‘Knowledge workers’ and the contradictions of the Creative City

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Abstract

Who are the ‘knowledge workers’? Are they Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’, David Ley’s ‘new middle class’, David Brooks’ ‘new upper class’ or Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘dominant class’, all high in cultural, ‘knowledge’, and economic capital? Or do they include those whom Florida, at least, is less clear about: the innovators, students, cultural producers and participants in social enterprises who live on poorly-paid casual work or government grants or benefits? The latter workers may have high cultural and ‘knowledge’ capital but they are economically marginal because they do not generate profit, or because they engage in the kind of experimentation that requires that their products sometimes fail. We can assume that ‘knowledge workers’ certainly do not include service workers and the working class – those on whom the ‘creative class’ relies heavily as cleaners, drivers, shop assistants and kitchen hands, and yet who are not considered to contribute economically, culturally, or, presumably, knowledgably.

These are serious questions. Cities that develop and maintain creative, knowledge-rich and sustainable resource bases are diverse in their social, cultural and economic composition. Creative city strategies, on the other hand, are measured the world over by rising property values, leading to the suspicion that they really are more about economic than cultural development. Creative city strategies are too often urban regeneration strategies, resulting in gentrification which diminishes diversity by displacing the less economically secure. If the ‘knowledge city’ is to represent anything other than the ‘creative city’, it must include a capacity for generating new ideas. Those who are young, marginalised or otherwise act and think differently must have a place there.

This paper makes a critical analysis of Melbourne, home of the 2010 summit, with an assessment of its City and State government interpretations of the ‘creative’ and ‘knowledge’ city. It reviews local planning and policy practices and their effects on Melbourne’s knowledge and cultural capital, and concludes with a recommendation to engage critically with the multiple meanings embedded within these concepts.

Keywords: knowledge, creative, cities, class, equity
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Introduction

In the 21st century, more than ever before, cities around the world rely on the knowledge of their citizens, their institutions and their firms and enterprises. The knowledge image, the human competence and the reputation of their public and private institutions and corporations profiles a city. It attracts investment, qualified labour, students and researchers. And it creates local life spaces and professional milieus, which offer the quality of life to the citizens that are seeking to cope with the challenges of modern life in a competitive world.

(Melbourne 2010 Knowledge Cities World Summit website, welcome from summit chairs)

The purpose of this paper is to look closely at the concept of ‘knowledge capital’, its relation to the ‘creative city’, and the very fact of this conference in Melbourne. The conference is supported by the Office of Knowledge Capital of the City of Melbourne. What does an ‘Office of Knowledge Capital’ do? The title plays on the idea of Melbourne as Australia’s ‘Knowledge Capital’ as well as its ‘Cultural Capital’. But the office is presumably invested with the task of developing knowledge capital, or is the ‘knowledge image’ sufficient? Is the ‘knowledge image’ imagined to attract “investment, qualified labour, students and researchers” in the same way that the ‘creative city’ (with its image of cultural capital) is imagined to attract business? Clearly both “offer quality of life” to a certain class of citizens. How do these images interact: the ‘knowledge city’ attracts jobs and people, while the ‘creative city’ attracts people then jobs? Are they the same or different concepts?

The paper takes first the concept of ‘knowledge worker’, then discusses its connection to Richard Florida’s (2002) ‘creative class’ and the broader concept of the ‘creative city’. Following this is an analysis of the robustness of these concepts in addressing questions of cultural production, urbanity and social equity in the city. Next, the paper reviews three major areas of local planning practice that could be expected to contribute to Melbourne’s claim to ‘knowledge’ and ‘creative’ status. The paper concludes with with a recommendation to engage seriously and critically with the multiple meanings embedded within these concepts.

Who are the ‘knowledge workers’?

