



ARTS, GENTRIFICATION, AND PLANNING FOR CREATIVITY

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Figure 1 - Brownstones in Brooklyn, New York in 2013. Brooklyn is now the least affordable housing market in the entire United States. Photo credit: Julia Barnard.

Recent decades have seen an almost obsessive focus on creativity in an urban development context. Yet creativity has come to be prized not so much for the intrinsic values of imagination, innovation, and experimentation as for the possibility to exploit these qualities as a means of urban revitalization and wealth generation. This emphasis on policy has contributed to the misplaced assumption that artistic activity causes gentrification and displacement. At the same time, it often sets in motion programs that are detrimental to the creative environments such policies claim to support. It is time to end the current approach to creative city planning: the arts as amenities catalyze land development and lure upscale consumption.

The contemporary framing of creativity is apparent if we look at how cities plan for arts and cultural activity. Over the last fifteen years, arts policy and urban policy alike have markedly shifted from supporting “art for art’s sake” and towards arts and cultural production as mainly drivers of economic development or place-based revitalization (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Grodach, 2013). Cities as diverse as London, Shanghai, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Hobart, Tasmania have all developed “creative city”

plans that seek to capitalize on the economic potential of creative activity. Though wide-ranging, the leading aim behind such programs is often to harness the power of an arts presence to attract new development, generate consumption (and sales tax), and boost real estate values. Similarly, at the federal level, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has moved away from traditional arts policy emphasis on artistic excellence to promoting “creative placemaking” projects that “deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work” (National Endowment for the Arts, 2016).

As creativity has assumed a more central role on the urban agenda, so, too, have researchers sought to identify the array of characteristics that define “creative environments.” Research maps and describes the places that attract musicians, actors, designers, and other artists and seeks to demonstrate this milieu’s importance to urban economies (e.g. Currid, 2007; Florida, 2002; Scott, 2010; Smit, 2011; Wood and Dovey, 2015). Perhaps the most well-known claim to emerge from this work is Richard Florida’s now infamous argument that where the Creative Class goes, economic growth follows. Many others—including recently Florida himself—have also pointed out that so too does gentrification and economic inequality (2013). However, this has not stopped local governments from “planning for creativity.”

Not coincidentally, the policy emphasis on creativity aligns with the gentrification of urban America over the last thirty years. Cities held up as hotbeds of creativity and the arts—such as Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco—are now routinely cited as some of the most expensive and gentrified places in the world. Artists traditionally flocked to these creative capitals seeking like minds, inspiring

environments, and a concentration of venues and patrons to support their work. However, the high cost of living makes survival challenging for most, whether you are an artist or not. At the same time, we increasingly hear stories of the seemingly inevitable march of gentrification in smaller creative centers—Austin TX, Portland, OR, or even Asheville, NC—as well as in neighborhoods in economically struggling cities like Detroit or New Orleans.

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The visible move towards planning for creative activity has given way to debate around the role of the arts in urban development. Some call planning for arts and creativity a thinly veiled gentrification strategy. Others, like the NEA, argue that the arts play a direct community development role that benefits existing residents regardless of gentrification. Are the arts and creativity inevitably intertwined with gentrification and displacement? Must planning for the arts and cultural activity be synonymous with creating consumption precincts for the wealthy? Below, I review the arguments around the arts and gentrification debate and the existing research that sheds light on the complex and varied relationships of the arts to place change.

Art and Gentrification

Probably the most common way of thinking about the role of the arts in urban and neighborhood change

focuses on gentrification. A long line of research posits that by changing the character and status of an area, artists and small creative businesses help to attract capital and middle- and upper-class residents to formerly struggling neighborhoods (Ley, 1996; Zukin, 1982). The formation of bohemian enclaves attracts aspiring creatives not only for cheap space, but also for the aesthetic appeal of a lifestyle on the margins of mainstream society (Lloyd, 2010). As the new residents renovate older buildings, open galleries and cafés, and operate temporary performance spaces, they create a new atmosphere and “scene” in disinvested areas (Silver and Clark, 2016). Such activities serve to revalue and heighten the status of place, thus creating the potential to draw new economic value from previously ignored areas.

