Planning Creative Cities: Reflections on a Trend[1]

Planung kreativer Städte: Überlegungen zu einem Trend

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Abstract

The proliferation, internationally, of local cultural plans focused on the development of a 'creative city' has been remarkable with even intergovernmental bodies, such as UN-ESCO, fostering the use of creativity in strategies to revive cities and urban economies. This essay reflects on some of the contradictory and uneven conceptual and political foundations that have shaped cultural planning, suggesting that inherent tensions are being played out in the friction between cultural planning as promise and cultural planning as strategic action by local governments. What is evident is that there is a need to rethink urban cultural planning and its implicit agenda to enable it to emerge as a truly innovative approach to supporting the diverse cultures of every day urban life.

Der internationale Anstieg lokaler Kulturkonzeptionen mit Fokus auf die Entwicklung „kreativer Städte" ist besonders vor dem Hintergrund zwischenstaatlicher Organisationen wie der UNESCO bemerkenswert, die die Nutzung von Kreativität zur städtischen und wirtschaftlichen Wiederbelebung vorantreiben. Dieser Essay legt einige Widersprüche und Unebenheiten der konzeptuellen und politischen Grundlagen solcher Kulturplanungsinitiativen offen und diskutiert, inwiefern sich diese im Bruch zwischen Kulturkonzeption als Versprechen und Kulturkonzeption als strategische Handlung lokaler Regierungen niederschlagen. Deutlich wird hierbei, dass städtische Kulturkonzeptionen und die dahinterliegende, implizite Agenda im Hinblick auf die tatsächliche Schaffung innovativer Ansätze zur Förderung verschiedener städtischer Alltagskulturen neu gedacht werden müssen.

Keywords

Cultural policy; cultural industry; cultural economy
Kulturpolitik, Kulturwirtschaft, Kulturökonomie

Culture is now entrenched on the urban policy and reimaging agendas of an ever-increasing number of cities around the world. Indeed, city-based cultural planning intended to foster and, more frequently, to capitalize on, creativity in all its guises has emerged as a significant local policy

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initiative – often shorthand for city-based innovation and imagination – while the notion of the 'creative city' has become an international city imaging cliché. Not only has the proliferation of local blueprints for cultural planning and the development of a 'creative city' been remarkable, but many intergovernmental bodies such as the European Union and United Nations Education Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are also actively engaged in fostering the use of culture in strategies intended to revive cities and urban economies and to mark places, if only symbolically, as 'different.' They, like other intergovernmental bodies, have pursued a range of policies that directly target the local as opposed to their usual (mandated) focus, the national. Key programs, notably the EU Capital of Culture scheme and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, are designed variously to support both local cultural development and city branding, two objectives that are fundamentally in tension.

Inherent tensions notwithstanding, such high-profile creative cities schemes are usually initiated as part of a broader aim to assist municipalities to further their cultural ambitions. These aspirations might involve the development of local cultural policies and creative precincts, and the formulation of guidelines for administering often high-profile targeted cultural programs. The city-based initiatives of intergovernmental bodies thus necessarily work both with, and against, national cultural priorities in that they prioritise cities and urban cultures at the same time as attempting to endorse and support nations and their cultural policy agendas; they seek both directly and indirectly to identify and assert commonality as well as difference within and between cities and states. For local authorities, as well as seeing such schemes as key pivots of their local cultural plans, they are also often prized as potentially being the impetus for a range of other cultural initiatives, and strategies many of which are concerned with place marketing and city boosterism, and will often involve building cultural infrastructure, developing an ambitious program of local cultural events, and investing in local cultural production. Even more ambitious are those cultural policy and creative infrastructure initiatives that also articulate with a range of housing development projects, the restoration of historic buildings, and the construction of new office and commercial space often as part of the redevelopment of former industrial sites.

