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The creativity fix

In Richard Florida's "creative city" theory, the creative class dissolves the classical division between the productive bourgeoisie and the bohemian - thereby giving rise to a new creative subject. Jamie Peck discusses the implementation of these ideas in contemporary cities and shows how capital investments intended to attract the creative class to the city prioritize an urban middle class. "Creativity strategies have been crafted to co-exist with urban social problems, not to solve them," writes Peck. "It should come as no surprise, then, that the creative capitals exhibit higher rates of socioeconomic inequality than other cities."

Creativity is the new black. An increasingly fashionable urban-development script has it that an historically distinctive "creative economy" — powered by raw human talent, as cool as it is competitive — is displacing sclerotic, organization-era capitalism. The prime movers in this new new economy are members of the so-called Creative Class, a mobile elite whose finicky lifestyle preferences increasingly shape the geographies of economic growth. We are told that cities — like corporations — have become embroiled in an endless "war for talent", as flows of creative individuals have become the fundamental vectors of innovation-rich growth. And lo, there is man in black at the centre of this burgeoning creativity fad — Richard Florida, who makes frequent recourse to sartorial signifiers in his best-selling primers on the creative economy. As an architect and popularizer of the creative class thesis, Florida has been feted around the world as a cool-cities guru. His germinal texts on the creativity thesis serve, simultaneously, as cliff notes for Creative Economics 101, as how-to manuals for anxious city leaders and opportunistic policymakers, and as lifestyle guides for the rising class of creatives.¹ While Florida's catchy notions concerning the creative city and its favoured inhabitants have certainly benefited from some savvy promotion, their evident allure and alleged salience have little to do with the intrinsic explanatory power of the model of creative growth — "my theory"² — or indeed the inventiveness of the associated marketing push. Rather, the creative-cities thesis has travelled so far so fast because — as a seductive urban development script-cum-vision, complete with prescriptively defined policy practices and positions — it has been artfully crafted for today's neoliberalized political-economic terrain.

The creativity script encodes an engaging "economic imaginary," based on a set of principles that combine cultural libertarianism and contemporary urban-design motifs with neoliberal economic imperatives. Undeniably, there are liberal and even progressive themes running through the creativity script — notably, its explicit embrace of social diversity, arts, and culture, together with its articulation of a positive economic role for (central) cities. But these pinkish elements are folded into a development vision that is profoundly

market orientated (creative cities, assets, and actors, always in competition) and individualistic (creative subjects as hedonistic free agents). So while the creativity thesis has generated attention, and controversy in some conservative circles, for highlighting the positive contribution of gays and lesbians to the life of cities, here these contributions are ultimately valued for their economic functionality, or as mere indicators of a favourable competitive climate. Likewise, art and culture are discursively commodified, as productive assets and positive externalities of creative capitalism, while streetlife and authenticity are also located within the circuits of (accelerating) interurban competition. For all its social-liberal compensations, the creativity script works with grain of the contemporary *realpolitik*. It offers a feel-good but fiscally undemanding development vision, consistent with a post-entitlement, intensively competitive urban realm. It facilitates revamped forms of civic boosterism (flogging cultural assets), alongside the gratification of middle-class consumption desires and the lubrication both of flexible labour markets and gentrifying housing markets. The creativity script also subtly relegitimizes regressive social redistributions within the city: the designated overclass of creatives are held to have *earned* their superior position in the creative city, by virtue of raw talent and creative capital, validated through the market, and it is they who must be catered to in what amounts to a post-progressive urban policy. The lumpen classes of service and manual workers, on the other hand, are so positioned in the new socioeconomic structure by virtue of their creative deficits, and they play little or no positive role in Florida's account of the creative economy. They must be content with lectures on creative bootstrapping and — in lieu of their own creative awakening — the benefit of downward-trickling positive externalities like the opportunity to wait tables for the creative bohemians.

