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## Livable City/Unequal City: The Politics of Policy-Making in a « Creative » Boomtown

*Ville habitable/ville inégale : la politique de l'élaboration des politiques dans une ville « créative » en plein essor*

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# Livable City/Unequal City: The Politics of Policy-Making in a « Creative » Boomtown

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## Introduction

- 1 In a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Leone Sandercock (2004) charts what she calls a “new planning imagination for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Her paper identifies new ways in which we might conceive of the goals, methods, sites of engagement, and political potentialities of urban planning practice. She defines planning as an “always unfinished social project whose task is managing our coexistence in the shared spaces of cities and neighborhoods in such a way as to enrich human life and to work for social, cultural, and environmental justice” (Sandercock, 2004, p. 134 ; see also Sandercock, 1998 ; 2003). Her intent is to emphasize the need for planning to remain relevant to the contemporary economic and cultural characteristics of cities.
- 2 There are three elements of Sandercock’s work that are relevant here. First, she draws attention to the relationship between livability/quality of life/“enrich[ed] human life” and economic development in cities. Second, her paper presents a broad definition of urban policy-making that encompasses the actions of activists, the business community, and the media as well as city officials and politicians and, therefore, indicates that the formulation and adoption of urban policies is always a political process (Logan and Motloch, 1987). Third, Sandercock draws attention to *imagination*, not as separate from reality but as productive of reality through its central role in “framing’ (Tarrow, 1992) social practice. More specifically, her work points to a particular type of social imagination – what David Harvey (1973, pp. 23-27), following Mills (1959), called the

*geographical imagination* – whereby actors recognize how social relations are mediated by space and through which they seek to use, shape, and manage space for specific purposes. This approach resonates with the wider understanding among geographers of the mutually constitutive relationship between urban social, political, and economic processes and urban space (Harvey, 1973 ; Soja, 1989 ; Lefebvre, 1991).

- 3 This paper will address the contemporary tendency in North American urban policy to uncritically seek to connect specific ideals of urban 'livability' with urban economic development policies that cater to the whims of Richard Florida's 'Creative Class' (Florida, 2004a). It will do so through an analysis of the politics of urban policy-making in Austin, Texas, a city Florida sees as a model for aspirant creative urban regions. Austin has 37.5 % of its workers employed in the Creative Class – third among large US urban regions, behind Washington, DC and Raleigh-Durham, NC (Florida 2004a, p. 368) – and it experienced a recent high-technology boom – a sector defined by Florida (2004a, p. 328) as part of the "Super-Creative Core" of the contemporary economy. The paper will outline two related spatial frames or parts of a geographical imagination, that underpin in Florida's argument – one which identifies an idealized vibrant urban neighborhood as the geographical nexus at which livability and economic competitiveness connect and another that positions individual cities within a wider context of competitors through the device of rankings and comparative tables. The paper will then address the case of Austin from 1997 to 2001, a period when a charismatic mayor and a Democrat-led, so-called "green council" enacted a set of policies aimed at growing the city's high tech economy while preserving its environment and enhancing quality of life. It will show how the council's attention to certain parts of the city and Austin planners' and local economic development specialists' attention to a mental map of cities to be learned from and competed against reflects Florida's perspective and, as his book indicates, has also influenced his account of how cities can become "creative' (Florida, 2004a, pp. 190-191, 298-300).
- 4 The paper will subsequently turn to the question of inequality and its relationship to policies aimed at nurturing, attracting, and retaining the "Creative Class.' It will examine debates in Austin over rising economic inequality and a related decrease in housing affordability which arose just as the city was gaining its reputation as an exemplar of "new economy' urban success. This section will again focus on geographical framings to outline how activists, policy-makers, and politicians struggled over and sought to mitigate the negative consequence of Austin's high-technology boom and how this politics calls into question much of the rosy optimism of the Creative Class thesis.
- 5 In this context, the paper makes two related arguments : (1) an attention to space and spatiality – the interaction of space and social action (Soja, 1989) – offers analytical purchase on contemporary issues of urban development since urban policy, politics, and economic development reflect and shape geographical processes, including geographical imaginations and their spatial framings, and (2) the case of Austin suggests that even the most favored "creative cities' are quickly forced to address the inequality which seems to result from Creative Class policies and, thus, advocates of the Creative Class thesis must address evidence of how creative cities are becoming increasingly *less* livable for many. Addressing this issue needs, the paper argues, the development of concrete policy strategies, not merely the sort of hand-wringing that has characterized much of the most prominent literature to this point.

