Culture club: creative cities, fast policy, and the new symbolic order

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Introduction: fast-policy culture

This chapter reflects on what Allen Scott (2006) once aptly called the creative-cities 'syndrome', a phrase that captures the essence of what has become a pan-urban policymaking paradigm, culture or 'order', in which both the means and ends of local economic development have been 'culturalised'. This process of policymaking contagion was initially animated by Richard Florida's (2002a) bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, although it is not entirely reducible to the after-effects of that much-discussed book, or to the extensive and long-running marketing campaign with which it was associated. Rather, the argument in this chapter is that Florida's zeitgeist-catching intervention articulated, and then helped to realise and reproduce, a particular kind of 'late entrepreneurial' or 'soft neoliberal' moment across evolving regimes of urban governance, in a context in which the scope for effective maneuver (not to say innovation) in local economic policy has been significantly narrowed, in ideological, practical and financial terms. That is to say, while Florida's book did not unilaterally make this policymaking environment, in which cultural assets have been mobilised in a competitive war of all against all to attract (and retain) a footloose class of lifestyle-sensitive 'creatives', both his diagnosis and his policy prescriptions were crafted in such a way as to exploit and indeed capitalise upon these circumstances. In this respect, the creativity model can be seen as an exemplar of fast-policy development, as a bearer and condensate of an urban policymaking rationality, technique and indeed culture (cf. Peck and Theodore, 2015).

If *The Rise of the Creative Class* rode a wave of sorts, lionising a class of creative winners that were held to be reaping the just desserts of their talents, while arguing for

a realignment of public policies (and public subsidies) in their favour, Florida's most recent book, *The New Urban Crisis* (Florida, 2017) has been widely read as something between a climb down, a recalibration and a confession (DePillis, 2016; Dorling, 2017; Bures, 2017; Brook, 2017; Renn, 2017; Wetherell, 2017). Who could possibly have known, the author now asks, that the celebrated 'return to the city' of tech-era professionals, taste makers and talent workers would have been associated with a tangle of negative externalities, like spiraling socioeconomic divides, over-inflated housing markets and unchecked gentrification? Setting aside for the moment the fact that these entirely predictable (side?) effects were actually predicted, and quite widely, there is some truth in the defence that 'to tar Florida with the ills of the knowledge economy is like blaming Thomas Friedman for the problems of globalization just because he wrote *The World Is Flat'* (Renn, 2017: 1). Again, the Florida phenomenon did not unilaterally create the late-neoliberal policy environment that it would cleverly exploit and then comprehensively inhabit. It went from an edgy idea to an everyday artifact, if not a policymaking cliché, not by being revolutionary or earth-changing (of course), but by *conforming*, having been expressly designed, purposefully circulated and proactively consumed as a travelling technology and seductive script for cultural-economic governance. 'Traveling policy, like globalization [itself], is nothing new', Catherine Kingfisher (2013: 11) has written, 'nevertheless, it has been accelerating in recent decades to such an extent that it is now ubiquitous, almost mundane'. Made in a different context, this argument very much applies to creativity policies, which have become almost trivially commonplace— retrofitted, adapted and translated as they have been to a bewilderingly wide range of urban contexts, from small towns to global cities. What once seemed like a cutting-edge, culturally-edgy development model has since become almost numbingly ordinary; its traces all over the place, it has become normalised. Rather like that of Thomas Friedman, one might say, Florida's achievement was to produce an ur-text for this late-neoliberal urban moment, exploiting the format of social-scientific disclosure to present what could otherwise be read as something between a lifestyle guide and a policymaking manual.

The policymaking fix, it has to be said, was an alluringly simple one. Relatively modest, locally targeted and 'eventised' interventions, consistent with a climate of accelerating gentrification, social inequality and competitive insecurities, were not only sanctioned but sanctified in the creative-cities script, which has since been instrumental in legitimising, sanitising and reproducing these conditions, even if they were not of the project's own making. In this sense, impact of *The Rise of the Creative Class* can be read as a banal affirmation of the performativity thesis, since the world of urban policymaking has been at least partly remade in its reflected, affirmative image. With requisite irony, Florida's book was knowingly, if artfully, positioned as a critique of what had become a deeply entrenched orthodoxy in the field of urban economic development, 1990s style, based on smokestack-chasing, corporate subsidisation and the mobilisation of urban spectacles, subsequently to inherit this very mantle, as a near-hegemonic and common-sense mode of culturally inflected urban competition (Harvey, 1989; Peck, 2014). Florida himself would be duly anointed as urban policy's most 'charismatic economic-development troubadour' (MacGillis, 2010: 13), a role in which he has revelled, even after changing his tune on culture, creativity and 'crisis' (Brook, 2017; Bures, 2017; Florida, 2017).

