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Beyond Green: The Arts as a Catalyst for Sustainability

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Arts, Sustainability and the City

At the international policy level, such as the Sustainable Development Goals or Agenda21, explicit references to “culture” are often left out, but cities are included – “and once you have cities, you have culture, because cities know the importance of culture.”

Thus cities prove a valuable means of promoting culture at the international level. Some dismiss the need for explicit inclusion in such agendas because “culture is everywhere,” but “if culture is everywhere, it will be nowhere.”

Cities “understand” culture, as well as heritage and tourism. Their smaller size and forms of representation means cities can engage their citizens in a more direct manner than states and regions, and art can be a valuable method of engagement. “The time that the town hall makes all of a city’s decisions are over,” remarked one Fellow; cities need to engage their citizens. Artists are especially well-placed to help assert the fact that cities are a place for solidarity, community and equity, especially in cities where there are huge disparities between the rich and the poor, rather than just drivers for economic growth and development.

This is not to say that artists should be willing to be “instrumentalized” by their cities, but instead form partnerships and help cities imagine artistic engagement in manners they may never have considered – and imagine a shared future. Co-creation and participatory design projects can help promote dialogues throughout the city. As one Fellow remarked, “We need to build dynamic relationships that allow people to articulate what they want at a grassroots level.”



Omar Nagati, Christine Gitau, Francis Sollano, Singh Intrachooto and Liz Thompson

Turning trash into treasure

Whether it’s manufactures’ waste, informal spaces, or plain old garbage, the panelists of the fifth plenary session of *Beyond Green* brought new meaning to “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure”.

The presentations of initiatives from Egypt, Thailand, the Philippines and Kenya, elicited utterances of “cool” and “wow” throughout Parker Hall, with one Fellow tweeting, “Singh from Thailand is really blowing my mind right now.”


Thailand’s “Scrap Lab” works with manufacturers to collect their waste, experiment with it, and ultimately turn it into marketable and profitable new products. Recognizing that manufacturers would be less resistant to this “upcycling” than to simply reducing their waste output, Scrap Lab doesn’t plan to change companies’ business models, but instead turn their waste into new business ideas. Examples of this reuse of waste have included turning the leftovers from the button making process into an alternative to terrazzo, glass dust into porous “eco stones” to help water plants, and even coffee into tiles (that cover the walls of a Bangkok Starbucks).

In the Philippines, a similar approach has been adopted, turning

garbage into desirable fashion items. Initially seen as a massive irritation, the trash of the city of Cebu, has been transformed into “trashion” by skilled local workers. This small industry has not only given the community additional income, but also a sense of pride and greater purpose. The locals now wants to make this industry and their communities more sustainable, with Youth for a Livable Cebu engaging younger residents to not only harness their honesty (“Kids will tell you if it’s trashy”), but to also engage their parents and wider community.

The trashion products are marked “Made in Cebu,” not “Made in Philippines” – a branding choice understood and being adopted in Kenya. Rather than exporting all its raw materials, Craft Afrika is seeking to expand Kenya’s design and manufacturing industries. If Germany inspires thoughts of cars and Switzerland watches and chocolate, what could “Made in Kenya” become most positively associated with?

The use of waste isn’t limited to trash; “junk” informal spaces in post-revolution Egypt are being utilized innovatively, from street stalls to mini urban parks, and even into access ramps to highways that would otherwise bypass whole communities.

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Voices from the regions

Escaping the plenary sessions of Parker Hall, the Fellows broke out into regional groups to examine what projects already exist in the region and how they can collaborate.

In **Latin America**, despite the footballing rivalry between Brazil and Argentina, the group explored projects that will connect water and garbage management with education to promote sustainable practices on a wider international scale.

A combined group representing **Africa and the Middle East** acknowledged that we need to look to neighbors and discover existing networks. They encouraged the Fellows to be more pragmatic, especially when considering the powerful role of artists that can work outside of traditional morals and systems to promote change.

