

Editorial

When Cities Begin to Dream Through AI

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Cities have always told stories. They speak through architecture, street food, music drifting from alleyways, old shop signs fading under sunlight, graffiti on concrete walls, public rituals, festivals, and the everyday movements of ordinary people. Urban culture has never belonged solely to governments, planners, or institutions. It belongs to collective memory.

Today, however, a new storyteller has entered the city: Artificial Intelligence.

Generative AI now creates images of cities, writes cultural narratives, designs public campaigns, recommends destinations, archives heritage, composes music, and even predicts what citizens may prefer to see or experience. Increasingly, urban culture is no longer only lived by people; it is also interpreted, filtered, and reproduced through algorithms.

This transformation raises an important question:
Who will define the identity of future cities – communities or machines?

AI offers remarkable opportunities. It can help preserve endangered cultural knowledge, translate local wisdom into accessible digital forms, and connect younger generations to traditions that may otherwise disappear. Communities once overlooked by mainstream media may suddenly gain visibility through digital platforms. Small cultural voices can now travel globally within seconds.

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Yet visibility itself has become political.

Algorithms do not merely “show” culture neutrally. They select, prioritize, simplify, and aestheticise. Certain images become more visible because they are visually attractive, emotionally engaging, or commercially profitable. Other realities – poverty, displacement, loneliness, disappearing neighborhoods, ageing communities, or fragile local traditions – may remain unseen because they are less marketable within digital systems.

In this sense, AI does not only reproduce culture; it reshapes cultural memory.

The danger is not that AI will erase culture entirely. The greater danger may be that it creates beautifully polished versions of cities while disconnecting them from lived realities. A city may appear vibrant online while local communities quietly disappear beneath rising economic pressures and rapid urban development.

Urban culture scholars therefore face a new responsibility. We can no longer study only physical spaces, architecture, or traditional cultural practices. We must also examine digital urban imaginaries – how cities are reconstructed through AI-generated images, narratives, soundscapes, and online emotional experiences.

Equally important is the ethical question of ownership. If AI systems are trained using community histories, local artistic styles, indigenous motifs, or collective memories, who owns the resulting cultural production? Can communities consent to becoming data sets? Can urban memory be commercialized without returning benefits to the people who created it?

These questions are no longer futuristic. They are already here.

At the same time, AI may also become a powerful cultural partner if guided responsibly. Rather than replacing human creativity, it could amplify overlooked voices, document endangered traditions, support multilingual storytelling, and create new forms of participation between citizens and cities. The future of urban culture may therefore depend not on rejecting AI, but on ensuring that human values remain at the centre of technological development.

Cities are more than smart systems.

They are emotional ecosystems built from memory, grief, celebration, migration, conflict, resilience, and hope. If AI becomes part of urban cultural life, then empathy, ethics, and community participation must evolve alongside innovation.

Otherwise, our cities may become increasingly intelligent – while gradually forgetting how to remain human.