Robyn Archer AO – The Artist and the City Event


I think in this context I’m a bit of a ring-in because though I am currently involved in festivals and programming and events in Melbourne, Toronto, Western Australia, Germany, Mildura and something in Paris that may or may not eventuate, none of these things are really Olympian in scale and so I hope that what I have to say is useful to you, many of whom are working on large scale events as such.

It’s self evident from a conference like this that large-scale events are an industry in themselves within our cities. They have been legitimised, professionalised and granted status by various governments and experts like yourselves gathered to exchange views and skills. But I wonder how many opportunities you get to sit outside the profession and ask the simplest of questions, why do we do what we do? If that question never crosses your mind, if a gig’s a gig and that’s all it means, then we could end the conversation there. But I suspect many of you here have the feeling that working in events has something to do with service and good citizenship as well. The subtitle of the conference, Catalysts for Change, surely indicates an altruistic agenda.

The methodology of major events encompasses not just fun for all, but also deals in the rhetoric of civic, state or national pride as well as notions of reinvention or regeneration of the profile and various fortunes of the host.

We know very well the components of a bid. Bring out the numbers, show it’s worth the investment because of the return to the community (though this is often just in terms of visitation, bed-nights, restaurants, etc, that is the tourism or hospitality benefits rather than indeed the community as a whole) and in the biggest bids, Olympics, Commonwealth Games, etc this will include urban regeneration projects as well, the demonstrable legacy to the host city or nation. And a bid always invokes the rhetoric of pride even in predominantly Christian countries whose spiritual teachings still count Pride as one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

The bids tend not to list the number of cases when the investment hasn’t really paid off, when the host is left with a cultural hole, as is the case with a number of cities who have participated in the European Capital of Culture Program, or a debt that takes decades to pay off. But that aside, there is also an assumption within most bids that the event will not only be good for a community but will even unite the community. Its scale, presence and awe inducing spectacle will be enough to overcome all difference and we will ‘unite together’.

But is this empty rhetoric? Does it work for the moment it’s on and then togetherness dissipates once the lights go off? In any case, does the rhetoric only work for the mythical mainstream of any country; the event rhetoric playing to its lowest common denominator? It also begs a couple of other questions too. Does an event really reinvent an exhausted city or does it just distract the populus for a while away from the deep seated problems which cannot be addressed in this superficial way? And if a City is not exhausted, if it’s full of small gems, things to be discovered, a vibrant day to day culture, why on earth would you want to reinvent it?
Two weeks ago I addressed the question to a group of theatre workers in Prague saying:

“A program such as the Prague Quadrennial rightly celebrates the achievement of architecture and design in and for theatre.

Those of us who have made our lives within the arts (and for me it started at four years old) we relish the opportunity to see what brilliant concepts and ideas have been recently dreamt, built and recorded, to discuss these and other ideas with our colleagues, to be inspired by them and return to our work in this vein refreshed and reinvigorated. But there’s always the danger that our, or any playground (the events world for instance) can become its own justification. The question that always comes to mind for me is, ‘why are we here, why do we do what we do?’ “

It then took me an hour in Prague, which I’ll spare you, to come to the following conclusion:

“ While what we come up with in the end, we hope, will be important, as well as enjoyable and inspiring, I doubt it will ever be as important as the real work we do, that is the daily talks, debates, disagreements, the testing of concepts as well as materials, the use of our skill and intelligence, the exercise of mutual respect, the understanding that we will have differences of opinion and practice but we will work together to arrive at the best solution at the time. That is the work that we will do best because that is the most important thing that humans need at this time. Yes, they need plays and they need stories as well as inspiring public architecture and art, yes and maybe even spectacle, but they also need examples of how to live well, how to work together, how to acknowledge that we will always have different views and beliefs and practices but that we can arrive at solutions which can be achieved through intelligent debate, and a return to dialectic, to produce something beautiful as a result. I hope my play or festival or event is good and tells a good story, but more importantly I hope the way I conduct myself with my valued colleagues is a joy to me and reminds me evermore about how to be human in what is often a less than humane world.”