In the rush to embrace urban cultural planning, however, it is increasingly rare for strategies to be modest in their ambitions and be, for example, a policy framework concerned only with supporting local arts

organizations and creative activity. Rather, urban cultural planning has come to be framed, at least rhetorically, as capable of achieving not only creative outcomes but also those that are social, economic, and urban. It is also variously marketed and embraced as a way of fostering local cultural diversity, supporting community development, and building productive partnerships between the public and private sectors. Importantly, strategies now also position the arts and cultural activity more broadly, as an 'industry' sector that is valued because of the contribution it makes to local economies as well as to the establishment of vibrant city spaces. Even more optimistically, urban cultural planning is also not uncommonly touted as a strategy for achieving social inclusion and nurturing engaged forms of local citizenship. In other words, strategic cultural planning is not uncommonly touted simultaneously as being social planning, urban planning, arts planning, and economic planning (EVANS 2001).

Given the expansive brief so often promoted in the name of urban cultural policy and planning, it is important to consider some the factors which have been responsible for shaping it and for moving it so far from being a strategic approach to local arts and cultural development. To this end, what I want to do here is first briefly to unpack some of the contradictory and uneven conceptual and political foundations of cultural planning, which although by no means definitive are nevertheless pivotal to any understanding of contemporary strategic practice. In undertaking this task, it is important to take stock of the way in which cultural planning is framed including highlighting its underpinning objectives and key legitimating discourses. What is clear is that the wide-ranging agenda that cultural planning has assumed is underpinned and legitimated, in part, by a conceptualization of culture as the entire way of life of a group or collective, which subsumes other understandings of culture at the same time as revealing some profound tensions, including between 'art,' 'culture,' and 'creativity' that remain unresolved. Also important to the agenda of contemporary cultural planning is the idea of place – its ambience, economies, and vitality – and as a result placemaking as well as place marketing are often central to its strategies. Finally, cultural planning also espouses a social agenda through its mobilization of discourses such as urban citizenship and social inclusion. This agenda, however, has increasingly become subsumed or, perhaps more accurately, overwhelmed by economic objectives to such an extent that the achievement of social outcomes is increasingly assessed with reference to economic indicators.

Planning Urban Cultures

It would be misleading to represent cultural planning as a cohesive body of thought or policy intervention; indeed, the term 'cultural planning' is not even used universally. What is striking though, irrespective of what they are called, is the extent to which similar blueprints are being developed in cities around the world in the context of what has effectively become an echo chamber of assertions regarding the potential of integrated, locally focused, and coordinated cultural planning/creative city approaches to address a range of urban issues. Indeed, in spite of varying political configurations, local histories, and the idiosyncrasies of communities, place, and culture, there is, as many commentators have noted, a striking sameness to the discourses and practices of cultural planning and associated creative cities strategies that is in no small part the result of an increasingly global exchange of ideas. One insight that emerges from any consideration of such exchanges and their key framing discourses and consequences, is that cultural planning is founded on fundamentally competing assumptions. Indeed, cultural planning in the United Kingdom emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as part of an essentially 'third way' agenda that was concerned with, if not reconciling, then balancing opposites (STEVENSON 2004).

In 1986, Geoff Mulgan and Ken Worpole published their pioneering work *Saturday Night or Sunday Morning: From Arts to Industry – New Forms of Cultural Policy,* which can still be read as a passionate call for (what the authors describe as) a 'radical' approach to arts and cultural policy. This book soon became a key text in establishing the framework of what later came to be known as cultural planning. In focusing on the initiatives of the Greater London Council, Mulgan and Worpole were keen to demonstrate that local governments were no longer (if they ever were) simply concerned with roads, rates, and rubbish, but were deeply engaged in supporting, and providing for, the cultural life of their communities. Importantly, the book canvassed the potential benefits to localities of adopting a cultural industries approach to community cultural development, and advocated for the expansion of what counts as culture to include an "understanding [of] modern popular arts as commodities […] produced, marketed and distributed by industries dependent on skills, investment and training" (1986: 122). Many aspects of the agenda that are now taken for granted within cultural planning, such as challenging artistic hierarchies and accepting the idea that the arts and culture are industries, can be traced to the contribution of works such as