Who are these ‘knowledge workers’? Are they members of Florida’s ‘creative class’, which has so captured the attention of urban policy makers? Or do they arise from any of its antecedents, of which there are many? Pierre Bourdieu called them the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’ in 1979, and later, in The Field of Cultural Production, the ‘dominant class’ (1993). Are they David Ley’s (1996) ‘new middle class’ – the famous gentrifiers of the major Canadian cities in the 1980s and 1990s? Or David Brooks’ ‘bobos’ (bourgeois bohemians) or ‘new upper class’ (2000)? Or are they simply what Jim McGuigan (2009) argues would “otherwise be called routinely the professional-managerial class” (p.293) – that grouping of inner and middle-suburban professionals and managers that Australian newspapers know as the ‘AB demographic’. All are high in cultural and presumably ‘knowledge’ capital. The summit chairs’ welcome refers to ‘human competence’ in a way that suggests they are high in economic capital, too.

More ambiguous is whether ‘knowledge workers’ include those whom Florida, at least, is less clear about: the innovators, students, cultural producers and participants in social enterprises who live on poorly-paid casual work or government grants or benefits. These people have high cultural capital but they are economically marginal because they do not generate profit, or because they engage in the kind of experimentation that requires that their products sometimes fail. Florida does include them in his definition of ‘creative class’, but their marginality means that no-one with their focus on the economic capital really notices if they disappear.
We can be sure that ‘knowledge workers’ do not include service workers and the working class (Florida’s other two class categories, which make up 45 and 25 percent of the American workforce respectively, though with nothing like the clout of his ‘creative class’) but, according to our summit chairs, cities around the world need not rely so much on them. Notwithstanding that it is these on whom the ‘creative class’ relies heavily as cleaners, drivers, shop assistants, kitchen hands – ‘unqualified’ labour, in short – they apparently do not contribute to the city economically, culturally or in terms of ‘knowledge’.

I contend that ‘knowledge workers’ are precisely Florida’s ‘creative class’ – the main criterion for membership essentially being large salary-earning capacity – and that the representations in the first paragraph are all euphemisms for the group of people that most cities want to attract in their quest to become a ‘creative city’. To support this, I will unpack the idea of the creative city.

**What is the ‘creative city’?**

The creative city was brought to popularity with Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini’s 1995 book of that name. The concept builds on Lewis Mumford (1938) and Jane Jacob’s (1961) characterisation of good cities as breeding grounds for creativity, borne of diversity. Landry and Bianchini added that creativity and diversity are good for economic activity, and that to stimulate growth, governments should make their cities ‘creative’. Richard Florida built on that idea to propose that some people make a city more creative than others, and defined them as a class. Florida’s creative class includes a core of people in “science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment” and a broader group of “creative professionals in business and finance, law, health care and related fields” (2002:8) – essentially, anyone with a university education or white-collar salary potential. This class earns way more than the other two combined.

The creative class thesis is that economic growth occurs in cities that are tolerant, diverse and open to creativity because that’s where the creative people want to live, and that companies follow the creative people, not the other way round. So instead of offering tax breaks and infrastructure to big companies, cities wanting to be economically successful must make themselves attractive to the creative class. This means – and this is the main point of difference between him and Landry et al – attracting the creative class (and the investment that follows) from elsewhere, in the classic model of the competitive city, rather than developing local resources. Florida advocates a formulaic urban regeneration strategy that includes up-front city investment in soft infrastructure such as heritage restorations, galleries, street cafés, bike paths and cultural initiatives. This will bring the ‘creatives’, and the corporate headquarters will follow.

Let’s be clear here: Florida’s strategy is first and foremost an economic development strategy. But there are problems with this approach, the most obvious being that big companies want the tax breaks and infrastructure too; as Peck (2005) and Berry (2005) point out, the formula reduces too easily to development business-as-usual. No matter how many galleries and street cafés are in place, the office blocks, shopping malls, luxury housing and car parks have to be there too: even a Guggenheim won’t bring them if the creative CEOs can’t park their 4WDs.