The creative-cities syndrome reveals something quite telling about the fast-policy market that has emerged in recent years around the urban-solutions industry. Policies that travel far and wide do not necessarily do so because they are 'functional'—because they do just what it says on the can—although of course they must sustain that appearance. Instead, some of the features that fast policies, pervasive fixes, and winning formulas will frequently share, in this context, include the following … They will often travel farthest and fastest when they affirm, or only marginally recalibrate, prevailing values. (And all the better if they can work within existing political, resource and institutional constraints.) They will be especially appealing if they facilitate some kind of renewal, or makeover, of extant rationales, rubrics and repertoires for intervention, preferably in the form of self-contained solutions or best-practice arrangements, complete with an accompanying package of tools, targets and ready-

made discourses. Their prospects for rapid-fire diffusion will also be enhanced if they are successful hailing, enrolling, and then equipping a network of downstream advocates, intermediaries and functionaries—maybe even some true believers. And fast policies will really fly if they can do some or all of these things while at the same time doing nothing to perturb or otherwise upset powerful, incumbent interests.

In a context in which conventional urban-policy remedies, based on the well-worn methods and motifs of 'entrepreneurialism', have been displaying diminishing returns for decades now, the creative-cities fix has provided a low-cost but high-visibility means for refreshing and renewing mandates for local economic development—pretty much in the absence of politically viable, financially feasible, mainstream alternatives. This is the vacuum into which the creative-cities model was launched and within which, to all intents and purposes, it continues to live. It hardly matters that there is little or no evidence that creativity policies actually deliver. In a broader and more nebulous sense, they work as fixes *because they fit*. And this one-size-fits-all but at the same time highly 'elasticated' policy really does seem to be suitable for practically all sizes and shapes. Of course, there are subtle differences in the operationalisation of Floridaesque policies between one city and another, but these details should not detract from the wider pattern, which overwhelmingly is one of casual, almost friction-free recycling and regurgitation. So it is that not only wannabe creative hubs but even ostensibly 'winning' cities, like Amsterdam or Seattle, still find it somehow expedient to embrace the ethos of creative growth (see Peck, 2012; Bréville, 2017). As a policymaker at the City of Amsterdam put it, 'As a label, it just works'.

Asking how it is that the creative-city model 'works,' not in the sense of intrinsic functionality but how it exists in a world of late-neoliberal urban governance, the chapter proceeds in two steps. It begins by summarising the policymaking rationale-cum-formula that accompanied (and indeed facilitated) the rise of the creative-cities craze. Since a policymaking model can only become a *model* if it recruits followers, admirers and emulators, the chapter then turns to the audience and the field of reception for this culturally packaged solution. Finally, the conclusion asks why it is,

how it is, that the creative-cities fad has lasted so long, and why indeed it endures in the face of critique, skepticism, fatigue and chronic underperformance—now that even its principal architect has taken to voicing public doubts. For it is that, after 'a period of rethinking and introspection, of personal and intellectual transformation', Florida (2017: xvii) has since come around to seeing 'the back-to-the-city movement as something that conferred its benefits on a small group of places and people', a condition that critics all along saw as a defining feature of this self-serving and elitist formulation: 'I [find] myself confronting the dark side of the urban revival that I had once championed and celebrated'. Florida's disposition may be rather less sunny now, but the continuing appeal of his millennial policy prescriptions—priming the creative pump by subsidising professional-class lifestyles and amenities—tells a rather different, but also sobering, story.

The fix

Sold as a portable formula for urban success, apparently everywhere, the creative-cities policy fix was sufficiently succinct that it could easily have fitted on a three-by-five-inch index card. As Florida himself recently summarised his pitch:

> The key to urban success, I argued in my 2002 book … was to attract and retain talent, not just to draw in companies. The knowledge workers, techies, and artists and other cultural creatives who made up the creative class were locating in places that had lots of high-paying jobs—or a thick labor market; lots of other people to meet and date—what I called a thick mating market; a vibrant quality of place, with great restaurants and cafés, a music scene, and lots of other things to do (2017: xiv).

This, in turn, was connected to an alliterating policy imperative, the now-famous *three Ts* of technology, talent, and tolerance. In order to advance in the creative economy, even to *defend* existing positions, cities would need to be on top of all three Ts— technology, in the form of a high-performing cluster of tech companies and research universities, the latter serving as willing partners, as factories for talent, and as markers of the right kinds of neighborhood milieux; talent, the essential ingredient for high-

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quality economic development, as borne (individually) by a uniquely mobile and demanding creative class, bent on exercising their lifestyle and workstyle preferences to the full; and tolerance, defining the preferred social operating environment and the hearth of creative growth, places with a culturally rich, open-minded and welcoming 'people climate' being told to expect an economic dividend from this atmosphere of hipster liberalism. If cities worked on the third T, tolerance, they could anticipate—on the basis of Florida's theory that jobs now follow (talented) people—that the first two Ts would soon be looking after themselves. This charge was addressed, quite explicitly, to civic leaders and urban managers who were called upon urgently to act lest their cities consign themselves to the creative, cultural and economic backwaters.

