



The significance of creative industry policy narratives for Zurich's transformation toward a post-industrial city



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ABSTRACT

During the past decades, the city of Zurich endeavoured to facilitate both a transition toward a post-industrial economic base and a diversification of its existing service sector. The latter relates to Zurich's idiosyncrasies that, besides its long industrial tradition, it already disposed of a strong service sector, i.e., the financial services since the 19th century. Since the repeated financial crises in the 1990s and 2000s, however, the city pursued a two-fold strategy. It sought to lessen its over-dependence on dominating private banking, whilst attempting to strengthen this sector's global competitiveness by attracting talent. This article shows how the *creative industries* served as a key instrument for both strategies and critically investigates the narrative created to legitimise and underpin a new economic growth agenda with concomitant new urban policies of neo-liberal design. Important socio-spatial consequences of these new urban policies are discussed in the example of the transformation of one of Zurich's former industrial districts, Escher Wyss, today known as Zurich-West. Empirically, this article draws on a detailed content analysis of policy and marketing documents between 2005 and 2010, which reveal the legitimisation process of the making of the new trend-quarter, Zurich-West. Additional qualitative interviews with the *new creatives* in this quarter illustrate the catalysing of the urban redesign.

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1. Introduction

The decades since the 1970s have brought about massive economic changes explained with concepts such as globalisation, industrial transformation, and the shift from Keynesian welfare economies toward neo-liberalism. Former industrial cities sought both to adapt to these changes and to actively pursue urban entrepreneurial politics in order to succeed in the new inter-urban competition for economic investments, consumers, and *talents* (Harvey, 1989). Talents—i.e., the highly skilled workforce—were identified as key for the new entrepreneurial urban strategies. Against this background, the 1990s witnessed the steep rise of a new conceptual approach and economic action plan with respect to what nowadays is known as the *creative industries* (CI). By referring to the CIs, the UK Government Department for Culture, Media, and Sport undermined much of the traditional rationale for cultural policy and even the cultural aspects of cultural industries policy after its early documentation of the CIs in 1998.¹ The CIs are defined

as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent, and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (The UK Government Department for Culture, 2001, p. 4). The CIs comprise a large range of mostly market-oriented cultural and creative enterprises and activities.

This article, importantly, acknowledges the inherent tendency of such conceptualizations of CIs to lead to instrumentalist uses and seeks to document this through the example of Zurich. In particular, the sector's overall structural traits—i.e., its heterogeneity and the important cross-sectional function it performs for other economic sectors—indicate its capacity for economic transformation and innovation, whilst its relatively flexible, small-scale spatial patterns also predestine it for urban upgrading and renewal processes. Even more tangibly for cities, urban economist Richard Florida translated this new urban policy approach of attracting the creative class in order to attract capital investment into a recipe that many cities thankfully incorporated into their policy agendas.

An extensive body of (critical) literature covers the somewhat tense relationships between CIs and urban transformation—dynamics that also apply to Zurich. This article, however, provides two important new insights. First, and in contrast to many other urban economies, Zurich has traditionally been dominated by a strong service sector,

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¹ We are grateful to one of the referees who explicated this particular point.

namely the financial services industry. Unlike numerous other cities undergoing a post-industrial transformation that have been studied extensively, Zurich has always had a strong base of bankers and other finance-related knowledge workers. This fact, in essence, ties in closely with Florida's (2005) notion of the creative class. In 2011, the financial sector contributed 22% to the city's gross domestic product (GDP) (Kanton Zürich, 2014), which echoed the continuing long-term growth of the sector's net product since 1980. This income has long been a blessing; the curse it brings, however, is Zurich's strong economic dependence on the well-being of a turmoil-prone banking sector. The bursting of two financial market bubbles since 2000, in particular, has illustrated the vulnerability of Zurich's strong dependence on the financial sector (Kanton Zürich, 2014, p. 7). Hence, Zurich's well-positioned, distinctive knowledge-intensive service sector and its simultaneous strong dependence on one major income source both called for and provided an offbeat starting point for the city's economic diversification, which has hardly been discussed in the existing literature.

Second, given this specific adaptation of the creative cities discourse, surprisingly little updated material has been published on Zurich's urban transformation processes. Although different aspects are indeed covered in the literature (cf. Eisinger & Reuther, 2007; Hitz, Schmid, & Wolff, 1994; Koll-Schretzenmayr, Ritterhoff, & Siebel, 2009; Salvini & Heye, 2008; Theurillat & Crevoisier, 2012; Widmer, 1995), this body of work is very limited. Zurich's traditional industrial heart, Escher-Wyss, now known as Zurich-West, and its remarkable transformation into a new trend-quarter – initially pushed from the bottom-up and later changed to a top-down strategy—shows the radical nature of this process, yet has hardly received academic coverage (for an exception, cf. Kunzmann, 2008).

