

CREATIVE CITY LIMITS

Urban Cultural Economy in a New Era of Austerity

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council





This pamphlet brings together discussions from a research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Council entitled 'Creative City Limits' that begins to chart the impact of recent financial instability and public-sector cuts on the place and role for creativity in urban economic growth.

The last two decades have marked the emergence and proliferation in the UK of research and policy agendas emphasising creativity as a powerful new 'motive force' for urban economic regeneration, planning and design. In particular, the 'creative city' has acted as an influential template and narrative for efforts at stimulating growth and re-imagining and rejuvenating urban communities. The notion suggests that talented people are the key to economic growth and that large cities rich in diversity, design and heritage create the physical and social conditions for the local incubation and global export of new ideas and technologies. Policy-makers and planners have eagerly commissioned and adopted an array of creative city strategies to reap perceived employment and income-enhancing effects, ranging from attempts at nurturing art districts to efforts at incubating clusters of creative industries. They have also sought to encourage a critical infrastructure of intellectual resources, social diversity and cultural intermediaries; not only as a way of improving cities' economic vitality and competitiveness, but increasingly as a means of addressing issues of social cohesion and transforming notions of civic identity.

However, the global economic crisis which first came to the fore in 2008 poses significant tests for this creative economic and urban development agenda. Arguably the creative city notion has flourished within the context of a long credit fuelled boom in financial services and real estate. Policy-makers and cultural practitioners have often benefited from, relied on and targeted new forms of upmarket consumption, corporate sponsorship and property-led urban regeneration. This has been supported and supplemented by public investment in cultural facilities and urban 'renaissance' programmes. The ongoing economic downturn and political instigation of

fiscal austerity therefore challenges many of the underlying assumptions which nurtured the new agenda of creativity. For example, during our first workshop in January 2011, planner Peter Hall argued:

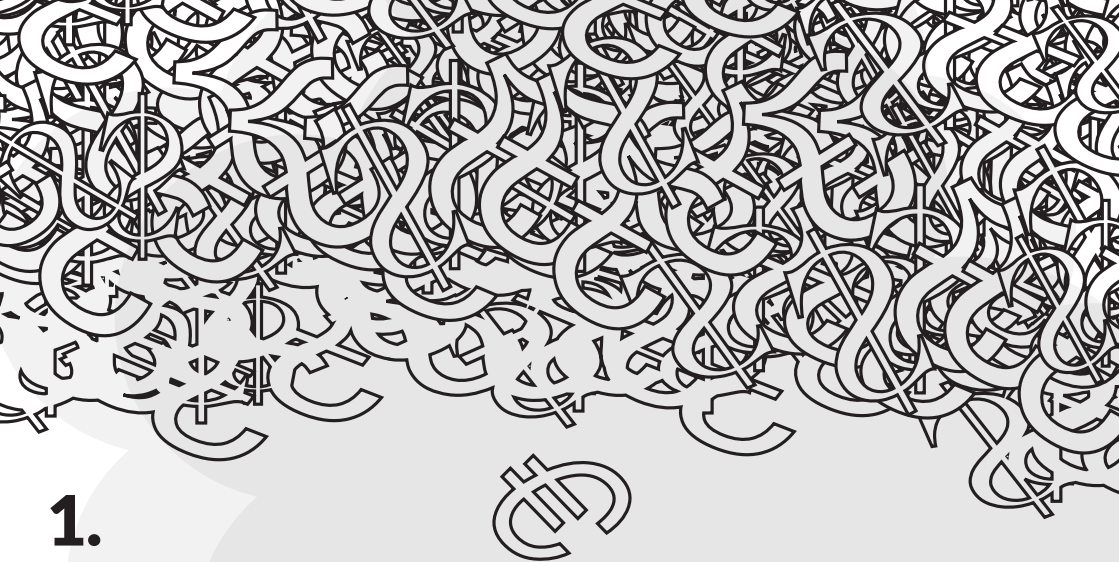
The vast destruction of the public service class in this country, which I don't think I am exaggerating, is going to be as big in scale and impact as the destruction of the manual industrial working class in the 70s and 80s. But people can't quite see this happening. And no one really knows what the impact of all this will be.

