



## Creating a world-class Twin Cities

By Jay Walljasper

**T**he best answer for how the Twin Cities can thrive in the future depends on asking the right questions today, says urban strategist Charles Landry. Early in his recent weeklong residency here to explore the region’s prospects for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Landry fired a round of provocative queries to his audience.

- What is it that makes a great neighborhood, city or region in the Twin Cities?
- What level of openness and closedness do you find here?
- What do you find here that seems to say “Yes”? And what declares “No!”

Based on 40 years of consulting work for major cities in his native UK and around the world, Landry—who has won international recognition for his books about “creative cities”—offers advice on what it takes to succeed amid vast economic and cultural changes.

### **Interculturalism**

“It’s everybody’s city,” he notes—and that includes racial minorities, people with low-incomes, and immigrants. Everyone’s creativity is necessary to securing a healthy future. Landry stresses that it’s not enough to involve only the so-called “creative class”—which account for no more than 25-30 percent of people, even in forward-looking places like Minneapolis and St. Paul.

“It goes beyond respect for diversity to making changes that bring people together,” he explains. “Cities thrive on the basis of exchanges. How do you get all people to meet, talk, and communicate with one another? Rich and poor groups need to share spaces—that’s one of the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

### **360-Degree Perspective**

We can no longer map our route to the future relying solely on the insights of a few disciplines. As evidence, he shows a sobering photo of the tangle of freeway interchanges that divide downtown Minneapolis from the University of Minnesota. “Every decision made in building this was a logical decision,” Landry



**Landry’s Cedar Riverside Station Area  
Workshop**

points out. But because decision making was left solely to engineers and politicians, the result is a mess of severed connections between two focal points of creativity.

## Moving from engineering to city-making

For 30 years knowledge and technology have been the locomotives of change, Landry notes. But with the rise of web 2.0, connectivity and creativity now play an equally important role, which fosters new ways of looking at our communities. We are evolving from a strict “urban engineering” approach to a more expansive “city-making” approach. This offers the opportunity to enrich economic development and urban design plans by incorporating a broader web of perspectives, including health advocates, artists, and everyday citizens from a variety of neighborhoods.



Landry speaking about art, culture, and community development in North Minneapolis

“It’s very important that the community be involved with developments from the start,” he says, “so that they can have a say in what happens....Minneapolis-St. Paul will benefit by saying ‘yes’ to more people’s creativity.” He predicts that regions that continue to say “No” to the creativity of their own people will pay a dear price in the coming decades.

In the introduction to his Creative City Index, Landry lists the warning signs of uncreative places: complacent, focused on past achievements, limited connections within the community, limited connections with the outside world, sticking to rules without checking if they still apply, fear of collaboration, and a refusal to let new people into the power structure.

A creative place, meanwhile, is somewhere people can express their talents, the exchange of ideas is encouraged, connections are easy to make, urban design generates affection, a rich variety of experiences and an efficient and accommodating public sector exist, and lively public spaces and a sense of buzz welcome people.

## So, what about the Twin Cities?

What does Landry think of the Twin Cities? After spending a week here, sponsored by Twin Cities LISC and other organizations, his impression is generally positive, with a few caveats. “Both cities have a good urban fabric, but the downtowns are a little soulless. There are lots of creative things here and I sense a lot of positive energy from the many people I met.”

“What I see happening is a massive urban re-knitting”—a lot of it addressing scars like the freeway that destroyed the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul or the wide racial gap in income and education that has grown over recent decades. “It’s a healing process both physical and psychological.” Landry sees the new light rail corridor between Minneapolis and St. Paul as “a major opportunity to do this urban re-knitting.”

He observes that the Twin Cities does a strikingly poor job of letting the world know about its strengths. “No one knows that downtown St. Paul has one of the best district heating systems—unique in America. Can anyone visiting downtown Minneapolis see that it is a cycling capital?” He warns that we should be concerned that many American cities are “much better at bragging about what they are doing—even if they are not doing as much.”

Landry believes the most useful thing he can offer is more questions for Twin Citians to probe:

- Are the projects you’re doing just an isolated project, or are they connected to reknitting the community?

- Are you doing enough to boost conviviality here—to bring all kinds of different people together? How are you improving communications and connections throughout the community to achieve social, economic and cultural benefits?
- Are you creating tomorrow's heritage today, something people will appreciate and want to keep?
- Is what you're creating today good enough for the Twin Cities? There is a lot of aspiration here—does a particular project fit the goals and culture of the community? Is this aspiration reflected in the quality of everything you build—and everything you do?
- How can you tell the Twin Cities story better, and include everyone in it?

*Twin Cities LISC was one of the sponsors of Charles Landry's visit to the Twin Cities.*

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