

The Kigali-social enterprise using public art to debate social issues

By Sarine Arslanian



A Kurema mural addressing the stigma of positive living and HIV/AIDS. Image: Sarine Arslanian.

Public art has an inherent civic purpose. Not only does it bring people and places closer, it can also invigorate a neighbourhood's identity and activity. Recognising the arts' potential to connect individuals to their localities, and to each other, many communities around the world have used the medium as an innovative communications tool.

So it is that a group of Rwandan artists are now using their work to re-shape the urban landscape of the capital, Kigali. Their participation in thriving public art projects is a reflection of the increased cultural awareness and growing civic engagement that can be seen throughout the country.

“Kurema, Kureba, Kwigira” – to create, to see, to learn – is a Kigali-based social enterprise, supporting such projects in Rwanda. By bringing together government and artists, public and private sectors, to create something of shared value, the group is successfully designing opportunities to bring arts to the streets, and engage more people in the arts in untraditional and unexpected places.



One of the murals addressing the stigma of positive living and HIV/AIDS. Image: Sarine Arslanian.

Kurema’s founder and director, Judith Kaine, has played a pivotal role in facilitating art in the public realm. In her work, positivity, flexibility and a can-do attitude are essential in getting things done – especially when confronted with complicated administrative processes which involve permitting agencies, different stakeholders, and limited funding sources.

The key to the social enterprise’s work is a participatory and collaborative approach: it involves local communities not only in the planning, but also the creation of the artwork. This brings the art closer to the people, makes them understand its messages better, and thus increases its potential as a vehicle for positive change. So far, Rwanda has seen a spate of new murals which promote reconciliation and address stigmas, such as the ones around HIV and AIDS, and positive living.



Isakari Umuhire, a contemporary Rwandan artist and muralist. Image: Sarine Arslanian.

Isakari Umuhire, a contemporary Rwandan artist who works with Kurema, admits sharing similar values with the public arts enterprise. “We both want to take the arts to the next level,” he says.

His fellow citizens do not know much about contemporary arts at present, he argues. “Instead of having the paintings stuck in galleries and studios that not many people visit, with Kurema’s support, we can bring our art to the public and raise awareness.”



Another mural referencing the AIDS stigma. Image: Sarine Arslanian.

The public art scene is relatively new in the country, Kaine says, and “because we are doing something new and unexpected, there is always going to be a challenge of matching supply with demand.”

Improving the quality of that supply is key – and Kurema is working hard to build increased demand for such a product, too “This translates into pushing the artist to go further and try to really inspire people to see that there is value in art being in your everyday life and public places,” Kaine says.



Bruce Niyonkuru, a contemporary Rwandan artist and muralist posing in front of his work.

Image: Sarine Arslanian.

There are many among this new generation of Rwandan artists who use their art as a vehicle for positive change, challenging conventional wisdom and trying to have a lasting impact on their communities. They are talented, ambitious, often self-taught, and ready to engage in international dialogues



Editor's Pick

Game: Can you identify the city from its metro logo? **TRANSPORT QUIZZES & GAMES** October 13, 2015

In Yemen, there's a city full of 500 year old skyscrapers made of mud **SKYLINES ARCHITECTURE** October 12, 2015

The leader of a Tory county council just said we should

Image: Kurema, ed. But ther in Kigali's stunning murals in sharing le adding

Kurema murals addressing the stigma of posi
Kureba, K

Their art remains somewhat misundersto
regardless of all this, Rwandan contempo
busiest neighbourhoods to see their visio
embody the idea that public art with a str
information of great importance in a crea
vitality to the city landscape.

Related

- It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine: Against the "resilient cities" bandwagon

- ▶ Researchers are trying to come up with sustainable energy model for small African cities
- ▶ China's land reclamation is endangering some of the world's rarest water birds

MORE CONTENT

review the green belt
POLITICS
HOUSING
October 8,
2015

Tweet  Share  Pin 



Subscribe to our newsletter

HORIZONS SUSTAINABILITY  *October 15, 2015*

It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine: Against the “resilient cities” bandwagon

By Alastair Donald



Get your tickets for the end of the world. The Armageddon ride, in Disneyland Paris. Image: AFP/Getty.

Competition amongst the scaremongers predicting Doomsday has intensified recently. The last month alone has brought predications of obliteration via an

earth-smashing [giant asteroid](#), and an apocalypse given impetus by the celestial alignment that created the [Blood Moon lunar eclipse](#). And while the planet slaying giant fire anticipated by the eBible Fellowship didn't come to pass, it didn't stop them defiantly asserting [annihilation would come "soon"](#).

The cranks of recent weeks have been widely ridiculed. But Doomsday scenarios today are not always the property of eccentric conspiracy theorists: more frequently, they're the results of fearful speculations of an unknown future by those claiming authority and expertise.