The discourses and practices of creative-cities policymaking are barely disruptive of the prevailing order of neoliberal urbanism, based inter alia on polarizing labour and housing markets, property- and market-led development, retrenched public services and social programming, and accelerating intercity competition for jobs, investment, and assets.³ The creative cities thesis represents a "soft" policy fix for this neoliberal urban conjuncture, making the case for modest and discretionary public spending on creative assets, while raising a favoured bundle of middle-class lifestyles — based on self-indulgent forms of overwork, expressive play, and conspicuous consumption — to the status of an urban-development objective. Urban leaders, a key audience for the creativity shtick, are likewise urged to do what it takes to transform their cities into "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 shiny, creative economy. Discursively downloading both risk and responsibility, the creative-city concept is predicated on, presumes and (re)produces the dominant market order. So is revealed the funky side of neoliberal urban-development politics.

Creative subjects are celebrated for their hypermobility and for their strictly circumscribed, individualistic commitments to place. These economic hipsters thrive in buzzing 24/7 neighbourhoods, where they can satisfy their craving for "heart-throbbingly real" experiences,⁴ but at the drop of a hat may chose to relocate to an even more happening place. It follows that anything short of public pandering to the needs and desires of the restless creatives is practically guaranteed to secure their automatic "flight".⁵ The creativity discourse amounts to a paean to the international talent market and its favoured agents, to which cities and regions must be performatively deferential. In this retreat of

the orthodox globalization script, the argument for decisive local action — featherbedding the creative supply side — is presented as no less than a new urban imperative. Cities must "attract the new 'creative class' with hip neighbourhoods, an arts scene and a gay-friendly atmosphere — or they'll go the way of Detroit".⁶ Which way, then, to the creative city?

The creativity catechism...

Routinely overstated and hyperbolic, Florida's essential argument is that human creativity has become the engine of twenty-first century economic development, such that the competitiveness of nations and cities is increasingly rooted in the capacity to attract, retain, and "nurture" talented individuals — the newly dominant factor of production. For Florida, human creativity is the "defining feature of economic life [...] [It] has come to be valued — and systems have evolved to encourage and harness it — because new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good economic things flow from it."⁷ What this account lacks in causal analysis it makes up for in alliterative chutzpah. Success in the new, creative economy is down to three T's — technology, talent, and tolerance. Technological capacity is a precondition for creative growth, but on its own is insufficient. The gist, though, is that cities with a shot at the creative big time must have a strong cluster of high-tech companies and a good university. The lifeblood of the system is the flow of talented individuals, the second T, this restless-but-critical factor of production having become the carrier of creative potential. Productive capacity is therefore located not in institutional matrices or production systems, but in the heads and hearts of creative individuals. Yet a city's development strategies will add up to naught in the absence of the third T, tolerance, where open, dynamic, and heterodox local cultures represent the supply-side foundations upon which creative meccas are built. As Florida informed the readers of *Salon* magazine:

[I]n every economic measure, Detroit and Pittsburgh should be trouncing Austin. These are places that had probably two of the greatest technological powerhouses of their time — they were the Silicon Valleys of their day. Detroit in automotive, Pittsburgh in steel and chemicals [...] What happened, however, was that both places fell victim to institutional and cultural sclerosis. They got trapped in the organizational age; they thought we really live in a patriarchal, white, corporate society and that the key to success was to strap on your tie, go to work 9 to 5, and behave yourself. There was no room for people with new ideas ... [In contrast, what] Austin did was they really hustled. In the 1980s and 1990s they said, "We want to grab some of these high-tech companies," so they did that. [Then] they said, "We're going to make this a fun place to live" [...] They created a lifestyle mentality, where Pittsburgh and Detroit were still trapped in that Protestant-ethic/bohemian-ethic split, where people were saying, "You can't have fun!" or "What do you mean play in a rock band? Cut your hair and go to work, son. That's what's important." Well, Austin was saying, "No, no, no, you're a creative. You want to play in a rock band at night and do semiconductor work in the day? C'mon! And if you want to come in at 10 the next morning and you're a little hung over or you're smoking dope, that's cool." [...] Austin saw this from day one.⁸

Florida uses this kind of sophomoric sociology to make the argument that, riding the new wave of urban economic development, the creatives have inherited the earth, and it is they who now make the rules. The logical, if stark, conclusion is that "the Creative Class has become the dominant class in society".⁹ Florida softens the edges of this millennial pronouncement with his own form of new-age atmospherics: he frequently declares that every human being has the capacity to be creative, just as every city has a shot at becoming a creative hot spot.

