

# Culture & the City

*The City, as one finds it in history is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here in the city the goods of civilisation are multiplied and manifolded; here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, and patterns of conduct systems of order. Here is where the issues of civilisation are focused; here, too, ritual passes on occasion into active drama of a fully differentiated a self-conscious society.<sup>1</sup>*

Mumford's description of the city emphasises the city's role in forging and shaping human relationships. Cities are the focal point for negotiating our national and cultural identities. They are the setting for the coexistence and intermingling of people from diverse social classes, national and cultural backgrounds. Cities are the primary space for potential intercultural dialogue. When we speak about the need for healthy communication between peoples from diverse cultures it is the city that provides the location and context for such debate.

Although the impact of immigration is recognisable throughout Ireland the principal towns and cities and in particular Dublin, the capital city of Ireland with its population in excess of 1 million inhabitants has become the main focal point for the arrival of newcomers to Irish shores. On the streets of Dublin today there is the potential to hear hundreds of different languages being spoken at any given time from Polish, to Cantonese to Gaelige. The widening of the native Irish community to include people from other parts of world is reflected no where more so than in the capital of a country. The capital of a city is the most popular initial port of call for the immigrant individual and family wishing to access temporary and more permanent accommodation, employment opportunities, education and social services.

Dublin is a cosmopolitan city and as such newcomers are greeted by familiar brand name stores from the global giants like McDonalds and Starbucks and banking services like Western Union. Alongside these instantly recognisable cultural symbols like the McDonalds M, Dublin's newcomers have begun to establish their own shops and services to cater for their own ethnic group's needs. For instance, a new addition to the Dublin high street shopping environment has been the establishment of several Polish mini markets which stock traditional Polish ingredients. Not only do Polish people living in Dublin have the chance to maintain their own cultural identity by preparing their own unique dishes here but Irish people are granted the opportunity to explore another culture through its cuisine.

<sup>1</sup> Mumford, L. 1938. *Culture of Cities*. Pg 3.

In a multicultural city like Dublin, is it possible to speak of singular urban culture or many distinct subcultures? Urban studies scholar, Sharon Zukin (1995) rejects this notion arguing that cultures are constantly negotiated in the city's central spaces the streets, parks, shops, museums, and restaurants - which are the great public spaces of modernity.

It has been remarked that 'citizenship has been associated with the universal, identity is associated with the particular' (Islin & Wood; 1999: 14). Individual citizens shape and negotiate their own particular identities within the universal public sphere. In the same way that we speak of a shared experience among people from the same nuclear family or nation group can we speak of a shared experience of city life common to all city dwellers? Or do each city's geographical, economic, social and cultural landscapes that form each city make it distinct?

The concept of place is conceptualized in terms of the setting in which social relations are constituted, the effects upon locales of social and economic processes and the creation of a sense of place, defined as the 'local structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977). Feeling of place attachment resonates as a significant marker of identity and community even as a sense of place is challenged by the developments in modern city places. The sense of allegiance to a particular place is strong part of our identity. However in the era of globalisation which has increased human mobility our identity is less static than ever and we are called to negotiate our place and others in the world more frequently.

Similar to how the concept of a 'job for life' has shifted to a 'life of jobs' it is unusual in today's globalised world for this generation to have a 'home for life'. Young people travel abroad on exchange programmes, like Erasmus to learn a new language and experience a new culture, the J1 US programme grants 18-26 year olds a working visa for four months. As many international companies have chosen Ireland as their base including Intel many employees are required to work abroad for several years. Now that the world economy is experiencing severe downturn and unemployment is dramatically rising workers will be exploring opportunities away from home. However in this time of economic insecurity it is important that the most vulnerable in society do not fall between the cracks and that the positive steps taken and initiatives established during more prosperous times are drawn on to ensure that the bonds between the native Irish and newcomers are not severed.

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