



Kumortuli, Kolkata

The City in Motion

The irony is that the **nomadic world promises you diversity and so often offers sameness**. Surface appearances may be different, but wherever you go you see the same stores, the same brands, the same block buster films, the same cars, the same shopping centre formats, the same music genres, the same architectural styles, the same clothing, the same fashions, the same trends. The globalised market and media have ensured that is so. **The fightback will begin**, however, and some of this will be nostalgic, looking backwards before the confidence emerges to be as far as one can be oneself rather than copying.

Of course there is still local distinctiveness. The massive Indian film industry focused on Bollywood has a different aesthetic than that of Hollywood and different stars and icons.

THE DECLINE OF DISTINCTIVENESS

India has chain stores we do not know in the rest of Asia or Europe and Africa like Big Bazaar or Reliance Retail. Korean K-Pop is different from US hip-hop. The Hispanic world has its cultural legends and the world music genres, especially from Africa and places like Mali, Burkina Faso or the Congo are rich in content. In many countries it is local bands or singers who reach the number one spot like O.S.T.R.'s *Life after Death* in Poland, or in Korea where very few of the global labels are in evidence. The Twice song *Cheer Up* was a number one song, but a reviewer said 'it begins with what sounds eerily like a musical quote from Radiohead's *No Surprises*'. Nevertheless, within the cultural sphere many of the underlying patterns are similar, for instance in music the core genre is often hip-hop. These genres, styles and trends travel the world.

Let us take three examples to describe a theme with endless illustrations: architecture; place names; and retailing. Is it beyond human ingenuity to think of a Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Nigerian, Egyptian, Brazilian high-rise building style that responds to climate, culture and local aesthetics rather than merely trying to be flashy and imitative. Architecture astonishingly has a similar palette world-wide, but exceptions exist. Here Tallinn and Estonia need a mention with their interestingly zany designs, and even in the Arab world there is some modern local flavour. And Africa's talent, such as David Adayje, Francis Kéré, Kunle Adeyemi, Mphethi Morojele and Mokena Makeka are blending an aesthetic that has a strong African flavour. We therefore expect more to come from that continent.



We have witnessed mostly a roving band of nomadic starchitects as the world globalized with renewed force. They are stepping over themselves to produce the most spectacular forms, proliferating gleaming glass towers, bold shapes breaking out of traditional square box patterns; skyscrapers exploding onto the landscape, some with good public spaces. They have built vast retailing, entertainment or cultural centres that try to bewitch, enchant and seduce you. **It will be interesting to see which of these stand the test of time**, at least they look different from the interminable monotony and low quality sameness that has invaded and dominates the urban landscape.

These are supposedly the manifestations of ambition, yet reflecting ambition is more complex. Consider Malaga or Bordeaux where instead of one 'global' icon, a hundred well-blended and co-ordinated initiatives are more effective than the one-off building. Malaga, once seen as the cheap holiday resort for the British has brought its extensive old city to life by expensively under-grounding all car parking, upgrading housing, and bringing out its Andalusian character in innovative schemes like canvas sun shading of streets.

China is now officially banning its weird buildings that are distinctive – whether truly interesting or just faddish is a different question. This propelled China onto the architectural stage. Yet according to guidelines on urban planning in 2016 from the State Council, China's Cabinet, the statement says: 'this applies to the construction of "bizarre" and "odd-shaped" buildings that are devoid of character or cultural heritage', and the directive calls for buildings that are 'economic, green and beautiful.' What beautiful means is a question for debate, perhaps the monotonous structures that line Beijing's seven ring roads – I think not. Targeted are buildings like the Sheraton Horseshoe in Huzhou, the Sunrise Kempinski hotel in Beijing, Guangzhou's Circle, inspired by a jade disc and home to its plastics exchange, the Gate of the Orient in Suzhou, and perhaps even the CCTV building by OMA and Rem Koolhaas. This is possibly why construction on the world's largest proposed skyscraper at one-kilometre high, the Phoenix Towers in Wuhan, had not started in 2017. Does it include Zaha Hadid's Soho Galaxy in Beijing, which was then copied in Chongqing. It is called the Meiquan, and the developer behind Meiquan, 22nd Century, denied accusations of pirating the building, his blog says: 'Never meant to copy, only want to surpass.'

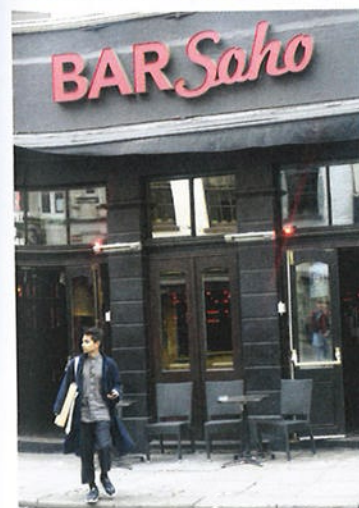
There are so many Sohos and **if you want to be trendy just call yourself Soho – or not**. The first and real Soho name in London apparently comes from an ancient hunting call –soho –which took place on lands west of Wardour Street in the current Soho. New York's SoHo means south of Houston Street. Both these places are renowned for their vibrant cultural life and edgy feel and, in the past, some griminess, sex clubs and traditional markets. I should not be too snuffy as I had my office in London's Soho for 15 years in the 1980s and 1990s, setting up my organization Comedia and also running a social innovation hub for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. I loved the area and its combination of intimacy, artiness and even sleaze.