This evidently compelling formulation encapsulated existential threats (the old economy is going, a new one is coming) and boundless opportunities (for those cities that can catch the creative wave; easy if you try, and everywhere can win), suturing these both to a can-do policy posture and to a readily available and lightweight program of local-scale intervention: defer to the new economy of tech, embrace (the values of) its workforce, and provide for its needs by ensuring that the right kind of lifestyle ecosystem is in place. The policy vision and the package of interventions were both nominally tailored to the particularities of place, but at the same time they resembled, in a practical sense, a prefabricated and generic formula for 'urban success'. The impact and staying power of this formula has been remarkable. In light of the feebleness of the formula itself (in causal terms, it is bunk science), this perverse staying power demands (another) explanation.

When French journalist Benoît Bréville went on a mission for *Le Monde Diplomatique* to Seattle, 'capital of the hipster boom', in the Fall of 2017, he discovered a city that had 'monetised creativity, tolerance and diversity to create wealth for a few, and employment for young graduates [but] may have lost itself in the process' (2017: 8). Nevertheless, local policymakers were still enthralled to the creative-cities vision, still validating their strategies in relation to Florida's putative 'theory'. As Bréville retold the now-familiar story :

> Florida … is widely criticised by his peers, but he has had a big impact on municipal decision-makers for 15 years. He first set out his theory in [the] bestselling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. It is fairly simple: the old economy (industrial, manufacturing, extractive) will disappear and be replaced by a 'creative' economy. Rather than trying to attract businesses by building motorways and conference centres, offering tax breaks and financial incentives, cities should entice *talent*. That means people who innovate, invent or otherwise use their intellectual capital to create wealth: artists, engineers, journalists, architects, gifted administrators, financiers, lawyers, researchers, IT specialists, medics (2017: 8).

Seen as an ingeniously crafted economic imaginary, the attendant creativity script mashed together cultural libertarianism, contemporary urban-design motifs and neoliberal policy imperatives. Critics hardly needed to work hard on reading between the lines, however, to detect that this was a familiar story retold, 'the old deregulatory gospel repackaged in the shiny new wineskin of lifestyle liberalism' (Brook, 2017: 111; see also Lehmann, 2003; Peck, 2005). There were socially-liberal and even faintly radical themes running through the creativity script—including an explicit embrace of social diversity, human-scale urban design, the arts, and (public) culture, together with a positive economic vision for (central) cities.[1] But these pinkish and progressive elements were folded into a development project that was, in a constitutive sense, both market orientated (creative cities, assets, and actors, always in competition) and individualistic (creative subjects as hedonistic free agents). In Florida's account, the creatives essentially presented as neoliberals, dressed in black.

We were told that creative-class types yearned, above all, to 'validate their identities', seeking out neighborhoods amply endowed with the kind of amenities that would permit them to maintain an experientially intensive work-life balance. These were the so-called 'plug-and-play' communities, with low social-entry barriers and a pattern of loose ties, but plenty of scope for creative commingling, where creatives could (re)locate 'and put together a life—or at least a facsimile of a life—in a week' (Florida, 2002b: 20). Thriving on weak attachments and noncommittal relationships,

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[1] This section of the chapter draws selectively on my article 'The creativity fix', *Eurozine*, 28 June 2007, accessed 4 February 2018 at http://www.eurozine.com/the-creativity-fix/. See also Peck (2005).

homo creativus was an atomised actor, with quite particular cultural tastes although rarely held back by social ties and obligations, thriving on long hours of work and unrelenting competition. As a member of the creative class, an identity that he would go on publicly to live, Florida understood that 'there is no corporation or other large institution that will take care of us … we are truly on our own' (Florida, 2002a: 115).

One of the ways in which the creativity thesis garnered attention, and controversy in some conservative circles, was by highlighting the positive contribution of gays and lesbians to the life of cities. This was coarsely captured by way of a 'gay index', built around various proxy measures and then correlated with a series of economic 'goods' and nice-to-haves. Under the veneer of progressive inclusiveness, gays and lesbians were quite literally being valued, in this account, for their (supposed) economic functionality, but they also stood in as diagnostic indicators of the favoured kind of 'tolerant' climate. So it was that gays and lesbians were portrayed not only as the 'canaries of the creative economy', but also as 'harbingers of redevelopment and gentrification in distressed urban neighborhoods' (Florida, 2005: 131). Similarly, other typical features of these gentrifying, mixed-use neighborhoods, such as 'authentic' historical buildings, converted lofts, walkable streets, plenty of coffee shops, live-music spaces, street art, maybe a little graffiti and a connecting bike path, were likewise interpreted as indicators of creative potential, and newly productive assets ripe for exploitation in the interurban war for talent.

