

Creative Cities International, LLC

# The Vitality Index™

Ranking of 35 U.S. Cities  
Executive Report, July 2011

creative  cities

 VITALITY  
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**The Vitality Index™ (VI) is a cultural impact study that models the human experience of the city at its heart. In practice, it is a ranking and assessment which applies the same level of rigor to qualitative factors as it does quantitative ones. It brings to life a city's human strengths as it respects its complexities: a vibrant downtown, an engaged populace, educational opportunity, economic sustainability, good transport, diversity of population and opportunity, and a citizenry that embraces its history and culture.**

This VI ranking is composed of data on both quantitative and qualitative factors – through cultural and demographic research, online surveys with citizens and questionnaires to city officials. Its purpose is to analyze and assess each city's assets and what is distinctive and interesting about it. Rather than focusing on what doesn't work, the VI emphasizes what does. We wanted to know what residents liked and felt was "special" about their community. The Index serves as a tool to translate residents' desires into civic action, in the tradition of urban sociologist William Whyte. Using data garnered from surveys and direct mail, the VI is a unique instrument to gauge civic vitality. We want to understand the

relationship of how people actually live and participate in a city and how this relationship is crucial to its greatness.

Our objective is to reflect a sense of the city from the perspective of the people who live there, the "inner tourists" who are the first and most important actors in any city's present and future. Their commitment, loyalty, and participation in all aspects of urban living hold the key to a city's future sustainability. Their appreciation or dissatisfaction with their city will greatly determine the level of interest or attraction the city holds for visitors looking for places to travel and for businesses looking to invest.

# Small Things Matter

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These are the experiences that create the texture of daily life and come to form the feel of the city. We wanted to know more about how people really used their city. We added to our online survey measuring what people liked and what they thought would attract people to their city an open ended question: What are your three favorite places and why? We asked this in order to hear from city residents directly about where they go, what they do, and what they value in their city.

## Bottom-Up

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We looked for people-oriented projects and initiatives that were embraced by city government, i.e. plans to revitalize downtown growth and density, the funding of public art, improve public transportation, the building on neighborhood initiatives, the support for community aspirations, or sometimes where citizens managed to do it themselves.

**“Fayetteville Street: Reborn from a dead pedestrian mall just a few years ago.”** —Raleigh

**“Guadalupe River Park, with a great potential to connect our city to perhaps the only natural asset in our urban area.”** —San Jose

**“...once a shopping area for the well to do, the area [NE Columbus] fell into disrepair in the ‘90s and has been ‘repurposed’ by various different immigrant communities. Great food, great cross-cultural experiences.”** —Columbus

## Public Access

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It is not surprising that where there are interesting things to do in a city, e.g. rivers, parks, lively neighborhoods, arts activities and events; people want access to them. Here we valued—because participants did—both the quality of the public spaces and events, and the public’s access to them.

**“Olympic Sculpture Park-a beautiful marriage of nature and art, at a huge scale, right on our most beautiful natural asset, the waterfront!”** —Seattle

**“I’d go to a lot more events there [Ohio Theatre] if the rest of downtown weren’t so desolate at night.”** —Columbus

**“Miami Design District/Wynwood since these areas provide great support and accessibility for arts and culture”** —Miami

**“Founder’s Hall - a great gathering space”** —Philadelphia

**“lakefront-it’s uniquely ours”** —Chicago

# Parks, Public Spaces, Waterfronts

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These need their own category because in nearly every city, residents in 27 of the 35 cities we studied, or 77%, rate them second only to the arts in what they like most about their city. Parks are particularly important as a way to relax yet still be around people in the midst of the city. For example:

**“Springwater Trail [and] Mt. Tabor Park. Why? Fairly distinctive places, lots of energy due to lots of people.”** —Portland

**“Guthrie/riverfront, both the cultural opportunities and the beauty”** —Minneapolis

**“public parks because of [sic] there are wonderful opportunities for recreation”** —Phoenix

**“Central Park for giving New Yorkers a backyard to play in”** —New York City

**“Wade Oval: especially “parade the circle” event, location of Ingenuity Festival”** —Cleveland

# Cultural Institutions

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All the cities we studied are rich in cultural resources, which citizens value. We noted a tendency for older residents to value institutional culture more than younger ones who cared about outdoor assets for recreation, art galleries, and those activities that can sometimes include both, such as art walks.