We all know, if we’re honest, that event creation and management is often not like that. That it is often speedy, pushy, competitive within the ranks, frequently boastful, if not downright deceitful, and hierarchical; and that humane behaviour often comes as second best simply to getting the event up and on and over without incident. So you spend two or four years in high stress aggravation for the sake of three weeks of joy. Strange way to spend a life in my opinion.

My conclusion in Prague in late June was perhaps not so different from the conclusion I reached speaking to another group of impassioned cultural producers, directors etc, at the Push Festival in Vancouver in January. The Push Festival is an up and coming contemporary arts festival really starting to give the West Coast of Canada more profile as it seems to have been so long in the shadow of the incredible cultural outpourings of the East Coast and French Canada.

In this festival I was talking very much about who we are and what we do and moreover what we should be doing, what is needed most at this time:
“The challenge for our time is in grasping a sense of urgency. We who have the time to express ourselves, the relative freedom to say whatever we like, we who have more than adequate food and shelter often have problems with the daily apprehension of the urgent matters of our time. Lack of water, lack of compassion, lack of any consistent methodology or guidance whereby we can deal peacefully and respectfully with the offences we inevitably cause each other. We must not reduce the diversity of any bit of life and that includes diversity of belief and opinion. We must not homogenise but at the same time we most urgently need to acknowledge that now that the world has become so in touch with its widespread components we will inevitably tread on each other’s toes.

We need to know how to retain the diversity, acknowledge that there will be accidents of offence, insult, careless appropriation, everyday in every degree but we have to learn to live with it. To resolve differences without lawsuits, guns and punishment. For me this stuff is urgent and our urgent concerns need to be taken up by artists, sports persons and other people in the cultural sector and shared with their audiences in whatever numbers just in case we do, under those special rare, never to be repeated shared circumstances (the performer or writer and the audience) move something in someone to go out and do something, change something, either in themselves or in the world.

Well, how does this apply to you here who are pondering the reinvention of cities? And while you frequently use artists for the creation of spectacle in large scale events, does the event really have anything to do with art and its purpose and function? Again I guess it depends whether you care about the urgent needs in our cities and whether you see a role in that for yourselves. I suspect that just increasing tourist numbers and therefore pleasing Governments at that level will not be enough for genuine reinvention.

If ever there was a reinvention of a city about to be attempted it is surely in Abu Dhabi and a new 27 square kilometre island where around US$27B will be spent constructing Musea by renowned architects Gehry, Hadid, Nouvel and Ando to create “a cultural asset for the world”. This will include the brand names of ‘Pompidou’ and ‘Guggenheim’. There will surely be a huge amount of museum art from the past on display and Hadid is creating a performing arts centre as part of the project. This is quite unusual. Most new iconic buildings are only for museological purposes, that is, to house old ancient unchangeable art, and that may still be true of the performing arts centre in Abu Dhabi. Maybe it will only be older, safer forms shown there, opera, ballet, Shakespeare etc; and is it worth pointing out that in the discussion we’re having at the moment, for me reinvention of cities includes vast building projects in the same way, in a similar category in my mind, to the vast major event.

No doubt this monster project will have the potential to attract visitors in exactly the same way as Disneyland attracts visitors, a sort of art theme park in the Middle East. But will it really reinvent Abu Dhabi? Well Gehry and Guggenheim may have been right for Bilbao, but that kind of project is not necessarily suitable for other cities. In many cases reinvention doesn’t necessarily mean a new iconic building or a new major event. What the city might need for instance is reinvention at the grassroots level not at the top of the tree. What a city might need is not more events but clearer, more detailed, more subtle thinking about what it takes to live together and create a great city.
In Madrid two weeks ago I saw again Bosch’s marvellous triptych, The Garden of Earthly Delights. There in amongst the incredible imaginings of his fantasy, or the visual expressions of various mythologies of the time, is a collection of fantastical buildings, five of them, sitting in the background of the centre panel. They seemed less fantastic to me now than the last time I saw them ten years or so ago. They looked like Shanghai looks now, or maybe what Abu Dhabi is going to look like in the future; and I wondered just how many of the Seven Deadly Sins they would represent in our world. Because that’s what Bosch was saying, that fantastical grandiose building is the surest way to hell. Certainly Envy, as well as Pride, since the iconic building is both the pride of the host and the envy of every other city. Greed perhaps? Certainly Gluttony (in a cultural sense) and maybe even Lust. And I wonder if the same can be applied to major events.

