What makes Cities Creative?
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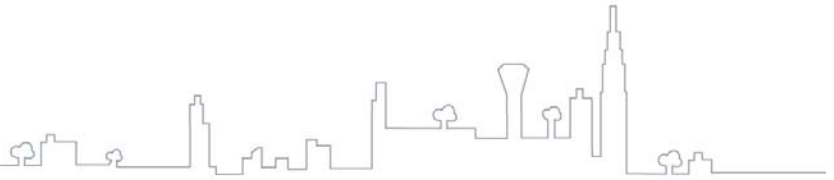
1. Is Creativity Narrow, Broad or Non Existent in your City?

Why does creativity matter to cities, where does comes from and how it is organised?

There are two quite different ways of answering these questions.

The first, is that creativity is wrapped up with culture and the arts, knowledge and learning. Cities have always been centres of learning, the first home to libraries and universities, museums and galleries. Cities provide some of the key ingredients for cultural creativity: diversity, density and proximity.

This account of the city as a place of culture and learning took of new life with Richard Florida's account of the role of the "creative class" in city renewal.

Florida's argument is that the presence of a thriving "creative class" – artists, designers, media folk - was the best signal to other knowledge workers that the atmosphere in a city was vibrant, open and tolerant. A city with a thriving creative and cultural sector would then attract other high end knowledge jobs and set off a spiral of economic and social growth. The road to economic salvation for a city lay through the cultural quarter of galleries, clubs, restaurants and studios.

Indeed cities are increasingly managing how they make people *feel* as much as they manage their roads and buildings.

This is a "narrow" account of the creative city: creativity is confined to narrow group, that works in particular areas of the city, and their creativity is mainly applied to a narrow range of cultural activities. This core creative class has a huge multiplier effect on the atmosphere and economics of the city. Culture projects a city's reputation internationally: Edinburgh is known for its summer festival, while in reality its economy relies on more hum drum financial services.

The recipe for the "narrow" approach to the creative city are well known: investment in cultural institutions; renewal of the city's historic core; Bohemian cultural quarters, as the basis for the wider economic regeneration of a city that will bring investment in new retail and leisure facilities, apartments and knowledge worker jobs.

Cities that have pursued this strategy still face enormous challenges, particularly to connect the suburbs to the city core and to connect people outside the "creative class" to the jobs that it helps to create in the service economy. Even if culture is central to a city's creativity, it is at best only part of the answer.

The second approach to why cities need creativity is much broader in scope: cities have to be creative about all aspects of city life, not just culture.

The density and scale of cities pose significant innovation challenges, to create mass forms of housing, transport, health, utilities, waste disposal, education. That is why cities created of new shared institutions – libraries, fire services, postal systems. Cities require continual social and political creativity to address the problems that cities throw up as they grow, mutate and decline.

Those challenges are only going to become more intense with migration into growing cities and away from declining ones; the different demands of an ageing population and young singles; changing patterns of employment and family life; the need to shift to more environmentally sustainable forms of energy and transport.

These social challenges have traditionally been tasks for specialists - planners, architects and engineers - to reimagine the city. Most famously this gave rise to the the modernist vision of the city as a machine, a lattice work of roads, factories and high rise apartment blocs.

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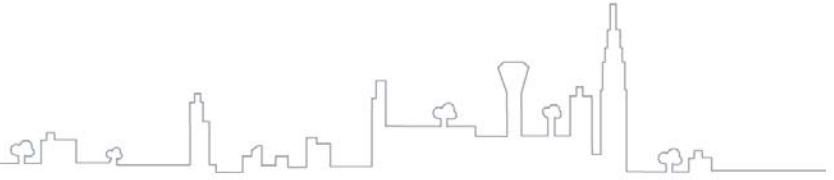
The wider problems cities face require a more distributed, social creativity, which often involves a combination of top down investment in new infrastructures – for example for energy, transport or waste– combined with mass changes in individual behaviour – using electricity, mass transit, household recycling.

The recipes for "broader" social creativity in cities are far less clear. First, it requires a more social, cumulative and collaborative account of creativity, in contrast to the traditional idea that creativity depends comes from a spark of individual genius. Second, this social creativity has to apply to things which are not widely seen as worthy of creativity: waste disposal, health provision, housing and transport. Third, the ingredients for "broader" social creativity are very different in different cities depending on their political governance, history, the strength of civil society organisations.