## The spatial politics of urban economic development and quality of life

- 6 The geographical aspect of contemporary efforts to fuse urban economic competitiveness with urban quality of life, or livability is captured by Logan and Molotch's (1987) phrase, "the political economy of place," which, along with Cochrane's (1999, p. 111) notion of the "the local politics of business" emphasizes the actions of "locally-dependent" (Cox and Mair, 1988) fractions of capital (rentiers, whose increased profit margins are dependent on the intensification of local land uses) and allied individuals and institutions (from the local media to developers and labor unions) in branding cities, shaping urban landscapes, and framing urban policy in reference to inter-urban competition (Hall and Hubbard, 1998; McCann, 2004; Ward, 2000a, 2000b). The importance of place and scale in these works emphasizes the centrality of spatiality at the heart of sociologists, political scientists, and geographers' understanding of contemporary urban development. A parallel focus of these literatures has been on the discursive and representational aspects of the politics of urban development that, according to Jessop (1998, p. 84-85 ; see also Boyle, 1999 ; Jonas and Wilson, 1999b ; McCann, 2002), increasingly involves, among other things, "modifying the spatial division of consumption through enhancing the quality of life for residents, commuters, and visitors."
- 7 Jessop's words echo Harvey's (1989, p. 12) argument that cities, once set on the treadmill of competition by larger structural forces, such as the reconfiguration of revenue streams from other levels of government, must "keep ahead of the game [by] engendering leap-frogging innovations in life-styles, cultural forms, products, and service mixes, even institutional and political forms, if they are to survive." There is a long social science and policy-making tradition of addressing factors involved in improving quality of life (such as decreased residential overcrowding and mitigating natural hazards) in order to create more socially just, equitable, and humane cities (Pacione, 1982 ; 1990). Yet, Harvey's emphasis on lifestyle in his discussion of urban entrepreneurialism indicates that quality of life is now routinely understood as a competitive advantage and defined in terms of consumption opportunities for wealthier and/or more economically valued class fractions who are able to choose the cities in which they live or invest on the basis of specific lifestyle characteristics.
- 8 This definition of urban economic competitiveness in relation to a narrow definition of quality of life (Ley, 1990), is especially evident in Richard Florida's (2004a) "Creative Class' discourse. It is a new policy vulgate or "commonplace' ("notions or theses *with* which one argues but *over* which there is no argument") (Bourdieu and Waquant, 2001, p. 2, their emphasis) that has become central to the entrepreneurial rhetoric of North American urban policy-makers (Peck, 2005). Florida's argument is that in order to be economically successful, cities must attract the "Creative Class' - young workers, primarily working in the sciences, engineering, the design professions - from architecture to product design - as well as the arts and education (Florida, 2004a). Cities' attractiveness, he suggests, is based on their ability to provide this class fraction with a high quality of life. "They like," says Florida,
- indigenous street-level culture - a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creators (Florida, 2004a, p. 166).

- 9 According to this perspective, the city, if it is to be economically competitive, must be reshaped and repackaged as a consumption and lifestyle space that attracts the Creative Class.

## Florida's geographical imagination

- 10 This has clearly been a persuasive argument for a wide range of cities (Peck, 2005). One aspect of its persuasive power that I would like to point to is Florida's skillful use of particular spatial frames – related elements of his geographical imagination. Each of these invokes certain images for policy actors, they are “causal stories” (Clarke and Gaile, 1997) or “regulating fictions” (Robinson, 2002) that help policy actors visualize their current practice, their creative future, and allow them to legitimize certain policy strategies over others.
- 11 Geographical imaginations are ways of seeing and understanding social space that influence how one acts in it and how one thinks it can be organized and managed (Soja, 1989 ; Harvey, 1990 ; Wolford, 2004). A geographical imagination, according to Harvey (1973, p. 24),
- enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his [sic] own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him to recognize the relationship which exists between him and his neighborhood, his territory, or . . . his "turf." It allows him to judge the relevance of events in other places ... It allows him to fashion and use space creatively and to appreciate the meaning of the spatial forms created by others.
- 12 More recently, Woford (2004, p. 413), writing in a different context and elaborating on the cognate term, "spatial imaginaries," suggests that these ways of seeing are, “lens[es] for turning context into action.” This suggests that imagination, “no longer represents transcendence or escape, but is crucial – indeed the most crucial – form of social construction, of productive work” (Buell, 1994, p. 314 ; quoted in Olds, 2001, p. 48). Geographical imaginations allow urban policy actors to locate themselves in wider flows of knowledge (about good policies, for instance) and also motivate and legitimate their actions (e.g., efforts to attract the Creative Class). Each geographical imagination is a conception of society and space as they are, as they might, should, or will be. They are also social gathering points, around which actors converge to form interpretive communities, “who come together around a shared reading of a set of texts,” where “their shared reading serves as the basis for social action” (Duncan, 1990, pp. 155-156 ; see also Stock, 1986). Geographical imaginations like Florida's are, therefore, powerful. They permeate and constitute everyday urban policy-making.
- 13 Two spatial frames are particularly relevant here. The first is a mental map of successful or aspirant creative cities with which to compete or from which to learn. This is created through the “calculative practices” (Larner and Le Heron, 2002, p. 753) used to create Florida's indices of high-tech, innovation, gays, bohemians, talent, the melting pot, diversity, and creativity (Florida, 2004a, pp. 327-334). Subsequently these calculations lead to a ranked mapping of cities in terms of their levels of creativity (e.g., Florida, 2004a, p.xxii) which, I argue, are powerful and attractive spatial frames of reference for

policy-makers interested in competing with or learning from similar cities and interested in legitimizing their activities.

