



Culture and creativity: A case study from the West of Ireland

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 August 2009

Received in revised form 23 July 2010

Accepted 31 July 2010

Available online 9 September 2010

Keywords:

Creative cities
Economic development
Cultural policy
Galway City
Ireland

ABSTRACT

Taking the dynamics of second tier city of Galway as a case study, this paper sets out to answer two simple and related questions: How important has culture been to the city's economic and social development, and how integral is culture in maintaining the city's economic and social sustainability? In order to provide answers, we look at the city's development in relation to an emerging body of literature concerning creative cities. We focus on production of culture and gauge its assimilation into the economic life of the city by looking at various facets of the city's economic structure, including the technology sector.

The aim of this paper is to look at cultural policy in Ireland under three interrelated domains: Technology; Institutions; and Spatial Culture (encompassing the place of public performance in urban morphology). The case study of a second tier city provides interesting insights for policy and practice as well as cultural/creative activity arising out of place specific circumstances. The paper explores the changing role of culture and concludes by drawing attention to the tensions surrounding the perceptions of ownership of culture and questions to what impact this will have regarding the city's sustainability into the future.

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Introduction

The proliferation of academic research in the area of creative cities and the rate at which it has reached policy making tables is worthy of note. Indeed, a number of recent issues of this journal have concerned themselves with this topic (see for example Long, 2009; Vanolo, 2008). For many, the literature of the creative cities rhetoric has been consumed as the panacea of urban woes (see Miles & Paddison, 2005). Recent research has elucidated a number of fundamental ways in which the presence of creative activity can contribute to the competitiveness of urban economies (Florida, 2002; Gertler, 2004). Successful cities are no longer judged solely by their profitability or rate of economic growth, rather sustainability, quality of life, economic development and distributional issues rank as key factors for assessing success (Lever, 1999). The role of culture in creating lively cities and communities where people want to live, work, visit and its subsequent role in supporting social and economic health and development are amongst the central tenants of creative cities' literature (see Florida, 2002, 2005).

Developments around the globe are re-defining media, arts and other related sectors as 'creative industries' which are being recognized for their potential impact on local and national economies. Cities are making more use of cultural events to attract investors as well as visitors. Throughout this paper, we contend that artistic and cultural activities are not simple by-products of a developed economy but essential elements of economic success and sustainability. Such activities represent alternate forms of expression of human creativity that encourage lateral thinking and thus complement scientific and technological innovation (Udo-Ernst, 2005). Additionally, artistic and cultural activities lie at the core of a number of growing industrial sectors (including tourism, publishing and entertainment), and contribute directly to employment growth. Indeed, creative activities are increasingly being viewed as alternative development paths for some second-tier cities (see for example; Markusen & King, 2003).

More dissenting voices have pointed out the ease with which the Creative city rhetoric fits with the neo-liberal regime. Creativity has been reduced to a dependent variable in the demand functions of urban/regional attractiveness. It is thereby linked to the primacy of global markets and is positioned as a central determinant of economic success (Gibson & Klocker, 2005; Peck, 2005). The concept of creativity has been appropriated by governments (regional/urban and national) because of its ability to act as a catalyst in the cultural transition of individuals from 'citizens' to 'entrepreneurs' and 'consumers', the 'idealised companions' of

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the neo-liberal state: 'liberated, independent and competitive subjects' (Peck, 2004, 395).

Using Galway City, in the west of Ireland as our case study, we explore how the city's economy and society have been impacted by culture/cultural policies in the past, and what role they have in the city's economic and social sustainability. In order to do this, we look firstly at the historical economic and social development of the city. From this, it quickly becomes clear that the city and region's cultural history is innately bound with its economic and social development over the past number of years. This exploration also makes it clear that the city's past economic and social success is bound with and dependant on the exploitation of the unique culture fostered in the city. In an attempt to explore this further, we gauge the city's cultural exposition and sustainability according to three pillars which have been identified by others (see Craik, Davis, & Sutherland, 2002) as the critical domains of cultural policy: Technology; Institutions; and Spatial Culture. The spatial manifestation of culture is evident throughout all cities. Garcia's work on the cultural legacies of Glasgow 1990 experience (European City/Capital of Culture) highlights the importance of local images, identities and communities in culture-led regeneration (Garcia, 2005). Also Waitt (2008) outlines the work of geographers investigating urban festivals as place marketing tools in the contemporary politics of entrepreneurialism.

