

BRIEFING NOTE, OCTOBER 12, 2015

## COLUMBIA GLOBAL CENTERS | ISTANBUL

### ARTS AND CULTURE IN GLOBAL CITIES: ISTANBUL



Columbia University's Committee on Global Thought and Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul convened the fourth in a series of roundtable discussions supported by the Ford Foundation. The meeting aimed to reflect on the contribution of arts and culture to global cities as part of the project, *Arts, Culture, and Quality of Life in Global Cities*. After New York, Rio and New Delhi, Istanbul offered another important vantage point to assess the key issues affecting the ways in which the arts relate to the vitality of cities.

Participants in the Istanbul meeting included leading figures active in shaping Istanbul's cultural scene - curators, scholars and representatives of arts institutions and civil society organizations. The following is a synopsis of the main points that surfaced throughout the discussion, summarized without direct attribution.

The discussion revealed that, despite the vibrancy and global renown of Istanbul's art scene, there are significant impediments confronting its cultural environment. Although some of these stem from long-standing, unresolved structural issues, the most serious challenge seems to arise from the polarized political climate in Turkey, where the appreciation of the freedom of creative expression and its value to society is increasingly undermined. A pertinent question to consider for all global cities, is how it may be possible for the arts to flourish in increasingly restrictive political environments? Under such conditions, could there be an optimal balance between private and public sector engagement in the arts, and what are the benefits and risks of different ways of positioning oneself as a cultural institution or an artist? An additional focal point in the discussion related to inclusion and the dichotomy between 'high art and popular culture' – a theme that resonated across all the cities involved in this series.



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#### ARTS, CULTURE, AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN GLOBAL CITIES

Urban spaces have become a crucible for the transformations of the global era. The Committee on Global Thought's research on cities focuses on identifying these new formations, describing their impact on the global and local scale, and developing innovative strategies for improving urban life.

This project, led by [Dr. Vishakha N. Desai](#), centers on measuring and augmenting the impact of *Arts, Culture and Quality of Life in Global Cities*. There is a growing consensus among civic leaders that the presence of arts and cultural institutions and networks is vital to the health of any global city, old or new. But it is less apparent how to build and sustain robust cultural infrastructure.

A multi-disciplinary, trans-national conference, *Arts, Culture and Quality of Life in Global Cities*, convened in December 2013 with the dual objectives of 1) exploring the broader questions around the role of arts and culture in cities from a global perspective using New York as a case study and 2) highlighting the experience of New York City over the last twelve years under the Bloomberg administration to focus on past challenges and successes in the context of developing a blueprint for future city development. This event was organized in collaboration with the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Ford Foundation.

The report of the conference, which was published in December 2014, aimed to identify key drivers of a successful cultural policy, barriers in the implementation of such a policy, and themes for further research that would help create better assessment tools for measuring the impact of arts and culture on rapidly changing global cities.

Following the success of this conference, further events were conducted in partnership with the [Columbia Global Centers](#):

- Dec. 9, 2013 in New York
- Jun. 24, 2014 in Rio de Janeiro
- Dec. 10, 2014 in New Delhi
- Oct. 12, 2015 in Istanbul

View past Arts, Culture, and Quality of Life in Global Cities events and photos [here](#).  
<http://cgt.columbia.edu/research/arts-and-culture/past-events/>

## SETTING THE SCENE

The roundtable began with welcome remarks by Vishakha Desai and Vasif Kortun (Director of SALT) and personal introductions by attendees. It should be noted at the outset that the meeting took place just two days after a massive suicide bomb attack in Ankara left over 100 people dead. This influenced the course of the meeting in several ways. As expected after a traumatizing event, a number of participants declined to attend. This also made the overall political context in Turkey and the region more pronounced throughout the discussion. After expressing remorse about this act of violence, Desai remarked that one needs to think about art especially at times like this. She then gave a brief introduction about how the program on Arts and Culture in Global Cities came to life in New York and extended to other cities in order to broaden its frame of reference. Vasif Kortun was also part of the early gathering that took place in New York where the global concept was initially discussed. The roundtable in Istanbul was planned as a continuation of the conversations which took place in New York, Rio and New Delhi. The previous meetings revealed that there are interesting correlations among these cities, where the main idea is to go beyond economic interpretations of art and culture in such cities. While conventional measures may look at how the hotel sector benefits during the biennial in Istanbul, for example, the intention here is to focus on global equity, the role of imagination, why we think culture matters and how. How to create respect for differences through arts and culture and what to make of private funding in such programs are also other key issues under discussion.



