian in a remote Caucasus mountain village – by declaring, “We’re talking art with a capital A.” That art came packed in immigrant luggage, and flourished in a city in which regional theatrical achievement was not much older than the immigrants themselves. Capitalizing the “A” in art required all that the immigrants brought with them melding seamlessly with the environment they found when they arrived. The story of Synetic's success – so compellingly evident in the current production of *Beauty and the Beast* – is the story of art and community together

December 15, 2014

Misty Copeland to Dance Swan Lake at DC's Kennedy Center

Originally published by The Root

History will be made at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater on the evening of Thursday, April 9, 2015, when Misty Copeland, a soloist with the American Ballet Theatre, joins Brooklyn Mack of the Washington Ballet in a performance of *Swan Lake*. Copeland and Mack, both African American, will go where no dancers of color have gone before. They will become the first African Americans to dance the leading roles of Odette/Odile and Prince Siegfried respectively in what remains our whitest performing art: classical ballet.

There should be little doubt that Copeland—a rising star at the American Ballet Theater who gained notoriety after appearing in a widely noticed Under Armour advertising campaign—and Mack—trained at Washington's Kirov Academy of Ballet and Chicago's Joffrey Ballet—have demonstrated ample talent on ballet stages around the world. Their appearance as leads in *Swan Lake* would be seen merely as appropriate next steps in their expanding careers if they were white.

Their success should remind all Washingtonians of the pioneering role that D.C. has played in promoting African-American dance. As dance historian Tamara Brown has noted, the

juxtaposition of academic training at Howard University and the numerous popular theaters along U Street nurtured a creative center for African-American dance during much of the 20th century. Howard University's Maryrose Reeves Allen stood at the heart of this energetic scene.

Allen, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1899, earned her college degree at the Sargent School in Massachusetts before teaching summer school at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, then the country's leading center for the study of African dance. She joined the Howard faculty in 1925 as the director of a new physical education program for women.

Allen's arrival coincided with the heyday of the Howard University Players under the leadership of T. Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke. Two years after coming to the Howard campus, Allen established a group that would grow to become the Howard University Dance Ensemble, one of the era's most inspired African-American companies.

Allen's dancers penetrated the world of white concert dance by the 1950s, performing with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington and on many integrated stages in New York City. Her students—including Debbie Allen,

Chuck Davis, Melvin Deal, Ulysses Dove and George Faison—populated major classical- and modern-dance companies throughout the U.S., from Broadway stages to Hollywood studios. They nurtured a lively dance scene in Washington that spawned the Capitol Ballet and professional companies associated with the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s and 1970s.

Maryrose Reeves Allen remained active in the Howard University and dance

communities after her retirement in 1967. In 1991, one year before Allen's death, Howard became the first historically black university to offer a degree in dance through its Department of Theatre Arts. Her spirit will be very much present at the Kennedy Center as Copeland and Mack step center stage.

April 5, 2015



Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Building



The Devil is a Local Call Away: Cities, the Arts, and Misunderstanding “Decay”

Originally published in Meeting of the Minds

At the height of the Cold War, Soviet wags loved to tell ironic tales about their political leaders. Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev inspired a number of particularly endearing stories which always somehow related to his being slightly at sea in the middle of world events swirling around him. One such *anikdot* pitted the witless Brezhnev against a wily Richard Nixon.

Brezhnev and Nixon, it seems, were meeting in the White House when the American President decided to call God for advice. He summoned an aide, who brought a large white phone. A few moments after he had completed his consultation with the Divine Being, another assistant came in with a receipt. Nixon approved the bill of some \$20 million for the call.

Flying back to Moscow, a furious Brezhnev inquired of the cowering Red Army officers how it was that the Americans could call God, and he could not. He demanded that the entire Soviet military research

complex dedicate itself to establishing phone service with God.

A few months later, it was time for Nixon to visit Moscow. The two leaders sat in Brezhnev’s Kremlin office. At a critical juncture in the negotiations, Brezhnev summoned an aide, who brought an even bigger red phone than the white one that Nixon had used in the Oval Office. Brezhnev dialed a number and had a brief conversation. A few moments later, an obsequious aide shuffled into the meeting with a receipt for just two kopecks (or .02 rubles). Brezhnev was pleased, but perplexed. Why, he asked his assistant once the Americans had departed, had it cost Nixon \$20 million to place his call, but he, the Communist General Secretary, had to pay only two kopecks? The subordinate quickly responded, “Because calling the Devil from Moscow is only a local call.”

The very Moscow in which Hell was just a local call away happened to be one of the planet’s most creative cities at that moment in history. Internationally acclaimed authors were penning their best works; noble ballerinas trained; world class actors perfected their craft; perhaps

the greatest collection of mathematicians in recent centuries thought. Brezhnev's Moscow was the headquarters and command center for an ideological empire that extended to nearly every continent; it oversaw massive military and prison kingdoms of a previously unknown scale; it stood at the center of an enormous hinterland covering a dozen time zones. Clocks from Prague to Pyongyang marked Moscow time. People of vast differences came and went every day; they jostled on streets which, indeed, resembled various visions of Dante's Inferno from time to time. Moscow under Brezhnev underscored the reality that virtue and creativity do not necessarily coexist.

But Moscow wasn't just any place; it was one of the largest cities in the world. How did its "urbanness" matter?

Order within a metropolitan region is the result of the accumulation of layer upon layer of social, economic, cultural, and political sediment. For the vast majority of inhabitants, much of what takes place in a city seems spontaneous. To the extent that conscious rationality determines a city's fate, it appears as a sum of the rationalities of its constituent parts. This process of city building is particularly exposed at moments of great societal transformation, such as that which occurred following the implosion of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new market-oriented economic system in Russia.



Brezhnev and Nixon, by Central Intelligence Agency/flickr

Cities, because of their density and diversity, are a natural environment for a distinctive sort of cultural creativity – the creation of beauty in the midst of ugliness. Urban decay certainly is not the only stimulus for humans to try to step out of themselves to add a note of splendor to the world; nor are cities a unique venue for creativity. But cities are places in which people who often can barely tolerate one another crash together while coming and going to their homes, apartments, places of worship, doctors' offices, funeral parlors, restaurants, cafes, bars, theaters, stores, stadiums, and schools. Because they must co-exist with one another, they must create new ways of being together. Such cities at such moments in history reflect a core commitment to create something new.

The urban experience in inherently contradictory and conflict-ridden places and times such as Brezhnev's Moscow are the urban wetlands of our lives. Like wetlands in the natural environment, such mixing bowls of urban diversity often appear to outsiders to be little more than wastelands.

They are the first places to be rebuilt, redesigned, reconceived, and reconstituted when “reformers” think about “improving” how we live. Yet this is a terrible mistake. Like wetlands, a city's jagged edges are among the most productive corners of our environment. Like wetlands, cities must be revitalized from time to time for them to continue to enrich society at large.

Such cities at first glance may appear to be centers of conflict and despair, yet they simultaneously can become places for social healing. This is where the human urge to create enters in. The most successful cities encourage creativity to transform emotions into new forms of being. Music, the visual and performing arts often can reveal more about the richness of a particular moment than data run through infinite algorithms. As the noted South African urban observer Edgar Pieterse argues, if you want to understand why the city is important, “tune in to the beats” of urban creative invention.

May 27, 2014

As Urbanization Accelerates, Policymakers Face Integration Hurdles

The challenges for cities in the coming century will be many, but accounting for swelling numbers of new residents – due to more open avenues of communication and flows of goods, economic opportunity, population growth, and potential climate change-induced displacement – is perhaps the biggest.

While cities always have received migrants, the development of increasingly mobile populations on a previously unknown scale comprises a new urban reality. As cities around the world have become home to the majority of human beings, they have evolved into agglomerations of neighborhoods defined by ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Creating inclusive and socially sustainable cities in this context requires a strong democratic civic culture; urban policymakers must pay close attention to the ways neighborhoods and local governments interact to forge community, foster economic and educational opportunities, and provide services.

