



Artists and creative city policy: Resistance, the mundane and engagement in Stockholm, Sweden [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature around notions of the 'creative class' and the 'creative city' has placed artists as a central, typical creative group. However, that literature has often placed artists in a conceptual dichotomy - either they are seen as uncritical champions of creative city policy (because it boosts their profile and markets) or they are placed in radical opposition to it. This paper explores the attitudes of a sample of artists in Stockholm, Sweden to open this dichotomy up to a more nuanced critique. The analysis considers the diversity of views, attitudes and perceptions of these artists towards creative city policy. While opposition and resistance to the application of creative city policy can certainly be found, the paper seeks to move beyond this to examine how the lack of accord between creative producers and policy-makers can be the outcome of more mundane, everyday practices. In addition, artists join together in specific projects and loose, ephemeral networks to address the issues surrounding the implementation of creative city policy in ways which oppose it but also seek alternatives through engaging planners and the public. Overall the paper calls for an understanding of artists which goes beyond the enthusiast/opponent dichotomy towards developing an understanding of the diverse range of artist responses and engagement with creative city policy.

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1. Introduction

Much of the literature around notions of the 'creative class' and the 'creative city' has conceptualised artists as a key creative group (Borén & Young, 2013a; Florida, 2002, 2007; Markusen, 2006). Problematically, the literature has tended to place artists in a dichotomy in relation to the 'creative city' and creative urban policy (Markusen, 2006). Either they are seen as uncritical champions of creative city policy, because it boosts the profile of culture in the city and hence their opportunities, funding and markets, or they are placed in radical opposition to it, because as individuals and collectives they espouse a politics of resistance to how culture is being appropriated in the neoliberalisation of urban policy. However, as Markusen (2006: 1936) argues 'Neither of these stylised portraits

probe artists' roles in struggles over urban form and social welfare. Artists as political actors are more self-conscious, critical and activist than either of these dualities suggests.'

In order to open this dichotomy up to a more nuanced critique this paper explores the attitudes of a sample of artists towards creative city policy in Stockholm, Sweden. Stockholm has seen a growth in the adoption of instrumental views of culture, art and creativity as part of its increasingly neoliberalised urban policy (Loit, 2014; Rutherford, 2008; Stahre, 2004), and artists have certainly shown an awareness of and opposition to the exploitation of culture in this context (cf. Harvey, 2012; Novy & Colomb, 2013). However, we would suggest that the many valuable analyses of how cultural producers are organizing against urban cultural policy run the risk of further stereotyping the range of artists' responses, particularly across different contexts. As a complex, global policy mobility (McCann & Ward, 2011) the 'creative city thesis' becomes embedded in local planning contexts in diverse ways which are still relatively unexplored (Borén & Young, 2013b) emphasizing the need for studies which explore the locally contingent nature of artists' responses and organization (Novy & Colomb, 2013). Following in particular the more nuanced analysis of Kirchberg and

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Kagan (2012) we therefore explore the range of attitudes and responses among Stockholm artists as “crucial cases” (Eckstein, 1992) which blur the enthusiast/opponent dichotomy to produce a more complex understanding of artists’ relationship to the ‘creative city’.

More broadly, the paper seeks to advance the idea that there are important social, cultural and economic implications for cities in forming a grounded understanding of what creativity actually is, of the views of different producer groups and what can be expected from creative producers of various kinds. Moreover, following recent critiques in the literature (Borén & Young, 2013a, 2013b; Evans, 2009; Peck, 2005; Peck, 2012; Scott, 2014) it is also high time to move beyond critiquing the ‘creative city thesis’, particularly the Florida-inspired, fast-policy quick-fixes which have influenced cities around the world for the last decade or so, and instead discuss in a more grounded and constructive way how art and culture may best contribute to the well-being of cities and their inhabitants, without simply becoming subsumed into the goals of neoliberal inspired urban policy. Therefore we also explore the possibilities for openness and dialogue which arise when rational, top-down planning and policy is left behind and new modes of governance are opened up (cf. Lange, 2011; Metzger, 2011). Following Gibson and Klocker (2005), what kind of ‘new conceptual spaces’ might facilitate the interaction, rather than opposition, of creative producers and policy makers?

2. Methods

The research is based on analysis of planning documents and a range of semi-structured qualitative interviews with planners and artists in Stockholm, Sweden (see also Borén & Young, 2013a). From this material we illustrate the points argued with a number of “crucial cases” (Eckstein, 1992) in order to destabilise the aforementioned dichotomy. The main policy documents and strategies shaping policy in Stockholm were analysed to reveal the focus on culture and creativity in Stockholm’s urban policy. This was undertaken as an initial stage to gain an overview of how issues of creativity are located within the dynamic policy environment.