The **Asia** group focused on the way language can cause a rift when discussing sustainability. The word sustainability in itself is not necessarily a commonly understood word when translated across Asia, but there are many other definitions and practices rooted in traditional culture that can promote the same message in more understandable and less daunting manner than terms that are only understood in a Western context.

The nature of **Europe** was a major starting point for the European group. Questions were raised on identity in Europe and the major role the EU takes in facilitating networks and the bureaucratic structures that connect across boundaries. Several key points were noted such as the shift in the way energy is produced, consumed and transmitted, and the attempt to descale back-to-basics when thinking about sustainability.

Lastly the **North American** group made the provocative statement that the land they work on is stolen land and was built by stolen labor. They believed this was inescapable from their identities. This free flowing discussion moved on to ponder what the individuals believed in, whether that be love, their city or art, and encouraged colleagues to ask questions like this of each other to encourage both hyper-local understanding as well as their context in the rest of the world.



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Enablers of change

If we want to enable and sustain positive change, we need both the rabble-rousers and the insiders.

Post-COP, there is now a sense of urgency – but also a sense of paralysis. What do we do next to seize this moment and accelerate change?

Artists can help ask questions about our “inconvenient truths” and disrupt the current power structures. But artists can also prompt and facilitate difficult conversations between diverse actors. Under oppressive regimes, it can often be valuable to work with or around the system, and learn how to look about society but without touch politics – and avoid being silenced.

Artists and creatives, institutions and custodians, policymakers, and audiences all have vital roles to play but they don’t always know how to speak to or help each other.

Organizations, such as Julie’s Bicycle in the UK, can help support artists, institutions and policymakers looking to foster change in multiple ways. Julie’s Bicycle provides resources such

as “how to green a festival,” conducts research such as carbon footprinting the whole of the UK’s music industry, and hosts events where like-minded artists, organizations and individuals can come together. These activities not only provide artists with the means of greening their own behavior, but also provide valuable evidence for policymakers. To have lasting change, “We need to come together, amplify our voices and talk up” to power structures, not just to each other.

Funders also have a key role to play in helping artists working to enact change, and not only by strategically investing funds; they can also offer a “bird’s eye” view of what else is happening and help artists collaborate.

The two notions “to change everything it takes everyone” and “the front lines of crisis are the forefront of change” may seem conflicting, but climate change offers the chance for equity and solidarity: “We will soon all be in the same boat, for a change.”



Kusumawijaya with panelists Zayd Minty, Ania Rok, Margaret Cullen and Anupama Sekhar

Marco Kusumawijaya: Change happens “community by community, postcode by postcode”

Patrick Wilson

The city is often cited as a driver of change, but it is important not to overlook the role the communities within those cities can play in delivering that change.

One Fellow determined to highlight the role of the communities within cities at the Salzburg Global program *Beyond Green: The Arts as a Catalyst for Sustainability*, was Marco Kusumawijaya, the director of Rujak Centre for Urban Studies (RCUS), based in Jakarta, and founder and director of the Bumi Pemuda Rahayu (BPR) sustainability learning center in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Speaking on a panel on “The City as a Driver of Change,” Kusumawijaya spoke of the role the community can play as an important intermediary to promote change. Change that begins with one person, can spread to their family and then into the community, and onwards. Change happens “community by community, postcode by postcode,” he told the gathered Fellows.

The community thus acts as intermediary level between individual behavioral changes and systemic change. “While I don’t see one as more important than the other, I think there’s a role I can play more successfully,” he explains. “I don’t have the power to make change from above at a governmental level but I think I can do it at a community level

because I have the skills to organize people and encourage engagement.”

Kusumawijaya directs RCUS’s main program “Citizen Urbanism,” where he is responsible for co-production of urban knowledge in eight Indonesian cities with different communities and partners.

“We do research but we call our way of working a ‘co-production of knowledge,’” he told Salzburg Global during the session. “We encourage and work with communities to co-produce knowledge about their own cities, organize exchanges and encourage initiatives.”

