



Deconstructing the Creative City: Snapshots from Helsinki

Since the 1990s, innovation, culture and creativity have become new catchwords in urban development as a growing number of cities started promoting and marketing themselves with a wide array of concepts ranging from culture, cultural tourism, heritage preservation and art to technological innovation and urban regeneration, urban design and architecture. Economic activity based on cultural values was brought into the forefront of urban development policy in many European cities and culture became an increasingly important element in many cities' development strategies and plans. Following this the current future vision of many western cities is currently based on vague ideal type of economically successful post-industrial city, where the economy and social wellbeing is based on new types of flourishing service industries, innovation, information and non-material production. Some of the building blocks of this emerging urban creativity discourse are a number of rather vague notions of creativity and innovation based on local urban culture, cultural diversity and new technologies.

This paper discusses those transformations by drawing from the international urban studies debate on the theme. The second part of the paper presents a very brief excursion and case study of City of Helsinki's urban policy and its transforming focus during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

1. Urban Development, Policy and the Economic Globalization

During the last two decades many urban theorists have been quite unanimous about the growing importance of places in rapidly globalizing world ¹. Several issues have been raised in the subsequent debate: Urban regions and cities in particular gaining power and importance, national governments are increasingly losing their capacity to respond to economic changes and challenges from global level through traditional policy measures and instruments ². The growing importance of sub-national level decision-making where urban development measures become more and more important for local decision-makers in both public and private sectors has been discussed. In addition, the de-centralization of political power from central government to regional and local levels and governing bodies, the fragmentation of power at the local level, and a shift of local planning policy priorities from more welfare-oriented policies towards fostering economic growth, have been some of the major tendencies visible in many European countries ³.

In connection with these broad transformations in the global environment the history of European urban policy can be divided roughly into three phases and associated with three different policy-fields. During the 1980s urban-related activities aimed primarily at environmental policy. In the 1990s urban issues became part of the cohesion policy, formally remaining there until today but as to its contents, the city itself has increasingly become part of the economic development policies. On the level of urban policy, politics and governance, the shift in focus from technology to culture in the economy of the cities also implicitly suggests a transformation of cities' economic base from industrial production to services and towards more service-oriented economy.

2. Cultural Economy as the Main Ingredient of the Creative City

It has been argued by many authors that some of the most significant effects of the post-industrial shift are reflected in the sector of economy linked with culture and cultural production, often roughly put together without much consideration on their actual contents and labeled as ‘cultural economy’. Authors such as Allen Scott, for example, consider the location of cultural industries within cities as vitally important to the competitiveness of urban economies on global scale ⁴. Whereas globalizing processes allow cultural products to gain access to wider ranges of markets, the cultural economy has been re-localized at nodes of global transaction flows ⁵.

In the context of cultural production and new cultural economies in cities, many critical academics believe that small-scale cultural producers tend to be excluded from the new entertainment economy and they may even be actively forced to move because they can no longer afford the rents ⁶. The counter-criticism to that argument is conversely that for example tourism offers increased opportunities for local people who are involved in the production of culture and providing culture-related consumption opportunities ⁷. David Harvey has made the bold claim that rapidly growing inter-city competition exerts an external coercive power over individual cities to conform to the rules and logic of capitalist economy and accumulation. Although the consequence of this can be a forced uniformity of cities, all in the provision of a good business climate, the orchestrated production of urban image for a city can also help to create a sense of social solidarity, civic pride and loyalty to place ⁸. However, Harvey has also pointed out that concentration on spectacle and image rather than on the substance of economic and social

problems can also prove to be harmful in the long run. In the same vein Sharon Zukin has voiced her concern by noting that greater attention should be paid to the material inequalities that are at stake in cultural strategies of economic growth and community revitalization ⁹. The question of *'who the city is for' and 'who is it (effectively) marketed to'* by using culture and cultural aspects has its implications for cities ¹⁰. This brings about the central question of the consequences of these developments for the societies and particularly for the social sphere of societies. These developments contain linkages to many much debated urban issues and problems, some of these more obvious than the others.