But since then any gentrifying area in the world is in danger of being called Soho. There is Palermo Soho in Buenos Aires, Hong Kong's Soho, South of Hollywood Road. Others indirectly get the name as Trastevere is known as the Soho of Rome and Brera the Soho of Milan and both cities have Soho restaurants. Madrid has a Soho restaurant, a hotel Vincci Soho, a Soho House, and a Cambridge Soho club. The latter brings together two brands Cambridge and Soho. There are Soho hotels as in Miami, Chicago and Toronto.

Then of course there is the Soho House chain, rightly since its original location was in Greek St., Soho, London. Now it has 18 locations and is expanding across the hip centres of the world – from Barcelona, to Berlin and Istanbul with Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Hong Kong on the horizon.

There is Soho Coffee Co. started in 1999 in Cheltenham, not far from where I now live, and aiming to have 50 outlets by 2018. It has a solid ethical foundation supporting Fairtrade coffee. The name is ubiquitous and my latest find was the Soho Travel Agency in Trieste. One of the biggest Sohos is Soho China, one of the largest prime site office developers in China that has a dozen Soho branded developments. They say their 'soho originally stood for "small office, home office"'. There are copycat derivations like SoMa, South of Market San

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Sohos in London, Beijing, Trieste and Madrid

Francisco, where the Soho sound rings in your ear. Clearly the ring 'So', 'Mo' 'No', 'Bo', 'Ho' has a rhythm to it. Boho is a bohemian and there are numerous boho brands from cosmetics to clothing, such as exploring 'the best Boho in Boston.' Noho is now North of Soho in London and New York and there is Noho North of Hollywood in Los Angeles. I am sure Nomosoho in Crosby Street New York wanted to send out a different message for this hip place as they probably overlooked that 'nomo' means not homosexual. Remember too if you are obsessed with the Soho sound there is a town called Soho in North Korea, and another area in Pyongyang called Soho-ri.

The serious decline of distinctiveness can be seen in Soho House – when visiting in Berlin not one member of staff could, was willing or apparently allowed to speak a word of German in what is now 'the hottest hotel in Berlin'. The German deputy finance minister noted: "it increasingly drives me up the wall that waiters in some Berlin restaurants only speak English," adding: "You would never find this craziness in Paris... we will only understand each other if we speak each other's language."²⁵

Next up is food retailing and it is food that we imagine can be locally produced and sold. Not so. The drugstores CVS and Walgreens in the States together control between 50 and 75 per cent of the market in each of the country's 14 largest metro-areas, such as Chicago, the Bay Area, Los Angeles and New York, and together control at least half the market share in almost every major US city. Walmart currently captures around 20% of the grocery market in the US, up from around seven per cent in 2002. The top four US food retailers led by Walmart control an astonishing 40 per cent of the vast, complex US market. Grocery sales in Britain are dominated by Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons. Dubbed the 'big four', they had a combined market share of 73.2 per cent in 2016. The top three food retailers in the Netherlands control 83.5 per cent of the market with Albert Heijn in the lead with 35.4 per cent, followed by SuperUnie with 29.6 per cent and Jumbo with 18.5 per cent. In Australia Woolworth has 36.3 per cent and Coles 33.2 per cent. Two companies with a 69.5 per cent market share. What they sell has travelled the world. Green beans from Kenya, tomatoes from the Canaries, potatoes from Cyprus, avocados from Israeli, asparagus from Spain, apples from New Zealand, pak choi from China, mangoes from India, dates from the Middle East and roses from Ecuador. These are the same roses the mafia gangs get immigrants to sell to diners in the restaurants of Australia, the States and Europe.

Again we see the counter-reaction, interesting new bakeries sprouting up, specialist cheese shops or old-fashioned fishmongers or butchers. Farmers markets, that attract all classes, are on the rise and a boon to new food focused start-ups. **Great as they are their force cannot contain multinational food power.** The creativity bursts out in the numerous restaurant formats and pop-up food experiences, and these are subject to the constant movements in taste, fashion and trends that sweep the globe. At one moment it is Mexican tacos, the next Japanese teriyaki, South American parillas, (iron grilled barbecues), Scandi fresh food. Then there are the craft beers, experiments with wine and even vodka made from cow's milk – Britain's Black Cow. Often it is the fusions that capture the imagination like current favourite Yotam Ottolenghi's Middle Eastern mix of cultures. Criss-crossing continues apace.

Similar examples of **the dominance of the 'constant same'** could be made with clothing. It is not only that most of the world dresses in the same Western style, it is also that you see the same clothes shops in their thousands, like Zara or H&M, both of whom are in fact well-designed.

Notable exceptions include the Arabs frequent wearing of the thawb, the generally long tunic, or the variations women wear such as the hiqab, the headscarf that covers the head and neck, but leaves the face clear, the niqāb, a female head covering and scarf that covers all of the face except for the eyes, or the burqa which covers the whole body from the top of the head to the ground. Of course, Indian women wear the sari.

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A good example of dealing with the global and the local is the most globally popular and immensely successful televised Indian Premier League cricket competition. The eight teams have a minimum of 16 players. Of these every team must have at least two players from the Indian under-22 pool, as well as a minimum of eight local players out of the total. There can be up to 10 foreign players in a team's pool and of the 11 playing in a game only up to four.

The effect has been dramatic on the development of India's young cricket talent coming through, who apart from being mentored by famous senior players would not have had such visibility.

The spread of Kolkata's idol making district Kumortuli and that of Jodhpur's blue city that follow remind us of old forms of distinctiveness. Beyond flashy towers and cafés what will the distinctiveness of our cities look like in the future?



A very Torino day in the rain

This section draws on issues first explored in my book *The Art of City Making* published in 2006.