While the large-scale rapid movement of people is happening globally, the process by which migrant communities are incorporated into a particular urban region varies from city to city. The history of place, community identities, and public policy all impact this process. Therefore, rather than make specific policy recommendations I would suggest that developing effective policies must begin with the promotion of new sensibilities about what these policies should be.

To be successful and avoid conflict in a time of rapid global population movement, a city must simultaneously accept both different and shared points of reference. Local legends, memories, and telling of history must go beyond exclusionary understandings of society and embrace an inclusive pluralism. In other words, urban civic identities must encompass a variety of urban groups and individuals. Even if they have been divided in the past, cities must somehow create a shared sense of responsibility for a common future.

Cities – the center of changing patterns of interconnections – are inevitably diverse. Therefore cities must strive to provide protected public meeting places in which people of difference interact with one another, incorporating their multiple histories of space, place, and identity. Public space and public domain (both literal and figurative) must be both shared and protected.

As sociologist Daniel A. Bell recently argued at a Comparative Urban Studies Project event on “The Spirit of Cities,” the distinctive ethos of a particular city creates an important shared sense of community in otherwise divided cities. Sometimes, the process of nurturing a shared sense of place and community emerges from mundane, everyday life activities. Many Chicagoans of all races and classes identified with Marshall Field’s Department Store as a central element of living in the city; a reality which became most apparent



Marshall Field's Crowd, Chicago, by Chris Metcalf/flickr

after Macy's had taken over the store. Local food – New Delhites like to eat kulki by India Gate on summer nights – allows people who otherwise assume they share little to find common ground. Sports teams similarly bring people together across otherwise meaningful divides.

At other times, shared meaning can emerge from public protection of places used by all sorts of different people. Specialists writing about Montreal's extensive networks of parks, for example, have commented on how migrants, Anglophones, and Francophones all use the same park space with ease even if they do not necessarily mingle with each other. Such sharing of a space can be an important first step towards something more meaningful.

Similarly, while commenting not long ago on the emergence of Washington, DC's U Street area, Jamal Muhammad, community elder, jazz historian, and radio personality, observed that while people of different races and ethnicities coexist along today's U Street without commingling, such coexistence might be a first step toward something new.

"One day," he suggests, "there will be real diversity, and people will frequent the area and color won't matter. We will all just hang out because we have the same interest."

In other words, seemingly trivial aspects of everyday life may not be trivial at all when it comes to nurturing a broad umbrella of

social identity that encompasses many competing identities. Policymakers need to build on these moments in their efforts to nurture shared identity.

There can be no "quick fixes": approaches must be complex, incremental, and presumed to require persistence and time for success. The challenge for policymakers thus becomes how to expand the economic and social space for migrants while balancing conflicting assumptions about the appropriateness of specific policies.

The complexity of the challenges faced by cities with new migrant communities thus demands we appreciate that a city is subject to constant renegotiation. Residents and businesses constantly seek to re-establish the boundaries of the local social, economic, political, cultural, and linguistic landscapes. Responses must be fluid policies, rather than starkly posed regulations that favor black-and-white distinctions.

This sensibility is more difficult to sustain than one might think. Moral relativism offends those who feel that they have played by the rules of the game, only to lose to those using a different set. This tension is why there must be both shared general assumptions and flexible individual policies. Otherwise, the complexities of migration and urbanization in a rapidly changing world can simply overwhelm local policymakers.

August 31, 2012

After Baltimore, We Must See Community as a Process

Originally published by The Washington Post

Baltimore became my refuge when I moved to the District four decades ago. As a native New Yorker, I could not quite adjust to overly conformist official and bureaucratic life in a nation's capital. Charm City's quirky citizens just an hour away offered a much appreciated escape. Working-class Baltimore was the opposite of Washington, blues singer Leadbelly's quintessential "Bourgeois town." Watching Baltimore's torment unfold in recent days has broken my heart.

Over time, I came to understand that Baltimore and the District have much

in common. Both cities were carved out of large slaveholding states at the beginning of the republic. Baltimore and the District were two of the three cities on the eve of the Civil War in which there were more free blacks than slaves (St. Louis was the third). These venerable African American communities faced down vicious segregation by creating their own vibrant institutions – civic, educational, commercial and religious. Both cities produced people who changed the country and the world. To mention but a single example, the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall, grew up in Baltimore and secured top legal training at Washington's Howard University.



Members of the community make heart gestures with their hands in front of a line of police officers, by Jim Bourg

Both cities followed similar trajectories of urban “decline” and population flight following World War II.

Baltimore and Washington experienced destructive riots in 1968 following the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The scars from those riots are becoming less visible in the District but remain starkly evident in Baltimore. Recent development in the areas that saw rioting in 1968 in the District underscores two significant differences between the cities that offer important insights into how we think about cities.

The large African American working classes of Baltimore and the District and Baltimore’s notable white working class benefited from core economic sectors that provided long-term, decently paid employment with opportunity for upward mobility. In the case of Baltimore, the steel and shipbuilding and related industries that supported so much of the city’s life have collapsed. In the District, the federal government has played an important role in supporting the city’s recent economic vitality. Employment and, more important, career opportunities matter for people and for communities.

The concept of neighborhood has evolved differently in both cities as well. Following the related but distinct traumas of white flight and suburbanization in the 1950s, the District’s neighborhoods entered a half century of turmoil and upheaval. Many established in-town communities collapsed as blacks and whites and rich and poor changed places. Working-class white neighborhoods in Anacostia became black; prestigious

uptown neighborhoods transformed from white hands to become a black “Gold Coast.” In more recent years, the once pre-eminent African American community around U Street became majority white.

In Baltimore, the same social and economic forces encouraged the glorification of “neighborhood.” Baltimoreans love their city — as has been evident despite all the traumas of recent days — and their adoration begins at home. Communities became surrounded by invisible moats with clear and defined boundaries.

The advantage of strong neighborhood identity is a deep social capital enhancing community resilience. The disadvantage are walls that declare those not within a community’s embrace to be outsiders.

The uneasy relations among Washington old-timers and newcomers are real. We should understand that tensions are rising in the District and — given the wrong people at the wrong place at the wrong time — neighborhoods here can explode as they have in Baltimore. Nonetheless, the constant disruptions of Washington communities have forced an at times unwelcome yet fruitful interaction among residents. Most important, open neighborhoods can create pathways into the world at large. The District’s many current trials include connecting still-disenfranchised neighborhoods — particularly those “east of the river” — to the opportunities that exist elsewhere in the city and region.

As time passes, Baltimore will find ways to move forward. Too many Baltimoreans are

too committed to their city for the status quo to remain invariable. To do so, though, community and neighborhoods have to engage a larger world rather than build

existing walls ever higher. Community has to be a process, not an object; a verb, not a noun.

April 30, 2015



Nothing Stops Detroit, By AllieKF/flickr

Fight not Flight: Lessons from Detroit

Originally published in Meeting of the Minds

Several of the speakers at the recent Meeting of the Minds in Detroit – including Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh, Mayor Dawn Zimmer of Hoboken, together with several foundation and community leaders from Detroit itself – echoed one simple sentiment: “We aren’t going to lose our community on our watch.” This sense of identification with and responsibility for community constitutes an important component of urban resilience. Significantly, speakers underscored how “not losing” one’s community is not just about keeping things as they are. The durable message emerging from the forum is that “not losing” a community or a city requires making them new, different, and better. If, in the past, the human fight or flight response has led middle class Americans to flight from so-called declining urban communities, over the past ten years the opposite has happened. People now are much more willing to fight than to flee. Why is this so?

Community members, of course, throughout history have made a choice to stay and fight rather than flee, so that the decision to renew rather than to abandon should not completely surprise. What is striking about the speakers in Detroit was that they represent a new generation of leaders from many who created the

challenges their cities now faces. Often in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, the community and elected officials featured at the Meeting of the Minds Forum reflected different life experiences than their parents, for whom the dream of a quiet life in suburbia appeared more attractive. For the postwar generation, the suburbs represented an elusive utopia come to life; for their children, suburbia was just one more all-too-human environment with challenges and disappointments as well as opportunities and hope.

