

Creating Identity within the City

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Abstract

Outdoor mural art in the city of Boston, Massachusetts has been effective in shaping the identity of locations within the city, playing an important role in resisting homogenizing effects of globalization impacting urban areas in the twenty first century. This study presents the city's programs for outdoor mural creation and examines outdoor mural art projects commissioned through independent entities and collaborative efforts as well as those initiated by the city. In the contemporary context of reactions against traditional urban design, this study considers outdoor mural art as an approach to creating identifiable locations in the city through the creation of cognitive as well as material urban-scapes. Research explored the murals themselves, public records available through the city's website, contemporary publications, and interviews with key individuals. Observations presented here offer insights into innovative uses of outdoor murals as an effective tools for creating identity in locations throughout the city.

Key words: outdoor mural art, urban design, globalization

1. Introduction

The city of Boston, Massachusetts was selected for this study based on the relatively small number of outdoor murals in the city, at this point still a few hundred, the city's small size, 48.4 sq. miles and population of just over 650,000 as well as its relatively recent engagement with outdoor mural art. These statistics set Boston apart from other cities such as Los Angeles, with an area of 502 square miles and a population of 3.9 million which has over two thousand outdoor documented murals and a longer engagement with outdoor mural art. This distinction establishes an important basis for this study.

The appearance of outdoor mural art in the city of Boston during the period traced in this chapter is evidence of the larger cultural shift that changed the relationship between ordinary citizens and art. Outdoor mural art achieved a new status in the United States and Europe in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of this century. The understanding of outdoor mural art as a legitimate artistic endeavor, separate from graffiti, is a basic premise for this study. Outdoor mural art is explored in cases that are city and private initiatives, not part of the work of the Boston Planning and Development Agency which has only recently begun to provide guidelines for developers who include outdoor murals in proposed projects. Outdoor mural art has not been an urban design tool used by the Boston Planning and Development Authority.

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2. Literature Review

The shift to understanding outdoor mural art as a legitimate artistic endeavor, separate from graffiti, occurred in the United States and Western Europe in the 1980s. Among those whose work is important in describing and elaborating that shift are graffiti historians Gastman and Neelon (2011), Schiller & McCormick (2010), and Andron (2018), and Boston historian, resident, activist and writer Vrabel (2014). Questions about the commodification and commercialization of outdoor mural art have been investigated in the recent academic work of Molnar (2018).

Scholarly work by Greaney (2002) explored outdoor mural art in Boston in the last decades of the twentieth century from a social historian's perspective. Sieber, et. al., (2012) examine community engagement in the production of outdoor murals in Boston.

Boston politics has played an important role in the design of the city, especially after World War II (O'Connor, 1995). More recent explorations of the relationship between politics and culture in the city are found in Washington (2018). The theoretical basis for critiquing traditional approaches to urban design that informs this study can be traced to the work of Lynch (1960). Others who provide provocative theories and reactions to traditional urban design and planning approaches in the United States during the post-World War II period are Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (1977). Madanipout (2017) does not specifically address the history of urban design but considers the concept of cities over time.

The need to rethink traditional urban design in the face of twenty first century challenges to urban areas around the globe is explored by Hack (2009) and Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, (2022). Interesting concepts for non-institutional approaches to city design conceived as tactical urbanism and temporary urbanism are explored by Lydon & Garcia, A. (2015), Rossiti et. al, (2023) and Stevens & Dovey (2023). Contemporary reactions to and critiques of traditional tools and approaches to urban design and planning have recently been explored through the work of such theorists as Florida (2002), and Landry, (2008).

In addition to these documentary sources the ready availability of public resources facilitates the exploration offered here. In particular descriptions of outdoor murals in recent projects are described in the public records available through the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture describing the "Nubian Ascends" and "Underground at Ink Block" development proposals. Records from the the Boston Arts Commission, the Boston Office of Tourism, the Roxbury Cultural District and local community organizations such as the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative and the Asian Community Development Corporation are additional sources of information for this study.

3. Methodology:

Presented as a case study, this paper examines specific examples of outdoor mural art in the city of Boston to understand its effectiveness in creating identifiable locations in the city beginning with an examination of the politics informing city initiatives and programs for outdoor mural art. The focus of this study is the thirty-year period beginning in 1991 when the Boston Mural Crew was created and the commencement of this study in 2022.