The economics of creativity are more utilitarian: from the perspective of corporations and cities (the difference hardly seems to matter in this instance), talented workers are a scarce resource, yet they are both highly mobile and discerning in their tastes; therefore, they must be given what they want or they will not come/stay; without them, there is only creative disinvestment and economic decline. In the context of a persistent shortfall in the supply of talent, cities must learn what corporations have before them been forced to learn, that if they do not take steps to establish the right "people climate" for creative workers, if they are not appropriately welcoming, "they will wither and die".¹⁰ There are roles for government in this development vision, but they are safely located on the supply side of the creative economy: establishing the right kind of urban ambience becomes the key to "harnessing" creativity.

Paradoxically, Florida seeks to celebrate certain "qualities of place," like buzz and cosmopolitanism, while at the same time recirculating pernicious neoliberal narratives of external competitive threat/vulnerability to flight.

The core of the challenge is what I've come to see as the new global competition for talent, a phenomenon that promises to radically reshape the world in the coming decades. No longer will economic might amass in countries according to their natural resources, manufacturing excellence, military dominance, or even scientific and technological prowess. Today, the terms of competition revolve around a central axis: a nation's ability to mobilize, attract, and retain human creative talent [...] The global talent pool and the high-end, high-margin creative industries that used to be the sole province of the US and the crucial source of its prosperity have begun to disperse around the globe. A host of countries — Ireland, Finland, Canada, Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand among them — are investing in higher education, producing creative people, and churning out cutting-edge products, from cellular phones to computer software to blockbuster movies.¹¹

It follows that no-one, *and nowhere*, is safe from this new competitive threat. Even powerful economies can fall prey to new forms of creative competition, which (along with the hyperbole) is said to be "heating up".¹²

Help is, however, at hand, since Florida's self-appointed role is not simply to disclose the new economic order. He is also a purveyor, conveniently, of winning urban strategies. Right along with the identification of policy imperatives comes a suite of new policy solutions, all designed to give the creatives what they want, while securing the position of cities within the evolving creative division of labour. Figuring out what the creatives want, and where they want to be, was a primary task of Florida's opening salvo in the creativity debate, *The rise of the creative class*. This bestselling book probed

the locational proclivities of the creative class using a combination of pop-culture anecdotes, focus groups with young, restless, and talented people, excruciating insights into Florida's own creative lifestyle, and supposedly suggestive spatial correlations, for instance between gays and growth. The results — sparsely documented from a social-scientific perspective, but nevertheless emphatically stated — indicated that the creative class yearn, above all, to "validate their identities." Creatives seek out neighbourhoods amply endowed with the kind of amenities that allow them to maintain an experientially intensive work-life balance. They are drawn to "plug and play" communities, where social entry barriers are low, where heterogeneity is actively embraced, where loose ties prevail, where there is plenty of scope for creative commingling. These are communities that creatives "can move into and put together a life — or at least a facsimile of a life — in a week".¹³ Such diagnostically-critical conditions are signalled by conspicuous presence of gays and lesbians, designated here both as the "canaries of the creative economy" and as "harbingers of redevelopment and gentrification in distressed urban neighbourhoods".¹⁴ Other more concrete indicators of urban edginess include "authentic" historical buildings, converted lofts, walkable streets, plenty of coffee shops, art and live-music spaces, indigenous street culture, and a range of other typical features of gentrifying, mixed-use, inner-urban neighbourhoods.

These environments serve as creative incubators. *Homo creativus* thrives on weak attachments and noncommittal relationships, most often mediated through the market. These atomized actors seem to lack families and non-market support systems, revelling instead in long hours of work and individualistic competition. This twenty-first century version of economic man may have a better social life, but he is still economic man. As a member of the creative class, Florida understands that "there is no corporation or other large institution that will take care of us — that we are truly on our own."¹⁵ The edgy urban neighbourhood facilitates and enables this productive lifestyle, allowing the creatives to plug into the new economy and play as hard as they like. The defining characteristics of this new urban überclass are all framed in competitive terms. They are, one might say, neoliberals *dressed in black*. It takes no effort at all to translate the founding principles of the creative doctrine into just such terms.