According to the standard narrative, this encourages higher-income residents and speculators to move in and renovate properties, bidding up the price of real estate and displacing existing residents who can no longer afford the area. This familiar process, documented in many central cities, has been quite thorough in global centers such as London, New York, and Sydney. Elsewhere, however, the process tends to occur in just a few neighborhoods. Nonetheless, because arts-based gentrification is such a highly visible process, it is often believed to be the inevitable or even natural outcome of artistic and creative presence in the city. The reality is much more complex.

For one, there are multiple types of arts-related gentrification. In addition to the “organic” upscaling of artistic places, arts-led redevelopment is a common public policy initiative. Cities turn toward investment in the arts for much the same reason as described above: to capitalize on the aesthetic experience that attracts consumers and



Figure 2 - A view into the yard of the artist squat, Kunsthalle Tacheles, in Berlin, Germany. 2011 The squat is now shuttered. Photo credit: Rachel Wexler.

real estate investment. Publicly supported arts-based gentrification has been around since at least the 1950s when Robert Moses championed John D. Rockefeller III’s plan for a performing arts complex in Midtown Manhattan. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts became a representative example not only of civic-minded arts policy but also of art as a tool to remake neighborhoods and revalue real estate at the cost of displacing the poor and people of color.

Since this time, dozens of US cities have sunk significant money into flagship cultural projects and high arts venues to catalyze development in targeted areas of the central city (Grodach, 2010b). Ironically, many artists avoid these areas due to their highly programmed and staged

aesthetic and their isolation from their surroundings (Grodach, 2009). That being said, the purpose of such projects is to provide amenities that encourage residential and retail development and brand places to attract more affluent residents and visitors; the purpose is not to foster local arts activity. In this way, even when cities incorporate community-focused art spaces in their cultural districts (as San Francisco and Dallas have done), the intention of arts-based redevelopment projects is essentially to gentrify urban areas. While these projects may offer fiscal benefits to cities, they also result in residential and commercial displacement and support some types of arts activity while pricing out others.

Similarly, the primary intent of many creative city plans is really not to directly support creative activity because of an intrinsic public value but to harness an economic development opportunity. While many creative city strategies plan for artists and community arts activities they simultaneously threaten them because their key strategies focus on upscaling the neighborhoods where many artists live and work. Redevelopment programs and creative city plans have been particularly controversial in cities such as Austin, Texas that rely on arts and creative industries for the city image and economy (Grodach, 2012).

Alternative Views on Art and Place Change

There are counternarratives to the standard arts and gentrification story. Emerging evidence shows that the accepted model of arts-induced gentrification is too generalized and that, in reality, the arts exhibit multiple divergent relationships to place depending on context and type of arts activity. As my recent work with Nicole Foster and James Murdoch III demonstrates, the arts are not a universal force for gentrification (Grodach, Foster, and

Murdoch, 2014b). Based on a study of the 100 largest US cities, we found that commercial arts industries related to film, music, and design are most likely to locate in places that undergo rapid gentrification (and therefore are more likely associated with displacement). In contrast, visual and performing arts companies, museums, and fine arts schools favor slower growth neighborhoods with little to no sign of gentrification.

In fact, there is a lack of evidence that the arts actually cause gentrification and displacement (Markusen, 2013). Research has emerged only recently to challenge this accepted notion. New work on the neighborhood effects of various types of arts clusters attempt to show that an arts presence is associated with neighborhood improvements such as lower poverty rates and increased housing values without signs of displacement (Foster, Grodach, and Murdoch, forthcoming; Gadwa and Muessig, 2011; Stern and Seifert, 2010). The upshot of this work is that struggling neighborhoods with more arts organizations may be better off over time than those with less arts activity. The real force behind gentrification stems from the process of speculative investment and disinvestment or “creative destruction” that defines urbanization at large, not the arts (Harvey 1985).

Other studies demonstrate that the assumed relationship between the arts and gentrification works in reverse—the arts may seek out affluent areas with an established patron base rather than cheap places on the margin. Whether looking at nonprofit arts organizations or art galleries, research based in New York City finds that the majority of new arts

activity flows to more affluent areas with large professional populations and a high level of amenities already in place. Arts organizations also tend to avoid areas with high levels of disadvantage (measured by rates of poverty, unemployment, and single-parent households) (Grodach, Foster and Murdoch, 2014a; Murdoch, Grodach, and Foster, 2015; Foster, Grodach, and Murdoch, forthcoming; Schuetz, 2014; Schuetz and Green, 2014). Additional studies on different types of artistic activity and different regions could confirm whether this is a widespread phenomenon or one that is limited to New York galleries and art organizations.