# Desire for Connection & Street Life

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It sounds like an oversimplification but needs stating: People generally like to be with each other and want places where they can get together, whether public plazas, streets, cafes, restaurants, or art festivals, etc. They find ways to create community even when cities do not make that easy. Where good public transportation is not readily available they are willing to “drive to walk” in parks or neighborhoods livelier than their own. We noted especially when residents commented that the city had made attempts to help them make connections either with better transportation like the new streetcar in Atlanta or by joining up cultural assets like the River Walk in San Antonio or the Plaza District in Oklahoma City.

**“Downtown cultural district; very vibrant and affordable”** —Pittsburgh

**“The Central West End and the Delmar Loop are two great neighborhoods and remind me of what downtown could become”** —St. Louis

**“Echo Park, Silver Lake, Downtown. They feel like actual neighborhoods, with places I like to go and people I know or might want to know.”** —Los Angeles

# Sense of Place

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We noted where residents showed particular enthusiasm for their city, its assets, and its story, e.g. Jacksonville, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Detroit. They note their history but also how their cities maintain a feeling of authenticity:

**“independent local restaurants” as opposed to chains** —Indianapolis

**“small local businesses”** —Riverside, Jacksonville

**“no other neighborhood better tells the story of this city”**  
—Old North St. Louis

**“great market and great place to see neighbors and other Detroiters”** —Eastern Market, Detroit

**“there are so many little [independent] coffee shops, each with their own ambience, regulars and charm”** —Minneapolis

**“Regent Square - variety of shops and restaurants that attract people but does not lose its neighborhood feel”** —Pittsburgh

**“Downtown...the growth is exciting.”** —Tulsa

**“Silverlake sunset junction area for its neighborhood feel and an active commercial area that has remained independent and lively”**  
—Los Angeles

# Lively Neighborhoods / Rubbing Shoulders

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Respondents placed a strong emphasis on lively and authentic neighborhoods, those that had the feel of a “real city.” They are willing to drive distances to reach them for their energy and variety of people. These are sometimes designated art districts but also places where the arts have emerged spontaneously bringing with them restaurants, bars, and nightlife. Respondents note the energy and diversity they find there in people and activities:

**“It’s great to see more activity and people living downtown.”**  
—Kansas City

**“So much going on steps from my home.”** —Downtown, Memphis

**“Midtown Market...it helped integrate the many cultures who live, work, and enjoy that part of town.”** —Minneapolis

**“Harvard Square for the access to free lectures and other opportunities to learn.”** —Boston/Cambridge

**“Downtown (anywhere) because it is walkable and because food and entertainment are easily accessible.”** —Raleigh

**“Capitol Hill-It feels urban, there are people walking at night, businesses are open, it is lively.”** —Seattle

**“Sugarhouse has a happening local scene although it has diminished since a large block was torn down”** —Salt Lake City

**“Cherry Street: unique bars and restaurants, great farmer’s market in the summer”** —Tulsa

**“Common Market-sense of community among patrons”** —Charlotte

# Joint Cultural/ Community Projects

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This rated high from respondents in about half the cities we studied. It seemed surprising at first that what seemed like the most elusive and complex choice to achieve for “what would make your city better” was so popular. This could mean that citizens believe that a “joined-up” approach would better serve the city as a whole because they have seen such projects already at work or that they share a sense that partnerships provide better benefits as a whole. Perhaps cultural institutions might strive to be more visible in their communities or share resources with other non-profits in innovative and creative ways.

**“LACMA because it is the people’s museum, although sometimes they forget.”** —Los Angeles

**“Harwelden Mansion, a great English gothic mansion near downtown, now home to the Arts and Humanities of Tulsa”**—Tulsa

**“Pinball Hall of Fame, one of the largest collections of functioning pinball machines in the world. It’s a non-profit that gives most of its proceeds to charity”** —Las Vegas

**“Mint Museum Uptown - cultural activities, free concerts, interesting collection of exhibits, good for tourists”** —Charlotte

# It’s Not About the Buildings

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People do comment on good architecture in their cities but not nearly as much as we might expect. Their overwhelming connection is to natural assets where they are in abundance (Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, and Portland, for example) and to public spaces where they can meet up to enjoy the feel of urban density and lively neighborhoods. When they do make mention of buildings, those places primarily house the arts.

