



Constructing the creative neighborhood: Hopes and limitations of creative city policies in Berlin

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ABSTRACT

Recent urban development policies have put much emphasis on the establishment of creative cities. The creative city promises to be a new city, a transformative shift from the existing and conventional ways of urbanization to one that includes creativity and livability for all. Yet, this goal is often not achieved nor is it even necessarily pursued. The dominant creative city policies are not different from the current system of urban entrepreneurialism and growth-driven urban development. The paper presents the development of Kolonie Wedding in Berlin as an example of the promise and limitations of creative city initiatives. Here, guided art walks were introduced to revitalize the local economy and property market and re-imagine the neighborhood as creative and lively. However, the initiative reinforces social and ethnical boundaries, enhances exclusion and advocates for gentrification instead of challenging these practices. The paper calls for an overhaul and revision of the creative city model in which equality, and not growth and centrality, stand at its center. Such an approach includes the enactment of creativity not as an urban development strategy but as a human right.

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The deceptive creative city

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the development of creative cities by academics, planners, developers and policy makers alike as an auspicious model of urban development and prosperity among industrial decline and global urban competition. The creative city promises urban vitality, distinctiveness, centrality, wealth creation and above all conditions to “ride the wave of change” for the benefit of the city (Landry, 2008: xvii). But what kind of change, what benefits and for whose city does this approach actually produce? Although the creative city concept is advocated for in the name of ethical, just and inclusionary urban development, in practice, this is often not the case. Instead, the progressive potential of creative city development tends to be shrunk down, reinterpreted and enforced as ways to promote growth-driven urban entrepreneurialism for the benefit of an urban elite. In short: the result is no fundamental change but an extension of more of the same.

This paper argues that the promise of the creative city model lies in its promotion of the promise of creativity and livability for all. The prevalent use of this model, however, is as a cynical rhetorical play for property-led and amenity-oriented urban development, as well as a spectacle-driven governance of arts and culture and place production and promotion. The paper illustrates this problem through an analysis of Kolonie Wedding, an initiative organized with the goal of re-imaging, reorganizing and revitalizing – via the promotion of arts and culture – the urban environment of the Berlin neighborhood Wedding. Kolonie Wedding was established in 2001 by a neighborhood management organization and a major real estate holder in an area characterized by a mixture of industrial and residential buildings, high numbers of low-income and immigrant population and empty and/or neglected properties. It is a local network made up of a variety of individual artists (predominantly visual and performing artists), arts organizations and showrooms (private studios, galleries, theaters and bars, cafes and restaurants regularly showcasing art work). Its specific purpose is to produce two monthly neighborhood art walks where visitors are personally guided from one art-based event to another and thus are encouraged to perceive and re-imagine the locale as creative. Art walks have become a new and pervasive practice

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of urban redevelopment and creative city planning in cities around the world yet there is not yet any detailed scholarship on them.

This paper first provides a short assessment of the creative city model – its promises, practices and pitfalls. It then provides examples of Berlin's current creative city policies and explores the developments, aims and goals of Kolonie Wedding. Kolonie Wedding is singled out here not because it is a singular initiative but rather because it exemplifies a common way of transforming urban environments towards a creative city and neighborhood respectively. However, Kolonie Wedding does stand out due to its sustained and desperate efforts to accomplish this task. The paper shows how and why local stakeholders are pursuing these initiatives, explores their aspirations, actions, as well as the limitations of their strategies. It concludes by arguing that this creative city strategy introduced an urban entrepreneurialism that instead of breaking down social and ethnical boundaries reinforces exclusion and welcomes gentrification. The paper thus calls for an overhaul and revision of the creative city model in which equality and civic participation and not growth and centrality stand at its center, including the enactment of creativity not as an urban development strategy but as a human right.