Much is being written about the impact of so-called “Millennials” on American cities. The dramatic movement of twenty- and thirty-somethings into urban centers appears to be driving some of the most profound re-positioning of how Americans live their lives since the suburbanization wave embraced by their grandparents. The arrival of younger, often whiter and resource-rich residents in historically impaired inner-city neighborhoods across the United States has touched off a wave of social change that often has been pigeon-holed by the term of “gentrification.”

The re-distribution of urban resources that we see all around us is producing new “winners” and “losers” in urban political and economic life with all of the consequent tensions and discontent that can be imagined. Either glorified or

pilloried, American cities appear to be experiencing a dramatic dislocation in which all the rules of the game are being ripped up and re-written in cyberspace.

Great debates among learned observers swirl around whether or not these transformations are simply “life-cycle” effects in which younger Americans are starting families later, thereby delaying but not reversing the move to the suburbs; or, alternatively, represent a profound and fundamental shift in how Americans will live their lives. Whichever side of that debate proves to be accurate will carry enormous policy implications for city leaders.

The discussions in Detroit revealed a much more complex set of forces at work. A commitment to re-inventing urban communities runs deeper than the glibest commentaries about “Millennials” and “gentrification” might imply. Rather, the recent Meeting of the Minds put on display a much more profound evolution in the American relationship to the city in which new urban residents have begun drawing their own line in the urban sand; fighting rather than fleeing in the face of deep social, economic, technological, and even climate change. They have done so by creating partnerships unimaginable to their parents, seeking out practical and efficient solutions to noisome problems; and doing so with great determination and vision; patterns which are second-nature to their Millennial offspring.

Rip Rapson, President and CEO of the Kresge Foundation began the Meeting

of the Minds by speaking about some of the lessons we might draw from the recent experiences of Detroit. The Kresge Foundation has been a leader in helping Detroiters work through problems of extraordinary complexity.

The Foundation has supported projects small and large, working closely with state, city, and community officials and activists to invest in the city, while encouraging the private sector and other philanthropy organizations to support efforts to enhance municipal services and the city’s quality of life. Simply put, he observed, the city can’t do it all itself.

Rapson continued that Detroit’s transformation of city has been remarkable in part because of early investments which now allow others to invest more. To intensify the city’s challenges, he continued, the total number of blighted properties in Detroit roughly equals the territory of the City of San Francisco. Drawing on support from foundations such as Kresge, the city dispatched young people with iPhones to inventory the complete city. This survey is being used to help the city better understand the condition of neighborhoods and is being combined with other information from foreclosures, taxes collection, and water use to enable officials to make better informed decisions about what must be demolished, what can be recycled, and what can be saved. Their effort identified around 81,000 abandoned properties in the city (which is to be expected given that Detroit has lost more than two-thirds of

its population from a high of 2.6 million in 1955 to 700,000 now), and offers an ideal example of public-private-philanthropic engagement.

These same local partnerships are working together to develop a regional transportation system connecting the city and the suburbs in the absence of public leadership. For example, the Woodward Light Rail system, which will carry its first riders in 2016, is funded almost completely by private and philanthropic donors who have funded the \$150 million project now under way.

Rapson and his colleagues – like Mayors Peduto and Zimmer in their communities

– have demonstrated deep commitments that go far beyond a model of social change which begins and ends with arriving newcomers. The process of rejuvenating American cities runs deeper than the headlines of the day. The commitment of newly arriving younger urban residents is an important part of a dramatic story of renewal unfolding in many American cities. It rests on a far more profound and no less important story: the emerging multigenerational commitment of city residents across urban America to stay rather than flee.

October 27, 2014

Odessa: Ukrainian Port that Inspired Big Dreams

Originally published by Reuters

Tensions have been rising in many corners of Ukraine as the threat of a Russian intervention looms. Ukraine's Black Sea port of Odessa is one such corner of dispute between Moscow and Kiev, where macro-battles have been transformed into a seemingly endless chain of micro-conflicts.

Supporters of both countries have taken to marching through the streets, ominously threatening each other. The Ukrainian government is trying to wrest control of the local oil refinery — one of the country's most important — away from a Russian bank. Tension is visible in the smallest aspects of life.

Odessa's role as a site of unbridled Ukrainian-Russian competition is not surprising. Though within Ukraine, the city is overwhelmingly Russian-speaking. Prominent Russian political figures regularly proclaim their right to take back what was theirs — from Alaska to Finland.

In the case of Odessa, however, such a claim might have historical justification. The city was, after all, a creation of the Russian Empire.

Yet Odessa has existed as a different sort of Russia than today's nationalists take to be their own. The port city represents a Russia that always has been open to

the world, with a wry smile that scoffs at the sort of ruffians and thugs dispatched by Russian President Vladimir Putin to "liberate" the city.

I have traveled to many parts of what is now the former Soviet Union. Even in the carnival-esque wreckage of a collapsed political system, however, nothing quite compares to Odessa. Not just a place, the city is more of a state of mind. (Or, at the very least, a website for a virtual Odessa that exists in the imaginations of thousands of former residents who have moved to places as varied as Tel Aviv, Sydney, Toronto and Brooklyn.)

A "real" Odessa exists as much in the ironic short stories of *Odessa Tales* by Isaac Babel, who was arrested and shot by Joseph Stalin's NKVD, as it does in the compelling stage productions of his grandson, Andrei Malaev-Babel, who teaches acting in Florida. Odessa, in other words, is not just a waterfront promenade with a celebrated staircase, stunningly captured in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. It is more than just a patch of land over which the Russian imperial, Soviet, fascist Romanian and Nazi, and Ukrainian flags have unfurled at one time or another. Odessa extends from Siberia to Sarasota; prevailing independently from all political claimants. It does so because, throughout its brief yet extravagantly tawdry history, Odessa has always inspired great dreams.

Catherine the Great established the city in 1794 as a frontier settlement. Her Black Sea port quickly emerged as a randy mix of nationalities and cultures. It is a Russian city, yes; but also a Jewish city, a Ukrainian city, a Greek city, and an Italian city. Odessa is all — and none — of the above. It is a cosmopolitan antithesis of the Russian nationalism on the march today. The city's striking peculiarities — its mix of nationalities, tolerant attitudes, cuisine, dialect, joie de vivre, sense of humor, southern temperament, resourcefulness and entrepreneurial spirit — always defined a distinctive Odessan sense of place. No matter who claimed sovereignty.

The Odessa kaleidoscope was spinning from the very beginning. The city took shape in the mind of a Neapolitan soldier of fortune, José Pascual Domingo de Ribas y Boyons (Osip Mikhailovich Deribas), before it assumed physical form. De Ribas was the child of a Spanish consul and his aristocratic Irish wife. He had entered into Russian service in the 1770s, after a brief stint in the Neapolitan army. Serving on the staff of Catherine's lover and imperial strategist Grigory Potemkin, the Neapolitan caught the attention of his superiors by watching over and covering for the multiple offenses of the dissolute American Rear Admiral John Paul Jones, who had also come to Russia in search of fortune.

After Russia's victory over the Ottoman Empire, de Ribas convinced Catherine and Potemkin that a patch of land near the mouths of four major European rivers — the Danube, Dniester, Dnieper and Bug —

would make an excellent location for a city. On May 27, 1794, the czarina ordered that a port be built on the site.

Following Russian practice for identifying settlements in the empire's recently acquired lands in the south, which had been christened "New Russia" — de Ribas's city was named after a classical Greek hero. In this case, the name Odysseus was feminized to Odessa in honor of Catherine.

De Ribas set out to create a more orderly version of his hometown Naples. In this he succeeded, for the city grew out along a logical grid.

There was nothing well-ordered, though, about the people who filled up that well-engineered civic plan. Odessa attracted a multitude of fortune-hunters and adventurers from around the world. All sorts of folks from a variety of backgrounds were drawn by the opportunity to get rich quick as traders in a city that was growing into one of the world's biggest commercial ports.

