

PAINT THE TOWN...

Is a lick of new paint all that's needed to change our cities for the better? It certainly worked for Tirana. And it's proof, says **Ingrid Fetell Lee**, that little moments of daily joy can transform our urban existence



In the late autumn of 2000, a crew of painters covered a historic building in Tirana, Albania, with vibrant orange paint. A shade between tangerine and Tango swallowed up the old façade, spreading over stone and cement indiscriminately, sparing only the windows. The painting began in the morning, and by midday a crowd of onlookers had massed, gaping in the street. Traffic came to a halt. Bewildered, some spectators shouted while others burst out laughing, shocked to see such bold colour amid the grey. For all the commotion, the painting might have seemed a prank by a particularly brazen mischief-maker. But this wasn't an act of graffiti, and the commissioning artist was no ordinary street vandal. He was the mayor.

Edi Rama won the World Mayor award in 2004 for his stunning success in restoring the capital city of Albania, just four years after he was elected. Visit

Tirana today, and you will see few traces of the city that Rama inherited when he first

took office. Broken by decades of repressive dictatorship and starved of resources by ten years of chaos after the fall of Communist rule, by the late 1990s Tirana was in a poor state indeed. Public services left much to be desired and sometimes rubbish piled uncollected in the street.

Tax evasion was rife. As Rama himself has described it, "The city was dead. It looked like a transit station where one could stay only if waiting for something."

The painted buildings were an act of

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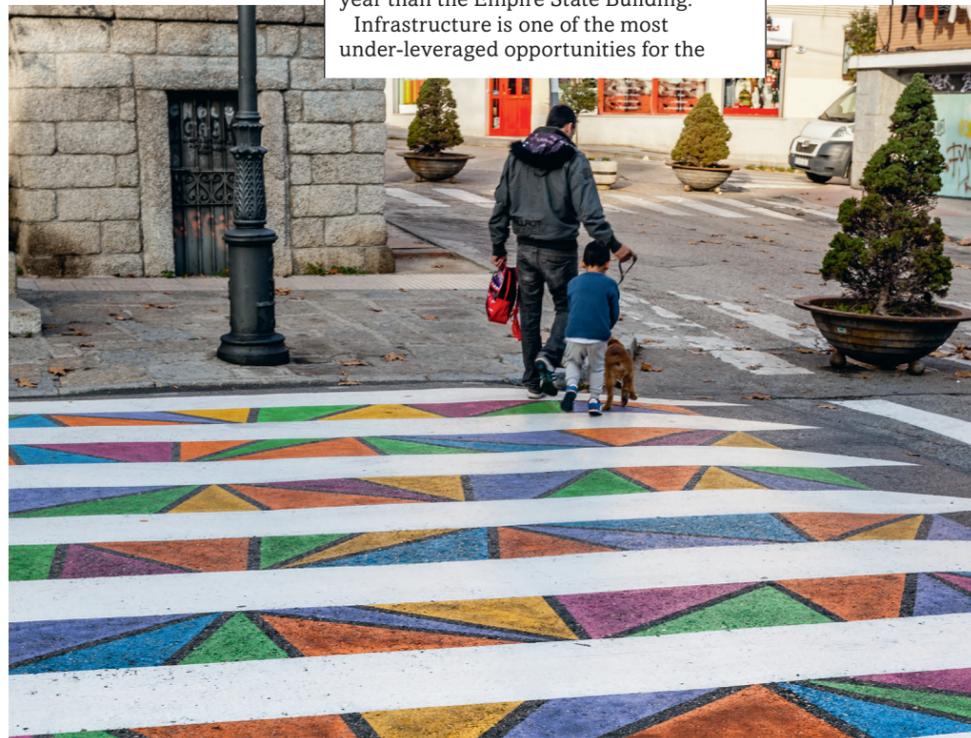


desperation by a mayor faced with an empty treasury and a demoralised populace. An artist by training, Rama sketched the first designs himself, choosing vibrant hues and gaudy patterns that disrupted the bleakness of the urban landscape. The orange façade was joined by others in different colours as Rama's project quickly spread throughout the city, enveloping public and private buildings alike.

At first, the reactions were mixed: some citizens were horrified, others curious, a few delighted. But soon after, strange things began to happen. People stopped dropping litter in the streets. They started to pay their taxes. Shopkeepers removed the metal grates from their windows. They claimed the streets felt safer, even though there were no more police than before. People began to gather in cafés again and talked of raising their children in a new kind of city. Nothing had changed, except a few patches of red and yellow, turquoise and violet on the surface. And yet everything had changed. The city was alive, ebullient, joyful.

Though quality of life has long been a major concern for the leaders of our cities, traditionally they have focused on practical issues, such as affordable housing or access to essential services, healthcare, and transport. But increasingly cities, and citizens, are recognising the importance of little moments of quotidian joy. These small flashes – experienced in our local neighbourhoods, on the way to work, or during a night out – punctuate the experience of life in a city, and can also be a catalyst for deeper change. In Tirana, the bright colours aroused a communal spirit that had been absent during the city's decline. Shop owners not only started paying their taxes, but they also banded together to pay for the

Walks of life
The New York High Line. Below: one of Christo Guelov's Madrid crossings



restoration of the pavements outside their shops. The colours became a galvanising force that engaged people in the revitalisation of their community.