As well as trying to make sense of what a new era of austerity means for creative city thinking and policy-making, the network uses the present-day situation to reflect on and reassess what happened during the recent 'Creative Age'. The hope and motivation is that the ongoing financial and fiscal crisis should cast doubt on and make more visible some of the more seductive and spurious claims, theories and charms that have accompanied various notions connected to the creative city since the mid-1990s.

The network identifies gaps of emphasis within existing research and practice, often stemming from a failure to connect across distinct yet related disciplinary conversations, and the sidelining of critical academic perspectives by policy-makers during the long boom of the last twenty years. It draws on examples and experiences from a range of places: large archetypal 'global cities' such as London, UK regional centres such as Leeds and Plymouth, as well as the contemporary urbanism of the global South. Run between the Urban Laboratory at University College London (UCL) and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), now disbanded, it brings together the views and perspectives of academics, artists, planners, architects, policy-makers and other key stakeholders.

This pamphlet draws on the network's presentations and discussions to outline five points that we wish to emphasise in what we suggest is a new urgent need to reformulate and reclaim the notion of the creative city.





1. STOP BEING CREATIVE

While 'creativity' is generally associated with originality and innovation in the arts and sciences, since the 1980s the definition has steadily widened to encompass social, economic and cultural transformation in the organisation of firms and cities. During the 1990s and 2000s economists and business theorists began to argue that growth in contemporary capitalism depended on constant urban creative innovation and the ability to adapt to changing

conditions of urban competitiveness. The logic was that periods of upheaval in everyday life were the unavoidable consequence of a global process which thrives on 'creative destruction'.

But as discussions within the network developed, and drawing on the key arguments of the sociologist Angela McRobbie from our first workshop, we became increasingly uncomfortable about this focus on urban creativity. This is not because we wished to downplay or dismiss the role for creativity and culture in urban economic development or everyday life, but because we were skeptical of the way a certain sort of creativity (what might be given a capital C) has been defined and established in valorizing and normalizing particular occupations and forms of employment practice.

This has led to a celebration of particular forms of economic development and urban dynamism, and a failure to think through the consequences of a working life defined by personal flexibility. The recent age of Creative classes, Creative clusters, Creative quarters and Creative industries has been one where jobs have become increasingly short-term, casualised and precarious. New forms of occupation have tended to privilege people with certain sorts of connections, competences, looks and lifestyles. The policy agenda has been one of entrepreneurship and flexibility, rather than old-fashioned yet no less important concerns such as employment, rights and entitlements. As Angela McRobbie argued:

The arts have been used and instrumentalized as a way of restructuring labour and of changing the world of work ... There is a clear pattern here of creating ideas about what it is to work in a way which is to be completely set free of the kind of infrastructures of support and welfare and legislation and entitlements and maternity benefits which actually have of course been struggled for where they do exist. These provisions and entitlements were the result of 70 or 100 years of struggle to actually have these forms of work protection.

Education has been a significant part of this Creative regime with schools increasingly emphasizing media and performing arts as a primary aspirational pathway. Universities similarly run courses on 'Creativity and Enterprise' and research councils focus on Creative Industries at the expense of the full spectrum of research offered within the arts and humanities.

What is required is not to revoke the possibilities encompassed by urban creativity but to problematise the way it has been celebrated, shaped and institutionalized by policy-makers, consultancy advisors and indeed academic researchers. By eagerly heralding and neatly packaging the practices and processes of creativity, the result has often been to paradoxically destroy some of its very creative potential. As the urban geographer Steve Millington wryly suggested 'If you have a cultural quarter sign, this means you don't actually have one.' Moreover the general emphasis on urban economic growth rather than social and geographical disparities has meant the Creative agenda has become complicit in new invidious forms of urban inequality and marginalisation. A new inner-city world of hipsters and trendy lifestyles can be closely mapped onto a world of disenfranchisement and urban division.