For all its social-liberal compensations and new-urbanist planning motifs, the creativity fix has worked with grain of the contemporary *Realpolitik*. It offered a feel-good but fiscally undemanding development vision, congruent with a post-entitlement, intensively competitive urban realm. It facilitated revamped forms of civic boosterism (flogging cultural assets), alongside the elevation of elite consumption norms and the lubrication both of flexible labour markets and gentrifying housing markets. More implicitly, the script also provided a smokescreen for—if not a brazen legitimation of—the continuing rise of socioeconomic inequality, both within and between cities: the designated overclass of creatives was held to have *earned* its superior position in the

creative city, in the world of global flows, and in the socioeconomic hierarchy (for a hierarchy most certainly it is), by virtue of raw talent and creative capital, validated through the market and by Florida's 'theory' as well. The lumpen classes of service and manual workers, on the other hand, were so positioned on the wrong end of the new socioeconomic structure by virtue of their creative deficits, and as such played little or no positive role in Florida's original account of the creative economy. Back then, they had to be content with lectures on creative bootstrapping and—in lieu of their own creative awakening—the benefit of downward-trickling morsels like the opportunity to wait tables for the creative bohemians. This said, socioeconomic inequalities, and the plight of the 'bottom' 66 percent of the class structure, play a much more prominent role in Florida's recent repositioning (Florida, 2017), but his account of why this 'dark side' of the creativity boom, with its winner-take-all rationality favouring hipster hubs and their elite inhabitants, was initially overlooked in *The Rise* does not really pass the sniff test. 'As he tells it,' a business reporter at the *Houston Chronicle* recently disclosed, Florida 'had wanted to include a chapter on inequality in his first book, but it was cut for length [and then after] the book came out, the problem kept getting worse' (DePillis, 2016). The chapters that were included in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, on the other hand, were much more concerned with elaborating an indulgent and self-regarding account of life 'inside' the creative class, documenting its lifestyles, its wants and needs, in a manner intended to resonate with first-person authority. Creative subjects were celebrated for their hypermobility and for their strictly circumscribed, individualistic commitments to place.

It follows that anything short of public pandering to the needs and desires of the restless creatives was practically guaranteed to secure their automatic 'flight' (Florida, 2005). The creativity discourse amounts to a paean to the international talent market and its favoured agents, to which cities and regions can only but defer. In this retread of the orthodox *globalisation* script, the argument for decisive local action—priming, subsidising and featherbedding the creative supply side—is presented as nothing short of a new urban imperative, the new cargo cult. Paradoxically, Florida sought to

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celebrate certain 'qualities of place', like buzz and cosmopolitanism, while at the same time recirculating pernicious neoliberal narratives concerning existential competitive threats and the need for constant vigilance in the face risks not only of capital flight but (now) talent flight. 'The core of the challenge is what I've come to see as the new global competition for talent', Florida has explained, 'a phenomenon that promises to radically reshape the world in the coming decades' (2005: 3-4). It follows that no-one, *and nowhere*, is safe from this new competitive threat.

Help was at hand, however, since Florida sought not simply to disclose the new economic order, but also to offer his services as a purveyor of winning urban strategies—as a consultant-for-hire, as a high-price public speaker and as a roving public-policy advocate (see MacGillis, 2010; Bures, 2012). Right along with the identification of policy imperatives came a suite of new policy solutions, all designed to give the creatives what they want, and city leaders something to do, while securing the position of cities in the competitive scamble for talent. Creatives were the primary movers and decision-makers in Florida's account, and it was their choices—writ large— that would shape the spatial divisions of creative labour, the creative urban hierarchy and the outcomes of the interurban talent war. And, 'when it comes down to it, creative people choose *regions*', Florida explained, 'They think of Silicon Valley versus Cambridge, Stockholm versus Vancouver, or Sydney versus Copenhagen. The fact that many regions around the world are cultivating the attributes necessary to become creative centres makes this competition even fiercer' (Florida, 2005: 10).

Just like the wave of entrepreneurial urban strategies that preceded it, this form of creative interurban competition was both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating: developing open, plug-and-play communities that are welcoming to the always-restive members of the creative class becomes tantamount to both enabling and *subsidising* the very forms of mobility that were a source of competitive anxiety in the first place. But since there was (again) only one game in town, cities had to make sure that they were ready to play, to do what is necessary, or they will 'they will wither and die' (Florida, 2002a: 13). The (circumscribed) role for government, in this context, was

loudly to cheerlead while investing in the creative supply side, Florida's chameleon-like position being to sanction modest and discretionary interventions at the local scale (such as delivering events, amenities and marketing campaigns), while joining the chorus that big government had better get out of the way. 'Where I share common ground with some Republicans and libertarians [is] that old-style government programs have become a huge impediment', Florida once explained, the more limited function of the state being to 'set up the parameters in which market-based actions take place' (quoted in Steigerwald, 2004: 2).

Urban leaders must do what it takes to transform their cities into 'creative hubs' or 'talent magnets', having been made acutely aware of the risk—if they do not adequately tend to the needs of the 'young and restless'—that they will be demoted to the rust belt of the new economy. Discursively downloading both risk and responsibility, the creative-city concept was predicated on the dominant market order, the unforgiving logic of which it transplants into soft-focus, cultural tones. The resulting policy posture—since its attendant interventions are hardly, if ever, guarantees of actual economic success—is therefore for the most part a symbolic one. In one sense, this is a matter of incorporating culture 'into' economic-development policy; in a more fundamental sense, it speaks to a new culture *of* economic-development policy. In a world in which cities are (found) responsible for their own economic development, both failure and success being deemed to have been 'home grown', there is an obligation on city leaders to act, and to *be seen to act*, on and for the local economy, even if their aspirations repeatedly exceed their effective grasp. Creative-cities policies were fashioned for, and proliferated in, this ideological environment. They provide a means for urban economic development to be performed, 'eventised' and 'festivalised'. So was revealed the funky face of neoliberal urban-development politics.

