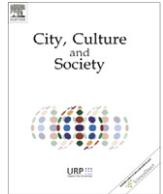


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## The life cycle of New York's creative districts: Reflections on the unanticipated consequences of unplanned cultural zones

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### ABSTRACT

The history of New York's creative districts from Greenwich Village in the early 1900s to Bushwick today shows that the unanticipated consequences of unplanned or naturally occurring areas where artists work and live are higher housing prices, more intensive capital investment, and eventual displacement and gentrification. Despite predominant motifs of grittiness and transgression, the esthetic representation of "difference" in creative districts attracts non-creative cultural consumers who develop a taste for an authentic, bohemian lifestyle. Cultural entrepreneurs, some of whom are creative producers themselves, enable knowledgeable consumers' entry into the creative district, followed eventually by the media, more consumers, and real estate developers. The little state regulation of artists' housing that exists does not serve the stated goal, for the building of a district's reputation as "creative" results in group out-migration to other places.

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Since the 1990s, cities around the globe from Amsterdam to Singapore have established cultural policies intended to mark them as centers of creativity and innovation. Without ignoring differences in local political economy and cultural ecology, we can see that the policy makers to a great degree share common goals. Though public officials in Europe and North America are motivated mainly by the decline of their industrial economies and the desire to jump-start a new era of post-industrial growth, older industrial cities such as London, Osaka, and Yokohama also aim at "social inclusion", which includes targeting cultural services, facilities, and products to less privileged social groups (Noda, 2010; Sasaki, 2010). Still other Asian cities, notably Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, are not suffering from economic decline but policy makers are trying to establish both a comparative advantage in high tech industries that place a priority on new product development and a cultural place-identity that would raise their city's status among global and local elites (Cartier, 2008; Kong, 2009; Wang, 2009).

These mixed motivations may exacerbate tensions between the intended beneficiaries of "creative city" policy. While an *aspirational* cultural strategy tries to narrow

inequalities and broaden everyone's "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968), an *industrial* cultural strategy tends to reward highly educated and affluent city dwellers as well as wealthy, cosmopolitan migrants and members of the transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 1991).

Contradictions between aspirational and industrial cultural strategy are eased when public officials adopt Richard Florida's (2002) idea of the leading role of the "creative class" in post-industrial urban development. Indeed this idea has provided the conceptual bedrock of cities' forays into cultural policy during the past decade, for it suggests that human rather than financial capital is the key to post-industrial growth, and proposes a relatively low-cost scenario for cash-starved cities to attract and retain creative, dynamic residents. Cities without a lot of money to invest can build bicycle paths instead of factories, encourage bars and cafés to thrive, and ensure an atmosphere of social tolerance for men and women who express their "difference" from traditional, mainstream ways of life.

But the creative class as Florida defines it embodies many of the tensions between using culture for both social inclusion and economic growth, for this key human component of cities' new cultural policy includes bankers, lawyers, and engineers on the one hand and artists, writers, and musicians on the other. The incompatibility of needs and wants and economic inequality between these groups has led to severe criticism of Florida's work by academic

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researchers (e.g. Peck, 2005). Moreover, there is little evidence that members of the creative class migrate for amenities rather than jobs (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Musterd & Murie, 2010), especially after they reach the age of thirty.

Locating cultural policy at the geographical scale of creative *cities* spatializes contradictions and competition between key actors. Land, after all, is the basic urban commodity, and in a housing market where most places are allocated by how much money people can pay, selecting the goal of a creative city gives priority to the spatial claims of those who think it is important to identify with cultural producers on the basis of lifestyles and tastes, while reducing the chances of those who do not, mainly because they lack the education and financial resources—the cultural capital—to shape and consume new art, food, media content, and fashion: the dominant symbols of modern times. Whether they take the form of gentrified or hipster districts, spaces identified with taste communities like the creative class are closely connected with the ebb and flow of capital investment, government policies, media representations of spaces and lifestyles, and, of course, the social and cultural formation of tastes (Zukin, 2010). As a result, a district that begins by protecting space for creative *producers* risks becoming a space for creative *consumers*.

