



Culture is reclaiming the creative city: The case of Macao in Milan, Italy



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ABSTRACT

In May 5, 2012, a group of artists and cultural workers occupied a 33-storeys abandoned skyscraper in Milan, founding Macao or the “New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research”. It was an event, with thousands of people joining in, newspapers headlines, and a massive flow of social media activity. Along with spaces, they claimed a new role for art and culture in society. Macao constitutes one of the last nodes of the national network of occupied theatres, which spread out in Italy from early 2011.

This case is explored with the aim of understanding to what extent Macao, and more in general the global wave of art activism, constitutes an alternative to the neo-liberal articulation of the creative city in Milan. On the one hand, we ask whether Macao is a political actor able to influence the local cultural policy and to what extent it is included in the urban governance of Milan. Related questions concern Macao claims and expectancies, and its possible process of normalization. On the other hand, we evaluate Macao's role into the cultural milieu at different levels (local, national, international). We will argue that Macao not only is an actor included in the urban governance, but also it provides the city a different cultural offer, open to bottom-up processes.

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1. Introduction

Since the demise of Fordism, innovative and high added value products have been elements central for economic growth in Western societies; particularly in cities, culture and creativity have become common means to promote both urban growth and the city's image. Indeed, the strategic objective of cultural policy shifted “from a social and political concern prevailing during the 1970s, to the economic development and urban regeneration of the 1980s” (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993, p. 2). The process began in the late 1970s and reached its peak at the turn of the twenty-first century, generating strong excitement among cultural producers, workers in the creative sectors, and artists, who were regarded as new entrepreneurs able to create jobs and contribute to the city's economic growth (Florida, 2002).

In the past decade, many urban development programmes have been centred on strategies supporting cultural clusters, creative neighbourhoods or districts. They have assumed that the co-

location or concentration of productive activities benefits urban economy and society, and *per se* induces regeneration and revitalization effects.

Moreover, city branding, which reached its peak during the 1990s and the early 2000s, made intensive use of ‘culture’, ‘creativity’ and ‘art’ as key elements in a rhetoric able to (re)present the city. In a global market where all cities want to rank among the topmost in the world, all cities narrate their characteristics as coherent with such newly defined standards. Paradoxically, this has made one city the mirror of the others: everywhere, artistic and creative neighbourhoods have been artificially created, and ‘archi-stars’ have been commissioned to design museums and downtowns, waterfronts and new neighbourhoods (Ponzini & Nastasi, 2011).

In general, therefore, cultural policies have been implemented according to a strong neo-liberal vision which focuses on culture as a market-regulated object or as a tool to create economic profits.

Within this paradigm, which has been named the ‘creative city’, all cultural forms that do not contribute to promoting the image of the city, or to its economic growth, are generally dismissed as irrelevant.

The academic world has strongly condemned this cultural turn

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of urban policies, claiming that it gives rise to harsh processes of gentrification and ignores the fact that a huge portion of creative labour lives in precarious and insecure conditions (Pratt, 2011).

Recently, research has focussed on the growth of criticisms towards, and political resistance against, this exploitation of culture, which occurs not only within the art sphere but also, and more importantly, within the broader domain of the cultural industries (see Grodach & Silver, 2013 for a wide range of examples).

The paper explores activism among cultural operators in urban social movements (Mayer, 2009), focusing on their capacity to produce a cultural model alternative to that of the *creative city*. In particular, the paper observes the action of a group of artists and cultural operators in Milan, and it addresses two issues: first, the group's explicit (re)action towards the creative city model in Milan and its actual capacity to contribute to the city's cultural governance; second, the group's cultural/artistic production and their effective role within the cultural realm.

2. Alternative forces as cultural producers in the creative city

Cities are often regarded as the privileged sites for arts and culture because, on the one hand, they promote and organize culture production and consumption, and on the other, accommodate elements of structural instability that can nourish the local creative atmosphere.

