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The struggle for creativity
Creativity as struggle

Tino Buchholz

Creativity is fancy, glamorous and desirable. Who can be against creativity? At the same time it is used selectively and consists of precarious and hard work. When it comes down to urban development the ambivalence of the concept primarily involves the contradiction between non-commercial initiatives, self-exploitation and the contemporary hype around the creative city. The advantage, frankly is, that creative working conditions are on the political agenda today – even though in need for radical democratization.

The discussion around the creative industry is almost 30 years old (Andersson 1985, Andersson et al. 2011). The hype around the creative city began a decade ago (Florida 2002), it is global in scope and about to reach its peak. After clusters and networks, creativity is one of the key concepts in today's urban renewal, crucial stimulus for gentrification processes and "probably the single most important urban development strategy at the present time" (Peck 2011). It is a "vehicular idea" (McLennan 2004, Peck 2012) that travels the world and may soon be replaced by another vehicular catch phrase. It responds to the changing economy re-arranging industrial labour on a global scale. It focuses on soft indicators of advanced capitalist cities, such as knowledge, design, services and entertainment to be a productive part in the global division of labour.

In the following, I will follow the rationale of my documentary *Creativity and the Capitalist City – The struggle for affordable space in Amsterdam* (Buchholz 2011; www.creativecapitalistcity.org) and address the question of creativity as a question of struggle, not only in Amsterdam. All quotes, if not indicated differently, derive from this research and art project. Hence, I want to concentrate on two drivers of the creative city: (a) the role of urban social movements (i.e. squatting activists) and the threat and reality of cooptation by neoliberal urban policies and (b) the role of the real estate market and temporary housing, so called Anti-Squat contracts, that replace squatters and accommodate low-budget initiatives with no housing rights whatsoever.

A recently published *Handbook of Creative Cities* (Andersson *et al*. 2011) gathers the key proponents of the human capital discourse and highlights the subsequent emergence of human creativity as a stimulus for economic development. I will not go into its details here but predominantly draw on the critique by economic geographer Jamie Peck (2005, 2007, 2011, 2012), who has worked extensively on the subject, who is the narrator of my film, and whom the afore mentioned handbook is lacking. Along with prior works the Florida (2002) concept centrally involves the global shift in industrial labour. It focuses on the significance of mental labour, i.e. technology, tolerance and talent. "'Creative class' is the shorthand I use to

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describe the roughly one-third of U.S. and global workers who have the good fortune to be compensated monetarily for their creative output" (Florida 2005: 4). The class concept is not unproblematic and criticized to be elitist. Florida's contribution to urban analysis is denoted to be a "feel good policy" (Peck 2011), that merely re-describes socio-economic class relations in the name of creativity.

"It actually provides a justification for social inequality. It says, it is the creative class who are the winning one third of the society and the losing two thirds must learn to live like the winners. And so it does nothing other than to tell the working class or the serving caste they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That is in the end a recipe for more of the same. It legitimizes inequality" (Peck 2011).

The role of urban movements

In Amsterdam, Florida's story has been introduced in 2003 (Peck 2012). The Dutch "breeding place" program (http://bureaubroedplaatsen.amsterdam.nl/) is a creative flagship project that clearly indicates prior conflicts and later transformation (i.e. legalization of squats). Jaap Schoufour, the director of the program puts it as follows:

"The breeding place program is based in fact on the squatting movement, which popped up in the 1960s, 70s, 80s … In fact, these squatting groups were wiped out of the warehouses at the end of the 90s in Amsterdam ... In these warehouses all kinds of cultural and creative initiatives settled … [so] they addressed themselves to the city council by saying: 'well, look here, you can wipe us out. We know, we will lose this battle, but beware – we contribute to this city as well. Even economically we contribute to the city'".

Today's breeding places, in this sense, mirror the housing struggles and squatter movements of the past. Here, urban movements scandalized the housing shortage vis-à-vis speculative vacancy and appropriated space. The past 10 years, however, have shown a representation of the squatters' (do-it-yourself) logic articulated in the language of the creative industry. In this context, squatters do not necessarily represent a threat but an asset to the political economy. Even when choosing a deviant path squatters can hardly leave the economic framework and are likely to create alternative products and markets (Uitermark 2004).

Not seldomly, urban movements play a crucial role – as pioneers – in redevelopment or gentrification processes. Hans Pruijt (2012) i.e. differentiates between various types of squatters, where next to 'deprivation-based' and 'political squatters', 'conservational' and 'entrepreneurial' squatters follow different strategies in Europe. This differentiation is helpful, since squatting initiatives in Western Europe today may not be confused with revolutionary movements that have the capability to seriously contest the capitalist production of space.

Progressive activists are aware of the struggle for creativity, their role and range of activism (see Amsterdam Gallery Schijnheilig). For squatting activist, Momo, the problem of many activists is that they believe their own propaganda: "You have to be very realistic and materialistic in order to survive in such a context. If they say: you are the nice guys, because you are the artists, then you have to take their word and turn it around in their mouth: 'Of course we're the artists. We are the only real artists, you are the fakes. So give us everything, if you don't give us anything, we will riot'".