A more well-known example of an urban initiative that has sparked joy and transformation is New York City's High Line park. One of the ways it did this was by breaking the structure of the city. A common characteristic of joyful cities is that they have streets that lie at different angles and scales, a feature that makes navigation challenging, but also presents regular opportunities for discovery. While New York's rectilinear street grid reflects its practical and efficient character, the High Line, a park created on the elevated structure of a disused railway line, has a meandering path that floats above the hard angles of the city. Its elevation brings a joyful shift in perspective.

The introduction of wild elements further softens the rigidity of the urban landscape, creating opportunities for serendipitous encounters with birds and butterflies. The furniture is also designed to allow people to move and interact in free and unexpected ways. Benches have angled endpieces, which kids often slide their toy cars down, or scoot down themselves. Wooden loungers wheel along the original tracks. In the amphitheatre, large steps give visitors permission to sprawl. Within a city that is so structured, the High Line provides a space for liberation, one that has become so iconic that more people visit it each year than the Empire State Building.

Infrastructure is one of the most under-leveraged opportunities for the



Positive play
The Pigalle Duperré basketball court. Right: Jan Vormann fills cracks with Lego bricks in Toulouse

creation of joy in cities. Roads, bridges, and pavements are often the duller features of the urban environment, and as a result often recede into the background of daily life. One example of joyful infrastructure is the colourful pedestrian crossings created by artist Christo Guelov in Madrid. Suddenly one of the city's background features is brought gloriously into the foreground just by the use of a little colour, and it's no wonder that similarly vibrant crossings are popping up in cities around the world. Similarly, in Edmonton, Canada, city officials recently decided to cover the pathways in one of the main city parks with ice, turning them into skating trails in the winter. Illuminated in bright colours at night, they beckon people outdoors at a time when most feel cooped up inside.

One of the city's background features is brought gloriously into the foreground with the use of a little colour

Dead spaces that are too small to be used for anything else can also be infused with a sense of joy. In the Paris neighbourhood of Pigalle, there's a basketball court painted in vibrant purple and orange gradients, sandwiched between buildings. Basketball is traditionally a sport that squeezes itself into the city, but the way that this court has been painted turns it into an

opportunity for joy for both players and spectators alike. Initiatives such as this disrupt the rigid, repetitive quality of the built environment, counterbalancing it. Their boldness creates a feeling of surprise that diverts our attention from everyday concerns, and prompts us to reconsider our assumptions about our city, looking at everything around us in a new light.

Joy can be used to highlight problems in a city in a way that invites people to participate in fixing them. For example, artist Jan Vormann has used Lego bricks to fill in the cracks in walls, and Juliana Santacruz Herrera has filled potholes with brightly coloured yarn as a playful way to call attention to the deterioration of infrastructure. The power of joy is that it is an inherently attractive force; rather than turning people away, it draws them together in support of change. In



GETTYSTOCK; BRALEY PÉREZ MARTÍNEZ; ALEX PEREGRINIS; JAN VORMANN

Cincinnati, the organisation Future Blooms paints the boards on derelict buildings, creating brightly coloured doors and windows to make them look alive. It claims its work has contributed to a drop in crime and an increase in economic development.

The popularisation of these initiatives casts the origins of street art in a new light. While in the 1980s it was often viewed as contributing to the decline of urban environments, perhaps it was actually an attempt to brighten a landscape that had been left devoid of nature and colour. Today, rather than hasty murals completed under cover of night, the work of street artists is more likely to be recognised as a valuable contribution to the city's cultural fabric. But more than just brightening up the landscape, public art can also shift our perspective in joyful ways.

French artist JR, for example, uses enormous graphics to disrupt our sense of scale, creating images of people as large as some buildings. One of his recent installations had a distinctly political tone: a 65-foot image of a toddler peering over the Mexican side of the US border wall. Others feature ballerinas or athletes immersed in joyful movement, making the buildings look like toys by comparison. This creates a kind of 'Alice in Wonderland' effect, where we feel our own scale pleasantly distorted and, again, see the city and ourselves in a new light.

Similarly, Olafur Eliasson frequently

Knitting together
Juliana Santacruz Herrera fills potholes with woven yarn.
Below: Olafur Eliasson's iceberg clock in Paris



works in a playfully disruptive way in cities. For the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris, he brought 12 icebergs from a Greenland fjord and made a clock out of them in the Place du Panthéon. In effect, he brought the massive, amorphous topic of climate change into a strange intimacy, where people could touch and feel and actually understand what they were losing. The delightful nature of the experience invited deeper engagement with uncomfortable truths, giving people a visceral awareness of a problem that often feels distant and removed from daily life.

There are many things that joy can do in a city, from stimulating economic development and tourism to prompting action on social issues. But I think the most significant effect is that joy can help overcome the isolation of modern urban life. With the proliferation of mobile devices, our engagement with our surroundings is often mediated by screens. We spend less time interacting with people and buildings, and therefore less time immersed in the sensory experience of the city. By bringing our focus into the present moment in a positive way, small moments of joy call us back to the world around us, reinvigorating our connection to our city and each other. ■

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ALAMY; JULIANA SANTACRUZ HERRERA