Catherine's grandson Czar Alexander I replaced de Ribas as "city chief" with the French aristocrat Armand Emmanuel Sophie Septimanie du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, great-nephew of the infamous Cardinal Richelieu, who was fleeing Jacobean revolutionaries in Paris. De Richelieu, who served as governor between 1803 and 1814, set out to promote trade and tried to attract energetic entrepreneurs. He built state-of-the-art infrastructure for the city and it expanded to roughly 20,000 people by the

time he stepped down as governor. He is still fondly remembered, though. His statue now stands atop the iconic Potemkin Stairs, an urban ladder that climbed 200 (now 192) steps from the docks to the central districts.

De Richelieu transformed Odessa into a safe harbor for Russia's least respected social class: the petty bourgeoisie. It drew all those seeking opportunity — tradesmen, shopkeepers, former serfs, Jews fleeing shtetls across the Pale of Settlement, semi-skilled workers and any number of outcasts of various sorts. In Odessa, they were able to build new lives. The city, with its diverse population, also became a cultural center, fostering

new forms of Russian literature, theater, song, and media.

A senior Ukrainian diplomat in residence in Washington, who happens to be an Odessan by birth and temperament, recently told me that wherever he went, he felt there was a sprite telling him everything around him was absurd. In the old Soviet days, he explained, this personal sprite would mock the speech of a Communist Party secretary. More recently, the sprite would mock him whenever he was called on to meet with world-famous leaders.

Such sprites, the diplomat said, inhabit the brains of thousands of contemporary Odessites. Their muses will mock Putin's Russia ceaselessly — until we all



Odessa, Ukraine 2007, by Thomas Depenbusch/flickr

understand that no emperor ever wears any clothes.

Throughout its history, Odessa has encouraged a melding, reconciliation, and mutual borrowing of diverse cultural expressions and traditions to produce new amalgams. There can be no greater threat

to Putin's hollow juggernaut than this special place.

A tattered Ukrainian military, even when backed by Western sanctions, may never bring Putinism to an inglorious end. Odessan mockery, however, most certainly will.

April 15, 2014

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The Great Debate

Odessa: Ukrainian port that inspired big dreams

By Blair A. Ruble | April 15, 2014



Tags: ALEXANDER 1 | CATHERINE THE GREAT | CRIMEA | ODESSA | POTEMKIN | RUSSIA | UKRAINE | VLADIMIR PUTIN



Tensions have been rising in many corners of Ukraine as the [threat of a Russian intervention looms](#). Ukraine's Black Sea port of Odessa is one such corner of dispute between Moscow and Kiev, where macro-battles have been transformed into a seemingly endless chain of micro-conflicts.

Supporters of both countries have taken to marching through the streets, ominously threatening each other. The Ukrainian government is trying to wrest control of the local oil refinery — one of the country's most important — away from a Russian bank. Tension is visible in the smallest aspects of life.



Blair A. Ruble

Blair Ruble served as the director of Kennan Institute on Russia at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He is now the center's vice president for programs.

Any opinions expressed here are the author's own.

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How Cities Can Foster Tolerance and Acceptance

We live in a time of cities, as well as in a time of migration. A new urban reality has arisen with the influx of mobile populations often related to the globalization of economic and communication flows. Cities around the world have become agglomerations of ethnicities, religions, classes, and nationalities. Creating socially sustainable cities that can accommodate migrants and their diversity requires policies that nurture shared identity and maintain spaces whose use can be shared by everybody, promoting a pragmatic pluralism and a culture of tolerance.

What failure looks like

We have no difficulty thinking of failures of diversity management. Days of rioting in the Paris suburbs in October and November 2005 shocked a world more comfortable with thinking of the French capital as a city of romance. The major civil disturbances almost a decade ago have been followed in recent years by smaller but nonetheless serious street fighting involving French authorities, immigrants and the children of immigrants, and right-wing groups. 2014 has seen a spike in anti-semitism in France which is home to the largest Jewish community in Europe. The first three months of the year saw reported acts of anti-Semitic violence skyrocket to 140 incidents, a 40 percent increase from the same period last year. This month, two young Jewish men were severely beaten on their way to synagogue

in an eastern suburb of Paris. Across the English Channel, London's reputation as perhaps the world's most successfully diverse city was rocked by nearly a week of disturbances during August 2011 in inner-city boroughs within the British capital, as well as in numerous other cities across England. While tensions subsided, a residue of visible resentment remains among many residents of both capitals. Meanwhile, Jerusalem, Sarajevo, and some American cities today suffer from old conflicts. Washingtonians remember race- and ethnicity-based outbreaks of violence within two miles of the White House in 1919, 1968, and 1991.

What success looks like

Success is less conspicuous. It occurs when people live together quietly and is defined by the open conflict that does not happen. In Toronto, where nearly half the city's population are foreign-born, a block shared by a Middle Eastern grocery, a Jamaican gift store, and an Ethiopian spice market seems unexceptional. Venezuelans in Toronto learn to bake bagels to serve to Jewish customers—and Jewish customers learn to buy bagels from Venezuelan bakers—simply because it makes their lives easier. Tensions exist to be sure, but cities such as Toronto are able to convert diversity into an asset by embracing a pragmatic pluralism that emerges from a willingness born of necessity.

How to get there

The processes by which diverse communities are incorporated into a particular urban region vary from city to city.

The particular history of place has an impact. A store can be central, as when Chicagoans of all races and classes found that they identified with Marshall Field's department store, especially after it had been taken over by Macy's. Local food—such as a Philadelphia cheesesteak—allows people who otherwise assume they share little to find common ground.

Sports teams often bring people together across all sorts of otherwise meaningful divides, as is evident when a local team wins a major championship. Baltimoreans of all races and classes joyfully celebrated the Ravens' 2012 Super Bowl victory in a scene repeated in nearly every victorious city before and since. Such communal demonstrations hardly are limited to American cities. One dramatic moment of community unity across all the lines that can divide a city occurred when the Barça Football Club—the pride of Barcelona—won its first FIFA Club World Cup in 2009 (a celebration that can be repeated whenever the team defeats the hated Real Club from Madrid). These seemingly mundane moments foster a shared sense of place from which community emerges.

The public spaces that cities offer also have an impact. Cities must strive to

provide protected public meeting places in which all kinds of people can interact with one another, incorporating their multiple histories of space, place, and identity. Mere co-presence can be an important first step toward something more meaningful. Specialists writing about Montréal's extensive networks of parks, for example, have commented on how Francophone and Anglophone immigrants and natives all use the same park space with ease, even if they do not necessarily mingle with each other.

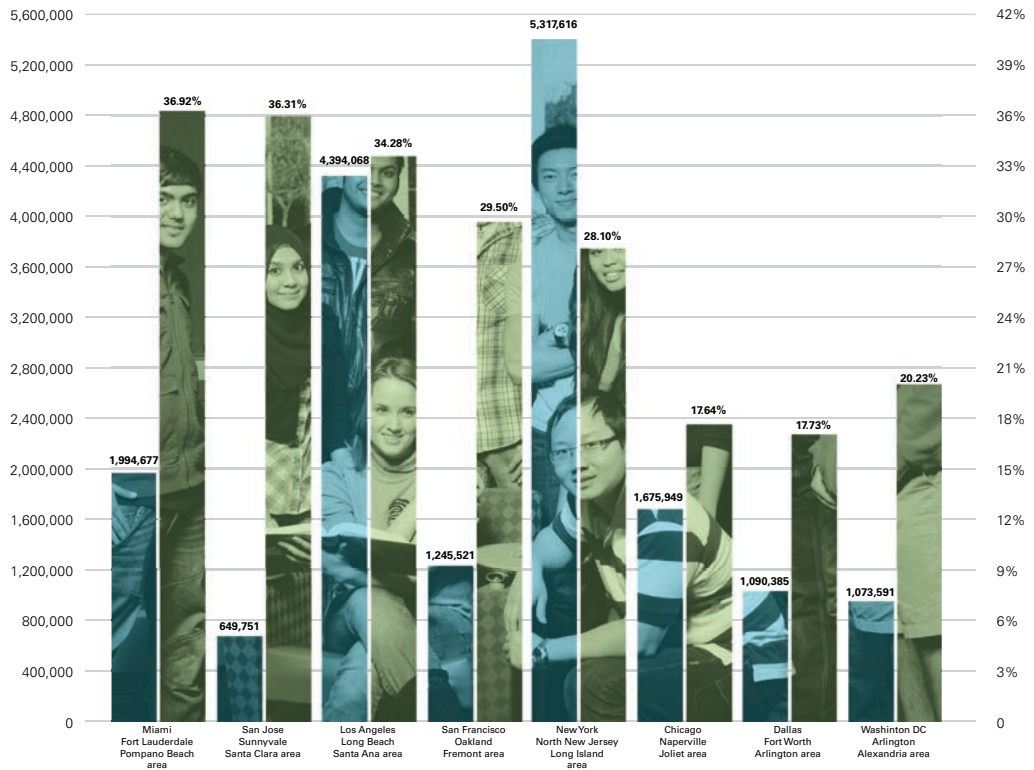
Policymakers need to build on such moments as they become more ambitious in their efforts to nurture shared identity. City residents need to relate to one another in a shared public manner that transcends individual and group needs and perceptions. A new playground in Washington's rapidly gentrifying Brookland neighborhood began to attract different racial groups at different hours of the day until, after having been open only a few weeks, the facility began to attract people from all groups simultaneously. Soon, neighbors who had kept a wary distance were beginning to speak with one another. This small process is precisely the sort of seemingly minor opportunity that can lead to major changes in how communities function. Similarly, Washington's First Annual Funk Parade, dancing through the rapidly changing U Street neighborhood in May 2014, brought together long-term residents with new arrivals of various races and economic groups in a joyous celebration of the city's musical history.