The followers

At some risk of understatement, Florida has recently reflected that 'my work generated

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a considerable following among mayors, arts and cultural leaders, urbanists, and even some enlightened real estate developers who were looking for a better way to spur economic development in their communities' (2017: xv). Nominally bespoke creativity strategies can be purchased from consultants in practically any mid-sized city these days, or they can be lifted off the shelf from countless websites and urban regeneration conferences. These are almost ideal products for the fast–policy distribution systems that have evolved in the past two decades: both the rationale and the design parameters of the policy are essentially portable—just ensure that each plan contains at least a dash of local cultural 'authenticity', while nodding to the right 'grassroots' constituencies in each city. While the peddling of urban solutions is hardly a new activity, and while all manner of consultancy bromides are readily available on every street corner, it has been observed that 'Florida has taken the art to a new level, wielding his "creativity index" and making each city feel that, whatever its shortcomings, it has the potential to move up the ladder' (MacGillis, 2010: 13). This is a motivational discourse.

The presentation felt new, even if the formula was familiar: construct new urban governance networks around growth-oriented goals, compete aggressively for mobile economic resources and government funds, respond in formulaic ways to external threats, talk up the prospects of success and do not buck the market. The emphasis on the mobilisation of elite policy communities around growth-first urban policy objectives is nothing new, but whereas the entrepreneurial cities chased jobs, the creative cities pursue talent workers; the entrepreneurial cities craved investment, now the creative cities yearn for buzz; while entrepreneurial cities boasted of their postfordist flexibility, the creative cities trade on the cultural distinction of *cool*. Urban leaders are duly nudged to contemplate new forms of fiscally modest investments in local events, happenings and amenities, mostly targeted at economically secure residents and local businesses in parts of town where there are already signs of 'buzz' and where property prices are already climbing. After all, this is much less of a lift—politically, financially, institutionally—than, say, developing a new science park,

establishing a citywide living wage, implementing a green-economy strategy, or most other things on the local economic policy menu.

Across what is now a thoroughly neoliberalised urban terrain, a receptive and wide audience has effectively been pre-constituted for the kinds of market-reinforcing, property- and promotion-based, growth-oriented and gentrification-friendly policies that have been repackaged under the rubric of creativity. The creative-cities policy fix can be deployed to accessorise extant urban-growth agendas, with the minimum of disruption to established interests and constituencies. In its minimalist form adds a livability/lifestyle component to a conventional urban competitiveness stance, which can now be spiced up with cultural accoutrements. Furthermore, local growth coalitions can be enlarged (and enlivened) by adding artists, musicians and cultural entrepreneurs to the mix, alongside the suits from the chamber of commerce and the local development agency. The typical mayor is likely to see few downsides to making the city safe for the creative class; there is little to fear from conspicuous urban consumption, gen-x marketing campaigns, key-worker attraction strategies and gentrification-with-publicly-subsidised-art.[2]

A creativity strategy is therefore easily bolted on to business-as-usual urban-development policies, while providing additional ideological cover for market-driven or state-assisted programs of gentrification. It resonates with business-development, real-estate and local-media interests; it calls upon, but rarely threatens to exceed, what are normally quite limited capacities for supply-side intervention at the city-government scale; and it connects by way of positive messaging with established portfolios in arts and cultural policy, city marketing and promotion and small-business support. And on top of all this, such is the elasticity of the creative-cities policy package, it can be adapted for use up and down the urban hierarchy, as well as across a wide range of local and national contexts.

The promise made to lagging cities, most of which had probably worked their

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[2] That is unless a federal lawsuit filed by civil-rights activists in the District of Columbia is successful: it alleges that urban policies targeting members of the creative class discriminate against poor and working-class African Americans (see Schwartzman, 2018).

way through much of the conventional repertoire for economic regeneration with little to show for it, was that creativity might just be the silver bullet. As Daniel Brook (2017: 110) puts it, 'If innovation-minded leaders of the nation's slumping metropolitan economies would just chase college-educated workers by tolerating gays and liberals and upping their indie rock scenes and food-truck menu prices, even Scranton could become the next Austin'. That these promises turned out to be empty ones, for Scranton and countless other struggling cities that took a chance on the Florida tonic, is now widely acknowledged (MacGillis, 2010; Tochterman, 2012; Wetherell, 2017). Or as DePillis (2016) chose rather generously to read it, the Florida thesis proved to be 'half true': it is very difficult indeed, if not impossible, to find verified examples of policy-led creative recovery in mid-sized cities facing the challenges of structural economic decline, but then there are the San Franciscos and New Yorks and Seattles of this world where 'the theory work[ed] entirely too well, as creative and techy types revitalised downtown neighborhoods to the point where only bankers and software developers can afford to live in them comfortably'.

