# COVID-19 and the Creative City: Lessons from the UK

Jonathan Gross, Tamsyn Dent, and Roberta Comunian

## Introduction

Since the 1990s policy makers have paid increasing attention to 'creativity' as a potential source of job creation, urban renewal, and post-industrial growth. Within this context the 'creative city' became an influential idea. It describes an approach to urban development that takes account of the rising significance of the creative economy and seeks to make planning processes themselves more creative (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2008). Creative city thinking has been widely critiqued, yet its influence persists. In this chapter, we consider the implications of COVID-19 for the creative city 'script' and explore what the pandemic reveals about the need for new approaches to urban cultural policy. (Chapters Five and Six also address sectors of the economy that are disproportionally ravaged by the pandemic.)

## The creative city and inequality

In the last two decades, the creative city has become a popular branding and policy script for cities all over the world. The 'creative' tag is associated with a range of feel-good factors, evoking opportunities for self-expression, imagination, and human connection. However, in the case of the creative city, there is now a broad literature suggesting that 'creative' is not used in these human-centered ways (Pratt, 2011). Instead it is used to mobilize specific political priorities: promoting GDP growth via creative economy, global competition among entrepreneurial cities, and top-down intervention to redevelop urban spaces.

A range of authors have intervened to unmask these neoliberal agendas. Chatterton (2000) was one of the first, characterizing the creative city as a branding exercise that does not involve citizens in defining their role in the places they live and work. Others consider the contradiction between the fact that artists and creatives shape cities, and are encouraged to do so, but then become victims of processes of redevelopment, gentrification, and top-down intervention that reduce their space and civic agency (Novy and Colomb, 2013; McLean, 2014). Ultimately these tensions between different stakeholders – each interested in their city and its future – are grounded in diverging priorities and values. There is a continuous struggle to reconcile the interests and views of cultural producers, and possibilities for everyday citizenship, with neoliberal agendas which do not prioritize urban inclusivity and long-term sustainability.

The research shows that 'creative cities' are often an image exercise rather than a reality, and the transformative value of creativity in place has frequently remained unfulfilled. Where top-down creative city policies have prevailed, this has often increased inequality, making many spaces in the city exclusionary and unaffordable (McCann, 2007). Before COVID-19, urban cultural policy required radical rethinking. The pandemic has made this even more urgent.

**COVID-19 and failures of creative justice**

While creativity has been celebrated as a source of GDP growth, urban renewal, and 'good' jobs, a growing body of research demonstrates that creative work is marked by inequality, exploitation, and precarity. COVID-19 has laid bare the failures of the creative city script to deliver what Banks calls 'creative justice' (Banks, 2017). The pandemic has intensified pre-existing inequalities operating across urban creative economies. In the early days of the outbreak, multiple surveys were distributed across Europe, investigating the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural and creative workforce. These studies revealed a widespread and critical loss of income for an already vulnerable workforce. There have been varying degrees of state intervention to manage the impact, with some European countries delivering substantial financial packages to mitigate cultural and creative workers' loss of earnings in the first months of the pandemic. In the UK, Arts Council England announced a £160 million emergency package in April 2020, followed by the UK government's £1.57 billion 'investment' in the cultural sector announced in July 2020. However, this was already too late for some organizations, such as the Nuffield Southampton Theatre, which went into administration in May 2020. Such closures mean the loss of many jobs, and potentially long-term damage to urban communities.

Banks describes creative and cultural workers as having 'low immunity' to the economic consequences of the pandemic (Banks, 2020: 3). While the UK experienced a decade of reductions in public funding for arts and culture, and the erosion of legal rights and protections for the cultural and creative workforce, the creative economy and the creative city have emphasized their value in terms of entrepreneurialism and innovation. These discourses have been criticized as symptomatic of systemic moves towards deregulated employment models, helping to accelerate conditions of precarity not only within the creative economy but more widely. Creative and cultural work is, in this sense, the canary in the mine of neoliberal labor relations (McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016), with significant physical and mental impacts on workers (Carey et al, 2020), and particularly unjust consequences for women and minority/minoritized groups. While these inequalities are likely to have been further exacerbated by COVID-19, little attention has been given in the sector surveys to the disproportionate impact the pandemic might have on earnings and livelihoods with respect to gender, race, disability, and social class (Comunian and England, 2020).

Of all economic sectors, some sections of the creative economy are among the most badly affected by social distancing measures. The performing arts, for example, including live music, theatre, dance, and comedy, have interpersonal encounter at their heart. These kinds of activities make crucial contributions to urban life, as sources of employment, entertainment, community, and collective identity. One of the distinctive ways in which COVID-19 is an urban crisis lies in its undermining of these kinds of cultural and creative work, and the forms of sociality that they make possible. But, of course, the cultural and creative life of cities is not only about cultural and creative work. It is also about opportunities for new experiences – as audience members, participants, and creative citizens. Here the limitations of the creative city script as a model of urban cultural policy have been exposed by the pandemic, demonstrating the effects of long-standing inequalities in government cultural funding.