This suggests a need to call time on Creativity, or at least the one-dimensional city propagated as a panacea for urban decline. This calls for a more frank assessment of the selective 'destructiveness' of creative urbanism, and a need to re-valorise and consolidate the kinds of work and institutions which provide all people, not just the few, with the capacity to exercise their powers of inventiveness and imagination.

Further reading

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Jamie Peck 2005. Struggling with the Creative Class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29(4), 740–770.

Angela McRobbie 2013. *Be Creative? Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Policy Press.

Sukhdev Sandhu 2009: Precarities and Dissensualities: Arts, Policy and Space on the Eve of an Election. In Naik, D. and Oldfield, T. (eds.) *Critical Cities: Ideas, Knowledge and Agitation from Emerging Urbanists*.

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2. Real-estate led regeneration is *not* a creative policy

The network also explored the experience of medium-sized cities in the UK and the inter-linkages between investment in culture and education and property markets. While the network acknowledged the new opportunities made available to artists and cultural producers in the boom, the implications of the absorption of cultural practitioners in urban regeneration projects have not been fully explored.

For example, the role of artists and the importance of the cultural qualities of places have become recognised as essential elements in the 'start up phase' of urban production economies. Yet, ultimately the 'end-game' of regeneration often leads to large scale commercial and residential oriented schemes, or urban marketing, that often physically remove (or put out of economic reach) the smaller, intricate built spaces suitable for burgeoning artists and start ups. As the economic geographer Tom Hutton suggested the economic success of cultural, heritage-led urban regeneration policies often 'carry the seeds of its own destruction'. Once areas of the city become regenerated the rise in rents and the removal of older buildings remove the 'very individuals and groups' that could provide future sources of culture and enterprise.

This means that the ambitions of the UK urban renaissance, led by a new wave of micro-scale, artisan producers has in practice realised commercial and residential spaces for higher earning service workers, and large-scale corporate and retail clients. This fundamentally undercuts the headline story of a creative, diverse and plural economy of small pro-

ducers that continuously recreate the urban qualities of economic development.

Moreover, as far as public investment in social infrastructure goes, urban economists have shown how housing markets will often 'capitalise' the complex benefits that public investment in cultural infrastructure bring to places. The result is that living centrally for many people is unaffordable. New entrants into the labour market today are in a sense experiencing the 'backwash' effect of an urban economy structured around the exploitation of scarce assets like housing, access to higher-education, and luxury goods.

Given the recent interdependencies between real estate development and urban regeneration policy, the 'creative city' notion emerges from our discussions as a hollow policy idea that has provided a veneer for the restructuring of urban labour markets, based around the exploitation of rising asset values of urban real estate, and growing debt-fuelled household consumption. As it stands the 'creative city' formula fails to provide any real contribution to understanding the stark post-industrial realities UK cities now face.

