Throughout human history, cities have acted as centres of innovation, melting pots of culture and philosophy, cradles of economic activity. Arts, crafts, architecture, music, theatre, science, business and myriad other pursuits have taken shape in their fertile environs. This relationship between culture and cities is natural, given that cities offer unique opportunities for creative cooperation and exchange amongst people of diverse backgrounds, and provide the economic vitality and social infrastructure required for cultural practices to flourish.

Culture and identity are not merely intangibles. They have a profound impact on several aspects that are critical to the functioning of cities such as social cohesion, community engagement and action on civic issues, local economic strengths, building practices and technologies, and importantly, on long term resilience of local communities. Cultural and creative industries generate nearly 30 million jobs worldwide and employ more people in the age range of 15-29 than any other sector. Economies linked with culture are also more resilient, for e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic, exports in creative services only fell by 1.8%, while exports of all services fell by 20%. However, rapid growth of consumerism and globalization has resulted in increasing homogenization of cities worldwide. While the economic benefits of global capital flows are necessary and need to be harnessed, it is equally important to protect local economies, practices and knowledge to ensure long term resilience to economic and other shocks.

Preserving the unique identity of cities requires fostering of a “sense of place”. This has also been emphasized by the G20 Sous Sherpa, Mr. Abhay Thakur, who stressed on the importance of creating cities of tomorrow with a sense of belonging and uniqueness. This will require action on several fronts such as supporting vulnerable local economies (including cultural economies and crafts), protecting historic city fabrics and heritage assets, improving the social infrastructure and community commons available in the city etc. Local knowledge on climate-responsive design of built environments, conservation of essential resources like water, approaches to disaster mitigation and adaptation also needs to be harnessed and scaled. Many cities are also actively promoting creativity and cultural heritage as a means to drive sustainable economic growth.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in India has recognized this and initiated several flagship programs such as the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), HRIDAY Mission, and National Urban Livelihood Mission (DAY-NULM) for mainstreaming this agenda within city planning. While SCM has encouraged area-based development through community engagement and has been instrumental in revitalization of numerous cultural precincts, HRIDAY has focused on preservation and development of heritage assets. DAY-NULM on the other hand promotes sustainable livelihood opportunities and supports local economies. The inclusion of this aspect as a priority agenda under Urban20 further demonstrates India’s commitment towards concentrating global attention and action on this critical matter.

Most deliberations on urban development tend to be focused only on material aspects of infrastructure, finance and governance, often neglecting the need to recognize cultural aspects and the role they play in ensuring the health of cities. I want to take this opportunity to urge city leaders across the world to renew focus on ‘Championing Local identities’ as an essential lens through which we want to think about the future of our cities.
Delhi is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world and a site of numerous settlements over its history. It has several heritage assets and precincts, including the living walled city of Shahjahanabad that is more than 350 years old. The present-day city is a unique palimpsest where cultural artefacts seamlessly meet every day public activity. The city’s cultural ethos is also strongly linked with several public spaces of cultural, social, and economic significance, which form important activity nodes and add to the vibrant public life of the city. While earlier masterplans recognized the need to conserve listed heritage assets, the draft Master plan for Delhi 2041 for the first time recognized the need to create a comprehensive policy environment for reinvigorating public spaces, supporting adaptive reuse of assets, conserving the larger built fabric and socio-economic relationships that exist in living historic precincts, and leveraging the economic potential of culture and heritage. In a fresh approach, the plan dedicated a separate policy section on ‘Heritage, culture and public spaces’, wherein it propounded strategies covering three major aspects.

Promoting heritage and cultural clusters in the city – Three types of clusters were identified, with different strategies for preservation and enhancement. These included Heritage Zones (e.g. Walled City), Cultural Precincts with a mix of heritage and other socio-cultural functions (e.g. historic urban villages, institutional areas, etc.), and Archaeological Parks, showing a mix of natural and cultural heritage. Through the development of local plans for these zones and precincts, the plan targets area improvement measures to improve the quality of life of citizens, promotes cultural and creative economies, and enables the development of tourist circuits.

