

Parasites of Innovation

The Dual Models of Neoliberal Urban Creativity

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This critical interrogation of the neoliberal agenda pivots around its usurpation of creativity as crystalized in the creative city and related urban politics in the global North. Cities being the engines of the economy (Jane Jacobs and Peter Hall), Florida and Landry advocate the *creative city* as the real motor force of the neoliberal economy – a kind of creativity that has little to do with spontaneous imaginative bottom-up urban regeneration but rather the fostering of a factitious or cultivated creativity through the top-down implementation of specific policy interventions. It is theorized that this artificially created creativity is incarnated in a direct and indirect model respectively that function differently to foster economic growth. While the direct model is glaringly invasive and overtly top-down, the indirect model is more insidious because more subtle and unobtrusive by utilizing negative planning measures to let the informal creative margins and interstices flourish “organically” – the latter serving as breeding ground upon which the former parasitizes. Together the direct and indirect models permeate the entire register of power operative in the creative city from macropolitical urban interventions to the microphysics of the individual creaworker. This contribution critically unpacks the dual models of neoliberal urban creativity and concludes by briefly touching upon the crucial question of resistance.

Introducing the Argument

On the eve of the globalized and globalizing neoliberal turn, Ernest Mandel (1975) insisted that the city of late capitalism has become a pliable scientific object readily submitted to technical operations and rationalization procedures streamlining its efficient functioning. Therein he unwittingly anticipated the neoliberal dream of the creative city. More recently, Marc Schuilenburg and Alex de Jong argue in their 2006 *Mediapolis* that the limits of today's city are expanding well-beyond the urban into the domain of visual culture. Urban matter no longer consists in the concrete but in the creative. In my enquiry into the precise sense in which urban matter has come to be defined in terms of creativity, I take the creative city as case in point arguing that the concrete and the creative are not mutually exclusive but rather parallel universes (wo)manned by the formal creative class and informal creaworkers respectively. Both incarnate the neoliberal agenda, but while the former serves as conduit exacerbating its deleterious effects, the latter suffer at the hands of these effects. I shall start with a brief introduction of the paradoxical notion of a factitious or cultivated creativity and the linkage that the architects of the creative economy try to establish between

creativity and the city. Thereafter I will critically unpack the dual models of neoliberal urban creativity before briefly touching upon the crucial question of resistance.

Premised on a Cultivated Creativity

While creativity is usually associated with spontaneity, with the imagination, innovation, invention and the inception of original ideas, the creative city is about malleability, about how and to what extent the creative city can be *created*. Of course, the ambition of cities to be transformed into creative cities runs the risks of turning into the opposite. A local or regional policy implemented using a standardized strategic toolkit – as suggested by the subtitle of Charles Landry's 2000 book, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* – is about a top-down artificial integration of creativity into the planning and governance of cities rather than a bottom-up spontaneous flourishing of the imagination. It is nevertheless argued that a creative city can be generated by producing the right conditions to foster the existing creative potential and to attract what is lacking. Creativity is presented as the panacea for turning slumping cities into booming cities. It is argued that creativity is the driving force behind a flourishing economy, and this creative economy is inextricably linked to a tolerant and diverse urban environment.

The usurpation of creativity by the neoliberal variant of capitalism fits nicely into Mandel's and subsequently Frederic Jameson (1991)'s insistence that late capitalism is characterized by the infiltration of capital into areas previously outside of commodity production. This is exemplified by Florida's contention that booming cities are those that cultivate their alternative or "countercultural" circuit, i.e., their bohemian, gay or whatever wayward wiles, which leads to his insistence upon tolerance, diversity and openness. Tolerance and safety foster contact and creative cross-pollination. Such an urban climate is highly desirable because, as Jane Jacobs (*The Economy of Cities*) and Peter Hall (*Cities of Civilization*) point out, cities are the main engines of the economy.