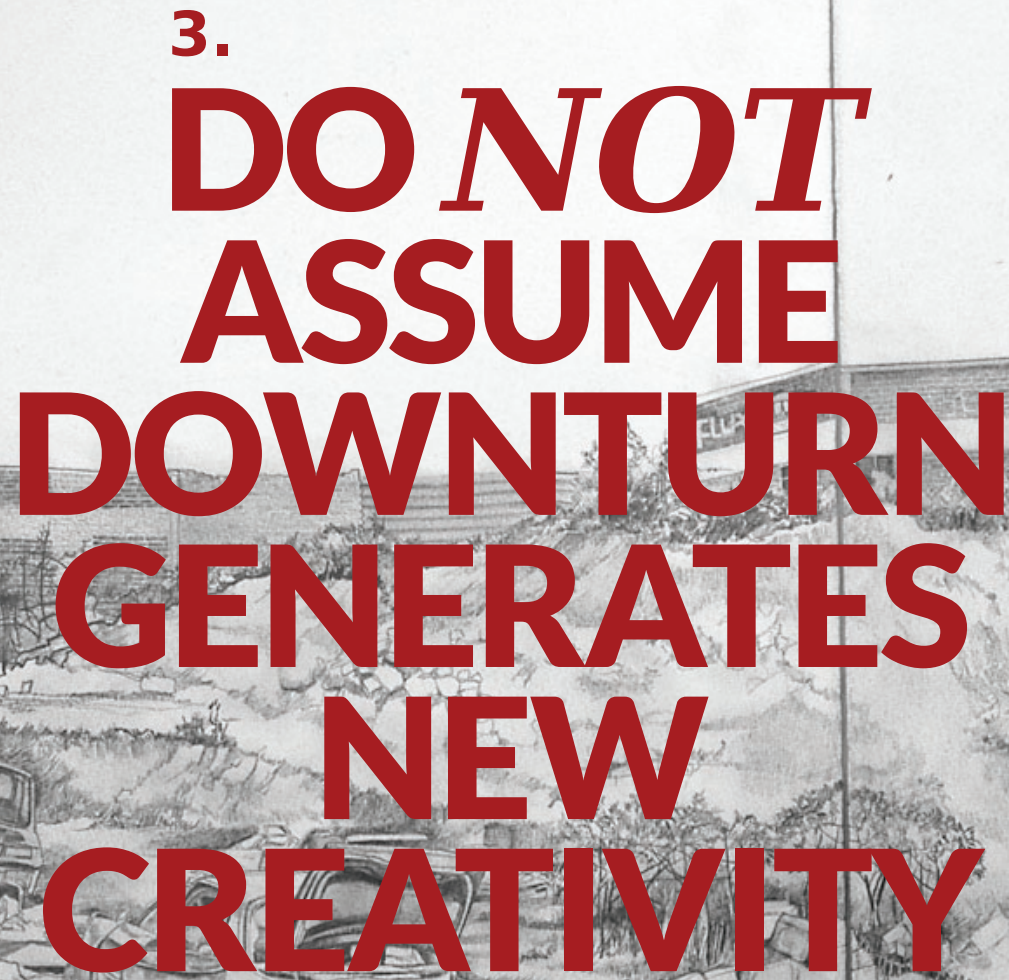
Further reading

Owen Hatherley 2010. *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, Verso Books.

Tom Hutton 2008. *The New Economy of the Inner City*, Routledge.

Michael Storper and Allen Scott 2009. "Rethinking Human Capital, Creativity and Urban Growth". *Journal of Economic Geography* 9(2), pp. 147–167.





3. **DO NOT ASSUME DOWNTURN GENERATES NEW CREATIVITY**

Recent economic instability has led to hopes that the Creative era that emerged in the 1990s might be replaced or reset by new cultural and critical opportunities. It is assumed that moments of crisis generate new insights and ideas, and periods of recession produce new opportunities and spaces for creative production. The comparison that is often made is to the dynamic music and art scenes of New York during the downturn of the 1970s. However this network has highlighted how it is important to try to disrupt any simple equation or romanticisation of hard times with vibrant urban culture. Cities in the UK are not necessarily the same 'abandoned movie set', to use urban sociologist Miriam Greenberg's term, of New York during the 1970s. The job market may be similarly slack, but UK cities do not contain the same new waves of immigration, excesses of affordable downtown space (at least not in London) or the immediate cultural legacies and lexicons from the 1960s. And perhaps, as the writer Simon Reynolds argued, recent technological developments have reshaped if not short-circuited links between urban creativity and political action.

It is important to recognise how previous periods of cultural flourishing amidst urban retrenchment and disinvestment signalled new creative policy regimes and a revaluing and gentrification of formerly industrial and working-class districts. The crisis in New York during the 1970s heralded new forms of urban branding and place-marketing. In London, the

recession of the early 1990s not only yielded Young British artists but new inner-city upmarket property development. Similarly we need to explore whether the current era of austerity in the UK has ushered in a new relationship between creativity and urban economic restructuring, particularly given dramatic cuts to educational funding and state support for artistic pursuits, and the stark and debilitating impact of new welfare and housing policies.