It is precisely the concern about over-competitiveness and its cost in both bidding and event terms that has led the Western Australian Eventscorp to start some part of their thinking away from the bidding wars for events that can be held anywhere to events which are unique and can only occur in Western Australia. I believe that this is where artists come into their own. Because they’re involved in originality and genuine creativity, thinking outside the rules and beyond what has gone before, to challenge our sense of curiosity (which in my opinion is the most valuable sense we have) and our view of the world, whether that be local, national or global.

I am very pleased to be in the middle of this thinking at present and it has at its heart not just the numbers and the dollars (though of course they have to form part of the pitch) but just good hard thinking about what constitutes a unique, irreplaceable, non-transferable event and how that will benefit the people of the city and the State. There is also a lot of new thinking around how that event will incorporate artists not as an add-on frill, something that’s introduced after the real work of securing the event has been done and a huge amount of irreversible process and precedent put in place, but as integral to the creation and delivery of the event itself.

While the percentage of art principle has been well argued in many cities, so that a certain percentage of the building costs of any new project must be devoted to public art, there’s often great difficulty in involving artists at the very beginning of a project, whether that be a building or an event, making them integral to the decisions that are made before the first sod is turned or the first pitched document is created. But imagine if every project whether for an art centre, an office building, a hospital, a festival or a major event had a team of genuinely creative thinkers, artists amongst them, offering their view of the world in relation to this new project and its place in that city or town or country. I wonder how different our cities might be, how much more playful, how far less repetitious, how different from the marketing philosophy that says that people all over the world want their shopping malls precisely to be unrecognisable from any other shopping mall in the world, want their tennis events to be the same as everywhere else, or their Grand Prix’s.

It is argued that urbanites want familiarity rather than the kind of differentiation which genuinely creative thinking produces. But how much easier to attract visitors and retain them by creating a unique way of life and way of seeing by ensuring that every city really is uniquely its own with its unique events rather than carbon copies of everywhere else.
And how odd that that sounds exactly as the world was perhaps just 100 years ago before the effects of increased travel and communication and the all powerful drives of globalisation started to rub out our precious differences and make the special nature of our cities as endangered as plant or animal species or languages. Well, the time has come to reconsider, and now many cities are now striving to give back to their cities something of their special character. Let’s understand immediately that as much as we love Frank Gehry and admire his buildings the answer cannot be, as I’m sure he would say himself, Frank Gehry for every city or even an iconic arts building in every city since we would yet again be reconstructing sameness. In that bid to recreate the special nature of each place let’s put our trust in art and artists amongst other creative thinkers to revision places in unique ways, and we do have ample examples of good creative thinking within some large events.

Nigel Jamieson, the English but now Sydney resident artist, is able admirably to make work both for an Olympic opening and for a show about David Hicks for the small stage of Belvoir Street Theatre. It’s why I invited Nigel to create an opening event for Liverpool next year. The French Canadian, Robert Lepage is an exquisite theatre maker but he also brings that intelligence from small scale performance in the theatre to Cirque Du Soleil in Las Vegas as I’m sure he will next May for the grand opening of Québec City’s 400th birthday.

So employing an artist, inviting an artist into the process rather than just a showman or a commercial events producer is often advisable. And one of the simplest vehicles for that trust in artists is the festival, often low on infrastructure, high on the utilisation of existing arts venues and precincts and with the ability to animate and transform any part of the city, its parks or waterways, and disappear again within weeks or days. You’ve already heard from the Edinburgh Fringe on the effectiveness of festivals, and that Fringe is a perfect example of the way a major event is able to animate a city and once a year bring it to life (along with the other eight festivals that happen in that city at that time) in a way that has made it famous throughout the world and a remarkable magnet for cultural tourists.

This exercise of festival making has all the energy of the ephemeral and often leaves the place reenergised, without physical traces or residues but with the soul somehow more intact.