Creativity in Landry's *The Creative City* (2000) and Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) and *Cities and the Creative Class* (2005) should therefore be understood in the broadest possible sense of the word. Apart from art, design and architecture, it adds surplus value to almost any consumer product or aspect of consumer society. It is therefore not limited to the visual (and performing) arts but encompasses more fundamentally the creative processes in organizations. Creativity is supposed to be an inexhaustible raw material that is available to everyone. Some are, of course, "more privy to" creativity than others. Artistic and cultural producers, designers, architects, and young and upcoming professionals would be more creative than factory workers but as factory labour migrates to faraway low-wage countries and the industrial age wanes, vacant industrial sites were rediscovered and repurposed as magnets for creativity also as a way to ward off undesirable squatting by vagrants. Think, for example, of the defunct Gasworks factory in Amsterdam that stopped production in 1967 that was re-invented as part of the "Culture Park Westergasfabriek" in 2003, which is now a vibrant creative hub. Another striking example is the "High Line" – the repurposed elevated railway in New York City that has been described as becoming "an engine of neoliberalism".¹ Originally, the mile and half (around 2 km) long railway line, elevated 9 m above the Meatpacking District and Chelsea neighbourhood in West Manhattan was used by freight trains servicing Manhattan with meat, dairy and other produce before the structure was deserted as the trucking industry expanded and businesses relocated. As the railway succumbed to nature, engulfed by unkept vines and wildflowers, the derelict structure became a fitting representation of post-industrial United States. Following the intervention by what Florida would call the "super-creative core" of the creative class, i.e., architects, landscape architects and garden designers, fifteen years later the neighbourhood bears little resemblance to its dingy past life having swapped butchers' coats for haute couture appearing to affirm Florida's prophecy that creativity paves the way for profit and hence urban regeneration. Above, on the High Line itself, hipster crowds relish the coolness afforded by water features and bask in the sun on reclaimed-teak² park benches amidst the

1 Lucas 2024.

2 Following pressure from climate activists, reclaimed-teak replaced the use of timber from the Amazon rainforest originally planned.

expansive incorporation of green space, while enjoying eats from the array of cosmopolitan food stalls. Everywhere along the High Line's length scaffolding has sprouted announcing the immanent erection of new developments, which already include pricey high-end apartments and designer penthouses.

Florida appears to defend a rather broad and inclusive definition of the so-called "creative class" – not limited to members of the "super-creative core" that attract other members (architects and garden designers attracting fashion designers) but also "creative professionals" or knowledge workers that do problem-solving for a living based on a high level of education and human capital and gravitate towards the recreational and residential opportunities afforded by the creative city. The creative class therefore appear deceptively classless – a broad category of individuals whose work involves creating new ideas, technology, or creative content that resemble Landry's conceptualization of "creaworkers" who apply creative thinking to solve problems across various industries, including public services, urban planning, and business. As egalitarian as this may seem, however, it supposes certain privileges only a select few has access to – most notably the freedom to choose for oneself where you want to live. On the one hand, the creative class have the luxury of not having to go where the jobs are, the jobs will follow *them* as demonstrated by the fact that creative industries have been known to relocate to cities that are home to the largest percentage of creative labour force. On the other hand, this class is mobile and empowered, a kind of migrant labour force attracted not to jobs but to place, vibrant places. In this creative economy, the market is determined above all by the quality of the public domain. It offers both safety and countless possibilities for transgression. It is imagined as a place of tolerance, diversity, vibrancy, entertainment and countless network opportunities. It is a place where creativity flourishes and money flows. The creative class/creaworkers have thus become the motoring force of economic development based on the creative economy, of which the creative industry (the arts, design and the media) is but one sector.