Since it is the creatives who are the primary decision-makers in Florida's account, then it is ultimately their choices — writ large — that shape the spatial division of creative labour, the creative urban hierarchy, and the parameters of the interurban talent war. And, "when it comes down to it, creative people choose *regions*," Florida explains, "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."¹⁶ Just like the wave of entrepreneurial urban strategies that preceded it, this form of creative interurban competition is both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating: establishing open, plug-and-play communities that are welcoming of restive creative types becomes tantamount to both enabling and *subsidizing* the very forms of mobility that were the source of competitive anxiety in the first place. But since there is (again) only one game in town, cities had better make sure they are ready to participate, to do what is necessary, or they will certainly lose out. This is a variant on the "do it, or else" style of neoliberal urban policymaking, in which favoured strategies are translated into economic imperatives, a new-age variant of smokestack chasing.¹⁷ Again, cities must be reflexively responsive to a hypercompetitive

external environment, comprising "liberalized" flows of capital, public investment, consumer dollars... and now talent workers:

Lasting competitive advantage today will not simply amass in those countries and regions that can generate the most creative, innovative, or entrepreneurial output. The places that will be most able to absorb new energies will be those that are both open to diversity and also capable of internalizing the externalities that the creative economy gives rise to [...] The most successful places will require a *socially adaptive* capability that will enable them to pioneer new fields and innovative industries.¹⁸

The role for government, in this context, is to invest in the creative supply side, Florida's chameleon-like position being to sanction discretionary, pink-tinged interventions at the local scale, while demanding that big government 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 to leveraging the creative age and allowing it to emerge," Florida explains, the more limited function of the State being to "set up the parameters in which market-based actions take place".¹⁹ Priming the creative pump therefore becomes a task for *urban* leaders; the way forward is with "grassroots initiatives" and "community-oriented efforts". Step forward the street-level activists of the creative age.

... and its converts

The response to the creative cities thesis amongst urban policymaking communities around the world has bordered on the ecstatic. Florida's ideas have been picked up by mayors, regional development agencies, policy entrepreneurs, advisors, and consultants across the United States, Europe, Australasia, and parts of Asia, both in wannabe locations at the bottom of his creative league tables (which are now available in numerous countries) and in established centres like London, Toronto, and Melbourne. This "fast policy" success story may be attributable less to the revolutionary or transformative nature of the Florida thesis itself, more to its character as a minimally disruptive "soft neoliberal" fix. The story is, in many ways, a familiar one, though the cast of characters has changed. National governments just have to get out of the way for the creative economy to flourish; effective urban responses call for bold leadership and vision, but some kind of response is essential for any city that wants to stay in the game; self-managing and hyperactive creatives, as bearers of creative market forces, will look after the rest, so earning their status as privileged urban subjects.

In this neoliberalized 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 creativity rubric. The creative cities policy fix can be deployed to accessorize extant, market-based urban development agendas, with the minimum of interference to established interests and constituencies. At root, it simply adds a livability-lifestyle component to the established urban competitiveness stance. The typical mayor is likely to see few downsides to making the city safe for the creative class. Establishment power elites have little to fear from conspicuous urban consumption, gen-x marketing campaigns, key-worker attraction strategies, and gentrification-with-public-art. A creativity strategy is easily bolted on to

business-as-usual urban-development policies, while providing additional ideological cover for market-driven or state-assisted programs of gentrification. Inner-city embourgeoisement, in the creativity script, is represented as a necessary prerequisite for economic development: *hey presto*, thorny political problem becomes competitive asset!

Creative cities policies, of course, would hardly be spreading like wildfire if they represented a revolutionary challenge to the neoliberal status quo. In fact, they are being stamped out cookie-cutter style across the urban landscape, spanning a quite remarkable range of settings²⁰ having become policies of choice, in particular, for those left-leaning mayors who have learned to live with, if not love, the market order. 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 make sure that each plan contains at least a dash of local cultural "authenticity", while nodding to the right "grassroots" constituencies in each city.

