Cultural Planning and the Creative Tropical City

By

Dr. Lisanne Gibson
Research Fellow
The Cultural Industries and Practices Research Centre
The University of Newcastle
NSW, Australia, 2308

PO Box 1292
New Farm
Brisbane, QLD, 4005

Ph: +61 (07) 3358 6167
Ph: + 61 (0)416 216 626
Fax: +61 (0)2 4921 7907
Email: Lisanne.Gibson@newcastle.edu.au
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/cips/
http://www.uqp.uq.edu.au/book_details.php?id=0702232041

A selection of American, Australian, British and Canadian newspaper articles clipped over the last two years demonstrate the general acceptance of the 'just add culture and stir' school of thought: 'Cool cities may defy planning: Leaders believe new image could boost state economy' (Singer, 2003:1); for the Governor of Michigan cafes, hip clubs, street vendors and loft homes are the winning formula for the attraction of the 'creative class'. 'The Canadian arts community has caught a whiff of the urban-renewal agenda and is hot on the scent'; 'Regeneration sexy? It is now' (Weaver 2001:1); 'Can culture save us?' (Becket 2003:1). Or more ominously, 'concerns that an urban renaissance will lead to a form of social cleansing in British cities, of the kind that has occurred in New York under… Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani'. My newspaper clipping folders are overflowing with articles espousing the miracle of cultural planning.

The cultural planning phenomenon in its various guises has developed in Europe and North America over the last 20 years. The British model, developed most famously by Charles Landry in his book *The Creative City*, proposes various cultural animation programs, such as public art, which will transform the deserted and dangerous streets of Britain's city centres to those of a 'creative city'. We have seen antipodean versions of these developments. However, as it has turned out, in both the UK and Australia, these initiatives have been successful only at bringing the middle classes back from the suburbs and into the city centre. This had brought attendant problems, which we are now trying to find solutions to, not of violence this time, but of gentrification and cultural homogeneity, as much of our inner city heritage dies a 'death by cappuccino' and our live music venues are closed to make way for more lucrative high-rise apartments and wine bars for their residents.

Landry seeks to develop strategies to create a 'welcoming city', welcoming to who and as defined by whom becomes apparent when you look at the models of cultural planning suggested by Landry. Landry's ideal city model is based on the notion that a city should have a central space (or spaces) which is the locus of the city's cultural vitality. Landry's strategies are then all about providing adequate public transport to this central space, encouraging urban density, banning the car, encouraging a nighttime economy at the central space, and so forth. Obviously this is all fine if the raw material you are dealing with is a European city model, which by definition is spatially dense, has a clearly defined centre, and, at least at its core, probably wasn't designed to have cars in the first place.

In Britain the cities that have taken on Landry et al's cultural planning solutions are the post-industrial mid-sized towns which are losing their economic base and therefore populations as their industry closes. City's such as Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in northern England hope that the massive investment in the redevelopment of their quayside, a redevelopment which is based on cultural institutions and other forms of cultural consumption such as public art, café's, restaurants, bars, and gift shops, will 'regenerate' the region through culture by positively effecting the declining population, massive unemployment, low levels of completion of secondary and tertiary education, and high crime rates. It is thought that massive cultural investment in a region will have a pump priming effect on the broader economy, thus providing a benefit even for those who do not make use of the publicly funded cultural developments. In addition, in a version of the 'culture is good for you' argument, it is argued that there will be a 'trickle down' social and cultural effect, from regional

cultural investment, which will have an esteem boosting effect even for those people who do not partake in the galleries, café's, bars, music centres, museums and gift shops which are the focus of these cultural developments. However, as yet there have been no completed studies which measure the long-term benefits of what has been termed 'cultural regeneration'. For such studies to be useful rather than boosterist they would need to measure the effects of cultural regeneration programs in terms of both economic benefit and social and cultural diversity. Glasgow's program of regeneration for its year as European City of Culture and Temple Bar in Dublin, supposedly the model for local government investment in micro cultural businesses, are the two programs most cited as successful examples of culturally led regeneration, to date these claims are based on 'say so' as neither have been the object of a thoroughgoing study.