To fill these gaps, we seek to answer two questions. First, to what extent was the CIs presented by city officials as an incubator and engine for economic growth in Zurich's effort to both transition and diversify its economic foundations? Based on Zurich's idiosyncrasies, this article seeks to scrutinise the unfolding narrative that primarily served to legitimise and implement a CI-led strategic realignment of Zurich's economy. Second, we critically ask about the socio-spatial consequences of such policies and representations with respect to a particularly transforming city quarter. Empirically, this article is based on the analysis of key official documents, of which particularly Zurich's three creative industries reports from 2005, 2008, and 2010, and the additional economic and marketing documents mirror key steps in Zurich's policy discourse and actual policy making (cf. Dörry & Rosol, 2011). Complementary narrative interviews with key representatives of this process in Zurich-West between 2013 and 2014 allowed us to deepen our understanding of the impacts of those policies on the ground.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Section 2 summarises (the critique of) the CI and the creative city debates, and links the economic sector with the urban policy endeavours in Zurich in general. To answer the first question, Section 3 analyses the city's CI reports and their quantification of the CIs' overall importance and growth. Section 4 complements these quantitative perspectives with a qualitative analysis of specific marketing publications, which illustrate the significance of the CIs for Zurich's future public image. This is important to understand because we argue that Zurich pursues not only a strategy of a structural improvement and economic diversification, but—strongly linked with Florida's recipes—to attract the smart, the famous, and the wealthy. This article argues that the CIs' instrumentalisation, both as an important input factor for economic transformation and diversification and as a location factor to attract foreign businesses and what Florida subsumes under the creative class, were key for the overhaul of Zurich's image as a 'new', opportune financial centre. The creative class is hence an important link that specifically applies to Zurich to an extent that does not necessarily apply to other cities.

This strategy has intensely impacted the city's urban development, as we investigate in Section 5 through the example of Escher Wyss. It scrutinises the processes of redevelopment and recent spatial and

socio-economic impacts in Zurich-West and links them with the promotion of Zurich's new, creative image. Zurich-West represents a development area that has undergone fundamental economic and spatial restructuring since the late 1980s. The quarter's gradual conversion culminated in the foundation of numerous temporary, small, creative businesses that include architecture and design studios, contemporary theatres, art galleries, and gastronomy facilities (Thissen, 2015). In their entirety and through their spatial clustering, these businesses have established a cultural milieu in formerly inaccessible areas (Eisinger & Schmid, 1999) and provided hundreds of new jobs (INURA Zürich Institut, 2013). Section 6 summarises and discusses the main findings and positions the analysis of Zurich within the wider debate on urban development through creative industries.

2. Creative industries and the creative class

The empirical investigation of the three CI reports helps unravel the development of a specific narrative that valorised the CIs' inbuilt economic instrumentalisation and contributed to the legitimisation of the actual policy-making, which is most clearly observable in Zurich-West. Therefore, this section focuses on giving an overview of the most relevant literature on the creative economy and the concept of attracting vital talent.

In both the academic and political discourse, the creative economy concept often is treated in a rather, well, creative way and exposed to several programmatic settings as exemplified by a number of often synonymously used concepts such as *cultural economy* (Gibson & Kong, 2005; Scott, 1997), *cultural industries* (Power & Scott, 2004; Scott, 1997) and *creative industries* (Caves, 2000; Garnham, 2005; Hartley, 2005). Whilst, for example, cultural industry explicitly refers to Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) critique that the homogenisation of cultural products manipulates mass society into docility, the concept of cultural economy alludes to the increasing economic valorisation of cultural products in late modernism (Harney, 2010). This latter concept is essential in countries with significant public funding for culture (Weckerle, 2008). In contrast, the more economically oriented concept of the creative economy, epitomised by, above all, the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport, allowed for the economisation of the creative submarkets' design, advertising, and software and games industry, in addition to the classical cultural markets. Overall, CIs subsume economic activities characterised as idea inputs and economic activities centred on products and services, which serve the design, placement, and marketing of products (Kloosterman, 2004).

For cities, the CIs appear as a new bearer of economic hope in times of economic structural change and empty public coffers for at least two reasons. First, the spatial accumulation of human creativity is understood as an essential location factor and competitive advantage in the global competition of cities because it increases a city's frequently invoked quality of life and thus its very attraction to tourists and businesses. Second, the CIs offer considerable scope for local policy action.

Local politicians' focus on the cultural and creative economy is largely due to Florida's (2002a, 2002b, 2005). Florida argues, in essence, that a city-region's attractiveness and therefore its competitiveness and potential for economic development is heavily dependent on the city's ability to create and capture three key location qualities: talent, technology, and tolerance. With his main thesis that 'jobs follow people', he claims that cities should focus on attracting creative and highly qualified individuals, the so-called *creative class*, who often chose to reside in life-style-oriented locations. It is, hence, at this juncture that local politicians need to intervene (Florida, 2002b). Commercially successful in promoting his concepts to cities worldwide, Florida and his colleagues created a new urban development strategy enthusiastically embraced and uncritically welcomed by representatives from both business and politics. Notwithstanding the rather vague measures, his particular "message of hope" to guide poor and declining localities to a future path of

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