Creative Urbanism

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Abstract

In the last decades contemporary cities have witnessed the rise of creativity as a resource for economic and urban development, mobilising both advocates and critics. This chapter examines the emergence of creative urbanism as a way of planning the city by using culture and the arts and/or adopting creative strategies. It approaches creative urbanism from a sociological angle but also draws on urban studies and cultural policy in order to trace its origin, conceptual developments, policy applications and academic criticism. The creativity underpinning this type of urban planning has a variety of sources – from the activities shaping and revitalising urban space, to the process of design and implementation, and the ways in which social groups are included in the process. The focus is on both top-down and bottom-up practices – on the one hand, official governmental policies for culture-led urban regeneration and creative industry-based strategies, such as creative hubs or incubators for small and medium creative enterprises; on the other, grassroots-led projects using culture and the arts for urban transformation. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first outlines the key features of creative urbanism in order to identify a paradigm shift. The second considers scholarship that has sought to move the 'creative city' debate forward in view of solid critiques to Richard Florida's controversial 'creative class' proposition. The final section considers the social futures of creative urbanism in the light of its neoliberal uses and potential for alternative applications.

Introduction

In 1951 the journal *The Town Planning Review* published an article entitled 'Creative Urbanism' where Christopher Tunnard, Director of City Planning at Yale University, described the lack of art in the urban environment as one of the more serious social problems of the time. The crucial question was, in his view, how to build 'to satisfy the eye' at the same time than satisfying existing social demands. Creative urbanism was presented as a particular city planning approach, a creative form of urban design, and a solution to the aesthetic problem of urban ugliness, which had resulted from industrial development and post-war destruction. As such, it would be incarnated in the figure of an imaginative creative designer, skilful in the fields of architecture, the arts and visual planning. 'If we include the art approach as part of our daily thinking then our practical solutions may change in character and become a better fusion of form and function, of the practical and aesthetic (Tunnard, 1951:229). Echoing the American 'city beautiful' movement of the late nineteenth-century with its emphasis on design, aesthetics and landscape architecture, the challenge ahead was then how to incorporate imagination into planning and fundamentally, how to take the past into account in the present when planning the cities of the future as works of art.

In recent years the term creative urbanism has acquired a different meaning. A widespread use since the 2000s has associated it with the spatialisation of the new economy in the post-Fordist city, involving processes of urban transformation that resort to cultural activities, adopt creative strategies or involve the work of artists to satisfy more than just a visual need. The emergence of the (new) creative economy, comprising a range of cultural and creative industries that are differently defined across contexts, has given rise to both new urban and social formations as well as city branding labels such as the creative city (Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2000), the creative class (Florida, 2002),

creative placemaking (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010), creative clusters (Montgomery, 2003; Evans, 2004), creative hubs (Evans and Hutton, 2009; Gill, Pratt and Virani, 2019,) and creative enterprise zones (i.e. in the work of the Greater London Authority), to name just a few. In its original conception, the creative city is a toolkit for urban innovators, a new approach to urban planning, and a new way of thinking about cities that challenges habitual practices, organisational structures and power configurations and overcomes deeply entrenched obstacles (Landry, 2000:xlix). The term, now used by developers, policymakers and scholars, implies at a basic level the existence of non-creative urban planning or city-making, referring to cities purely of trade and commerce. Creative urbanism ultimately refers to how culture and the arts relate to, make and transform the city in creative ways. From a temporal dimension, it can be both ephemeral, as in the case of pop-up festivals and events, and enduring, through more permanent capital projects for culture or the physical demarcation of specific areas as creative.

This chapter offers a conceptualisation of the term creative urbanism and the challenges that lie ahead of its social futures. The first part traces the origin of the unfolding of creative urbanism in relation to the rise of the so-called symbolic economy of cities. The second section discusses scholarship that has sought to move the 'creative city' debate forward by formulating solid critiques to Richard Florida's controversial proposition of the 'creative class'. The final section concludes by considering the social futures of creative urbanism in the light of its contemporary neoliberal uses and potential for alternative applications.

