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Leading the healthy city: taking advantage of the power of place

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Abstract

Creating healthy cities requires the exercise of bold city and community leadership. However, our understanding of the role of local leadership, from inside and outside the state, in bringing about processes that can co-create healthy, just and sustainable cities is not well developed. Notwithstanding this weakness in the world of academe, imaginative civic leaders in the world of practice – in a large number of cities and communities in many countries - are pioneering new forms of progressive, collaborative governance. This article aims to enhance understanding of these developments, and give support to them, by analysing: 1) The power of place, 2) The importance of place-based leadership in bringing about progressive change, and 3) The role of civic leadership in orchestrating processes of local social discovery. Cameos of inspirational civic leadership in three innovative cities – Malmö, Sweden, Portland, Oregon, USA and Bristol, UK – illustrate some of the possibilities. Suggestions on how to advance the leadership capacity of communities and cities are set out.

Keywords

City leadership; healthy city; power of place; equity planning; international exchange

Introduction

This essay examines the role of city, or place-based, leadership in creating healthy, just and sustainable cities. In the first issue of this journal the Editorial Board claimed that city leadership is crucial to health. The authors of this overview of cities and health state:

> 'It is essential that we develop effective and innovative models of place-based leadership at both city and neighbourhood level and better understand the drivers and the conditions for leadership in healthier place-making' (Grant *et al* 2017, p. 4)

In the world of public health scholarship it is well understood that health is created largely outside the health sector. De Leeuw (2017), for example, examines this topic in some detail, and urges public health scholars to pay more attention to the existing science of governance, policy and implementation. In line with this way of thinking

some scholars argue that, in particular, political science has much to contribute to the development of more effective public health policies (Gagnon *et al* 2017). In much the same vein, the World Health Organisation (WHO) report to the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, held in Quito in 2016, explained how the health of urban residents goes well beyond the provision of health services and how a wide range of steps need to be taken by a variety of stakeholders to deliver healthy cities policies and practices (WHO 2016). The argument presented in this paper adopts a similar perspective. It offers a new conceptual model for understanding city governance, one that draws attention not just to the politics of place, but also to the critical role of place-based leaders in stimulating and encouraging community-based social innovation. By drawing on recent international, comparative research on progressive city leadership this contribution aims to enhance understanding of three closely related topics: 1) The power of place, 2) The importance of place-based leadership, and 3) The way that wise civic leaders orchestrate processes of local discovery. Three cameos of inspirational city leadership drawn from three different countries are provided to illustrate the argument. The analysis presented here is, then, intended to offer a fresh perspective on leading the healthy city. It attempts to provide practical insights on how to deliver on some of the ambitious goals agreed by the 'Copenhagen Consensus of Mayors' (WHO 2018).

Framing the power of place

It is incontestable that, what I call, place-less power has grown dramatically in the last thirty years or so. By place-less power, I mean the exercise of power by decision-makers who are unconcerned about the impact of their decisions on communities living in particular places. The forces of economic globalisation, which have resulted in a remarkable growth in the number of multinational companies operating on a global basis, have provided the engine for this expansion in place-less policy-making, and the consequences for social, economic and environmental justice have been dire (Stiglitz 2006; Monbiot 2017).

Michael Sandel (2012), in his acclaimed book, *What Money Can't Buy*, shows how the global economic crisis of 2008/2009 did more than cast doubts on the ability of markets to allocate risk efficiently. The crisis and the global economic convulsions that have followed in recent years have prompted a deeper sense of unease, a feeling that markets have become detached from morals and a broader sense of public purpose. Sandel notes that, for many, the solution is to rein in greed, insist on higher standards of probity in the banking industry, and to enact sensible regulations that will prevent irresponsible financial practices in the future. His major insight, however, is to recognise that such an approach is insufficient. Sandel argues that, while excessive greed played a major role in the financial crash, something more troubling was actually happening:

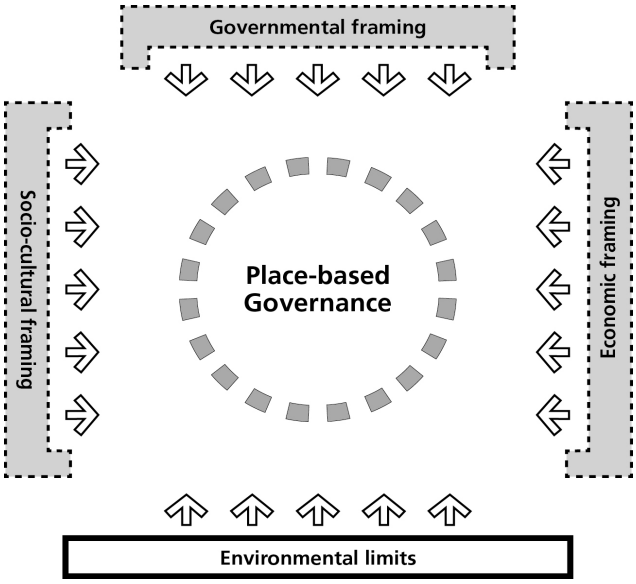
> 'The most fateful change that unfolded during the past three decades was not an increase in greed. It was the expansion of markets, and market values, into spheres of life where they don't belong … We need a public debate about what it means to keep markets in their place. To have this debate, we need to think

through the moral limits of markets. We need to ask whether there are some things money should not buy.'
(Sandel, 2012: p. 7)

In a recent book on inclusive city leadership, I build on Sandel's critique of modern society and argue that city leaders and local activists can play an important role in highlighting the moral limits of markets, and can draw attention to the importance of advancing other important values, for example, altruism, solidarity, generosity and civic spirit (Hambleton 2015).

Place-based leaders are not free agents able to do exactly as they choose. On the contrary, various powerful forces shape the context within which civic leaders operate. These forces cannot, however, prevent local leaders from co-creating new possibilities. Rather they place limits on what urban leaders may be able to accomplish in particular places and at particular moments in time. **Figure 1** provides a simplified picture of the four sets of forces that shape the world of place-based governance in any given locality.

Figure 1 Framing the political space for place-based governance



Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 114

At the bottom of the diagram, are the non-negotiable environmental limits. Ignoring the fact that cities are part of the natural ecosystem is irresponsible, and failure to pay attention to, what some describe, as the ecological ceiling or planetary boundaries, will store up unmanageable problems for future generations (Boone and Modarres 2006; Bulkeley 2013; Raworth 2017; Thunberg 2019). This side of the square is drawn with a solid line because, unlike the other sides of the square, these environmental limits are, despite the claims of climate change deniers like US President Donald Trump, non-negotiable.

On the left hand side of the diagram are socio-cultural forces – these comprise a mix of people (as actors) and cultural values (that people may hold). Here we find the rich variety of voices found in any city - including the claims of activists, businesses, artists, entrepreneurs, trade unionists, religious organizations, community-based groups, citizens who vote, citizens who don't vote, children, newly arrived immigrants, anarchists and so on. Places have traditions and identities that are built up over a long period of time (Tuan 1977; Bell and de-Shalit 2011). The people of the city will have different views about the kind of city they wish to live in, and they will have differential capacity to make these views known (Davies and Imbroscio 2010). Some, maybe many, will claim a right to the city (Lefebvre 1967; Brenner et al, 2012). We can assume that, in democratic societies at least, elected leaders who pay little or no attention to these political pressures should not expect to stay in office for too long. Expression of citizen voice, to use Hirschman's term (1970), will see them dismissed at the ballot box.

On the right hand side of the diagram are the horizontal economic forces that arise from the need for localities to compete, to some degree at least, in the wider marketplace - for inward investment and to attract talented people. Various studies have shown that, contrary to neo-liberal dogma, it is possible for civic leaders to bargain with business (Savitch and Kantor 2002).

On the top of **Figure 1** we find the legal and policy framework imposed by higher levels of government. In some countries this governmental framing will include legal obligations decreed by supra-national organizations. For example, local authorities in countries that are members of the European Union (EU) are required to comply with EU laws and regulations, and to take note of EU policy guidance. Individual nation states determine the legal status, fiscal power and functions of local authorities within their boundaries. These relationships are subject to negotiation and renegotiation over time.