In our broad region, Singapore offers a good example of a place which had to take stock and re-envision itself, if not reinvent itself. Having devoted itself for years very successfully to progress and the celebration of shopping and all things new, Singapore suddenly realised that something was missing, that the citizens of Singapore as well as the tourists were tiring of shopping alone and also needed their cultural fix. Singapore has taken enormous steps ever since to reinvigorate the cultural life of its city and to revalue its museums, its living history and its contemporary artists. Along with the regeneration of the various riverside precincts, festivals have been at the core of that renaissance; because it’s not just in the permanent fixtures that a city revitalises itself, even when those permanent fixtures have artists’ involvement.
The signs of revitalisation under public care for creativity can be seen even more easily and rapidly in the ephemeral nature of festivals and their performances. In fact I would go so far as to say that festivals and the ephemeral spirit of change can sometimes come most effectively first to a city’s planning before too many buildings choke the space and for a very long time predetermine the use of that part of the city. The placement of a celebration which arrives in some place for a day or a week or a month can be a good measure of whether the people of that place want to gather there, want to celebrate there. It shows whether new life can be breathed into a place and if not, then the festival can go and can be tried somewhere else.

This is most unlike a building which goes up and like it or not, whether it really serves its purpose or not (whether it works for a major event for instance and becomes a white elephant thereafter) affects the lives of the citizens of that place for perhaps 100 years, long after the original spirit and purpose of the building has vanished. Why not use moveable feasts as perfect acid tests for what should go on in various places in any city? What needs to be left open? Where does a city need to breathe and have spaces to play in? What and who would benefit from more permanent structures or the presence of public art or artists studios, galleries, etc.?

Of course this is pie in the sky stuff. We all know that it doesn’t work like that. A developer will buy land with a scheme that has not benefited from testing or consultation, or a sexy pitch for an event will have been made, and Governments at all levels are often unwilling to allow broad consultation amongst artists or any other part of the population for that matter as to what they would like to see in that space or at that time. But we can retain the idea of early creative involvement as an ideal, and when it doesn’t happen, as is often the case (though I’m so glad to say it is the case in my work with Western Australia at present) then it is even more important for festivals to take the opportunity to breathe life into the places where the creative spirit seems to have been neglected.

I am inclined not to make hard and fast rules for everyone and every place, in fact appropriateness and meaning are keys to success for me. In some situations gargantuan thinking can work very well, but only in my opinion when it befits that city, reanimation perhaps, reviving, restoring, emphasising, highlighting perhaps rather than always needing to reinvent.

I am also involved in present in a brand new festival in Toronto. With Canadian $13M for a ten day festival, it is well endowed; and I was pleased to see in its first iteration a kind of large scale thinking which seems to sit well with that particular place. Toronto is a large city of more than five million culturally diverse citizens. There is wealth and ambition there, a flourishing film industry and it seemed to me, coming in June from a festival in the much more European size and sensibilities of Montreal, that Luminato, this new event in Toronto, was right to think big.

An installation by an East Coast Canadian artist called Pulse Beat had been commissioned for the Harbourfront area at a cost of around $0.5M. It allowed citizens day and night to grasp handles which registered their pulse which in turn governed the beat of massive search lights which shot far into the night sky. It was popular at all hours of the night. Giant installations also occupied the atria of downtown buildings and a brand new building was unveiled.
The first reactions to Daniel Libeskind’s new work in Toronto speculate on what can be effectively displayed in there, but there’s no doubt about its effectiveness as public sculpture. On the weekend I was there, at the opening of the festival, people of all ages and from all walks of life queued for hours late at night to give them a ticket to see the empty virginal inside of the building for the first time, sometimes with entries at three or four in the morning and I’m talking about ten year olds to 75 year olds.

A similar exercise was conducted for Liebskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin which many felt told a more interesting and dramatic story empty than later when exhibitions crowded the big simple architectural ideas.

They opened the Toronto Crystal from 6:00pm Friday until 6:00pm Sunday with no closure at night and outside they commissioned superb large-scale projections for the street front facades.

This really was an event within the festival, and it was terrific. The major donor (who donated $30M Canadian dollars to this building) is Michael Lee-Chin and it’s known as the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. He was cheered in a standing ovation by the public. That was novel and it was uplifting; it was a real party and a genuine display of public curiosity and appreciation, but most of all it seemed appropriate for Toronto and the building is unique to that place and that Liebskind’s Crystal appears to have crashed into the side of the old museum building and hovers out over the street. The new quite literally grows out of the old, like a crystal, rather than replacing it. In 2009 as part of this festival the new Frank Gehry designed museum for contemporary art will open and that too feels okay for a big ambitious city.

