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Beaumont, Justin; Yildiz, Zemiattin

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Entering a Knowledge Pearl in Times of Creative Cities Policy and Strategy. The Case of Groningen, Netherlands

Justin Beaumont and Zemiattin Yildiz

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we critically examine the notion of the creative cities paradigm in terms of socio-spatial inequalities, with reference to the knowledge pearl of Groningen in the northern region of The Netherlands.

On Wednesday, 21 January 2015, the newspaper of the University of Groningen (RUG) announced that the university, together with the Hanze University of Applied Science (Hanze), the municipality, and the provincial government, would invest 14–17 million euro in the coming years “to transform the campus (*de Zernike Campus*) from a grey, liminal zone to a lively Silicon Valley”. This transformation would consist mainly of the construction of more green spaces and walking corridors to connect both sides of the Campus. New space will be made for small retail outlets, catering businesses, enterprises, and potentially an international student

J. Beaumont (✉) • Z. Yildiz
Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen,
Groningen, The Netherlands

dormitory. The vision is to bring together students and business in order to facilitate more cooperation in the knowledge economy.

Although the budget remains modest, this investment is striking for several reasons. First, the municipality has until now warded off small retail, catering, and housing in this part of the city to focus on the inner-city as the center of its leisure economy. Second, the overriding assumption is that improving the physical outlook and spearheading some cafés and related services on campus could foster synergies between knowledge institutions and the private sector. Third, despite the associated optimism and hyperbole, the comparison with Silicon Valley reveals the level of ambition in the rationale behind this public investment.¹

In another part of the city, adjacent to the historic city-center, we find the former CiBoGa terrain.² This city area was fallow for some 15–20 years, plagued by soil contamination, for which local policy-makers only recently have found a new albeit temporary purpose. Today the area is home to the *Open Lab Ebbingge* (OLE), a project that mainly provides a testing ground (*proeftuin* or Lab) for temporary area development, and creative urban use in the form of events, dwellings, exhibitions, work ateliers, and so on. The aim of the project is “to develop a deprived urban area into a dynamic creative zone, where knowledge, innovation, culture and creativity meet and mutually reinforce” [...] “further developing the profile of Groningen as a creative city, tackling the problem of unoccupied commercial buildings in the *Ebbingekwartier* and stimulating the local business climate”.³

We do not argue that these developments can be subjected to an overarching, all-encompassing (urban) development logic (Du Gay 2004; cf. McDowell 2017). Neither do we imply that they are entirely subject to or “complicit” with neoliberalism (Peck 2005). However, we argue that these developments center on a new ambition of cities: to proliferate as a regional center of urban economic development in a post-industrial, competitive, urban environment through the installment of creativity policies, strategies and developments. While these developments provide striking examples, they are only the tip of the iceberg (in Groningen and elsewhere). As such creativity policy now occupies a prominent place in urban

¹ *Ibid.*

² (*Ci*)rcus), (*Bo*)dem en (*Gas*)terrain (CiBoGa), see: www.woneninhetebbingekwartier.nl/. Accessed 6 December 2015.

³ See: www.openlabebbinge.nl/english-project-description/. Accessed 6 December 2015.

interventions and therefore becomes an important subject for the people who inhabit cities and especially in terms of the differential access to benefits of these changes and the spatial dimensions of those inequalities.

Against the back-drop of recent approaches to [urban] inequality (see section “Our Approach to Inequalities”), the next two sections discuss and compare two conflicting strands of (spatial) urban theory. In particular, we draw on key concepts in critical urban theory (CUT) as pioneered by David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre and on the concept of “policy mobility” rooted in a tradition of assemblage-inspired readings of urban space. “The section a Knowledge Pearl in Times of Creative Cities” offers a detailed description of creativity-cum-knowledge policy, strategy, and development in Groningen in the face of socio-spatial disparities. We make reference to two illustrative examples: (1) creative re-development of the former CiBoGa area; and (2) Groningen’s aspiration as a ‘City of Talent’. Finally, we conclude with implications for local strategies to reduce socio-spatial disparities in the face of a growing dependence on creative city development and point to implications for further research.

CRITICISMS OF THE CREATIVE CITIES PARADIGM

The notion of creativity has become an almost normalized and popularized trend in policy-making over the last decade. This process has occurred in particular at the level of the city and region (McCann 2004), as well as within local economic development policy (Donegan and Lowe 2008). Of particular relevance—although first pioneered by Landry (2000)—is Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), where he argues that in the US economy a new class of workers has emerged. This new class, which he calls the creative class, has, for a large part, replaced traditional industrial jobs and consequently radically changed the role of place in spatial (urban) economic development. Instead of workers following jobs, now jobs follow highly mobile, creative workers (see Florida 2005). These workers, in turn, are attracted to urban centers that offer a specific range of amenities and an economically and culturally attractive environment. As Donegan and Lowe (2008) point out, economic prosperity of cities and regions therefore is no longer seen as dependent on “traditional economic development strategies—such as industrial recruitment, export promotion, or workforce development—but rather on its success in attracting and retaining creative talent” (p. 46). We wish to emphasize, however, that there already existed profound bifurcations regarding the

use of Florida's logic both in theory and practice. Some cities are already past his conception of the creative class (e.g. Amsterdam as already "post-Florida", see Peck 2012), but still aim to foster further economic growth through similar policy reforms and development strategies.

In academic circles too the creative cities paradigm has been the subject of long-standing debates over the concepts of creativity, culture, and knowledge vis-a-vis urban development. The creative cities paradigm could be simplified as follows: while the concept "creative industries" represents a particular economic sector (or perhaps capital) that is to be "mapped" and promoted, and the "creative class" a specific group of workers (labor) that cities and regions aim to attract in a bid for increased competitive edge, we might say that the term creative city refers to the bringing together of the former two in a(n) (often predefined) spatial (urban) unit (see Prince 2012: 322–3). In this sense, the latter term of creative city designates creativity policy in its most spatial dimension.

