Slow Cities

In Western Europe a backlash is under way in reaction to the culture of speed imposed by the 24/7 global marketplace and the manic pace of life dictated by globalization. In France a 35-hour work week was introduced in 2002, an innovation that is also being considered by Belgium and Sweden. In Italy writer and activist Carlo Petrini was so offended by the temerity of McDonald's wanting to open a store in the Piazza di Spagna in 1989 that he started the "slow food" movement.

In 1999 the slow food movement spurred an offshoot called the CittaSlow (slow cities) movement, made up of municipalities whose leaders reject the North Americanization of European cities. In 2003, the first 28 slow cities were certified. All 28 charter members were Italian, the majority of them located in northern Italy, particularly in Tuscany and Umbria. By mid-2005, the list had grown to 45 (including Verteneglio in Croatia; Hersbruck (Figure 1.30), Uberlingen and Waldkirch in Germany; Asolo, Chiavenna, Orvieto, Spilimbergo (Figure 6.C), Tevi, Todi, and Urbino in Italy; Sokndal and Levanger in Norway; and Ludlow and Aylsham in the United Kingdom) and a more than a dozen other towns were actively seeking certification through pilot programs. More than 100 other towns from around the world have inquired about joining.

The movement's charter specifies that a slow city is one with a population of fewer than 50,000. Member towns must pledge to promote organically produced, traditional foods, a clean environment, quiet neighborhood, urban charm, and the idea that the good life is an unhurried sensual experience. The slow city charter contains over 50 pledges, such as cutting noise pollution and traffic, increasing green spaces and pedestrian zones, supporting farmers who produce local delicacies and the shops and restaurants that sell them, and preserving local aesthetic traditions. Promoting local distinctiveness and a sense of place is almost as important to the movement as the enjoyment of good local food, wine and beer.

This means that the charter also covers many aspects of urban design and planning. Candidate cities must be committed not only to supporting traditional local arts and crafts, but to supporting modern industries whose products lend distinctiveness and identity to the region. They must also be committed to the conservation of the distinctive character of their built environment and must pledge to plant trees, create more green space, increase cycle paths and pedestrianized streets, keep public squares and piazzas free of advertising billboards and neon, ban car alarms, reduce noise pollution, light pollution, and air pollution, foster the use of alternative sources of energy, improve public transport, and promote eco-friendly architecture in any new developments.

Bra, one of the founding municipalities of the slow cities movement (along with Greve, Orvieto, and Posizano) has banned cars, as well as supermarkets and lurid neon signs, from parts of its historic core. In order to promote a more leisurely pace of life, every small food shop in Bra is obliged to close on Thursdays and Sundays. Small family-run businesses selling locally produced crafts, fabrics, cheeses, roasted peppers, white truffles, fresh pasta, olive oil, and specialty meats are granted the best commercial real estate. The municipality subsidizes building renovations that use the honey-colored stucco typical of the Piedmont region. In schools, children are served organic fruit and vegetables grown by local producers.

One obvious critique of the CittaSlow movement is that it could all too easily produce enervated, backward-looking, isolationist communities: living mausoleums where the puritanical zealotry of slowness has displaced the fervent materialism of the fast world, Aware of the dangers of prescriptive slowness, the CittaSlow movement hopes to propagate vitality through farmers' markets, festivals, and the creation of inviting public spaces. It aims to deploy technology in air, noise and light pollution control systems, modern waste-cycling plants, and composting facilities. It seeks to encourage business through ecologically sensitive, regionally authentic, and gastronomically oriented tourism.

Here, though, is another danger: that, paradoxically, slow city designation becomes a form of brand recognition within the heritage industry. Because they are small, the charming attractions of slow cities could all too easily be overwhelmed by tourism. So the more they flaunt their gentle-paced life, the faster they may end up changing. In this scenario, shop prices will rise, and cafes will lose their spilled-drink, smoky, messy, authenticity. The better known that slow cities become, the more affluent outsiders will choose to make their second homes in them. House prices will go up, and the poor and the young will be pushed out.

Nevertheless, whatever the eventual outcomes of the slow city movement per se, its principles speak directly to the concepts of "dwelling" and intersubjectivity that are key to the social construction of place. Fostering respect for seasonality and traditional rhythms of community life propagates recurring and interlocking patterns of events that make for cultural transactions and public sociability in the public realm.

Source: Source: Knox,P. - Marston, S.: ***Human Geography*** : *Places and regions in global context*, Pearson Prentice Hall 2007