Cases chosen for study were evaluated on the basis of the unique circumstances of their creation and their success in establishing distinct identities for locations throughout the city as well as the potential of each to contribute to the larger discussion of the use of outdoor mural art in the strategies and mechanisms for meeting the challenges facing urban growth in the twenty first century.

By focusing on a few unique cases for study this investigation is intended to provide evidence for considering outdoor mural art as a tool addressing some of the aspects of

formlessness and interchangeability that often characterize urban development in the twenty first century, a key issue for this study.

4. Analysis and Discussion:

From Graffiti to Art, the Shift

The recognition of outdoor mural art as a legitimate art form and its acceptance as a legitimate artistic endeavor followed its separation from graffiti writing beginning with gallery shows of the work of graffiti artists in New York City in the 1980s. Considered a transformative moment for the art world, the post graffiti shift in the relationship of curator, artist and artwork was quick to gain worldwide acceptance (Greaney, 2002). The development of cultural tourism in the twenty-first century would further change this relationship.

In Boston in the 1990s, wall painting, or the production of outdoor mural art, was initially engaged in efforts to wipe out graffiti and the subculture of violence that went with it. Social historian Maura Gearney has observed that “The act of graffiti, long considered a sign of social disorder, has been curbed by mural creation.” (Greaney, 2002, p. 258). Describing the move from graffiti writing to large wall productions to outdoor wall art (later coming under the larger umbrella of street art) graffiti historians Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon note that the graffiti artists who were making the transition in New York City in the 1990s would use the term “production” rather than “writing”, making an important distinction among the artists and their work. (Gastman and Neelon, 2011) Their work points out that the shift had its beginnings in the late 1980s when painting subway cars became increasingly dangerous because of threats of violence from rival crews of graffiti painters and the crack down by police in major cities in the United States. More importantly however, as Gastman and Neelon observe: “if murals went up on city walls, writers would leave those walls alone.” (Gastman and Neelon, 2011, p. 142).

The city of Boston officially began supporting the production of outdoor mural art through the establishment of the Mayor’s Mural Crew in 1991. Originally a summer work program for teens as part of the Parks and Recreation Department the Crew’s initial charge was to wipe out graffiti. And as program director Heidi Schork describes the program’s trajectory: “Our first few summers were spent in Codman Square painting out gang graffiti...Then it took on a life of its own.” (Greaney, 2002, p. 254). The effect of these original outdoor murals went beyond the role originally envisioned by the city. By the end of the twentieth century, Boston’s outdoor mural art would become closely associated with establishing the identity of locations in which it appeared and less explicitly associated with eliminating graffiti. (Seiber, Cordeiro and Ferro, 2012) In this way the production of large outdoor mural art became a sanctioned, even celebrated activity in Boston’s neighborhoods. Whether strategically or opportunistically, outdoor murals became visual anchors, establishing identifiable locations within Boston’s neighborhoods and the city.

By 1997 when the Mayor’s Mural Crew became an official part of the Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture internationally known street artists such as Banksy, Keith Haring and Shepard Fairey were changing ordinary citizens’ relationship to art; outdoor mural art became widely recognized as a legitimate artistic endeavor, and significantly, perceptions and attitudes towards outdoor mural art in the city of Boston shifted. The original purpose behind the program had shifted away from fighting graffiti to creating and supporting an enhanced vision of the city.

The shift in the relationship between art and Boston residents was also evident in the attitude that city government took towards outdoor mural art. By the first decades of the twenty

first century city officials would leverage outdoor mural art as an asset in the visual environment of the city. In 2013 when Marty Walsh ran as a candidate in the contest for mayor he outlined a vision for the city in which artists would find an advocate in city hall and funding would be increased for arts organizations through an increase in the budget for the Boston Cultural Council. After his election in 2014 Walsh followed through on his campaign promises by creating an Arts and Culture cabinet position intended to oversee and promote public arts in the city.