In terms of spatial (urban) planning and governance the creative city hypothesis leads to the question how should local and regional actors act upon this paradigm. How can these actors operationalize the creative cities idea in their city (see Peck 2005)? We refer to the following features:

1. Fostering creatives (talent), industries and synergies;
2. Cool, sexy, edgy, and surprising parts of the city, where municipalities plan for leisure, tourism, and redevelopment;
3. Mainly anti-government in ethos (see McCann 2004; Donegan and Lowe 2008) and where government assumes a more facilitating role, creating more room for creative solutions (see Gerhard 2017);
4. City competitiveness based on numerous creative city rankings, with an emphasis on urban networks and hierarchies;
5. Favoring short-term solutions and planning processes, not just short term as in temporary projects like *OpenLab Ebbinge* in Groningen but in terms of governance style (link to debates on Foucauldian governmentality), internationalization and the knowledge economy;
6. For municipal governments these factors mean that there are new industries to bolster involving specific groups of workers and certain types of neighborhood; sprucing up the appearance of the city becomes a cornerstone in policy documents, where an entrepreneurial, libertarian preference for "trickle down" prevails.

The rationale behind the academic discourse, as well as the implications for practice, has been rather over-blown, opportunistic and populist in tone. One could say that the creative cities paradigm has to a large measure served the purposes of a particular group of policy-makers, politicians and other urban elites, with little in the way of benefits for ordinary, low-income people in working-class and deprived neighborhoods. The discourse has attracted a range of criticisms on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum (see Peck 2005).

One important critique concerns the contested size of the alleged creative class and the actual amount of creative industries in any given city (see Peck 2012; Gerhard 2017; McDowell 2017). Another important critique concerns the problem of causality (Peck 2005): “Street-level cultural innovation and conspicuous consumption may just as easily be consequences of economic growth, rather than causes of it” (p. 755). That policy-makers will never be certain whether the creative city policy will really bear fruit is another point of concern. In effect, some even wonder whether we are really looking at something special or new at all (see Gerhard 2017).

Despite these objections, as Bontje and Lawton (2013) note, the furor over creative city policy has raced ahead of careful conceptualization and empirical engagement. The result is a free-wheeling policy with poor referencing to existing research and academic debates on the side of policy-makers, while ensuring much disagreement among scholars about the true virtues and benefits of creative cities themselves.

The most virulent critique now emerging concerns relations between the creative cities paradigm and inequality. In particular:

1. An idealized conception of the creative worker, rooted in uncertainties, instabilities and flexibility working practices and arrangements;
2. Focus on a dealer class and real economy, therefore the creative city concerns a deeply stratified and unequal sector in itself (see McDowell 2017);
3. Tendency to instrumentalize and commodify culture;
4. Complement and aggravate neoliberal politics and governance with the associated cleavages and grievances for less advantaged groups;
5. Discourse bypasses and circumvents debates on inequality; the discourse re-packages rather than changes policy (Peck 2012).

OUR APPROACH TO INEQUALITIES

Interpreting inequality has always been a particularly contested topic, both in modern and pre-modern societies. The recent publication of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014a), where he demonstrates that inequalities (in terms of income and wealth) have increased dramatically since the 1980s, almost mirroring the unequal distributions during the early 19th century (see also Piketty 2014b), has renewed relevance of the topic as well as the urgency to address and mitigate their consequences.

Simultaneously, inequality remains a politically sensitive and scientifically challenging topic, subject to manifold ideologies, concepts, and narratives. The lines between its analytical and normative features, and by extension between science and politics, seem to blur significantly. Apart from opposing interpretations of the term inequality (respectively in terms of merits and rewards, and in terms of human beings as equals)—let alone, the term equity, referring to respective starting positions of individuals and social groups—there are a series of “modalities of inequality” (i.e. their legal, economic, political, social, and physical “dimensions”) and “cleavages” (social class, stratification, gender, ethnicity, etc.) along which inequalities persist. In addition, expressions, concepts, and explanations of inequalities diverge substantially. For example, (social) inequality has been conceptualized in terms of “differences among people in their command over social and economic resources” (Osberg 2001: 7371); in terms of distribution of resources and (human, social, creative) capitals (referring to Rawls and Bourdieu); in terms of production and consumption referring to Marxian approaches; and even in terms of “recognition” of rights and desires of different individuals and social groups (Honneth 1995, 2003, 2007).

Accordingly, the vocabularies and grammars deployed to address and conceptualize the issue also differ a great deal (MacLeod and McFarlane 2014). Moreover, and paramount to the potential solutions, we may wish to advance in order to prevent further entrenchment of inequalities, the construction and availability of (new) tools—concepts, equipment, statistics, measuring instruments, and, not the least, money—to investigate inequality are crucial elements for how both academics and “others” are able to investigate and interpret the issue, and, in extension, to (de-) problematize it.

Two sets of distinctions characterize our interest in the purported relations between creative cities and inequalities. First, whether a particular form of inequality is a unique feature or consequence of creative city

policy and strategy or whether they affect existing disparities. We attempt to identify direct relationships between the creative cities paradigm and inequalities. Second, we are interested in how the discourse on creative cities not only amplifies but also potentially offers chances to reduce, growing socio-spatial inequalities under conditions of global neoliberal urbanism.

Since the logic supporting the creative cities idea is embedded in a distinct spatial (urban) paradigm, we are especially interested in inequalities in an urban context. This interest is ignited by concepts of urban space that conceive of capitalist urbanization as a process of ‘un-equalization’. Take note that several empirical analyses have already identified correlations between urbanization and inequality, demonstrating that respective rates of wealth and/or income are exceptionally higher in metropolitan areas as compared to the national level (see Fiscal Policy Institute 2010; Glaeser et al. 2011). More direct concerns over the relation between creative cities and inequality have been expressed by Donegan and Lowe (2008) and Peck (2005). Even Florida himself has anticipated and hence reviewed this relation (see CityLab website; c.f. Peck 2005). What matters for us about creative cities and socio-spatial disparities is not merely how the ideas, concepts, and policies of creative industries or creative class engender new forms of socio-spatial disparities or how they may aggravate and/or obscure any existing disparities, but what role (the concept of) the city—or more accurately, the *urban*—plays in this regard.

