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Intersections: The Creative Grid in Downtown Toronto

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PHOTO: Jennifer Anderson

Recently in Toronto, a fascination with the study of all things urban has become evident in numerous academic research projects, lecture series, and municipal urban policy conferences.¹ This diverse range of discussions indicates, either through critique or affirmation, that the city is not just a geographic site for the production and consumption of material goods, but a symbol and an object to be studied, marketed, and branded as world-class, labeled as a tourist destination, or celebrated as a cultural scene. As Raymond Williams has brilliantly argued, creativity, culture, and the city are intricate words with many layers of meaning.² When applied to the contemporary metropolis, particularly in relation to the arts community, art scenes, and the concept of the “creative city,” the complexity of these terms becomes intensified. It is largely within urban planning that the relationships amongst community, geography, artists, and creative culture have converged. In North America, many of these planning meetings and media stories have focused on Richard Florida’s writings, particularly his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002).³ In this work, Florida builds on a series of observations of US cities and redefines traditional concepts of work and class, arguing for the new category of a “creative class,” which is tied to urban geography. Florida sees the “creative city,” perhaps better understood as particular districts within the city, as a conceptual framework for urban regeneration and growth.

Given the attention that Florida’s work has attracted, it is worth examining Toronto’s cultural communities in terms of his concept of the creative class. How have Queen Street West, Spadina Avenue, and Kensington Market—with their overlapping histories as immigrant reception areas, retail and manufacturing districts, battlegrounds for labour and political rights, and most recently struggling arts communities—adapted to their new symbolic roles as urban cultural districts? What has the “creative city” meant to the various lives and divergent peoples, both “artistic” and not, who inhabit and cohabit in the larger urban fabric of Toronto’s western downtown, loosely defined by Queen Street, Spadina Avenue, Kensington Market, College Street, and points as far west as Parkdale? In short, whose creative city is it?

Richard Florida’s Framework

Florida’s analysis begins with urban place and then establishes a series of interrelationships between talent, tolerance, creativity, and technology as the engines of urban economic growth.⁴ These co-relations are actually measured by a series of regional demographic indicators and indices such as:

- the bohemian index (a measure of artistically creative people that includes authors, designers, musicians, composers, actors, directors, painters, sculptors, printmakers, photographers, dancers, and performers)
- the gay index (a measure of the coupled gay people in any region)
- the foreign-born index (relative percentage of the foreign-born)

These are then cross-referenced with the following indices:

- talent index (based on the percentage of people with a bachelor's degree)
- innovation index (the number of patented innovations)
- high-tech index (the high-tech output in a region)

Florida organizes all of these factors around urban place, seeing place and human creativity as the key economic and social indicators for economic growth.

Florida defines his central concept in the following manner:

[T]he Creative Class—whether they are artists or engineers, musicians or computer scientists, writers or entrepreneurs—share a common creative ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference and merit. For the Creative Class, every aspect and every manifestation of creativity—technology, cultural and economic—is interlinked and inseparable.⁵

Organizing their time to blend their work and daily lives, the members of the creative class seek out urban spaces, which provide a range of cultural and social amenities. Constructing an identity to counter the quasi-anonymous state of urban life defined by work and maintained by the connectivities of email and cell phones, the members of this class seek out a more immediate and tactile geographic community of bars, bookstores, galleries, restaurants, and public parks. Florida's creative class thrives in mixed-use neighbourhoods, where redevelopments are carefully planned and where the preservation of the neighbourhood provides an authentic and unique character.

Notwithstanding the appeal and influence of Florida's thesis, a number of critical issues in his methodology are problematic. The most glaring, as Steven Malanga and Marc Levine have pointed out, is the lack of correlation between Florida's various "coolness indices" and indicators of real economic growth.⁶ Levine goes on to conclude that Florida's thesis obfuscates the real crises of the contemporary city, such as homelessness, lack of civic investment, sprawling suburbs, and chronically underfunded public transit. Florida's concept of a creative class is also broad enough to include everyone who doesn't do manual labour and who lives in a certain area.⁷

There is something obviously appealing about Florida's indices; whether gay or straight, married or single, we are now virtually all bohemians. Anyone with a higher education and a downtown geographic location is by definition a participant in the bohemian index. In our convoluted nostalgia we can fondly look back to the creativity of early modernism in bohemian Paris and Berlin, while living comfortably in the early 21st century with a middle-class income and home ownership of converted factory lofts that harken back to early 20th-century industrial modernism.

