INTERVIEW

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What role does culture play in a city's transformation and development?

The observation of human settlements shows that culture contributes to bringing people together and creating a social bond based on emotions or memories that they share which can, for instance, be linked to a movie or song. Even in slums, public or private areas allow inhabitants to gather and dialogue, debate ideas or entertain with music or cinema. By creating cultural areas where the function and activities evolve according to the inhabitant's cultural needs, culture contributes to transforming the city. It does so through movements of ideas or art works that artists produce in order to analyse or criticise how we live there, as well as through the activities invented there. Thus, public squares play an important role as a place to introduce innovations: new creations or new lifestyles. This is very clear in the two Congo, in Brazzaville and Kinshasa or even in Paris through the phenomenon based on fashion and elegance called "Sapeurs = Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes". In Brazzaville and Kinshasa, it goes along with the emergence of a creative sector focusing on elegance and has generated a series of activities and professions ranging from designers to dry cleaners and specialised merchants. A similar phenomenon emerged in the 1950's in Zimbabwe with the stone carvers.

During your speech in London on September 6th 2016, you talked about a lack of strategic thinking in the consideration of culture in the urban development. Can you explain to our readers what that statement meant?

This is particularly true in African countries where culture was traditionally linked to different dimensions of social life, but isn't anymore and is often not regarded as an element of the city life calling for the action of public authorities. I find it crucial to show that it contributes to the transformation of the city. Culture does so by creating new activities or products, through the professions required for which artists, technicians and designers need to be trained, by influencing the city's design through the ways of living, and contributing to the inhabitants' wellbeing through the atmosphere that it spreads. It should also be incorporated into transversal strategies, particularly in contexts where there is too little money available for culture. This doesn't mean that it should be diluted. On the contrary, this challenge makes us pay more attention to what could be an exclusively cultural strategy, based on culture's intrinsic value, in particular when it comes to mixing it with other strategies regarding, for instance, professional training or urban planning.

Which governance model and which economic model do you think today's city should follow in order to be an inclusive and creative city for everyone?

Social life is so "uncontrollable" that I don't think it can be regulated with models. This being said, we should start by observing what is going on in cities considered as inclusive. Nevertheless, I don't think a city can be inclusive if it doesn't display diverse ways of living, practices and economic models. In my view, diversity is the key word for both inclusion and creativity.