

# MANAGING THE 'CREATIVE' CITY

## Introduction to the special issue

Alf Rehn and Ann Rippin

*Alf Rehn*  
School of Business and Economics,  
Åbo Akademi University  
alfrehn@me.com

*Ann Rippin*  
Department of Management,  
University of Bristol  
Ann.Rippin@bristol.ac.uk

We live in the age of the city, an age where urbanism is both the state in which most of us live, and the state that is promised to bring untold riches and development to us all. The city has been hailed as everything from mankind's greatest invention (Glaeser 2011) to mankind's very savior (Owen 2009), and looking to the world of construction and development there seems to be no end to the fanciful projects that aim to showcase the power of urbanity to reshape, reengineer and reimagine the world. Key in all this outpouring of great things from the collection of concrete and cafés that is the contemporary metropolis is creativity, or more precisely the kind of creativity that emerges out of the hustle and bustle of the urban condition. Reading what is written on the creative city (see e.g. Landry 2008), one can even come away with a feeling of creativity being all but impossible in any other setting, one devoid of the plethora of connections and fortuitous serendipity that is supposed to characterize the city today.

This is not merely a story being told *about* cities, it is one increasingly told *in* them. Even though not every urban citizen will recognize him- or herself in this tale of endless novelty, idea-generation and blooming culture, the men and women who have been elected or otherwise put in charge of the city will increasingly see this as a necessary story, a story that not only bears constant repetition but also demands of us that we stay true to it (cf. Badiou 2005). As an activity, the leading of a city is today more often seen as the shepherding of creative energies than the management of something as pedestrian as infrastructure, a turn which has been welcomed by many city officials. The creative turn in city management has not only quantitatively increased the tasks of the managers in question, it has represented a qualitative improvement. No longer seeing themselves as the city elders of yore, fussing about with ordinances of unclear importance, the modern leaders of urbanity perceive themselves as champions of the unbridled energy that the creative city promises to generate.

No wonder then that gurus of this great promise, such as e.g. Richard Florida (2002, 2010) and Charles Landry (2008), have been able to benefit greatly from reiterating the tale of the great creative transformation. Such tales are of no little importance to the profession of city management, as they both recast the importance thereof and surround it with a symbolism of creation and renewal. By insisting that city management can be part of the creative economy, the innovation economy, the very groundswell of post-industrial society, the pundits of the creative city have presented us and the professionals involved herein with a narrative that both flatters the incumbents and promises a better tomorrow. That this becomes repeated as gospel shouldn't surprise us.

But what, exactly, is meant by this transition towards "the creative city"? Is this an acknowledgement of something that has always been true of cities, only now elevated to the category of a definitional characteristics rather than as a result of day-to-day activities? Or is this a clarion call to new forms of management, new forms of understanding the city, forms that can corral this excitable energy and through it create ever-greater cities, evermore successful engines of

creation? Further, what are the mechanisms through which this assumedly new form of urbanism should be managed? These issues are often swept aside, as the narration of a brave new city often focuses more on the shape of things to come rather than the pedestrian business of enabling it to do so, but at the same time these activities represent some of the most influential moves in city management. Not necessarily through their direct economic impact – here the old stalwarts of infrastructure and health-care still reign supreme – but through the symbolic value assigned to them and through the manner in which these are read as representing the resurgence of the urban condition. In such a situation, it is important to inquire into the way in which these are constituted, how they are supposed to create the great changes so casually ascribed to them, and what kind of ideological constructions can be identified as driving them.

For it is natural, albeit not always common, for creativity too to be critically analyzed. It is, after all, a concept that is often used when changing policy, when arguing for the benefits of a new project, when establishing the focal points of a new city strategy. Put somewhat differently, the invocation of creativity *does* things, and the concept thus becomes something easily politicized, something that can be used as a tool and as an argument, rather than the pure energy it at times is presented as. There is thus a need for academics to engage with not only the existence of creativity, or the benefits thereof, but to study the multitude of ways in which creativity becomes embroiled into debates about what a city is and what it can become.

This latter point is important specifically as creativity has, through the processes referred to above, become part of the identity politics of the city, part of how the city is narrated and how the city self-identifies. In such a situation, the varied ways in which such an identity politics plays out can tell us not only about the impact creativity can have, but also about the varied manners through which it can be invoked and the manifold of ways it can be utilized. So in yet another way, the very notion of “the creative city” might turn problematic, as the reference to creativity does not point to any one specific form of being, but to a complex negotiation where various interests and interpretations come together in the construction of what creativity can mean in this specific instance. While there might be a desire for the generic creative city, that beacon of productive urbanity within which the pop-up restaurant and the chi-chi boutique co-exist in peace and prosperity for all, but as many a city has been forced to concede, the actual move towards a more creative form of urbanity holds many a challenge.

For while the story of creative cities often treat their prefixed phenomena as something that enters without friction, and where all citizens understand and celebrate the transformation it brings with it, real urban development is a far messier story. As an example we can point to the case of Austin and the campaign to “Keep Austin Weird” (see Long 2010). Worried by a perceived gentrification and commercialization of its burgeoning independent music scene, the Austin Independent Business Alliance (among others) adopted the aforementioned slogan in order to emphasize that the creativity it wanted to champion was not a corporate one, but rather one that drew upon the “weirdness” of the Austin scene.