Two participants in our discussions offer their assessments of the current situation. For former Chief Executive of CABI, Richard Simmons, 'definitions of what a creative quarter meant...are shifting and they are becoming large sheds of television companies and they look something like out-of-town shopping centers.' For cultural theorist Malcolm Miles, 'I think we are moving into a different phase now... for 20-30 years it was the strategy to put some kind of cultural presence in first, you begin to make an area colourful, interesting, worth more ... now there is no cultural pretence, it is still called regeneration, but regeneration has become the regeneration sector, it has become autonomous, it doesn't need the art mask any longer.'

Further reading

Miriam Greenberg 2008. *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World*. Routledge.

Laura Oldfield Ford 2011 *Savage Messiah*. Verso Books.

Simon Reynolds 2009 'Cession Musicians: music and the economy. *FACT Magazine*, 21 February.



4. Make creative cities more ordinary and uncool

So how do we respond to the current difficult climate of economic and fiscal uncertainty given the problematic role for Creativity in the long property and financial boom of the last twenty years? One important strategy, we suggest, is to move beyond privileging forms and practices that are easily sold and marketed. This will not only help reduce the hype and inflated rhetoric associated with discussions and policies concerning creativity, but open up different geographies beyond the archetypal metropolitan and middle-class creative 'quarter'. In short, creativity needs to be more widely distributed.

Several contrasting if overlapping approaches to this overall objective featured in the network's discussions. The American planner and economist Ann Markusen detailed the important role for small-scale, non-export-orientated local interventions involving a wide range of artistic practitioners. These did not necessarily involve archetypal 'cool' people but emphasized groups such as older people and faith communities often left off the urban creative radar. Examples included a Public Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, public art on transit networks in Portland, Oregon and creative place-making on a Native American reservation:

None of these cases involved a Tate Modern or a big addition ... None of them were of that sort. They're all relatively small scale and modest. None of them were motivated by "oh they got one of those, we need one of those." None of them. All of these cases were really distinctly about a problem, a mission, a community. And ... all of them are really aimed at engaging the people within the community first. ... None of these projects started out saying "we're going to build something so tourists will come", no. They were about engaging people in the local community. ... I think this idea of distinctiveness of working from who you are and what you want to express whatever that might be is a very, very positive common theme.

The urban geographer Steve Millington also outlined more diverse and socially inclusive creative city strategies and spaces. He emphasized the undervalued role for everyday, vernacular forms and practices. This offers an important critical revaluing of urban creativity. The emphasis is not on revenue generating schemes but on more quotidian goings-on such as knitting circles, poetry groups, car customising, horticultural shows, novelty garden designs, Christmas house lights and protest placards and leaflets. Creativity is considered as social and sociable, and communally produced, rather than inherently and exclusively part of a downtown cultural scene.

The sociologist Angela McRobbie similarly urged new ways of deflating the significance of particular forms of creativity and recovering practices left out of mainstream policy narratives. She encouraged artistic work to be re-orientated towards notions of social work and investments in local politics, and urged that creative work be made more ordinary and normalized so that ideas of craftsmanship and ‘a good job well done’ could be revisited and revived.

The urban sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone spoke of acknowledging the creativity found in the ‘popular economies’ of cities such as Sao Paulo, Karachi, Cairo and Jakarta. These kinds of urban cultural economies have often been dismissed in terms of their lack of formal regulation and perceived inefficiencies, and have almost completely been excluded from the recent Creative agenda. Yet they offer important arenas for creating and conceiving alternative values and forms of social interchange. As Simone argued, ‘They in themselves don’t embody necessarily a resolution, but rather a demonstration of certain kinds of possibilities, some yet to come, some already in some sense actualized but lacking certain kinds of resources and certain kinds of political efficacy to support.’