Following this thirty-one semi-structured, qualitative interviews, each lasting around one and a half hours, were completed. Ten of these were with key urban actors at the regional, city and district scales of urban governance. These included officials responsible for cultural planning, city planners and directors of Stockholm suburban district administrations and representatives of the city-region authority.

Twenty-one artists’ interviews were completed exploring a range of issues around their practice and attitudes in relation to ‘creative city’ policy. It is difficult to define artists as a discrete group. Following calls in the literature to focus on specific occupations, the sampling process was designed to identify one type of artist with shared characteristics, so that the sample was not so diverse that it was impossible to derive meaningful conclusions. All of the sample work outside the “white cube” gallery system and few of them sell their artworks. There were nearly equal numbers of men and women in the sample, reflecting women’s high rates of participation in labour markets in Sweden. All of the sample are graduates, white and Swedish citizens. The artists work in a variety of media (photography, painting, film making, radio, installations) with the goal of creating experimental artistic interventions and conceptual/discursive performance art. They are all ‘social artists’, ie. their purpose in engaging with art is to create new material and symbolic spaces which encourage reflection upon the nature of urban life generally to provoke new practices and ways of thinking. Many of them are research-led, eg. using interviews with marginalised urban communities, and engaged with critical social theory.

3. Culture, art and creativity in Stockholm’s urban policy

Stockholm’s economic performance is heavily dependent on knowledge intensive industries (OECD, 2006) and it is, like many other cities in high-cost countries, competing with innovation-rich outputs rather than low-price products. A restriction on economic development in this type of urban innovation-driven economy is often the supply of highly educated, innovative and creative labour. No surprise then that Stockholm’s strategic plans mirror this in their overall imagining of Stockholm as an ‘attractive, world-class city’ for the highly educated, with a clean environment, world-class facilities at all educational levels and a vibrant cultural life. The role of culture has in Stockholm, as in so many cities around the world (Evans, 2009), gained a prominent place in urban development strategies. Culture and creativity have become increasingly visible in the main planning documents for the city and city-region, eg. the comprehensive plan from 2010 or the regional development plan from 2010 and in Vision 2030, the city’s primary strategic vision document from 2007 (updated 2009 and with a new version – Vision2040 – agreed in 2015). Recent national and municipal elections have put in place a broadly leftist-based coalition both at the national level and in Stockholm City Council dominated by the Social Democrats, so the policy context and the emphasis on culture may change again.

In the Swedish context, however, this adoption of culture, art and creativity in urban policy must be seen as internally differentiated. Three key conceptualisations of how culture and creativity are used can be identified from the analysis of plans and interviews with policy-makers. These understandings relate to: 1) social instrumentalism inherent in ‘old style’ cultural urban policy aiming at goals such as social integration (eg. of immigrants or the unemployed); 2) economic instrumentalism as part of more recent urban cultural policy (eg. promoting the ‘globally attractive city’); and 3) that culture is important for social existence. These three different types of understanding also show that older (social instrumentalist) urban cultural policy and newer versions (economic instrumentalist) co-exist side by side and that newer understandings are not fully replacing older ones.

In addition, the different urban plans and levels of the city do not speak with one voice when it comes to culture and art. The regional development plan from 2010 has much more on culture in than its predecessor from 2003 (see also Hermelin, 2009; Hermelin, 2011; cf.), but the comprehensive plan from 2010 provides little space and less commitment when it comes to what should actually be done in this field. In some suburbs there are municipal art spaces which follow strategic aims of integrating immigrants and strengthening the local community. However, this is no longer an overarching policy idea for the city but is rather used locally, in certain suburbs with clearly stated social goals. Moreover, the leaders of these art spaces in turn demonstrate a variety of strategies, at times promoting international ‘high profile’ exhibitions and events as well as social instrumentalism, with the suburban Tensta Konsthall being a primary example of this ‘double nature’. This demonstrates that these policies sometimes co-exist, although with different rationales, and that the relations between these policies, different user groups and target audiences (local population and/or globalized knowledge workers, tourists etc) and individual art space directors form complex urban policy ecologies in which notions of creativity are contested and diversified from the over-arching policy agenda.

In conclusion, there is an overarching policy script in Stockholm for the way in which culture and creativity can contribute to a preferred vision of urban development, the main emphasis of which is raising the attractiveness and competitive power of Stockholm in the context of global inter-urban competition.

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