We now draw upon two interpretations of urban space that both generate and inspire better understanding of three issues: (1) the relation between urban space and inequality, and by extension between creative cities and inequality; (2) how creative city policy and strategy circulates and mutates and as such becomes seemingly ubiquitous; and (3) respective claims over the relation between urban knowledges of concepts of the city and creative cities, on the one hand, and urban practices—urban and creative governance, policy, strategy, developments)—on the other.

CRITICAL URBAN THEORY

One fundamental insight of Lefebvre was to distinguish between the city, on the one hand, and the urban and urbanization, on the other, which opens up understanding both in the relationship between creative cities and inequalities, but also provides initial insights in what enables creative city policy to acquire a sense of “everywhereness”. The former merely constitutes a “thought object” or a “virtual object”, and hence cannot be

treated as “category of analysis”, but only as a “category of practice” (see Wachsmuth 2014; c.f. Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 57)). Recently Neil Brenner (2013) has taken up this lead to counter contemporary hegemonic urban knowledge(s) inherited from the Chicago School. He demonstrates how debates on urbanization by international institutions, such as the World Bank (2009), European Commission (2010), and the United Nations (2008), on which much of growth and cluster theories (e.g. Porter 1998), and also creative city theory and policy hinge and rely, suggest we are currently witnessing an “urban age” because more than 50 % of the world population lives in urban areas (see also Merrifield 2013; Brenner and Schmid 2014). However, Brenner and Schmid (2014) argue that “[w]hile urban age discourse is usually put forward as a set of empirical claims regarding demographic and social trends, the latter are premised upon an underlying theoretical and cartographic framework whose core assumptions, once excavated and scrutinized, are deeply problematic” (p. 744). In this vein, the term city, and by extension the methodological territorialist definition of urban space, becomes perceived as scientific urban ideologies, which *both* obscure *and* sustain “the contradictory socio-spatial relations of capitalism (commodification, capital circulation, capital accumulation, and associated forms of political regulation and contestation) [which are] are at once *territorialized* (embedded within concrete contexts and thus fragmented) and *generalized* (extended across place, territory, and scale and thus universalized)” (Brenner 2013: 95: *emphasis added*).

The suggestion is that data accumulation, analysis, and cartographic representations associated with these urban knowledges obscure policy debates related to urban poverty, public health, and environmental degradation and ecological issues. This obscuring can be extended to include policy debates and interventions related to labor markets, housing, education, transportation, development, and energy provision, which all impose confusing and misleading understandings of the multi-scalar processes of urbanization (Brenner 2013; Brenner and Schmid 2014). Today, such knowledge of urban space is being disseminated and naturalized at all spatial scales and among powerful actors and institutions, as for example to facilitate creative city policy transfers. We could therefore say that creative city policy and strategy—through the definition of city, especially the separation of urban and rural—is sustained along these territories, which, as demonstrated, are thus problematic in the first place, while simultaneously facilitating their legitimacy. In this respect the creative city paradigm is

both embedded in a broader processes of global, neoliberal spatial (urban) restructuring *and* as an enforcement of this regime.

The second insight derives from the claim of Lefebvre that urbanization, superseding industrialization and exceeding the traditional conceptual boundaries of the city, has become a generalized condition on a world scale (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]). This generalization does not hold that the entire planet will be covered by densely, concentrated agglomerations (traditionally labeled as cities, and now as urban space, e.g. urban age thesis). Instead it is to designate, as Soja and Kanai (2007) explain, that “the major features of urbanism as a way of life—from the play of market forces and the effects of administrative regulations, to popular cultural practices and practical geopolitics—are becoming ubiquitous” (p. 62). We could see creative city policy as a significant expression of these popular cultural practices. These practices are embedded in recent processes of geopolitical and political economic restructuring of spatial policy that promotes development especially by centering on regional and urban spaces. For example, almost 30 years ago David Harvey (1989) already anticipated the emergence neoliberal, entrepreneurial, urban strategies where, along with the decline of the industrial sector and growth of service-based industries, cities are forced to adjust their policies to a competitive urban landscape and to adopt strategies for urban and regional profit at the expense of existing (or renewing and creating new) redistributive schemes, thus preparing the “urban tissue” for the next spatial fix.

Peck (2005) has already dismissed creative city policy as an extension of “urban entrepreneurialism” and “consumption-oriented place promotion” (p. 761). To Peck, cities and regions are increasingly bound to compete for talent and businesses in the creative-cum-knowledge sector, while structurally relinquishing responsibilities for those excluded. The problem that remains, however, is that at the same time local policy-makers desperately deploy such strategies without any reasonable certainty that they will bear the fruits of their investments.

Returning to the notion of ideology, we can begin to see that the discourse on creative cities does not only thrive on an idealized conception of the creative worker (see Castells 1977 [1972]; Peck 2005; McDowell 2017), but by implication an idealized conception of the good city (see Gerhard 2017). Such conceptions of the city leave unattended spaces both of the unequal divisions of labor and of uneven-development of capital, in which these practices are embedded.

A third fundamental insight Lefebvre added to our conceptual repertoire is to understand urbanization as a historical process that “contains two dialectally intertwined moments”: *implosion* and *explosion* (Brenner 2013: 94). On the one hand, urbanization is characterized by concentration, centralization, agglomeration of infrastructures, capital, labor, and interactions (“implosion”). However, while forgotten and largely neglected within conventional urban studies, on the other hand, urbanization is simultaneously characterized by “explosion”: “urban transformations, materialized in densely tangled circuits of labor, commodities, cultural forms, energy, raw materials, and nutrients—simultaneously *radiate outward from the immediate zone of agglomeration* and *implode back into it* as the urbanization process unfolds” (Brenner 2013: 103: *emphasis added*). As such, we can understand creative city policy and strategy as inextricably bounded through a vast web of social and physical infrastructures (extended urbanization) that not only connect the dots, traditionally labeled as cities, but which themselves play a constitutive role in the production of intra- and inter-urban spaces.

