

Editorial:

Urban Crisis Management – New Research Challenges

Kjell Skyllstad*

Editor in Chief

On July 22 I was sitting at the breakfast table with my sister in Stockton, California when BREAKING NEWS news flashed across the TV screen. It was followed by the terrible unfolding as it happened of the Oslo terrorist attack that shook the world. We were all in a state of unbelief and shock. How would our small country respond to such a despicable act? Soon our Prime Minister appeared on the screen with his response: More openness, more democracy, more dialogue, more inclusion. We all remember his appeal, repeated again and again. And a whole people seemed to agree: The perpetrator should not succeed in destroying what we had been working for during the last decades, showing a way forward for Europe: dignity replacing humiliation, inclusion replacing exclusion. 78 young activists paid with their lives for promoting these ideals. Their sacrifice should not be in vain. The words of the Prime Minister and the reaction of the people stunned the outside world.

There is no doubt in my mind: The Norwegian nation would not have come this long way in affirming and extending our democratic traditions had it not been for determined day to day efforts by dedicated pioneers and bridge builders, men and women of good will of the cultural community. I am not speaking of one time intercultural events like festivals or concerts, important as they may be as openers of eyes and hearts. But there is no substitute for the will to determined and persistent action that propelled this movement. It all started when activists from the artist community more than three decades ago formed an alliance across ethnic, cultural and religious divisions in the capital Oslo to share the artistic heritage of immigrant traditions, an initiative that quickly spread to the other sectors of cultural life, gaining support from the city and national governments.

The financial crises we see unfolding in Europe today is accompanied by signs of a new build up of a process of social polarization in step with increasing unemployment, especially among the youth, amplifying social tension. Large numbers of our immigrant populations in major European cities still find themselves locked in a state of social seclusion. Recent experiences show how

* Dr. Kjell Skyllstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway

immigrant ghettos can act as dangerous isolates. This seclusion also acts to separate immigrant groups from each other, providing obstacles towards common action.

Shortly before the recent London riots, the Guardian (22 July 2011) predicted a coming crisis: “While budget cuts leading to the loss of facilities that kept many inner-city youths of all races occupied, experts predict a rise in crime.” The paper speaks of child poverty and run-down schools and a “lost generation,” hardest hit by the economic downturn. The city recently slashed 41 million pounds off support for youth activities. A borough in North London hit by the riots had its youth service budget slashed by 75%. Under the heading “Farewell youth clubs, hello street life and gang warfare” the Guardian comments: “How do you create a ghetto? By taking away the very services that people depend upon to live to better themselves”

It has been pointed out that urban Islamic activism could be a direct result of this policy. Islamic activism has both social and cultural roots. The movement offers young migrants to the cities a way out of social isolation caused by their transition from provincial small town dwellers to urban students or workers. For these people the confrontation with city life and the liberal norms of secularized urban colleagues is experienced as a cultural chock. They see our cultural forms as expressions of moral convictions and lifestyle, which judged by their own standards can only provoke derision. The movement then is for many the only accessible social group that offers acceptable and recognizable norms.

On the backdrop of to-days crises cultural bridge builders (and arts managers) are confronted with an increasing cultural entrenchment and isolation among the majority population as well, encouraged by ostentatious declarations by big nation leaders of multiculturalism as a failed policy and an attempt to bolster a crumbling European cultural identity by identifying its imagined and threatening opposite – Islam.

What really has failed is the ability and will to implement policies that these same politicians have coined. In 2003 the European Ministers for Cultural Affairs met in Croatia to formulate a Declaration on Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention. The Declaration bases its recommendations on the awareness that cultural “impoverishment” and marginalization, on the one hand, as well as prejudice and ignorance, on the other, are among the prime causes of the increase in violence and of the stereotyping of others. The Declaration however fails to pinpoint the underlying inequality propelled by unjust economic and social policies.

Recent events give warning of a build-up towards possible serious conflicts and confrontations between separate, entrenched cultural units. Our children increasingly become victims of this development, inevitably picking up discriminatory attitudes of adults. This formed the backdrop for the “Resonant

Community” research initiative supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture (1989 – 92) which aimed at preventing destructive cultural conflicts and supporting tolerance and democratic interaction in Oslo primary schools through art activities.