The arts not only serve the wealthy—they have long played a community development role too. We can look back to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs in the 1930s that put artists to work in communities across the United States painting murals, producing theater, and other art. In the 1960s and 1970s, the community arts movement emerged to challenge mainstream arts institutions to be less elitist and called on artists to take on activist roles. Simultaneously, a multitude of art spaces have opened to approach the arts as forces for social change. These organizations are often rooted in specific neighborhoods and work with marginalized communities. Rather than attracting gentrification, they function as neighborhood anchors that contribute to local revitalization through outreach programs that, for example, engage youth in documenting neighborhood life, offer photography classes for the homeless, or job training in media production (Grodach, 2011; Jackson, 2012). Further, the arts may serve as public spaces or forums for diverse groups to interact and potentially build social networks that lead to larger social engagement and investment (Carr and Servon 2009; Grodach, 2010a, 2011; Jackson and Herranz 2002).

Today, the “creative placemaking” initiatives sponsored by both the National Endowment for the Art’s Our Town and ArtPlace programs seek to reinforce these community building activities alongside local economic development (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; National Endowment for the Arts 2016). The wide-ranging projects funded by these grant programs vary from those that integrate public art into new housing and infrastructure projects to spontaneous arts interventions in public places to artist residency programs. Some offer strong opportunities for community engagement and development while others are more oriented to tourism. This causes some observers to challenge creative placemaking projects to consider the type of arts activities and neighborhoods in which they invest (Nicodemus, 2013).

Planning for the Arts and Creativity?

The research is fairly clear: the arts shape the character and value of places in numerous ways. Artistic and creative activity come in myriad forms and can do much more than drive gentrification and displacement. Yet, what is labeled planning for creativity today often is not; it is planning for gentrification through the symbolic incorporation of “creative” amenities into real estate development and consumption district schemes. We need to move away from the dominant approach to creative city planning, which positions the arts as bait for upper middle class consumption. Rarely do these strategies seriously attempt to encourage community arts practice or nurture the development of locally-rooted arts and cultural production.

In terms of community arts practice, states and cities can do much more to support art organizations that engage in community development work. Creative placemaking programs are certainly a move in the right direction, but



Figure 3 - A gallery space in the now gentrified Berlin neighborhood, Kreuzberg. 2011 Photo credit: Rachel Wexler.

require more focused objectives and award criteria to be effective in this regard. The research techniques can be used to identify target areas and build on the existing arts activity already in place there. Additionally, public and philanthropic entities can revisit their funding structures. The majority of arts funding has long gone to large, established venues at the expense of smaller groups. Yet, the smaller and younger organizations tend to directly engage in community development work.

In the rush toward attracting tourists, policy also leans toward favoring cultural consumption over cultural production. This is a key problem with creative city planning if not urban economic development at large. The rise of the so-called knowledge economy assumes that design, research, and other “brainy” occupations are divorced from material production. This is completely false in the field of artistic and cultural production, which often relies on a localized cluster of support services, materials, and skilled labor to design, assemble, and manufacture both original artworks and final products. Yet, today, places that were



Figure 4 - Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York City. 2013 Photo credit: Julia Barnard.

once established clusters of artistic production are now centers of arts consumption. It is rare that planners consider zoning mechanisms that incorporate artistic businesses and craft manufacturing into their redevelopment projects. Rather than rezoning industrial land for upscale mixed use developments, planners can rethink the concept of mixed use and test strategies that recognize the trade-off between better work and production opportunities and the highest return on real estate.

It is time to let go of the creative city planning agenda and concentrate more on how the arts might play a role in staving off some of the more inequitable outcomes of contemporary urban development. Perhaps we can return to a focus on how to integrate opportunities for engaging in artistic consumption and production in everyday life and channel this knowledge toward fostering more inclusive places.

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Figure 5 - Street scene in Berlin, Germany neighborhood of Friedrichshain. (2011) Photo credit: Rachel Wexler.