- 14 Florida's second spatial frame is an idealized vision of the vibrant, diverse, street-oriented, and creative urban neighborhood. Such neighborhoods – whether existing in the past, currently present, or promised for the future – are the rhetorical and spatial anchors of Florida's vision of creative city-regions (cf. McCann, 2007). His always-polished prose is at its liveliest when he describes these places and, as a result, I argue that the images he presents are powerfully persuasive to policy-makers and the general public, evoking as they do a sense of nostalgic familiarity coupled with anticipation of an urban future that is almost in reach.
- 15 This spatial framing is evident in his discussion of Jane Jacobs's Greenwich Village of the 1950s, and particularly Hudson Street, where she lived at the time : Her book, "celebrated the creativity and diversity of urban neighborhoods like her own Greenwich Village." "Jacobs's neighborhoods," Florida continues,
- were veritable fountainheads of individuality, difference and social interaction. The miracle of these places, she argued, was found in the hurly-burly life of the street. The street, where many different kinds of people came together, was both a source of civility and a font for creativity (Florida, 2004a, pp. 41-42).
- 16 Florida argues that Jacobs's (1961) ideas are increasingly coming into their own :
- Not only are urban neighborhoods similar to Hudson Street reviving across the country, but many of the principles that animated Hudson Street are diffusing through our economy and society. Workplaces, personal lives, entire industries and entire geographic regions are coming to operate on principles of constant, dynamic creative interaction (Florida, 2004a, p. 43).
- 17 This evocation of Jacobs's New York lays the foundation of many of the key arguments in Florida's book, particularly those that suggest the need for a fusion of economic development, "quality of life," and "quality of place." Here is Florida in the chapter entitled, "The Experiential Life," describing the appropriate milieu for the Creative Class – a type of space which cities must foster if they are to be economically competitive :
- [T]he Creative Class is drawn to more organic and indigenous street-level culture . . . in multiuse urban neighborhoods. The neighborhood can be upscale like D.C.'s Georgetown or Boston's Back Bay, or reviving-downscale like D.C.'s Adams Morgan, New York's East Village, or Pittsburgh's South Side. Either way, it grows organically from its surroundings, and a sizable number of the creators and patrons of the culture live close by. This is what makes it "indigenous." (Florida, 2004a, p. 182).
- 18 "And then," he goes on, "if it is a proper street scene, there will be . . . a delicious sense of adventure in the air. One has an awareness of the possibilities of life [in such a place]" (Florida, 2004a, p. 186). Adventure and possibility can best grow in a certain type of space, he suggests, and in the vibrant urban neighborhood, they become the experiential building blocks of creativity :
- I would further argue . . . that this kind of experience is essential to the creative process. We humans are not godlike ; we cannot create out of nothing. Creativity for us is an act of synthesis, and in order to create and synthesize, we need stimuli – bits and pieces to put together in new and unfamiliar ways<sup>1</sup>, existing frameworks to deconstruct and transcend (Florida, 2004a, p. 186, my emphasis ; cf Jessop, 1997, p. 31).
- 19 These two spatial frames – the mental map of competitive creative cities and the vision of the livable, creative neighborhood – are geographically-grounded stories which link certain urban spaces and the geography of inter-city competition to current and future

visions of urban economies and societies. As "causal stories" (Clarke and Gaile, 1997) around which groups of interpreters gather and in reference to which they develop policy (Stock, 1986), they are therefore powerful.