Kusumawijaya believes that more work can be accomplished when we acknowledge that human beings always live in a group and are essentially social animals. In addition to Citizen Urbanism, this manner of thinking also comes across in projects such as The Artist in Residency (AIR) program at BPR. The biannual project invites Indonesian artists from a variety of disciplines to live at BPR for three months making work with the local community in relation to their practice. Programs like this, he believes, allow us to recognize the right of citizens to participate in the formation of the future of their cities through learning about art and new skills to promote development in cities and new ideas.

“We see art as a way of knowing, as a way of researching and as a way of touching the hearts of people and communities,” he explained. “It

allows us to encourage doing things that are fun but also at the same time critical and promote deeper thought.”

Something that requires deeper and more critical thought, according to Kusumawijaya is the word “development.” While frequently used when talking about countries in the Global South and in terms of creating more sustainable societies, for Kusumawijaya the word has negative connotations.

“The word ‘development’ was an economic term but economy has become so hegemonic that people think if you’re not developed economically, you’re not developed in any other fields of life. For me this is simply wrong,” says Kusumawijaya. “Somehow we moved from a sense of general welfare for all to measuring our governments by what rate of economic growth they deliver.

“I think one of the most important revelations from the research of many fields is that growth has nothing to do with equity. The largest amount of growth goes to the smallest amount of people.

“It’s wrong to base development theory on growth.

“That’s why I think the term ‘sustainable development’ is poisonous; its meaning has been nailed to growth rate. The economic idea has even been used to measure other parts of life which is wrong. For example, I don’t think our dance tradition is underdeveloped – our classical Javanese dance or West Sumatran dance is very well developed. Of course it is different to ballet and Western traditions, but it would be wrong to say it’s underdeveloped as compared to it.”

Whilst his work is challenging, Kusumawijaya has found support in the community of Fellows in Salzburg.

“There are so just many ideas being shared and passed around by the Fellows,” he said. “I think I only knew maybe one or two people in the group before coming here so one of the most important parts for me is to meet all these people who are thinking, working and experimenting with brilliant ideas to promote change. While I still have to digest them all, the mere fact there are so many people, thinking and working with the same aspiration of change as me is incredibly heartening.”



Hot Topic:

“Do you agree that ‘development’ has become a poisonous word?”

Patrick Wilson

“The word ‘development’ was an economic term but economy has become so hegemonic that people think if you’re not developed economically, you’re not developed in any other fields of life. For me this is simply wrong... That’s why I think the term ‘sustainable development’ is poisonous; its meaning has been nailed to growth rate. The economic idea has even been used to measure other parts of life which is wrong.”

Marco Kusumawijaya

Director, Rujak Center for Urban Studies, Jakarta, Indonesia
(Read our full interview inside!)

“Development is now in many ways considered a bad word, also in Asia. We need to work out how to make people understand the value of sustainable development. In many ways we are very romantic about the past but it is coming to the point where you have to see the urgency to have change.”

Margaret Shiu

Founder & Director, Bamboo Curtain Studio, Taipei, Taiwan

“It’s an interesting point because I’m interested in the redefinition of the word development rather than thinking of it as economic development. We should start thinking of it as a holistic human development and what does it mean to invest in holistic individual societal development and evolutionary development.”

Alexis Frasz

Researcher & Strategist, Helicon Collaborative, New York, NY, USA

“Nowadays, not only in Argentina but all over the world, development is still very much connected with growth of GDPs and economic development and that is exactly the disease. It’s a very one dimensional view for a multi-dimensional problem. I think we still don’t understand what the goal is, economic growth could be important but it is not the goal. The goal of development is for people to flourish.”

Christian Tiscornia Biaus

Founder & President, Amartya Buenos Aires, Argentina

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If you do intend to write for your own organization either whilst you’re here or after the session, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you’re in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Louise.

We’ll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, on the session page: www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/561

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