A second critique says the thesis is such a hit with governments worldwide because of its offer of the quick fix, whether it works or not. The ‘just add culture and stir’ formula (Gibson 2004) means not having to spend too much, and certainly not having to accommodate the poor. This critique asks where the working and service classes are in Florida’s happy picture. Florida assures us that “factory workers and even the lowest-end service workers always have been creative in certain valuable ways” and expresses his belief that “the key to improving the lot of underpaid, underemployed and disadvantaged people lies ... in tapping the creativity of these people, paying them appropriately for
it and integrating them fully into the Creative Economy” (2002:10). At best this is a naïve variation of the ‘trickle-down’ effect, which has long been shown to be highly selective. At worst the assurance is disingenuous: as Anthony O'Donnell from the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Employment and Labour Relations Law points out, low-paid service workers are integral to the rise of the creative class, taking care of their kids and ageing parents, cleaning their houses and offices and serving in their favourite bars. O'Donnell argues that the contemporary flexible workplace laws “help create a low-end service class that enables a creative class to pay as little as possible to people who do some of their most important work” (2004). Florida’s creative class thesis is predicated on and perpetuates a neoliberal competitive framework in which there are clear winners and losers.

Let’s be clear about this too: cities want the ‘creatives’ because of their economic capital. The success of Florida’s creative city is measured by increasing land values and low vacancy rates. This puts pressure on low and moderate-income earners in insecure residential and commercial tenancies, including low and non-profit-generating cultural producers – crucial elements of any genuinely creative culture. It is reasonable to conclude that a creative city strategy is a gentrification strategy. If it is successful, the result deviates from Jacobs et al by actually diminishing diversity. Florida slides over those cultural producers on low incomes, which, in Australia at least, is most of them. The last comprehensive report on this subject was conducted in 2003 by the Australia Council (the national arts-funding body). Titled Don’t give up your day job, the report said that very few artists in Australia earn high incomes, that most earn very low incomes, and that half Australia’s artists had a creative income of less than $7,300 a year (Throsby and Hollister 2003). This situation is unlikely to have changed substantially.

There is life after Florida (Berry 2005) however, and the growing creative cities literature is becoming more nuanced with recent analyses placing more emphasis on conditions for meaningful cultural interaction and on the ways people actually use space (Wood and Landry 2008; Fincher and Iveson 2008). Much of this work focuses on genuine cultural activity and the role of young people in particular; indeed Florida’s work originated with university students at the Carnegie Mellon University campus where he was employed. Any real notion of a creative city – in as far as it is inspired by the production of new ideas – must recognise the qualities that large concentrations of students and other young people bring to a city.

Independent young people are highly vulnerable to displacement from gentrification. Florida’s creative class consists mainly of those who benefit from, or are not disadvantaged by, rising rents and land prices. These are the urban professional-managerial class, the bourgeois, the elite – the dominant class as indeed Bourdieu and Florida agree. The creative class is a gentrifier class and any city that pursues it above all others risks becoming exclusive and moribund. An alternative view of a creative city might be one in which artists and musicians and other low-income cultural producers, and students, and working classes and service classes, and homeless people for that matter, have what they’ve always needed – cheap space to live, access to work, and decent public transport. A genuinely creative city is an equitable city that encourages and enables anyone who wants to, to fulfill their creative and productive potential. This could be the definition of a ‘knowledge city’, as distinct from the ‘creative city’ which has come to mean, by Florida’s hand, anything but equitable. In a gentrifying city this kind of inclusiveness can only be achieved systematically by government.

So, how do the City of Melbourne, the Cultural Capital of Australia; its ‘knowledge capital’ arm, the Office of Knowledge Capital; and the Victorian State government, which wields considerable power over what the City Council can achieve, deal with these matters? Specifically, how do these institutions choose to understand the concepts of the ‘creative city’ and the ‘knowledge city’?
Policy and planning practices in Melbourne

This section discusses three major areas of planning practice to illustrate the approach of Melbourne City Council and the Victorian State Government to the concepts of the 'creative' and 'knowledge' city. Each case involves the potential for significant creative and knowledge-based planning policy development: the reactivation of the city centre, student housing in the 'university precinct', and the urban regeneration of the Melbourne docklands.

