Will the real Creative City please stand up?

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Something has been troubling me. It is that, apparently, the cities we live in have become creative. What I mean by this is that the various attempts to tackle social and economic decline in urban areas over the last few decades have recently found new expression through discourses of creativity and the ‘creative city’. These discourses have made their way into the centre of urban policy debates (Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2000) and have been pursued through several international conferences (Glasgow, 1994; Helsinki, 1996; Huddersfield, 2000). Several commentaries have also emerged on how the creative city concept has been put into practice by urban authorities (e.g. see Tony Harcup in issue 4(2) of City in relation to Leeds).

As a result of this new vocabulary, certain cities such as Barcelona, Cologne, Bologna and even Huddersfield have gained the tag ‘creative city’. But what does this rather nebulous term mean? It refers to a new ‘method of strategic urban planning and examines how people can think, plan and act creatively’ (Landry, 2000, p. xii). A city is being creative, then, when people adopt new and different ways of looking at the problems which they face. In what follows, I want to explore some of the ideas associated with the creative city concept which were explored at an eponymously named conference in Huddersfield in May 2000. I then want to take a closer look at some issues which arise from a more critical analysis of the creative city concept. In particular, I want to explore in more detail the links between ethics, values and creativity, and the types of creativity which are tolerated within the creative city.

The most recent Creative Cities conference occurred in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, near where I was born amongst the mill towns of the east Pennines which these days I didn’t much associate with either cityness or creativity. While people’s perceptions of Huddersfield may extend to cloth mills and its role at the centre of textile production during the industrial revolution, Lowry’s matchstick people, or perhaps the new McAlpine football stadium, for fewer people, I imagine, it would extend to that of a creative urban milieu. Nevertheless, several significant shifts have occurred in this town and it has experienced a partial cultural, and in some ways economic, turnaround. Indeed, it often comes as a surprise to learn that Huddersfield includes 1660 listed buildings, an amount second only to Bristol and Westminster in the whole of England.

While much of the recent upturn may be a result of its propinquity to its more flourishing and cosmopolitan urban neighbours of Leeds and Manchester, several rounds of European aid and the establishment of a university in 1992, over the last decade the town has embarked upon a number of its own innovative and risky policies to develop the creative industries in the local economy. The foremost of these, the ‘Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative’, established when it was selected as one of the 26 European Union Urban Pilot Projects (UPPs) out of over 500 entrants, was used as the backdrop
for the conference. Through this Project, Huddersfield received £2 million to spend on 16 projects over three years to highlight what could be achieved if people thought, planned and acted creatively. The reasoning behind the Creative Town Initiative is explained in the following way:

‘Medium and small sized towns like Huddersfield whose locational advantages, natural resources and traditional skills base have long since disappeared exist all over Europe. Many have gone into decline, perhaps terminally, so they have not been able to adjust to the demands of the new globalised economy. They often suffer deep seated deprivation with all the social consequences that entails and live in a cycle of exacerbating difficulty. Huddersfield until recently was just such a place, but over the last decade it has fought its way out of this vicious cycle by recognising and nurturing what the people of Huddersfield can offer to their town’s renewal in the face of adversity.’

The strategy for renewal which emerged in Huddersfield was based upon ‘principled opportunism’ — in effect taking advantage of opportunities in the market economy. The Initiative’s approach focused upon developing a distinctive cultural industries quarter around several projects such as Creative Lofts — combined living and working units for young entrepreneurs, the LAB project for training local unemployed people and the Kirklees Media Centre. In all, it has achieved some success, for example, it has identified and supported 6000 ‘creative firms’ which earn £150 million and now account for 4% of the workforce. However, what would have been achieved without this framework is not clear, nor are the effects of prioritizing the cultural industries rather than other clusters such as the environmental sector.

From this backdrop, the conference explored a host of other examples of creative urbanism from around the world. These included Wise Eyes Communication which develops indigenous arts and crafts in schools in Durban, South Africa; the Gate Project in Turin entitled ‘Living not Leaving’ which, partly funded through the European Regional Development Fund, aims to involve people in the regeneration of the largest open-air market in Europe; and Kulturrädren Tapestry Weaving project which focuses on the integration of immigrant, refugee and Danish women into mainstream society.