It is clear that **Figure 1** simplifies a much more complex reality. The space available for local agency is always shifting, and a key task of local leaders is to be alert to the opportunities for advancing the power of their place within the context of the framing forces prevailing on their area at the time.

Figure 1 indicates that place-based governance, shown at the centre, is porous. Successful civic leaders are constantly learning from the environment in which they find themselves in order to discover new insights, co-create new solutions and advance their political objectives. Note that the four forces are not joined up at the corners to create a rigid prison within which civic leadership has to be exercised. On the contrary the boundaries of the overall arena are, themselves, malleable. Depending on the culture and context, imaginative civic leaders may be able to disrupt the pre-existing governmental frame and bring about an expansion in place-based power.

The New Civic Leadership

In the 1980s New Public Management (NPM), which involves the use of private sector management practices in the public sector, gained popularity in many countries (Hood 1991). In essence, the approach stems from the belief that

government should be run like a private business. Various writers have shown that privatization, marketization, treating people as if they were self-interested consumers, and similar strategies, have serious limitations (Hoggett 1991; Mintzberg 1996; Barzelay 2001). In academic circles, partly as a reaction to the limitations of NPM, interest in new forms of public governance, ones involving co-production of public services grew considerably (Osborne 2010; Bovaird and Loeffler 2015).

The New Civic Leadership (NCL), presented here, offers a clear alternative to NPM. It involves strong, place-based leadership acting to co-create new solutions to public problems by drawing on the complementary strengths of civil society, the market and the state. The NCL approach, which is set out in detail elsewhere (Hambleton 2015 pp. 66-74), draws on the new public governance literature. However, it has three distinctive characteristics. First NCL draws attention to the power of place in public policy making. Second, it stresses the importance of improvisation and radical innovation in local governance (Barrett 2012). Third, NCL highlights the critical role of leadership, specifically place-based leadership, in spurring the co-creation of new ways of enhancing the quality of life in a locality. If we are to understand how effective, place-based leadership works, we need a conceptual framework that highlights the role of local leaders in facilitating public service innovation. Here I provide a sketch of a possible framework.

Figure 2 suggests that in any given locality place-based governance is likely to comprise five overlapping realms of place-based leadership, with leaders in each realm drawing on different sources of legitimacy:

- **Political leadership** – referring to the work of those people elected to leadership positions by the citizenry

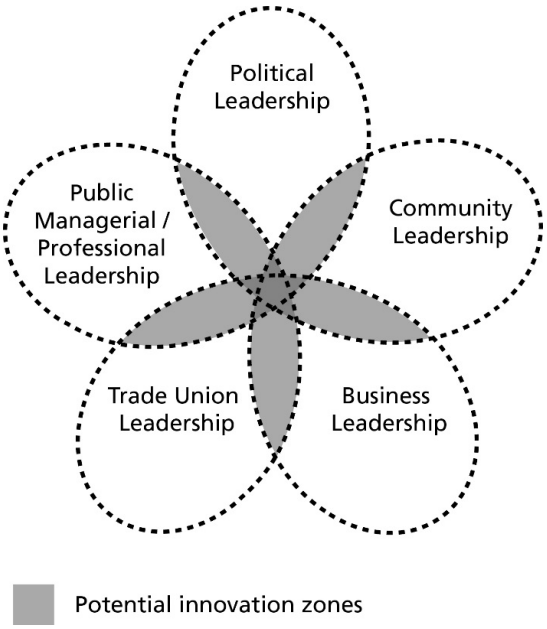
- **Public managerial/professional leadership** – referring to the work of public servants appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organizations to plan and manage public services, and promote community wellbeing

- **Community leadership** – referring to the many civic-minded people who give their time and energy to local leadership activities in a wide variety of ways

- **Business leadership** – referring to the contribution made by local business leaders and social entrepreneurs, who have a clear stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality

- **Trade union leadership** – referring to the efforts of trade union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees

Figure 2: The realms of place-based leadership



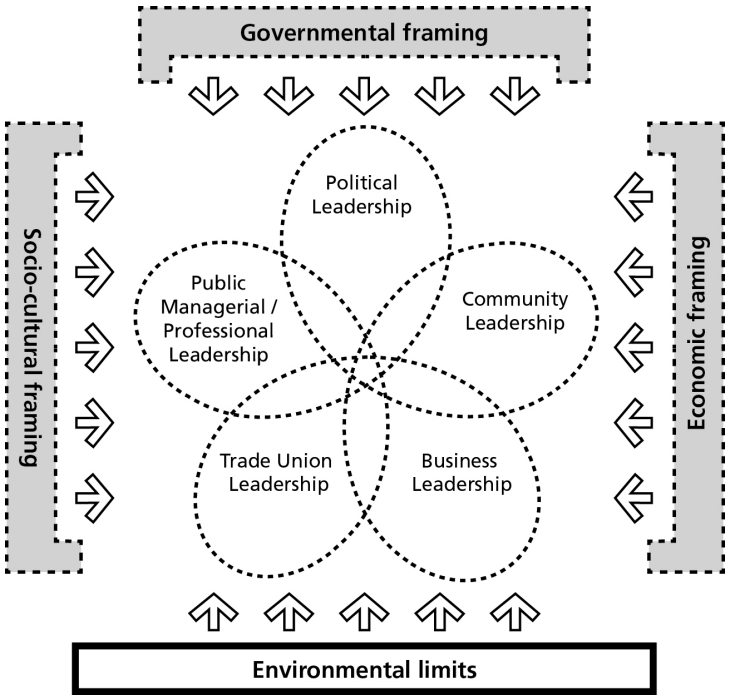
Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 127

These leadership roles are all important in cultivating and encouraging public service innovation and, crucially, they overlap. The areas of overlap, or 'space for dialogue' (Oliver and Pitt 2013 pp. 198), can be describes as innovation zones – areas providing many opportunities for inventive behavior. This is because different perspectives are brought together in these zones and this can enable active questioning of established approaches.

It is fair to say that the areas of overlap in **Figure 2** are often experienced as conflict zones, rather than innovation zones. These spaces do, of course, provide settings for power struggles between competing interests and values. Moreover, power is unequally distributed within these settings. This is precisely why place-based leadership matters. The evidence from my research on urban governance is that civic leadership is critical in ensuring that the innovation zones are orchestrated in a way that promotes a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to innovation. Civic leaders are, of course, not just 'those at the top'. All kinds of people can exercise civic leadership and they may be inside or outside the state. My definition of leadership is: 'Shaping emotions and behavior to achieve common goals' (Hambleton 2007 p. 174). This definition puts emotions centre stage and stresses the importance of the co-creation of new possibilities.

Having explained the five realms of place-based leadership it is now possible to advance the presentation by locating the five realms within the broader context outlined earlier – see **Figure 3.**

Figure 3: Place-based leadership in context



Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 128

Cameos of inspirational place-based leadership

Having outlined a set of concepts that can, perhaps, help us develop our understanding of the dynamics of modern, place-based leadership I now provide some examples to fill out the picture. The cameos of three cities presented here are chosen because they are internationally recognized for their inspirational civic leadership. In various ways the governance innovations taking place in these three cities - Malmö, Sweden, Portland, Oregon and Bristol, UK - provide practical insights on how to deliver the New Civic Leadership just described. For space reasons these cameos are very short but references are provided for those wishing to study these examples in more detail.

Progressive planning in Malmö, Sweden

In 1994 civic leaders in the City of Malmö, population 320,000, were faced with a formidable challenge when, in just a few years, the city lost almost 30,000 jobs. The traditional industries of the city, notably shipbuilding, were in steep decline and, in effect, the long-established economic structure of their city was in a state of collapse. The elected leaders, with the support of their officers, responded with great imagination to the difficulties they faced. Under the leadership of Ilmar Reepalu, then Mayor of the City, a new vision for the future of Malmö was developed, one that imagined a thoroughly modern, environmentally aware city. Elected politicians

worked closely with their officers, particularly their planning officers, to develop this new vision.

Initially, the emphasis was on responding to climate change, and a major programme to regenerate the old industrial area with far-sighted eco-friendly policies and practices was introduced (Hall 2014 pp. 238–244). The city not only created entirely new eco-friendly neighbourhoods, for example, the Western Harbour, but also transformed existing, municipal housing areas, like Augustenborg, from neglected neighbourhoods into model estates.[1] Over time, given the increase in new immigrants arriving in the city, a strong commitment to social sustainability and inclusion has been developed to sit alongside the long-standing efforts to promote environmental sustainability (Nylund 2014; Larsson and Rosberg 2015).

