

Editorial

Screams and Visions: The Arts Embracing Urban Change

Kjell Skyllstad* Editor in Chief

Have you ever visited Oslo, the capital of Norway and one of its most visited museums – the Munch museum? In a central position and behind protective glass you will find one of the most famous and controversial icons of expressionist art – the Scream.

The painting was intimately connected to a personal experience on the road toward the city, recorded by the painter at the time of creation:

*The sky suddenly turned blood red-
I stopped, leaned against the fence, deadly tired –
looked out over the flaming clouds, like blood and swords
Above the bluish-black fjord and the city-
My friends walked on – I stood there quaking with angst –
And I felt as though a vast endless scream rang out through nature*
Edvard Munch, January 22, 1892

It seems significant that a picture of a city at risk should be the very work that may be seen as inaugurating the expressionist period in European art, with the Scream as a central emotional symbol. In music it was later to be followed up by works where the expression of Angst (the scream in Gustav Mahlers 10th Symphony or Arnold Schönberg's *Erwartung*) were connected to the development of a new contemporary musical language in the years leading up to the 1st World War.

* Dr. Kjell Skyllstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway

In light of the urban crises we are experiencing today Munch appears as a warning prophet, connecting the vision of an ecological disaster with a premonition of conflict (blood and swords) and social collapse (the suffering foreground figure pictured against the utterly undisturbed background society). The road to Oslo becomes the road to Aleppo today.

The contribution of the arts in documenting urban risks and catastrophes is well documented, be it through music, the visual arts or photography. It is enough to mention the Polish composer Penderecki and his *Threnos* dedicated to the victims of the Hiroshima bomb, the Spanish painter Picasso and his *Guernica*, documenting the horrors of the Spanish civil war, or the photograph of the screaming victim of napalm bombing, recently rejected (and after protests reinstated) by Facebook.



Figure 1. The Scream, Munch.

On all the different sectors of urban threats artists world wide have reacted not only calling attention to risks, but not least presenting visions and constructive ideas for a new urban agenda. It has been the privilege of the Urban Research Plaza of Bangkok and Osaka since its start to open its doors to welcome artists, activists and other actors on the urban arena to contribute to our Journal of Urban Culture Research and come together at our annual Forum conferences on city culture. Our concern, however, is that the contribution of artists, activists and researchers do not reach the fora where the future course of urbanism worldwide is being discussed and guidelines are being adopted.

This is the year when people all over the world have come together to seek ways to invigorate a new global commitment to the sustainable development of towns, cities and human settlements. Researchers, artists and activists working together to forge a holistic approach to finding a way forward for our urban future, facing the threats, finding solutions.

And just the UN Habitat III world conference in Quito, Ecuador where on October 17, 2016 presidents, ministers and other representatives from 170 countries met to discuss and adopt the New Urban Agenda, a global strategy on sustainable urbanism, would have needed the guiding vision of the urgency for real change so often presented and advocated by the art communities and inspiring and motivating research projects worldwide.

In spite of the presence of 200 mayors and delegations from 500 cities, taking center stage at the global table to develop a tool kit and strategy for 21st century urbanism, the final adoption on October 20, however, still leaves many questions unanswered, not least how cities will be able to fully implement the provisions of the recently concluded Paris agreement on the environment and carry the costs involved. Because a sustainable urban development will at the base of it all not be possible without the global adoption of a new economical agenda so vigorously advocated by our late King Bhumibol through his testimony and advocacy of a Sufficiency Economy as a blueprint for mankind

Another concern voiced was the failing will and readiness by the world leaders to address the urban-rural divide that took central stage in last years discussions at our last years Urban Research Plaza Forum in Bangkok. It is interesting to note that already Thomas More in his visionary work *Utopia* 500 years ago (1516) included practical advise on how to address this dichotomy.

A similar disappointment for many over the outcome of Habitat III was the watering down that happened during the closed discussions of the draft of concepts like the *rights to the city*, with national governments unwilling to stand up against the increasing malpractice of grabbing and transforming public space to serve commercial interests.

The central question would be how a non-binding resolution without a definite plan for implementation and financial budgeting would be able to hold up against the plans for urban growth molded in the protected offices of corporate directors, working out and implementing concepts like the *smart city*, destined to digitally supervise and control large urban populations .

Against the backdrop of a neo-liberal stance dominating the conference, a *People's Social Forum Resistance to Habitat III* came into being, presenting an alternative manifesto – *the New Inhabitants Agenda*. It could be argued that the political hardliners had been provoked by the removal of the planned *Multi-Stakeholders Panel on Sustainable Development* and that in fact the inability to come to terms with the global anti-poverty framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

With this removal and the failing to find an academic alternative through the cooperation with the research communities worldwide the conference sadly shut itself out from the creativity and innovation that has formed the very basis for the agenda of our Urban Research Plaza and the Journal of Urban Culture Research since its foundation.

Because research is desperately needed. It paved the way for the passage of the Paris Climate Change agreement. This is why the UN Habitat called for a partnership with universities worldwide and more than 100 universities joined. The Oslo Statement on the New Urban Agenda emphasized. “It will be of particular future importance to supply the development of new knowledge on what takes place in cities. This relates in particular to how market forces and power politics change the living conditions and security of inhabitants.” Cities are where the issues of sustainable development will be won or lost. Scientists and artists will need to play a key role – together.

Despite the disappointments with the document approved in Quito the work will go on. Let us believe that it will be a stimulus for many city governments to reconsider their plans and aims, but in the final round it will be the needs of the people itself locally that must decide the future course. It is all about the right to the city and it cannot be watered down.

The URP has felt the need to point to the risks threatening our growing urban populations world wide, but also to explore solutions locally and regionally and responded through opening a new Forum venue at the Inter-University Center in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Our readers will remember the report on the 2015 conference with the theme Urban Culture at the Crossroads published in Vol. 11 to be followed by an extensive analysis by Dr. Evelin Lindner, the president of the *World Dignity University Initiative* of the issues connected to this years challenging theme of *Cities at Risk – From Humiliation to Dignity*.

It turned out in Dubrovnik that what could have become a forum for mainly discussing urban loss in a city that a quarter of a century ago became the victim of a savage destructive attack, in fact became a unique opportunity for a meeting of minds and souls to share their visions for a brighter urban future.

Taking first place among these is the imagining of a future city for all, giving priority to help people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger and sharing communities.

So along with sending the best greetings from our Editorial team we have the privilege and pleasure of inviting all our readers to attend the 15th annual Urban Research Plaza Forum with the theme:

Creating Vibrant Social Spaces.

New Avenues to Urban Renewal see www.urp.faa.chula.ac.th/urp/Welcome.html

Another urban future is possible.