the cultured city

We live in an age in which the quality of the public realm is driven by the ability of our streets, open spaces, parks, plazas, commercial and cultural centers to tell us stories and give meaning to life. As American social theorist Richard Florida has noted, cities are increasingly being valued for the level of creativity that they inspire and encourage. In the current political, economic, and social climate, it is important that cities have strong identities and engaging programs that are accessible to a broad range of cultures and economic groups. Access to the arts, education, culture, and design is an integral element of the fabric of the urban environment promoting diversity, education, creativity, tolerance, and the exchange of ideas.

The following projects illustrate how cities across the world are fostering activities that encourage social interaction and skill-building. In less privileged communities in London, Soweto, and the Serbian city of Novi Sad, new public recreational and cultural centers are reinventing traditional spaces for learning, playing, and socializing. In New York and Milan, new parks are providing access to nature and are creating opportunities for cultural and environmental education through diverse landscape conditions and facilities for adults and children. In Rotterdam, a new park is being designed for local residents focused on community activities and hobbies as part of a larger renewal project for a depressed urban area. In Denia, Spain, an elevated artificial landscape forged into the natural surroundings has given the city a dynamic town square activated by a theater, a museum, and an open-air amphitheater. In addition to large-scale initiatives, a diverse collection of smaller-scale interventions from public art and urban games, to installations and performances, illustrate the importance and potential of more grassroots methods of investigating how we use, understand, play in, construct, and cultivate the city. *The Cultured City* projects illustrate that the best and most sustainable public spaces are those that are flexible to change and can accommodate multiple activities, both programmed and unscripted. —ZR

roundtable discussion

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The following conversation took place in spring 2005 at Van Alen Institute. This text is an edited version of the original transcript.

evans There are some significant contradictions faced by our institutions and museums related to the use of technology. One is that technology has allowed us to customize experience. With web-based technologies, for example, everybody feels entitled to have their own experience of a museum. I think what is really important about education in a museum setting that sometimes gets lost is for an institution to present its point of view and values while allowing for practices that encourage people to follow their own investigations.

goodman Much of the interactive technology used in museums as interpretive programming makes people feel as though they are involved or have something to say but in fact controls what they can do.

utterback I have been working on projects that create spaces in which people can test their own assumptions. For example, I did a piece for the American Museum of Natural History in New York as part of "The Genomic Revolution" show in 2001. A live video of visitors was projected on the gallery wall. Instead of displaying normal video, my piece translated people's images into the letters ATGC, which represent the proteins of DNA. I hoped that after the initial fun of seeing themselves that people would start asking, is that me? Do those letters represent me? This question was raised throughout the exhibit, but my piece allowed people to encounter it in a very personal and subjective way.

goodman This technique of putting a mirror in front of museum visitors and asking them to look at themselves is a dramatic gesture that is itself not educational, but opens the door for education and visitor involvement, which is vital for learning.

lehman The most successful education program that we have had recently was a complete surprise to us. It was for the "Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children" exhibition. We invited children to sit for a portrait. Visitors went through the exhibition reading about Sargent's various sitters and looking at his portraits and at

the end of the show had the opportunity to have their photograph taken. Over 10,000 people sat for portraits. We lined a gallery from floor to ceiling with these images and comments. The photographers commented on how many times the sitters would go back and forth into the gallery in order to be able to mimic a formal seating arrangement Sargent had established. The exhibition became very interactive.

evans Technology allows us to think that everything can be customized and people can have an at-home experience that duplicates a museum experience or an art experience or a cultural experience. At the same time, people miss being in a space in which they can have a communal experience. I think a current concern is how do you honor those kinds of impulses—the individualization of experience and the real need for people to be in public spaces together?

lutfy One of the things that we realized when we were developing the master plan for BAM Cultural District with Rem Koolhaas and Diller Scofidio + Renfro is that we wanted to encourage interaction between people and artists, as well as between art organizations from various disciplines. We wanted to design the district's landscape so that it would foster connections between the Cultural District and the surrounding communities. We also wanted to design and program the public spaces to make the district an inviting destination that people would want to come to hang out in, pass through, or enjoy the arts and activities going on. As we move forward with the project, we plan to literally incorporate artists' works into the landscape. We will use design and architecture as tools to elevate the level of awareness about the district's surroundings and the cultural diversity that is inherent in these spaces.

rodriguez I think that in order to create a healthy and sustainable city in a broader sense you need to provide places that are accessible to all. The city is inherently a percolator of information but one of our major concerns as designers, educators, curators, etc., is how do you draw different people in?

utterback I think the question of accessibility is essential to discussions about education and the arts. My work is always about transforming the public's experience of a place or a situation, allowing them to reflect on it, and through that encouraging them to engage in more didactic information. The message does not need to be overt but can be more subliminal and still have an impact. It is about sparking people's curiosity first and then working on holding people's attention long enough so that they explore the work, whether that's an art piece or a public space.