this one. Following the lead of the Greater London Council, subsequently also important in this context, was the formulation by a number of Labour-dominated councils in the UK of cultural policies and plans that were intended, simultaneously, to support marginalized local cultural 'communities,' nurture the established arts, foster cultural entrepreneurship, enhance cultural democracy, and develop the cultural industries. A central objective of many of these early cultural plans was also to assist local communities adjust to deindustrialization and a post-industrial future.

Today, an ever-increasing number of municipalities around the world have cultural planning strategies of some kind and those cities without formal cultural plans invariably have a creative city or local placemaking or marketing strategy. In spite of taking varying forms and operating in vastly different political circumstances, a number of important similarities between cultural planning/creative cities approaches and discourses can be discerned. Central are the discursive shift from 'art' to 'culture' and the conviction that cultural activity and participation should be understood as being part of the urban economy. Also prevalent is the expectation that local cultural strategies can (should) be used to achieve the inclusion of the socially excluded and nurture urban citizenship, a status that, increasingly, has come to be understood in terms of aesthetics, taste, and the ability to consume.

The concept of citizenship that was mobilized in the early cultural planning treatises was one that was imbued with a range of assumptions which were grounded quite specifically in the history of the labour movement, an agenda for social justice, support for the welfare state, and a concern with local political configurations including those associated with the relationship between the tiers of British government. A key aim was also to use cultural planning to strengthen local identity and, significantly, this was a form of local identification and urban citizenship that was understood as being forged in the 'civic heart' of the city. As Mulgan and Worpole explain, the 'civic':

> [...] expressed the strong sense of active citizenship which came out of the war; it expressed a sense of there being such a thing as a "civic culture" – the reciprocal responsibility between state and citizen, and amongst citizens towards each other. "Civic responsibility" and "civic pride" were transformed into "civic halls", "civic baths", "civic gardens", "civic theatres" and so on ... This is where the heart of such cultural policy as there was at a local government level was expressed: through very patrician forms of municipal provision. (MULGAN/WORPOLE 1986: 27)

As the territory of citizenship has for some time now been as much if not more the province of the ideological Right as it is of the Left, the discourses

of cultural planning have also moved and the increasing dominance of the discourse of the 'cultural' and then the 'creative industries' in the language and agenda of cultural planning is both symptom and cause of this move. Indeed, cultural planning now reflexively embraces and promotes such notions as the 'creative economy,' the 'creative industries,' and the ideas of social/cultural/creative 'capital' to an extent that other objectives including ideals of urban citizenship have either been subsumed or more commonly have come to be defined in terms of it. Liz Greenhalgh (1998) observes that in the early years in the development of cultural planning in the UK the objective was to endorse an industry development model of cultural provision at the same time as giving support to both the traditional (high) arts and a community cultural development agenda that was grounded in Leftist ideals of social justice, but these goals proved (and continue) to be fundamentally contradictory and perhaps incompatible.

For many commentators, the wholehearted embrace of the creative industries is a 'sell out' and undermines the social agenda that was foundational to cultural planning (O'CONNOR 2015); but for others, including many cultural administrators and those working in the arts, it provides a powerful language for asserting the economic importance of the cultural sector which in turn has played an important role in helping to shift the focus away from the entrenched subsidy model of cultural provision to one which highlights the value of the arts; in other words, the discourse of the creative industries and the strategies and actions it gives rise to, has been pivotal to ensuring culture had a seat at the policy and development table (THORSBY 2008: 230). As discourses of the creative industries have become hegemonic, governments of all political persuasions have moved to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to arts funding. This entrepreneurialism has taken a number of forms, including an increased emphasis on cultural tourism, endorsing decentralisation and regional cultural development, and competing to attract high-profile productions and hallmark cultural events. It has also been influential in positioning artists and other cultural workers as 'entrepreneurs.'