Cultural activity in the city centre

Policy initiatives to encourage creativity and vibrancy in Melbourne’s quiet city centre in the early 1990s included a long term program with incentives to increase the city’s residential population (called Postcode 3000), liberalisation of liquor laws, and facilitation of planning permissions for bars, restaurants and ‘al fresco’ dining. A major redevelopment of the south bank of the Yarra River and several redevelopments or ‘revitalisations' of entire central city blocks in the 2000s involved star architects in building and precinct designs. All these initiatives were successful, generating large quantities of new housing mainly in high-rise apartment blocks. In the early 1990s there were less than 1,000 dwellings in the centre; by the end of that decade there were more than 5,000. Since then the figure has doubled (City of Melbourne 2010). The vast majority of the new and converted apartments are high-end housing, and the influence of the new residents is being strongly felt on the new consumption spaces in the city, with serious contests over bars and noise (see Millar 2009).

Less discussed is the dramatic reduction in the availability of affordable housing in the city, along with places for informal and low-profit generating cultural production. The city centre has long been home to a small alternative scene living cheaply in the apartments few others were interested in. Cheap artist spaces, often spread through entire city buildings, are now diminishing rapidly with evictions and substantial rent hikes being common. Music venues and clubs have been finding suitable, tucked away city premises for five decades, but many of these old uses are now in direct conflict with the new residents. Live music venues in particular are currently under pressure from two sides, with resident complaints limiting the hours and volume of music, and blanket reforms to the liquor licensing laws (in response to the amenity concerns issuing mainly from the new, larger consumption spaces) significantly increasing their costs.

An arts strategy that claims Melbourne’s place as the nation’s ‘Cultural Capital’ is careful to emphasise “the importance of the creative agenda for Melbourne’s future sustainability, including its economic vitality” (City of Melbourne 2004:3). It doesn’t expand on how the council understands these concepts, but focuses on the “venues, streets, laneways, buildings and parks [that] provide a public domain where art can happen and people can participate and engage” (City of Melbourne 2004:14). The council appears happy to be on the receiving end of Sydney’s much-hyped envy for Melbourne’s small bars and music scene. The Arts and Culture Branch of the council openly defends and celebrates stencil art and graffiti in the city’s laneways.

The small bars, music venues and street art are surviving, but they are rarely favoured in a direct contest. St Jerome’s was until recently a tiny bar in a city laneway with a strong local creative component, quirky artwork and support for independent music. The people who ran the bar held an annual independent live music festival in the laneway, and much of the street art in the area was produced by participants in the scene around St Jerome’s. But when the nearby Myer Melbourne and David Jones shopping complexes announced their expansion to become “the biggest branded department store in the southern hemisphere” (Dowling 2009), the council responded with delight and approved the widening of the lane to facilitate rear access to this "Very Melbourne retailing precinct" (Lucas 2007), requiring the demolition of St Jerome’s. Neither the council nor the private
corporations involved seem too committed to considering ‘local life spaces’ (beyond a shopping mall) for young people.

Another laneway bar, Section 8, is an interim use set up in a couple of shipping containers on a vacant site. It quickly became a favourite student hangout and one of the most culturally diverse social spaces in the city. The bar was always intended to be an interim use, and when the developer of the apartment block that will go ahead on the site asked the instigator of Section 8 to stay on and run a formal bar on the ground level he declined, saying that the temporality of the space was central to its ambience. He said he would try to relocate in a different form to another vacant site. Under-used laneways and vacant sites need to be available, however, for activities such as these to keep on reappearing and reinventing themselves. In mid-2009 the City announced it would sell some of its lanes to surrounding property holders, meaning that the lanes that the city regards as insignificant – precisely those that accommodate informal uses – will be removed from the pool of potential sites.