Here, the case was not about whether Austin should be creative or not, but which kind of interests should be championed. Fearing gentrification and, in a manner of speaking, disneyization (Bryman 2004), citizen activists in the city established a narrative in which the innate weirdness and anti-corporatism of an already established scene was to have precedent over whatever other template might be imported into the city.

Consider for instance the parade of "good examples" that populates each and every conference on creativity and the city, of which there are a fair few. In these, an often fairly limited set of examples, where New York, Berlin, Barcelona and London (and, to a lesser extent, Liverpool) are over-represented, trotted out as proof positive that creativity will change a city to the better – if the template they offer is followed. Bear in mind that the negotiations about what, exactly, was supposed to be creative (or, for that matter, cultural) about these various initiatives is rarely discussed at any length. Instead, creativity is often presented as something that could be fairly unproblematically inserted into a specific setting, to the extent that one is reminded of what J.K. Gibson-Graham referred to as the penetrative logic of capitalism (1996). Creativity just arrives, and changes things to the better.

What "Keep Austin Weird" did was that it challenged this hegemony, opting instead for a form of creativity and a form of identity politics that resisted pre-defined templates of the creative city. In so doing, it established an alternative form of management over the same, one focusing more on alternative branding and engaging grassroots activists. While, in this case, city leaders were at least partly fellow travelers in the strive to avoid "Houstonization" (the local vernacular for undesirable city development), we can easily see that the case of Austin might be read as a cautionary tale by those who wish for their city to adopt a less edgy approach.

So the management of the creative city isn't merely a case of championing a well-defined agenda, but increasingly to manage the very notion of what creativity is and what can represent this irascible energy in a city context. In a way, the management of the creative city is the establishment of fit, attempting to take one (or several) of the various symbolic or material instantiations of creativity and making this fit with the grander narrative or strategy one wishes to pursue. Be this a festival, a house, a kind of activity or a scenography, the management aspect emerges out of how it can be coaxed into a story about the city as specifically creative. Where some forms may resist, more or less overtly, the managerial logic of the creative city, they still run the risk of being co-opted into a meta-narrative of urbanity. Once upon a time, a café may have been a café. No longer. Now it is a resource to be used in crafting the tale of creativity as an urban force, proof positive of a city's capacity to attract "the creative class" (Florida 2002), or a symbol of the strivings of untiring city managers, dragging the city kicking and screaming into its creative future.

It is here, in this *mélange* of symbols and stores and singer-songwriters, that this special issue seeks for the creative city. Our interest was not to repeat the already tired clichés of how creativity is a potent force of city renewal, but rather

to walk the streets of the city, seeing the manifold of ways in which ideas about creativity could emerge in the same. On this trek, or, following Benjamin (1999), this *flânerie*, we have been joined by a number of people, neatly categorized by the four papers that here represents them.

In our first paper, *Another new museum? Imagining the space of art in the creative city*, Christoph Michels, Timon Beyes and Chris Steyaert explore the manner in which the notion of creativity affects the planning and establishment of a new art museum in a Swiss city. By analyzing the entrepreneurial logics inherent in such a move, as well as the various ways in which such a logic can be resisted and appropriated, the authors show how museums can be seen as baubles with which to adorn a city, but also that these can become spaces that hold the potential to radically free the urban imagination.

This can be contrasted with our second paper, written by Astrid Huopainen and Jutta Tailas and entitled "*At the heart of culture? Constructing the 'creative city' through Logomo*". Here, a cultural center becomes the focal-point of large-scale project to rebrand a Finnish city, and the authors go on to show how this has led to multiple meanings being attached to this specific space. Rather than seeing the center as a finished building, the authors invite us to engage with several interpretations of said space, critically analyzing how it becomes imbued with notions of creativity and change, and how this in the end may end up reinforcing mainstream notions of urban space.

Our third paper, *Crafting the idea of multiculturalism: The case of Wrocław, European Capital of Culture 2016* by Dominika Latusek-Jurczak & Magda Ratajczak, presents a case of city-branding specifically through the project(s) of "European Capitals of Culture" (of which the Finnish city in our second paper also was one). By studying a "non-Western" city – Wrocław in Poland – the authors invite us to consider the role of multiculturalism in the creative city, and this time in a context of transformational change and an increasingly globalized world.

Finishing off this issue is Mika Mård, whose paper *The destructive distance between the ideological discourse and the practical management of the "creative city"* challenges assumptions of inclusivity in the official statements regarding how cities want to embrace creativity, and shows how attempts to co-opt street culture while failing to understand the same result in conflict and resistance. By engaging with for instance skateboarding culture, he shows the complexities inherent in trying to include the ever-changing nature of creative living into the frameworks of city planning and formal city strategy.

Obviously this represents only a fraction of the ways in which we could engage with the creative city, and many other papers could and should be written about this phenomena. What we hoped to achieved with this issue was not to present a final word on how creativity affects the city, but rather to open up the issue, to allow for more interpretations of creativity to come to fore in the discussion about the urban condition, and we hope that this special issue represents a step in that direction.

## References

- Badiou, Alain (2005), *Infinite Thought*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Benjamin, Walter (1999), *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bryman, Alan (2004), *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Sage.
- Florida, Richard (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Life, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Florida, Richard (2010), *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996), *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Glaeser, Edward (2011), *Triumph of the city: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier and happier*. New York, NY: Pan Macmillan.
- Landry, Charles (2008), *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*. London: Earthscan.
- Long, Joshua (2010), *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Owen, David (2009), *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability*. New York, NY: Penguin.