To take just one of dozens of (very) similar examples: Michigan's recently enacted Cool Cities program, derived directly from the creativity playbook, retasks state funds to the goal of localized gentrification, hipster-style, in the hope that this will attract the creative class. Beneath the rhetoric of avant-garde economic development, this entails the public subsidy of various kinds of "creative" collective goods and infrastructure projects, focused exclusively on locations with *demonstrated* development potential (a.k.a. "happening", gentrifying neighbourhoods). Making Michigan's cities attractive to the creative class has entailed a youth-oriented marketing program; extensive learning from other cities and from creative citizens themselves (given that "government cannot create 'cool'"); and a bundle of mostly repackaged policies aimed at the rehabilitation of historic buildings (specifically, theatres, galleries, mixed-use housing), farmers' markets, streetscaping and public art, physical infrastructure development, façade improvements, outdoor recreation facilities, greenspace, parks, pavilions, and, if necessary, demolition.²¹

Posing in fashionable shades to launch the program, Michigan's Governor, Jennifer Granholm, insisted that it was essential that this struggling, auto-industry state catch the *next* wave of economic development. Michigan has been experiencing an "exodus" of young, highly educated people in recent years, as "large numbers of talented workers have fled the state in search of employment".²² According to the creativity script, the way to alleviate Michigan's economic decline is to reverse this critical flow of talent, since in the new knowledge economy jobs follow workers, not the other way around. Curiously, even though Michigan's creative class decamped "in search of employment," we are expected to believe that they will be attracted *back* by enhanced urban environments, and *then* the state's economy will revive: "Given the right mix of services and amenities, this group will 'vote with their feet' and relocate to vibrant, walkable, mixed-use communities. Attracted by a talented, diverse workforce, business will follow".²³

The target demographic for the Cool Cities program is defined as college-educated young professionals in core fields like science and engineering, art and design, entertainment, computing, and the media, whose defining characteristics include a "preference for lifestyle," distinctive

purchasing patterns (reflecting individuality and self-statement), and above all, *mobility*:

[T]oday's young professional workforce is more interested in working as a means of experiencing and enjoying their lifestyle than their counterparts in decades past. This group is increasingly mobile, and in order to attract and retain them, cities have to change their paradigm of physical and social development. The city itself has to be attractive, not only to business, but also to the workforce.²⁴

But will young Michiganders, who left the state in search of better career opportunities (apparently having had their fill of the lifestyle options of Flint, Kalamazoo, and Saginaw), *really* be tempted back by the policy-induced trendification of their old neighbourhoods? Even if the goal of "making Michigan the 'coolest' state in the nation" is a realistic one, it sits rather awkwardly with the sobering realities of structural economic decline and public-sector downsizing in a state hardly renowned as a hipster haven.²⁵ Michigan has one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation, the auto industry has entered a(nother) major phase of restructuring, and the rate of job loss in the state has been characterized by local commentators as "staggering".²⁶ The city's economic trajectory has been described by David Littman, chief economist at Comerica Bank, as a "graveyard spiral".²⁷

Inhospitable territory for creative cities strategies? Apparently not. In some respects, the level of enthusiasm for creativity makeovers may be inversely proportional to the scale of the economic challenge confronting local policymakers. Even in the rustbelt capitals, the creativity cult has been recruiting new members. CreateDetroit, an offshoot of the state's Cool Cities program established in 2003, characteristically self-describes as a "grassroots organization", despite sponsorship from the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Governor's Office, the City of Detroit, Wayne State University, Detroit Renaissance, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, and corporations like Apple and SBC. CreateDetroit has been striving to turn around the flagging fortunes of Motown by making it a "destination city" for the creative class. Detroit was ranked 39th out of 49 major cities in Florida's original "creativity index," but as the creative economist himself has pointed out, this means that the city has more creative *potential* than almost anywhere in the nation (see Klein 2004b).²⁸ CreateDetroit is pursuing similar strategies to a range of other (newly designated) creative bottomfeeders, like Memphis and Tampa Bay, who were similarly spurred to action by their lowly rankings in Florida's widely publicized league tables.²⁹ These include periodic events that splice the arts and urban development; lobbying for creative investment; creatively themed marketing and promotion activities; and hobnobbing initiatives like "Connect Four," where artists, writers, designers and media types can "meet, mingle, hunt, gather, network, and play".