## Keepin' Austin weird ? Geographies of policy and quality of life

- 20 Evidence of the power of Florida's geographical imagination and its two key frames, is widespread (Peck, 2005). How might a perspective that reads the contemporary influence of the Creative Class thesis in urban policy through the notion of the geographical imagination be useful in analyzing specific cases? In the following paragraphs I will address this question by drawing on the politics of urban policy in Austin, Texas from 1997 to 2001. Austin is widely seen as the epitome of what might be termed a hometown/boomtown ideal in North America urban policy. By this I mean that the contemporary urban policy orthodoxy in North America suggests that successful cities must effectively blend a boomtown atmosphere – a vibrant economy, usually one structured around specific economic clusters such as semiconductors and electronics, computers and peripherals, and film and media – with a high quality of life which makes the place attractive as a hometown for business owners and their most valued employees (McCann, 2004). Austin is a city with a well-developed and still expanding technology sector, a growing population, a relatively low cost of living, an attractive environment, vibrant nightlife, and a strong arts sector, anchored by the music and movie industries.
- 21 While many North American cities have been adopted Florida's language and some of his policy ideas (Peck, 2005), the Austin case is more complex since the city was an exemplar for Florida – he drew some of his general principles from the study of the Austin case. Thus it might be seen as a proto-creative city, where some of the problems with the Creative Class model (such as the tendency towards increased economic inequality in creative cities) can be identified as clearly as any of its benefits (such as a tolerance for some forms of difference). The following two sub-sections discuss (1) the way Austin's policy-makers attempted to limit sprawl and to channel new development in ways that would enhance existing historical neighborhoods, thus promoting the sort of vibrant street-life that Florida celebrates and (2) how these internal policy interventions are shaped by an inter-city imagination of best policy practices and exemplary cities to be emulated or competed against – a mental map that is reflected in Florida's rankings of the top creative cities. These will lead to a discussion, in the next section of the paper, of the politics and geography of inequality in Austin.
- 22 The empirical material is based on fieldwork in Austin in Fall 2000, which employed semi-structured interviews with key informants (planners, members of the business community and neighborhood activists), direct observation of planning meetings, and archival research. Eighteen interviews, 45 minutes to two hours long, were conducted. Direct observation in various settings provided the opportunity to view how analyses of policy challenges were articulated in the political process. Archival research on government documents, newspapers, and materials distributed by activist organizations was also used during the period in Austin and afterwards.
- 23 Shaping vibrant, livable central city neighborhoods through planning policy

Redevelopment of downtown Austin is one of the priorities of the Smart Growth Initiative. The vision for downtown is a vibrant, diverse, neighborhood with a mix of cultural, employment, entertainment, residential, and retail uses.

City of Austin (1997, p. 3)

- 24 In Austin, after the election of the “green council” in 1997, the policy agenda soon focused on promoting economic development while managing the negative effects of growth on both the surrounding natural environment and also on central city neighborhoods. In this context, planning policy was reformulated around a Smart Growth agenda that had at its center a participatory neighborhood planning program, branded with the slogan “Neighborhoods First.” The two related intentions of the Smart Growth approach were first to discourage growth on environmentally sensitive land on the city’s edges and, instead, to channel that growth toward the downtown and a central city core defined by the city’s immediate post-war boundaries. Second, the neighborhood planning component of the strategy was intended manage new central city growth in order to maintain and promote the attractiveness of urban neighborhoods as they were impacted by new investment (McCann, 2003).
- 25 The city’s approach, then, was tied to a specific geographical imagination, frame, or causal story that guided and legitimated policy. In it, certain parts of the city were understood as particularly important objects of planning, either as problem areas to be managed (the growing suburbs) or as areas with the potential to attract the desirable populations (the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods). As a senior planner, resonating with Florida’s discussion of vibrant urban neighborhoods, put it,
- One of the things, though that the Mayor sort of hooked on to, was . . . the fact that there’s a changing demographic going on here and everywhere else around the country. . . . [M]any young people who are tired and bored with the suburbs [are] interested in living downtown. So you’ve got this renaissance of downtown going on . . . and the Mayor and the Smart Growth Program have helped each other to help that process move forward (Interview with senior planner, November 6, 2000).
- 26 The control of sprawl, in this context, is part of a policy strategy aimed at promoting the “quality of life’ and “quality of place’ of central city neighborhoods and, in turn, to maintain and encourage the development of a high technology economy. While Florida (2004a, p. 290) makes a strong case for the importance of urban neighborhoods like Jacobs’s Greenwich Village, he also notes the links between sprawl-control and neighborhood-building strategies:
- [I]n one of the most ironic twists in recent memory, both sprawling cities and traditional suburbs are seeking to emulate elements of urban life. Cities like Atlanta, Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Jose have all undertaken major efforts to increase density in and around their urban centers, develop downtown housing and redevelop their downtown cores. San Diego has embarked on an ambitious \$2.5 billion “City of Villages’ initiative to generate more compact, community-oriented development by rebuilding its older neighborhoods as pedestrian-friendly centers, where homes are close to shops, parks and public transit.
- 27 Vibrant central city neighborhoods and their relationship to a certain definition of livability, are, then, central to Florida’s geographical imagination and to that of Austin’s politicians and policy professionals. As a City of Austin (1997, p. 1) document puts it, “[t]o address [problems of rapid growth] Smart Growth emphasizes the concept of developing “livable” cities and towns.”

Livability suggests, among other things, that the quality of our built environment and how well we preserve the natural environment directly affect our quality of



life. Smart Growth calls for the investment of time, attention, and resources in central cities and older suburbs to restore community and vitality to these areas (City of Austin, 1997, p. 1).

- 28 Following Clarke and Gaile (1997), this geographical imagination can be understood as a "causal story" which encourages, frames, and legitimates certain policy interventions. Austin's experience with this particular imagination in turn provided partial inspiration for Florida's arguments, as did a second spatial frame to which I will now turn.