City planners play a major role in the governance of Malmö at the citywide and at the neighbourhood level. Christer Larsson, Director of City Planning, when addressing a national planning conference in London in 2017, put it this way:

> 'The vision that we are producing is not as project-oriented as the old one. It's more value-based and I think this is something crucial for planning – that planning is looked upon for what it makes for society, and for what it can do for social cohesion and social connectivity'.[2]

Leaders in Malmö recognise that modifying the structure of the city is crucial to their approach not just to climate change but also to tackling public health challenges and social inequality. Through careful planning designed to ensure mixed-use developments close to railway stations the aim is reduce the need for car travel enormously and, at the same time, improve access for residents to job opportunities. A sophisticated Comprehensive Plan for Malmö was adopted in 2000 and this was updated in 2014.[3] The plan is designed to grow the city, but with the smallest possible environmental impact, by emphasising 'inward expansion'. High-quality development is concentrated around public transport nodes, and the plan aims to create an appealing city that is socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.

Equity Planning in Portland, Oregon, USA

Portland, Oregon, USA has acquired an international reputation for progressive city planning. A city of 610,000 in a metropolitan area of 2.4 million, Portland has a long-established commitment to sustainable urban development (Ozawa 2004). Ted Wheeler, Mayor of Portland, is building on the work of his predecessors and, given the progressive values of the city, it is not surprising he is now playing an active role in the network of American cities that are opposed to the racist and divisive policies being advanced by US President Trump. For example, shortly after taking up office in January 2017, he reaffirmed the importance of Portland's role in the Sanctuary Cities movement by stating:

> 'Under my leadership as Mayor, the City of Portland will remain a welcoming, safe place for all people regardless of immigration status.'

Portland has developed, over a period of years, a sophisticated approach to civic leadership, one that combines a strong commitment to tackling the adverse impacts of climate change with a deliberate and explicit desire to combat social and economic inequality in the city. Susan Anderson, until 2019 Director of the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, notes that Portland has become more ambitious in relation to tackling issues relating to social justice:

> 'Portland has shifted its focus to not only advance traditional planning and sustainability but also to more fully understand issues related to equity, displacement and social justice.'[4]

Anderson and her team worked closely with, then Mayor, Sam Adams and other stakeholders to create the Portland Plan, an impressive citywide strategic plan adopted by the City Council in 2012. This bold and innovative document puts advancing equity at the heart of the strategy and includes a 'Healthy Connected Neighbourhood Strategy' designed to make healthy options available for all. Portland's 2035 Comprehensive Plan, which came into effect in 2018, updates the previous plan and provides a framework for land use and transportation planning for the next twenty years.[5]

It is important to record that the adoption of an equity goal for the City of Portland emerged from a process that included collaborative capacity-building efforts by city planners and community advocates. Lisa Bates, a planning professor based at Portland State University, is actively involved in working with under-represented groups in the City of Portland. Her action research on equity planning in the City suggests that outreach activities by City Hall are helping community organisations build their capacity to speak the technical language of planning and advance the cause of social justice in the city (Bates 2017).

The One City Approach in Bristol, UK

Bristol, a city of 460,000 in a city region of around 1 million, has a well-established reputation for promoting sustainable development and healthy living. For example, in 2007 the city created a Healthy Urban Team, a multi-disciplinary group that pioneered a wide range of initiatives designed to encourage healthy living in the city. These intiatives included: urban health audit walkabouts with local people in deprived areas of the city; the introduction of health impact assessments into local housing policy; supporting residents to close streets to through traffic to provide safe space for children to play[6] (Ferguson 2019); and the provision of health evidence to regional spatial and transport planning processes. In 2008 Bristol was, in recognition of its efforts to support cycling, named by the UK government as England's first 'Cycling City'. The city went on to achieve international recognition when it was designated as European Green Capital in 2015, a title that rewards cities that consistently achieve high environmental standards and are committed to further improve their performance.