Dedicated creative districts seem at first glance to decommodify urban land by taking it out of the economic cycle of under-use, devalorization, real estate speculation, and revalorization. But real estate developers and public officials often use the symbolic capital of the “artistic mode of production” to establish new place-identities for problematic industrial areas, rebranding them as “creative” and increasing their economic value (Harvey, 2001; Zukin, 1989).

Moreover, cultural districts help to mobilize another key urban commodity: labor. Finding a place for creative producers near the city center brings them close to employers in cultural industries such as advertising, fashion, and media, who hire them as freelance and contract workers, using their skills and talents to produce both niche and mass-market consumer goods (Lloyd, 2006). Needless to say, the actors and artists who take “day jobs” in restaurants, cafés, and bars also support the tourism industry. As both servers in, and customers of, these businesses, they demonstrate the cultural ideal of a “do-it-yourself”, laid-back, leisured lifestyle, a model of consumption that embodies personal autonomy and “authenticity” (Binkley, 2007). This model has been especially important in “western”, “post-modern”, “post-scarcity” consumer culture since the 1960s (Frank, 1998; cf. Bell, 1976).

The cultural districts that make up the *habitus* of today’s creative class differ greatly from those that were built during earlier phases of state-led urban redevelopment. In New York in the 1950s and 1960s, the public-sector planners of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts demolished a working and lower middle class district of Manhattan, replacing modest apartment houses and stores with monumental performance facilities for concerts, opera, and ballet that identified New York as a modern capital of world culture and attracted private-sector developers of expensive, new housing (Zipp, 2010). At around the same time and for similar reasons, the French government built the

Pompidou Center of modern art in a dilapidated area in the center of Paris, upscaling the Beaubourg district and modernizing the image of both the city and the national state (Baudrillard, 1977).

From the Sydney Opera House in Australia, designed in the 1950s and designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007, to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, opened in 1997 and regarded by many professional architects as the most impressive building of the late twentieth century (Tyrnauer, 2010), the first model of cultural districts planned by the state aimed to consolidate high-status cultural institutions and impress other governments as well as cultural consumers (Evans 2003). They were neither neo-Bohemias nor live-work locations.

Today’s cultural districts revalorize old buildings as hubs, nodes, and workplaces for creative production. The much-publicized emergence in the 1970s of SoHo, an industrial loft district in New York City, around a core use of artists’ studios and art galleries, changed the way public officials and developers looked at creative arts facilities. SoHo was a “naturally occurring” rather than a state-planned creative district. But its success encouraged local governments to seek the expansion of low-key, small-scale spaces for creative production, often in live-work locations. During the next two decades, based partly on SoHo’s example but also on the recognition of the growth of cultural industries and on emerging cultural policies within the European Union, increasing numbers of municipal governments around the world began to subsidize rents on workshop space in cultural hubs for artists, artisans, and designers. They wanted these spaces not just to support an innovative work force, but to identify the city as a whole as creative and dynamic rather than obsolete and decayed.

But as local governments soon realized, these policies could lead to unanticipated consequences. On the one hand, a creative district can make artists more visible as controversial political activists or at least enlarge their opportunities for collective criticism, transgression, and subversion. Local officials may then try to enforce social control over an artists’ zone by imposing surveillance or limiting access, as happened in the Cattle Depot Artists’ Village in Hong Kong and happens periodically in Mainland China. On the other hand, as happened in SoHo itself, cultural hubs can attract so much interest that rents rise, spaces used by artists are converted to more profitable uses at higher rents, and cultural producers can no longer afford to work and/or live there. More affluent members of the creative class move into luxury loft-apartments which were poor artists’ studios; they become the main patrons of the cultural district’s restaurants, boutiques, and bars.

Gentrification of this sort threatens communities that creative artists and low-income cultural producers have carved out in cities as different as London, Chicago, Berlin, and Shanghai. Especially in New York, however, where “artist-led” gentrification has a long history, we can trace the life-cycle of creative districts as a cautionary tale of spatialization followed by re-commodification. We can even chart the beginning and the end of the life cycle in a significant feature of a creative district’s visual landscape: public art. In the creative district’s early, quasi-spontaneous formation, public art is anonymous, provocative, and

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