It is surprising that within the cultural sector little thought is given to the implications of this shift both in practice and discursively, including for artists and cultural workers who often find themselves disadvantaged by the very economic agenda they have embraced if not enthusiastically then pragmatically (STEVENSON 2020). Cultural plans now routinely advocate public-private partnerships and position economic (as opposed to cultural) development at their centre. Indeed, as stated above, more

often than not, economic objectives are regarded as the only way to achieve all other outcomes, including those that are social. Cultural value within a creative industries framework becomes something that can be measured according to criteria linked to economic (indeed, market-based) outcomes. As a consequence, urban culture and citizenship are both in some way being redefined and repositioned either explicitly or by default.

At the time that cultural planning was developing in the United Kingdom, in the United States the not-for-profit organisation Partners for Livable Spaces (now Partners for Livable Communities) under the direction of Robert McNulty was also initiating a new approach to place-based cultural policy development and implementation (see, for instance, MCNULTY 1988; 1991; and MCNULTY ET AL 1986). Partners for Livable Communities focuses in particular on developing urban cultural infrastructure as a way of building local communities, citizenship, and economies. This approach, as Denise Meredyth and Jeffrey Minson (2001: xii) point out, encouraged local communities "to tap into a tradition of volunteerism, identifying their own cultural needs and planning for themselves and generating funding for cultural initiatives." Important here is the focus on the local, especially as it relates to a particular imagining of citizenship. Partners' proposals and many of their underpinning assumptions dovetailed with the UK initiatives, discussed above, to be influential in the emergence and orientation of cultural planning as a strategic initiative of local governments. More recently Richard Florida's (2002) proposals regarding the role of the 'creative class' in revitalizing cities and regions, and Charles Landry's (2000) pronouncements regarding the 'creative city' have melded with earlier frameworks not only to inform contemporary practice and hegemonic perspectives, but also to further assert the centrality of the economic.

Cultural planning is also implicitly and explicitly concerned with cities and urban space. In tandem with the language of creativity, social inclusion and economic development, the idea of place and the goal of forging a sense of belonging and community through placemaking and place animation are fundamental to the rhetoric and objectives of cultural planning. As well as creating places that supposedly are meaningful to local people, cultural planning is also concerned with marketing places and with place-identity as part of broader city branding and reimaging strategies. Not uncommonly, however, it is the places of the inner city that are the focus of such initiatives which frequently involve the construction of specialist cultural tourist precincts (WEARING ET AL 2010). Other parts of the city, namely the suburbs, where most people live, are

the frequent silences of these placemaking and branding strategies. In exploring the positioning and mobilization of place within cultural planning, what emerges as important are the ways in which different uses and understandings of place shape and, in turn, are shaped by, these strategies. There is, for instance, now considerable evidence that cultural planning is deeply implicated in gentrification, and the creation of enclaves of exclusivity and spaces for middle class consumption. Indeed, Florida's (2002) formula for measuring and developing the 'creative class' as the basis of city reimaging and cultural industry development clearly has a middle-class bias and can readily be read as a prescription for gentrification and displacement (STEVENSON 2013). But such evidence has not stopped the cultural planning bandwagon rolling ever onward and it has become internationalized through highly effective (and lucrative) circuits of information exchange. The proponents of urban cultural planning/creative cities have a formula to 'sell' and municipalities around the world have been eager to embrace it.