The Dual Models of the Creative City

THE DIRECT MODEL

Florida's and Landry's models therefore consider various forms of cultural production (such as design, film, entertainment, music, computer games, etc.) as a *direct* way to attract and foster economic growth – a magnet for urban affluence and prosperity. It is within this model that we can speak of the "commoditization of culture": the paradoxical yet powerful combination of commodity and creative singularity/individuality. As we have seen, the impoverished notion of creativity operative in this model is one limited to a specific sector with a matching class of which the spatial needs can be determined empirically. The predominant belief is therefore that creative urbanity can be fostered or manufactured *ex nihilo* if needed. This often entails far-reaching governmentally steered top-down planning interventions and in its most extreme form can take on grotesque shapes unashamedly displaying its spectacular artificiality. Hudson Yards in New York City is no doubt exemplary in this regard, a handful of glass shard-like skyscrapers, seven story gigantic shopping mall and arts centre – all designed by big-name architects – superimposed on a dozen gritty acres of working rail tracks, a Nowhereland on the Far West Side. According to architecture critic, Michael Kimmelman, "[i]t is, at heart, a supersized suburban-style office park, with a shopping mall and a quasi-gated condo community targeted at the 0.1 percent". "[N]early devoid of urban design", he continues, "it declines to blend into the city grid ... [and] lacks any semblance of human scale" seemingly oblivious to the fact that architecture without urban design is just sculpture and that the success of a neighbourhood and its retail businesses comes down to what's happening at street level. "With its focus on the buildings' shiny envelopes, on the monotony of reflective blue glass and the sheen of polished wood, brass, leather, marble and stone, Hudson Yards, glorifies a kind of surface spectacle – as if the peak ambitions of city life were consuming luxury goods and enjoying a smooth, seductive, mindless materialism." It is the epitome of the neoliberal urban myth that private development is the truest measure of urban vitality and health and money a city's only real currency. This \$25 billion architectural development promises to be a wellspring of future tax revenues

by offering Grade A office and apartment space. Already the who's who of top-end knowledge economy firms and corporations have or plan to move in. While city officials sold Hudson Yards to New Yorkers as a self-financing venture, the city and state poured billions of public dollars into an extension of the No. 7 subway line and into acres of open space around the yards – investments presumably benefiting everyone, which the project is supposed to pay back by increasing New York's GDP. So far, however, the project is merely shifting economic development from other neighbourhoods to Hudson Yards without creating new net growth.³

Projects such as Hudson Yards are primarily geared towards the revalorization of prime urban land. Urban geographer, Erik Swyngedouw (2008) explains that investment in the restructuring of developed urban areas or the production of new built environments re-valorizes, at least potentially, the monetary value of the land and the built environment – benefits that are almost always reaped by the private sector. The financial and economic viability of these projects depends on the future realization of the produced increased urban rents. Most of the development or restructuring costs incurred is supposed to be covered by the sale or renting of the land or buildings – the value of which has been inflated through state support, de-regulation, zoning changes, infrastructure investment, and the like. Their dependence on rent returns invariably means that they target high-income segments of the population. This, in turn, exacerbates the problem of social segmentation and exclusion and often leads to the creation of islands of wealth in an impoverished environment. The city consequently mutates into a hotchpotch of socio-economically highly diversified and more mutually exclusive areas.

Such large-scale urban restructuring and gentrification projects also foreground the decidedly undemocratic nature of the prevailing urban politics, since they have largely replaced statutory urban planning. Suspension of the latter permits the former to effect rapid re-zoning, functional transformation and accelerated implementation.⁴ Creative cities are advised to opt for planning through urban “projects” as primary means to fuel economic growth and to “organize innovation”. According to Swyngedouw and Kaika (2003),

“the large, emblematic *Project* has emerged as a viable alternative, allegedly combining the advantages of flexibility and targeted actions with a tremendous symbolic capacity. Essentially fragmented, this form of intervention goes hand in hand with an eclectic planning style where attention to design, detail, morphology and aesthetics is paramount, often solidified through the use of international icons of signature architecture”.⁵

This emblematic *Project* captures the *deus ex machina* – the unexpected power of creativity to save a seemingly hopeless urban situation. It becomes the symbol of the new restructured/revitalized metropolis signalling innovation, creativity, and global competitive success.⁶

