Civic Identity, Civic Pride, Civic Trust

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Prologue

The Jesuits’ maxim “Give me the boy until he is seven and I will give you the man” probably explains my own passion for places and civic life. I grew up in the Harpurhey district in the north of Manchester in the 1940s and 1950s, before much of it was demolished in the slum clearance programme in the early 1970s. As a child I moved in quite a small area, the terraced streets that connected my home to my school, and to the shops to which I was dragged by my mother. The streets, back alleys and pockets of waste ground were where I played. Aunts and uncles lived nearby. A sense of place and identification with that place was strong.

Linked to that identity was a source of pride in the place. That was evident at the everyday level of women (never men) scouring with a kind of pumice stone the pavement adjacent to their front doors that opened directly to the street. At the larger scale there was pride in the city of Manchester; “What Manchester does today, London does tomorrow” was an oft-repeated phrase.

Upon this platform was built my trust in the civic authorities. Manchester city council educated me, housed relatives, and ran the buses that took me to the city centre, with its swaggering buildings from the days of Cottonopolis, but also dank bomb sites left from the war.

Thus, for me, the personal and the civic were closely intertwined with each other and with the place that I came from. This ontology is the lens through which I approach civic identity, civic pride and civic trust. I will seek to analyse and connect the underlying concepts, explore why I feel we are experiencing a crisis of civic trust, and end with a call for action.

Civic identity

“Civic” means that people are connected to each other through sharing a place. As we shall see this simple statement has some complex ramifications. For now, it is enough to observe that the origins of the civic idea are generally accepted as being in the Greek city states. Peter Hall in his magisterial book Cities in Civilization explained how the polis developed around 700BC as an economic, political and communal unit, originally based on “a self-sufficient and self-governing group of villages” (p.35). It was “a group of citizens” (p.36). Hall further observed (p.39-40) how the “golden age” (500-400BC) was marked by a surge in construction of major public buildings, most notably the Parthenon (447-432BC).

So what are the factors that build a collective identification with a place, a shared, existential and inclusive sense of rights and ownership defined by relation to that place? My proposition is that the building blocks are economy, institutions, environment and culture.

A local economy shapes civic identity in a number of ways. For example, there are “mining communities” or “shipbuilding communities” or “fishing communities”, where the identity is defined by a dominant economic activity. As services have become dominant, and commuting more
widespread, such one-dimensional civic identities are less common, though Cambridge, for example, remains a “University town”, while concentrations of military personnel still define places like Aldershot or Portsmouth. In a few cases, the economic structure has given an ethnic dimension to a place: Bradford and Leicester are examples.

There is often an association between the economic structure and the institutions that are prominent and shape civic identity. In respect of civic institutions such as local councils this was traditionally the case: the town / burgh hall was everywhere a prominent edifice, located at the heart of the settlement, and in its architectural design expressing dignified sentiments. Universities have similarly been prominent institutions, not just physically but as emblems of a place. Churches have also contributed landmarks to the skyline, as have the headquarters of banks and other financial institutions.

As hinted above, the environment, particularly the built environment, also contributes to a sense of civic identity. Major rivers are always evocative (and often the focus for significant economic activities). Sometimes the built environment has been deliberately designed to foster a sense of civic identity, both at the neighbourhood and the town scale. This was evident in the development of Scotland’s New Towns (and before that in the Edinburgh New Town!). A more recent example of such artifice is Poundbury, with its Residents Association meeting in Brownsworth Hall (styles on a traditional West Country market hall), in Pummery Square (the “hub” that is easily reached by all residents).

In Moravia the combination of economy, institutions and environment is evident in the civic identity of Zlin. The town was developed by the Bat’a shoe company, with the firm using a standardised template for construction not only its factories but also the hostels, schools, hospitals and shops. Tomáš Bat’a was also the Mayor. For more detail see Zlin – Conserving a classic of functionalism on my website.

Civic identity is also a cultural construct, something that is imagined and related like a story. Modernism and functionalism were embedded in all aspects of the work and town development, with the Bat’a philosophy “Work collectively, live individually” given expression in the relation between the factories and the housing areas of this “town amongst gardens”. While Zlin was a referent for the future, Poundbury reaffirms “the timeless ideas that have enabled many places around Britain to endure and thrive over the centuries” (Prince of Wales, 2012). Cultural works of the imagination can even define the identities of real places. “Dickens’ London”, for example, is a place where you peer through the foggy, hovel-lined streets and tread warily amongst the warehouses at the docks.