Cities, good and bad: Politicians' and policy professionals' moral geography of urban policy

Austin or Houston ? You Decide.

Political campaign poster, Austin, Fall 2000

- 29 While the attention of Austin's politicians and planners was focused in part on the creation of a vibrant central city through the Smart Growth Initiative, those same actors along with the city's economic development professionals – in the city government and in the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce – were also developing a spatial frame which positioned their practice within a wider inter-urban geography of learning and competition. Through this frame, they positioned Austin, its quality of life, and economic competitiveness in relation to other cities and thus were able to advocate for and legitimize certain policy strategies. This inter-urban geographical imagination was frequently framed in terms of hierarchies or rankings that : (1) identified cities where positive or negative lessons about urban planning policy could be learned and (2) highlighted cities to be competed against for investment. These hierarchicalizations were simultaneously spatialized as part of a mental map or moral geography of good and bad places.

- 30 Local politicians and policy-makers actively sought out examples from elsewhere as they shaped and legitimated their Smart Growth approach. Specifically, the mayor took the lead in bringing the Smart Growth approach to Texas by "basically copying [Governor] Paris Glendenning's [highly regarded state-wide Smart Growth] effort in Maryland, but at a local level" (Interview with senior planner, November 6, 2000) and by subsequently hosting a national Smart Growth conference in 1998 (Interview with planner, October 17, 2000). More specifically, the planner in charge of the Neighborhood Planning element of the Smart growth process described how

we looked to Portland [Oregon] and we looked to [others places to] get these ideals from places, to design the initial program. [We did a] survey of neighborhood planning events in Texas to see what are those cities working with and to really learn about . . . their process and what they thought has worked out. And I think that our process of course is different from Houston because Houston doesn't zone. Our process is somewhat different from Portland, in that they have an excellent, excellent program. They really, they have a lot of funding for other things that we haven't been able to obtain (Interview with planner, October 12, 2000).

- 31 The focus on Portland was an obvious choice for a group of planners with a longstanding regard for the city as an exemplary place for growth management and the maintenance of vibrant neighborhoods. As Austin's chief Smart Growth Planner put it when asked to identify cities Austin modeled itself upon,

Portland has always held up as the prime example and its certainly been mentioned prominently here. I think you could probably talk about a number of west coast cities – Portland, Seattle ... Just the idea that you could have a very different type of city, from what we tend to have around here, you know. One that is not so auto-based ... (Interview with planner, October 17, 2000)

- 32 The other side of this moral geography highlights the cities that Austin's policy-makers view as cautionary examples. San Jose, California, at the heart of Silicon Valley, is a very different west coast city from Portland. It is a place with a high cost of living and problematic traffic congestion. It is frequently cited in Austin as a cautionary tale. "[We] don't want Austin to become the next Silicon Valley, in terms of quality of life," said a member of a local high tech trade association. She continued, ". . . there is a real sense that the economic engine that we are fueling is fantastic, but we don't want it to run over what is Austin" (Interview with trade association representative, October 12 2000). A local columnist echoed these sentiments: "[Silicon Valley] illustrate[s] the conundrum of prosperous, glittering new regions that attract brains and bravado. The regions spawn clusters of businesses, spin wealth for fortunate, highly skilled workers and, inadvertently, create a starkly divided cultural landscape in which poorer people are pushed farther out to the margins of society. . . . Is this Austin's future?" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2000, p.A14).
- 33 Similarly, in the election of November 2000, Austin's ballot included an opportunity for the city's residents to vote on a proposal to fund a light rail system in the city. The proposal was strongly supported by incumbent politicians and policy-makers, who argued that it would mitigate the worst effects of traffic congestion in the rapidly growing city. Again, this local infrastructure proposal, which failed by the slimmest of margins, was framed in terms of an inter-urban geographical imagination. In the weeks before the election, signs appeared around the city with the following text: "Austin or L.A. ? You Decide. Vote Light Rail" (another version asked "Austin or Houston? . . ."). While the campaign was unsuccessful, the imaginative geography it invoked both reflected and resonated with many in Austin who worried about a possible negative future for the city. A similar, if less explicit, sentiment was expressed in a bumper sticker that began appearing at approximately the same time. The sticker demanded, "Keep Austin Weird," and spoke to fears that the influx of technology workers – many who were attracted from California by Austin's relatively low cost of living – threatened to dilute the city's bohemian spirit in favor of corporatization and "Californication."
- 34 This spatial frame dovetails with that of city's economic development professionals and the greater Austin Chamber of Commerce. They identified a group of US cities that are Austin's main economic competition. The cities – Boulder and Denver, Colorado ; Phoenix, Arizona ; Portland, Oregon ; Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina ; Salt Lake City, Utah ; San Jose, California ; and Seattle, Washington – are, according to the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce,
- [metropolitan] regions chosen because, like Austin, they are high-tech centers, and because they are the competition. The Chamber has seen many businesses consider these benchmarked regions when locating or expanding in Austin (*Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce*, 2000, p. iii, my emphasis).
- 35 This geography, like that described previously, reflects an understanding of Austin's place within more widespread networks of interaction – circuits of policy knowledge and of capital. It resonates with the mental map produced by Florida's ranking of "creative cities" which places Austin at the top of the list, followed by San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Raleigh-Durham, and Portland. Again, I want to argue that these imaginations should be seen as produced by and productive of the material practices of politicians, city planning and economic development staff, and business leaders. They are the causal

stories that framed and legitimated Austin's late-1990s push towards what Florida would later term the Creative Economy.