The crux of the dialectical process of implosion/explosion is that while the morphology of concentrated urbanization appears as straightforward (defined by concentration, density, and agglomeration) the morphology of extended urbanization is uneven, variable and context specific (Brenner 2013). While (global) processes of urbanization, including dominant urban policies and strategies, such as creativity policy, may seem to conform to a more general (global) urban logic, manifestations of these processes, policies, and strategies, on the ground, variegate along local, domestic contexts. Accordingly, for a policy or policy idea to acquire a sense of “everywhereness”, it needs not only a *vehicle* that grants it *mobility* (to *travel*), but also a means to *adapt* to the particular local context of destination (to be *adopted*). Here Peck (2012) has argued creativity policy to be a “vehicular policy idea”—i.e. a policy idea that “is constructed for travel” and “formulated with purposive ambiguity/ mutability (rather than as a fixed template), so as to move swiftly and smoothly between policymaking sites, and to lubricate new (or rebadged) initiatives in distant locales” (p. 480).

POLICY MOBILITY

Against these critical observations on the circulation and adaptation of urban (creativity) policy (Peck and Theodore 2010; Peck 2011; McCann and Ward 2011), it is worthwhile to consider another perspective on the movement of creative city policy: assemblage-inspired readings in human

geography and urban studies (see McFarlane 2011a, b for an overview of urbanism; see Anderson and McFarlane 2011 for overview in human geography). From this body of work we see an emerging literature on “policy mobilities”, which “explores the apparent movement of particular policy programmes from one place to another” (Prince 2014a: 191). Russell Prince’s discussion of policy mobility in the case of creative city policy offers a more nuanced account of this movement by deepening our understanding of how these policies travel from regional centers to their respective recipients, and as such why they are capable of acquiring “a sense of everywhere-ness” (Prince 2012, 2014a). By “looking through” taken-for-granted spatial constructs such as the city, the nation-state, the continent, and so on, and describing the boundaries, continuities, and discontinuities that give shape to their construction, Prince provides a way to think differently of the relation between policy and city (see Prince 2012: 320).

One important aspect of policies that helps explain how, or better, what makes, policies *move* is their topology, or more accurately: their topologies. Prince (2014a) contrasts the notion of “policy topology” with the notion of “policy topography”. The notion of topology, which derives from science and technology studies (STS) and actor-network-theory (ANT) conceptions of space, opposes the Euclidean spatial conception of topography: “[c]ontrary to Euclidean geometry, which assumed that space was in fact an absolute extrinsic dimension in which entities were circulating and in which their position and transformations could be calculated and measured [...] [t]opological forms do not move and circulate within space, they do not occur in space, they are not contained in space (e.g. like a bed would be in a bedroom), but rather constantly generate and modify their dimensions” (Lecomte 2013: 475). The notion of topology problematizes the notion of topography as the latter presents a container-like image of space as to indicate *what* happens *where*—in space—while the former stresses that space does not exist independently of any other entities but instead is made up by these entities themselves: no entities, no space. As Law and Mol (2001) explain, an analysis of spatial topologies “helps to undermine the essentialism of Euclidean space, but also hints at the way in which Euclidean space is produced” (p. 612).

The notion of policy topology suggests that we abandon questions concerning how global (or local) a policy is, but instead affirm that “the topographical connections through which policy can be seen to travel are wrapped up with multiple topological relations that shape that policy’s movement” (Prince 2014a: 194). Instead of perceiving the policies as circulating *on* space, policy topologies inform us about how the “circuits” of

policy create multiple spaces itself. As such describing policy topologies can inform us both why certain policies seem to be everywhere topographically, as how they are to be contested or altered (re-scribed). Drawing on STS and ANT literatures on social topologies (notably Law and Mol 2001; Mol and Law 1994), Prince discusses four typologies of creativity policy: regional, network, fluid, and fire.

“Regional topologies are composed of bounded areas that do not overlap [...] [but] can, however, be nested at different scales, and so contained within larger regions” (Prince 2014a: 194). Examples of such regions range from the neighborhood and the urban to the continental and the global. Importantly, on the one hand, they “inscribe boundaries between different regions at each of these scales, and they are often reproduced through the construction of administrative jurisdictions that are coterminous with the region [...] [but, on the other, they] are also reproduced through the collapse of variation within boundaries and its reconstruction *between* regions” (*ibid*: 195: *emphasis in original*). Certain forms of economic activity can be observed regionally (e.g. at the level of the urban) but not within these regions. Policies, such as those for creative cities, do not necessarily need to produce new topologies but often utilize existing ones.

In order to actually compare regions we need a second typology: the network typology. “Network topologies can cut across regional boundaries, but are, paradoxically, central to their reproduction” (Mol and Law 1994) (*ibid*). To compare the (presence of) creative industries or class along different regions requires the reproduction of a similar measurement technique in all these different regions. In this way places from all over the world “come together” on a “level space of comparison” (*ibid*). Indices and table charts, applied by Florida, represent such a space.

Similar to the regional topologies, network topologies do not necessarily require the construction of new networks (Prince 2014a). Just like how creative policies make use of existing regions, their measurement often relies on existing statistics, picking out the variables that are regarded or deemed most important and, if necessary, gather new ones. As Prince points out, “the ‘new’ topological spaces of creativity policy are never entirely new. They build on and transform existing topological relations, with their existing policy channels, to produce a policy geography that is distinctive, and yet emerges out of prevailing configurations” (*ibid*: 196). It is in this way that we can begin to grasp how creative city policies can simultaneously be *perceived* as authentic and as simply complementary to existing urban trends like neoliberalism.