Funk Parade, by Elvert Barnes/flickr

Eight U.S. Cities with the Biggest Immigrant Population

Number of Immigrants



A *Washington Post* article covered the similar reaction of Washingtonians to a brass band on the streets of DC on a recent Friday night:

“The corner of 14th and U streets NW swelled with nearly 100 people rocking to a brass band’s Friday night street performance. Shoeless panhandlers were dancing with

summer interns. Young professionals and baby boomers were shimmying next to one another. And a kaleidoscope of races shed inhibitions and bounced to a bold version of the 1990s R&B classic ‘No Diggity.’ In a largely segregated city trying to erase its reputation for stuffiness and stress, soul had burst onto this street corner.”

From tolerating to sharing

With this vision of the future as a promising goal, cities can take the following actions to promote a diverse and inclusive landscape that will be welcoming to all.

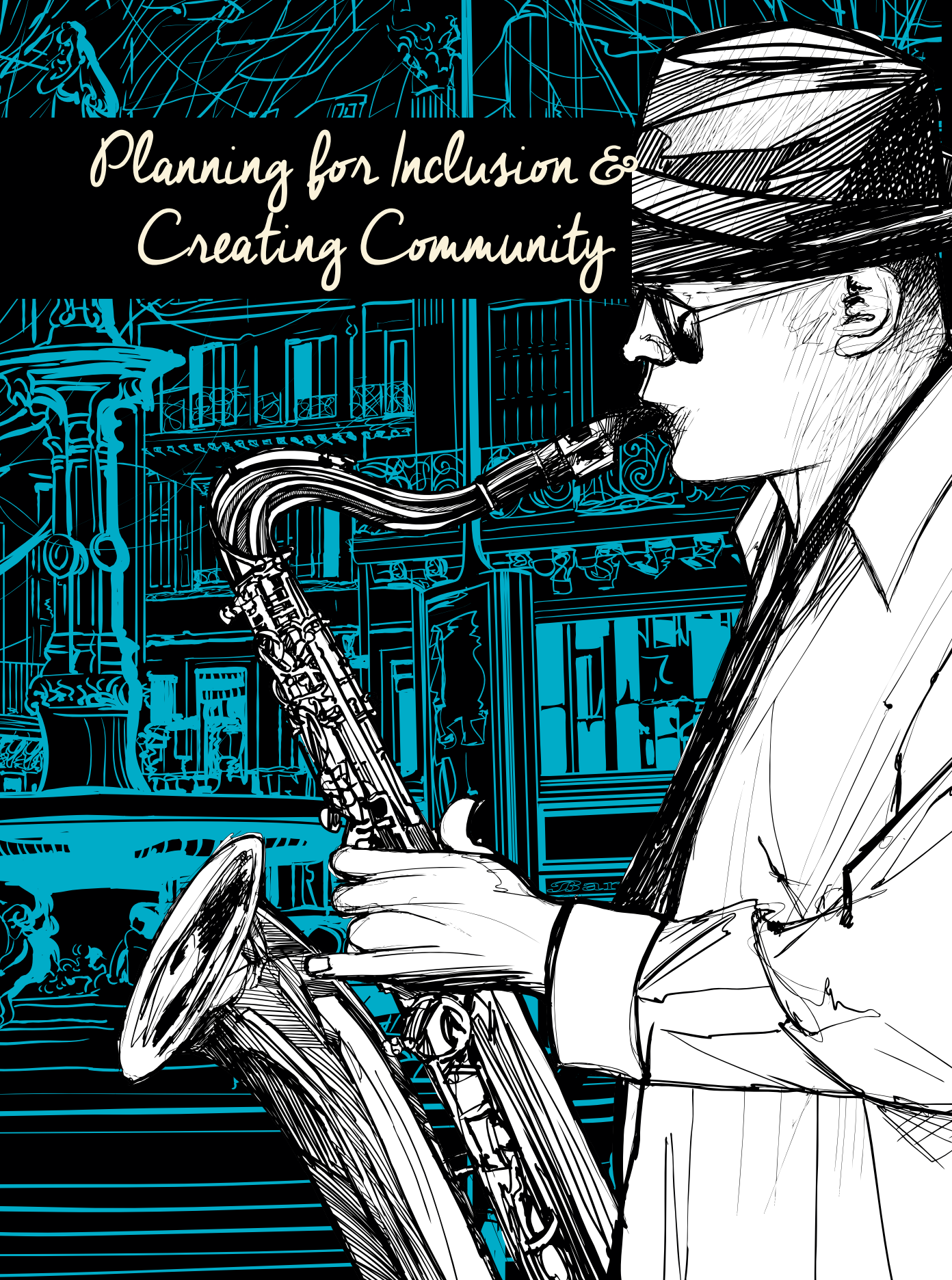
- Cities should recognize and reinforce common points that help connect neighbors of differing backgrounds to a single place through festivals and celebrations.
- Cities should create protected shared spaces such as small parks which encourage unstructured communication among residents in order to convert diversity from a challenge to an asset by promoting tolerance and casual interaction.
- Cities should promote commerce that expands economic opportunity

while bolstering contact among diverse communities and emphasizing shared opportunities.

The challenge for policymakers is to expand economic, social, and political spaces for different people while balancing any number of conflicting assumptions about appropriate behavior and policies. A new sensitivity embracing diversity as a value must be incorporated in policy-making, ranging from planning and development to health and education. The task need not be daunting even though such interventions may appear to add new expenses to already over-burdened budgets. It is important to recall that starting modestly may work more efficaciously than announcing grandiose plans.

June 23, 2014

*Planning for Inclusion &
Creating Community*



Rethinking Engagement in Cities: Ending the Professional vs. Citizen Divide

Originally published in Meeting of the Minds

Cities are among humankind's grandest and most complex creations. Even small urban communities represent the cumulative result of literally hundreds of thousands of public and private, individual and collective decisions over time. They are the playgrounds of spontaneity.

Such an understanding of how cities come into being and evolve is hardly new. Nor are its implications for how we plan and govern cities. While the language has changed, these ideas — and how those with custodianship for urban life approach their responsibilities — have been around for nearly as long as there have been cities. We can look to ancient Greek political thought for notions about participation and empowerment that have been dressed up for our own times.

We need not look back so far. Anyone who has thought seriously about the contemporary urban condition, for example, has encountered the writings of Jane Jacobs. The specific insights of the ancients and the contemporary deserve serious engagement, criticism and debate. The importance of community engagement

and mobilization, one might have thought, has become indisputable over several centuries of reformulation.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, a plentiful number of urban professionals around the world — including economists, planners, architects, and administrators of all types — have dismissed citizen participation as an extravagant expense that only gets in the way of efficient urban management. They reveal a steady re-entrenchment of top-down approaches to shaping the city in which professionals know best. Involving citizens, it seems, just costs too much.

