

Shaping Kuala Lumpur into a creative city

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Cities are facing a growing number of crises that cannot be resolved by traditional means. These include the challenges of coexisting with significant cultural differences and diversity, developing the sustainability agenda and discovering the city's role and purpose on an economic, cultural and social level.

The key to overcoming these issues is by making cities creative, according to Charles Landry, an expert on creative city planning and urban change. He has authored books such as *The Art of City-Making* (Earthscan Publications, 2006), *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (2nd ed, Earthscan Publications, 2008) and *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (with Phil Wood; Earthscan Publications, 2008), in which he offers insights on the role a place can play in attracting, retaining, developing and inspiring a world-class workforce in today's fast-changing business environment.

Landry presented this concept at the Creative KL Talks, organised by Think City Sdn Bhd on March 29. The talk centred on the theme of "What Makes a Creative City Work", during which the challenges faced by Kuala Lumpur and what it needs to become a creative city were highlighted.

Incidentally, the event is part of the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District (KLCCD) programme developed by Think City in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur City Hall, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, the Department of National Heritage and Yayasan Hasanah.

Think City managing director Hamdan Abdul Majeed said in his opening address: "What makes a creative city? This discussion is not just about theory. It's about understanding how we can also transform downtown Kuala Lumpur into a vibrant, creative and culturally rich district. At Think City, we are committed to making downtown Kuala Lumpur a thriving hub of creativity and culture.

"We believe that by fostering creativity and innovation, we can create a city that not only attracts visitors and businesses but also enhances the lives of its residents. Rejuvenating Malaysia's capital is crucial as the city experiences a decline in repeat visitors and a hollowing-out effect. We must be able to diversify and urgently create authentic, locally oriented experiences beyond conventional sites and shopping centres."

Think City was provided with an allocation of RM20 million under Budget 2024 to lead several projects to develop KLCCD further. These include institutionalising certain key schemes within the KLCCD demarcation; greening the city through data advocacy and demonstrative programmes; deepening the plans for every KLCCD precinct; area rejuvenation programmes in the civic precinct, heritage triangle precinct and traditional shopping street precinct; crowdsourcing participation of grassroots and partners in rejuvenating downtown Kuala Lumpur through the Creative KL Grants Programme; and branding the Creative and Cultural District through knowledge sharing, creative content and activation programmes.

Hamdan highlighted that creative cities are not a new concept and are deployed as part of an economic transformation programme, with benchmarks like Barcelona and Bilbao in Spain, New Delhi in India, Bangkok in Thailand, Bandung in Indonesia, Hong Kong in China, and Singapore showcasing innovative urban development strategies.

What is a creative city?

Landry began his presentation by providing a definition of creative cities. "A creative city is a place where the enabling conditions have been set up for people, organisations and the city as a whole to think, plan and act with imagination to solve problems and create opportunities to have the



The Creative KL Talks, organised by Think City, looked at the challenges faced by Kuala Lumpur and what it needs to become a creative city



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mechanisms to allow that to happen. Think City is that mechanism for Kuala Lumpur."

A creative city is also born out of the resources and assets a country has, which are its culture and heritage, he added. "Culture is who we are, creativity is what we can become. So there's a link between those two things, heritage and creativity come together very well. Because the creativity today that is maintained over time is tomorrow's heritage. It also has a social and image impact. Think of any city. Is there any great city in the world that has a weak culture?" he prompted the audience. The obvious answer is no.

Landry further stressed that the local cultures of a place, if incorporated and implemented well in its cities, can drive it to become creative.

"Every tourist board knows that you have to have a rich culture in order to attract people. So the evidence is there. The question we have to ask is, why do some people still think it's not important?"

Every place in life, in the world, is trying to position itself for many reasons. One of them is ultimately prosperity, to have businesses, generate jobs, earn money, pay taxes and provide infrastructure. But that is not enough to breathe life into these cities and that's where the creative aspect comes into play," he said.

Landry also emphasised that city-making changes through time as it should take into consideration factors such as public transport, micro-mobility, walking accessibility and reducing the use of cars.