The foundations of creative urbanism

Although cities have always been spaces of creation and vernacular creativity, the development of creative urbanism, as we know it today, can be linked to the rise of the creative economy in post-Fordist, knowledge-based societies, which are marked by flexible specialisation, high-technology industry and specialised locational clusters (Scott, 2006). The creative economy is comprised by the economic activities of the creative industries – differently defined across contexts, but originally conceived in the UK as those industries based on individual creativity, skill and talent, with the potential to generate wealth and jobs through the exploitation of intellectual property (DCMS, 1998). This definition, which has economic value and individual entrepreneurship at its centre, initially identified the 13 (now 7) sectors that would become the objects of creative economy policy, ranging from advertising, architecture, crafts, arts and antiques, to design, designer fashion, film and video, TV and radio, as well as interactive leisure software, software and computer services, music, performing arts and publishing. However, new versions – with reduced or expanded sector scope and formations – have been developed in time and across space. Despite the plurality of definitions, existing confusion and multiple approaches to measuring the economic value of culture and creativity, the 'creative economy' is still the prevailing term used in the academic, policy and industry literature. Even if it means different things to different people.

The invention of the creative economy as a global orthodoxy with the production and dissemination of certain political discourses (Schlesinger, 2016) has had resonance all over the world, promoting a competitive, and at times collaborative, landscape of urban creativity. This global trend is epitomised by UNESCO's launch of the Creative Cities Network in 2004, the UNCTAD's publication of the Creative Economy reports in 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2018, and the EU's support programmes for creative cities and networks of creative business, incubation and digital innovation. Beyond Europe, in Asia, Africa and the Americas we can also find a rapidly emerging institutional infrastructure of urban creativity, that sees the UK as the 'pioneering model' and finds in the UN's conferences, publications and recommendations a good opportunity and framework to develop new cultural infrastructures, secure international funding, and host international cultural events. The publication of the Orange Economy

manual by the Inter-American Development Bank in 2013 was meant to act as a 'wake-up call' for policymakers in Latin America and the Caribbean about the enormous 'development opportunities' that the creative economy holds for the region, particularly in social and economic terms. This transnational mobility of Western creative economy discourses, technologies, finance and images (Kong, 2014) in places as dissimilar as Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Australian cities show the complexity, heterogeneity and widespread presence of creative urbanism. In Africa, the launch of the Arterial Network of African Creative Cities and the publication of research, for instance, on the South African and Senegalese experiences of cultural policy and the creative industries (i.e. Oyekunle, 2017; Mbaye and Dinardi, 2019) presented renewed interest in the use of creativity for urban development and city branding. This research highlighted the key role that local civil society actors play, especially with their – sometimes hidden – informal urban interventions, in a policy context that, although acknowledges the importance of creativity, offers insufficient public support. It is interesting to note how these global perspectives of urban creativity reinforce the constitution of creative urbanism as a global urban policy field, interweaving top-down discourses and practices with bottom-up grassroots initiatives.

In other words, creative urbanism can be defined as the urbanism of creative cities (Borja, 2009), and creative cities, as we have seen, constitute an example of the new urban forms and styles of urbanisations that have been unleashed by the structures of the new informational economy (Scott, 2006). But creative urbanism can also exist outside such label, for the very definition of cities as 'creative' takes us to a contested arena about the very meaning of creativity. If creative cities are, as some believe, a mere city branding or urban marketing strategy, then creative urbanism would encompass much more than the promotion of a brand. Cities such as Barcelona, Medellin or Glasgow, which have transformed themselves and been rebranded through culture, innovation and the arts, are good examples of so-called creative urbanism. If we consider urbanism as 'a way of life', in the classical sense of the term defined by Louis Wirth in 1938, what would be the distinctive social characteristics of living in cities under creativity?

Examples of creative urban life abound – from citizen-led improvised solutions to unmet basic needs in informal settlements, to innovative modes of transport, food production and clothing alternatives with reduced environmental impact. This sense of creative urbanism as the development of *creative solutions* to social and urban problems was already contained in the early notion of the 'creative city' as originally conceived by Landry and Bianchini (1995). However, the more prevalent idea of creative urbanism, as promoted by policy discourses, nowadays gets materialised in strategies that develop or promote the city's new economy: the use of public art in urban spaces and iconic cultural infrastructure, the recycling of abandoned, industrial infrastructure, the organisation of pop-up festivals and arts events, the launch of incubation programmes for small creative companies, the creation of museum quarters or creative districts, and the use of creative city branding campaigns, among others.