## Livability for whom ? Inequality, politics, and the limits of the Creative Class thesis

- 36 In the preceding sections, I have suggested that contemporary urban policy-making aimed at nurturing, attracting, and retaining the group of workers and capitalists Richard Florida dubs the Creative Class has partly entailed the deployment of a particular geographical imagination. This imagination is underpinned by an ideal of vibrant, creative urban neighborhoods and by a mental map of cities to be learned from in terms of good urban policy and to be competed against for creative talent and high-tech investment. This geographical imagination and its intrinsic spatial frames are important, I suggest, because they are causal stories that encourage and legitimate specific policy interventions in the built environment and in the economic base of cities. I show that this imagination is evident both in Florida's writing and in the policy discourse of Austin in the period 1997-2001. Austin, I argue, can be seen as a proto-creative city; one that inspired Florida's account and that has continued to develop policies in parallel with those he proposes.
- 37 I will now suggest, however, that while the Austin's experience and Florida's writings do seem to run in tandem, there is a point at which the reality of the rise of a high-tech, "creative" economy in Austin diverges from the rather rosy account of the Creative Class and its impact on cities that is featured in Florida's work. This divergence is caused by rising levels of economic inequality that are certainly correlated with, and are likely caused by the rise of the Creative Class. While, as I will show, Florida is aware of this problem but chooses to avoid dealing with it in any sustained and serious manner, Austin's politicians, planners, and economic development professionals have, since the mid-1990s, been forced to address its various dimensions. There has been a politics of inequality in Austin – inflected again by a strong spatial framing – which has brought politicians and policy professionals into engagement with a range of critics, journalists, and activists and, during the late 1990s and the beginning of the current decade, has entailed the development of a number of concrete, if unevenly successful, policies to mitigate the effects of the city's high-tech boom. The politics and policy interventions aimed at reducing inequality and of the politics surrounding questions of livability that were necessary in Austin are not reflected in the generally optimistic and apolitical writings produced by Florida. Arguments about the Creative Class must seriously address the relationship between policies aimed at this group and the economic inequality that is making cities *less* livable for many.
- 38 “The glittering signs of the new economy are becoming a familiar sight around these parts – the cranes and construction cones, the millionaires and megaplexes, the technology and traffic,” noted an editorial in the *Austin American-Statesman* (2000b, p.A14). Yet, “[p]aralyzing poverty in a time of plenty is fast becoming the catch phrase for [Austin's] new economy”. Austin's economic boom came with an attendant income bifurcation, which was a prominent discussion point in the city, not just in terms of its impacts on Austin's long-term economic competitiveness but also in terms of its quality of life. In 1990, the city's top decile of earners made 5.7 times the average wage of the

lowest-earning ten percent. At the end of the decade, during the height of the city's economic boom, those at the top earned 11.1 times as much as those at the bottom (Bishop, 2000, p.A1). At the same time, 13.1 % of the city's population lived in poverty, while the US average was 12.7 % (Sustainability Indicators Project, 2000).