Creative Cities and Beyond

The idea of using cultural strategies to make places, create citizens, and nurture cultures has also spread beyond the cities and nations of the global North. There are many interesting and important examples from Asia, for instance, of the use of cultural strategies in city imaging and local urban development, while the influence of the rhetoric of the creative city and aspects of cultural planning is also evident. In Shanghai for instance, the notion of cosmopolitan urbanism has long been high on the urban development agenda of the municipal government (DONALD/ GAMMACK 2007), while the comparison between Shanghai and Beijing as creative cities is particularly instructive. Hong Kong too has been keen to utilize culture in the marketing and revitalization of the city. The situation of Singapore of course is very different in that it is both city and state, but it has nevertheless also been active in using cultural strategies as elements of a broader agenda to reposition the city and its economy. That said, the scope and scale of the discursive and practical influence in Asia is mediated by the need to interpret and develop cultural strategies at the interface of traditional and contemporary cultural practices and beliefs, a juggling act tha is explored in many of the contributions to Xin Gu et al.'s (2020) collection on the Asian creative city, where it is argued

that what is required is a wholesale rethinking of the role of Asian cities as sites of cultural production and consumption.

Another important aspect of the internationalization of cultural planning are the aforementioned creative cities initiatives of UNESCO and the European Union. The European Capital of Culture is one of the most high-profile competitions of its type in the world, and although it has played a central part in the reimaging schemes of a number of European cities most notably, the Scottish city of Glasgow, its goals are primarily symbolic. While the focus and operation of the EU Capital of Culture scheme are also well documented and much studied (see, for instance, CAMPBELL/O'BRIEN 2020), there has been considerably less attention paid to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), which in some respects has a grander agenda having been established directly to support social, economicc and cultural objectives initially by promoting cultural tourism as a strategy for local economic and cultural development. As I have argued elsewhere, however, with the shifting priorities of UNESCO in particular its adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UCCN is becoming increasingly entangled in a tension between cultural development (frequently framed in terms of the creative industries) and urban sustainability (STEVENSON 2020).

The decision (requirement) to affiliate the UCCN directly with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is posing a number of challenges for the Network and its member cities not least of which is to determine what sustainability can mean for a scheme which implicitly encourages inter-city competition and was formed primarily to support and showcase creativity and the creative economy. What is not obvious from approaches adopted to date, is whether the aim is to develop projects, policies, and programs that position culture and creativity at the centre of sustainable *urban* development or if the intention is to nurture, sustain and showcase *urban cultures* and local cultural activity. Missing too is a clear statement from either UNESCO or the UCCN of what the focus should be and why. A key reason for this absence is that the UCCN is predominantly a network of goodwill and influence; it does not have the resources to fund or directly support projects. So, what it does is 'highlight' or 'showcase' initiatives that have their roots (funding and imaginative) elsewhere and which often only have a tangential connection with the UCCN.

In the absence of any strategic force, the adoption of the language of sustainability may be tokenistic at best and bordering on incoherent at worst. The cities of Asia, for instance, are variously enmeshed in environmental, social, cultural, and political milieus and challenges that are not

only unlike those of cities elsewhere in the world but unlike other cities in Asia. They, as with elsewhere, must be understood in the context of their specific development agendas, something which does not appear to be happening at the moment. That said, cities around the world have nevertheless been keen to seek out and embrace UCCN membership and for many of these cities, it is the potential for tourism and the development of the creative industries that appears to be most attractive.

Conclusion

Cultural planning has from the outset been a compromise that supposedly is capable of addressing a range of agenda and objectives. On the one hand, it is a strategy of reducing arts subsidies and furthering user-pays, whilst on the other, it attempts to embrace an economic agenda without abandoning the socially and economically marginal. Cultural planning is in many ways, as Jim McGuigan (1996: 107) has noted, "creative, lateral and synthetic." However, the extent to which it is possible for cultural planning actually to achieve its often quite contradictory, multifaceted objectives is questionable. And while the implications of the contradictions inherent in cultural planning may not have been immediately obvious, they are now being played out in cities around the world in the friction between cultural planning as promise and cultural planning as strategic action by local governments. Major points of strain are definitional and ideological. What is evident, is the importance of engaging critically with this pervasive but under-explored trend in order to move beyond description and advocacy and create the context within which urban cultural planning may emerge as a truly innovative approach to supporting the cultures and diversities of every day urban life.

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