Scientists musing that [humans will be extinct in "perhaps" in 100 years](#); researchers predicting [societal collapse](#) from catastrophic food shortages; environmental commentators predicting [mass extinctions](#) – all are likely lauded for setting out potential threats and warning of the need for extreme caution. The advance of technology has overtaken our capacity to control [the "possible" consequences](#) says Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute.

The credence given to the expert imagination of disaster was nicely captured earlier this year in Channel 4's [End of the World Night](#) where leading academics and scientists were invited to analyse the outlandishly apocalyptic scenarios of Hollywood sci-fi movies – not as means merely to dismiss them, but to speculate on an “even scarier” truth about how the world might really end.

Given that cities have long provided a focus for society's fears, it's no surprise that the imagination of disaster is having a significant impact on how we think about and plan for the urban future. This is captured in the rapid growth amongst think tanks, social policy gurus, NGOs and corporations of “resilience thinking”, and in the planning and urban design solutions of the Resilient Cities movement.

The Rockefeller Foundation, which is leading the brand development of Resilient Cities, is typical of the new outlook, stating that [“crisis is the new normal for cities in the 21st century”](#). For [others](#), Avian Flu and SARS show that cities are the places where “infectious diseases have spread horrifyingly

fast”. They also play a major part in chronic illness: “Heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer rates are rising, fuelled by unhealthy lifestyles; fast food restaurants proliferate in our cities.”

Not too long ago, cities were seen as a progressive form of social organisation; now, through the prism of resilience, they are interpreted in potentially terrifying terms. For the Rockefeller Foundation the future must be planned on the basis that “cities can’t predict which disruptions will come next”. Whether rising sea levels or heat waves, terrorism or pandemics, energy shortages or crime, cities are now widely perceived as permanently “under threat”.

The upshot is planning shifts from taking account of *probable* risks to *possible* outcomes

This projection of risk is having significant negative consequences including an emerging stasis in development and new constraints on urban freedoms.

Speaking on Chanel 4’s End of the World Night, Astronomer Royal Martin Rees suggested that “an important maxim is the unfamiliar is not the same as the improbable”. This invitation to speculate on dangers that we don’t yet know, but which may create future problems that we cannot yet calculate, is cut from the same cloth as Donald Rumsfeld’s famous “unknown unknowns”.

Rumsfeld took his lead from the US military’s “scenario planning” exercises which used simulation games to speculate on outcomes of conflict. One of the major recent innovations in urban planning has been the adoption of scenario planning to catalogue alternative urban strategies.

But unfortunately, with planners currently infatuated by “future-proofing” – the avoidance of unspecified hazards that may or may not be around the corner – solutions inevitably gravitate towards a precautionary approach that seeks to take account of the unknown or uncertain. The upshot is planning shifts from taking account of *probable* risks to *possible* outcomes.

Take earthquake zones. Scientific monitoring of the earth and atmosphere has

helped our understanding of plate movements, allowing designers and engineers to build based on the probability that – within a certain likely range of events – structures will absorb the energy of an earthquake.

But the recent shift to a more speculative approach has led us to replace development decisions based on a calculus of probability, with those based on outlandish possibilities, in an effort to ensure “no harm shall come”. Consequently from nuclear power in Japan to fracking in the UK, development potential is stifled.

Today, the presence of human development within the landscape has come to be seen as part of a problem rather than the solution: there’s a sense that, rather than bringing nature under our control, it creates greater uncertainty. Nowadays, from flood plains to the green belt, environmental assessments are used to dictate that development be constrained lest there be adverse consequences.

At the heart of the emergence of resilient cities is society’s newfound understanding of itself as vulnerable and “at risk”. The recent retreat from development as a means of securing our interests has gone hand in hand with the idea that individuals must be empowered to make “better” life choices.

The upshot is an impetus amongst urban planners and designers to shape behaviour. Designers planning for an increase in mobility, for example, are guided to think about how to insert “cues” into the urban environment that prompt better decisions – to make us travel by healthier or more sustainable modes – regardless of the inconvenience it may cause.

And yet, even as we live longer and healthier lives, innovations and advances in technology make us better equipped than ever before to manage adverse situations. At a time when disaster looms large in the imagination, the real disaster is the widespread adoption of the ideas and techniques of resilience thinking. It presents itself as the exercising of responsible choices – but it holds society back from realising a better future.

Alastair Donald is associate director of the Future Cities Project and architecture programme manager at the British Council.

He is speaking at [From tsunamis to terror attacks: do we need resilient cities?](#) at the

Battle of Ideas festival on 18 October. CityMetric is a media partner for the festival.

Related

- ▶ **Researchers are trying to come up with sustainable energy model for small African cities**
 - ▶ **China's land reclamation is endangering some of the world's rarest water birds**
 - ▶ **Cities will make or break any deal on carbon emissions. Here's why**
-

Tweet  Share  Pin 



Subscribe to our newsletter