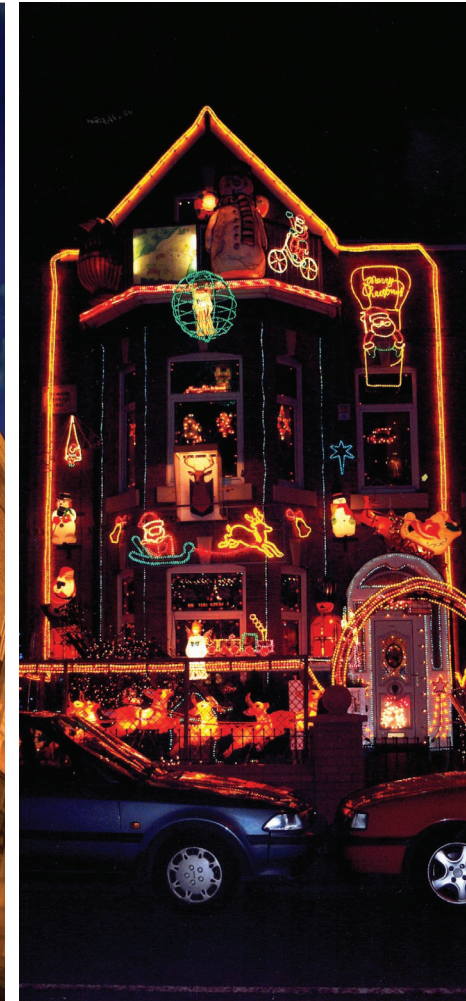
Further reading

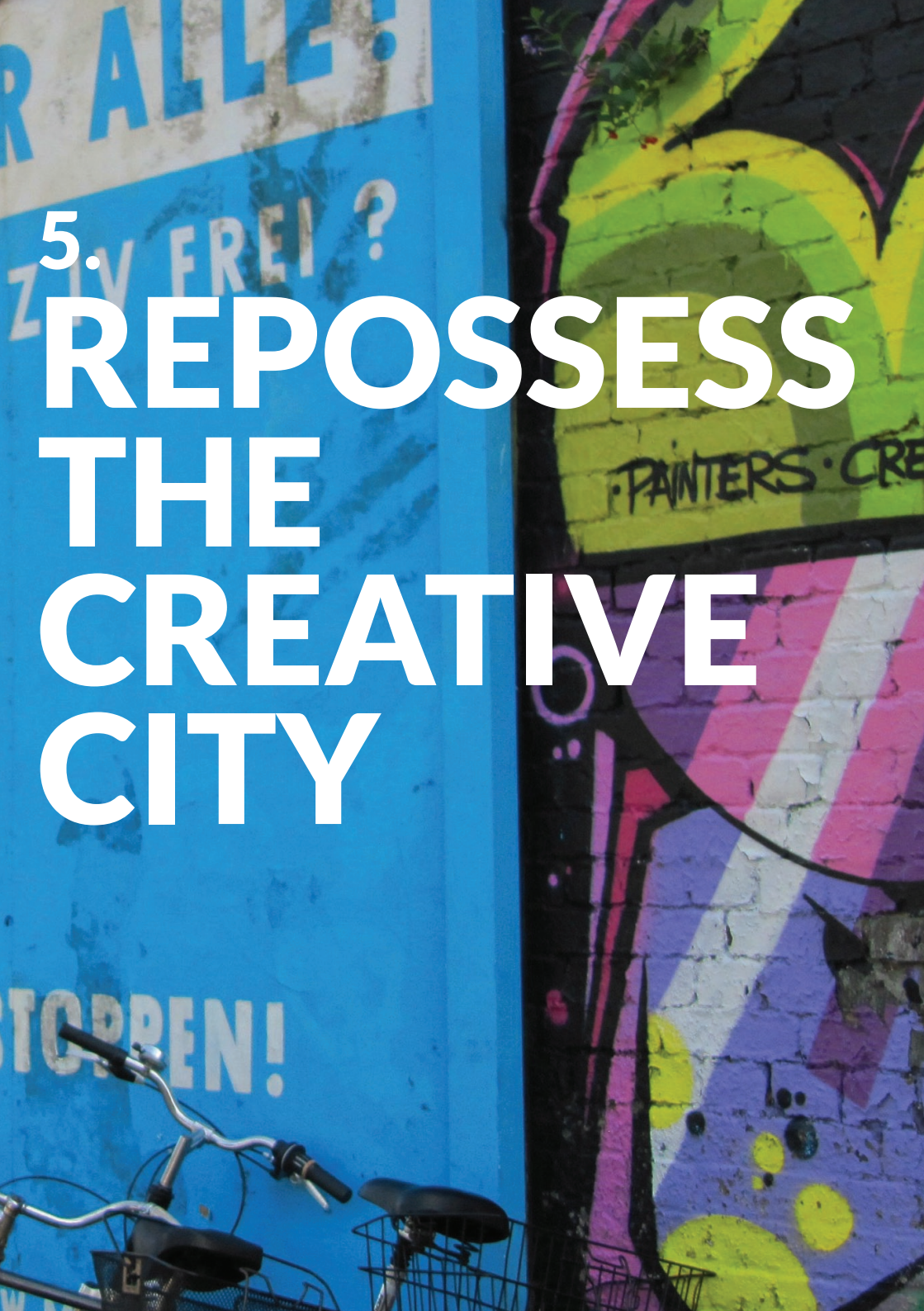
Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa 2009. Arts and culture in urban/regional planning: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 29, pp.379–391.