Providing appropriate norms to support conservation – In addition to listed buildings, the fabric of the walled city was identified as being critical to the character and community networks of the place. The plan regulates the form of redevelopment (form and footprint) that can be taken up and awards any unused development rights as TDR. An additional Heritage TDR has been introduced to enable adaptive reuse of listed buildings. The plan encourages specific form-based codes, improved walkability and street improvement, and place-making initiatives through customized Cultural Resource Management Plans for identified precincts. It also provides flexibility to implement a mix of creative and cultural uses like studios, museums, libraries, handicraft shops, etc.

Managing public spaces better – A variety of enabling norms are provided to develop city-level priority public places such as waterfronts, woodlands, cultural hotspots, marketplaces, and transit hotspots. The plan lays special emphasis on promoting a vibrant night life in the city through creation of night-time circuits and provision of supporting infrastructure such as extended timings for commerce and public transport, area improvement initiatives, proper illumination, and safety measures, etc. Norms for place-making through creation of public plazas, activation of public spaces through activity programming and promotion of vertical mixing of uses, façade controls to maintain active frontage along streets and public areas and encouraging privately-owned public spaces (POPS) were critical features of the plan. The plan also encourages citizen engagement in auditing, designing, activating, and maintaining public spaces.
Kumbh Mela: A Confluence of Spirituality and Local Identity

A significant pilgrimage and cultural event in India, the Kumbh Mela attracts millions of visitors from all across the nation and the world. It takes place every 12 years at Allahabad (Prayagraj), Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain, four different cities in India. During the festival's communal washing rite, devotees congregate to cleanse themselves of their sins and seek spiritual enlightenment. The Kumbh Mela is both a religious celebration and a cultural spectacle that highlights the area's unique art, music, and cuisine. The event gives local business owners, artists, and craftspeople a venue to market their goods and make a living. Kumbh Mela is a distinctive occasion that captures the cultural and religious character of India's cultural heritage.

Respective state and local governments support the mass gathering through a number of initiatives targeted towards improving infrastructure and leveraging the economic potential of the festival. These include development of a temporary planned city to accommodate housing for the visitors, developing internal roads and pontoon bridges, improving connectivity to the mela site, enhancing hospitality and safety facilities in the host city, overhauling of infrastructure at transit hubs like railway stations and airports, and deploying large scale administrative machinery to manage the festival and look after the design and smooth flow of various cultural events that take place during the festival.

Ahmedabad ‘World Heritage City’

Ahmedabad is known as the 'Manchester of India' due to its cotton textile manufacturing industry. The 600-year-old walled city of Ahmedabad has 600 residential clusters known as 'Pols', which have a distinct structure and architectural character. However, due to urbanization, the built form and quality of life in the walled city are deteriorating. Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) set up a heritage cell in 1994 to conserve the city's rich heritage. This cell prepared a comprehensive plan to revitalise the walled city, setting an example of how local bodies can play an important role in preserving, and promoting the rich culture and heritage of cities. It also works to preserve the cultural heritage of the city through programs and projects such as awareness creation, educational programs, identification and listing of heritage resources, conduction of heritage walks, promotional programs, lectures, seminars, conferences, painting competitions, exhibitions, and physical conservation and restoration of heritage buildings. Ahmedabad encourages the conservation and preservation of the walled city through the introduction of a Core Walled City zone in their Development Plan. The Core Walled City Zone is divided into ‘Heritage Areas’ and ‘Other areas of Core Walled City’, and regulations have been identified for promoting the conservation of heritage structures and the urban fabric within the walled city. With constant efforts towards heritage conservation, Ahmedabad became the first Indian city to be inscribed on the World Heritage list by UNESCO in 2017.
London is a major global centre for the creative and cultural industries, contributing to the city’s economy. Key highlights include £10 million generated every hour by the creative industries, 1/6 of jobs in London are in the creative economy, 30% growth in London’s film industry, and £52 billion contributed by culture and creativity annually. To strengthen its cultural identity and maintain a competitive edge, the city authorities support the development of its cultural infrastructure. Investments in the cultural and creative economies have direct advantages to the city-wide economy and have a cascading impact on the creative industries supply chain.