lehman At the Brooklyn Museum of Art, we just opened the door. I had wondered for many, many years how to engage the hundreds, if not thousands of schoolchildren who walked by our museum but never looked or came in. By creating more access points and a more transparent entrance, designed by Polshek Partnership, these kids now walk through the museum. In addition, one of the reasons that we still have a suggested admission rather than a fixed admission fee is exactly for these kids. If by chance one of them decides not just to walk in and see what is hanging in the lobby but maybe wants to see an exhibit they do not have to think twice and say "But it is going to cost me $5 or $20?" They can just walk in.

rodriguez I went recently to the Seattle Public Library, designed by Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. It is a stunning space, but what stuck in my mind, which I still can't get over, is that you can drink a cup of coffee in the library. You can in fact bring your coffee into any part of the library. In one sense it changes the library from a place in which you study, to a place of recreation. It is a simple idea but it totally changes your perception of what the space is used for and makes the concept of the library much less formal and more accessible.

goodman At the Museum of the Moving Image, we have been investigating how people access information. Our interest in handheld devices emerged out of seeing visitors who come to the museum with some form of electronic device in

their pocket: a cell phone, a media player, or a PDA. We wanted to take advantage of this and create a way for people to utilize their personal device to access information about the exhibitions and events within the context of the museum. The idea was to enhance the intimate relationship visitors have with their digital devices and find a way to enter into this relationship rather than compete with it.

Though this technology can distance people from their surrounding physical environment, experiences can be designed that aid social interaction. For instance, people can share the information they have on their personal devices with one another.

rodriguez One of the things I'm curious about is how technology is transforming how we design and think about our physical, personal, and collective spaces. How important is the physical place to conveying information? Can technology be used to go beyond the walls of an institution or a specific neighborhood?

goodman What we are interested in is exploring how we can connect a visit to a museum with the visit of that same person to our website. We want people to be able to bookmark a physical object within the museum, and access that information later via a personal point of entry on our website.

lehman We've developed a PDA system called Pocket Museum, which gives visitors access to everything in our collection database.

lutfy Is it connected to the website?

lehman Yes, visitors can get onto the museum's website through the PDA. Unfortunately, they can also just sit in a chair in the lobby and go through the entire museum, but hopefully, they will explore exhibits, and as they go through, they can access information which will encourage them to explore further.

lutfy Again, I think that what is important about all these projects that are being mentioned is the idea of connectivity. With the BAM Cultural District, we want the district not only to be about the presentation of art, but also about its creation, so spaces need to be able to accommodate both. Our plan is to develop a sense of transparency between the buildings and public spaces so that people can see what's going on, get engaged, and make connections between difference spaces.

rodriguez Your point about connections is critical when thinking about the cultured city. In designing the new Frank Sinatra High School for the Arts in Astoria, Queens, we've created a large glass curtain wall facing the Museum of the Moving Image and Kaufman Studios, in order to enliven the avenue with the arts program within the building. The glass façade will become a luminous beacon at night when the school's concert hall is open to the public.

goodman Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam, designed by West 8, is very interesting in this regard. The square has a series of light posts that the public can play around with by changing their position. It can be off-putting at first but then it is actually quite wonderful.

evans Education is not just about making cerebral connections or connections through technology, but is also about personal engagements that affect all of the senses. It is about something as simple as being able to walk down the street and have a conversation and casual encounter with things and people. For me, urban environments are all about trying to reinforce the collective memory of a city and build on that through the everyday experiences and encounters that are both programmed and unscripted.

lutfy A key ingredient for a public project such as the BAM Cultural District to succeed is ensuring that there is a demand for what you are doing. There needs to be a critical mass of people that embrace the idea. One of the great things happening in New York right now is the dispersal of arts organizations, artists, and the general population from Manhattan to the other boroughs. As a result, there is a critical mass of people that

either needs or wants to participate in a project such as the Cultural District. That demand is enabling projects such as ours to take root.

rodriguez It takes leadership to make that happen and a commitment by the city.

husser I think it would be fascinating to explore how we might experience a museum environment or new ways of connecting with information at an urban scale. While recently waiting on jury duty downtown, I received this pamphlet about Lower Manhattan listing all of the significant downtown sites and their histories. It was fascinating. There was so much great information in there that I never would have found myself, yet because it was made available to me, I learned a lot.

goodman I am a big fan of a company called Sound Walks. They produce audio-based walking tours of New York City neighborhoods such as Times Square, the Bronx, Chinatown, Dumbo, and Williamsburg. Not just a voice droning on and on, they provide an audio soundscape that more closely connects you with the site's history and perhaps its essence. These are examples of projects that really add something to our experience and knowledge of public space.