Thus civic identities can be positive or negative. They may also be inclusive or exclusive and contested. Few places are more contested than the Old City of Jerusalem, containing sites sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Is Jerusalem the capital of Israel or is it Al Quds, the capital of the State of Palestine? Similarly, in Charleston, South Carolina, while the Confederate flag was recently removed from flagpoles of public buildings after the racist bombing of a church, monuments to the Confederacy still stand proud. In many situations, and especially in these contentious examples, there are plural civic identities, not just one identity.
Figure 1 draws these arguments together. It shows that economy, institutions, environment and culture are the mutually reinforcing foundations for shared place-based experiences that form civic identities. The shared stories are vital for moving from civic identity to civic pride.

**Figure 1: Building Civic Identity**

**Civic Pride**

The stories that transform civic identity into civic pride are told in several voices. The media can promote or suppress them, maybe even generate them, but for purposes of this lecture I would highlight four key sources of messages about civic pride. These are governance, entrepreneurs, everyday life and social movements.

The way a place is governed can make a difference. An inclusive form of governance, I would suggest, is likely to foster a sense of the civic and hence to build civic pride. However, those able to pull the levers of government have great potential to tell the stories that nurture civic pride. If the local council does not demonstrate pride in the place, how can it expect others to? Does the council and its leadership act as a civic champion, or is it just a contractor of services?

This is not just a question for local government, especially in a very centralised place like Scotland. Does the national level of government take pride in its towns and cities and support local government in conserving and enhancing them? It is generally recognised that Australia’s cities have seen some important improvements over the past 20 years. Behind this trend has been support, albeit not always sustained, from higher levels of government. A *Building Better Cities* programme was launched in 1991 which ran for 5 years. In 1995 the Prime Minister set up a Task Force on Urban Design. Then in 2009 a Major Cities Unit was established which has produced State of the Cities reports and national urban policy, and has worked in partnership with sub-national governments on urban issues. This supportive context helped spur endeavours at city level, with some major design-led successes (Byrne, Chandler and Echberg, 2013).
The part that entrepreneurs can play in creating civic pride is well illustrated by the music industry in Manchester, and in particular by Tony Wilson, co-founder of the Factory record label and owner of the Haçienda. The 1990s boom of popular music in Manchester came at a time when the city was very depressed, following the de-industrialisation of the 1970s and 80s, and the Council’s losing battle with the Thatcher government. The amount of vacant, cheap floor space and the lack of more mainstream career opportunities for those who didn’t move south, helped kick start an alternative music and fashion scene (Hague, Hague and Breitbach, 2011, p.230-231). Wilson became known as Mr. Manchester, and it has been written of him that “In the 1990s (Wilson) turned his love of the city into the driving force for its renewal...He said he wanted to do something for Manchester music that wasn’t just a band...Manchester began to redefine itself around Wilsonian principles of originality, bravado and can-do” (Griffin and Chlebik, 2014, p.28).

Alongside dynamos such as Wilson, we should also recognise the power of everyday life to germinate a sense of civic pride. It can come, for example, through support of a local sport team, or just through the memories and daily routines that accumulate in a place. Michel de Certeau (1984, p.101) spoke of the “long poem of walking”. His book compared walking around a city with processes of linguistic formation. He saw places as “fragmented and inward-turning histories” (p.108), the shared civic having been exterminated by a “functionalist totalitarianism”.

We can escape the solipsism of de Certeau’s inward-turning flâneurs through taking social action as an expression of, and proponent of civic pride. The Civic Trust itself grew out of a social movement: as the SCT website says, “The Scottish Civic Trust was established in 1967 as a response to the destruction of the innumerable historic buildings and areas of townscape that had evolved over the centuries, and to the loss of the communities that valued these places.” Similar passions were stirring elsewhere. In Canada “The heritage movement began in earnest as a radical social movement at mid-century. The Baby-boomers’ concerns about the environment and their sense of social justice found fertile ground in a heritage conservation movement which was at odds with the tenets of unfettered modernism in architecture, city planning and large scale public works” (Heritage Canada Foundation, 2012).

While the basis of the conservation movement has often been found to be predominantly upper-middle class and urban (see, e.g. Harry, Gale and Hendee,1969, writing of the movement in the USA), it should not be forgotten that in the 1970s there were connections into the trade unions, particularly in Australia where unions declared “Green Bans” on some projects.