Several commentaries were also given from speakers on the nature of creativity and the creative city. Charles Landry, architect of the concept, suggested that we need to make a number of ‘software changes’ to the way we think to create a high-risk, low-blame culture where the change process is not elite-led. Sir Peter Hall outlined the usual aspects of a new economy after de-industrialization associated with knowledge and creative industries, and Charlie Leadbeater, author of *Living on Thin Air* (see review in issue 4(2) of *City*) trawled through the well-worn buzz words of the knowledge economy such as ‘dynamic clusters’ and ‘adaptive innovation’. On a more inventive note, Professor Ken Robinson, Chair of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, gave an impassioned and entertaining speech concerning the way in which the current education system stifles rather than promotes creativity. He summed up by saying that the ‘education system needs a more generous definition of creativity to harness people’s talents’. Dr Andy Pratt from the London School of Economics outlined that creativity entailed collectivity, reflexivity, boundary spanning and risk taking while Dr Franco Bianchini, from DeMontford University, spoke of the need for contradiction within creativity and made the rather insightful comment that ‘most creative acts in history do not happen under conditions of democracy’.

The agenda set out for the creative city through this conference, then, seems exciting and ambitious. It should be. Three-quarters of the European population live in urban areas, much of which is blighted, in both image and reality, by poverty, poor health
and housing, crime and environmental degradation. The need for cities to regain their creativity has intuitive appeal—many cities are anachronistic giants struggling to restructure out of their industrial past and urgent action is needed to build a new urban economy. Much of this new economy is based upon the well-worn couplet of ‘learning society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ and some notion that cultural or symbolic rather than productive industries have a key role to play in this transformation.

So, while the rhetoric of the creative city speaks of a ‘call to action’ and a ‘paradigm shift’ in the way we think about cities, what does the concept have to offer for the problems facing cities? The concept has moved from mere rhetoric over the last decade and could provide good medicine for urban areas around the world which are being slowly crushed by the weight of unimaginative bureaucracy and entrenched power blocs. In this sense, a conceptual toolkit has been developed which has been adopted by many urban authorities over the last 10 years. Following this toolkit, to be creative is simply to do something in a new way. The toolkit is laden with buzz words: ‘innovation matrix’, ‘holism’ and ‘creative lifecycles’ and draws upon gurus of creative thinking such as Edward De Bono and his concepts of lateral thinking. Rather than presenting narratives on how this toolkit has enabled creative urban renewal in particular places, I want to explore critically a number of issues within the concept.

The first relates to its tendencies towards reductionist and simplistic understandings of the processes of urban and regional development. In particular, the ‘toolkit’ approach directs people to opportunistic rather than strategic thinking, which can overlook or marginalize more structural problems faced by urban areas such as their place in the uneven flow of capital around the globe, lack of democratic accountability and an unsustainable growth of ecological footprints. These problems remain intact while a more sanguine story of urbanism is written through the lens of the creative city. The example of Newcastle upon Tyne illustrates many of these points. While ambitious culture- and creative-led renewal strategies are being put into place in the city centre, most notably through large-scale corporate leisure developments, the expansion of the Quays area and its joint bid with Gateshead for the European City of Culture, other parts of the city continue to experience problems of high unemployment, out-migration and a decline in welfare service provision.

In many instances, then, the creative city is little more than a rhetorical device which can placate the hearts and minds of local councilors and politicians that they are actually doing something whilst doing hardly anything at all. In practice, it is part of a broader shift towards new forms of entrepreneurial urban management used to boost the image of ailing cities and persuade highly mobile global capital and professional and service classes that urban areas are interesting and safe places to live (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997). It is also about presenting a sanitized picture of urban life. Peter Hall in a homage to Keynes’ view of the growth of leisure time recently commented:

‘In the intervening years [since the 1930s], something remarkable has happened: in the advanced economies, we are almost arrived at that condition . . . in that we can guarantee the resources necessary for at least a decent minimum of existence.’ (2000, p. 640)

Aspects of the creative city approach, then, continue to overlook the stark inequalities which characterize life for countless urban dwellers.