# The Unexpected

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Great cities have a sense of the unexpected. People voice their pleasure at finding the new and undiscovered: a great bakery or cafe, a club, art gallery, or an exciting neighborhood that seems to be the result of spontaneous combustion. These “events” need room to happen.

**“Ludivine because they integrate local farmers into all of their food and no one would expect it to be in OKC.”** —Oklahoma City

**“Cherokee Street - an unstable coalition of Mexican immigrants, anarchists, and artists that has managed to revive a once forgotten commercial strip.”**—St. Louis

**“Area Fifteen - An old warehouse that has been converted to an arts and small business incubator.”** —Charlotte

**“...the Beat Coffeehouse which is an independent cafe that recently opened...”** —Las Vegas

**“Big Truck Tacos - best burrito in the city, and open late.”**  
—Oklahoma City

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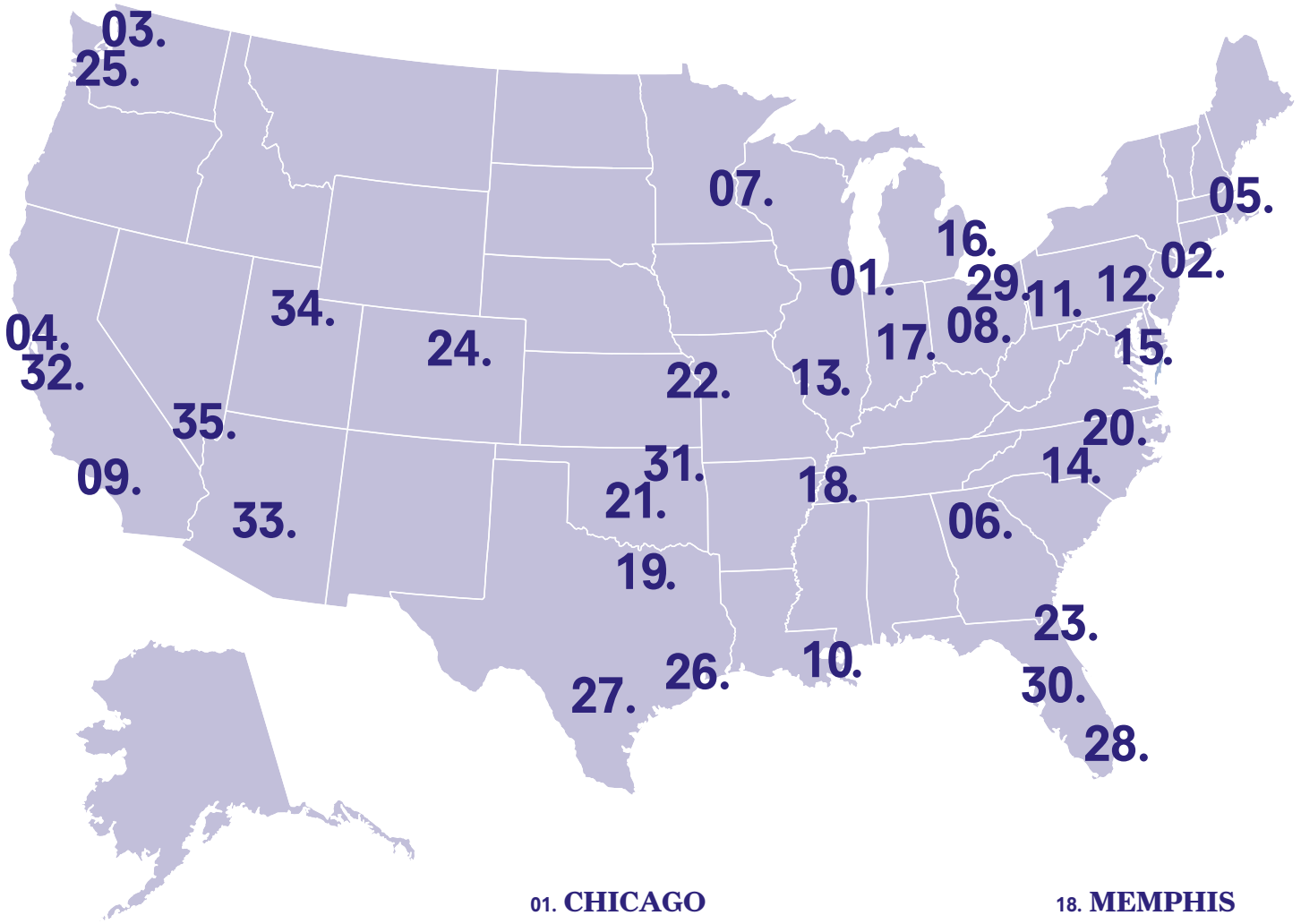
# Good Messiness at The Top

