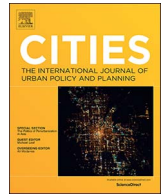




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The shifting spaces of creativity in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of Hong Kong's cultural economy and its translation into urban space. On the one hand it focuses on recent economic development and planning strategies to develop a post-colonial identity based on the international cachet of attracting creative industries. On the other hand, it considers the development of grassroots initiatives that herald the potential articulation of Hong Kong as a culturally dense global city. These grassroots initiatives are analyzed from the perspective of their problematic relationship with urban space, and how urban planning both supports and hinders cultural development. The paper argues that top-down planning is in large part catalytic, yet at the same time can run counter to the development of genuine artistic expression. It stresses the importance of 'middleground' actors in facilitating the development of spaces for artistic creation, particularly in their productive interlocking with different forms of artistic expression and public policy initiatives. The middleground can be conceived of as a relational space produced by various processes, actors and structures operating at different scales between institutional actors and the interests of 'underground' creativity. The article concludes by problematizing the role of middleground actors and underlines the value of 'unpacking' the middleground in order to account for the contested and negotiated processes it embodies. Renewed attention to these processes will contribute to enhancing the development of sites of artistic expression in Hong Kong and other emergent contemporary contexts.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is almost invariably portrayed as a 'global' city (Chiu & Lui, 2009) with all the requisite attributes of a commercial and financial hub. In the recent past, however, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government has championed a series of cultural industry development initiatives to complement its existing advanced producer services hub (Zuser, 2014, pp. 100–102). This change coincides with the 'creative turn' in the public policies of developed countries following Florida's (2002) thesis tied to global competition among cities to attract the creative classes. Though this thesis has been widely rejected (Healy, 2002; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008), its legacy is still rather palpable in global urban cultural policy.

This paper focuses on the creative spaces in contemporary Hong Kong that constitute the 'middleground' and how these spaces embody conflicting visions of urban space. The shifting landscape of emerging and disappearing artistic spaces heralds the coexistence of different paradigms relating to space and culture in Hong Kong. These conflicting perspectives shed light onto how urban space is continually formulated, appropriated, and re-appropriated by actors whose objectives may be simultaneously aligned through visions for arts-led development, yet

misaligned by market-driven logics and the concomitant imperatives of top-down approaches to planning.

Hong Kong is a challenging environment for universalizing policy approaches, owing to its geographical and infrastructural characteristics, its economic and planning model, and its dynamic and resilient creative class. Leong (2013) has highlighted the development of local cultures in 'post-colonial' Hong Kong, contrasting the development of massive infrastructural projects to the challenge of sustaining a local culture (Leong, 2013, p. 30). There seem to be at least two conflicting objectives between ambitious government-led infrastructural projects geared toward a form of cultural tourism, and initiatives from artistic communities and grassroots cultural organizations whose first concern is the survival of their artistic practices, and consequently the survival of diverse forms of artistic expressions. Between these strata, layers of diverse categories of actors – individual philanthropists, university-related structures, and private companies – also carve oases of creativity.

This analysis focuses on the evolution of a series of sites that have developed through the convergence of the territory's top-down planning and bottom-up movements, homing in on the apparent successes of middleground institutions which allow creativity to emerge organically yet providing the requisite framework to function within Hong

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Kong's top-down planning system. It specifically analyses how negotiation and contestation between all these actors construct a certain type of middleground artistic spaces within a creative city. In doing so it addresses a knowledge gap related to the production of creative spaces in Hong Kong by analyzing how grassroots initiatives are contributing to the development of sites for creative expression.

2. Conceptual framework: creativity, institutions and spaces

The 'creative turn' in urban development has been the subject to a vast range of scholarly critique (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009; Landry, 2000). As Scott contends, "creativity is a concept whose time has come in economic and urban geography" (2014, p. 566). This concept has guided economic development policies internationally and influenced planning strategies in different locations mainly North America but also Europe in the last decade or so (Darchen, 2013). The 'creative city' concept is a translation of the concept of creativity into urban policies aimed at creating urban environments conducive to innovation and creativity.

Although the concept of a 'creative' city is not new, it received renewed attention in 2000 with the publication of Charles Landry's 'The Creative City'. This paradigm is linked to the creative class concept in economic development (Florida, 2002), which is an extension of the human capital model that predicts economic growth according to the concentration of the educated population in metropolitan area (Glaeser & Saiz, 2004). Florida's (2003) theory of human capital suggests an alternative measure of human capital based on professional occupations; artists are part of the super-creative core that 'produce[s] new forms of designs that are transferable and useful' (Florida, 2003, p. 8). Florida argues that, in times of intensifying international competition and rapid technological changes, states should strive to attract the 'creative class' to boost their economy and gain competitive advantage over those states that fail to do so. The virtuous cycle relies on the cities' ability to attract the international, cosmopolitan creative class by fostering a creative-friendly environment.