A third topology, fluid space, provides more clarity on the latter tendency of policies. Fluid spaces are similar to networks in that they traverse boundaries, but are contrary to the network topology which is based on similarity between different points cutting through (e.g. by means of reproducing similar measurement methods), and they also allow a certain degree of variation between them (Mol and Law 1994; Prince 2012, 2014a). The fluid spaces of creative city policies are mobile due to *a lack of clear boundaries, ability to mix, robustness, and interrelations with regional and network spaces* (see Prince 2014a: 321). Creative policies appear to be less bounded, more mixable and changeable and as a consequence become more “open to interpretation and manipulation” (Prince 2014a).

According to Prince (2014a) “a key element of the topologies of creativity policy is their technical aspect” (p. 194). “Creativity policy, almost without fail, consists of attempts to measure the nature and size of something considered relevant to creativity. This quantitative dimension is central to the topologies of policy that are present here, particularly in relation to regions and networks” (Prince 2014a: 198–9). However, at the same time, this technical element of topologies transforms the creative city into a universal category. In effect, policy is “stripped off” from “the context of their initial conception”, which renders a certain global validity based on alleged scientific measurement and delimitation and makes their transferability conceivable and possible.

A KNOWLEDGE PEARL IN TIMES OF CREATIVE CITIES

The city of Groningen in the northern region of The Netherlands provides a compelling case of “hidden inequalities” and the politics of urban development in the face of the creative cities discourse in what could be termed a “knowledge pearl” city (see van Winden et al. 2007) (Fig. 8.1).

A geographically delimited area of Groningen now referred to as the *Ebbingekekwartierterrain* (or just *Ebbingekekwartier*) has been the focus of several creativity inspired redevelopment initiatives as early as 1987. While clearly dependent on the particular notion or understanding of “creativity”, the burning conceptual issues are: (1) redevelopment of old industrial, “brown-field” areas, creative space, housing and gentrification effects; (2) inequalities and differential benefits (social and economic⁴) by socioeconomic class and

⁴The tension between social and/or economic return was discussed during our Let’s Gro event #087: *Politics, inequalities and the creative city*, which took place Friday 21 November

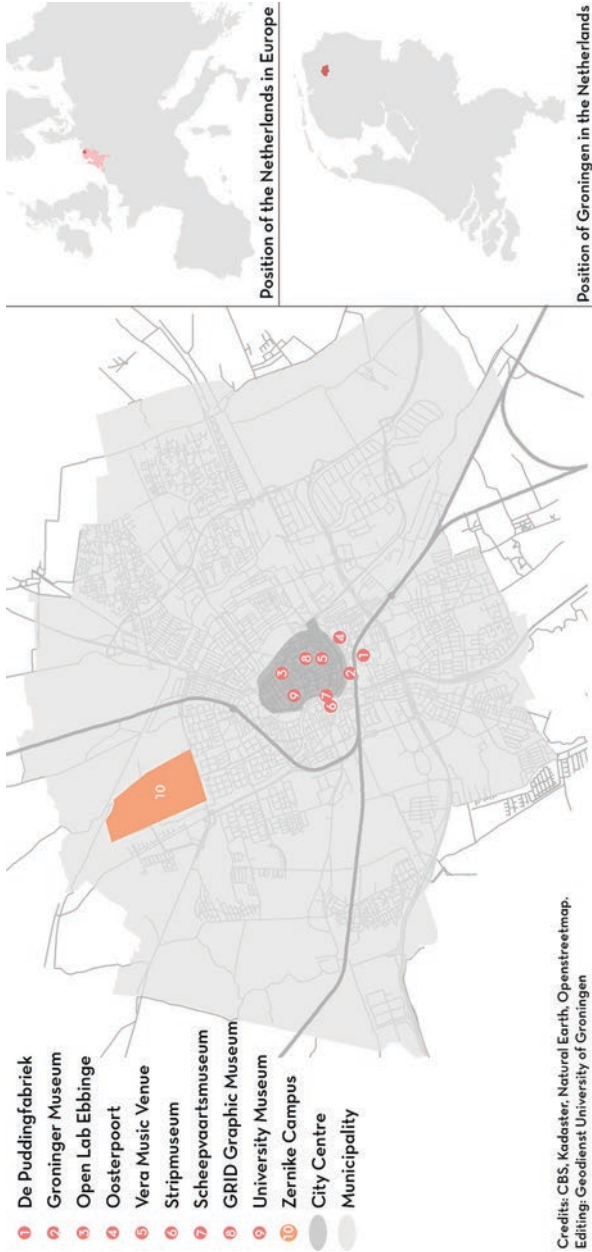


Fig. 8.1 Map of Groningen

creative/ non-creative groups; and (3) lasting effects of temporary uses in terms of net effects and emergence of new areas.

What we show in the context of Groningen is a (re-)development agenda that had led to a number of largely state financed activities increasingly brought under the label of “creativity”. Due to high levels of state subsidization the creative city agenda in Groningen can be viewed as a form of redistribution in a city where employment in the public sector and reliance on essential public services including welfare is pronounced. Redistribution within the public sector is now being commodified and revalorized as creative, cultural and “business” entrepreneurialism. Diverse social groups have access to these developments and their benefits differentially, sharpening existing inequalities and forging new cleavages.

To understand the significance of the Ebbingekwartier one needs to place it in historical and spatial context. The Ebbingekwartier can be seen as the successor of the former Circus-, Boden- en Gasterrain (CiBoGa), an urban development project in the Hortusbuurt on the eastern edge of the Groningen inner city that has long been used for purposes other than housing. In 1854 a gasworks was built at the Boterdiep which later led to the pollution problems that needed dealing with; the ground had to be dug deeply when redevelopment commenced. Although the gasworks has long since been closed, the chimney is still visible today. It was at this location that the *Groningse Wereldtentoonstelling* (Groningen World Expo) took place in 1903 to showcase industry and art. The whole area is now ripe for residential development. In the interim, the site now referred to as the *Ebbingekwartier* serves as a creative space and cultural breeding ground under the auspices of the EU-funded, public–private partnership: *Open Lab Ebbinge*.