**The vitality of a creative city distinguishes it from just any urban environment. The exemplar creative city is full of energy, opportunities and interesting people combined with a bit of edginess. That creative tension, which is the result of an entrepreneurial spirit combined with restless talent wanting the city to be more remarkable or provide better outlets for ideas and energy equals what we call “good messiness.” It is the energy we find in exciting places that is difficult to define but immediately felt. (And just as readily felt when it isn’t there.)**

“Good messiness” depends, however, on many of the factors in the quantitative side of this index. Safe streets and economic stability, a sound infrastructure of good transportation, education, and healthcare all make it possible to have “good messiness” and not bad. This is the environment in which new ideas and businesses, culture and commerce can thrive.

It is not surprising then that the cities that ranked high did so. The assets of New York, Chicago,

Seattle, and Los Angeles are well established both economically and culturally. They are in flux, which is a good thing, buoyed by changing economic forces and migrations of residents in and out of the city, leading to a kind of instability that is creative and dynamic. They are cities with a rich past and a powerful present. But no city can assume that its present will be its future without attention to many of the factors we assessed in this ranking.



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|--------------------|--------------------|
| 01. CHICAGO        | 18. MEMPHIS        |
| 02. NEW YORK       | 19. DALLAS         |
| 03. SEATTLE        | 20. RALEIGH        |
| 04. SAN FRANCISCO  | 21. OKLAHOMA CITY  |
| 05. BOSTON         | 22. KANSAS CITY    |
| 06. ATLANTA        | 23. JACKSONVILLE   |
| 07. MINNEAPOLIS    | 24. DENVER         |
| 08. COLUMBUS       | 25. PORTLAND, OR   |
| 09. LOS ANGELES    | 26. HOUSTON        |
| 10. NEW ORLEANS    | 27. SAN ANTONIO    |
| 11. PITTSBURGH     | 28. MIAMI          |
| 12. PHILADELPHIA   | 29. CLEVELAND      |
| 13. ST. LOUIS      | 30. TAMPA          |
| 14. CHARLOTTE      | 31. TULSA          |
| 15. WASHINGTON, DC | 32. SAN JOSE       |
| 16. DETROIT        | 33. PHOENIX        |
| 17. INDIANAPOLIS   | 34. SALT LAKE CITY |
|                    | 35. LAS VEGAS      |

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# The Specific and Unique

**All cities have something wonderful about them. But great cities big or small are open to ideas from anywhere. They make room for spontaneity. They are receptive to the best talents wherever those may come from, which in turn fosters creativity and innovation. When they are on the rise, tradition and new ideas interact. We want to highlight some of the cities that caught our attention.**

***Indianapolis, Jacksonville, San Antonio*** —The new striving energy in smaller cities like San Antonio, Jacksonville, and Indianapolis is remarkable. Whether or not these cities ranked high on the VI, they are clearly on the move upward with a sense of self-discovery and identity.

***Detroit*** — A big city diminished by economic hardship now appears to be reinventing itself as one of the most interesting urban experiments in the country.

***New Orleans, Memphis*** — Neighborhoods! These cities are full of diversity, nightlife, and interesting neighborhoods. They allow for spontaneity. The enthusiasm of their residents grabs you.

***Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Pittsburgh*** — These places are strong in cultural institutions and heritage. How they

continue to maintain a vibrant edge will be worth watching.

***Charlotte, Raleigh*** — Residents seem fine as they are, but we detect from respondents a sense that their cities may not have quite caught up to the aspirations of their citizens. They can do more, particularly as their economies, demographics, and aspirations are rapidly changing.