What about your city?

- Is there a narrow creative class/district?
- Is this (or its absence) important to the wider creativity of the city?
- How is your city dealing with the broader creative challenges it faces?
- What is the scope and need for improvised creativity?
- How much creativity is part of a struggle for survival and how much is animated by a wider social vision?
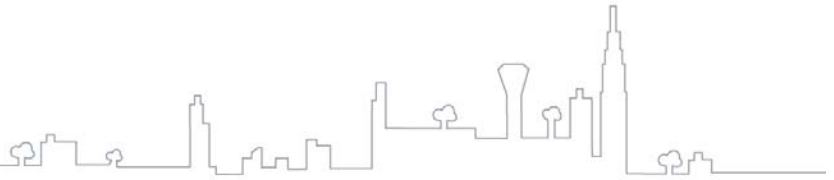
2. Are the creative challenges like clouds or clocks?

Cities are poised between the dangers of rapid growth – which stretches the social fabric, pumps up property prices and threatens to overrun older infrastructures for transport and business - and a cycle of decline in which people, businesses and jobs leave, setting off a downward spiral of economic and social disinvestment. Cities need creativity both when they are "going up" to cope with growth and when they are going down, to arrest and reverse decline.

Complex public goods – like a clean and safe environment – have to be *created* from within cities, through collaborative innovation involving many contributors, the public, private, not for profit sectors as well as families and citizens. They cannot be *delivered* to a city, like DHL delivers a parcel.

Great cities have always been at the forefront of innovation in the public good. Cities work when they create shared infrastructures that support a mass of private and social innovation.

Some city problems are like mending a broken clock: they are complicated, with many interlocking parts, which require technical expertise to solve: planning mass transit systems, laying utility pipes.

Yet many of the problems cities face resemble clouds: they are diffuse and escape attempts to pin them down. Cloud problems include making a neighbourhood feel safe, reducing a city's overall carbon footprint.

Clouds are tens of thousands of loosely linked water particles. Cloud problems in cities are made up of thousands of individual people with different choices and outlooks.

Clock solutions invariably focus on hardware and professional skills, measurable inputs and outputs, buildings and roads. Solutions to cloud problems require new software: cultural and behavioural change that yields intangible benefits of greater trust, respect, tolerance and social capital.

What about your city?

- Are the biggest problems like clocks or like clouds?
- What problem does your city most need a creative solution to?
- How does a city create intangibles like belonging?

Make your city a better place to live in
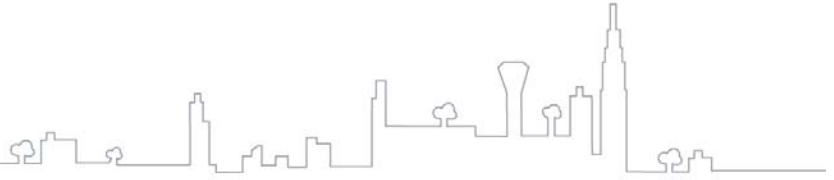
3. Who is creative in your city?

The "narrow" is that creativity is an activity for special people, with special talents, working in special places: the artist in their studio; the writer in their garret; the boffin in the lab; the bohemian in the cultural quarter.

The implication of this view is that if you want more creativity you need more special people in more special places, bigger and better cultural quarters or research parks.

The "broader" social account is based on the idea that creativity often comes from combining different ideas and insights to create new ideas. Creativity is inherently social because it stems from the interplay of different ideas.

Most creativity does not come in a flash of genius or insight in the head of an individual. Most creativity – in science, business and culture – comes from the recombination of two existing ideas to create a new one. That is why new ideas often emerge from intense and extended conversations between people

Cities only work through a mass of people adjusting and adapting to one another. Cities depend on a particularly social kind of freedom. Cities made interesting and vital by the presence of other people, who provide the diversity that makes city life so interesting. Yet their presence also constrains what we can do.

The issue of who is creative also raises issues of power. Who has the right and the power to "create" a city's future: its political leaders; private property developers?

"Narrow" cultural creativity often overlaps with entertainment and leisure. It creates a rosy, optimistic account of the creative city that can be good for all.

The "broader" aspects of creativity raise issues of power and conflict over resources: who has a say over how a neighbourhood should develop, whether a road should be built or how rubbish should be treated.

What about your city?