Observing Toronto, I would argue that Florida's approach, his use of the bohemian index, and for that matter the gay index, glosses over the huge public

investments in education, cultural policy, and cultural infrastructures that are essential to enhance and maintain a working creative community. Over the last 20 years, public agencies and collective organizations such as Artscape and the Performing Arts Retirement Home have been locating and establishing housing, studio space, and live/work space for a range of artists and performers because the prohibitive costs of housing and studio space are a major issue for both young and established artists trying to live in the downtown area.⁸ Simultaneously, cultural planners and arts councils have been preoccupied with support for individuals and festivals/events, like the Queen West Art Crawl, the Junction Arts Festival, Hot Docs, Images, the Rhubarb Festival, etc. More broadly, in Canada (bordering the U.S. elephant of cultural mass production) there are the federal regulations that define Canadian content rules for music, television, and film production, providing jobs and venues for the production and dissemination of Canadian cultural artifacts and ideas. Florida's oversight of the role of public funding limits the application of his methodology to a country like Canada.

The breadth of Florida's methodology and the vagueness of the economic data to support his claims are most apparent when applied to the vagaries in real estate values of any particular city. The value of land and buildings in a specific urban area and the potential for urban regeneration and growth reside within a complex mixture of ethnic and class histories. The potential for growth is overlaid with the scale and quality of housing and apartment stocks, the percentage of homeownership versus rental accommodation, and larger cultural factors such as generational differences and migratory patterns.

Finally, Florida's methodology does not deal with the contradictory nature of cultural economic activity, in which artists and cultural producers, although often associated with notions of urban chic, earn far less than the average worker. As Betsy Donald and Douglas Morrow comment in their study for Canadian Heritage, Florida's use of the bohemian index as a sign of economic growth is ironic when the majority of creative workers live below the poverty line.⁹ Artists and cultural producers rarely benefit from the growth of the urban economy and are more likely to be victims of rising residential housing prices and rents resulting from the burgeoning scene.

The dreary reality of an artist's existence is documented in the recent reports by Hill Strategies, based on the 2001 Canadian Census on artists.¹⁰ In 2001, Toronto had 28,865 artists, categorized under nine occupational groups: actors; artisans and craftspeople; conductors, composers, and arrangers; dancers; musicians and singers; other performers (clowns, puppeteers, and magicians); painters, sculptors, and other visual artists; producers, directors, choreographers, and related occupations; and writers. Interestingly, not included in these categories are graphic artists, theatre or fashion designers, illustrators or photographers, although a few might be included as visual artists. In ten years, there has been a 40% increase in artists working in Toronto, with average earnings of

\$31,543, 17% lower than the mean Toronto income. Yet, Toronto artists' earnings are the highest in Canada, as Toronto is the location of the major English Canadian cultural industries. The category of artist includes producers, directors, and choreographers, who often earn well over the average, with a mean income of \$48,000 a year. If one looks at the earning power of immigrant artists (or in Florida's terms, "foreign-born"), it is approximately \$28,733, or 9% less than the average Toronto artist, while visible minority artists earn approximately \$23,353, 26% less than the average. Although there are no Toronto-specific figures for aboriginal artists, truly the first "local" artists, they earn well below the average artist's income across Canada. Artists' earnings are thus not only well below the overall labour force average in Toronto but also decrease exponentially for immigrants and/or visible minorities. Florida's diversity index therefore carries little credence as an indicator of economic growth for a diverse range of working artists, and in reality is more likely an indicator of poverty line existence.

Toronto Observations

Queen Street West in many ways appears to be a perfect fit for Florida's definition of a vitally active street-level scene, a truly urban, linear "bohemian district."¹¹ It is an inviting and interesting street, with its complex rhythms of everyday life and cultural activity. It is anchored at the eastern end by commercial shops, some chain stores, bars, bookstores, and restaurants. At Spadina Avenue, the Queen Street scene widens and briefly jogs south to encapsulate 401 Richmond, which houses a range of artist-run centres, commercial galleries, non-profit offices, small businesses, a daycare centre, and a few work/live residential units. Moving west, past Trinity Bellwoods Park, is the eclectic new "Queen West West" gallery district, which since 2000 has developed a range of galleries, designer clothing and furniture stores, as well as restaurants and bars. These establishments are generally an economic success, particularly in the Shaw to Dufferin stretch, and with the renovations of the Gladstone Hotel and the somewhat more contentious Drake Hotel. There is also a new congregation of galleries, yoga studios, and businesses developing up Ossington Avenue from Queen.

The cultural agency of this new Queen West scene is part of a longer history and network of artists, musicians, and designers who have lived in and around Queen West, Spadina Avenue, and Kensington Market since the late 1970s. The original loose-knit Queen Street community lived in apartments above storefronts and in semi-illegal industrial workspaces. Individuals moved back and forth between the visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and associated design professions, while often working day jobs in offices, bars, and restaurants. The public face of the community was evident in the local music scene, which included screenings and performances in local bars and galleries, particularly in the new practices of video and performance. Many of the younger activist artists and musicians aligned themselves with



gay and feminist issues, developing a diverse social and cultural working community. They organized and built a series of cultural institutions such as artist-run galleries, magazines, arts collectives, theatre groups, production co-ops, music studios, and member organizations that set in place a cultural infrastructure that continues to this day.