3. Cultural Paradigm in Urban Development

The discussion about what makes cities creative has been mainly going on between policy makers, politicians and media but only scarcely involving artists and other people operating in the field of cultural production. At the same time the international urban studies, urban planning, economics and policy studies academic community at large has kept more distance to the subject. Discussion and research has been mostly concentrated on the concept of the creativity and cultural values linked with economic production and the cultural economy, the academic community has been rather critical, as evidenced for example by the attitude towards Richard Florida's *'The Rise Of The Creative Class'* book ¹¹. Other, older examples, of academic work on the theme has been carried out by Bianchini and Parkinson who argued already in 1993 that in the past twenty years, the relationship between cultural expression and the city has been turned on its head as cultural expression in thought of less as a socio-economic practice that follows in the

wake of urban life, but it is regarded instead as the motor of the urban economy ¹². Similarly Allen Scott saw the location of cultural industries within cities as vitally important to the competitiveness of urban economies on global scale ¹³. Graeme Evans in turn went even further in claiming that the idea of cultural city and the use of arts and entertainment as tools in urban regeneration and economic development can be considered almost universal phenomenon ¹⁴.

4. Creative Helsinki Since the 1990s

Following the described general changing trend and paradigm in urban policy aimed at urban development and urban economy, it's time to turn to look at Helsinki, capital of Finland.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s Helsinki region was the second fastest growing EU metropolitan area after Dublin, Ireland. Besides the population growth, the main factors of structural change in the region were the ICT-sector, increased focus on "*planning for the know-how*" materializing in new university campuses, infrastructure investments both in roads and air travel, and new retail patterns ¹⁵. At the same time, or actually already some years earlier since the mid 1980s, Helsinki witnessed a remarkable urban cultural change. During this time new forms of and sites for consumption and leisure, new cultural institutions and also new local media sprung up in very fast pace ¹⁶. At the very same time in Helsinki as in cities of most other western post-industrial societies, developers, entrepreneurial private sector actors and political regimes and local elites started seeing the city more and more as a commodity. Creative and cultural economy

was all of a sudden considered as one of the most central future growth sectors for the cities and metropolitan regions and there was strong renewed interest in developing culture in its many forms to their benefit ¹⁷. In some sense the year 2000, when Helsinki acted as the European Culture Capital, and which was incidentally also the year when the dot.com boom was at its heated peak in Finland like in other countries as well, was the zenith of this long transformation and development that had started already in the 1980s.

As documented and discussed by Cantell and Schulman ¹⁸, in Helsinki the Culture Capital of Europe Year generated an enormous positive buzz prior and during the year 2000. There were large numbers of different kinds of cultural activities and significant investments in cultural activities and facilities were made. A seemingly endless amount of festivals, exhibitions, concerts, festivals and happenings took place. Following the conclusion of the event/Culture Capital year there seemed to be almost like a communal ‘after-the-party’ depression, which was pushed even further by the many financial troubles and issues that emerged later. Many of the new small companies which had produced events for the year ran into trouble the next year when there were no more public sector or European Union –investments and subsidies or private sector sponsorship money available. Unfortunately many of these new companies based their activities and business models largely around these sources of financing, which were relatively easily available while Helsinki was preparing for the year 2000. The Culture Capital year and its activities were organized largely by establishing different types of public-private partnership arrangements and by encouraging individual artists and cultural producers to engage actively in the year by setting up their own private companies, which were then

sub-contracted by the city administration to organize different types of events. The strong economic growth and the ICT-boom of the time period also generated a very optimistic atmosphere with the many success stories of young entrepreneurs, rumors of the abundance of easily available venture capital and so on, which appeared in media continuously. The factual main element of the economic boom in Helsinki region was the mobile telephone brand Nokia's phenomenal rise from a mid-sized rubber boot- and electrical cable-making traditional heavy-industrial company into the leading mobile phone and network technology company in the world. While Nokia recreated itself very quickly as a leading global company, it also helped along a great number many smaller local technology companies and spin-offs linked to it.

When the Culture Capital Year was over it was argued that the undeniable synergy and cooperation between all the different actors, private actors, local business and public sector was lost during the process of trying to sort out the problems, and in some cases trying to find scapegoats for some of the incidents. To put it very bluntly, it seemed like many politicians or local administrators did not want anything to do with what turned out to be a series of minor financial catastrophes.