The *Ebbingekwartier*, referred to as the *creatieve stadswijk Groningen* (creative urban neighborhood in Groningen), has since 2005 become a focus of diverse “creative” projects that benefit from the central location in the city and the availability of space. There are ample opportunities for creative and cultural entrepreneurs and innovative retailers that reflect changing consumer preferences and tastes in the wider context of Groningen-style gentrification. A core element would appear to be a growing emphasis on service, a personal approach and an atmosphere of reified artisan or craft consumerism in keeping with general cultural trends. Several premises are available for cultural and creative entrepreneurs to set up shop in the area.

2014 at Het Concerthuis in the centre of Groningen. Let’s Gro was an inspiration festival, organized in collaboration with Municipality Groningen and University of Groningen.

Open Lab Ebbinge (OLE) is located within the boundaries of the *Ebbingekwartier* and is a unique and internationally relevant example of innovative, temporary city building where a “brownfield” site within the city is transformed into a hub of cultural innovation and business creativity.⁵ Through public–private partnership, a one hectare, once contaminated site in close proximity to Groningen’s center was developed into a “micro-city”. The “micro-city” (2010–15), abandoned since the late 1980s, housed diverse cultural and entertainment activities as well as innovative and trendy service provision. The project aims to augment the area as a cultural and creative hotspot, one for innovative entrepreneurs and educational institutes to develop new products and services. Largely financed through EU subsidies, the OLE brings together a wide array of public and private stakeholders in an experimental development process in the use and re-use of buildings that are sustainable and movable/nomadic. In this way the project is an innovative engagement with unused inner city sites and paves the way for innovate and creative cultural entrepreneurs.

What emerges from this creative redevelopment is a clear demarcation, or social stratification, between creative and non-creative groups. Creativity can be beneficial to some groups; these people are the creative elite and progressive entrepreneurs, in other words, well-educated people most of the time.⁶ De-regulated zones such as the *Ebbingekwartier* and also the *Wolkenfabriek* (on the former *Suikerunie-terrain*) reflect government support for the creative class. The government expects highly unrealistic trickle-down. The belief is that supporting growth in creative activities benefits a growing number of entrepreneurs and tourists, and more tourists and more creativity lead to job and income growth and in turn to higher tax revenues, which will purportedly spread to the poor and lower educated. The creative redevelopment process can be seen as a form of gentrification in focusing on attracting creative industries, individuals, and groups to the inner city.

The *Ebbingekwartier* has become a place for the young art/design/IT class, largely but not exclusively students and those pejoratively known as “hipsters” in a peculiarly Groningen form. Other groups tend to be

⁵ See: www.openlabebbinge.nl/. Accessed 7 December 2015.

⁶ Frank Menger a politically active resident of Groningen stated during the Let’s event #87 (see footnote #4) that the perception of the *Ebbingekwartier* is divided: on the one hand it is recognizable, but on another level some people are simply unaware of it. Demonstrable positive effects, however, are thin on the ground at the moment.

onlookers from the sidelines, merely visitors and spectators who take little part in the developments. So elderly people and the lower educated, for example, are not those intended to benefit from the activities in the *Ebbingekewartier*. Mostly students, but a particular or special brand of students, are attracted as a result of the incubator activities in the area. It is far less attractive for the “stadgers” (people who come from and live in the city) and Groningen’s low-income residents.

City of Talent

In Florida’s work the creative class also consists of those labor segments working in knowledge institutions (mainly public sector jobs), such as universities, higher education institutes, research and development (R&D), and medical centers. This coming together is relevant in the Groningen case. Conceptualization of the “creative knowledge city” (Bontje et al. 2011; van Geenhuizen and Nijkamp 2012) voices the merging of debates concerning creative industries and creative cities with concepts on knowledge and innovation.

Groningen is a medium sized city with approximately 190,000 residents and is the capital of Groningen Province. Spatially and economically the city and region are relatively peripheral and were hit less severely by the economic recession in 2008 than other cities and regions in the Netherlands. It is home to the second oldest university in the country after Leiden, the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (RuG), dating back to 1614, and located mainly in the inner-city and on the Zernike Campus on the edge of the city, and a higher education facility (Hanzehogeschool) located on the same campus. Together both knowledge institutions account for well over 45,000 students,⁷ which amounts to roughly over a quarter of the metropolitan region’s population. Nationally Groningen has always been perceived as a student city (*studentenstad*). With the University Medical Centre Groningen (UMCG) located on the edge of the inner-city, the health sector is strongly represented.

Overall, Groningen’s economy relies strongly on knowledge institutions and the attraction of students (hence the public sector). Dutch spatial economists Raspe and van Oort (2007) distinguish between three dimensions of the knowledge economy—R&D, innovation, and knowledge workers—which in spatial/topographical terms rarely overlap.

⁷The number of students in Groningen is over 50,000 and the figure for residents is in the region of 200,000 (see: <http://groningen.buurtmonitor.nl/>. Accessed 6 December 2015).

Groningen's knowledge sector is mainly represented by knowledge workers rather than R&D and innovation, which are more prominently represented in other cities and regions.

Two city-regional trends further inform local and regional policy with regard to the knowledge economy: a brain-drain at the scale of the city-region and the state. It reflects migration from the surrounding region to the city of Groningen, and again from the city to other regions in the Netherlands (mainly the Randstad) and a vast population decline in the region (mainly in the east of the province). While migration of graduates to other parts in the Netherlands is partly inevitable due to a lack of jobs, and the share of highly educated workers as a share of the total workforce in Groningen is already exceptionally high (47.8 %) (Manshanden 2009), for cities and regions in the Netherlands, and certainly for the municipality of Groningen, a recurring question is how it may use the excess of graduates for its own labor and housing markets.