Vacancy management by Anti-Squat

After the squatting ban in the Netherlands in 2010 (Buchholz 2009) the struggle for affordable space has shifted from a user's logic (tolerating squats when vacant for more than one year) to an owner's logic (property protection + vacancy management = Anti-Squat) and

temporary user's allowances. The idea of Anti-Squat (Anti-Kraak) derives from security agencies, which realized that 'live-in guardians' are a more effective and cheaper form of property protection than a patrol guard. The building is maintained and secured from squatting and vandalism. Affordable housing is a side effect.

While Dutch Anti-Squat guardians were paid for their service 30 years ago, today the agencies have capitalized the struggle for affordable space in contested housing markets and "Make space pay . . . while your property is vacant" (http://uk.cameloteurope.com/). They ask for rent-like payments but refuse to call it rent. This semantic twist is crucial, as Anti-Squat offers temporary 'user's allowances' for 'live-in guardians' but no (tenant) protection or legal rights to stay put.

Former schools, run down houses awaiting demolition and speculative vacancies in the housing and office market are promoted as a creative market solution. The use of space, however, is heavily restricted (no pets, no kids, no parties, no smoking etc.) and can be cancelled within 2-4 weeks. Anti-Squatters are caretakers, cleaners, guardians but not tenants. While prior to the squatting ban squatters enjoyed housing rights (close to tenant protection), Anti-Squat still is more of a job and conflicts with privacy and housing rights. Interestingly, it seems to work for approx. 50,000 people in the Netherlands. Ironically, this is also the estimate of former squatters from 1964-1999 (Duivenvoorden 2000), indicating the continued lack of affordable housing.

So far, the agencies have been very careful with their profiling. They primarily target young people, students, artists, singles and so on. So far, conflicts are still not a major issue. Some Anti-Squatters even hold more than one site for their living and working purposes. For an explicit critique of the Anti-Squat strategy see the Dutch Union of Precarious Dwellers.

While Anti-Squat has started to temporarily provide cheap working space for artists in the early 1990s, it has developed into a major alternative for housing that is affordable. Market leader 'Camelot' is the first agency to expand its services from the Netherlands to Belgium, since 2001 in UK and Ireland, since 2010 France and Germany.

In short, Anti-Squat is the most flexible instrument for property owners today and effectively installs up a 3rd class housing market in Western European cities. The civil squatting option benefited the Dutch creative status quo for a long time. It was a simple but fundamental difference to the global business as usual. The neoliberal roll-back (Brenner and Theodore 2002) of progressive policies, however, already shows a decline of creative initiatives and reinforces struggle.

Conclusion

Creativity and affordability are crucially inter-connected. The struggle around affordability is a pre-condition for creativity – and one has to be very creative these days to be able to make a living in a creative capitalist city.

Creative activity today is to a large extent co-opted by an economic logic. It is effectively pushed into class structure and competition. The decline in welfare, social housing and increased deregulation of market forces, however, fit the Florida argument, together with his promotion of the New American Dream (Florida 2003)

The instrumental conception and exclusionary effects inherent to creative city policies can be traced in numerous projects. Most recently, when the Ruhr Region in Germany was announced the Cultural Capital of Europe 2010. During that summer two art-squat initiatives emphasized the grassroots of creativity claiming abandoned spaces in Essen and Dortmund

(http://netzwerk-x.org/). Regardless of the Florida logic, they were evicted immediately. While such repression does not come as a surprise, Richard Florida, on the other hand, did support the Hamburg art-squat 'Gängeviertel' (http://das-gaengeviertel.info/) in 2009 arguing it would fit in nicely into a creative city strategy. Earlier, he also advocated for toleration of longhaired, hashish users who may be programmers, by basically asking: what's the point, if they do their job well (see Peck 2007)? The discussion above may signal the ambivalence of the concept and its criticism by left and right wing professionals, activists and policy makers.

Creativity is one of the key concepts in today's urban renewal, a crucial stimulus for gentrification processes

It would be silly, if creativity took serious damage from Richard Florida and his mere economic interpretation. Creativity is not an end in itself but aims for something. That's a normative issue – to be defined. Creative upgrading processes in the neighbourhood are not necessarily the problem, if they benefit the local residents. The problem usually is that any improvement is seen (and functions) as an investment to stimulate real estate prices resulting in displacement and higher rents (gentrification).

In any case, the role of social movements will remain crucial to creative urban re-development, and so will be the discussion around instrumentalization and co-optation of movements by neoliberal urban policy (Pruijt 2003, Uitermark 2004). "The situation, we face the present time, is a sort of internal crisis of the neoliberal project but not an alternative project waiting to fill the vacuum or contesting the space in the same kind of way . . . There is a thousand alternatives to neoliberalism, not just one" (Peck 2011).

Interventions, however, would always have to be a community issue in need of a wider discussion, mobilization and democratic decision-making. The creative class can surely show commitment here. Even further, creative people need to look for their return in this? Creativity has a lot to do with self-exploitation. Endless competition and struggle is not necessarily admirable or healthy. In this sense, today's challenge rather is to reclaim creativity from the capitalist city and insist on democracy (Purcell 2008).

In other words: "If we are talking about what a real strategy for cities ought to be in the present time, it clearly needs to deal with issues like working poverty, inequality, ecological sustainability and the caring economy. There is a broad raft of questions which need to be addressed urgently on a 'Rights to the City' kind of framework or Reclaim the City for its citizens" (Peck 2011).

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