Pratt (2008, 2011), for example, has criticized the 'creative turn' for promoting a superficial, marketing-oriented conception of culture and for exacerbating social inequality between a small category of 'creative' workers and the rest of the population. As Scott suggests, at a global level, public policies enacting a model of the 'creative city' fail to grasp that 'the interdependent processes of learning, creativity and innovation are situated within concrete fields of social relationships' (2014, p. 565), and this might come at a heavy social cost and disappointment (*id.* p. 566). Most critical perhaps has been Peck (2012), who has demonstrated that the policies promoted by this thesis needed to be 'domesticated' (Peck, 2012, p. 466) in their 'adaptation' depending on the local conditions, arguing that creativity is often a proxy for government spending rather than endogenous growth as such.

Despite the criticism it has sparked and the late mea culpa by Florida himself (2017), the concept of 'creative city' still finds a sympathetic ear among policymakers, notably because it enables to 're-badge' or 'reframe' policies in positive terms (Peck, 2012). For cities such as Hong Kong, which need to rethink their development model in a highly competitive environment, creativity and innovation seem to be the most promising avenue for sustainable growth.

The widespread momentum in creativity in cities has left a need for new understandings of how its various components come to be. Creativity and innovation in cities are products of social relationships; those relationships might emerge spontaneously and are often a product of a specific cultural, political and societal context (Scott, 2014). Notwithstanding, 'creativity' is a very ambiguous term and new theoretical approaches are needed to understand why and how particular processes emerge in specific locations.

A recent focus on institutional contexts is critical to understanding creative urbanism. In particular the rigidity of top-down mechanisms has been often rejected, as demonstrated by the failure of creative

policies enforced in Osaka City in the 2000s (Sasaki, 2010). Yet the needs or intentions of grassroots or local bottom-up actors are often misunderstood at the institutional level, or blatantly ignored in policy discourses. Contrary to the ethic of general well-being on which modernist cities were predicated, the creative city is 'often a socially divisive city, in which culture as the arts is privileged over culture as the articulation of shared values in everyday life' (Miles, 2013, p. 123).

Beginning in the 1970s, several ethnographic studies theorized the key role of subcultures (Hebdige, 1979) and amateur communities in the cultural production of cities, as well as their articulation to larger structures. In her landmark ethnography of amateur musicians in Milton Keynes, Finnegan (2007) observed that the grassroots organizations of amateur musicians are sustained by a certain number of transversal institutions (churches, pubs), leading her to reject the use of the popular concept of 'art world' (Becker, 1982) because the implied notions of "coherence, concreteness, stability, comprehensiveness and autonomy" are nowhere to be seen in the grassroots organizations of amateur musician in Milton Keynes (Finnegan, 2007, p. 190).

Similarly, Charrieras' study of the trajectories of new media artists in Montreal in the 2000s shows the complex entanglements of new media art practices between different places, private apartments, artist-run centers, creative industries and cultural institutions supported by the affirmative policy of the city in favor of new media arts (Charrieras, 2010). These researches highlight the importance to consider the productive (or counterproductive) interlocked processes existing between local artists, mid-range organizations and cultural institutions supported by the government, these links being essential to the sustainability of these grassroots initiatives (Kong, 2012; Zuser, 2014, pp. 88–94).

Aptly, Cohendet et al. introduce "the dynamic role of the middle-ground" (2010, p. 92) as a key process in the development of the creative city. 'Middleground' institutions often codify new knowledge coming from the underground to make creative material economically viable. In such a context, Cohendet, Grandadam, and Simon (2011) underline the key role of a middleground:

Where the work of collectives and communities enables the necessary knowledge transmission that precedes innovation: [...] these communities of the middleground are not only sources of inspiration for both the upperground and the underground, they also are repositories of cognitive material from which existing knowledge can be internalized and/or externalized (Cohendet et al., 2011, p. 157).

The middleground is heterogeneous, composed of different actors with different agendas and goals; it is a place of contestation and negotiation. We need a proper conceptualization of space to give an account of the complex processes through which artistic spaces come into existence in a city like Hong Kong and how they evolve. Therefore, we propose to problematize this concept by injecting a 'Harveyan' conception of the middleground as relational spaces, or as 'sites of processes' (Harvey, 1973). This approach will eventually help understand under what circumstances the middleground can successfully serve its purposes, or the processes that undermine its role.

In his seminal publication *Social Justice and the City* (1973), David Harvey proposes a three-dimensional view of space. An absolute space is the space according to its objective, immovable physical properties as well as pre-existing regimes and conventions (e.g. the city of cadastral mappings, private property vs. public spaces); it is a 'space of individuation' which 'applies to all discrete and bounded phenomena' (Harvey, 2004, p. 2). A relative space is space considered as 'a relationship between an object which exists only because objects exist and relate to each other' (Harvey, 1973, p. 13, emphasis in original). The relationship is brought to the fore by the observer's reference frame. Therefore, the space of transportation could be represented in 'different maps of relative locations' depending on whether the reference is 'cost, time [or] modal split' (Harvey, 2004, p. 4). A relational space is another form of relative space which is constituted by its underlying processes. In Harvey's words, 'an object can be said to exist only insofar as it

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