The municipality of Groningen has developed certain policies for the knowledge sector, combined with creativity-inspired developments in the city. One of these policies is (Groningen as) "City of Talent", which is in line with principles of the Agreement of Groningen (*Akkoord van Groningen*). This is an accord between the municipality, University of Groningen and the Hanzehogeschool to jointly invest 1.5 billion euro in local innovation and knowledge infrastructures (Provincie Groningen 2007). This agreement prioritizes three elements: (1) marketing (*proflering*) where space is created for Groningen to be "... a creative city", to proliferate through a "multi-layered campaign strategy" (*ibid.*: 5); (2) "cross-pollination" (*kruisbestuiving*), where Groningen facilitates interaction between firms, institutions and talent and provides the necessary infrastructure to help innovative start-ups, which in turn will exploit opportunities that offer further research and technological development; and (3) source points (*bronpunten*) where the municipality offers physical space for creative use and entrepreneurship (*ibid.*: 5–6).

Related policies concern "internationalization". Here the city, as regional center of the three northern provinces, attempts to construct ties with northeast Europe while trying to strengthen existing ties with partner cities. Having recently acquired the status of a top-100 University, the University of Groningen and the municipality are keen to attract more international students and staff to the city, the impacts of which are already starting to show. For example, the number of international students at the university has increased by almost 50 % between 2010 and 2013, rising to

over 3300. Never have the residents of Groningen experienced the presence of so many international students. A proposed branch campus, to be located in Shandong province, China in 2017, is another example of the University's internationalization strategy.⁸

The arguments supporting these policy objectives and developments are scattered and inconsistent. This fragmentation reflects a diversity of sometimes conflicting and disparate reasons among local departments. Various government departments deploy different definitions of the creative sector. For example, the department of Culture, Education and Sport puts the number of the creative class in Groningen at 30 % while (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (in Dutch)) Central Agency for Statistics (CBS) puts it at 4 %. Another municipal representative puts the figure at 9 % to include the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector (see CBS 2012, 2014a, b).

The creative sector is understood as a promising, yet uncertain, sector, for regional economies in terms of employment, production, and value-addition. However, the creative sector also has an assumed indirect effect. Creative activities develop cultural amenities that in turn may attract people and firms (Poort and Marlet 2005). Highly skilled (knowledge) workers but also talent (students) prefer to locate in those places with high access to cultural amenities as these contribute to the attractiveness of the city (*ibid*). Marlet et al. (2012) therefore suggest the positive migration rate in the municipality of Groningen can for a significant part be attributed to Groningen's relatively large cultural sector. For example, on the Cultural Index of Dutch Cities developed by Marlet et al. (*ibid*) Groningen is the second city after Amsterdam.

The attracted students, especially once they have graduated, offer an opportunity to provide an impulse for a stagnating housing market by increasing local demand (Venhorst et al. 2011). Furthermore, they can positively affect local (and regional) employment through consumption, which could even be increased if they establish start-ups or when their presence results in the establishment of new or the expansion of existing companies (*ibid*). The highly educated and knowledge workers are considered to contribute to a liveable city climate. As such, the mantra

⁸The RUG is the first Dutch university to open a branch campus in China. A collaborative effort with the China Agricultural University, Beijing, means the establishment of a presence on campus in the city of Yantai. See: www.rug.nl/about-us/internationalization/branch-campus-yantai?lang=en. Accessed 7 December 2015.

of Florida—jobs following people—is very much present in the academic arguments borrowed to support Groningen’s creativity and knowledge policy. Most policy documents focus on the introduction to Florida’s thesis. Interestingly, since creativity is often conceptualized as a “flywheel” (Rutten et al. 2011), able to perform different functions, knowledge and creativity here are often merged and work in tandem. In a parody of Florida’s suggestions, Groningen’s strategy assumes a reasonable opportunity for artists to facilitate innovative activities from the knowledge sector. The strongest argument for these policies, especially when it comes to the contribution to the overall population of the municipality (and the region) appears to be that the presumed trickle-down effects the knowledge and creative sectors will occur.

While the tone of these policies and physical interventions is celebratory and dreamy—“Groningen is ahead in innovation and entrepreneurship”⁹—we believe it to be essentially a façade. Groningen seriously lacks contemporary innovation, R&D, or left-over manufacturing to foster further economic growth. For example, previous developments of industrial parks in the municipality have embarrassingly misfired. The local economy largely depends on public sector jobs and funds. In fact, the whole region is economically marginal—e.g. *Langman Akkoord* supporting the three northern provinces in terms of employment, labor participation and to reduce the uneven spatial distribution of welfare (see Raspe and van Oort 2007). For Groningen (both the region and the city), then, sustaining the cultural amenities and knowledge activities it houses while trying to increase the value added of these sectors seems the only viable option at stake.

The question remains whether Groningen is really doing something new, or is simply repackaging policy (Peck 2005, 2012). Are problems such as socio-spatial disparities in the city and region solved or at least addressed, or are they bypassed and relegated to the background? Does the city and region really believe it can do something about these problems? These questions remain unanswered or are at least problematic. Another problem concerns the relation between city and region (Lefebvre’s dialectic of urbanization). As Venhorst et al. (2011) demonstrate with an increasing concentration of highly educated people in cities the surrounding regions witness a brain drain: “the city wins, the region loses”.

⁹See: www.cityoftalent.nl/en. Accessed 7 December 2015.

CONCLUSION

We have critically examined the notion of the creative cities paradigm in terms of socio-spatial inequalities, with reference to the Ebbingekwartier and City of Talent developments in the knowledge pearl of Groningen in the northern region of The Netherlands.