From a historical perspective, an interesting aspect of Queen West is the relative slowness of real estate development in the area. Until the 1990s, city planners, in an attempt to protect industrial jobs in the garment industry, maintained and defended the industrial zoning policy instituted in the 1940s in the Spadina/King West area. Toronto, having learned from New York City, never legalized artists' residential occupancy of industrially zoned buildings. Instead, planners informally chose not to seriously enforce residential occupancy prohibitions, unless buildings were threatened by fire or safety infractions.¹² This informal policy allowed Queen Street and the surrounding area to continue with its industrial zoning somewhat undisturbed until the severe real estate crisis of the early 1990s and the increasing deindustrialization of the downtown.

In response, the Toronto City Council in 1995 changed the industrial zoning bylaws by legalizing the residential and office occupancy of former industrial factories. South of Queen Street and east of Spadina Avenue, the area morphed into a late night "entertainment area," primarily attracting suburban weekend club goers. Farther west along Queen and on the lower end of Spadina, older manufacturing buildings were renovated into lofts and office spaces, while many new condominium towers are currently being built on lower Spadina. In the Queen West West area, this gentrification has created tensions within the visual arts scene, as symbolized by the Candy Factory luxury loft-style condominiums, the arrival of the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art (MOCCA), and the elaborate renovation of the Drake Hotel. These transformations signify the new level of affluence, institutional culture, and urban chic in the area, while spaces like Bus Gallery and the Gladstone Hotel are seen to represent a more edgy, energetic, and youthful art, music, and bar scene—one connected to some concept of an arts community. However, within urban economics, the chic and the institutional, as



well as the edge, whatever their motivations, are all part of the process of urban regeneration of the larger area.

The urban economy, whether creative or not, has its own dynamic, and artists' issues and concerns are a small blip in the radar of the city as the real estate market rolls on. Queen West was not an empty void before the artists and loft dwellers arrived. Many of the former residents, Jewish and Eastern European immigrants from the early 1910s, had already been displaced further west into Parkdale or moved to new homes in the suburbs. The general economic pressure of the downtown core to add new real estate value, to reinvent itself, to renovate and gentrify, is very strong. New owners invest money and labour and therefore enhance and add new value to the existing housing stock. In the general area, diversity has declined, as many Italian and Portuguese immigrants who settled in the area in the 1950s and 60s are starting to sell their homes. Meanwhile, artists, musicians, and middle-class professionals who have rented in the area since the 1970s and 80s want to stay in the neighbourhood and buy their own homes. The combination of all these economic, social, and cultural forces makes the Queen St. area, with its vibrant street life and assorted rhythms of work, entertainment, and cultural production, an inviting and interesting public place.

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Moving away from the linearity of Toronto's Queen Street West and arbitrary geographic designations of "cultural districts" to the larger grid of intersecting streets loosely defined by Spadina Avenue, College, Dufferin and Queen Streets, one can observe a larger geographic area that includes Kensington Market. In less than 25 years, Spadina Avenue has shifted from a wholesale and garment manufacturing district of predominantly Jewish owners, to downtown Toronto's major Chinatown, with huge numbers of retail outlets, particularly food stores and restaurants. This shift has occurred alongside recent developments on lower Spadina, with its multiple condo towers and the new design, publishing, and high-tech industries that have settled in the multi-storey garment factory buildings

erected in the 1920s. Then, there is College Street's "Little Italy," as branded by the street signage, although it is a largely Portuguese and Anglo neighbourhood with new trendy bars, clubs, and restaurants. The grid framework of streets intersect and interact, providing junctions between the productivity and creativity of Queen Street, the chic restaurants and bars of Queen West and College Street, and the exuberant economies and lively immigrant communities of Spadina and Kensington Market.

Economically, the businesses of Spadina Avenue, Queen West, College Street, and Kensington Market appear to operate in different spheres. While the area includes a diverse demographic of emerging artists and designers, students, older European immigrants, shop keepers, middle-class professionals, and long-term residents, what holds it together is its occupational focus: the studios, architects offices, galleries, hair salons, tattoo parlours, food shops, and restaurants. Because these businesses are interspersed with the public social glue of bars and cafés, and the resolutely residential nature of the secondary streets and public transit, both the individuals and their varied communities can maintain their urban interactions of proximity and avoidance. It is the exchange, the intensity of these co-relations that produce a creative culture, something that is local and distinctive, and intensely urban. This is the core of a creative city. Based on my observations of history and the contemporary pressures on Queen West, Spadina, and College, Toronto does not really fit within Florida's bohemian indices, but rather reflects the creative urban culture that Charles Landry describes.¹³ A creative city involves the multi-faceted resources of applied imagination and action, and as global forces become more predominant in our lives, we must become more locally active. For it is civic creativity, through recovering the relationship between the past and the present, and using imaginative problem solving for the larger public good, that will produce the conditions for genuine urban cultural sustainability.¹⁴