Section 8 and St Jerome’s are exemplars of the places the city’s arts strategy explicitly encourages. Yet their requirements are anathema to the fundamentals of the economically vital ‘creative city’, and the influence of the arts strategy on the kinds of places produced or maintained through urban planning is minimal. The City’s street cleaning website observes that the council spends “thousands of dollars each year” on removing graffiti. It is clear that there are competing and contradictory views of the ‘creative city’ and, therefore, what needs to be done to achieve it, within the council. But those with an interest in ‘local life spaces’ for young people and informal cultures outside the ’professional milieu’ are in a minority.

Student housing in the ‘university precinct’

In the last decade the northern edge of the city centre – the precinct with the city's two largest universities – has been substantially redeveloped with high-rise student housing. These housing complexes were built in response to demand from a rapidly increasing international tertiary student population in Melbourne which to some extent took the universities and planning authorities by surprise. They were built quickly by the private sector with relatively little regulation, and on the whole provide small, high-density units that are expensive for what they are (Fincher and Shaw 2009). They cater to a very particular submarket, being heavily promoted in South and South-east Asia and rented mainly to full fee-paying students from overseas who have little information about their housing options in Melbourne. Often these students enter into year-long leases before they arrive. Because of the rolling demand for this housing from each new yearly intake of students, and because of drastically low vacancy rates elsewhere in the city – below 1 percent – these complexes do not have to compete with the broader market which offers better housing for lower rent, and which, though it is harder to find, is the preferred housing option for local students who are living away from home. As a consequence, this purpose-built student housing is almost entirely occupied by international students, who now make up well over half the residential population of this area.

The two universities, RMIT University and the University of Melbourne, have steadfastly resisted investing directly in student housing. They have provided limited rental guarantees to private developers with very little constraint on the form and cost of housing provided, resulting in more of the same which not only contributes to international students’ well-publicised perception of themselves as ‘cash cows’, but consolidates a kind of segregation between international and local students that begins with the distinction made by the universities when they arrive to enrol.

International students are major players in all the ‘creative cities’ literatures, especially as their multi-local orientation can be expected to bring ‘cosmopolitan’ attitudes and treat social differences
as a source of creative potential. But rather than fostering their interactions with local students and the broader communities in which they have located, they are separated and housed in complexes that local students eschew and the surrounding communities resent for what they perceive as the buildings’ unattractive form.

Notwithstanding that the city’s draft strategic plan, Future Melbourne 2020, nomimates as one of its ‘values’ “an intelligent and creative city”, and says:

An intelligent and creative city fosters learning and research. It is at the cutting edge of arts, business and education. It is creative, innovative, a leader, dynamic and adaptable.” (City of Melbourne 2008:5)

neither the council nor the public institutions in this instance have demonstrated their commitment to a ‘creative’ or a ‘knowledge’ city. The council has recently prepared a student housing policy that will guide the form, design and management of future student housing, with constrained support for affordability, but it has been not yet approved and is weakened with every round of council consultation. The Office of Knowledge Capital has been conspicuously silent on the matter. The State government continues to resist any notion of responsibility for student housing, despite the international student industry bringing close to $5 billion a year into Victoria. For such an important source of economic as well as cultural and knowledge capital, this is a curious response from Melbourne’s public institutions.

Melbourne Docklands

The Victorian urban development authority, VicUrban, is invested with the task of, among other things, contributing to housing affordability in Victoria, in line with the State strategic planning policy’s objective to increase the supply of well-located affordable housing. But as the Victorian Urban Development Authority Act 2003 stipulates that “the functions of the Authority ... are to be carried out on a commercial basis” (Section 7(2)), and because VicUrban is required to meet its objectives “within a commercial framework” (VicUrban 2005:5), this objective is hard to meet.

In mid-2010 the redevelopment of Melbourne’s former docks was at half way point. Melbourne Docklands is the largest urban redevelopment in Australia, having consumed $12 billion of public and private funds with 6,500 residents, 19,000 workers and 400,000 square metres of commercial space (VicUrban 2010a). It has 3,600 new apartments which rent at an average of twice the metropolitan median. In the full decade since construction began it has produced 57 social housing units, rented to “low to medium income service workers” (Lend Lease 2009:11) and no public housing. Key worker housing is regularly promised but yet to be delivered.