As such, these projects are invariably platforms for “profound power struggles and position-taking of key economic, political, social, or cultural elites”. These projects are engineered to embody the ambitions of a particular set of local, regional, national – and sometimes also international – players that determine, through the exercise of their socio-economic, cultural, or political power, the respective developmental courses of the urban areas. Instead of triggers for democratic urban empowerment – as the proponents of the creative city-formula would argue – they instigate exclusion, inequality and social injustice. In other words, as “elite playing fields” on which an urban future is engineered in line with the aspirations of the most powerful segment(s) of those involved, they foster a fundamentally undemocratic and exclusive urban environment in which the economic, political and fiscal interests of the powerful take precedence over the resident low-income population that suddenly finds themselves faced with imminent evacuation. The coalitions of elite actors, their periodic struggles for inclusion in or exclusion from the decision-making few, along with structural socio-economic changes are jointly responsible for shaping the fortunes of urban environments as they determine who has the right to affordable housing,

3 Kimmelman 2019.

4 Swyngedouw 2008, pp. 107-142.

5 Swyngedouw & Kaika 2003, p. 17.

6 Swyngedouw 2008, pp. 107-142.

access to services, to land, etc. Moreover, while traditional social-democratic redistribution channelled flows from the haves to the have-nots, the present neoliberal flows redirect the flow of urban moneys more decisively towards real estate developers and the new 'creative' economic agents.⁷

THE INDIRECT MODEL

Apart from this direct model, it is also possible to distinguish an indirect model. The indirect model, as theorized by the urban planning consultancy office, Urban Unlimited's 2004 report, *De schaduwstad [The shadow city]*, maintains that the presence or vibrancy of a creative class is not the decisive factor for a creative city. Rather than the creative class that is thoroughly integrated into the formal economy, of decisive importance are the various creative forces that operate in the margins, interstices or outside of the formal economic circuits. The surplus value of these informal creatives cannot wholly or at least exclusively be measured in economic terms. Their contribution to prosperity should rather be measured in terms of the general feeling of urbanity that it fosters, i.e., a tolerant, creative, dynamic and innovative living environment. It is precisely this immaterial and immeasurable quality that is decisive for the economic viability of the formal sector of the neoliberal city. According to this model, strong creative urban environments are generally not the product of excessive governmental interventions but rather the result of spontaneous bottom-up urban evolution. Contrary to appearance, this model does not advocate a laissez-faire approach to planning but is far more dialectic. Although it avoids the structural organization of freezones or breeding-grounds and the bureaucratic formalization that is concomitant with subsidies, it propagates indirect or negative planning measures responsible for the creation of those conditions potentially conducive to a creative urban environment. The indirect model is consequently much more subtle and unobtrusive in its planning measures and thoroughly aware of the precarious nature of such interventions. Important in this model is the availability of niche space, the possibility of improvised, self-organized networks, affordable rent and living costs, and high social and cultural tolerance. Although it is important that this parallel universe remains insulated from the formalized economy it serves as a vital incubator for fresh young blood and innovative ideas upon which the formal creative economy feeds in time of need. Of importance is the art of safeguarding and optimizing this crucial synergy between the shadow zones and the formal creative economy that operates in the spotlight.

Sociologist, Saskia Sassen in *The Global City* (2001: 240-242) likewise acknowledges the co-existence of the formal creative knowledge economy (the so-called "producer services") and small scale, informal and experimental creative industries that operate in the margins of the formal economy while functioning as breeding ground or incubator for the latter. However, instead of merely stating the parallel system of mainstream and underground as mere matter of fact, as Urban Unlimited does, she problematizes the injustices of the parasitic system – the high level of self-exploitation in the informally organized shadow economy and the precarious work and living conditions of the creatives.⁸ Examples of the self-exploitation of the overworked and underpaid human batteries that fuel the creative economy include all those young architectural apprentices at the architectural offices such as OMA eager to man Rem Koolhaas's firm completely free of charge – grateful to learn from the master himself. Equally exemplary is Dieter Lesage's acquiescent *digitariat* of translators, programmers, web designers, writers, editors and researchers busying themselves in the margins of the metropolis with all kinds of odd – mostly freelance – jobs on offer in the informal economic circuit. Not unlike the proletariat, the *digitariat* hardly owns anything – except their computers with internet connection. Urban Unlimited therefore depart from a romanticized conceptualization of the artist for whom precarity, flexploitation, cut-throat competition and "suffering" brought on by self-responsibilization are necessary conditions to actualize and optimize their creativity – all conditions that Bourdieu (1998) identifies as interrelated characteristics of neoliberalism.