Drawing these strands together, we can argue that Civic Pride is most likely to be constructed when there is a strong sense of shared civic identity, enriched by stories that are told be governments that are civic champions, entrepreneurs that are locally engaged, an everyday life that is able to be outward-looking, fuelling vibrant social movements. Conversely, if governments are remote and see their role only as contractors of services for consumers, if enterprises and properties have absentee owners disconnected to the place itself, residents are turned inwards and the conservation movement is waning and struggling to replace an ageing membership, then Civic Pride is likely to be weak.
Figure 2: Voices creating Civic Pride

Civic Trust

Trust is needed because places are shared. We need to trust each other and those who create, manage and regulate the development of places. “Trust” also conveys a sense of stewardship; as a collectivity we cede part of our own rights to act because we recognise that there are other stakeholders, perhaps in generations to come, who also have rights. Even when there are owners, and we have no direct legal ownership rights, we may trust those owners if they are seen to be good stewards. To create and sustain Civic Trust requires confidence in the competence, transparency and sincerity, values, and accountability of others with whom we share our places. Figure 3 sets out the pre-requisites for Civic Trust and the kind of questions that follow.

Figure 3: Pre-requisites for Civic Trust

A crisis of Civic Trust

Following this logic, I believe we are undergoing a crisis in Civic Trust. On the question of competence, there is a lack of confidence amongst many in the conservation movement about the
competence of elected members to take decisions on planning applications. Despite the aspirations in the 2006 Act for greater public participation in planning, and the active engagement of many community councillors, there is unease about the outcomes, as evidenced by the current review of the Scottish planning system. RTPI Scotland has stated that “Councillors should be required to have regular training and up-skilling on planning, especially to support them to plan beyond short-term political cycles” (https://rtpiscotland.wordpress.com/2015/12/22/the-planning-review-what-are-the-game-changers/). There is no smoke without fire.

Of course, elected members are advised by their professional officers. However, the imposition of austerity measures has resulted in the loss of experienced staff, and the under-funding of the planning service in general across Scottish local government. Planning and Development has suffered a 9% cut in net spending between 2010/11 and 2013/14, more severe than for any main other local government service, according to the Accounts Commission (2015, p.14). The Institute for Historic Building Conservation (2013) found that three of the 32 local planning authorities no longer had specialist local conservation advice, and that services were contracting with 15% reductions estimated over two years and more expected. In these straitened circumstances it is difficult to feel confident that there appropriate in-house expertise is consistently available.

Even more worrying is the perception that the planning system is not as transparent as it should be. Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2013) undertook research in Ireland and identified a “shadow planning system”, used by powerful developer interests to side-step the official system. While it does not follow that findings from Ireland’s planning system can be directly transferred to Scotland, the thrust of the argument is that few efforts have been made to investigate whether (and how) developers are able to operate through privileged channels. We hear anecdotes that themselves suggest that confidence in the system could be more robust. What is equally clear is that our councils are increasingly dependent on developers for provision of infrastructure, and that the promise of jobs is hard to refuse across most of Scotland.

This leads to the next question: is there confidence that the values of our planning authorities are those that support the civic ideal? Austerity has focused he minds of local government to balance sheets and to valorising assets. But this can pull against their civic stewardship. Spurred by the saga of the hotel proposals for the Royal High School I wrote a blog that BEFS kindly published on their web site, in which I said “While insensitivity from local councils in the face of commercial pressure is by no means new, the hollowing out of local government that began in the 1980s is so profound that the very notion of ‘civic’ has reached a vanishing point… The idea that a place belongs to its citizens is imperilled.”

There are also issues of accountability. Since 1975 we have had the largest scale “local” authorities in Europe, a system created by two reorganisations that were essentially top down. The underlying rationale for our system is economic efficiency. Though large in scale, the local authorities have increasingly become empty vessels. Their capacity to fund themselves was taken away, so that they now depend on central government for almost 75% of their spending. Then austerity cut their budgets further. If you set out to design a set of structures to create innovative, locally-rooted civic leadership, it would not look like this one.

Overlaid on the fiscal neutering of local government is a centralised planning system. Plans and the planning decisions informed by them, conform to national planning policy. Appeals are decided
through a system that is insulated from local accountability. Citizens are “third parties”, anonymous investment houses are accorded more rights to decide what should happen in places where they live. Cash-strapped councils are necessarily risk averse when delivering the system, and this situation itself can create the kind of delays that frustrate legitimate developer ambitions. As a professional planner, these are uncomfortable things to say, and I would be delighted if they trigger critical comments that make a convincing counter-case.