These initiatives, many inspired by the work of international organisations, exemplify the existence of a paradigmatic global model of urban creativity. But its current contested politics suggests an uncertain future for creative urbanism. This manifests in the myriad examples of local resistance to regeneration projects which dispute the cultural representations and uses of urban places and spaces and the creation of expensive, flagship infrastructure by 'starchitects', as we will see in the next section.

If the creative city is in the past, what holds for the future of creative urbanism?

In the present, global trends have shown both the allure and dismissal of the creative city promise. The disillusionment with the creative city narrative resulted from two key factors – the strong criticism that Richard Florida's notion of the 'creative class' received (for being reductionist, elitist and individualistic) and the compelling evidence demonstrating how discourses of urban creativity have been used to pave the way for gentrification, real-estate speculation, social displacement and the privatisation of public space. Creative strategies, thus, can 'extend and recodify entrenched tendencies in neoliberal urban politics, seductively repackaging them in the soft-focus terms of cultural policy' (Peck, 2005: 740). In this way, creative urbanism can hardly escape the broader policy and practice field of neoliberal urbanism, marked by institutional restructuring programmes, the de-regulation of market forces and the privatisation of state-own services and facilities. The links between creative industry policy frameworks and a neoliberal paradigm that praises an open market ideology and professes the dismantling of the welfare state show the existing contradictions with the more progressive elements of the creative economy (Newsinger, 2014). That is, creative urbanism can be put – potentially – at the service of social inclusion or generate social exclusion and perpetuate urban inequalities.

Further critique of the creative economy and the creative city pointed to their underlying misrepresentation and commodification of race and ethnicity (Saha, 2017) and the displacement of poorer racialised communities with their neoliberal ideologies (Cantugal and Leslie, 2009). Furthermore, the reductionist views on urban development processes upon which they are based have been challenged (Chatterton, 2010) while stating the need for evidence-based, situated approaches that question the universal place-marketing scripts of urban competition and acknowledge the contradictions of the creative class and the creative city (Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2011). 'If there is anything that the creative city as a global trend has achieved, apart from generating public interest and investment, has been the need to think creativity in place and embedded in particular local contexts which are intersected by competing and complex place narratives (Waitt & Gilbson, 2009) that defy one-size-fits-all models promoted by neoliberal doctrines. Critiques have also been made in relation to how market-oriented arts interventions 'entangle women artists in the cultivation of spaces of depoliticised feminism, homonormativity and white privilege' (McLean, 2016:38), showing the links between neoliberal 'creativity' and intersectional exclusions.

Asking ourselves questions such as 'what is possible?' 'what is likely?' and 'what is desirable?' can shed light on the social futures of creative urbanism – its present future, its past future and its future present (Ramos Torre, 2017). These can be defined, following Ramos Torre's analysis of fifty years of scholarship on the sociology of time, as: the present future, signalling the ideas or images that we have in the present about the future horizon; the past future, referring to those conceptions we had about the future in the past that helped ease uncertainty about the future at the time; and finally the future present, indicating what will actually happen when the future becomes present (p.5). We can then argue that the present future of creative urbanism is one that in many policy and industry circles of the global South appears full of promises, seeing the creative economy as part of the city's future, a vision of the desired future. In the global North, the substantial academic literature showing evidence about the exclusionary nature of the creative cities and the creative economy presents a dystopian present future of anxiety, informality, precarisation, unpaid jobs, and self-exploitation for those working[1] in the creative sector. There, the past future was defined by the (now unfulfilled)

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[1] The vast scholarship on the issues affecting creative labour at present is not reviewed here due to space limitations.

promise of freedom and equal opportunities that the creative economy was believed to offer in its early days. In terms of the future present, it is harder to ascertain what will actually happen as each region poses specific challenges and opportunities.