Second, numerous discourses have emerged to describe contemporary urban life, yet some striking variances exist between them, especially those about evening and night-time activity in cities. In particular, while the creative city concept may point towards the night-time economy as a place of vitality, serendipity and as a new source of
wealth for cities, recent comments made by the media, police and government have focused upon the increasing lawlessness of city centres at night. A language of ‘yob culture’ has emerged to outline the links between evening city centre activity, high alcohol consumption and violence/crime and a growing conflict between city centre residents and revellers. By introducing new powers to instantly shut down pubs for 48 hours and proposals for on-the-spot fines for rowdy behaviour, a war is being waged on what the government sees as a ‘yob city’ rather than a creative city. As the chairman of the Police Federation commented: ‘chaotic scenes in town centres are certain to increase unless more investment is poured into policing . . . ’ We are living in a pretty violent place. Lots of our towns and cities during certain times are pretty tough’ (The Guardian, 3 July 2000, p. 5). The claim by the Police Federation in May 2000 that British city centres are being taken over by ‘anarchy and disorder’ at pub closing times presents a picture of city centres as ‘no go’ areas during the night.

Third, creative and cultural development schemes in cities pioneered by independent, small-scale operators are now increasingly being squeezed out and dwarfed by large-scale, profit- and car-oriented corporate developments such as multiplexes, casinos, super-pubs, shopping malls and office parks. John Hannigan’s Fantasy City (1998) characterized this corporate cultural city through the emergence of enclave ‘urbanoid environments’ dedicated to the consumption needs of middle-class consumers. In particular, corporate ownership of city centre entertainment and leisure infrastructures (bars, clubs, restaurants, cafes) has never been higher in British city centres and rising property values block small-scale independent operators in favour of nationally recognized branded entertainment outlets. While the inflationary dynamic of city-centre property markets shoulder much of the blame, some must also lie with local authorities who do not take a stronger line on the types of cultural developments occurring in city centres. At some point, public bodies have to say no to greater levels of large-scale corporate developments in urban cultural infrastructures.

Moreover, the creative city concept needs to be tempered through a grounding in not just the ‘buzz’ and glamour of cities, but also the ‘hum’—the everyday, mundane, the ordinary and the drabness which makes up life for urban dwellers. In contrast to the new corporate playscapes in cities, large swathes of urban areas function on a less glamorous and spectacular basis and meet a range of other, more basic, needs for its inhabitants. Creativity, then, is all around us in the ‘ordinary’ city—in the markets, taxi ranks, bingo halls or the betting shop (Figure 1).

A further difficult issue concerns the ownership of the creative city concept and whether poor communities in cities are fully engaged in agenda making. The simple answer is no, unless progress is made towards eliminating fundamental structural inequalities of wealth and power. Much of the agenda is still elite-led and we have to question whether we are serious about opening up the creative process to the most marginalized groups in society. Recent experiences from the New Deal for Communities initiatives in the UK have demonstrated the extreme reluctance which local and central government bodies have in devolving democratic and financial power. Concern towards social inclusion does lie at the heart of the creative city and this is a worthy conviction. However, it raises the issue of who is doing the including and excluding and why. Many groups do not see themselves as ‘excluded’ and are not waiting for power to be devolved to them and are busily being creative in their own way.

Which leads us to the final, and in many ways the most fundamental, issue concerning what is meant by creativity in the creative city. In a similar way to sustainability, the term creativity is so ambiguous and overused that it is rendered meaningless. Everyone can buy into the concept—after all who doesn’t want to be creative? However, what will society tolerate under the banner of crea-
activity? The dominant examples of creativity still come from the artistic and cultural world—a theatre in education group, a small craft workshop, a media centre, a recording studio. What happens when we look beyond these limits?

For some, graffiti or subvertising, whether artistic or political, is a creative act concerning one’s relationship with the surrounding environment and society but others including the police and local authorities disagree; squatting is a creative use of long-standing derelict urban space, but private landlords and the police will disagree; the (dis)organizations of ‘reclaim the streets’ and ‘critical mass’ have devised imaginative and creative
ways, often using the internet, to highlight the dehumanization of our cities by automobile dependency, but again many including the police will disagree; those who ‘guerrilla gardened’ drew upon the creative impulses of pagan festivals associated with May Day to transform the sterility of Parliament Square in London, but again, most politicians, the press and the public disagreed.

Moreover, numerous ‘anti-capitalist’ events, variously dubbed J18, N30, M1 and most recently S26 in Prague, have been linking struggles all over the world as a creative response to what many protesters, human rights and peace campaigners and anti-globalization activists see as the excesses and cruelty of global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organization. Such events, drawing upon direct rather than representational forms of democracy, derive their energy from the creativity and inventiveness of participants. Old and new media forms, ranging from web pages and video cameras to home-made banners and whistles, are used to convey messages and make the event. The following photographs (Shown in Figures 1 and 2), taken in moments of protest and liminality in cities, offer contrasting responses on the theme of urban creative.