With new leadership in the city the vision to establish Boston as a leader in the arts gained momentum. Led by the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, Walsh's Transformative Public Art Initiatives promoted the understanding of street art as a legitimate artistic endeavor contributing to visually memorable and meaningful places in Boston. The Office of Arts and Culture sends out a call for artists, sets guidelines and procures funding for projects and promotes its curatorial vision. It is the city agency that reviews projects or funds outdoor mural art on public property; it does not fund or review art that is on private property even though it may have a presence in the public realm, such as a mural on the side of a privately owned building that is visible from a public space.

Boston's "PER CENT FOR ART"

Reliable funding for the arts had been a stumbling block in the city government for decades. With the inauguration of Boston's "per-cent for art" ordinance in 2015 a reliable source was finally established. The per cent for art programs are public art programs that emerged in the post-World War II decades and have expanded in the decades since then. One Percent-for-Art programs are established through city ordinances that require earmarking one percent of the city's construction costs on capital investments for public artwork. The implementation of this program in Boston coincides with the emphasis on public art under Mayor Walsh in 2015, however, it lagged significantly behind its adoption in other locales. In cities such as Philadelphia, for example where its plan was adopted in 1959, in Baltimore in 1964, in San Francisco in 1967, and in Seattle in 1973, public art was funded through the one per-cent for art ordinance for many decades before the city of Boston took advantage of the opportunity to secure this reliable funding source for public art.

In addition to the "per-cent-for-art" program a second project begun in 2015 was mapping existing mural art in the city. The resulting "Boston Mural Map" available through the city's website, currently identifies several hundred outdoor murals commissioned by the city as well as numerous others initiated through the private sector or collaborations with community organizations. With the recognition that mural tours are an important part of cultural tourism worldwide, the Boston Mural Map is an ongoing project that plays an important role in attracting visitors to the city.

In 2016 when Mayor Walsh officially announced his Arts Plan, mapping of outdoor murals in the city was given high priority. Walsh titled his plan "Boston Creates": the launch of the plan was orchestrated as a major event in the city in June of 2016 and reported in numerous media outlets. It was not a coincidence that the announcement came just as the National Convention of Americans for the Arts met in the city of Boston. By 2016 Walsh's cultural planning process, originally made public in 2015, was well underway, and with the announcement of the ten year "Boston Creates" plan the city was poised to maximize outdoor mural art as an asset. Twenty-five years after the original program for outdoor mural art was created, the Office of Arts and Culture would expand its program initiatives with support from the mayor and a new funding source.

A key moment for the city had arrived when these developments in outdoor mural art were incorporated in strategies developed by the Office of Arts and Culture aimed at achieving the goals of the Mayor's Arts Plan announced in 2016. By 2017 outdoor murals had shifted from

occupying a passive role in fighting graffiti to become an active element of the city's programs and strategies. The Office of Arts and Culture would introduce its Transformative Public Art Initiative in 2017, and by 2019 it would become a formal program, the Transformative Arts Program, run by the city to fund various artistic endeavors in the city. In 2024, the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture contracted with the mural consultant Street Theory to produce up to fifteen new outdoor murals every year for the next three years. Funds come from the Percent for Art program as well as other sources. A secure funding source and political back up signaled a long-term commitment to outdoor mural art in the vision for the city.

Creating Identity in the city

Boston's earliest outdoor murals became visual anchors in city neighborhoods, prominently featuring identifiable personalities and local landmarks in their imagery and local artists in their creation. These visual anchors effectively claimed space in the urban landscape and strengthened local identity in the larger context of the city. In Boston's Chinatown, East Boston and Lower Roxbury neighborhoods in particular outdoor murals have continued to be important landmarks in the twenty first century.



Fig. 1. Faces of Dudley on Malcom X Boulevard in Lower Roxbury, originally painted by Mike Womble and the Boston Mural Crew in 1995; repaired with in additions in 2015 with funding from the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture. Source: author

Steps away from Dudley Station, Malcolm X appears in "Faces of Dudley" by local artist Mike Womble (Fig. 1) created in collaboration with the Boston Art Commission and the Mayor's Mural Crew in 1995. When the mural was refurbished by the original artist in 2015 the local community requested that the artist include the face of community leader and resident Melnea Cass as well as that of Malcolm X, a figure in the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

Arguing for consideration of outdoor murals as one element in an approach to the design of urban areas that responds to the cultural and technical shifts of the twenty first century, urban theorist and educator Gray Hack suggests that urban environments in which outdoor murals play a part have the ability to "communicate in powerful ways that change perceptions, and help build attachment between residents and their environments" (Hack 2009, p. 458). The maintenance, curating and creation of murals discussed here demonstrates Boston's ongoing investment in outdoor murals.

