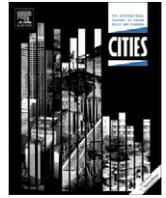




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Viewpoint

Sustaining creativity in the creative archetype: The case of Austin, Texas

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the popular literature on creative industries and the urban creative landscape has been largely dominated by the work of one scholar, Richard Florida. The popularity of Richard Florida's work has led to a zealous implementation of his creative class thesis by many city officials, policymakers, and urban planners. Recent studies have investigated the impact of creative city implementation in previously working class and industrial cities, but given Florida's popularity and influence, it is also necessary to evaluate the sustainability of cities touted as creative success stories by Florida and others. This article examines the case of Austin, Texas, seeking to evaluate Florida's model city in light of recent empirical research. This research suggests that while Austin has witnessed impressive economic prosperity, the "externalities" or unforeseen challenges associated with creative development are equally evident. Further, this research suggests that previously overlooked socio-cultural challenges (e.g. loss of urban cultural character, sense of detachment, over-commercialization) in Austin threaten to potentially undermine the sustainability of this mode of development.

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Introduction

Since the publication of *Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002, the work of Richard Florida has been a favorite target of urban scholarly critics. As Florida's creative class thesis gained mainstream popularity, early contrarians voiced concerns of elitism (Maliszewski, 2004) and circular logic (Malanga, 2004). These were soon followed by a mix of economists, urban planners, and geographers who took issue with Florida's anecdotal methodology, vague classification, shaky analysis, and 'pop sociology' (Glaeser, 2004; Peck, 2005; Markusen and Schrock, 2006; Scott, 2006; Rantisi et al., 2006; and others). Most recently, *Geografiska Annaler B* featured several articles analyzing Florida's strategies for the attraction of creative talent (Houston et al., 2008), his assumptions of causality in economic growth (Stam et al., 2008), and his ambiguous coupling of "creativity" and "culture industries" (Pratt, 2008). Although many of these recent studies carefully critique the creative class thesis, there remains a consistent judgment of Florida's work that falls just short of vitriolic, portraying his policy prescriptions as "neo-liberal snake oil" (Peck, 2005), his anecdotal musings as "yuppie self-indulgence" (Zimmerman, 2008), and his advocates as displaying the "heady passion of a religious movement" (Kotkin and Siegel, 2004). Given such damning criticism, it is difficult to imagine that policy makers, urban planners, or city governance would ever consider implementing the Floridian "creativity script."

In popular media, however, the outpouring of praise has squelched any mention of scholarly criticism. Among city planners and entrepreneurs, Florida has achieved near rockstar status, "attracting the type of attention usually garnered by salacious fiction or celebrity tell-alls" (Dreher, 2002, p. 1). *Rise of the Creative Class* has received accolades from sources as varied as *The Financial Times* (2008) and *The Colbert Report* (2007). Florida's most recent work, *Who's Your City*, touted celebrity endorsements from the likes of Cybill Shepherd and Chef Mario Batali.

Since *Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida has published three new books: *Cities and the Creative Class* (2005a), *Flight of the Creative Class* (2005b), and *Who's Your City* (2008)—the latter of which has become an international best seller. These recent works add to a Floridian creative canon that now includes six books, more than a dozen articles, and countless editorials, guest columns, blogs, lectures, and interviews (many of which are easily accessed through his flashy website: <http://www.creativeclass.com>). As some have noted, Florida's popularity has allowed him to create an industry out of his own work (Gibson and Kong, 2005), and it seems that a "new-found cult of creativity" is facilitating the introduction of a paradigm shift in urban planning policy (Peck, 2005).

While urban scholars continue to tease out statistical data and drive critical holes in the creative class literature, cities throughout North America and now abroad (see Vanolo, 2008; Houston et al., 2008; Stam et al., 2008) continue a zealous implementation of Florida-inspired policies, and the creative class has gained recognition as a highly influential demographic.¹ Given the

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¹ Incidentally, even Joel Kotkin, an outspoken critic of Florida, recently proclaimed Barack Obama's election victory as a *Triumph of the Creative Class* (2008).

apparent disconnect between academic opinion and popular support, it is evident that extensive empirical scholarship is needed to better comprehend the effects of the “creative city” phenomenon. This essay is not the first to appeal for further investigation. Most notably, Rantisi et al., (2006) pointed to several possible areas for future exploration, including “a clear understanding of the term ‘creativity,’” the “opportunities and challenges” confronting a range of workers in creative cities, and “prospects for smaller cities or rural settings and for contexts in the Global South” (1795–6). Adding to these suggestions, other avenues have been explored empirically, most notably the investigation of the “politics of city regionalism and livability” in the creative city (McCann, 2007, p. 188), and the possible consequences of “downtown-based property-led development” in blue collar-turned-creative cities (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 230). Following the example of Vanolo (2008), Zimmerman (2008), this paper seeks to illuminate the far-reaching effects of creative city development through empirical analysis. But where these scholars chose to investigate the active promotion of creative strategies in industrial cities (Turin in the case of Vanolo; Milwaukee in the case of Zimmerman), this study critically examines Florida’s model for creative success: Austin, Texas. In doing so, this article considers the recent work of creative class critics, but largely seeks to analyze the situation of Austin in light of Florida’s own scholarship. While Austin has experienced many of the recognized “externalities”² (i.e. negative side-effects) of creative development, research suggests that there are further socio-cultural challenges present. A vocal portion of Austin’s population has expressed serious concerns over the loss of cultural character, sense of detachment, and social polarization associated with rapid growth and landscape transformation. This paper suggests that, despite their assumingly intangible nature, these cultural expressions may lead to very real consequences for creative cities. Ironically, these problems seem most evident in the city that is considered the greatest creative success story, Austin. Based upon the case of Austin, this research questions whether Floridian strategies for creative development are as sustainable as their popularity implies.