Vasif Kortun's opening statement offered a broad context on the situation of the visual arts in Turkey, noting that fundamental support has always come from the private sector, mostly from a handful of renowned families who established their own institutions to facilitate their support of the sector. Starting in the 1980s, the government had a relatively favorable alliance with the private sector, which grew stronger in the European Union accession period. At this point the government was also leveraging funding for culture made available by the EU. However, most of the programs supported through these funds were used in urban centers, mainly benefitting those who live in close proximity to cultural centers. At the periphery, on the other hand, there is a different socio-economic structure, where local authorities use their own institutions to serve the public. The legacy of this configuration means that the private sector mainly serves the center, while private sector support of visual arts and contemporary art separated them from the rest of the cultural field. For example, even though the biennial is public, its funding mix reflects a narrow concentration of support. In the meantime, the cooperation between the government and the private sector has deteriorated in recent years, such that the

cultural sector has been the target of immense pressure. The level of tolerance came to depend on one's relations with the government. The Gezi protests also marked a breaking point in this newly emerging conjuncture.

## DEFINING AND CREATING A HEALTHY CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Against this backdrop, the discussion focused on how to define and create a healthy cultural environment, and whether there has been a point in the past when there existed a healthy cultural environment and how this came into place.

Participants presented their reflections and experiences in the evolving relationship between the government and the cultural sector. Beral Madra shared that there was a time after the 1980s, as noted above, when the private sector worked closely with the government. It was in the political interests of a post-coup Turkey to present a more liberal image of the country. Investment continued until the economic crisis of 2000, which led to a significant reduction in public spending. The next phase was characterized by a more collaborative and supportive environment, as demonstrated by the 2010 European Capital of Culture, when nearly €200 million was invested into 600 projects. The government also invested resources into developing Istanbul as a center for creative industry, but this has been reversed in recent years. Some participants noted though that even when support was given to culture, it was the respective Ministries who undertook most of the decisions about how funds should be allocated. Another constant throughout all these phases is the fairly restrictive fiscal and legal environment governing non-profit institutions, encompassing arts institutions as well. The heavy tax burden on museums and galleries factors into sustainability considerations.

There were also recent efforts by civil society and academia to undertake a more structured approach to actively engage with cultural policy. A notable example is a collaborative platform launched by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, Anadolu Kültür and Istanbul Bilgi University. Several reports were produced assessing cultural policies from the perspectives of a range of actors and voices from across the cultural field, but participants felt that none of these have had an impact on public policy.<sup>1</sup> The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts continues to issue policy briefings and conduct research, most recently on planning strategies for local governments and arts education in Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

Public policies need to generate and sustain a democratic and free political and cultural atmosphere: these are essential to creating a suitable climate for the arts and

<sup>1</sup> Reports are available on the Istanbul Bilgi University Cultural Policy and Management Research Center website: <https://kpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/publications/books>.

<sup>2</sup> The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts program on [Cultural Policy Studies](#) organizes meetings and symposiums and publishes reports and policy texts on relevant issues. It recently published a report on "Cultural Planning for Local Government," available online at: <http://cdn.iksv.org/media/content/files/YerelYonetimlerIcinKulturelPlanlama.pdf>. The report on arts education is available at: <http://cdn.iksv.org/media/content/images/files/RethinkingArtsEducation.pdf>.



culture to survive and flourish. However, at present, the polarization in society prevents a healthy dialogue on policy matters. Without the engagement of policy makers, it would be difficult to make lasting improvements. Socio-economic inequalities and horizontal divides due to political conflict compound the situation, while the progressively restrictive environment is exacerbated by increasing government intervention in the arts. Cultural institutions are dealing with this situation in different ways. Recently there have been a number of cases in which the independence of artists and cultural institutions has been violated. To avoid cutbacks in public funding and censorship, it has become essential to maintain a strictly positive relationship with the government, which may not be possible if cultural production takes on issues considered sensitive by the government. In order to reduce the vulnerability this creates, there is need for greater support from the private sector. One participant noted that currently many people are in a survivalist mode, trying to avoid tensions with the government which results in self-censorship.

Nevertheless, the alternative should not be the government completely removing itself from the scene, as there is scope for the government to have a constructive role. Government institutions and policies may create challenges to artists at times, but their absence could create larger problems. Some sort of official standards are not necessarily harmful and they in fact may be useful to provide some arena of inclusiveness and equality. Moreover, the government needs to allocate its funds for the right purpose and increase its support for cultural activities.

One participant questioned that it would be worthwhile to think about and understand why the arts are not supported, proposing that the current situation indicates that a different kind of strategy should be developed. To what extent has art been able to create public culture, how does it bring the notion of public into existence, how does it engage with society at large and in daily life? In Europe for example, art was crucial to public culture, but this may not be the case in other contexts. Why are some people suspicious of art in Turkey? If art is not a central part of the public sphere, how is it possible to make art part of cultural identity? What needs to be done to attract people into arts? Can we learn from other parts of the world where art is visible in public life? A healthy cultural ecology would only be possible to the extent that art becomes part of society and public culture.