The city was not alone in understanding the value of outdoor mural art as a cultural asset and financially supporting its creation. With the city's commitment to outdoor mural art as part of an enhanced visual environment private entities would build on the success of the city's programs to accelerate their engagement with outdoor mural art. In the second decade of the twenty first century outdoor murals are increasingly being commissioned by private entities, public organizations and collaborative endeavors that attracted artists with international reputations to work in the city as well as promote the work of the city's own professional outdoor mural artists.

Nubian Square: Planning for the Arts

Examined against the background explored above, development plans for a location in Boston's Lower Roxbury neighborhood illustrate the movement from efforts to eliminate graffiti by the Boston Mural Crew of 1991 to the understanding in the twenty first century of the important role outdoor mural art can play in establishing identifiable locations within the city, creating assets for the city overall. The "Nubian Square Ascends" proposal submitted by The Nubian Square Development, LLC Team is notable for its vision as an overall design proposal that includes strategies addressing and engaging the arts as an initiative to create a memorable identity for this location.

The ambitious vision for the newly named Nubian Square appears in a development proposal submitted to the Boston Planning and Development Agency in early 2020. The team's proposal, available on the Boston Planning and Development Agency's website, for what is known as the Blair Lot articulates how it would purposefully engage street art initiatives:

We propose figuratively (and in some instances literally), painting the streets, building walls, and the roof of the new parking garage with art so that as soon as anyone crosses the threshold from Melnea Cass, Columbus Ave, or Dudley Street, they realize something has changed – they know they are in Nubian Square. Over time, artists can be commissioned to give each street a unique identity; we have shown a single pattern as a symbol that means, 'art goes here'. We envision that other artists will build upon these catalytic moves, through murals, art kiosks and performances, helping to energize Nubian Square as a distinctive, unique destination and place.

"Nubian Square Ascends" (2020)

By foregrounding opportunities for the arts and including outdoor mural art as part of the initial vision for this project, the proposal recognizes the role of aesthetics in the service of creating a distinct identity for this location in the city and engages outdoor mural art as an integral part of the ongoing image of the project rather than an element that is merely decorative.

In the Nubian Ascends proposal architectural form becomes secondary, architecture is literally supporting rather than creating an identity for the Nubian Square project. The subordination of building form and architectural image that characterizes the proposal for new construction in the Nubian Square location has its roots in the thinking of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour with the publication of their seminal work *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972) and their work in design education at that period. Considered controversial at the time, their ideas challenged much of the contemporary design thinking as architects in the United States and Europe during the post-world War II period grappled with what many considered to be the dead end of modern architecture. Fifty years after the first edition of the book was published seminal concepts have evolved; understanding buildings as "media" and cities as communication centers has become mainstream, setting the stage for recognizing the value of street art as part of the city's culture.



Fig 2 . Outdoor murals on the side of the Nubian Market Building in Lower Roxbury. Outdoor murals by local artist Rob PROBLAK Gibbs attract attention to forth coming developments so that the developer assert “they know they are in Nubian Square.” Source: author.

Even before construction begins on the Blair Lot project walls of the Nubian Market Building at the heart of the site have been covered by murals. These vibrant, hard-to-miss murals (Fig.2) painted on the side of the Nubian Market Building by Rob PROBLAK Gibbs are intended to attract interest in an area poised to leverage the arts as an identifier for this location. Even before construction begins, residents in the area are accustomed to outdoor murals as an identifier for this location. Rather than a design concept established by the constraints of zoning regulations, design guidelines or built form, the vision in the Nubian Ascends project gives the visual arts an active role in shaping the everyday experience of inhabitants. As the developer asserts “they know they are in Nubian Square”

“Underground at Ink block”

The location of a new urban park in Boston known as “Underground at Ink Block” is actually not underground at all, rather, it occupies the site of a highway underpass connecting the new Ink Block development in Boston’s South End neighborhood with a nearby subway line. National Development, a private real estate developer, capitalized on the opportunity to create a unique identity for its adjacent development of mixed-use buildings by also developing the “Underground at Ink Block” urban park and linking the name to its adjacent real estate parcels.