***Minneapolis, Portland*** — Cities are about possibility. Those that invest in theme parks, shopping malls, stadiums and convention centers are foreclosing possibilities not creating them. Respondents in these cities cite the wonderful natural resources, good access to them, and a cultural life happening at street level. You get the feeling that Minneapolis and Portland are attentive to what its residents want from their city.

## HOW TO USE THE VITALITY INDEX™

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It is our hope that the Vitality Index™ ranking will give guidance to cities to continue to support programs and policies that are clearly - and verifiably - enriching the lives of their citizens in economic and cultural ways and also give them pause about pursuing policies that don't or won't. The real value of the VI is in its usefulness as a means of improving the quality of life for the residents of the city by staying in touch with their desires and aspirations.

The Creative Cities approach, with the help of the VI, is customized to cities' needs and requirements. It provides measurements and analysis that can also serve as a persuasive means of moving ideas and vision into the public realm of policy and responsible decision-making because what is missing in most analyses is crucial: the intentions and values of the community. It can help build consensus.

Fully activated, it is divided into three levels:

- 1 — gathering of data such as demographics, trends, costs and measures of typical and creative infrastructure modelled to produce a ranking that benchmarks the city against competitor cities;
- 2 — surveys and focus groups with residents and other stakeholders that examine people's habits, how they actually live their lives, where they go, what they do, their concerns, and their aspirations. This provides additional analysis, refined recommendations, risks and opportunities, and essential indicators of what people want and care about;
- 3 — high-level rigorous analysis from a cultural point of view.

## HOW TO USE THE VI FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

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The VI can help to ensure that the planned design of an area makes a positive contribution to the community and the city by taking into account—and valuing—what isn't usually considered. With this information, a city can pose a question about a goal or project. If a city wishes to attract business by enhancing its business climate or its amenities, by altering its tax and zoning laws, etc., those values can be reflected in the factors the VI chooses to review and the analysis can point to the city's objectives.

Another city might want to attract cultural tourism as a boon to economic regeneration and sustainability. How art and cultural activities contribute to the current state of the city and how they might be enhanced would certainly be a major priority of the analysis. In both cases, the cultural assessment evaluates the information from the VI on the basis of the project goals and the values the city thinks it has or wishes to enhance or attain. It is an analysis that has the ability to change with increasingly complex goals or ones that change radically.

Or perhaps the city's goals are less clear or its problems more profound. For cities under more serious stress, changing zoning laws or building a cultural center will not be enough to make a dramatic difference in their future. Even large infusions of cash won't matter if they still lack that vitality, energy or "good messiness" that are critical to a city's economic and cultural viability. Here, the VI can examine what is already working and why, e.g. its street life, the marketplace, and its complex mix of people. Identifying what is specific and interesting to the area is a first step in building confidence among residents and attracting commercial investment.

Finding answers to what seem intractable problems requires an analysis and understanding of a city's culture from the bottom up and a focus for planning, design and economic regeneration rooted in a city's uniqueness.

## METHODOLOGY

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The Vitality Index™ is produced using a mixed methodological approach. It begins with quantitative factors including trends, costs, services, and measures of creative infrastructure. It then combines these with key informant insights and survey data. Government and civic leaders in a variety of positions responded to open-ended survey questions to offer judgments on the key attributes and liabilities of their cities, with attention paid to cultural and athletic attractions, night life, street life, educational opportunities, café society, and general creative dynamism. At the same time, a survey was administered to several thousand individuals in the rated cities of the index to gain anonymous feedback on similar topics. The two approaches, together, offer both quantitative rigor and qualitative subtlety in our ability to actually produce a rating for each city, while allowing us the opportunity to offer disquisitive insights into specific attractions.

## WHO WE ARE

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We are a global team of the most dynamic and experienced practitioners in culture and urban planning, market and financial analysis, architecture, transportation and the creative industries. We believe that for cities, large or small, to be brilliant, they must use all their resources: economic, political, and most of all, cultural. There is a risk of failure in neglecting the creative and cultural potential in urban projects and city life. The successful project is one that has understood the history the situation, and the market, and engenders goodwill in as many people as possible.

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