It is the confluence of social, economic, and geographic forces—the new and emerging creative intersections and connections—that provides the material, cultural, and social resources for creative people; whether they are visual artists, writers, fashion designers, or film directors, they are the creative nucleus. The intricate working reality of creative urban culture is far too complex, convoluted, and alive to be crunched into the vague indices and codifications of Florida's planning theories. What makes a creative city is what it produces: the work, the new experimentations, the ideas that writers, artists, and designers are applying to various media, events, and actions.

In conclusion, what makes any city creative is the sense of vibrancy—the intersections of working forces, not just whether people are artists, gay, or foreign born. This productive activity ties the various communities and classes together. Creative culture is much more than the street signs, or the leisure activities of bars, galleries, and restaurants that cultural planning has become obsessed with. What is important is the interrelationships or layers of urban experiences; it is the

mixture, the juxtaposition, the working rhythm of the grid of streets within the larger city. As we can see from the recent high-rise development pressures on Queen Street West West and Spadina Avenue, we need new models and imaginative solutions that involve people and the local community, whether artists, small businesses, or just regular residents.¹⁵

As Sharon Zukin has noted, "Culture is, arguably, what cities 'do' best,"¹⁶ whether it is the Big Mouth Bass theatre company, Lee Gardens, the Rivoli backroom, the [murmur] project, the fabric and ribbon stores, the City Beautification Ensemble, or the panoramic graffiti murals on the back alleys of Queen West.

NOTES

- 1 For example, in Toronto there are two York University-based research projects on culture and the city, *Culture of Cities* and *The Visible City Project + Archive*. The original version of this paper was delivered at The Visible City's "Urban Interventions: A Symposium on Art and the City" at the Drake Hotel, April 2005. Other recent conferences include "Voicing Toronto: The City and the Arts," organized by the University of Toronto's Humanities Centre in May 2005, as well as Artscape's "Creative Spaces + Places" 2003 and 2005 conferences. The City of Toronto has recently launched a tourism campaign entitled "Toronto Unlimited" with a website (www.livewithculture.ca), street banners, and a well-funded promotional campaign.
- 2 See: Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Paladin, 1975) and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontina Press, 1983), 81-97.
- 3 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). See also Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London: Earthscan/Kogan Page, 2000). Landry is one of the founders of Comedia and a major European cultural planning consultant.
- 4 Richard Florida, "Technology and Tolerance: The Importance of Diversity to High-Technology Growth" (The Centre on Urban & Metropolitan Policy, the Brookings Institute, June 2001.) Available at www.heinz.cmu.edu/~florida/
- 5 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 8.
- 6 "Creative Class," *Arts Research Monitor* 2.10 (2004), www.hillstrategies.com/creative_class.html
- 7 Kate Taylor, "Creative city: an artful term, but not a place for art?" *The Globe and Mail*, Oct. 8, 2005, R4.
- 8 "There goes the Neighbourhood," a public panel discussion organized by *Fuse* magazine and Harbourfront Centre, Toronto April 7, 2005.
- 9 See Betsy Donald and Douglas Morrow, "Competing for Talent: Implications for Social and Cultural Policy in Canadian City-Regions," prepared for Strategic Research and Analysis, Canadian Heritage, May 2003. Available at www.culturescope.ca/ev
- 10 See Hill Strategies' series on statistical insights on the arts based on the 2001 Census data, "Artists in Canada's Provinces, Territories and Metropolitan Areas" 3.2 and "Diversity in Canada's Arts Labour Force" 3.3. See www.hillstrategies.com
- 11 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 183.
- 12 Toronto had actually learned from the experience of New York, which had rezoned industrial spaces for "registered" artists' occupancy in the 1970s. By the early 1980s, these areas were clearly out of control and unmanageable. Once residential occupancy was allowed for artists, industrial spaces quickly shifted to upper-scale residential occupancy. See *Lofts: Balancing the Equities*, New York City Planning Commission, 1981.
- 13 See Charles Landry, "Putting Creativity Centre Stage—Responding to Global Transformation," a public lecture given at the Victoria University School of Architecture, Wellington, NZ, 17 Feb. 2000. Available at: www.creativenz.govt.nz/resources/landry.rtf
- 14 See Charles Landry, "Experiencing the city anew," Open Democracy Network, 2001. Available at www.opendemocracy.net/ecology-urbanisation/article_450.jsp
- 15 John Bentley Mays, "Smart redevelopment: going forward while looking back" (*The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 25, 2005).
- 16 Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 264.