The city is fortunate in having a vibrant economy but, in the period since 2010, social and economic divisions within the city have widened. Today Bristol contains neighbourhoods that are amongst some of the most deprived in the country (Bristol City Council 2015). These growing social and economic divisions were exposed

during the mayoral election campaign of April 2016. Marvin Rees, the Labour Party candidate for mayor, drew attention to these scissions and the need to tackle them. Citizens were persuaded by his message and Rees won an emphatic victory in May 2016. In the period since then he has been striving to strengthen place-based, collaborative governance in order to tackle inequality in the city and create, in the words of his first annual mayoral public lecture, given in October 2016, a 'City for all'.

Mayor Rees is using the New Civic Leadership framework set out above to guide, what he describes as, the Bristol One City Approach. This is an attempt to unite civic purpose in the city, one that seeks to bring together all those who care about the city in a much more collaborative effort. A new City Office, located at the centre of the diagram shown in **Figure 2**, draws strength from all five realms of civic leadership in the city, and is charged with spurring the delivery of the One City Approach.

Mayor Rees rejects simplistic top-down leadership models and stresses that effective place-based leadership requires an inclusive, flexible approach, one that involves a process of opening up conversations with different stakeholders and one that involves risk-taking and experiment. Details of the One City Approach are set out elsewhere (Hambleton 2019).[7] Here it is sufficient to mention a few key features of the approach to give an idea of what it entails.

Inclusive city gatherings of 100 to 200 civic leaders have been held on a regular basis since the City Office founders' meeting in July 2016. These highly interactive city conversations take place every few months, with participants drawn from the five realms of leadership, to examine the major challenges facing the city and to develop ideas on how to tackle them. Rees has created a physical innovation zone in city hall on the same floor as the mayor's office. People, from any of the five realms of leadership in the city, who are working on the One City Approach, are invited to work in this open plan office space on Tuesdays. Project groups have been set up to address challenges identified by the city gatherings. A major effort during 2017-18 was to develop a big picture strategy for the future development of the city, one that looks forward to 2050, and one that agencies are committed to working towards. Launched at a city gathering in January 2019 the One City Plan has attracted national interest.[8]

This thirty-year plan aspires to establish Bristol as a 'fair, healthy and sustainable' city. In 2019 the Bristol One City Approach achieved international recognition. The European Union (EU) operates an EU-wide annual competition designed to recognise the cities in Europe that are best able to demonstrate their ability to harness innovation to improve the lives of citizens – the European Capital of Innovation. The success of the One City Approach, led to Bristol being designated as one of the six most innovative cities in Europe in September 2019[9].

Emerging themes relating to leading the healthy city

Several important themes emerge from this analysis. They can, perhaps, provide pointers for future work on how to co-create healthy, just and sustainable cities. It is clear that we need to develop more sophisticated ways of comprehending the power structures that are now shaping societal, including urban, futures. The anti-

globalisation backlash of recent years reflects, in large measure, the fact that a growing number of people feel relatively powerless to influence decisions that have a direct impact, sometimes a devastating one, on their lives. We can advance our understanding of this growth in anger at distant, unaccountable decision-makers if we reflect more critically on the shifting balance of influence between, what I have called, place-less power and place-based power. By building on the analysis of market failures provided by Sandel (2012), I have suggested that, in the last 30 years or so, there has been a spectacular increase in the power of place-less decision-makers, meaning people who make decisions without taking account of the impact of these decisions on communities living in particular places, at the direct expense of place-based decision-makers, meaning people who are directly accountable to people living in local communities.

If this analysis is broadly correct it follows that a major challenge now facing those wanting to promote the creation of healthy cities is to consider how to bring about a significant expansion of place-based power in the modern world. It is well known that neoliberal politicians, sympathetic to global capitalist interests, dislike strong states that have the power to regulate the private sector effectively in order to advance social, environmental and health objectives. The overarching argument I am presenting here is that global capital also favours having weak local governments as well as weak nation states. This is because relatively feeble local authorities will lack the political and legal authority to mount an effective opposition to the impositions of place-less decision-making. It follows that the renewal and revitalisation of local democracy should be a top priority for progressive reformers.