This brings us on to the link between ethics, values, democracy and creativity. Does creativity entail any shared values or ethical codes? It was suggested at the conference that creativity is not the same as freedom of action or expression but entails responsibility and a sense of limits. Moreover, when an action induces fear it certainly is not creative. So from this perspective, creativity demands responsibility and duty. But to whom? At the heart of a creative city is a creative citizen, and the creative citizen is encouraged to share the vision for the creative city laid out by the civic leaders. It is clear from the above examples that some people hold values which are not accepted by civic leaders — their actions may be creative, but their means are seen as undemocratic. If most creative acts in history did not happen under conditions of democracy, then taking creativity seriously entails living with and embracing ethical contradictions and con-
flicts and challenging dominant social norms and laws.

So, other ways forward? Firstly, are cities the best model for unleashing creativity while ensuring decent levels of equality? Radical thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin, Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard and Lewis Mumford have all pointed towards the need for the decentralization and deconcentration to avoid the negative effects of urban life such as overcrowding, poverty, environmental decay and alienation. More recently, Colin Ward (1989) and Murray Bookchin (1992) have convincingly made claims for thinner, greener and more humane urban settlements. Creativity which is based upon more equal and localized human relationships, then, may only be possible outside the city as we know it.

Further, education is at the heart of creativity. Ken Robinson’s auguries concerning the damage done to creative instincts by the conventional schooling system where young people, with all their latent creativity, grow up to be uncreative adults stifled by the humdrum of modern working life as accountants, call centre operators or teachers.

The challenge, it seems, would be to create an education system which doesn’t just value academic intelligence, but also creativity in all its guises, especially those which challenge social norms. A way forward, then, is to build an agenda for creativity which challenges rather than reinforces social and economic norms and is serious about embedding radical alternatives and shifting power and resources. However, the weakness of the current creative city concept is that for it to be acceptable for a liberal audience of policy makers and politicians it has to dilute or exclude unpalatable definitions of creativity.

One of the speakers at the conference, Julia Middleton of Common Purpose, suggested that we need a ‘mass of little solutions rather than a masterplan’. What kinds of little solutions are these to be? While we can all agree to activities which tinker at the margins such as Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), credit unions, action zones and even the odd protest outside McDonal’s, what about actions which present stronger challenges to the way we live our lives? It was also suggested by Julia Middleton that a good citizen is a difficult
citizen—one who knows how the system works and is able to challenge it. My thoughts turned to the three McLibel trials and the unbreakable creativity of Morris and Steel, the GM protestors ripping up crops in Watlington, Oxfordshire in 1999 in a defiant act of creativity against corporate giants in the bio-food industry, or Rachel Wenham and Rosie James from Trident Ploughshares, who despite facing prison sentences, creatively smashed up a Trident submarine in Barrow in Furness last year.

But how serious are we about such ‘difficult’ and ‘challenging’ forms of creativity? Are the Creative City’s progenitors ready for an army of creative, difficult and often unlawful citizens to chip away at the world we live in, in the hope of replacing it with a different one? I agree with the high principles of the creative city agenda in that there needs to be a paradigm shift of radical proportions in the way we conduct our economic and social life. But in practice, who will take up this agenda and champion the occasional necessity for undemocratic, and illegal, creativity? If we are to take the creative city concept to its logical extreme, then the Creative City also becomes a toolkit for urban disorder and unlawful activity. Is this the intention? If those promoting the creative city agenda are serious about creative acts in whatever form, then they need to pay more attention to legislation such as the Criminal Justice Act (1994) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2000) which are eroding the right to protest and act creatively. The Creative City in its liberal guise, then, remains a non sequitur. Until we have a serious debate concerning values and ethics, the creative city will remain a comfortable ‘feel-good’ concept for consultants, policy makers and politicians rather than a serious agenda for radical change.

References


Notes

More information can be found on Huddersfield’s Creative Town Conference at: http://www.creativetown.com/
Examples of other forms of urban creativity can be found at:
http://www.agp.org/agp/
http://www.gn.agp.org/its/
http://come.to/londoncm/
http://tapp.cjb.net/
An earlier draft of this article which includes responses from other authors can be found on the Urban and Regional Regeneration Bulletin: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/curds/urrb/

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