"The idea behind CreateDetroit," a founding member explained, "is to create a long-range plan, focused on making the Detroit region a magnet for new economy talent. The stakes are high. Those regions that do not flourish in the new creative economy will fail, according to Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida".³⁰ A formative early step for CreateDetroit was to invest in one of the professor's two-day "regional transformation" workshops, photographs from which adorn the group's web site. Following a well-established methodology, the event featured a range of local performance artists, plenty of feel-good provincial pride (along with *I am Detroit* t-shirts),

and a 350–person audience heavily tilted towards the arts and cultural communities, together with local policymakers and advocates. Florida's polished performance was greeted with enthusiasm, and there was widespread support for his populist rendering of "pro–people" economic development. His energetically delivered message, that Detroit was losing out in the balance of trade in creativity, focused attention on the out–migration of "talented" individuals, while validating a distinctive set of arts–intensive investments in the city. An irreparable failure of the computer system (and its backup) unfortunately marred the audience–participation segment of the workshop, in which attendees were invited to vote on their city's creative strengths and weakness prior to revelations of the "actual data" — perhaps calling attention to some of Detroit's deficits on the first T of technology. But most of the participants, especially those in the (previously–neglected) arts and cultural communities, seem to have left invigorated by Florida's "call to arms to take themselves seriously as an economic force".³¹

"The purpose of the event," Florida insisted, was not for "me and my team to come to Detroit and prescribe fixes. What will help Detroit is for swelling grassroots efforts like CreateDetroit to say, "This is where we want to be in the future. This is what we plan to do to get there".³² However, some noted that, for all his talk of "reach[ing] down and harnessing that energy," Florida failed to offer the hungry audience "a single concrete suggestion".³³ Others were left wondering whether the creative backwash, should it ever reach the shores of Lake Michigan, would really lift all boats. Buzz aside, most recognized that this was in many respects a canned presentation, and that Florida's troupe would soon be pulling "up their tent stakes, and mov[ing] on to their next destination".³⁴

Florida had the air of a motivational speaker, claiming that Detroit has more raw potential than any other city in the nation. He gave a brief synopsis of his concept of what makes a city livable, vibrant place — but other than the obligatory White Stripes and Eminem references, the speech could have been delivered in Anyville, USA.³⁵

In a sense, of course, the speech *had* been delivered in Anyville, a generic location for which it was carefully crafted. Scores of cities have heard, and often responded to, the same basic message, with each being urged to value — and valorize — whatever creative assets they might have to hand. (So, the creativity tonic for Milwaukee is ginned up with a dash of Liberace and the Violent Femmes, while Baltimore's makeover references Billie Holiday and Frank Zappa — what creative–city consultants now routinely decant as the "audio identities" of place.) According to Dr. Florida's prescription, practically any city can respond to the creativity treatment, at least as long as their civic leaders "get it".³⁶

On the face of it at least, Detroit's "hip hop mayor", Kwame Kilpatrick, still under 40 and the proud wearer of a diamond ear stud, gets it. The Mayor offered a fulsome introduction to Florida when he came to Detroit. (On this occasion, the Mayor chose not to mention his opposition to same–sex marriage, which would not earn him high marks on the Tolerance scorecard.) While the realistic prospects of a creativity–fuelled economic turnaround in Detroit may be remote, the city can hardly be faulted for its willingness to give anything a try. Its population has fallen by half since the mid–1950s; its unemployment rate is twice the state's average and getting on for three times the national average; 72 percent of the city's public school children receive free

school meals (up from 61 percent in 2001); and "white flight has become bright flight, with families and people earning more than \$50 000 a year leading the way out of town".³⁷ For the city's government, sustained population loss, coupled with a declining tax base, has been fueling an unprecedented and unresolved fiscal crisis: Mayor Kilpatrick's administration hovers on the brink of receivership, having cut bus services, closed the city zoo and 34 schools, and laid off one in ten of the municipal workforce. The City has also been considering closing "non-essential departments," including — note unfortunate inconsistencies — the Department of Culture, Art & Tourism, and turning off street lights. Its paralyzing three-year deficit amounts to just under one quarter of annual general fund revenues, while the first round of serious cuts has been said to threaten "a vicious cycle for a city already on the edge".³⁸