The rationale for using the three dimensions of technology, institutions and spatial culture is how they contribute to the cities cultural and competitive endowment. Previous work on the technology sector in Galway (Collins, 2007) acted as a starting point for an investigation as to the spatial practices in a post-Fordist economy. Highly mobile firms in an increasingly globalised economy have a greater breadth of location choices. Analysis of companies in Galway and Ireland (a country highly dependent on attracting foreign firms²) pointed to the increased weight placed on institutions and culture (in the sense of livability and place attractiveness) in location decisions.

The importance placed on *technology* and policies related to it are recognized worldwide. Indeed, technology is found to be at the core of creative cities rhetoric because it is the sector most easily related to constant change and high value returns to innovation (see Florida, 2002; Peck, 2005). The role of arts, culture and their *institutions* forms our second pillar. Recognizing that creative activities have the potential to play a vital role in creating a unique image for a city, there exists a huge value in producing distinctive and unique cultural products (Gertler, 2004). Stimulating urban development or the recycling of urban space is yet another way in which creative activities are seen to impact urban economies. Here, we investigate the role that the formation of local artistic institutions has played on the city's creative development. Our final pillar of analysis is *spatial culture*, encompassing the place of public performance in urban morphology. As explored in detail by Franklin (2004), public performance, and art festivals in particular, are an integral component of the creative city (echoing Florida's thesis that part of the environmental and cultural diversity the creative class thrive on includes institutions like arts festivals). Such festivals often provide an interesting lens to explore how culture is contested (Waterman, 1998) and the relationship between art and governance. Notions of 'ownership of culture' and tensions between cultural and commercial pursuits are explored in line with what Waterman sees as the transformation of cultural to commercial interests. We explore this further by looking at the promotion of Galway as a consumer playground for the mobile and affluent through its cultural events.

Methods³

This work builds on past analyses of Galway (and Ireland) as attractive locations for foreign direct investment and entrepreneurial activity. Referring to more critical writings on creative cities, we set out to question whether Galway City can now see itself as an 'entrepreneurial city' in the meaning employed by David Harvey (1989).

From the economic perspective, assessing culture and creativity in the city has been long regarded as a move towards a positive revaluation of urban assets. However, within the creative cities discourse, the methods used by the majority of studies to determine a city's cultural assets and potential have been criticized for their attempts to quantitatively identify and value this potential. Landry and Woods note that the majority of evaluations on the economic impact of culture on a city to date are 'largely quantitatively driven focusing on tourism figures and levels of participation' (2003, 53). In the context of Ireland, culture and creativity are often too narrowly defined as 'the Arts' and, in the case of Galway City, the majority of evaluations of culture in the city have simply been analyses of tourist figures or numbers attending an event. A notable exception to this trend is Quinn's (2005, 2006) insightful qualitative research conducted on the Galway Arts Festival.

Methodologically, our research relies more on qualitative than quantitative approaches. The data contained within this paper was in part derived from an analysis of policy documents, programs, and press releases from organizations in Galway; notably, Galway City Council, Galway City Development Board and Galway Arts Festival Office. In addition, 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in key industries, arts' organizations, and city councils. The interviews were conducted with commercial institutions between the period of July 2002 and September 2004. More recently (June 2006 until November 2009), interviews with cultural actors in Galway-based institutions of arts and commerce were carried out. This time coincided with an unprecedented economic boom in Ireland. Key issues that emerged in interviews with commercial actors regarding Galway as a location to carry out business (such as the cultural/bohemian vibe in the city and the generally high quality of life) acted as the main themes for exploration in the more recent interviews with the city's cultural actors and institutions. Qualitative interviews are often cited as a means of gaining greater insight into the respondents' feelings, experiences and beliefs which are important because of the ideological nature of the subject material. This research approach ensured a meaningful insight by exploring core beliefs in respondents regarding the place of culture, be it commercial or artistic. We correlated responses from representatives of different sectors (namely commercial and cultural) to demonstrate the divergent attitudes regarding the place of culture in the city's development. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that there are a number of instances when qualitative methods are crucial, such as enabling local grounding and substantial depth. These are key requirements when organizational and human processes are observed. Through these interviews, and an in-depth review of secondary material, we have attempted to build a robust picture of the city's economic and cultural make-up.

Context: the case of Galway City

Ireland's economic transformation over the period known as the 'Celtic Tiger' (ca. 1993–2007) years had been widely noted by com-

² For example, in the Irish technology sector, over half of employment and as much as 80% of revenue is accounted by foreign owned companies (IDA, 2009).

³ A point of clarification might be necessary in how we view the relation between the terms Creative, Cultural and Artistic. We see these terms as lying on a continuum which from left to right becomes less quantifiable and more subjective. Policies referred to in terms of creative cities rest somewhere between the first two terms, while cultural events like those referred to here lie between the latter two terms.

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