Together the direct and indirect model permeates the entire register of power of the creative city from macropolitical urban interventions to the microphysics of the in-

7 Swyngedouw 2008, pp. 107-142.

8 Sassen 2001, pp. 240-242.

dividual creaworker. Based on the examples cited so far, we are beginning to suspect that the celebrated creative city-formula is no more than the active implementation of what Bourdieu (1998) calls the dystopian reality of the neoliberal utopia of unlimited exploitation.

A Critical Consideration of the Direct Model of the Creative City

The direct model is unapologetically neoliberal in its intent to generate economic surplus value while impervious to the deleterious effects on urban life that follow in its wake. Gentrification leads to cultural and social homogenization and the displacement of long-time residents and small businesses unable to afford the increased costs of living and operating in the area. Since neoliberal urban development prioritizes private investment and real estate interests over the needs of existing communities, socioeconomic inequality is exacerbated through selective urban revitalization of areas with high potential for economic return. Public funding is invested in luxury developments that largely benefit private interests, while more pressing needs, such as affordable housing and public services, are neglected. Emblematic projects such as the High Line has led to the commercialization and commodification of public space, turning it into an exclusionary space that caters to the needs of tourists and affluent visitors rather than serving the broader public. This is accompanied by increased private management, surveillance, and regulation, which limits free expression and the spontaneous, democratic use of public space. Economic growth and global competitiveness are prioritized over social equity and inclusivity. Apart from being emblematic of neoliberal 'trophy' architecture that prioritizes spectacle and iconic design over human-scale, community-oriented urbanism, Hudson Yards development is often cited as an example of "corporate welfarism", where the government provides financial incentives to large corporations and developers, often with little return to the public. The direct model's usurpation of cultural production, creativity and even counterculture – traditionally conceived as notions that resist straightforward instrumentalization for commercial or capitalist ends – therefore fails to engender the ideal urban rejuvenating climate of tolerance, diversity and openness that Florida and Landry envisioned.

This model, then, would appear to suffer from two inherent theoretical contradictions: first and foremost, the fact that the idea of the creative class seems to undermine the very breeding-grounds needed for their inception. More specifically, it is anything but clear how the creative class' primarily individual, familial or virtual ways of living and production can and will lead to the promotion of social tolerance, cultural diversity, or alternatively, the strong state it needs to implement these conditions in a top-down fashion. In the second place, and related to the first, is the creative economy's focus on consumption rather than production. This seems to lead to an ever-widening socio-economic fissure and increased spatial segregation that (once again) present a serious threat to the conditions of possibility of this creativity.

A Critical Consideration of the Indirect Model of the Creative City

The indirect model seems more able to avoid these contradictions since it postulates a distance between the informal and formal economies, between marginal and mainstream urban processes. It would therefore also appear to be more promising in terms of fostering the desired open, diverse and tolerant urban climate. The upside of this model is that creative urban environments and cultures that operate in the margins maintain the possibility to contest, counter, or soften the negative effects of neoliberalism because of their outside position. The downside, however, is that as incubators of creativity, they are vulnerable to self-exploitation and usurpation. What if, for example, it is precisely these contestations of marginal non-profit activities that enable the global creative elite in the formal economy to stay in power? Marginal non-profit activities often generate innovative ideas, cultural expressions, and social practices that are fresh and appealing because they arise from the peripheries of society. The global creative elite can co-opt these ideas, integrating them into main-