Tim Edensor, Steve Millington, Deborah Leslie and Norma Rantisi (eds.) 2010. *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, Routledge.

Angela McRobbie 2012. Good Job Well Done: Richard Sennett and the Politics of the Creative Economy. In M. Heinlein et al. (eds) *Futures of Modernity: Challenges for Cosmopolitical Thought and Practice*, Transcript Verlag.

AbdouMaliq Simone 2010. *Urbanizing a New Global South*. Routledge.





5. REPOSSESS THE CREATIVE CITY

The current crisis and the limits it has exposed to the creative city model should be seen as a political challenge to rethink and rework dominant notions of urban economic and cultural life. We contend that the creative city franchise has proved not only unsatisfactory, but also, ineffective in addressing problems of structural unemployment, educational disparities and urban distinctiveness. There is a pressing requirement not only to use the current era of austerity to generate new critical perspectives on the creative city but to recharge and reinvest in its possibilities. Can we salvage political hope from the creative city? Can different and perhaps discordant critical voices and movements be brought together? Can we reframe creative city questions and priorities, and re-emphasise the importance of issues such as housing, poverty, inequality and employment?

One significant group that offer opportunities for repossessing notions of the creative city are artists. Although often implicated in gentrification and entrepreneurial policy agendas, cultural producers can play an important role in opening up alternative ways of seeing the world. They can help imagine and provoke new visions and debates about the ownership, provision, occupation and consumption of urban space. They offer possibilities for inhabiting the processes of planning, policy and governance, and subverting creative city language and rhetoric. As individuals predominately working in situations of precarity and marginalised politically, cultural producers also offer a means of linking the struggles of the deprived and the discontented, especially given their creative skills, resources and aptitude.

But if we are to take the idea of a truly 'creative' city seriously, according to critical planner Peter Marcuse, 'we are not talking about a city in which every resident is, in the narrow sense, an artist, but in which creativity is nourished in all its members, in all work, whether in the arts or not.' Rather than rhetoric focused on the creative economy, more could be made of the ethical and social advantages of civic labour and municipal culture. Educational reforms could emphasise the importance of creativity

not as a means of career progression and enterprise but as a way of accessing, as Marcuse states, 'the shared and enriched ability to appreciate the beauties and wonders of life, to glimpse what could be as well as what is'.

There is also a need to rethink what concepts like 'economic growth' and 'creativity' mean for all urban citizens. As Peter Marcuse suggested, 'growth for its own sake is more likely to defeat' the propagation of creativity across the city due to an emphasis on an economic system that works by monetising and managing risk and uncertainty.