Ironically, the lessons in recent years that have emerged from post-disaster experiences point in precisely the opposite direction. From Hurricane Katrina to Super Storm Sandy and all variety of man-made and natural disasters across the globe, we have seen integrated communities with high social capital and identity recover more quickly and more efficiently than those which are bedeviled by high levels of social anomie and isolation.

How can we explain this division between empirical lessons learned on the ground and the view from the commanding heights of professionalism?

There are multiple answers to such a complex question. Citizen engagement has often been oversold by its advocates who have failed to overcome challenges such as time, expense and passivity. Moreover, professional knowledge is essential to resolving many technical challenges.

Arguments against citizen engagement as being overly expensive and obtrusive ring ever more hollow at a time when smart technologies make information sharing and citizen participation ever more feasible and inexpensive. We know from the work of Tim Campbell's *Beyond Smart Cities*, for example, that cities learn from each other through transnational networks rather than from top-down professional pontificators. Urban professionals who view themselves as the high priests and priestesses of city life must confront the realities of a digital age that is converting hierarchies into networks in every aspect of our lives.

Within this context, traditional urban “think tanks” need a new approach to their work. Specialized knowledge and expertise play an important role to be sure; but there is simultaneously a need to make that knowledge and expertise widely available. Communities must organize themselves if they are to be resilient in the face of unprecedented challenges for cities which certainly lie ahead as our planet changes.

Fortunately, models exist for converting traditionally hierarchical academic, professional, and municipal institutions into urban laboratories embedded in broad networks of public officials,

business executives, entrepreneurs, civic leaders and citizens. The University of Toronto's Global Cities Indicator project, for example, mobilizes the considerable expertise necessary to collect and analyze big data about cities around the world while making such data available and transparent to broader communities. Similarly, Brooklyn's new Center for Urban Science + Progress seeks to promote “a new kind of academic center that functions in collaboration with the city itself.”

Conferences such as Meetings of the Minds amplify the benefits of engaging urbanites and urban custodians from across many sectors. There are countless more examples of governance mechanisms and political arrangements which favor participation over professional privilege.

As the world rushes towards an unprecedented urban age — as humans become a city rather than a rural species — we need new sorts of institutions — virtual and horizontal networks of minds rather than confined “tanks” for the best and the brightest — if we are going to sustain resilient urban communities. We need engagement and we need modesty if we, as denizens of cities great and small, are going to survive. We need to end the artificial divide between “professionals” and “citizens” once and for all. Fortunately, technologies that are now available allow the dreams of ancient philosophers who advocated direct involvement in decision-making for the cities to be realized.

September 30, 2013

Innovation through Inclusion: Lessons from Medellín and Barcelona

Originally published in Meeting of the Minds

For more than a century, Medellín has been known world-wide. For Spanish-speaking members of the “Greatest Generation,” Medellín is where Argentine tango great Carlos Gardel, probably the most popular Latin singer of his generation, was martyred in a fiery crash at the local airport in 1935. For “Boomers,” the city’s name is synonymous with the world’s most notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar. For so-called “Millennials,” Medellín has become the poster child for urban renewal.

Colombia’s second largest city has long punched well above its weight in terms of international notoriety. Nestled at some 5,000 feet above sea level in one of the northernmost Andean valleys, the Aburrá, Medellín is an unlikely candidate for fame. Though established as a town by Spanish colonists in 1616, and selected as capital of the Antioquia in 1826, Medellín remained a peaceful out-of-the-way settlement of some 15,000 residents at the time of Colombia’s independence in 1810. The arrival of the railroad and consequent industrialization changed everything. The city’s population grew from 60,000 in 1905 to 360,000 in 1951, to 2.5 million today. Yet, so has the populations of other similar cities far less known. Why has Medellín managed to matter beyond itself?

The answer lies in part in an assertive entrepreneurial class that has long turned

to global markets to make money. The city has grown prosperous by exporting gold, then by growing and selling coffee, followed by textiles, illegal narcotics (which would make the city the most dangerous in the world by the early 1990s), and now flowers (and coffee once again). Medellín is home as well to the continent’s largest fashion show, Columbiamoda. The city’s economy, in other words, long has relied on producing and purveying goods that capture peoples’ imaginations.

The city’s latest acclaim as a model of urban renewal is perhaps the most unexpected of all its accomplishments over the decades. For a city to be known as “murder capital of the world” in living memory to be awarded the title 2013 “Innovative City of the Year” ahead of New York City and Tel Aviv and host the United Nations HABITAT’s World Urban Forum a year later challenges credulity; and yet this is what has happened.

Any story as complex as the transformation from being a global symbol for despair into worldwide fame as a center of hope necessarily incorporates too many dimensions to be captured in a single article. There are many interwoven threads to such a tale ranging from pacification of drug cartels through the extraordinary civic leadership by such gifted and accomplished mayors as Luis Alfredo Ramos (1992-1994), Sergio Fajardo (2004-2007) and Aníbal Gaviris

(since 2012). Leaders need visions to mobilize those around them. One seemingly counterintuitive component of the Medellín vision deserves special mention. By using smart design and innovative transportation infrastructural development the city's leaders have striven consistently to include the excluded in the city's mainstream economy and society. Their approach, in other words, has been diametrically opposed to the building of gated communities that increasingly blight the urban and suburban landscape everywhere.

For Medellín's planners, no building is too beautiful to be denied the city's least privileged resident. The more striking a project appeared to be, the more likely it would be built in the poorest barrio. Giancarlo Mazzanti's Parque Biblioteca España, a massive public library which won several major architectural awards when it opened in 2008, sits perched above the city in the long troubled Santo

Domingo neighborhood. One of a half-dozen major libraries constructed by public authorities to bring learning and information closer to the poor, the Spain Library opens the world to local residents who previously had been trapped within the confines of their own self-built twisting streets isolated above the city.

The library, in turn, stands next to perhaps the world's most unusual public transit systems – one of three aerial tramways which carry 50,000 passengers a year up and down Medellín's steep hills linking the poorest and most well-to-do. There is an easily accessible library for children to study, read, and access the internet at the Acevedo metro station where gondola and metrorail seamlessly connect. Rail, aerial tram, and Bus Rapid Transit lines encourage all in Medellín to move about the city as they work, learn, and play. At a time when an impulse pervades communities – be they rich or poor or somewhere in between – to close



Parque Biblioteca España - Barrio Santo Domingo Savio, by Ivan Erre Jota/flickr

themselves off from their neighbors – to pull up the drawbridge and fill the moat – Medellín offers a counter example of how easier contact can, in fact, build a sense of community that enhances rather than diminishes security.

Just as Medellín appeared to reach its nadir two decades ago, those with responsibility for Medellín's future – political, business, civic, health, educational, and community leaders – built a world-class metro system explicitly as social policy rather than merely as a solution to transportation problems. They did so to bring all elements of the city together, to give everyone a stake in a shared fate. By doing so, they revealed an exceptional inventiveness. They also showed how they were learning lessons already learned elsewhere, for another important aspect of the remarkable Medellín story lies in a deep connection with Barcelona.

Those who took over the Catalan city following the death of Generalissimo Franco in 1975 faced many challenges similar to those confronting Medellín a generation later. Committed to knitting together the disparate elements of a fragmented city – and hindered by empty public coffers – those who rebuilt Barcelona turned to small interventions creating well designed public space where there had been none previously, to enhanced public transportation, and to seashore promenades encouraging people who lived apart to find a shared destiny. Helped along by the planning and construction of the 1992 Olympic Games, Barcelona successfully converted a grey, shabby, and

depressed authoritarian city into a glittering symbol of international success.

Many sons and daughters of Medellín came to Barcelona during these years to study, learn, live, and earn a livelihood. They experienced a city transforming itself for the better every day; and, they took these lessons back with them to Colombia when they returned.