Promises and reality of creative city making

The creative city characterizes a form and process of urbanization in which creativity stands at the forefront. Here, creativity refers to a process “by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: 8), thus, a creative city must consequently also be a new city, a transformative shift from the existing and conventional ways of profit driven urban development. Hall (2000) attributes the transformational qualities of a creative city to the presence of people who feel as outsiders and are simultaneously included and excluded in the established urban society. This sentiment is echoed by Florida (2002) in his claim for tolerance as a main component of a creative city. To actually induce change, however, these outsiders must be allowed to communicate their ideas for a new reality and find appropriate support. Consequently, creative cities are “almost invariably uncomfortable, unstable cities, cities kicking over the traces” (Hall, 2000: 646).

More commonly though, the creative city is seen by planners and policy-makers as a set of policy and planning mechanisms that once applied, result in a creative city. According to Landry the creative city “describes a new method of strategic urban planning and examines how people can think, plan and act creatively in the city. It explores how we can make our cities more liveable and vital by harnessing people's imagination and talent” (Landry, 2008: xii). But what does this promising claim exactly mean and imply? Is the creative city an inauguration of ethical, just and inclusionary urban development?

While Landry (2008) and Landry and Bianchini (1995) provide a variety of practical examples and suggestions, they are not “definite answers” but “idea banks” to inspire answers to the question of: “What are the conditions my city can create for people and institutions to think, plan and act with imagination and ride the wave of change so

that it can benefit?” (Landry, 2008: xvii). The authors advocate for a more holistic understanding of creativity that also includes social and political reform in addition to artistic and technological innovation. In practice, however, the real “creativity” of the creative city model tends to be its ability to reframe and repackage an entrepreneurial model of urban governance and development geared towards attracting highly mobile capital and professional elites with environments to live and work in as well as to consume and invest into that are lively yet safe, diverse yet controlled, and artistic yet profit-driven (cf. Catungal, Leslie, & Hii, 2009). The examples and descriptions of urban entrepreneurialism provided by Harvey (1989) more than two decades ago are in their essence no different from the more contemporary policies and practices of creative city making as, for instance, Evans (2003) shows. In other words, “the reality is that city leaders [...] are embracing creativity strategies not as *alternatives* to extant market-, consumption- and property-led development strategies, but as low-cost, feel-good *complements* to them. Creativity plans do not disrupt these established approaches to urban entrepreneurialism and consumption-oriented place promotion, they *extend* them” (Peck, 2005: 761).

Contrary to the progressive claim of social and political change for the betterment of all (Landry, 2008), the creative city model tends to be enacted with a narrow focus on the display and promotion of rather than the foundational sustenance for arts and culture and technological innovation. For instance, Pratt (2010) identifies four types of creative city policies within the UK: innovation and network initiatives, cultural flagship developments, single event mega projects, and social and cultural community engagement practices. He finds that the majority of the policies favor instrumentalist approaches to the production of culture rather than their direct and intrinsic support. Moreover, the political interest in the transformational qualities of more inclusionary urban development is usually limited.

One example for this shortcoming is the development of research and science parks, industrial clusters and incubators for new, innovative or creative industries. Although there is an argument to be made that local production networks serve and foster new ways of organizing production and labor and stimulate innovative thinking (cf. Scott, 2000), these new clusters are simultaneously offspring and materializations of profit-driven economic development policies and speculative growth by seeking capital from venture capitalists (cf. Indergaard, 2004). Another popular strategy of creative city development is the construction of cultural amenities in forms of flagship museums, concert halls, cultural mega events and spectacular city architecture. Again, these developments in and of themselves are noble achievements if they serve the public good and are universally accessible. Often, however, they are rather exclusionary places and events of supervised conspicuous consumption such as Potsdamer Platz and the Sony Center in Berlin including the Berlinale film festival hosted there that reinforce social boundaries instead of overcoming them and are guided by profit-driven principles. Flagship developments like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao tend to be mere investments into a hard infrastructure that, once inaugurated, lack the long-term funding and sustenance of their cultural content (Evans, 2003;

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