Whether the theory was really 'applied' in San Francisco, New York, or Seattle is quite another matter, as is the question of whether it was creativity policies *per se* that secured these outcomes. More plausible is the claim that the Florida thesis itself merely *redescribed* extant conditions in these and other high-growth cities, presenting this image of new-age success as a tutelary example for others to follow. In one such 'model' city, Amsterdam, which was hardly languishing in the creative doldrums before *The Rise of the Creative Class* came along, a Florida-style makeover did indeed occur, in some respects, albeit more in the service of political validation than economic salvation.[3] The trigger for Amsterdam's policymaking renovation was a book-tour appearance by Richard Florida at a high-profile event out at the city's Westergasfabriek, a former gas works regenerated as a culture park. One of the organisers recalled that this was the 'beginning of the hype … Florida's story was wonderful … And now it's over

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[3] This section of the chapter draws selectively on my article 'Recreative city: Amsterdam, vehicular ideas, and the adaptive spaces of creativity policy', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* **36** (3), 462–485.

here in the Netherlands'! A delegate from the City Council present at the event likewise recalled that it had 'really helped to get creativity, as an issue, on the political agenda. The mayor [was] very convinced about what he calls the creative knowledge economy … Then people were talking about the three Ts and making it seem all very easy: just make your city attractive and miracles will occur! [And who could oppose] making our city attractive?' The following comments from two well-placed local policymakers convey a sense of the way in which creativity was mobilised as a policy narrative in the city:

> Richard Florida has been influential here. He has been here two or three times, and he has met our mayor several times. I'm sure his books have had an impact. But at the same time, I believe that the reason this is so is that people feel that it really fits in [with] what Amsterdam's position has always been. So people saw the reasoning of Florida as supporting the power … that Amsterdam has always had [with its] history of being an open, creative, internationally orientated city. For us, therefore, it's much easier.

> Florida's huge contribution … was that he stressed, he redefined in effect, values and qualities of the city that were *already* [here in Amsterdam]. So we were already facilitating the three Ts, we were already a place where you could find wild places, rough places, cheap places, next to very expensive and sophisticated places. I think that these are the essential characteristics of Amsterdam … But then we got the wind on our back … Because everybody was discussing the Florida thing. What's a creative industry, are we a creative city, do we want to become a creative city? Politicians could say, well, we are working on that already!

After it touched down in Amsterdam, the new credo of creative growth seemed to bring with it the prospect of governing in new ways, with the support of new stakeholders and new strategic objectives … while at the same time changing very little. It would facilitate the discursive repackaging of a loose cluster of urban-development policies (with a social-inclusion accent), without necessitating any substantial reorganisation of the policies themselves, or funding any major new programs. At their most candid, some local officials conceded that the effort was tantamount to a 'do nothing' policy, but one that happened to resonate with the *pre-existing* bundle of competitive strengths, programming lines, cultural traditions and received images on which Amsterdam could credibly trade. In private, many officials distanced themselves from

the Florida thesis; some evidently took pleasure in ridiculing it. Few were taken in by 'the hype', as they routinely called it, and many were slightly embarrassed at its flashy presentation. Savvy and worldly, these were by no means credulous consumers of the Florida tonic. They knew that the 'theory' was questionable and overstated, if not fundamentally flawed. But they also knew that the model's very elasticity provided an expedient means of achieving a range of other goals, while productively repackaging local policies under an alluring urban-development metanarrative that at least appeared to 'fit'.

The nebulous language and soft-interventionist impulses of the creative-cities model could be utilised in the service of a wide range of local objectives, including: the embrace of more light-touch messaging in economic-development policy, in contrast to more heavily resourced programs demanding larger institutional commitments and some kind of 'business case'; the subsidisation of a program of low-rent 'breeding places' for artists and cultural entrepreneurs; the validation of existing promotional assets and positive images in city marketing campaigns; and the opportunistic yoking of at least a portion of the public-spending commitment on culture, heritage and the arts to what could be (re)presented as economic-development objectives. These are just some of the *Realpolitik* projects that have traveled under the flag-of-convenience that is the creativity meta-policy in Amsterdam; the hyperbole of creative-age growth is but a means of legitimating them. This appears to be a more general condition, however. Surveys of creativity policies find them to be both bewilderingly widespread but remarkably repetitive in form and presentation; and as characteristically 'soft interventions', they tend to be reminiscent of 'familiar types of economic development [policy and] generic business support initiatives' (Foord, 2008: 98).