The Mayor of London launched the first ever ‘Creative Enterprise Zones’ as part of an initiative to support artists and creative businesses while, developing skills and jobs for Londoners, with Deptford being one of the nine Creative Enterprise Zones (CEZs). These zones will leverage £30 million of investment with funding from the London Economic Action Partnership (LEAP) and the Mayor’s Good Gro Fund. The nine winning Creative Enterprise Zones chosen for their dedication to producing local jobs and increasing affordable workspace include Croydon, Haringey, South Tottenham Employment Area, Hounslow, Lambeth, Brixton, Lewisham, SHAPES Lewisham, Hammersmith & Fulham, Ealing and Waltham Forest, and Ealing and Waltham Forest. These zones are chosen for their dedication to producing local jobs and increasing affordable workspace.

South Shoreditch Conservation Area is a strategic planning area in the north of the City of London, featuring 52 listed structures. The area is home to 406 creative industries, of which 32% represent IT, software, and computer services. The site is a notable hub for IT-related businesses, with approximately 18% of the 406 creative industries representing film, television, video, radio, and photo related businesses. The South Shoreditch is the Creative heart of London, central to Europe’s creative, digital and tech industries. Over time, it and has become a national and international destination for culture, entertainment, and leisure uses, and supports Sustainable Development Goals through community wealth creation and income-generating spaces. The initiative supports SDG 8 through employment opportunities in renovation and resident businesses and SDG 11 through developing mixed-uses and income-generating spaces.

The Government of the UK has taken a collaborative approach to draft the ‘Historic England Industrial Heritage Strategy’ to recognise the potential of Industrial Heritage to improve health and climate change. The Architecture Heritage Fund (AHF) operates a Heritage revolving fund with a capital of £17.5M, and Second Floor Studios and Arts (SFSA) provides affordable studio space for visual and fine artists and craft and designer-makers.
The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, together with India's Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) and the National Institute of Urban Affairs (Technical Secretariat for U20), convened national and international partners to discuss mainstreaming climate action in cities, in an effort to shape G20 priorities and develop next steps for accelerating climate action in India and beyond.

The gathering was part of a series of events organised during India’s G20 Presidency under the ambit of the Urban 20 (U20), which is chaired this year by the city of Ahmedabad and supported by MoHUA, with various partner organisations. Its conclusions will inform the U20 communiqué of recommendations, which will be presented to G20 negotiators later this year.

Participants agreed on the urgent need for cities to accelerate climate action and for added support from national governments and international investors to address vulnerabilities due to increasing heat and rainfall. City governments should consider climate impacts when making budgeting decisions, while leveraging public-private partnerships, municipal green bonds and other innovative financing mechanisms where available. Climate action plans should address water security and resilience; institutional and regulatory reforms should be considered where needed to protect and revitalise vulnerable water resources, mainstream integrated urban water resource management, ensure equitable and safe access to water and reduce risk from water-related hazards like flooding.

The event in Bangalore facilitated cross-sector learning and strengthened city-to-city engagement on three of the six U20 priority areas: accelerating climate finance, ensuring water security, and encouraging environmentally responsive behaviour. Around 135 people attended in person, in addition to participants joining virtually, including city officials from across the country and region as well as experts, funders and partners.

The 6th Asian Cities Summit was organized by the All India Institute of Local Self Government (AIILSG) in collaboration with MoHUA and NIUA in New Delhi from April 5-6, 2023. More than 400 delegates from 25 countries attended the event to discuss ways to make cities more inclusive and resilient to climate change. The theme of the summit was ‘Resilient Cities and Inclusive Growth’. Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Hon’ble Minister of Jal Shakti, inaugurated the event and launched the Urban75 Book written by Indian urbanists, which explores the history of cities and urban policy in Independent India.