The target group was schools pupils between the ages of 10 and 12 who were to follow the project for three years (from grades four to six) as well as families of the children involved. The project involved 18 schools in Oslo and the neighboring municipalities with varying immigrant populations and the participation of 720 children in three models: Six schools were to offer an intensive program of intercultural art activities and learning (A-schools), while six others would only offer a program of concerts (B-schools), the remaining six functioning as control schools (C-schools). One important element was the planned participation of children as performers in cooperation and interplay with professional immigrant musicians and foreign artists of high standing. The project involved live presentation of artistic traditions (music and dance) from three continents: Asia (China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran), Africa (West-Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, North Africa) and Latin America (Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina). It should be noted that the arts program was sought imbedded in a more comprehensive project of cultural and social learning, giving immigrant students a chance to play a role as informers.

A comprehensive test and evaluation program was developed which included preliminary and concluding questionnaire surveys for participating pupils and artists together with continuous observation and video recording of all sessions.

The results show a considerably reduction in incidents of mobbing and conflicts in the A-schools (40%) compared to the other models, together with an equally important strengthening of self image and motivation among immigrant students. In conclusion the research report states: “Multicultural music education bases itself on the ability of music to communicate between cultures. This crossing of boundaries means that we finally begin to accept the expressions of other cultures to be of equal value with our own cultural heritage. The aesthetic subjects can, in this way, lead to a necessary re-evaluation and restructuring of the content and methods in an intercultural direction. This will require a revision of teaching materials and curriculum plans in all subjects with the goal of removing monocultural bias and hidden value manipulation. But in a wider context, this should lead to a necessary re-evaluation also of the total social milieu which gives nourishment to prejudice.

This study opened up new vistas and opportunities for intercultural education generally and arts education in particular. World music gained an important foothold in concert programming nationwide and in the other Nordic countries as well, providing professional opportunities for immigrant artists (Up to 1000 intercultural performances throughout the country were given yearly at schools and culture houses in the period following the study).

During the last quarter of a century the Norwegian demographic landscape has changed significantly, especially in urban settings. Oslo now has an immigrant population exceeding 25% with a school population approaching 40%, which provides new challenges not least in view of the changing cultural and social situation in an increasingly consumer oriented population at large. The distinction between what has hitherto been labeled majority and minority becomes ever more blurred and complex. In view of this development an interdisciplinary research program “Cultural Diversity in the New Norway” (later renamed “Cultural Complexity”) was selected as the new strategic priority area of research at the University of Oslo for the period 2004 – 2009 (which was later extended for a new period). The program involved five faculties: Humanities, Social Sciences, Education, Law and Theology and intended to actively confront, draw upon and challenge findings and perspectives on minority/majority relationships from such areas as gender research, research on human rights, social philosophy, criminology, the sociology of deviance, and finally music and the arts. Some of the themes chosen might serve as models for urban culture research in times of global mobility:

Challenging the difference between “us’ and “them” in schools. The Koran school movement – fundamentalism or normal religious activities. Gender roles among Christians and Muslims – shared problems and shared solutions? How does the labor market tackle cultural complexity? Who does migration threaten to harm-the idea of the dangerous immigrant. Law and multiculturalism – when law crosses borders. Immigrant men, honor and dignity.

It seems that for the academic community to avoid exploring what might be perceived as divisive and by some even provocative issues, means leaving them as potentially unexploded bombs to be armed by misleading press reports and public prejudice. This approach will require a will to theoretical innovation and fertilization with related areas of research. All the controversies paraded by the press about the concept of multiculturalism that have become part and parcel of urban culture to-day are brought to bear on this field of tension. A way forward here would be the planning of international cooperative and interdisciplinary research projects which the JUCR has been established to promote.

And a word in closing: As we celebrate His Majesty King Bhumipol of Thailand reaching his 7th cycle birthday we are reminded of his incessant incentives and holistic approaches that underlie the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, toward solving today’s ecological and financial crises. The teaching of a middle way also has other ramifications. It should be remembered that another name for Buddhism is dhamma-vinaya, pointing to the ideals of coexistence in society. What is urgently needed if we are to implement a more just society is to heed each in our own way the Buddhist teaching of inter-dependence, or inter-being, signifying the need to respect other lives, to develop humility and loving-kindness toward all beings.