There are several examples of how the arts have played an important role at the grassroots, community level. Many municipalities have established neighborhood cultural centers, however, they function as traditional centers where the role of the audience is mainly limited to participation instead of co-production. There are also cases in which municipalities do offer support for culture, but decision-making has always been quite arbitrary. The Çanakkale (since 2007), Sinopale (since 2006) and Mardin (since 2011) biennials in Anatolia, despite being

new, have been very inclusive. The Diyarbakır Art Center, established by Anadolu Kültür, is another prominent example. The Child Biennial in Istanbul, with a budget of less than 100,000 USD, draws more than 5,000 children, with public school teachers also engaged in giving lessons. The Küçükçekmece Municipality, whose constituents are mainly low-income immigrant families, started to develop a new strategy in 2010 which entailed establishing four cultural centers with strong community programming. Every municipality of Istanbul has an arts and culture commission – they could be encouraged to carry out similar actions.



A debate also took place on the extent to which the field of arts and culture can enlarge its impact considering the lack of a serious infrastructure needed for a healthy arts and culture environment. While one participant advocated for defined standards of arts management, another proposed just the opposite, while referring to universities and museums as ‘legacy technologies,’ advocating for de-institutionalization in the arts and working on a very micro-level. This new way of working emphasizes a distributed ecosystem approach characterized by openness, access, sharing and participation rather than programming. This also implies transforming the notion of audience, from that of passive participants to co-producers. What methods would be effective in doing this was an intriguing question for many of the participants. Some also felt that individual efforts, even if collective in nature, would not be enough to advance sustainability and development of the arts. While the new approaches certainly harbor great potential, arts institutions will remain an integral part of the cultural and artistic fabric of large global cities.

It was also noted that the Sustainable Development Goals make no reference to cultural sustainability. Prominent actors in arts and culture should consider ways to inject culture and cultural sustainability within the discussions on the SDGs. This is also important because culture needs to be part of education, especially since it can be so effective in promoting the appreciation of the other and multiculturalism in a more global sense.

As with all major cities, migrants compose a significant portion of Istanbul’s population. Cultural centers where migrants could bring their own cultures into production can be a powerful way to engage with these communities. The migrants should not only watch how Syrian or Iraqi culture is represented by Turkey, but need to self-produce their own cultures. This means that cultural spaces should not only open their doors to migrants but also create a sphere where migrants can act as co-producers. Queen’s Library at Flushing is one of the best examples of this experience. The Library became a hub for migrants where

they were able to access resources and actively participate in the making of arts and culture. To be successful with engaging communities and children requires deep and long-term work. Learning about such approaches could be interesting for cultural institutions in Turkey, at a time when there is an influx of migrants and refugees into the cities.

## POSSIBLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS IN THE AREA OF ARTS AND CULTURE

- What are ways of engaging people in the idea of art creation? What are the best ways to change the audience to a co-producer? What are other examples of participatory programs?
- The notion of “cityness” and “global cities” can be investigated further. What are the implications of cityness and global cities?
- Almost all mega cities experience an influx of new people. How can the arts be used or developed in terms of giving voices to these people? The aim is not only to enable access but to make newcomers part of the cultural fabric. How is it possible to achieve this? What are the different examples from the world that Turkey and others can learn from? What are the best practices?
- What are the ways to enable different institutions, universities, NGOs and the private sector to work collaboratively on different projects? What kinds of platform could be successful to bring all these agents together?
- How does cultural education affect youth development? What is the potential and power of cultural education on youth development? How would this affect the neighborhood and the city?
- How could one conduct impact assessment without being limited to quantitative measurement? What kind of impact and assessment models could one develop that involve qualitative data? Is there a model which first identifies the importance of a cultural program and then figures out how to measure its impact?

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*Columbia Global Centers promote and facilitate the collaborative and impactful engagement of the University's faculty, students, and alumni with the world to enhance understanding, address global challenges, and advance knowledge and its exchange.*

The eight global centers—located in Amman, Beijing, Istanbul, Mumbai, Nairobi, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago—form the core element of Columbia's global strategy, which is to expand the University's ability to contribute positively to the world by advancing research, learning, discussion, and discovery around the most important global issues through a truly global perspective.

Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul was launched in November 2011 and is directed by Ipek Cem Taha, a Turkish journalist and businesswoman, and a graduate of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs and its Graduate School of Business. A hub for students and scholars from Columbia and universities in the region, the Center hosts several educational programs: the Summer Program in Byzantine and Ottoman Studies; the Global Seminar on Byzantine and Modern Greek Encounters; the Summer Program on Democracy and Constitutional Engineering; and the Summer Program in Balkan Transcultural Studies. Initiatives facilitated by the Center in cooperation with Columbia faculty and regional partners include: Studio-X Istanbul, the Istanbul Documentation Project, Women Creating Change, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Regional Network for Historical Dialogue and Reconciliation. Freedom of expression, film, entrepreneurship and public health are other ongoing areas of programming, while the Global Center in Amman is a close partner on issues of regional concern.





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