The keynote address was delivered by Mr Kunal Kumar, Joint Secretary from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, who emphasized the challenges of building smart cities and the need for determination and courage. The summit featured three technical sessions and parallel sessions on various themes. Dr SP Singh Baghel, Hon’ble Minister of State for Law and Justice, highlighted the important role of mayors in city building.

The event also included the third Women Leadership Workshop, which focused on addressing issues related to women’s empowerment through three technical sessions. The summit provided a platform for knowledge sharing and mutual learning among local government leaders and urbanists, contributing to the development of more inclusive and resilient cities in Asia.
Celebrating the distinct characteristics of cities is a necessity in this globalising world where all places have started looking the same. Place specific approaches to sustainable urban development reinforce unique local identities, strengthen community networks and practices, preserve tangible and intangible heritage and build long term economic resilience.

Kanak Tiwari  
Programme Director - Urban Strategy Unit and Head U20 Technical Secretariat

Preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourism is critical for creating cities of tomorrow with a unique sense of belongingness. The Kashi Vishwanath and Mahakal corridors showcase how these efforts can drive economic development. By highlighting our cities’ cultural and local identity, we can create a sense of place and promote diversity. The G20’s commitment to showcasing the unique culture of Indian cities is a positive step towards cultural awareness and appreciation.  
(from C40 Bangalore Event)

Abhay Thakur  
G20 Sous Sherpa

India’s vast number of skilled craftspeople and unique regional crafts are a gold mine waiting to be recognized. We must acknowledge art and craft as a profession and allow these clusters to function in their own tailored way, with the government acting as a catalyst or funder. With crafts being applicable to every domain, we must harness their power to drive growth and innovation.  
(from U20 Manthan)

Laila Tyabji  
Chairperson, Dastkar

Local economies are the roots of sustenance, and decision-making should rest with local custodians to preserve local identity. While the government may fund projects, it’s crucial to ensure that powerful forces don’t alienate local communities. To champion local identity, questions may come from national or regional levels, but the answers must come from the local.  
(from U20 Manthan)

Gurmeet S. Rai  
Director, Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative

(from U20 Manthan)
Upcoming Events

**EVENT ON URBAN GOVERNANCE UNDER URBAN20 SERIES OF EVENTS - AIILSG**

18 May 2023
Indore

The event will include discussion amongst sector experts covering priority areas of Championing ‘Local’ Identity, Reinventing Frameworks for Urban Governance & Planning and Catalysing Digital Urban Futures

**MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN THE U20 AGENDA**

25-26 May 2023
New Delhi

A joint event hosted by the UN women and NIUA, is being held in May with the aim to mainstream gender within all six U20 priorities. Representatives from the C20, T20 and gender partners from the City Climate Alliance will come together for this event

**SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURES**

7 June 2023
Lucknow

A one-day joint conference on ‘Sustainable Urban Futures’ will be held in June with the aim of incorporating inclusivity and sustainability aspects within all six U20 priorities. The conference will be attended by policy research organizations, academic institutions, experts, and practitioners.

**CONVERGENCE**

**Y20 CONSULTATION SUMMIT**

10th - 12th May 2023
Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir

Youth 20 and Urban 20 are converging to organize “Twenty Talks” and “Urban Chaupal” based on the tenets of Jan Bhagidari. These collaboration initiatives are being launched at the Y20 Consultation Summit at University of Kashmir, on the theme of Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Sustainability - A Way of Life. “Twenty Talks” is a discussion series on the youth’s perspective of urban issues, in association with twenty colleges from all over India. “Urban Chaupal” is an informal community engagement session in selected urban areas aligning to the local aspects of the U20 and Y20 priorities.

About the U20 Process

The U20 brings together mayors from G20 cities under a common framework and coordinates a joint position to inform the discussions of national leaders. Contributions from the U20, including the U20 Communique, are shared with the G20 Presidency and Heads of State, enhancing the role of cities as global economic and political leaders. The U20 is an independent initiative that is permanently convened by the conveners UCLG and C40.

For more information, www.u20india.org

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