In this sense, as long as policymakers go through the motions, the creativity narrative serves a legitimation (or fig-leaf) function for urban administrations, enabling politically legible actions in the name of economic growth, cultural diversity and inclusive urban development, even in the radical absence of real leverage over structural competitiveness, or indeed the necessary fiscal capacities. Creativity policies

are thriving in the vacuum generated by neoliberal scale politics—cities having assumed (downloaded) responsibilities in the areas of economic development and social welfare, while at the same time being stripped of the powers meaningfully to dispense these roles. In this 'responsibilised' context, talking about (and up) growth potential has become a necessary (though hardly sufficient) means for securing investment. The language of creativity provides a means of freshening up this jaded discourse, albeit mostly in the realm of symbolic gestures, eye-catching events and cultural proxies for what otherwise have to be a much more heavy-lifting economic-development effort. And just as before, the most tangible prize is very often not economic growth itself, since many of the so-called growth coalitions were, all along, 'grant coalitions', lobbing for discretionary *public* investment in the priority projects of the business community and local developers (cf. Peck and Tickell, 1994). Increasingly, governmental funds are allocated on a competitive (or 'challenge') basis to those cities best positioned to articulate a vision for creative (or 'smart') economic development. One of the many ironies here, in light of the rhetoric of creativity as a driver, and leading edge, of economic development, is that creativity policies (and the institutions that promote them) tend to be anything but self-propelling or self-financing. These too are usually grant coalitions. A review of the European experience, for example, pointedly noted the sector's 'entrenched public sector dependency' (Foord, 2008: 98).

Nevertheless, the discourse of creativity provides a convenient and expedient 'umbrella' function, a bigger story within which to (re)locate what might otherwise look like a somewhat incoherent array of existing programs, small initiatives and opportunist maneuvers. In cities like Amsterdam, the creativity script provided a sort of 'cover', and a more uplifting rationale, for a bundle instrumental, short-term and business-as-usual policy actions. As the director of a local think tank put it, 'It's nice for [local politicians] to be connected with a rock-star architect, or a *nom* fashion designer, or to be on the red carpet. It's great. It's fun. It creates great PR. As a politician that's what you want. But that's it … It's quite opportunistic … It is a very short-term perspective: the next

festival, the next dinner, opening a new building, and most of the money [goes] to those kinds of opportunities'.

Consequently, when local policymakers describe creative-cities policy as an 'enabling technology', they do so in a double sense. Concretely, enables further rounds of policy development focused on the (newly constituted) object, and subjects, of creative urban growth. As a *flexible discursive frame*—closely aligned with, but to some degree mystifying, already-existing ideologies, imperatives and practices—it facilitates the consolidation and repackaging of extant lines of policy, with a favourable investment/payoff ratio. In this vein, tired policies can be cheaply refurbished, in the *à la mode* language of creativity; high-profile events and pet projects can be justified anew; marketing and promotion efforts can resound with some new tunes; and a host of (potentially controversial) initiatives involving unseemly doses of property speculation, gentrification, or regressive sociospatial redistribution can be legitimised or sanitised through disarming, soft-focus evocations of creativity, culture and inclusivity.

The serial, adaptive recycling of creative-cities policies, and their accelerated, relational reproduction across urban networks, reflects the *structural and symbolic conformity* of this policy package. It conforms with the underlying insecurity of the urban-managerial id, with late-neoliberal modes of urban governance and with the constraints of flex-labour markets, sociospatial polarisation, endemic interurban competition and gentrified housing markets—all of which the creativity frame endeavours, in effect, to translate into either necessities or virtues. Even if the utopian abstractions of the creative-cities thesis have proven easy to parody, both in theory and in practice, and not least by artists themselves, they have nevertheless found a ready market across urban policymaking communities in search of governing strategies capable of marrying a positive and inclusive development message with post-hoc rationalisations of incremental change. Hence the role of the creative-cities frame as an 'enabling technology', one that facilitates a purposeful re-narration of urban visions, along with the adaptive reuse of available policy instruments. ('As a label, it just works'.)

The creativity fix is emblematic of a new generation of fast-moving urban policy models, which are hardly revolutionary in form or effect, but which have come to define especially intensive zones of emulation and mutation, enrolling networks of followers, borrowers and adapters. It typifies a new generation of urban 'models' that are purposefully disembedded, and unmoored from their local conditions of existence and possibility, after which they can be prescriptively abstracted as ostensibly pan-urban *solutions*. As such, the models themselves are effectively constructed within an interurban space of policy circulation, across which they continue to mutate. Although they may be tagged to certain sites of authenticity or 'truth spots', like San Francisco or Austin, Texas, it may be more accurate to say that these models 'come from nowhere'; they are creatures of the circulatory networks of 'fast' urban policy, mobile manifestations of its symbolic order.

It is in this respect that the creative-cities phenomenon and its widespread policymaking reverberations are best understood as a 'syndrome' (cf. Scott, 2006), rather than some straight-line outcome of Florida's bestselling intervention. There are many members of the culture club, and surely hardly any joined against their will. But there were certainly many that did so in circumstances hardly of its own choosing. In doing so, they were making a calculation, as well as considering what the (viable) local alternatives looked like. Maybe it is the case, pragmatic policymakers will privately concede, that a Florida-style intervention could never really be expected to transform the 'real' economy, but it given that it tends to travel with other 'good' things (subsidies for the arts, a message of social tolerance, some upgrading of streetscapes), then where is the harm?