Since the mid 1980s' cultural planners have been selling various forms of the 'just add culture and stir' method of urban development. Any sized city, even medium and small sized cities, can be 'successful', that is, overcome a variety of economic and social ills from degenerated urban space to unemployment, drugs problems, declining populations you name it, the 'sick' city can be cured by the correct application of 'culture'. In American economist Richard Florida's 'just add culture and stir' story, as posited in his book mentioned by the Chief Minister this morning *The Rise of the Creative Class*, local and state government's are best able to encourage economic growth by developing a city which offers bohemian café's, small galleries, theatre, and restaurants where one can eat at any time of the day or night; streetscapes which offer groovy cultural *consumption*, and I emphasise that word on purpose, will attract a population of highly educated international knowledge workers or 'the creative

class' as Florida terms them. Florida has argued through studies of American cities that places which have diverse amenities, and are also culturally diverse, have higher concentrations of the creative class and therefore stronger economic growth than other places. Florida's 'creative class' includes a broad array of occupations; but, the defining quantity of a 'creative worker' is that their job is based on the creation of something original. The creative class is made up of two categories: the super creative core and the creative professionals, it includes people working in computer and mathematics; architecture and engineering; life, physical, and the social sciences; education, training and libraries; and, arts, design, entertainment, sports and media occupations it also includes just about every other white collar worker you could think of management, business and financial; legal; healthcare; and, high-end sales management. While you'd be forgiven for thinking that Florida was on about artists, he talks about the 'bohemian effect', for instance, in fact Florida's supposedly novel 'creative class' turns out to be a fairly traditional measurement of class on the basis of level of education.

If we look at the latest figures on artist income in Australia we see that in fact artists are the free after dinner entertainment for Florida's creative class of lawyers and software developers. According to David Throsby and Virginia Hollister in *Don't Give up Your Day Job* (Ozco, 2003), an economic study of Australian professional artists published last year, in 2000-01 artists had a median income from their art of $7,300 and a medium income from all other sources of $30,000 per annum. This is a far cry from the average $55,000(AU) per annum for Florida's so called 'creative class'. In addition, and this is a point important for the Northern Territory and Darwin for Florida the creative class doesn't include people who work in the service

industries, software programmers are more creative than chefs, furthermore, for Florida, regional economic growth can not be achieved by regions whose economy is based on the service industries. Retail also, are the hand servants of the creative class.

The 'sick' cities for which Florida and Landry offer a cultural panacea are the mid-sized post-industrial cities of Northern Europe and America, think Pittsburgh and Liverpool. The ideal outcome of cultural animation programs such as public art, outdoor dining, buskers, after hours shopping, and so forth, is a city defined by centralised cultural facilities and dense inner city populations; high levels of people with disposable incomes; and, high levels of cultural and leisure oriented consumption. Despite the development of these solutions to deal with particular kinds of problems in American and European cities, these international consultants are sought out by Australian government's ready to apply the 'just add culture and stir' recipe to problems as diverse as the decline of industry in regional Australia or the gentrification of inner city suburbs. For instance, last year Landry was the SA State Government sponsored 'thinker in residence' and recently consultant to the Canberra City Council, Florida was in Australia earlier this year consulting with the NSW State Government on regional and rural development and the QLD State Government on creative industry development.

However, the Euro and American centric models developed by many cultural planners are of limited use to Australian cities such as Darwin as they problemmatise or have nothing to say about the very things that are central to Darwin's cultural identity:

- its dispersed spatial nature;
- low population density;

- tropical weather which produces a number of months of the year where outdoor living is only possible in the evening;

- the itinerant nature of a large section of the population;

- large service economy; and,

- large population of indigenous Australians, many of whom are socially excluded and culturally alienated.

Rather than seeking to impose an inappropriate American or European model of cultural planning on Darwin what might a cultural planning methodology for a creative tropical city look like?

Darwin:

In the first instance such a planning methodology would pay close attention to the economic, cultural and social specificities of the city. So let's have a quick look at the characteristics of the Darwin and the Northern Territory.

- Growing population

- Very high levels of unemployment

- Young population

- Government followed by the retail sector are the largest workforces

- The economy is a service industry based economy.