A report by the Fabian Society lays bare regional discrepancies in local public spending on the arts and culture in the UK. These are largely due to the unequal effects of the fiscal austerity enforced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010, and intensified following the Conservative party's majority in 2015. In 2009–10 local authorities across England spent more than £2.2bn on arts and culture, supporting local libraries, theatres, museums, public entertainment, and heritage. In the following decade, this annual expenditure fell in real terms by over £860m to just under £1.4bn (Cooper, 2020), but the effects were unevenly spread. Before COVID-19 there was considerable regional disparity in terms of the allocation of public funds through direct funding to local government and through Arts Council England, with the West Midlands, East of England and the North East experiencing the largest cuts. A particularly problematic finding from the Fabian analysis is how funds raised through the National Lottery program are distributed by the Arts Council, with the majority supporting organizations based in London and the South East, which, given its purpose of supporting local community arts, is 'difficult to justify' (Cooper, 2020: 18).

One of the key recommendations from the report is that the remaining £258 million of the recovery package should be directly transferred to local government in a fair distributive model that enables local rejuvenation of public spaces, including the high street, placing culture at the heart of a localized economic recovery (Cooper, 2020). Like the failures of creative justice experienced by the cultural and creative workforce, the spatial inequalities of government funding pre-COVID have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with the most prominent cultural institutions in the biggest cities the most protected. As a result of these existing inequalities, and the failure of the British government to provide swift, large-scale, and sustained support for the cultural sector in response to the pandemic, many smaller organizations, particularly in towns and smaller cities, are likely to close.

**New possibilities for urban cultural policy in the age of pandemic**

The limitations of existing approaches to urban cultural policy have been made plain by COVID-19. What might new frameworks look like? We are currently undertaking fieldwork in ten European cities as part of Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies (DISCE), a Horizon 2020 research project. We are exploring the question of what 'development' can mean for creative economies beyond GDP and measures of employment. One aspect of this is to undertake detailed interviews with a deliberately wide range of people within the cultural life of each of our ten locations. Our research design is explicitly 'ecological', treating cities as cultural ecosystems in which the publicly funded arts, profit-making creative industries, education institutions, and everyday (or amateur) creativity are deeply interconnected and interdependent (Gross and Wilson, 2018). Unlike approaches to urban cultural policy that lay primary emphasis on the 'creative class', ours is a systematically inclusive framework, taking the broadest possible view of what the cultural and creative life of the city is constituted by, and why it matters.

In addition to this ecological perspective, our work further challenges the prevailing terms of economic analysis by addressing the role of care within cultural ecosystems. We include questions about care and caring responsibilities within our interviews. How have people been cared for and encouraged? What do they care about? What and who do they have caring responsibilities for? What skills are involved in these practices of care? With this approach to data collection, we then use theorizations and categorizations of care such as those developed by Tronto (2013) – who identifies four moral dimensions of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness – to analyze our data. We are thereby building up a picture of how cultural ecosystems are constituted by diverse practices of care, and how the power dynamics that shape who cares for what condition the processes by which cultural ecosystems are developed, and by who.

What might be the implications of this ecological and care-centered analysis for urban cultural policy, including policies seeking to address creative (in)justice in the age of COVID-19? As part of DISCE, we are exploring new approaches to evaluating and 'indexing' the development of cultural ecosystems (Wilson et al, 2020), working in collaboration with our research participants to explore what this can and should look like. One of the starting points is the need to place value on the extent to which populations within a given locality have capabilities (real freedoms) to care for and co-create the cultural life of their city (Gross and Wilson, 2018; Wilson et al, 2020). This work was begun before the pandemic but we are struck by its timeliness, as COVID-19 has laid bare the need for radically new approaches to creative justice.

The pandemic is revealing and extending existing inequalities within cultural ecosystems, and the creative city script is inadequate to the task of responding to these challenges. New approaches to urban cultural policy in the age of pandemic need to be sensitive to how existing and new forms of inequality play out. This is, of course, a fast-moving situation. It is also one in which there is the opportunity to do things differently. Building on the strong emphasis on deliberation advanced by Amartya Sen's 'capability approach' to human development (Sen, 1999), within DISCE we are exploring possibilities for embedding new processes of participatory decision-making within urban cultural policy (Wilson et al, 2020). Part of the urgent need here is to make possible ongoing processes of knowledge production with regards to what inequalities operate within a cultural ecosystem. Only via sustained conversation and deliberation can the lived experiences of inequalities be collectively understood and addressed. Moreover, only through the opportunity to take part in the policy processes are people fully free to contribute to the cultural life of their city.

Beyond the growth of GDP and jobs, 'development' of urban creative economies can be understood as constituted by the expansion of cultural opportunity. But this not only means the capability to engage in the specific cultural activities of one's choosing, across the interconnections of the publicly funded arts, the profit-making creative industries, education institutions, and everyday creativity. The expansion of cultural opportunities also means the extent to which a city's population enjoys real freedoms to participate in cultural decision-making. In the age of COVID-19, beyond the creative city script, urban cultural policy needs to prioritize the processes of deliberation through which cultural ecosystems can be democratically stewarded. This requires institutional arrangements sensitive to the ways in which cultural life is constituted by ecological interdependencies and practices of care through which inequalities can either be reproduced or challenged. In response to the pandemic, it is in developing new processes of democratic cultural governance that there is the greatest need – and the greatest possibility – for urban cultural policy to be creative.

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