Compared to the usual package of corporate tax breaks and big-box development subsidies, cool-cities policies certainly look like a break with the past. While there may be novelty in urban policymakers sharing the stage with fashion designers and hip-hop artists, none of this makes the causal relationships between buzz and economic growth any more real. But none of this will prevent cities, with few other realistic options, from trying. Recall, however, how entrepreneurial urban strategies proliferated during the 1980s and 1990s, facilitated by competitive leverage and the weak emulation of "winning" formulas, quickly stacking the odds against even the most enthusiastic of converts.³⁹ Coming on the heels of this experience, the creativity fix also seduces local actors with the no-less false promise that any *and every* city can win in the battle for talent. Under such circumstances, the first-mover advantages for a few quickly descend into zero- or negative-sum games: more players pursue the same mobile resources, the price of "success" rises, the chances of positive outcomes fall. In cities like Detroit, the odds look daunting. This said, there remains plenty of enthusiasm amongst the activists at CreateDetroit for what they are calling "Plan B [...] [making] sure the talent comes here".⁴⁰ Plan A was automobile manufacturing.

The Cool Cities program may indeed be an "economic development strategy that puts 'creative people' first",⁴¹ but in cities like Detroit these look like perversely indulgent priorities. Should the Motor City really be investing its dwindling tax revenues in a market-following means of underwriting middle-class house prices and consumption desires, with distributional consequences that seem certain to be socially and spatially regressive? Entrenched problems like structural unemployment, residential inequality, working poverty, and racialized exclusion are barely even addressed by this form of cappuccino urban politics. According to urban historian, Matt Lassiter, "the Rust Belt capital of Detroit has basically adopted the Sunbelt strategy of Atlanta and Los Angeles: ignore social problems of segregation and poverty, and instead try to transform the image rather than the reality of the central city".⁴² Creativity strategies have been crafted to *co-exist* with these problems, not to solve them. It should come as no surprise, then, that the creative capitals exhibit higher rates of socioeconomic inequality than other cities, as has been belatedly acknowledged by Florida himself.⁴³ This awkward correlation is quite consistent, of course, with the argument that creativity strategies are predicated upon, and constitutively realized in the context of, uneven modes of urban growth and neoliberal politics. In this light, the creativity fix begins to look less like a solution to, and more like a symptom of, Detroit's problems.

Conclusion: creativity redux

Beneath the creative rhetoric, Florida presents a familiar urban–economic development story: 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, whatever you do, don't buck the market. The emphasis on the mobilization 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*. Notwithstanding some conventional neoliberal frames of reference, the creativity fix is also a distinctive development vision, tailored to appeal to left–tilting mayors, with its easily digestible cocktail of cultural liberalism and economic rationality. Moreover, it is very much a *mobilizing* discourse, which actively *reconstitutes* external competitive threats in novel terms, while pointedly defining new *responses*, together with new roles for an enlarged network of urban policy protagonists and beneficiaries. It establishes a fresh set of "models" of urban development, distilling the essence of their success into a series of portable policy routines and mobile rationalities. It nudges urban leaders to contemplate new forms of fiscally modest, supply–side investment, mostly targeted at economically secure residents of neighbourhoods in which property prices are already on the up.

The seductiveness of creativity strategies must be understood in terms of their basic complementarity with prevailing neoliberal development fixes, their compatibility with discretionary, selective, and symbolic supply–side policymaking, and their conformity with the attendant array of development interests. Creativity strategies presume, work with, and subtly remake the neoliberalized terrain of urban politics, placing commodified assets like the arts and street culture into the sphere of interurban competition, enabling the formation of new local political channels and constituencies, and constituting new objects and subjects of urban governance. Creativity strategies work upon, indeed celebrate, mobile and adaptive creative subjects, making the case for public investment in their preferred urban milieu, while shifting the primary focus of proactive governance towards the "needs" of a techno–bohemian slice of the middle–class. Taking the flexible/insecure/unequal economy as given, these post–progressive urban strategies lionize a creative elite while offering the residualized majority the meager consolation of crumbs from the creative table. They enforce soft–disciplinary modes of creative governmentality based on mandatory individualism, relentless innovation, and 24/7 productivity. Say what you will about the fuzzy causality in Florida's model, its central message has certainly struck a chord. But as Detroit writer Carey Wallace, among others, has begun to wonder, does the creativity craze represent "a new truth, or something people want very much to believe?"⁴⁴

¹ Richard Florida, *The rise of the creative class* (2002), *Cities and the creative class* (2005), *The flight of the creative class* (2005).

² Florida, *The flight of the creative class*, p. 20.

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