



A fresh model for urban conferences: the Ideas City initiative

By Reena Jana | April 1, 2013, 6:54 PM PDT

Walking around New York City often feels like attending a festival. I'm not the only one to come up with this obvious simile: Two years ago, dozens of New York's cultural institutions, headed by the Lower East Side's New Museum, banded together and created the Festival of Ideas for the New City. It featured lectures, workshops, and performances. It's coming back from May 1-4, with neater, smarter branding as the Ideas City Festival. Could this be a new model for big-think, multi-disciplinary conferences, as such gatherings seem to be increasing in number and getting more competitive? (Think of the TEDx events alone on your calendar.)



The Ideas City Festival seems to be about offering a platform on the streets of the cities themselves and not in convention centers, focusing on culture and how it drives change. The arts don't seem like "extras" to "serious" speakers.

"We...believe that the cultural sphere is still a relatively untapped source of enormously powerful creative capital, especially in its potential to stimulate economic development and foster greater innovation in other fields," Lisa Phillips, the director of the New Museum, said in a press release. "The Ideas City initiative is an unprecedented step in expanding both our institution's mission and its potential as a community hub, drawing the creative population together as agents for change."

The May lineup includes designers pitching architectural proposals before an audience; tents mixing entrepreneurs, ecologists, food vendors; a traditional panel on how games affect how we understand cities, among other offerings. And the Ideas City team is ambitious. Last year, it held an event in Istanbul, Turkey; this fall, there's one in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The Ideas City effort echoes that of another museum: the BMW Guggenheim Lab, which we've reported on. The bigger, more interesting trend is how museums are reinventing themselves — and art itself — in terms of their urban influence.

Image: Scene from 2011 Festival of Ideas for the New City, by Garrett Ziegler/Flickr