The subsequent history of Barcelona similarly offers lessons for Medellín. Over time, as the generation leading the post-Franco transition has moved on, Barcelona's impulse to reform has subsided. Barcelona certainly remains one of the world's most remarkable urban success stories, a delightful city that fully embraces its considerable Mediterranean assets. Yet, the city is something less of a landmark of innovation now than it was a generation ago. More recent migrants from North Africa, for example, are not welcomed as amiably as a generation ago, economic growth has stalled, and the politics of division have returned.

Medellín today is at a similar breakthrough moment as that of Barcelona in 1992. The additional lesson from the Catalan city, then, is that successful urban governance and innovation is not a moment of static achievement. Cities continue to evolve, to grow and to decline, to confront new challenges even as old pathologies resurface. The job of innovative urban management is never finished; boxes once checked need to be re-visited forever; and lessons once learned must be learned over and over again.

Detroit: Planning for a City of the Future

On Friday February 21, Detroit's leaders filed in bankruptcy court the first official plan for moving the city to solvency. The plan envisions repaying the city's more than 100,000 creditors, tearing down tens of thousands of blighted buildings, shrinking the city's physical footprint, encouraging start-up ventures, and investing in improved core city services. The approach is ambitious and represents an important step in re-inventing Motor City. Much of the proposed roadmap will be contested in court and in political battles. However, at least one pathway forward has been set down with authority that will encourage the start of a sustained effort to bring Detroit back.

Just a day before the plan was presented, the innovative urban-oriented non-profit organization Meeting of the Minds convened two meetings in Detroit to discuss the longer-term implications of planning for the beleaguered city's future. The brainstorming workshops included a number of corporate and civic leaders from around Detroit and Michigan in one session, and international planners and urban thinkers in the second session.

The Wilson Center's Urban Sustainability Laboratory was among the participating organizations. While judges were deliberating and lawyers were filing their motions, more than six dozen of the best urban minds joined together to

think through the future of one of North America's most troubled cities.

Rather than look backwards at how to untangle the legal and fiscal uncertainties, those gathered by Meeting of the Minds purposefully looked forward past the moment when the wrangling over bankruptcy will have been resolved. Interestingly, attention rather quickly turned to considering what might happen if the myriad of experiments taking place in Detroit were to prove successful.

How can we think about a Detroit that has been re-fitted and competitive? That future might seem unattainable at the moment; and yet if Detroit is to "come back" how might the city be able to manage success a decade or two from now? The city can only do so by imagining and engaging with the possibility of a successful Detroit.

Twenty years ago, few policymakers and planners prepared the city for the disaster that was to follow. By the time we come to know a city it already has changed. This reality of constant change increases the complexity of planning, or preparing for the urban future. Yet we must do so.

The challenges of thinking about what Detroit might be in a decade or two are similar in form if not in detail with the challenges of thinking about how cities around the world need to prepare for an urban world in which there will be

hundreds of millions of new city residents all demanding services, infrastructure and access to jobs.

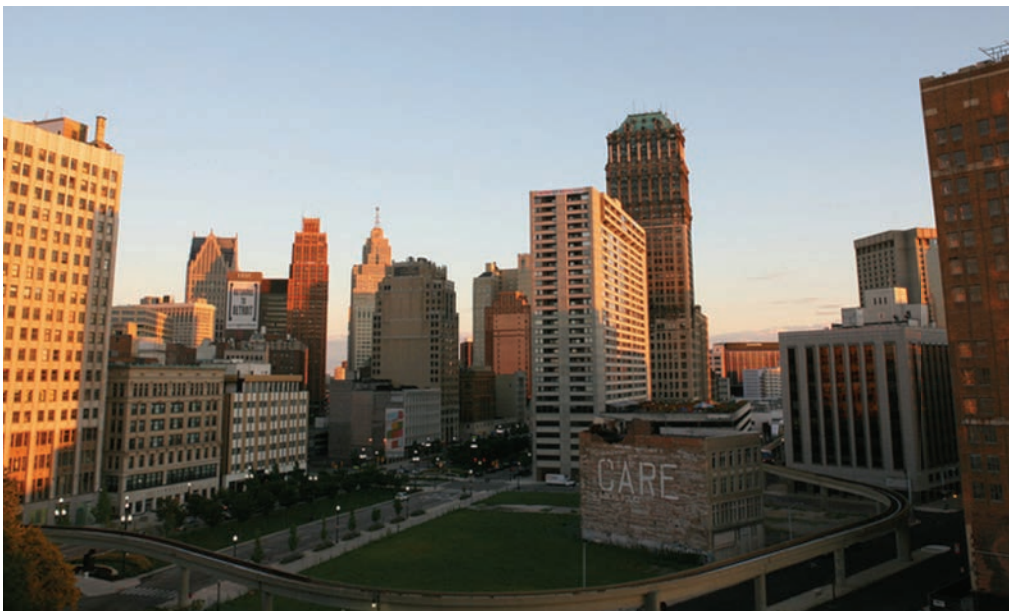
As the history of Detroit suggests, the time to start planning is now. And yet, planning requires considering urban processes which interact with one another in unpredictable ways. The act of urban planning and policy making thus becomes not simply imagining a static outcome, but engaging in a process which brings citizens, civic leaders, political leaders, entrepreneurs and businesses all together. In a digital age, we must also consider how big data, social media, and new technologies can enhance the process.

Perhaps the most exciting lesson to emerge from the discussions in Detroit are that system modeling and planning begin to make possible such engagement

with an urban future. Yet the technology needs to connect with the very real lives and realities of the people on the ground. Complex systems simulation can only forecast the future of a distressed Detroit, or of a successful Singapore if those simulations are tied to the lived lives of the people who actually live in cities.

Dreary mid-winter days in a blighted city such as Detroit would not appear at first glance to offer up much hope for the urban future. Yet, these meetings did. Drawing on people and organizations committed to Detroit, it is clear that the city is garnering positive energy. As it does so – and as that energy creates a new Detroit – Motor City could well offer up lessons not only about managing decline, but about managing success as well.

February 24, 2014



Downtown Detroit, by Lundgren Photography/flickr

Diversity by Design



Originally published on Medium

Challenging stereotypes and conventional wisdom, two North American communities aren't simply "managing" diversity, they are benefiting from it in significant ways.

Arlington County, Virginia consistently ranks among the most highly educated of all U.S. counties, with some of the highest income levels and lowest crime rates and

is one of the most ethnically diverse in the country.

With more than 200,000 residents, Arlington is home to the entire world as 28 percent of its population is foreign-born, including 15 percent who are Hispanic or Latino and nearly 10 percent who are Asian. Interestingly, no single ethnic group dominates in Arlington.

ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS



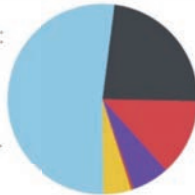
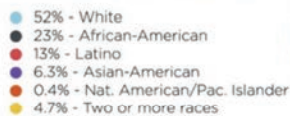
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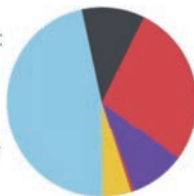
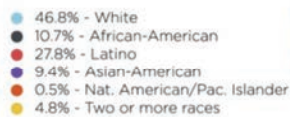
HAIL FROM 126 NATIONS

COMPARING STUDENT ENROLLMENT

VIRGINIA'S STUDENT ENROLLMENT:



ARLINGTON'S STUDENT ENROLLMENT:



In January 2008, Arlington County Chairman Walter Tejada announced an “Agenda for Progress” aimed at improving overall quality-of-life in the county, with a focus on three major priorities: public health, affordable housing, and making Arlington more inclusive.

Towards that end, the County Board established a Diversity Dialogue Task Force entrusted with holding town hall-style forums to “identify diversity-related issues that concern our community, ... [including] those that may not have yet become problems,” and recommending policy changes to make Arlington more inclusive.

Addendum from Arlington’s Diversity Dialogue Report.

A look at the student breakdown of Arlington, Virginia. Sources: Arlington County, Virginia Dept. of Education.

Addendum from Arlington's Diversity Dialogue Report

Background

A. Arlington County's Vision Statement

Arlington will be a diverse and inclusive world-class urban community with secure, attractive residential and commercial neighborhoods where people unite to form a caring, learning, participating, sustainable community in which each person is important.