  A measure of just how influential the Florida creative class thesis has been is illustrated by the fact that the 2002 Australian Local Government Association's *State of the Regions Report* measured Australia's regions in terms of their creative class in addition to the usual measurements used.

- Darwin ranks 10th in the country in pop. of creative class (in fact when Florida was here earlier this year he was reported in the Melbourne *Age* as saying the

only Melbourne and Sydney had a creative economy! Further this table shows something which is central to the make up and identity of Darwin, namely, the importance of the service industry to the NT economy: 47% of your workforce!

- And this of course is because of the importance of tourism here.

- Tourism is now the Territory's most economically important industry and it is a rate which continues to grow.

- However, it is not growing across the board, as you can see it is driven primarily by the growth in international visitor nos. while fallen from 1999-2000 in interstate visitors. This a problem due to the instability of the international tourism industry which is vulnerable to changes in the Australian dollar and random factors such as terrorism, disease outbreaks and so forth.

- In addition we know that Darwin's population is dispersed, it is hot, and indeed so hot and humid that day time outdoor eating and activities are uncomfortable at some times of the year.

- It is important nationally for its indigenous cultural production industry.

On the face of it, it would seem that a focus on café's and restaurants, theatre's, central streetscape beautification in the form of public art, and the other cultural animation programs would be a sensible investment to encourage and build upon the importance of the service industry and tourist market. Except that the risk here is that artists become the 'free after dinner entertainment' (and eventually leave) and people who work in the service industries become helpmeets with little opportunity for contribution to local cultural distinctiveness. Further, the privileging of the focus on

attracting people external to Darwin will not retain or facilitate the diversity and specificity which make Darwin interesting and exciting.

It is at this point that we can see that simple investment in cultural and leisure *consumption* will not provide an economic and cultural development result which is sustainable. This is because what you end up with is theme parks where local character is a Disneyfied version of itself, people who produce local art or cultural products can't afford to work or sell in these spaces; the locals do not utlise the space because it becomes overpriced and alien. A good example of this is Temple Bar in Dublin which was originally made up of old warehouses repurposed by artists, musicians and other local cultural producers. As developers moved in the cultural planners followed. It is now a theme park version of Irish cultural production, wildly overpriced, populated by Irish chain store pubs owned by Americans', young British backpackers and selling Irish products made in Taiwan. This is cultural planning as handmaiden to developers. Thus, it becomes difficult for visitors and tourists to experience an authentic interaction with place, and after all, it is for the authentic experience of different places that people travel.

So to avoid this 'death by cappuccino' what do we do? In the first place it is important to recognize the specificity of the place; its local characteristics are opportunities, not problems to be resolved. It is a challenge to achieve planning and building which retain both a specificity of place, appeals to locals and tourists alike, and retains local authenticity. In order for a place to have this kind of authentic vitality I suggest that what is necessary is the maintenance of the balance between consumption and production which has always been a key feature of urban spaces. Cultural spaces

should be no different. Spaces which are the sites of production as well as consumption are locally specific and diverse by definition.

In the UK now, as a way of dealing with twenty years of 'death by cappuccino' caused in part by developer driven cultural planning, local authorities are starting to focus on cultural programs which encourage cultural *production* rather than *consumption*. For instance, local authorities are purchasing buildings in the inner city which provide cheap rent to house start-up businesses of every kind including artists' studios, artist run galleries, clothes designers, graphic design and music recording studios and subsidised retail spaces selling local product. The free market will not provide for these kinds of local micro cultural businesses. Even more importantly it is local cultural production, which reflects a regions' specific characteristics and maintains its diversity. So while the attraction of 'the creative class' may facilitate economic growth, in order for a region to continue to have the local identity and 'authenticity' which Florida says in most attractive to the creative class, government must invest in cultural practice which is local in origin and appeal in the first instance. Further, often this kind of investment is risky and does not provide the kinds of glamorous outputs we see in the eponymous waterfront cultural precinct. Thus, it is not the market but only government intervention, which will ensure that the tropical creative city does not become a Disneyland version of itself but retains the authentic specificity which attracts people to it in the first place. Further and most importantly, while we develop programs which seek to attract new people to our cities we must remain focused on the fact that what makes our city interesting in the first place are the people who already occupy it and the culture which they produce.