- 39 Addressing these figures, a columnist for the *American-Statesman* argued that,
- [t]he rapidly increasing gap between rich and poor can contribute to ill health and crime, economists contend. And the gap could slow economic growth as companies find it difficult to do business in a region where most workers can't afford to live in most parts of the city. . . . Lower-wage workers can no longer find housing near their work. It becomes more expensive for them to connect to the labor market and harder for the labor market to connect to them (Bishop, 2000, p.A1).
- 40 Local politicians have expressed similar worries (ibid.), as have planners and activists (Interviews with planners and activists, October and November, 2000). Another columnist crystallizes these concerns, again in terms of economic competitiveness and livability. Referring to the increasing tendency of Austin's new high tech elite to build hilltop mansions on the edges of the city with majestic views of the surrounding Texas Hill Country, while also being involved in local environmental initiatives, she argues that,
- People who have the means to enjoy living here often define success in economic or environmental terms. In the past year, environmentalists and business boosters forged a delicate alliance based on a report that said businesses consider quality of life when deciding where to move. . . . Economic development and the environment were linked. Yet we've overlooked one E in the three Es of quality of life : social equity. . . . There is much to be preserved in this region. Including people, not just vistas (Richardson, 1999).
- 41 It is worth noting that Florida is compelled, in the preface to the paperback edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, to acknowledge that there does indeed seem to be a correlation between the characteristics of cities that make them 'creative' and the characteristics that make them socially and economically unequal. His analysis reveals that "inequality is highest in the creative epicenters of the US economy" (Florida, 2004a, p.xv) and that Austin – his top creative city (p.xxii) – also ranks fourth in the US in terms of levels of wage inequality (p.xvi). Yet, while Florida expresses disquiet over the probable causal relationship between creativity and inequality, he does not go beyond hand-wringing and offers no ideas for concrete policy solutions – merely opining that some city will eventually figure it out (p.xvii) and elsewhere suggesting that inequality is an 'open question' for policy-makers (Florida, 2004b).
- 42 This seems less than helpful for cities that, like Austin, have found inequality on the rise in parallel with the 'new economy.' In Austin, inequality was particularly evident in relation to housing. Austin's boom in the 1990s drove up housing costs to the point where many who worked in the city were forced to look elsewhere for affordable accommodation while many long-term residents with below-average incomes were increasingly likely to experience, or fear the prospect of, displacement as a result of gentrification. In 1997, the median house price in the city (\$108,200) exceeded that of Texas' other major cities while Austin's median income (\$35,118) was lower than any of those cities. This created a considerable housing affordability gap (Breyer, 1997). By the end of the decade, 55-60 % of the city's housing was affordable, down from 62 % in 1991. This figure was 8 % lower than the national average (Sustainability Indicators Project, 2000). The city also dropped 40 places in a national survey of housing affordability in the

1990s (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2000) and was ranked as the second least affordable housing market in the US South in 1997 (Breyer, 1997).

- 43 The question of economic inequality and declining quality of life for many in the metropolitan population was the focus of policy and politics. In April, 2000 the mayor proposed a series of related policies aimed at increasing the amount of middle- and low-income housing. These proposals complemented a longer standing set of "SMART [Safe, Mixed-income, Accessible, Reasonably-priced, Transit-oriented] Housing Incentives' that were part of Austin's original Smart Growth approach (Interviews, 2000 ; Rivera, 2000). Reacting against visions of Silicon Valley and spurred by city staff's assertion that "[t]here's no question we have a housing crisis in Austin" (Hilgers, quoted in Breyer, 2000, p.G1), the mayor argued that "[o]ne of the ways that Austin is no longer Austin is if we are only a city of the rich and poor and we don't have the ability to have other people live in this town" (Watson, quoted in Rivera, 2000, p.A1 ; see also Greenberger, 1998).
- 44 These policy initiatives were spurred, to a great extent, by the prospect of the middle class – including public employees such as police officers, firefighters, teachers, nurses, and planners – being priced out of the city. It evoked a possible future geography of negative social and environmental consequences resulting from sprawl and unaffordability. In this geographical imagination, the Austin metropolitan region would become a sprawling place of commuter-clogged roads, traffic spewing noxious fumes as workers, pushed to the suburbs and surrounding towns in search of affordable housing, commuted back and forth to the central city each day. It further threatened a bland geography of monocultural enclaves linked by arterial highways yet ironically segregated by the individualized car dependency upon which this socio-spatial form is based.
- 45 The worries of, and about, the middle class in Austin were paralleled and often challenged by political activist groups based in the city's poorest neighborhoods, located east of downtown. These groups saw the city's economic boom, its housing affordability crisis, and the Neighborhood Planning policies intended to alleviate it as particular threats to Austin's Latino and African-American poor. They were vociferous, yet eventually unsuccessful, in opposing attempts to rezone poor central city neighborhoods to allow mixed uses and multi-family housing (McCann, 2003). These policy changes would, they argued, lead to the displacement of large number of existing residents who rented single-family housing in the neighborhoods as landlords converted this housing stock into new profitable developments with shops on the ground floor and lofts or condos above. As a leading activist put it, "whenever there is a big economic boom, all we can do is just pray. Because we know we are going to lose a lot of the land." Expressing her organization's worries over gentrification, she argued that,
- commercialization and mixed use [in East Austin neighborhoods] is going to be [high rent] condominiums and lofts. We don't fit into that equation at all . . . so to our people, it's just a major displacement. That's what we're saying. It's just a major displacement that is coming into our communities, and by changing all that zoning, all those people [gentrifiers] have been waiting to cross over [the boundaries of the neighborhoods]. . . . They are going to now move us all east of [Highway]183. . . . And that's what we're seeing right now – you know the gentrification, and the move out of our community to further east. And the zoning is one way of how they are going to do it (Interview with neighborhood activist, October 18, 2000).
- 46 This is a vision of Austin focused not on the benefits of the Creative Class but on the forward march of gentrification frontiers through the urban core (Smith, 1996) and the

subsequent scattering of Austin's long-established and tight knit low-income communities.