B. Chairman's Three-pronged Agenda

The Diversity Dialogues were part of a three-pronged Agenda for Progress announced by Chairman Walter Tejada in January 2008 that focused on inclusion, health and affordable housing.

C. Diversity Dialogue Task Force Charge

As a diverse, inclusive and welcoming community, Arlington wants to build bridges across different cultures, ages, groups and economic backgrounds and take positive steps to better meet the needs of all of our people.

Specific Objectives

- Provide opportunities to learn about the different groups and cultures within Arlington and promote better understanding and appreciation among different people and groups.
- Identify diversity-related issues that concern our community, including those that reflect changing demographic and other characteristics and those that may not have yet become problems.
- Determine ways that Arlington County can take actions to better achieve its vision of being diverse and inclusive through its policies and programs.

Audience

- People who live, work, and do business in Arlington.

Strategies

- Conduct a series of World Cafés and other activities identified by a task force to serve as the venue for the Diversity Dialogues by the end of calendar year 2008.
- Organize a diverse task force of Arlington residents, named by the County Board and called the Diversity Dialogue Task Force, to coordinate the Diversity Dialogues. County staff will work with the Task Force to plan and carry out the Dialogues.
- Dialogues based on the World Café model and other activities as identified by the Task Force; and

Results

- The Task Force will produce a report to the County Board that will call attention to diversity issues that need to be addressed by the County Board and County staff, identify best practices, and make recommendations for further actions.
- The County Board may refer the report to the County Manager to recommend policy changes and other implementing actions that may be appropriate for consideration by the County Board.

In an effort to hear from a broad, multilingual spectrum of residents, Arlington recruited bilingual "table hosts" for each Diversity Dialogue.

In September and October 2008, the Task Force held three "Diversity Dialogues." All told, roughly 500 residents turned out to take part.

Divided up into groups of four-to-six people (including bilingual "table hosts" to facilitate the participation of non-English speakers),

the participants were asked open-ended questions aimed at prompting conversation, illuminating individuals' experiences, and informing prescriptive public policy:

"Why are people afraid of diversity?"

"What about our history needs to be acknowledged as we move forward to a more inclusive community?"

As the participants shared their thoughts, volunteers recorded their candid answers on

a giant paper canvas—“History is a context for understanding.” “Acknowledgement is not enough.” “Why are you assuming people is afraid of diversity?” “We have to get personal!”—and privately asked participants to fill our surveys after the exercise:

“I am more of an Arlingtonian than I realized.”

“The momentum against diversity is systemic enough that there needs to be consistent, deliberate efforts... to help combat the problem.”

“This is my community and my home of choice.”

Markham, Ontario

Recently, Statistics Canada declared Markham the most diverse city in Canada, with visible minorities comprising nearly three-quarters of the city’s population.

Home to more than 100,000 residents of Chinese descent, Markham is also the residence of nearly 60,000 South Asians, and thousands of blacks, Filipinos, West Asians, Arabs, Koreans, Southeast Asians, Poles, Russians, Greeks, Italians, Jamaicans, Iranians, Sri Lankans, and Latin Americans.

Like Arlington, Markham is traditionally thought of as a suburb (of Toronto, in Markham’s case), and ranks among the most economically successful towns and cities in Canada.

Both Arlington and Markham have their share of showy new houses and condos, flashy cars, and high-end retail. They represent a new North American suburban and urban reality in which the traditional boundaries between downtown and outskirt are blurred. Both offer similar lessons for how communities can reap the benefits of their diversity dividends.

Like Arlington, Markham has exploded in recent years, growing three times faster than Canada’s national average. And, like Arlington, Markham is governed by local officials who have embraced diversity as an opportunity, creating action plans and policies which welcome and support new residents.

Markham, Ontario could be like any other suburb. But it isn’t; it’s the most diverse community in Canada.

The Arlington County mission states that “Arlington will be a diverse and inclusive world-class urban community;” in Markham, the Diversity Action Plan notes that the community is “directly connected, through ties of history and family, to every corner of our globalized world.”

Markham’s “Diversity Action Plan” links the city’s recent diversity to historic immigration trends from European immigrants.

“Markham is directly connected, through ties of history and family, to every corner of our globalized world. But the challenge is obvious too: how do we build one community from so many? ...

At least two things unite Markham's many communities: everyone wants a better future for themselves and their children, and we all share Markham as home. Everyone should feel that they belong."

Both Arlington and Markham are home to diverse immigrant groups containing, as one report stated about Arlington, "the world in a zipcode." No single migrant group dominates. Both have robust public transit systems which enable residents to connect to jobs. Both benefit from being within the orbit of a new global economy that favors knowledge and high-tech industries.

While both Arlington and Markham have their share of new arrivals struggling to fit into the local workforce, both also retain highly successful immigrants and their families — nurturing upward mobility among forward-looking immigrant communities by providing quality public education and services designed to integrate immigrants into the local community and economy.

Neither Arlington nor Markham would have appeared to be beacons of diversity a half-century ago. These are communities that have undergone tremendous demographic, social, and economic transformations, and are dominated by economic opportunities and immigrant communities that simply were unimaginable in the 1960s.

Arlington and Markham have succeeded by reaching out to new residents and building the connections that convert diversity from a supposed liability to a hard-edged practical asset.

August 31, 2012

Discovering the Power of Community in Unexpected Places



Recently, I have been hearing a lot about supporting “community” as a way to address pressing urban challenges, such as rising crime, entrenched poverty, and substandard education systems. The concept of “community” – especially those deemed to be “sustainable” and “resilient” – has come to be a currency of the realm in discussions about cities, development, and rebounding from disaster. Any understanding of “community” loses texture and vitality as it becomes a term of art spoken too often in policy debates over violence, climate, equality, post-conflict, and post-disaster recovery.

During this summer I had an opportunity to witness an example of the healing power of community. While profoundly personal, the experience taught me some lessons about human nature that offer universal insights into the power of shared experience to secure a meaningful sense of community.

In July (2015), my wife Sally and I attended the Spinal Injury Recovery Unit’s annual Bar-B-Q in the lovely garden at Washington, D.C.’s National Rehabilitation Hospital, where Sally was a patient. Nature cooperated with a pleasant, relatively cool and humidity-free evening.

The garden is lovely, with quiet shaded places for patients to sit and a small well-designed piazza dominated by the sounds of an elegant fountain. There were five or six dozen patients, with assorted family and staff members comfortably filling in the available spaces.

The main event was a dunking stand where patients could launch their doctors into a pool of water by hitting a target with a ball (or, in some instances, their wheelchairs). Everyone caught the spirit, although the game turned edgier as doctors began to play against one another.

Carolina culture still lives in D.C. Most rural migration to Washington over the past century came from the Carolinas. Back in the day, many African American Washingtonians called the city the largest town in North Carolina. Fittingly, therefore, the main course — and the first non-hospital food in a long time for many of the patients — was a scrumptious slightly sweet western North Carolina Bar-B-Q.

National Rehabilitation Hospital is full of patients who don’t want to be there. The older patients tend to be recovering

from the ravages of strokes, heart and brain issues, and diabetes. The younger patients are mending from car crashes, other accidents, military casualties, and gun shots on the streets of the city. Rehabilitation is hard work compounded by the uncertainty of the outcome. The evening was special because everyone could forget why they were where they have to be on the lovely gentle summer evening.

The hospital's remarkable staff and doctors nurture a wholly supportive environment for everyone there. Of course, everyone at the party has a powerful individual story — a large, dramatic, and tragic tale of one sort or another — and their consequent infirmities created a bond among them. Clusters of

patients — some alone or chatting with one another; others surrounded by family members and loved ones — created a strong sense of connection among people who otherwise might never have encountered one another.

Those of us who write about cities and the urban future have come to use words such as “community” with an effortlessness that at times eviscerates all meaning. On that summer night in Washington, several dozen patients — each confronting an intense personal battle — demonstrated that “community” can be real. The human connections underlying shared destiny add the power of others to one’s own struggle to heal.

August 7, 2015