At present the link between national prosperity and the value of private property such as housing generates an abstract and self-interested view of what the economy is, and what cities are for. Access to good quality schools, hospitals and parks is often determined by the workings of housing markets, that essentially prevents the less wealthy from enjoying the best education and urban environments. As things stand this instrumentally consumerist approach to urban development threatens to undercut any long-term collective and environmental goals of building 'sustainable communities'.

The crisis therefore presents an opportunity to rethink how the social and ecological benefits of urban settlements can be developed in order to improve social and economic prospects for the long term benefit of a place. This presents an opportunity to redefine 'creativity' and restore a collective social interest in the whole city as a public good. A more profound localism would entail alliances and inter-linkages between groups and institutions that reflects the challenging complexity, diversity and cooperation that characterises everyday life. For example, a really 'creative' city would be defined by a local political dynamic that is more broadly framed than the 'big society' notion of the private and philanthropic provision of one particular asset like a school or a park. The problem of planning a creative city thus needs to open a political space to explore how we create and maintain cities whose economies work for their citizens.



Further reading

Claire Colomb and Johannes Novy 2012. Struggling with the Right to the Creative City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Early view, published online 6 March. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01115.x

Michael Edwards 2010: A London Utopia. <http://michaieldwards.org.uk/?p=464#more-464>

Peter Marcuse 2011: The right to the creative city. Paper presented at Creative City Limits workshop, <http://tinyurl.com/757ndmf>

Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles 2010. *No Room to Move: Radical Art And The Regenerate City*, Mute Publishing Ltd.

Workshops and Presenters

1. *Creative city limits: urban cultural economy in a new era of austerity*

CABE, 26 January 2011, Ann Markusen, Angela McRobbie, Peter Hall and AbdouMaliq Simone

2. *Creative majority: beyond the downtown cultural quarter*

University of Plymouth, 30 March 2011, Steve Millington, Gary Anderson, Jonathan Vickery, Jane Harrison, Susan Fitzpatrick, Nicola Thomas and Stephen Miles

3. *Cultural landscapes of boom and bust*

University College London, 1 June 2011, Simon Reynolds, Miriam Greenberg, Laura Oldfield Ford, Kevin Milburn, Maxa Zoller and Mirielle Roddier

4. *The real (e)state of the creative city*

University of Leeds, 27 June 2011, Tom Hutton, Tim May & Beth Perry, David Bell and Irena Bauman

5. *The Hoxton effect: reassessing culture-led urban regeneration*

Hoxton Hall, 28 June 2011, Richard Simmons, Alicia Miller, James Goff, Tom Hutton, Ben Payne, Ingrid Swenson, Graeme Evans and Micheal Pyner

6. *The right to the creative city*

Hub Westminster, 29 July 2011, Peter Marcuse, Andy Merrifield, Indy Johar, Zayd Minty, Michael Edwards, Bob Colenutt, Anthony Iles and Josephine Berry Slater

Photos and illustrations

Cover (front and back): Abandoned site of Noho Square, Fitzrovia, London, Make Architects, Candy & Candy (2009), Jun Keung Cheung

Page 2: The Right to the Creative City discussion group, Hub Westminster, Martin Slavin

Page 5: 'Elsewhere is here.' : Citybound Collective's vision of a 'neo-urbanist' strategy for the Heygate estate in South East London, City Bound Collective

Page 6 & 9: 'The Creative City in Ruins' (2009), Nils Norman

Page 13: 'Photograph of subverted billboard, Dalston' (2006), Laura Oldfield Ford

Page 14 & 17: 'Lower Lea Valley, pencil on paper' (2008), Laura Oldfield Ford

Page 21 (left): Cleveland Public Theatre, Cleveland Public Theatre/Ann Markusen

Page 21 (right): Christmas bling in Manchester (2007), Steve Millington

Page 22: 'River banks for all', Berlin (2011), Claire Colomb

Page 25: Drawing of Peter Marcuse at Right to the Creative City workshop, Azul Blaseotto

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