Kuala Lumpur's next big challenge

The landscape of Kuala Lumpur is fractured in the sense that the buildings are not coherently built, Landry opined. "When I say coherent, I don't mean it's all the same. But there's a certain sense of structure. For example, shophouses here are all structured similarly but have beautiful



Di Hua street in Taipei comprises traditional shops that were built sometime in the 19th century



uniqueness and they're all incredibly diverse as well, which is very stimulating for people. Whereas the new buildings here haven't really been coherent, in the sense that they tend not to fit into the surrounding."

He pointed out that there was a bit of a buzz around Kuala Lumpur about 15 years ago when Cyberjaya was announced as a technological hub with Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) status. That eventually died down and dimmed its presence on a global platform, he observed.

"How can Malaysia have that presence again? Because other countries have moved forward ... What we can do is harness the assets we have and that involves utilising culture and heritage to boost the city," he said.

As enhancement work starts to take place, there may be gentrification dilemmas, Landry warned. He also cautioned the relevant authorities to be alert when it comes to transforming or redeveloping a place.

"Look at it as a cultural project because it is about values, mindsets, attitudes, habits, behaviours, skills and so on. I think that is really incredibly important. Culture is often not taken seriously. It's often just seen as a bit of frilly, decorative stuff at the end. But it is the invisible home that actually drives places, which is why ultimately a country's emphasis on the creative cultural economy is so important because that is the invisible hand that drives it."

Developing a good place can be achieved when one is allowed to be curious, he explained. "If we're curious, we can become imaginative. Then we might have creative ideas in which inventions and innovations might emerge. The other point about culture is that it's sense-making, it's about storytelling. But also, it's about meaning-making and generating that which is significant."

Creative bureaucracy

Landry spoke on the concept of creative bureaucracy that had been developed through observation and research. New perspectives, concepts and priorities can change the way bureaucrats think, plan and act. This affects how the public administration thinks through its strategies, policies and actions, and how it adapts its regulations and incentives regime, he said.

"We need to shift the culture from a 'no because' to a 'yes if,'" he added. To achieve this, getting buy-in is important.

"We must think about what the rules, regulations and incentives are for tomorrow. How do we increase the inner life of the bureaucrat so they feel happier and how does this bureaucracy connect with the outside world's business community in better ways?"

Landry further explained that creative bureaucrats are inspired by problems, crises and opportunities. They look at a bigger picture, champion ideas, see opportunities for positive change and take action — sometimes in a context of personal risk.

"Creating something new means challenging the way things are done now. They sense that a problem can be solved and have an idea of how to go about making the change. Creativity brings a



From top: Pre-war shophouses in Jalan Tun H S Lee have been preserved and revitalised as trendy stores and cafes; shops in Jalan Sultan have interesting façades, contributing to the street's diverse character



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The former Kunsthaus Tacheles building has been transformed into Fotografska Museum Berlin, a photography and contemporary art museum. It also houses event spaces, restaurants, bars and other retail offerings



fresh perspective on the possibilities but implementation needs the support of people across one team or many parts of the organisation, especially from the top. A creative bureaucrat can also pave the way for the ideas of others to get through," he said.

Learning from other countries

Landry said a former department store turned prison, named Kunsthaus Tacheles, along Oranienburger Street in Berlin, Germany, was transformed into a contemporary photography and arts museum. The building that was built in the early 20th century was covered in graffiti and looked dilapidated before Fotografska — a photography, art and cultural exhibition company — took over the building and revitalised it into what it is today.

Today, the space named Fotografska Museum Berlin is being used by the company for exciting visual art performances and forums and is a destination for world-class food and beverage experiences.

For Kuala Lumpur's transformation into a creative city, Landry is of the view that the city is more similar to Taipei in Taiwan than any other neighbouring country because of its architecture. Some cultural districts of Taipei that would be good role models for Kuala Lumpur include Di Hua in Datong District, Treasure Hill and Huashan 1914 Creative Park in Zhongzheng District as well as Songshan Cultural and Creative Park in the Xinyi District.

"Think City is clearly an agent of change for Malaysia, for trying to combine a sort of community-oriented approach with a more global approach, which sometimes I think is always a dilemma. Someone who's working globally might say, 'What's this sort of little, it'sy-bitsy community project?' But what they don't understand is that a hundred lovely community projects might be the equivalent of something big that translates into a very positive impact on the city and community," he said.