

# Embracing the Soft Power of Art

Across the globe, more and more cities and countries are investing in the arts, with the aim of driving economic growth — and burnishing their images.

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Reporting from Milan

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On a recent sunny Tuesday, 17 people sat in a circle in a gray-and-white loft space, listening intently as the Swiss Cameroonian curator Simon Njami waxed poetic about the benefits of culture.

Hailing from around the world, these cultural leaders were here in Milan thanks to the Creativity Pioneers Fund, an initiative launched by the Moleskine Foundation — a nonprofit organization funded by the Moleskine Company, but which operates independently. This morning's conversation was part of a leadership seminar they were attending at the foundation's office space at BASE Milano, in the city's Tortona district.

The clutch of mustard-yellow buildings, which now house not only the foundation's space but also fashion studios, exhibition spaces, co-working offices and even a bar, was once an industrial metalworking plant. After the plant was closed in the 1980s, the city decided to transform the buildings into this creative hub.

It is, said the Moleskine Foundation's chief executive and co-founder Adama Sanneh, a perfect example of public-private partnership, with the city of Milan leveraging its cultural and creative sector to create economic growth.

“This is not just a theoretical approach,” Sanneh said in a video interview from

Milan a week before the conference. “And you are able to create this only as a city if you create the condition so that the economic indicator is not the only one that counts for public interest.”

Worldwide, this idea of investing in the creative industries has seen an uptick over the last decade as governments realize filmmaking, visual arts, music, fashion, design, dance, theater and craftsmanship can not only galvanize economies but also help countries present themselves in a positive light.

This concept was the focus of “Culture as Capital: Can the Arts Galvanize Economies?”, a panel discussion at the Art for Tomorrow conference in Milan last week, an annual event convened by the Democracy and Culture Foundation with panels moderated by New York Times journalists and others. During the conversation, participants discussed how their cities and countries — Milan, Korea and Uzbekistan — are using their creative industries to attract investment and foster social progress.

According to Jelena Trkulja, the senior adviser for academic and cultural affairs at Qatar Museums who moderated the panel, the creative economy is currently valued at over \$2.2 trillion. During an interview beforehand, she said, “in many cases, some countries are realizing that the cultural industries should be deeply embedded in government strategy of social, economic and human development, and this is why they’re investing, because the returns are there.”

Milan, for example, has long been known as one of the world’s great fashion and design capitals. According to Tommaso Sacchi, the city’s deputy mayor for culture, who was a panelist, 10 percent of the city’s GDP comes from the creative sector, with 10 percent of the city’s population working in that space. But, he said, the city understood that it also needed to expand within the cultural sector. It not only has invested in BASE, but in other projects, such as converting Fabbrica Del Vapore, a former tram factory, into an art complex.

Sacchi said that the city would also be spending €300 million in state and city public funds on new libraries, new museums and multifunctional spaces with both social and cultural missions. “Milan is in a more mature, more upgraded process of metamorphosis,” he said during an interview the day before the

panel, at his office next to the Duomo.

Across the Atlantic, Detroit has rebranded itself largely through cultural endeavors. For decades, its downtown was a poster child for urban blight that many locals avoided. But in recent years, public sector investment has helped to revitalize downtown — and draw locals and visitors back.

The abandoned Beaux-Arts Michigan Central Station downtown was for years a haven for drug addicts and the homeless, a physical symbol of the downward spiral of a city that made — and lost — its fortunes in the automotive industry. But through a public-private partnership funded by the city of Detroit, the state of Michigan and the Ford Motor Company — which, on its own, invested almost \$1 billion —, the station reopened last June as both an innovation hub for Ford and as a multiuse space for exhibitions and concerts.

Several miles away, what was once blocks of vacant, boarded-up buildings has become a creative campus, called Little Village. It includes the Shepherd, a church over a century old, that has been turned into an art space. Nearby, a former bakery now houses two arts nonprofits; the neighborhood even has a skate park designed by the skateboarder Tony Hawk. Time magazine recently named the neighborhood as one of the World's Greatest Places 2025.

Afa S. Dworkin, the president and artistic director of the Sphinx Organization, a Detroit-based classical music development program for young Black and Latino people, said the creative sector in the city was not just about aesthetic enrichment. “It is,” she wrote in an email, “a driver of opportunity, education, and community empowerment.”

This sort of community empowerment can take many forms. In South Korea, there is an emphasis on ensuring that the country puts homegrown cultural producers on the global stage. “We really have recognized the importance of this production of originality as a key factor for the creative industry,” said Jiyeon Lee, the chief executive of SUUM Project, an independent curatorial office, said in an interview after the panel.

Governments are also starting to understand that creative production helps

shape global perception of a place. “We’ve entered an era where influence isn’t only measured by military or industrial strength,” Lyndsay Duthie, pro vice-chancellor for academic partnerships and industry engagement at the University for the Creative Arts in England, said in an email. She cited the “cultural reach” of K-pop from South Korea and Nollywood from Nigeria, which create a kind of soft diplomacy.

In Uzbekistan, where some 60 percent of the population is under 30, the government has made it an economic pillar to invest in the arts and make it easier for craftspeople to promote and sell their work. In 2017, the president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, created the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (A.C.D.F.) by decree. The group is renovating four of the country’s museums, and also oversaw the opening of the Center for Contemporary Art, housed in a former diesel power station. In April, the country hosted the Aral Culture Summit, focused on helping transform the region through culture, art, science and design.

In September, the country will also host the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, aiming to promote craftsmanship from across the country, but also feature international artists such as Antony Gormley and Carsten Höller. Gayane Umerova, the chair of A.C.D.F. and a panelist, said during the discussion that she saw a “clear vision in leadership” from her country in terms of investing in culture and supporting young artists in those industries.

“We’ll have to build up the ecosystem in Uzbekistan because what was missing were things like a Center for Contemporary Art and art residencies,” she said in an interview after the panel. “And these are important elements in creating infrastructure.”

Trkulja could not have agreed more. “Culture is becoming central to how nations grow, compete and tell their stories,” she said in her opening remarks. “Governments are treating the arts as more than enrichment; they are viewing it as essential infrastructure.”