Unlike most urban parks “Underground at Ink Block” it is not defined by green space, trees or grass. The highway infrastructure at ground level provides a framework for a variety of activities and, most importantly, it acts as an armature for the more than twenty murals that establish a visual setting that predominates in what was an undistinguished massing of concrete and asphalt. Highway infrastructure almost disappears in the visual environment that has been created (Figs. 4 & 5). By turning the previously unappealing and inherently unattractive space under the freeway into an urban park National Development has converted what might have been a detriment to the perception of its adjacent project into an asset by supporting the production of more than twenty outdoor murals in this location. The outdoor mural art assembled here is part of an environment that is most memorable for its visual impact. The presence of a large concentration of outdoor murals gives the park its character.



Fig. 3 Outdoor mural art at “Underground at Ink Block. The highway infrastructure becomes the armature for more than twenty murals in this location linking the park to the adjacent development and creating a focal point on the route to the nearby subway station. Source: author.

Outdoor murals at “Underground at Ink Block” (Fig. 3) are the work of artists with national as well as international reputations. But it is the concentration of more than twenty outdoor murals at “Underground at Ink Block” that sets this location apart within the city of Boston where it is unusual to find such a large number of outdoor murals in one location. In nearby cities, Chelsea or Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, half a dozen or more outdoor murals are spread throughout a neighborhood. In contrast, at “Underground at Ink Block” the highway underpass frames the extent of the murals, heightening their impact. The constrained setting amplifies the importance of these outdoor murals creating a focal point on the path to the subway and shaping the everyday experience of the city’s inhabitants.

In this location outdoor mural art has taken on a role that goes beyond creating a distinct identity for National Development’s adjacent properties. The constraints, the concentration and the creativity that define the deployment of murals in this location give it a “singularity” that theorist Kevin Lynch would use as a term in his definition of “local landmarks” . In *The Image of the City*, (1960) Lynch was working in the context of other theorists questioning the City Beautiful movement in the post-World War II period in the United States. But Lynch took this argument further, and questioning the work of design professionals, Lynch developed his own terminology based on “the mental image of that city which is held by its citizens[.]” (Lynch 1960, p. 2). While Lynch still finds the need for cities to have an “image” it evolves from the elements that shape the everyday experience of its users; paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks, elements that make the city legible to its inhabitants. “Underground at Ink Block” presents a case of private interests creating a unique location in the city that has become a focal point in the everyday experience of the city’s inhabitants. Lynch would use the term “local landmark”, one element contributing to the legibility of the city.

In the context of contemporary reactions to the short comings of traditional urban design practice and academic interest in the role of urban design, Lynch’s examination of traditional urban design approaches and consideration of the city from the point of view of the inhabitants established an important context for further questioning of traditional urban design. By the close of the twentieth century new terms would emerge: tactical urbanism, temporary urbanism, informal urbanism, and guerrilla urbanism, etc. describing movements that developed as inhabitants have literally taken to the streets reacting to traditional urban design approaches resulting in bland, repetitive urban environments lacking any distinct identity or any reflection of the everyday experience of inhabitants.

5. Conclusion

There are numerous outdoor murals in the city of Boston that might be explored and other aspects of the role of outdoor murals in cities that would reward further examination. However, the focus of this investigation provides a starting point for the current area of interest: a consideration of outdoor mural art's contribution to the city's success in creating identity in locations that can be effective in addressing some of the aspects of the formlessness and interchangeability that often characterizes urban growth in the twenty first century as a result of globalization.

In the current context of academic interest in the field of urban design investigations have focused on presenting reactions to, and critiques of, traditional approaches to urban design and planning that characterize the last half of the twentieth century in the United States and Europe. Research has examined concepts such as tactical urbanism, temporary urbanism, guerrilla urbanism, informal urbanism or the fifteen minute city, for example, describe the underlying concept of local, non-institutional and inexpensive approaches to design of urban areas that purposefully subverts the designed and planned environment in which it exists.