Alternative, underground culture has a strong role in fuelling the creative industries; and close links are built between mainstream knowledge (re)production and underground creativity (Krätke, 2012; Leslie & Rantisi, 2011; Niessen, 2009; Pruijt, 2004; Vivant, 2009). As Bertacchini and Santagata maintain, elements of revolution are as important for the creative atmosphere of a given place as cultural institutions. Moreover, the agents of such transformation are often groups that present themselves as extraneous to the local history and context (Bertacchini & Santagata, 2012). Vivant (2009), for instance, uses a semantic pattern opposing the *off* culture to the *in* one. While the *in* culture is organized and planned, the *off* one is often said to be spontaneous and opportunistic; it is free of any constraints, so that it becomes extremely creative and innovative. In discussing the case of the Avignon theatre festival, Vivant shows how little by little, the *off* becomes the real festival: the place to show and to be, the real engine of the festival that attracts more people and more artists until a new *off* of the *off* appears.

Pruijt, in his study of squatting in Amsterdam, maintains that policymakers tend to recognize the squatting artists' workspaces as venues for cultural activities and therefore as elements extremely valuable for the city. This leads to connections between the squatter scenes and the local administration (Pruijt, 2013). The Municipality of Amsterdam invested more than 40 million euros in the 'Breeding Places Amsterdam' (BPA) project in 1999 (Pruijt, 2004; Uitermark, 2004), the purpose being to support local cultural production with space and workshop provision.

Often, the 'alternative', underground, subcultural culture is a scene that marks the urban space as attractive, not only for urban tourists and city users but also, and more importantly, for investors in urban regeneration programmes.

Cultural milieus are assets both in general cultural terms (for marketing, attraction of tourism) and especially in terms of real estate and urban development because "they are charged with cultural capital which in the scheme of creative city policy becomes transformed by investors into economic capital" (Mayer, 2013, p. 4). Cultural scenes emerging from alternative or underground culture are exploited as a branding asset showing how cool and 'authentic' (Zukin, 2009) the city is. Therefore,

neoliberal urban policies on the one hand manage to incorporate alternative and subcultural activism including the creativity of squatters (who, in the process, may find it difficult to maintain their political autonomy), while on the other they entail intensifying repressive strategies, stricter laws, tougher policing, and hence more evictions and fiercer criminalization of squatting

(Mayer, 2013, p. 5).

Paradoxically even the activities of the most alternative and antagonistic cultural fringes end up contributing to gentrification of neighbourhood, as cultural policy increasingly overlaps with programmes of urban regeneration (Pratt, 2011).

3. Aim and methodology

Within the frame of activism against the creative city model, the paper focuses on political mobilization by cultural workers in Milan, Italy, in particular by a group named M²C²O (henceforth Macao) opposed to the local cultural policies.

This case is analysed in order to determine the extent to which Macao represents a real alternative to implementation of the 'creative city' in Milan. On the one hand, we investigate whether Macao is a political actor able to influence local cultural policy and the extent to which it is included in the urban governance of Milan. Related questions concern Macao's claims and expectations, and its possible process of normalization. On the other hand, we evaluate Macao's role in the cultural milieu at different levels (local, national, international).

We explored Macao by means of a qualitative analysis: since May 2012, we have been carrying out an extensive ethnography with in-depth interviews.¹ Furthermore, we circulated a questionnaire to Macao activists: we collected 15 responses from about 30 key members of the organization. Questions in the questionnaire were mostly open-ended, and related to Macao's capacity to promote culture in the city of Milan.

4. Milan cultural strategies

Milan is famous worldwide for its creative industries, in particular for fashion and design (d'Ovidio, 2015; Knox, 2014; Perulli, 2015); empirical research shows that the city has the highest concentration of creative workers in Italy, and that around one third of its entire working population is engaged directly in creative or cultural sectors (Bonomi, 2012; Mingione et al., 2007).

Moreover, especially in the past, Milan had prestige for its artistic scene. Yet the city cultural policy has been strongly criticized, particularly in the 2000s for scant investments in the local cultural and artistic scene (Alfieri, 2009). Indeed, the city has adopted a policy of minimum intervention in the cultural sector, leading practitioners to denounce the total lack institutional support (d'Ovidio, 2016; Mingione et al., 2010). On the other hand, empirical studies testimony the difficult working conditions in the creative sectors, with increasing precariousness and diminishing protections for workers (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010; d'Ovidio & Pradel, 2013; Marchetti & Gramigna, 2007).

As regards cultural policy, Milan has followed the creative city model based on city-consumerism and urban branding. It focuses on large and mass-events, which should attract many people to the city and are not really aimed at promoting young or emerging artists, often ignoring artistic avant-garde production. This is even

¹ This work is partly based on research carried out by Alberto Cossu as part of his PhD.

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