But in Berlin for instance, something else entirely different is happening. It is said that Berlin is bankrupt and for all the talk about creative cities and creative economies in other places (as Quebec’s Cultural Minister said in Montreal ‘Florida is on every bedside table’), places where such huge investment in infrastructure and events is attempting to invent the creative city as in Abu Dhabi, Berlin proves that in the end it’s not the city which is creative, but the people within it. Berlin is said to have nothing but a creative economy. Recent developments such as their city beach or the swimming pool created in the sunken hull of a boat in the middle of the river, have massively improved the quality of life for Berlin residents through playful, gentle creativity at a fraction of the cost of an iconic building or major event.

The summer swimming pool which both looks great and is really put to joyful use year-round, was constructed at a total cost of €0.5M. It was converted to a winter pool and sheltered spa for the same amount. Therefore at €1M, this is a rare bargain made possible by the creativity of young dynamic architects and artists simply wanting to use their thinking and skills to make life better in their own city. Indeed it is exactly the same impulse as one entrepreneur had in Toronto, a private producer who provided half of the $13M and said match it and you’ve got a festival, but they are different means to different pathways for joy in different cities.

The key is something about appropriateness.
The difficulty I have with some major event thinking is the assumption that as long as the event is big enough and prestigious enough, strongly branded with a set of figures from somewhere else that seem to prove it’s worth it in economic terms, it will be right for any place that can afford the bid, then afford the event itself. I think many cities could get more out of a smaller localised, more thoughtful, less grandiose projects and that such projects often have a more lasting and positive effect than the vast event with the big hangover.

More importantly, if I want to move large numbers of people, I don’t necessarily want to do it in a constant repetition or highlighting or celebration of our most animal instincts. I think what we are most in need of at present are constant reminders that we are human, different from animals with only pack mentality; that we are creatures with remarkable powers of thought and subtlety and differentiation, not just members of a tribe with one aggressive song to sing.

We’ve been living in a bread and circuses environment for some time now. Subtlety and detail are not so appreciated. Value is placed on quantity not quality, on sheer scale rather than pure essence. The tiny gem is less loved. Success in art as appraised by the media and often by grant givers of all kind is often measured by box office takings, by bums on seats. Often on this basis alone, you will or will not have your annual or tri-annual grant renewed. More importantly it’s hard to convince a major sponsor that your tiny gem is worth their investment. They want to see how many people you reach, so spectacle attracts support. It is clearly why televised sport attracts sponsorship, it just reaches many people that the sponsor also wishes to reach and there’s nothing wrong with this when the State is also subsidising those things outside the circus sawdust, the things which are too small or too unfamiliar or too subtle but nonetheless very important to attract commercial support. The dilemma we often face is that a large part of Government subsidy in Australia is also going to the spectacle.

And spectacle, we have to admit, is a pretty time dishonoured propaganda technique. It was as temporarily successful in declining Rome as it was in the Third Reich. The politics of distraction through Ring Cycles or Olympic openings and Commonwealth openings and Aidas in the stadium etc ensures that those arts and activities which bring thought and responsibility back to a human scale which strip away illusion and want to deal with the way life really is, are not so valued. The bigger the better; and I would claim that these are the works, the small thoughtful works, the challenging works, are at the heart of the creative spirit and I don’t just mean in the arts.

In any society, in any discipline, science, medicine, architecture, engineering, biology, urban planning, etc, the stimulating of the creative muscle is the most important thing we do.

Does the major event stimulate the creative muscle?

Does it test the ethical and moral fibre?

Or does it simply write large the attitudes, opinions and styles which are familiar, comfortable and above all acceptable and approved?
Is the major iconic event in fact a more or less conscious attempt to be emblematic of what is considered the middle ground in any society? The very thing that is assumed to be the common thread is thus the very thing that aggravates those who think away from the mainstream, so in the end the major event may be divisive rather than inclusive and only inclusive of those who already feel included.

It’s not that we, it’s not that I, don’t enjoy the large.