Outdoor mural art has not been considered as part of these explorations of opposition to formal urban design in current academic literature; it does not fit into categories of tactical or temporary urbanism, nor could it be considered guerrilla urbanism, for example. In contrast to these movements outdoor mural art requires significant investments of time and materials; it requires time for planning as well as execution, and it requires funds for materials, infrastructure and artists' commissions, that go beyond the minimal costs associated with most tactical or temporary urbanism approaches.

However, like tactical urbanism, outdoor mural art can be engaged to support the goal of advancing local involvement in its realization. Many of the outdoor murals created through the city of Boston's programs actually reflect a stronger connection with a location and its residents than some tactical urbanism approaches such as park benches, temporary turf and planters that are currently in use in the city of Boston. For instance, the earliest "Faces of Dudley" mural examined in this study was originally painted in 1993 and features identifiable residents of the area and existing buildings. And it was in response to community requests that images of Melnea Cass, a local activist and Malcolm X, another well-known resident, were added in 2015. A generation after the initial sanctioned outdoor murals appeared in Boston neighborhoods the refurbishment of outdoor murals in locations such as Dudley Square continues to be an important element contributing to the variety and diversity of neighborhoods in the city and in maintaining the identity of locations throughout the city.

As the Nubian Square and "Underground at Ink Block" projects examined in this study demonstrate, outdoor murals are not tactical or even temporary, they are recognized as integral elements in creating identity in a location. These cases demonstrate an understanding of the unique possibilities of outdoor mural art and of their sites. In Nubian Square visual images dominate, not the architecture. "Underground at Ink Block" is a park without grass, but an urban space with a visual identity. Innovative uses of outdoor mural art are incorporated as essential elements in the design of these projects. The "Underground at Ink Block" and "Nubian Ascends" murals examined in this study were initiated by private entities with the intention of creating a distinct visual image for their specific location with the larger aim of setting it apart from other development projects within the city. By using memorable locations like "Underground at Ink

Block” cities can instrumentalize outdoor mural art as an innovative tool for shaping growth that resists the homogenization characterizing much urban growth in the twenty first century.

It is only coincidental that this study is based in Boston, Massachusetts, one of the cities urban designer and theorist Kevin Lynch examined in his seminal study *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960). Lynch’s theoretical approach as well as that of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (1977) remain pivotal to understanding some of the earliest reactions to formal urban design and planning approaches that characterized the second half of the twentieth century in the United States and Western Europe. The early work of these theorists laid the ground work for the critical reactions to traditional urban design at the close of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty first century in the United States and Europe. Lynch’s work provides a direction for future thinking about how outdoor mural art might foster “images within the city” that further support identity creation of locations within cities. Developing a language that describes how the presence of outdoor murals actually operates in a city, in the manner of Lynch, has the possibility of contributing to the transformation of traditional urban design thinking that has been the focus of contemporary academic questions at the heart of this study.

It is important to recognize that the presence of outdoor mural art may not generate positive outcomes for some locations in the city. For instance, while successful outdoor mural art can create an important link to the community in which it exists, in Nubian Square in particular the shift towards an Afro-centric identity may not reflect the overall diversity of the neighborhood. Outdoor mural art may be criticized for being primarily a marketing strategy, for the uncertainty of its long-term effects, for accelerating gentrification, or for the displacement of existing residents, and perhaps for creating the perception of exclusionary attitudes or practices in areas in the city.

These issues raise questions for further research. Especially important is the issue of gentrification. While it may be difficult to isolate the effect of outdoor mural art in fostering gentrification, the larger issue of the value that outdoor mural art adds to areas in a city deserves investigation. The question of how tourism affects the design of cities in the twenty-first century also looms large. With its recognition as a legitimate artistic endeavor outdoor mural art has become a cultural asset that brings tourists to Boston as well as other cities around the world with positive as well as negative effects. Mural tourism has not been investigated as a separate topic: it deserves further research. The challenge will be to balance the needs of the community and stakeholders for meaning and identity within the city and the ways it is achieved, with the issues confronting expanding urban areas in the twenty first century.

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