Several crucial points of discussion arise from our investigation of the Groningen case. *The notion of (in-)visibility is centrally important with respect to socio-spatial inequalities.* In a more simplistic sense (in)visibility alludes to the difficulty involved in elucidating direct, “factual” linkages between creativity, knowledge, urban strategy and development, and inequality. Certainly, different social groups do not benefit equally from these developments—especially their re-distributive “materials”—or conversely, even find themselves excluded from these developments. This exclusion could stem from access, age, education, or financial resources, spending power and money. The proliferation of creativity-inspired developments at the level of the urban dovetails with, and enforces, an organizational transformation that prioritizes the provision of soft, short-term infrastructures at the expense of responsible, inclusive, and long-term investments. The mobilization of public and private actors in joint task forces has increased the potential of the local and regional leisure economy and consolidated Groningen as a regional recreational hub. Here Talent is “put to work” more as a potential consumer than a potential productive asset in the local economy. Moreover, the rationale for certain developments (e.g. RUG campus) serves as a Trojan horse for further real estate development and valorization (e.g. University Campus). Developments tend to create local and regional excess of high, as a consequence, also low-skilled labor.

Creativity and knowledge are applied in tandem, preparing Groningen for the next “spatial fix” Importantly, the developments in Groningen focus more in terms of consumption than production, which we consider an unwelcome message in face of the large portion of jobless in the city, but also the northern and especially eastern part of the province (Oost-Groningen). These parts of the region do not take part in the creative festivities and instead require mobilization of their productive force.

Adaptations of the creative city paradigm in Groningen thrive on an idealized conception of the “good city” At the level of discourse, creativity is deployed to promote anti-government, libertarian life-styles, labor-contracts and arrangements, short-term development, strategy, policy, and

governance. The result is a prevalence of economic determinism expanded to and developed further (a) at the level planning and decision-making and (b) cultural and knowledge sectors. Planners do away with long-term planning in favor of short-term developments and incremental, facilitative management. An emphasis is placed on “attraction” of talent, but in extension of tourism, international students and business that implicitly waves away concern for socio-spatial disparities and further relegates *concerns* over inequalities to the background. Within the new creative spaces that are brought about little room is afforded for contestation of the policy mainstream and for the engagement with possible radical alternatives. In symbolic terms, developments are in abundance but are rather cosmetic and lack substance. While the developments add symbolic value it is questionable how far they are able to create new jobs for the harder to reach members of society.

While CUT offers many insights for engaging with the relationship between creative cities and inequalities profound limitations exist. The creative cities paradigm gets perceived as a feel-good complement and lubrication mechanism of a neoliberal urban policy regime. Consequently, there is little new or distinctive about it. The proliferation and popularity of creative cities policy gets conceived as a symptom rather than a cause of the prevailing urban policy condition. We can discern little about how the policy actually travels or how it gets adopted in various localities, other than that it simply utilizes existing urban policy constructs. The creative city becomes conceived as an idealized construct in which inequalities are “hidden”. While critics of the creative city paradigm are keen to deconstruct the creativity thesis—e.g. by noting that it is in fact poorly defined—at the same time it is still granted much explanatory power in terms of engendering and sustaining the more fundamental sources of injustice, albeit confined to the level of urban and (urban) policy discourse.

The notion of “policy topologies” gathers more credence against these limitations. Thus, creativity policy can be viewed more as a tool for inventarization than creation. Regional and network typologies allow the mobility of existing measurement techniques, not the creation of new productive devices at the local level. Rather than being “powerless”, totally subjected to a global urban regime as the overall pessimistic critical urban readings suggest, localities like Groningen are not simply passive receivers of creativity policy and strategy. Instead all localities together contribute to the production of such an inventarization. All sorts of actants—human and non-human, from persons to organizations, institutions and technological artifacts (creativity metrics, charts, statistics, concepts, empirical

research, and of course policy documents themselves)—are entangled in this process. One problem is that in the process of scientific advice and policy formulation the practice—the technical aspect of policy topologies (see Prince 2014a, b)—is rendered invisible.

Creative city policy in Groningen is not really that creative. While creative city policy remains embedded in an urban (neoliberal) regime depending on urban knowledges, we discover that not much is really new. Developments are more about copying, repackaging, and trying to get funds. Raspe and van Oort (2007) support this position, questioning regional and local policies of creative industries and the developments of “x-valleys”. They argue that copying best practices from other regions is often not a good strategy. Given the low value-added of the creative sector and its (partial) dependence on government funding, Groningen’s economy is unlikely to improve a great deal by these investments. Furthermore, by copying “best practices” Groningen may risk losing its uniqueness, becoming simply an isomorphic node in the global network of urban hierarchies.

We have to ask about the relation between inequalities or trickle-down logic adopted by certain actors and involved parties. Rather than addressing inequalities in Groningen as a matter of fact, we should put the issue of socio-spatial disparities and inequalities as a matter of central concern. To us, inequalities are not simply something that is out there only for the “smart” scientists to observe from afar, but something which requires sustained attention and care. In particular we think that it is the right time, post-Florida, to focus on new relations between neo-bohemian political dissent among creatives to create space for radical alternatives that do not overly rely on commoditized cultural and re-distributive assets and false market promises. Instead we should aim to mobilize actors and creative materials in which new assemblages are created between creativity policy channels and those excluded.

There are implications for further research that arise. What we find so compelling about the Groningen case and this volume as a whole is that the creative cities paradigm has clearly invoked a triple-whammy: (1) new cleavages, inequalities, and injustices have been generated; (2) alternative forms of creative and artistic expression including political engagement have been overlooked and sidelined, and (3) the tide is slowly beginning to turn as Florida-style “creatives” have now more or less had their day. Clearly, more critical forms of engagement on the ascendency. An example of the latter would be more progressive types of urban regeneration hitherto excluded or outside mainstream creative city policy regimes. We suggest that new

research should focus theoretically and empirically on new forms of creative expression, for example dissent activism among destitute neo-bohemian creatives, their forms of governance, politics and engagement, and, most importantly, how participants deal explicitly with a social and spatial justice vision or agenda.

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