stream economic and cultural production. In this way, the elite can rejuvenate their offerings without having to originate the creativity themselves, thereby maintaining their position of influence. Once co-opted, the creativity from marginal non-profits is commodified. What started as organic community-driven activities are transformed into marketable products or services. The global creative elite, operating within the formal economy, have the resources to mass-produce and sell these commodified versions on a global scale. This process not only allows them to profit from the innovation of others but also keeps the original creators in a subordinate position, often excluded from the economic benefits. Moreover, by commodifying and mainstreaming the creative outputs of marginal non-profits, the global creative elite suppresses the potential of these activities to form alternative economies or modes of existence that might challenge the status quo. Instead, these marginal activities are absorbed into the formal economy, neutralizing their disruptive potential and reinforcing the dominance of the elite. The absorption of marginal creativity into the mainstream can be used to legitimize the power structures of the global creative elite. By presenting themselves as supporters or patrons of innovative, grassroots movements, the elite can claim to be progressive and inclusive, even as they exploit these very movements. This legitimization helps them to maintain their dominance in the global economy. The cycle of co-optation and commodification furthermore contributes to the perpetuation of social and economic inequalities. The absorption of the creativity of marginal non-profits into the formal economy rarely changes the conditions of scarcity and precarity in which they operate. Instead, the benefits of their creativity are siphoned upwards to those who already hold economic power, deepening the divide between the global creative elite and the shadow city. By continuously mining the margins for new ideas, the global creative elite not only sustains its economic power but also its cultural capital. The power to determine what counts as “creative”, “trendy” or “innovative” reinforces their control over cultural production and distribution, ensuring their continued relevance and influence in the cultural sphere.⁹

If resistance can only come from within, as Foucault theorized, and if “within” is permeated by an aggressive capitalist order, does this model not incapacitate the informal creaworker’s ability to resist by firmly placing him/her outside of this order? Once inside, however, the informal creaworker becomes part of the formal creative class whose creative interventions are subject to the neoliberal rationality of a cost-benefit calculus.

The Possibility of Resistance?

The potential for resistance, in this context, depends on the extent to which the revolutionary potential of artistic/cultural practices can be maintained despite the complicity of creativity. As is clear in the case of the creative city, the more creative and therefore economically empowered, the tighter the neoliberal noose. For Bourdieu, the dystopian reality of the implementation of the great neoliberal utopia is evident “not only in the poverty and suffering of a growing proportion of the population of the economically most advanced societies, the extraordinary growth in disparities in incomes”, but also in “the progressive disappearance of the autonomous worlds of cultural production, cinema, publishing, etc., and therefore, ultimately, of cultural products themselves”¹⁰. The reclamation of autonomy is reasserting the right to give the law to oneself, strategically positioned points of resistance *within* that would open more possibilities for thought and action that defy the unanimity of acquiescence that the neoliberal utopia is in fact the best of all possible worlds. A recent example of the agency that creative workers wield is the 2023 strike of Hollywood writers – one of the longest in the industry’s history – that brought productions to a halt, sending shockwaves across Los Angeles and beyond affecting major studios such as Amazon, Netflix, Paramount and Warner Bros. As a result of the creative workers’ strike action, a new three-year agreement was reached, which was hailed as “exceptional”, by the Writers Guild of America – “with meaningful gains and protections for writers”¹¹. In a podcast hosted by the organizers of the Neoliberal Agenda symposium, Allan Siegel and Ulrich Gehmann, George Monbiot explained that from a systems theory perspective, pockets of resistance that oppose the dominant logic can create a tip-

9 Cf. Zukin 1982 and Klein 2000.

10 Bourdieu 1998.

11 Anguiano 2023.

ping point in complex systems – the point at which the impossible (a world beyond neoliberalism) becomes the inevitable. At first, these pockets of resistance may seem small and insignificant, but over time, their influence can grow as complex systems are made up of interconnected components that influence one another in various ways. As more and more people or groups begin to question the dominant logic, the system becomes more unstable. In complex systems, this instability can reach a tipping point – a critical threshold where the cumulative influence of resistance causes a significant and rapid shift. This is where what once seemed impossible becomes inevitable, as the momentum for change accelerates beyond the ability of the old system to contain it. Social change comes about not because everybody has bought into the cause, but because people do not want to be left behind and, as a result, they just go with the flow of a changing current that becomes a sea change. Hence, a tipping point does not require unanimous support for the change; instead, it relies on a sufficient shift in attitudes. As system theory suggests, feedback loops – where change reinforces itself – begin to play a role. Buy-in by all is not required because the bandwagon effect does the rest of the work: people start aligning with the new norms to avoid being left out, creating a widespread transformation in social behaviour or attitudes.

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