What kind of city was this planning process intended to deliver? Commentators from Leon van Schaik, professor of architecture at RMIT University, to social justice campaigner Mary Crooks, have declared Docklands, so far, a failure. Van Schaik calls it “a badly-missed opportunity ... all corporate homogeneity, lacking in grit”; Crooks says “it’s disappointing because it could have been an incredibly large jewel in Melbourne’s crown and I think it’s less than that, much less than that” (both cited in Millar 2006a:1). Crooks argues that the lack of affordability prevents the social and cultural diversity that is evident elsewhere in Melbourne.

VicUrban was apparently unable to utilise existing cultural and knowledge capital in this, its showcase project, and has abjectly failed to deliver anything other than the most anodyne professional milieu. Its commercial mandate probably ensures that this will always be the case. Of course, VicUrban and the Government of Victoria publicly disagree with this assessment, and so
does Richard Florida. After his visit to Docklands some years ago Florida pronounced: “I wouldn’t be at all surprised to see Melbourne emerge as one of the defining global creative centres of the 21st century – and that transformation will be made possible in large part by the creative spirit that the Docklands reconstruction both embodies and enables” (Florida 2005:9). It is conceivable that the redevelopment could be judged an economic success, although this is also in contention given the vast and largely undisclosed public funds that were sunk into the project. But only those with an interest in protecting their reputations could openly pronounce Docklands an exemplar of a ‘creative city’, no matter how they define it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to point out that celebratory claims to ‘creative’ and knowledge’ city status can too easily resolve into the production of images of these ideas. While the images may satisfy the objective of marketing a city to people with wealth – the ‘creative class’, the dominant class, that which all cities desire in the interests of economic development – they do not necessarily, or in the case of Melbourne, in fact (along with many other cities in the western world) achieve the original elements of the concepts. It is clear from the three case studies briefly discussed here that creativity and knowledge are not the primary outcomes of the city policy and planning approaches that nevertheless claim such concepts as seminal. They conform in no uncertain terms to the neoliberal competitive city framework from which Richard Florida has emerged, and they disguise their intent in his superficial and misleading thesis. Florida's 'creative city' prescription, while ostensibly premised on ideas of building diversity and creativity, achieves the opposite.

The fact of this 'Knowledge Cities World Summit' in Melbourne 2010 poses questions for me. Is the summit to be a celebration of Melbourne's achievement of 'creative' and 'knowledge' city status? Will the fieldtrip of the 'university precinct' conveniently elide the controversies around its profoundly unsatisfactory student housing arrangements? We can hope that the areas of the fieldtrips speak for themselves to the open-minded, and that keen questions are asked by our visitors about the relations of these areas to the idea of the 'knowledge city'.

No city is perfect. Melbourne has many features of which to be proud: its small bar and live music scene, its high quality universities, its proximity to water and its maritime and trade union history are just a few of them. The city is urbane and diverse. But these elements are fragile and need constant policy attention. Cultural production of all forms, high- and low- and non-profit generating, must be encouraged and facilitated. This means concentrating on the low and non-profit end, because these are the ones under pressure. Social diversity requires living and working places for low- as well as high-income people. The market looks after the high end; one of the roles of government is to look after the low-income end.

The performances of Melbourne's City and State Governments on matters of social equity are inconsistent. It is easy to suspect that both levels of government would really prefer (along with many other governments in the world) to not have to deal with those who are poor and marginal. One of the few features of merit of the creative city thesis is that, when taken seriously, it makes a case for diversity that has not been as comprehensively made since Jane Jacobs. Diversity and urbanity and equity are what make good cities stand out. I hope that this summit provides an incentive for politicians and policy-makers in general to engage seriously and critically with the multiple meanings embedded in the concepts of the ‘knowledge’ and ‘creative’ city, and to decide knowingly and openly on the meanings they choose.
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