We now live in a political economy an unimaginably wealthy global elite can determine what is good or bad for a place. One part of the case for the proposed hotel on the old Royal High School site is that it would cater to precisely this group. As our society becomes increasingly unequal so it also becomes increasingly more “necessary” for the mega-wealthy to protect their assets and investments from the depredations of the rest, as is evident through the elaborate schemes for avoiding tax. At a city level, the privatisation of the public realm has a similar insulating effect.

Liverpool One is a retail, leisure and residential development incorporating 34 streets all owned by the Duke of Westminster’s Grosvenor Estate. Civic space becomes private space, patrolled by private security companies. The Liverpool One lease lasts 250 years (Townsend, 2016): the capacity of citizens to change Liverpool One is on hold for a quarter of a millennium; it represents a fundamental shift of power away from Liverpudlians and towards investors.

There is also concern that the heritage movement, which has done much to hold planning authorities and developers to account for half a century, has an ageing demographic. Without succession planning and new recruitment, the civic voice will become more faint.

A call to action

We need Civic Pride. We need Civic Trust. And this means we need the Scottish Civic Trust. Civic Pride is an outcome and a generator of community cohesion. It boosts well-being. Pride and Trust make places more resilient, not just able to recover from shocks but also able to innovate and bounce forward. They are integral to the stewardship of our environment, built and natural, but that stewardship is eroded by the kind of short-term book-keeping that has shrunk the civic role.

As Saskia Sassen (2015) has shown, there has been a surge of corporate investment into urban property that is altering “the historic meaning of the city”. She points out that “in the post-2008 period, much buying of buildings is to destroy them and replace them with far taller, far more corporate and luxurious types of buildings – basically, luxury offices and luxury apartments.” Yet conserving the historic fabric by civic investment can also valorise assets while renewing “the historic meaning of the city” as a place that we share and which belongs to us all.

The success of the SCT over the past 40 years shows that it is possible to make a difference. There are over 100 local groups affiliated to the Trust, and thousands of people across Scotland are sufficiently committed to Civic Pride to give time voluntarily to support the Trust and the other organisations actively seeking to sustain and enhance Scotland’s buildings, spaces and places. The SCT’s annual My Place awards demonstrate inspiring achievements. Their six point action plan pitched at the political parties ahead of this year’s Holyrood election makes good, practical points.

In particular, I would highlight and endorse two points from the SCT manifesto. We do indeed need to roll out the Scottish Government’s new Place Standard tool across all local authority areas, and train and resource people in how to use it as a basis for dialogues about place-making. Similarly, it is
important to “Promote citizenship and civic pride at an early age, by supporting engagement with young people on heritage and the built environment.” This can be done, as SCT have shown through their own work and as PAS is doing through their Young Placemakers programme. In this and in other areas too, there is scope for international learning. For example I am involved in the Young Eyes Erasmus+ project where teenagers in Poland, Sweden and Latvia are looking at their home towns in terms of identity and ways to make them more attractive. We should be looking at such programmes and projects.

The SCT also calls for support for community empowerment. We now have the Community Empowerment Act. We should use it. Maybe the Trust or BEFS could help local groups by framing model “participation requests” that could then be given a local tweak. We need local audits that can identify possible right-to-buy sites, but if the asset transfer powers are to be used effectively there will need to be investment in training in asset management.

Finally, my call to action has two more ideas. Could we develop a wiki-style website about Scotland’s places? It would be a way of giving voice, making visible and sharing Civic Pride. There is a site for “1001 Danish Places” that encourages people to post stories about their town or village. We don’t need to copy that, rather we should aim to better it.

Yet we are still left with a crisis of Civic Trust, and as I have regretfully argued there are some strong forces eroding that trust. Can the heritage movement in Scotland come together to agree the basis of a new Charter for Scotland’s Places that would address the issues of competence, transparency, values and accountability? It would be constructed in a pragmatic spirit, seeking to help our planning authorities, city-region and national to work with communities to build Civic Identity, Civic Pride and Civic Trust. It would set out what we expect from each other, e.g. on consultation timescales, but also what we offer to each other, for there is a lot of expertise in civic organisations. So my idea is for a proactive, bottom-up innovation in the governance of our neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities. There would be an open invitation to any organisation, council or government agency to sign up to it, and then work together for the good of our places and the well-being of their citizens.
References