The absolute silence of 100,000 footy fans on the ANZAC Day match or the first roar at the start of the AFL Grand Final, never fail to produce a tear in my eye, a lump in my throat. I’m a devoted AFL fan and an official ambassador for the Crows; and that AFL thing is the most tribal of instincts and when I’m there I enjoy it. I’ll be there at Telstra Dome tomorrow night roaring my team along against St Kilda. But I want and need other things to lift me above my primal state.

Not only do we have football and sporting events which are measurable, contestable, things we can cheer on, but there’s a whole lot of other cultural manifestations in our lives at the moment which are also in this fashion of win/lose in/out: Dancing with the Stars, Big Brother, Australian Idol, etc.: almost all of the reality TV shows are about winning and losing, in and out. So the grey in between is disappearing and that means that popular culture has become much more like sport, become much more about reinforcing the tribal instinct, and people are getting into it. There is a sort of cultural revolution if you like, a cultural democracy which is in inverse proportions to political democracy in that some 72 million people voted for American Idol. This is way in excess of the number of people that ever vote for the President in the United States. At the same time polls indicated that 85% of the people in Britain and Australia said, “No, don’t go to war against Iraq”. The Government says, “Well I’m sorry, we’re going”. What then does democracy mean? As the idea of ‘victory’ in Iraq grows ever more absurd and more and more like the protracted end of the Vietnam War, there’s no satisfaction for all those people who voted ‘no’ just saying “I told you so”. Instead, people start to mistrust political democracy and almost in inverse proportions, there is this popular cultural democracy at the same time. Somewhere there’s a relationship in that – denied our voice in the real world we are distracted by the fact that we can vote on popular culture or the behaviour of our fellow human beings.

So there are a lot of manifestations at the moment about black/white, in/out, win/lose, good/bad, only two opinions with nothing in between, no grey. And I personally believe, that that’s where our subtlety, our difference, our art and our humanity exists in those cracks in between, in the vague spaces in between. It also happens to be where art exists – in the immeasurable and undefinable.

I want and need other things to lift me above my primal state, my competitive and tribal state. I want to be filled with the awe of the human condition and it’s true that some sporting events can do that just as some arts events can. But the more such quintessential moments ( like Kieran Perkins doing that incredible swim, Cathy doing that amazing run or the incredible physical feats of athletes etc) ,the more those quintessential moments of inspiration and human achievement are surrounded by multimillion dollar (or in the case of the London Olympics, multibillion pound spends), the more they are gated by outrageously lavish marketing campaigns and high ticket prices, and peopled by overweening celebrity and shrouded in sensationalist scare tactics about terror, the less and less opportunity I have to feel those moments in an authentic and human way.
My feeling is that the large-scale event is almost always inclined towards preservation of the status quo. The big all embracing statement and self congratulatory tone of large events doesn’t sit easily with the voices which have no choice but to say “but there are still things that we need to fix in our cities”. The feelgood factor is not particularly good for provoking action or affecting change at the deepest and most important levels. It’s why there have been instant questions about the recent large-scale concerts for the environment. Led by pop stars and politicians these events like Live Aid or Make Poverty History certainly raise awareness but do they get action? I’m inclined to ask whether major pop stars and celebrities who are at the very top of a capitalist hierarchy would be willing to change the nature of that very hierarchy which both makes them stars and is also largely responsible for the kind of equality and poverty they are purporting to aid. The big event can often result in exactly the opposite of action, “I did my bit, I went to the concert, that’s all I need to do”; or “I’m aware of this and I discussed it heartedly with my friends at dinner and that’s the end of my action”. As if awareness alone is now enough. It’s why Toyota’s Prius is now known as the Pious. The tool of the affluent, to assuage their environmental guilt, and an action in purchase for sure but a somewhat muted one.

Therefore I’m often sceptical about motive, and I would like to see the same Civic and National reverence for human beings as, for instance, grand new iconic buildings. Therefore the humble, but no less imaginative and creative dwelling or studio, the necessary supply of basic life supplies, food, materials, etc for artists should be as important as the new concert hall gallery or museum; and the citizens of a city which welcomes artists and supplies those things to them should take as much pride in that activity as those of the cities where famous architects graced their populations with great new edifices for the arts.