Methods

Throughout 2007 and in the beginning of 2008, research and fieldwork were conducted with the stated purpose of gauging public response to the recent growth and redevelopment in the Austin area. Upon entering the field, the intent of this research was to investigate the “Keep Austin Weird” movement, understood by most as a reactionary slogan in support of local business. However, interviews revealed that local business promotion was only one incarnation of “Keep Austin Weird.” It was quickly discovered that the slogan has been adopted by numerous groups advocating a variety of causes, but originally, the phrase had emerged from a local grassroots movement intent on the preservation of Austin’s unique culture. This discovery changed both the scope and purpose of research. It was clear that research demanded a more flexible means of ethnographic inquiry than originally intended. Instead of focusing on local business owners and members of local business promotion groups, interviews included a mix of Austinites and easily identifiable cultural experts (i.e. city council members, chamber of commerce representatives, musicians, journalists, city utility workers, local celebrities, developers, and local business owners). In addition to the formally scheduled key informant interviews (approximately 30 in total), random interviews were conducted among Austinites. During research, these were referred to as “On the Street Interviews.” Although well over one hundred informal

conversations and impromptu interviews were initiated, only between 60 and 70 resulted in open-ended, exploratory interviews that were deemed methodologically suitable for consideration.

Despite the flexibility of sampling criteria, almost all interviewees exhibited a significant level of awareness of the “Keep Austin Weird” phenomenon and about the situation of the city of Austin in general. In other words, it seemed that most Austinites were well aware of the growth and transformation of the city they called home, and there was no shortage of opinion. The passionate attitudes and well thought-out responses suggested that “Keep Austin Weird,” local business promotion, downtown revitalization, gentrification, and the “homogenization” of the cultural landscape were topics of frequent discussion. Certain commonly repeated responses reinforce the importance of structuring forces such as news media, movies, television shows, books, internet sources, and the blogosphere. Further, specific references to Richard Florida’s work suggested that many Austinites had become increasingly aware of the city’s position at the top of Florida’s Creativity Index. The majority of interviews were conducted during the summer of 2007 and in January of 2008, but dozens of follow-up email and phone interviews continued throughout 2007 and 2008.

In addition to open-ended, exploratory interviews, an extensive review of related material was also conducted. All material relating to the “Keep Austin Weird” movement, creative city policy, or urban landscape transformation fell under the scope of this study. This included (but was not limited to) print media, visual media, music, radio talk shows, city census data, maps, city council meeting minutes, comprehensive plans, surveys, polls, ordinances, building codes, and everything that Austin City Connection (the city of Austin website) offered. Simply put, a wide net was cast in order to best gauge the attitudes expressed regarding city growth and development.

Cultivating creativity: The Florida perspective

Despite its fairly recent emergence, Florida’s work has become widely read among scholars in geography and urban studies. His central thesis focuses on the emergence of the “creative class,” a group he argues is made up of more than 38 million Americans or approximately 30% of the American workforce (2005a:35). He defines the core group of the creative class (2004a:8) as the following:

Those workers in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content...these people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital.

In addition to this core, Florida adds certain “creative professionals in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields” (2004a:8). Largely attracted by what he calls the 3 Ts of economic development (*Technology, Talent, and Tolerance*), this group is migrating to cities and regions that “possess all three of these critical factors” (2005a:37). Of these factors, “tolerance” is the most ambiguous, and in some sense, the most important element in city image marketing. Florida defines tolerance as “openness, inclusiveness, and diversity to all ethnicities, races, and walks life” (2005a:37), and he includes several sub-factors that are strongly related to tolerance. According to Florida, factors such as “Bohemianness,” “Gayness,” and “Coolness” all tie into this important “T” of economic development. Florida suggests cities that foster tolerance and market themselves as gay-friendly, Bohemian, and “cool” will succeed in the competitive Creative Era where talent and capital are highly mobile and fickle. But these qualities go beyond simple marketing and talent attraction; these intangibles “provide the

² By externalities, Florida is referring to largely negative (and often unforeseen) social or economic side effects associated with creative city development (Florida, 2004a, 2008).

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