- 47 Tellingly, gentrification is not a term included in the extensive index of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Florida occasionally touches on it in the text, however. Yet when he does, it is in passing and the topic is quickly dispatched in favor of a more familiar optimistic narrative. For example, Florida (2004a, p. 312) acknowledges that “deep social divides remain” in rejuvenating Pittsburgh.

The edgy street-level venues of Garfield and the new upscale development on the South Side do little to address the desperate plight of a large economic underclass. And while growing numbers of Creative Class types infiltrate and gentrify low-income urban areas, huge numbers of people in all classes continue to segregate themselves distinctly into different places – and different ways of life – along income and racial lines.

- 48 Here, not only is the topic dealt with quickly and without any concrete policy prescriptions but it is phrased in such a way – “. . . classes continue to *segregate themselves* . . .” (ibid. my emphasis) – that blame for gentrification and the inequality it fosters seems to be laid at the feet of its victims and their “choices.” While some politicians and activists in places like Austin struggle to shape socially just economic futures, they find little in the largely apolitical and Pollyannaish Creative Class literature to aid them.

## Conclusion

Every technical task involves a decision . . . about what counts.  
Sandercock (2004, p. 136)

- 49 This paper makes two related arguments. It suggests that an attention to the framing and legitimizing role of geographical imaginations provides useful analytical purchase on contemporary urban development policy-making. Secondly, using the case of Richard Florida's Creative Class thesis and that of Austin, Texas' experience as it became seen as an exemplary “creative city,” the paper argues that the most prominent work on the Creative Class does a disservice to policy-makers looking to fully understand the range of positive *and negative* consequences of its proposed policy model. Thus, I suggest that Florida and others must take issues of inequality in “creative cities” more seriously, move beyond hand-wringing, and offer concrete policy prescriptions that promise to make those cities livable for more than just the Creative Class.
- 50 In reference to Sandercock's words on urban policy-making above, it seems, then, that only certain aspects of cities count for many proponents of the Creative Class thesis. For Florida, questions of inequality seem to count for less than optimistic and idealized visions of vibrant urban neighborhoods and an archipelago of “creative cities” strung out across the United States and, increasingly, the world (Florida, 2005). At first glance, what counted for Austin's party-political, business, and bureaucratic policy actors was the development of technology-oriented industries, attracting and retaining of “creative” workers, and the reassertion of the urban core as a live-work space for this class fraction. At most it seemed that these actors had accepted what Peck (2005, p. 766) describes as Florida's vision of “a form of creative trickle down” to aid the “two-thirds of the population languishing in the working and service classes.” It is clear, however, that while it is possible for highly-mobile, trans-local consultants like Florida to remain detached from the questions of inequality that emerge in cities as they experience high-

technology booms, politicians, journalists, activists, and residents are forced to engage with the destructive elements of these changes (e.g., wage inequality, housing affordability gaps, displacement, and increased commute times) and ask for whom it is that their quality of life and quality of place is being shaped ?

- 51 Solutions will not be found in the popular Creative Class work. They are more likely to be found through the careful study of the politics of policy-making in cities like Austin. The city is a cautionary example of the limits of the creative Class thesis but its experience offers the concrete starting points for a discussion of the appropriate policies to mitigate urban inequalities. In Austin, the extreme conditions of the boom years have lessened since 2000. Evidence suggests, however, that this change is due more to a global downturn in the economy which severely impacted the city in the early years of this century, robbing it of its boomtown status, and that inequality in wages or housing affordability among other measures has by no means been eliminated (Central Texas Sustainability Indicators Project, 2004). Thus, the question of the effectiveness of some of Austin's anti-inequality policies remains one to be explored further. However, the widespread acknowledgement of the link between rapid economic growth and problems of inequality and declining quality of life in the city should provide pause for thought for policy-makers attracted to the increasingly hegemonic creative city' ideal.

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## ABSTRACTS

There is a tendency in contemporary North American urban policy-making to uncritically connect specific ideals of urban 'livability' with efforts to cater to the whims of the so-called 'Creative Class.' The paper engages with this tendency through an analysis of the politics of urban policy-making in Austin, Texas – a place regarded as an exemplar of 'livability' and 'creativity.' With reference to the Austin case, the paper identifies and describes two related spatial frames that underpin the 'Creative Class' thesis and its relationship to a certain conception of urban livability – an idealization of the vibrant urban neighbourhood and a moral geography of competing 'livable' and 'creative' cities. The paper then addresses the question of inequality and its relationship to policies aimed at nurturing, attracting, and retaining the 'Creative Class.' This is done through a discussion of Austin's experience of rising economic inequality and declining housing affordability just as the city became 'creative' and 'livable.' The paper's core argument is that policy-makers must acknowledge and address the inequality that seems to result from the implementation of narrow 'livability' and 'creativity' policies and that advocates of the 'Creative Class' thesis must address, with more than hand-wringing and platitudes, evidence that 'creative cities' are becoming increasingly less livable for most people.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** inequality, livability, 'creative class' thesis, urban politics, space

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