Making one city a place where artists wish to be is surely as important as making one city a showplace for grandiose architectural projects. Helping a city become the kind of place where there is a day to day accessible and affordable experience of arts, sport and other manifestations of culture, is every bit as important as, if not more so in the long term, sourcing major events which cannibalise the city or place for a short period and often disappear with little trace except perhaps for an unhealthy hunger or greed for more and the persistent ignoring of the small gems everywhere ,available for little cost or hassle at the doorstep all the time.

Therefore the other challenge for all of us who love our cities and long to go on improving the lives of all those who inhabit them, is how to engender that sense of pride and value in the simpler and less obvious ways in which we build a creative city. At present such things are not highly valued either by the general population or because they are therefore not vote winners by politicians and city leaders. Big new buildings, big festivals, big sporting extravaganzas, major events, these are the worldly signs which leaders hope will point to a creative city and a bright economic future.

But I think we need to encourage new signs as well, full of light and promise, pointing to a creative future in which people love to think that they are surrounded by great thinkers, expressive artists, sports persons of similarly great skill and equally modest means all the time, possibly living in the most advanced dwellings and studios, practising and presenting their work in the most flexible environmentally friendly spaces on earth. I think of the Australian architect Glen Murcutt’s phrase ‘Touching the Earth Lightly’ as the best description for those buildings and of Italo Calvino’s ‘Six Memos for the Millennium’ in which he describes the need for the philosopher’s lightness in the 21st century.
Indeed at present, though I haven’t been there for a while and won’t get there until October this year, it sounds as if the paradoxically bankrupt Berlin goes close to one ideal of a creative city, constructed almost entirely by the creative community itself and often without much official help which is still intent on a futile grandiosity because they don’t have the money to pay for it. Interestingly, though Berlin was for decades the divided city with cash symbolically pumped in from the west to West Berlin as an expensive and prolonged two fingers up gesture against communism, and the East a model of harsh functionalism, there was nothing ever ‘exhausted’ about that town and reunification (now there’s a major event) brought not only bankruptcy but also the promise even now of Berlin’s reinstatement as one of the truly great cities of Europe.

In Asia we all observe with great interest the ongoing rivalry between Shanghai and Beijing. The former transforming itself structurally and superficially, the latter ‘til now actually developing in much more diverse and culturally interesting and attractive ways (for instance the remarkable independent contemporary art scene in Beijing). What will the Olympics do for Beijing apart from allegedly displacing more than a million of its citizens already for the three-week event? Will it aid the reinvention of that city, already being reinvented and rejuvenated in myriad small, intriguing and unique ways, or will the massive event stop that development in its tracks and turn Beijing into something more familiar, less edgy and less interesting?

And all the while on one side of Asia the Japanese character eschews the big event, apart from centuries old traditions, and manages to grow one of the liveliest and most fascinating capitals in the world in Tokyo, and on the other side of Asia one feels that the burgeoning economic giant in India will probably not immediately go the way of the Grand Prix but stick to the huge celebratory things it does best. Bollywood for instance has already made its global mark, as has Pilgrimage and bathing in the Ganges.

To summarise, I will say that if we are genuinely concerned with reinvigorating our cities we should make sure that we approach each one with an energy and creativity which is as different as each city’s character and needs. Sometimes a city may indeed require reinvention. For another that would be a mistake and what it most urgently needs is to ensure that what it already has is re-valued and given profile. For one city the massive event may be appropriate, another may lust for such an event, but in the end it may be counterproductive and require a more delicate touch for a fragile culture.

Stock answers or events for each city are unlikely to breathe new life into them, just overheated episodes and we all know from our own life experience that such episodes come and go but don’t necessarily contribute to the quality of life. They just interrupt it for a while maybe even set it back.

I see a world of artists and creative thinkers of all kinds bristling with great original ideas which really do have the power to inspire, motivate, animate and enrich the places they work in. You here are a powerful group with multiple opportunities to take advantage of these life affirming thinkers and practitioners. Don’t neglect them for the sake of a sexy looking ready-made package, don’t be curtailed by a politician who saw something good on his holiday last year and wants to copy it in his own city.

The real source of re-invention is invention, and thankfully we are bound, not only in nature’s gifts and beauty rich and rare, but thinkers and philosophers and artists everywhere.

Thank you.