Especially during the mid and late 1990s when Helsinki was competition for the title of Culture Capital and later during the preparation for the year itself, the role of culture in municipal urban policy was strongly stressed. Hence, one of the outcomes of the Culture Capital Year comedown was the fact that urban culture, which had been seen as a very positive and important element in Helsinki's urban policy prior to and during the year,

was very suddenly pushed aside in municipal politics. Since the period described above, the city of Helsinki has geared its urban development policy very markedly towards high technology and ICT-sector, even if it is still using creativity as the main catch-word in many policies and strategies, and this has been reflected clearly in Helsinki's development strategy as well as its city-marketing. Even if ICT-based economic development has not been the only theme in Helsinki's development strategy, the shift in focus has been very clearly observable.

5. Conclusion

A large part of the working population in western cities and urban agglomerations today are primarily engaged in creative professions. Artists, designers, university professors and researchers, writers, performers, but also consultants, advertisers and marketing people as well as engineers are all in 'creative' jobs. Accordingly many studies on the subject emphasize a need for openness, tolerance, diversity and a positive attitude towards change and deviation from prevailing standards. These elements are increasingly projected upon the character of urban environments as well. In theory only open, tolerant, diverse cities that welcome change and ideas, attitudes and action that contest and even encourage the status quo of societal values can be creative and attract more creative people, which will in turn then create more creativity and striving and vital urban culture. However, this equation is often much more difficult in reality than how it appears in seminar speeches given by politicians and city-administrators.

The most central issue is not whether an interesting and lively local arts and music scene, active local gay or other sub-cultural groups, a high profile flagship cultural space such as an art museum or other marginal attractions have a beneficial effect on the development of a certain place because it is very hard to anyone with any social consciousness to deny that existence of these phenomena are beneficial and 'good' for any locality or region. They are all integral elements urban culture and life and they undeniably form the fabric of modern western cities. The real accountable effect of those things on the developing of the local economy of a certain city is then altogether different question, which should be answered by studies based on hard empirical evidence.

Whether city government officials, policymakers and public sector organizations manage to develop policies or plans and implement concrete programs that help to produce creativity in all its forms and especially so that it would lead to economic development is yet again another question. Charles Landry has pinpointed the main resource of creativity in cities in arguing that cities have one crucial main resource, the people living in them:

Human cleverness, desires, motivations, imagination and creativity are replacing location, natural resources and market access as urban resources. The creativity of those who live in and run cities will determine future success.¹⁹

The cultural attributes of cities and creativity in general tend to be something much more intangible and spontaneous than development policies. Most often they are not a product of government planning, even if some concrete examples always exist. Without wanting to play down the important role of public sector subsidies, services and amenities such as education and cultural services, whether talking about ICT-companies and other kinds of technological advancements, individual artists or musicians and bands successes, vibrant nightlife economies or immigrants' businesses, creativity and innovation leading to economic success is more often the result of innovative and hard-working individual people with – often very limited – private or public sector investment and backing. Flagship buildings and major investment in urban regeneration, public infrastructure and public transport, sports stadiums and convention centers, city marketing campaigns targeting tourism and international investment are all equally important in their own rights and can most likely sometimes make a real difference in competition between cities but whether they will make a city creative is again altogether different question.

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- ¹⁰ Jussi Kulonpalo, *New Forms of Urban Governance in European Cities: Focusing on Cultural Policies: The City and the Region*, eds. Frank Eckardt and Dieter Hassenpflug, (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 251-264.
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¹³ Allen J. Scott, *The Cultural Economy of Paris*. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 24 (2000): 323-39.

¹⁴ Graeme Evans, *Hard-Branding the Cultural City – From Prado to Prada*, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 27 (2003): 417-440.

¹⁵ Panu Lehtovuori, *Experience and Conflict: The Dialectics of the Production of Public Urban Space in the Light of New Event Venues in Helsinki 1993-2003* (Espoo: Helsinki University of Technology, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, 2005).

¹⁶ Timo Cantell, *Helsinki and a vision of place* (Helsinki: City of Helsinki Urban Facts, 1999).

¹⁷ Jussi Kulonpalo, *New Forms of Urban Governance in European Cities: Focusing on Cultural Policies: The City and the Region*, eds. Frank Eckardt and Dieter Hassenpflug, (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 251-264.

¹⁸ Timo Cantell and Harry Schulman, *Mitä oli kulttuurivuosi? Kirjoituksia Euroopan kulttuurikaupunkivuodesta Helsingissä* (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus, 2001).

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