The appeal of creativity fixes lies in the *work that they do*. This does not mean that they 'work' as policy interventions, in the strict terms of cost-benefit analysis or impact evaluations, although it is worth noting that library of such studies is practically bare, despite the thousands of creativity initiatives that have been launched in cities around the world. Rather, they 'work' in the sense that they serve a purpose, especially in the humdrum world of local economic development, where the cupboard is also

pretty bare when it comes to needle-moving, genuinely effective, yet fiscally affordable and organisationally feasible interventions. In the space of mainstream urban economic-development policymaking, at least in North America, the spectrum of 'viable' interventions at the local scale is hardly wide. Florida-style creative makeovers sit somewhere between the soft centre and its somewhat-progressive flank, with the basic-to-basics deregulation redux favoured by orthodox economists like Edward Glaeser dominating its more no-nonsense, no-frills wing, with the latter making the case for tall buildings and loose zoning, and the former licensing softer, 'cultural' interventions (see Peck, 2014, 2016). Neither of these approaches—Glaeser on the centre right and Florida on the centre left—come close to realising the promises of their advocates, but in truth most local policymakers are savvy enough to know this already. What they also know is that low-impact, minimally-disruptive, and market-friendly interventions of the creative kind are politically expedient, they 'fit.'

Conclusion: a fading fad?

Taking as its focus the 'cultural turn' in urban economic development, in the wake of Richard Florida's signal intervention, this chapter has explored the rise and reception of this all-but ubiquitous policymaking fix. Hailed as a transformative moment by some, but passed off as little more than a sideshow by others, the rise and rather surprising durability of creative-cities policymaking can be seen as significant for at least two reasons. First, the conspicuous speed and spread of its accompanying bundle of frames and formulas, its techniques and its texts, speak to the operations of an ascendant regime of fast-policy development, or urban-policy mobility (see McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011), the reciprocating circuits of which have connected cities near and far in shared programs of experimentation and emulation. In this context, creative-cities policies have come to represent not so much the leading edge of innovation but a cheap-and-cheerful version of the lowest common denominator, a set of normalised routines valued more for their political-economic congruence and feel-good atmospherics than as any sort of trigger, realistically speaking, of transformative change. Second, urban-

creativity policies have come occupy a strategic position in a reconstructed symbolic order, where as a proxy form of economic policymaking they reflect distinctively late-neoliberal tendencies for the simultaneous responsibilisation and incapacitation of municipal government (see Hackworth, 2007; Peck, 2014). They have become stubbornly recurring features on the policymaking landscape not so much because they 'work', but because of the work that they do.

The argument in this chapter has been that the discourses and practices of creative-cities policymaking are barely disruptive of the prevailing order of neoliberal urbanism, for which it furnishes cultural legitimation. The creative-cities model represents a 'soft' policy fix for this neoliberal urban conjuncture, working mostly at the level of signs and symbols, rather than as an impetus for deeper economic or institutional change, being framed in such a way as to coexist with polarising housing and job markets, market-friendly development, retrenched social programming, public-sector austerity and always-intensifying competition for jobs, investment and assets (see Peck *et al*, 2009, 2013). In this context, it makes a (mostly quite disarming) case for modest and discretionary public spending in favour of cultural asset-building and the exploitation of creative potential, while elevating bundle of elite lifestyle preferences to the status of urban-development desiderata. As such, beyond its substantive effects on the content and goals of urban policy, the diffusion of the creativity credo reflects a shift in the policymaking culture itself. For more than 15 years now, Richard Florida has epitomised, indeed embodied, this transformation, even though it was not entirely of his own making of course. It is probably more accurate to say that he too rode, rather than made, the wave.

This said, the fact that Florida has recently changed his tune and to some extent his tone begs the question of whether this act of repositioning will make much of a difference. The author of *The New Urban Crisis* has described as 'deeply disturbing' the revelation, theatrically presented as a traumatic personal discovery, that the spatial clustering of talent, '[t]he greatest driver of innovation, economic growth, and urban prosperity … conferred the lion's share of its benefits on the already privileged, leaving a

staggering 66 percent of the population behind' (Florida, 2017: xviii). Whether this
'discovery' really did require extensive retooling in the methodological techniques of
urban sociology, followed by fearless dives into mysterious datasets, as Florida (2017:
xvii, 241) has claimed, is perhaps beside the point, in light of the fact that '[t]o sense
that American cities were becoming more unequal only took a pair of walking shoes and
eyes unshielded by rose-tinted hipster glasses' (Brook, 2017: 114), or for that matter,
passing familiarity with a raft of socioeconomic trends that have been extensively
documented and debated since at least the time of Reagan (see Harrison and Bluestone,
1988). For his part, Florida evidently relishes the give and take with his fellow urban
gurus, like Joel Kotkin or Edward Glaeser, although his real critics apparently drive him
'nuts'. He has said that has no time for 'the people who run around in geography
departments and who've just given up reality' (quoted in DePillis, 2016), taking critiques
from the right and the left in his stride, as if to affirm his secure position in the
depoliticised centre, or somehow above the fray. In a strange way, though, this may in
fact be where the creative-cities thesis really lives today, not on the edgy frontier of
urban innovation, but deeply embedded in a culturally realigned policymaking
orthodoxy.

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