The context of public austerity, social discontent and economic crises, instead of dissolving the future of creative urbanism, might create new senses about what it is to come. The extent to which communities are involved in the conception, implementation and evaluation of creative urban projects, events and initiatives will probably shape more inclusive social futures. How can the arts contribute here? As a political force in the city, arts interventions have been used in activism and protest movements disputing the future of cities. Concepts such as social urbanism, participatory planning and tactical urbanism have attempted to put people back at the centre of the making and remaking of cities, and in this sense, creative urbanism has underscored the importance of culture, creativity and the arts for place-making, urban revitalisation and social cohesion. Mould (2014) warns, however, of an existing risk showing how tactical urbanism has lost its tactics of resistance to become part of mainstream strategies of creative urban development that follow neoliberal agendas to serve the market. In a similar vein, urban regeneration and gentrification become intertwined, especially when 'state-led gentrification is being promoted today in the name of community regeneration' (Lees and Ley, 2008:2381).

If the future is a perspective in the present about something that will happen, we can be certain that in view of the environmental catastrophe and the challenges that lie ahead of cultural and urban policy, the future of creative urbanism can be apocalyptically defined by a fatal diagnosis: the planetary destruction and mass extinction of species already caused by the existing model of market-oriented economic growth. The ways urban cultural and creative policy can contribute to (not) damaging the planet have only recently begun to be examined. In the UK, the work of London-based charity Julie's Bicycle has been paramount in bringing together cultural policy thinking with urban sustainability and environmental justice. In the last decade, there has been rising awareness about the need to move away from oil industry sponsorship for culture and the arts. In this regard, the political economy that sustains creative urbanism needs to be carefully scrutinised if we are to shed light on the power dynamics that sustain the creative economy of cities. It is time for the cultural sector to imply itself in the ecological destruction of the planet.

Conclusion

We can trace three main pathways that can demarcate the *social* futures of creative urbanism. First, arts, cultural and creative interventions will need to be citizen-led (if not at least show considerable involvement from local communities throughout the conception and implementation processes) if they are to avoid gentrification outcomes. Second, they will need to be sustainable, if they are to protect, rather than further deteriorate, the environment they are in, without harming future generations; in other words, they should not have a large carbon footprint. 'It is time that cultural policy becomes environmental policy and not just a side-lined player in the global movement for sustainable development' (Maxwell and Miller, 2017:182). Third, they need to be socially inclusive if they are to bring benefits to people, rather than markets, either through arts and skills training, audience development or a wider and just cultural funding distribution.

Although creative urbanism policy agendas foresee a future full of promises, many will probably not be fulfilled in the light of the present circumstances. At stake are the cultural representations of urban spaces, the contentious uses of public space, the distribution of public funds for culture and the arts, the improvement or worsening of labour conditions in the creative sector, particularly with regards to gender and ethnic/racial exclusions and pay gaps, and the benefits from creative clustering in the form

of districts, hubs or quarters. A comprehensive view of creative urbanism must challenge the logic that equates urban creativity to (only) the commercial activity of the cultural and the creative industries, leaving out the informal creative economy.

The development of creative urbanism in austere, intolerant and conservative contexts faces threats to democracy and public culture. The connections and the interactions between (market-driven) urban transformations, in our case through 'creativity', and ongoing, uneven and contradictory processes of neoliberalisation (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009) cannot be ignored. Challenging prevalent neoliberal ideologies that sustain some of the present manifestations of creative urbanism demands collective action and organisation – with regards to how gentrification can be resisted, how artists can engage with the local areas they are now based in, and how policy can better support grassroots creative projects. As Cremin (2012:69) put it:

> *'A sociology of social futures must engage with the dialectical totality, to diagnose the situation and propose alternatives to it. More dystopian than economic collapse is the prospect that capitalism and the apparatuses that sustain it will somehow muddle through this crisis intact with the consequences of even greater hardships, atrocities and catastrophes to come'.*

If history is open-ended (Hall, 2016), so is the future with its alternative scenarios. Yet can the future of creative urbanism be constructed in an inclusive way in capitalist, entrepreneurial societies marked by a context of crisis and in a world facing environmental emergency? Can it distance itself from the intricacies of neoliberal urbanism? That remains to be seen.

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