- Who is entitled to be creative in your city?
- Do city leaders have a creative vision for the city?
- Are there entrepreneurs, in business or social entrepreneurs, who are reshaping the city?
- What scope is there for everyday citizen creativity?
- Can a city really be creative without some conflict and dissent?

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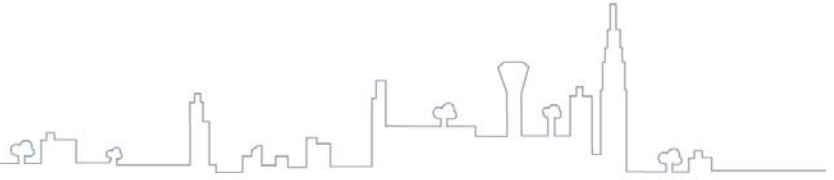
4. Where is creativity in your city?

The "narrow" account is that creativity is found in special places in cities, usually designed for the task: arts institutions, techno parks, cultural quarters. These are quite different from housing estates, business districts, shopping malls, which are zones for living, working or shopping but not for creativity.

Creativity is something we associate with the core of cities. That is where people gather and provide an audience for culture. The density of the core of cities provides the setting for ideas to spread and cross fertilise. The areas surrounding the core, into the suburbs, are not associated with creativity.

This split between creative core and workaday periphery is one of the main challenges facing cities that pursue regeneration through culture.

Where does the "broader" social kind of creativity thrive? It will thrive wherever there are creative conversations about the city's challenges. Creative cities provide many places in which these conversations can take place – in council debating chambers, university seminars, in coffee shops and squares. Barcelona stands out as an example of a city with many, distributed spaces for highly civic creativity.

Cities rely on a mass of localised, adaptive creativity which is vital to people's quality of life : how people living a tower block look after the land around it, create benches and gardens, a playground and place for older people to sit.

And there are many other spaces – marginal, unlicensed, criminal – in which creativity thrives in cities, where people have to improvise because they have few resources or are outside traditional institutions.

What about your city?

- Is there a creative and cultural quarter?
- Does it make a difference to the whole city?
- What are the other spaces for creativity in the city?
- Where have you seen creativity at work in your city?

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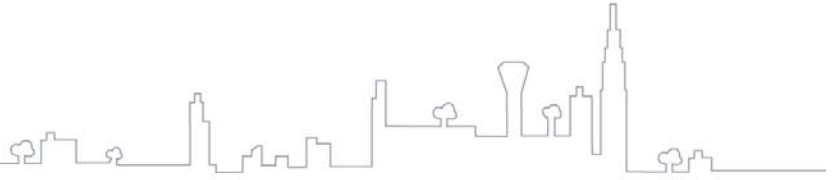
5. What motivates creativity?

The "narrow" account is a mixture of the aesthetic and the economic. If a city creates the conditions for aesthetic creativity – tolerant, open, diverse – then it will also create the conditions for economic success because it will attract high skilled knowledge workers. Economic self-interest and cultural value go hand in hand.

The "broader" account starts from a wider range of motivations. Crisis, frustration and the struggle for survival have all played their part in city creativity: fires and disease lead to new approaches to building and public health. Civic creativity – the creation of parks and libraries for example in 19th century cities – stemmed from a reforming middle class zeal. Civic creativity is spurred by a sense of pride, belonging and attachment to a city.

> **What about your city?**
>
> - What motivates creativity in your city?
> - Has crisis played a role in creating new possibilities?
> - Is there a civic culture which spurs creativity?

7. Conclusion

In 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in cities, even though cities had been around since about 6,000 BC. By 1900 it was 14%. At the turn of the century about half the world's population lived in cities and by 2050 it will be 75%. Cities will be our future.

Cities encourage mass innovation as people learn new habits from one another, observing what their fellow citizens are doing. Everything propagates faster in cities: disease, fashion, ideas.

Creative cities are too large, open and unruly to be regulated in detail, top down by an all seeing state or a feudal lord. So they have to encourage collective, voluntary, self control. Successful cities allow a lot of room for adaptive mutation, encouraging their citizens to invest their ideas in the spaces they inhabit.

Top down city planning all too often extinguishes this vernacular, everyday innovation or drives it underground. All too often the places created by these plans sap the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism in their stead.

Cities are cradles for innovation because they are where knowledge, culture and self-governance come together. That is how the narrow and the broad circuits of creativity connect. Cities are experiments in how to live together creatively.