

Design a city for culture or let culture design a city?

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When searching the web for dictionary definitions of “cultural district,” amid academic articles and policy papers, [Wikipedia’s](#) is actually the most concise: “a well-recognized, labeled, mixed-use area of a settlement in which a high concentration of cultural facilities serves as the anchor of attraction.” Cultural districts can be found across the globe – there are over 100 in the US alone – but I continue to be fascinated by how these districts came to be. In some cases, visionaries, city authorities and business leaders visualized places, such as Lincoln Center, as a part of city building, economic development, livability, creativity, local “spirit” and fun. Others, such as Fourth Arts Block ([featured last week on Urban Omnibus](#)), develop organically as a result of circumstances that attract artists and creative communities to one place. But this distinction is not just a matter of origin, but of audience as well. In one case, the audience is (often) identified and imported by the developers of the district, while in the other, the audience is the generator of the district itself. How do you design a city – any city – for culture? Or should you let the culture design the city?

Those questions were at the core of the discussion “[Designing for Culture: Hong Kong – Chicago – New York](#),” held by the Asia Society last week. Hong Kong was represented by Rocco Yim, one of three finalists in the competition for the West Kowloon Cultural District master plan (the other two finalists are Norman Foster and OMA). Edward K. Uhler, the executive director of Millennium Park, presented that project’s process in the context of Chicago’s cultural environment. And architect Hugh Hardy talked about a variety of cultural projects in New York. The intent of the projects in these three cities differed at their core. The discussion was moderated by Kristy Edmunds, Consulting Artistic Director for the Park Avenue Armory in New York.

Rocco Yim, an architect based in Hong Kong, presented his master plan proposal for the [West Kowloon Cultural District](#) in Hong Kong. The proposed district spans nearly 100 acres (40 hectares) and would be home to 14 major cultural institutions. Yim’s design is organized in three layers: Green Terrain, City Link and A Cultural Core. His design focuses on a public space network and connectivity to the city, but it is unclear how the activity of the new cultural district would be linked to the arts that already exist in Hong Kong. This project is part of an effort by the Hong Kong government to invest in the arts through the physical infrastructure of the city. Presently there is no cultural district in Hong Kong, hence the need for

such spaces. But one question remained unanswered: Is there enough of an audience to bring an arts district of this magnitude to life?

Edward Uhler offered insight into the potential economic impact of a cultural venue or district. He walked us through the process of developing the 24.5-acre Millennium Park, from the initial opposition to the idea, partially fueled by a poorly articulated economic plan, to what he described as a public amenity that has made a tremendous economic impact in Chicago. With pavilions, sculptures and built features by well-known artists and architects, such as Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Zaha Hadid, Anish Kapoor and Jaume Plensa, this cultural destination, according to Uhler, now attracts more visitors in the summer months than any other public project in the nation.

Hugh Hardy, founder and partner of [H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture](#), widely known for his work with theaters, performing arts facilities and other cultural institutions, shared his thoughts on planning a city around the idea of culture. Hardy expressed his constant fascination by how the visual arts and the performing arts come together in the urban environment. Citing examples of Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Times Square's Theatre Row, he argued that it is the integration of culture within the urban fabric that ultimately builds a city.

After the Chicago and New York cases were discussed, a question presented to Yim — Who's the audience for all this? — continued to linger. Thinking back to the Wikipedia definition of a cultural district — well-recognized, mixed-use, and anchored by concentrated cultural amenities — made me wonder about how deliberate design, policy and real estate projects can realistically be in creating cultural districts. Certainly both a planned cultural district and a naturally occurring one can serve as an anchor of attraction, and can contribute to a city's economic development. New York City's examples, from Fourth Arts Block to Lincoln Center, certainly demonstrate that. But whether increasing a city's supply of cultural offerings will eventually increase citizen's demand for cultural opportunities remains a question for another panel to ponder.

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