Having emphasised the importance of place in public policy-making, and highlighted the way that place-based identity and passion can provide the political energy to underpin progressive planning, what themes emerge from the experience of bold and innovative city leadership presented in the three case study cities?

First, values in planning matter. Spatial planning, if it means anything, is about serving the public interest ahead of serving the interests of global capital. At a time when authoritarian forces appear to be gathering, the importance of planners, and public professionals more broadly, standing up for progressive thinking relating to social, environmental and economic justice is more important than ever. It is encouraging to be able to document, and recognise, the professional leadership being shown by the public servants working in Malmö, Portland and Bristol. In these three cities the public service ethos is coupled with a public innovation ethos. The organisational cultures of the city halls in these three cities are outward looking and inclusive.

Second, leadership matters. The discussion of civic leadership presented in this article has attempted to puncture the commonly held view that leadership is, somehow, a top-down affair, one in which senior charismatic figures have the answers and tell their subordinates what to do. On the contrary, wise modern leadership, in both the public and the private sectors, emphasises listening to diverse views, bringing people together and releasing the collective intelligence and insights of groups and organisations (Keohane 2010; Bolden et al 2016). Again the three case study cities illustrate the important role of leadership in promoting public

innovation, in setting a tone that lifts horizons, welcomes exploration and cultivates an experimental approach to public problem solving (Barrett 2012).

Third, a culture of collaborative problem solving requires leaders to create innovation zones, or new spaces for imaginative exchange. A conceptual framework, described as New Civic Leadership, has been presented in an attempt to throw new light on how local leaders might be able, not just to tap into the emotional energy associated with the power of place, but also to orchestrate processes of local discovery that can generate new ideas and solutions. The framework suggests that there are likely to be five overlapping realms of place-based leadership in any given locality and that these realms reflect different sources of legitimacy. The areas of overlap between these realms are described as innovation zones. Most importantly, research suggests that innovation zones don't just happen. Civic leaders wanting to break new ground need to be proactive in creating them.

Finally, the analysis presented in this article suggests that place matters. Professional planners, urban designers and public health professionals have a high level of spatial awareness and a good understanding of the significance of place in modern life. This spatial awareness – this concern for place and for the consideration of place-based outcomes for different communities and groups – remains relatively unusual in public policy. Even now many national policy advisers focus narrowly on overall rather than spatially disaggregated societal impacts. Given the diversity of needs in different localities, it seems clear that the power of spatial understanding in public policy needs to be reasserted. In many countries current public policy is ineffective in addressing pressing public policy challenges precisely because central government departments tend to pursue narrow functional, rather than place-based, objectives. Fortunately, taking a global view, we can note that the number of civic leaders who recognise the importance of adopting a place-based approach to public problem solving is expanding rapidly. Malmö, Portland and Bristol deserve to be praised for their efforts in breaking new ground in place-based leadership. The good news is that they are not alone in realising that effective public policy in the future must take advantage of the power of place.

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Endnotes

[1] For more detail see Hambleton (2015), pp. 196-201

[2] Presentation by Christer Larsson to the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) *Planning Convention,* London, UK, 21 June 2017. Reported in *The Planner*, August, 2017, p. 27.

[3] For more information on the Malmö Comprehensive Plan:

http://malmo.se/Stadsplanering--trafik/Stadsplanering--visioner/Oversiktsplanering--strategier/Oversiktsplan-for-Malmo.html

[4] Personal communication, 6 March 2017.

[5] For more information on the Portland Plan visit:
http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/index.cfm?c=47906

[6] The team supported the emergence in Bristol of what became a nationally renowned model, called Playing Out, thus promoting innovation in health at city neighbourhood level. See: https://playingout.net/how/how-councils-support-street-play/bristol-case-study/

[7] For more on the Bristol One City Plan visit:
https://www.bristolonecity.com/

[8] A major report from the Royal Society of Arts' Inclusive Growth Commission refers positively to the Bristol City Office approach, praising it as a promising example of 'whole place leadership' (RSA 2017, p. 35

[9] The award of European Capital of Innovation (iCapital) stems from a process of international competition among innovative cities in the EU. More on the outcome of the 2019 competition: https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/prizes/icapital/icapital-2019_en