

Exploring the role of creativity in urban homelessnessCardboard Citizens and the Theatre of the Oppressed

As the creative cities (CC) discourse increases in prominence it is important to question the assumptions this generates in relation to what creativity is and who can be creative. This brief exploration into a demographic which may not be considered stereotypically 'creative' will hope to add to the literature which challenges these assumptions (Peck 2009; Chatterton 2004; Edensor et al. 2010). By challenging politically dogmatic notions of creativity, this work will assert that a sophisticated analysis of urban creativity should consider creativity which challenges this dogma and aims to promote social justice.

Cardboard Citizens

Cardboard Citizens is an organisation based on London which seeks to 'change the lives of homeless and displaced people through theatre and the performing arts' (Cardboard Citizens 2009). The organisation wishes to educate wider society regarding the challenges faced by homeless communities and individuals. The plays are created and then disseminated to a wider audience. They are written, created and performed by homeless individuals and communities.

Three challenges to the CC discourse

1. Geographically malleable - CC rhetoric relies on the permanence of 'creative clusters' and 'creative sectors' to attract a particular class of creative individuals to specific urban area. In opposition to this homelessness, almost by definition, is transitory and impermanent. Therefore there is no one fixed place where creativity can occur. Cardboard Citizens will travel across London. This challenges CC rhetoric by questioning the concept of geographical permanence being the only condition under which creativity can occur.

Image 1 - Going, going, gone¹

Cardboard Citizens 2007

¹ A play taken on tour around London's homeless shelters and hostels. Image from Cardboard Citizens 'Going, going gone – Gallery' [Source: <http://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/p2s7.html#gallery>]

2. Non-commercial – CC policy aims to increase economic competitiveness and growth. Homeless populations are a non-consuming class, their presence in an area will do little to harbour the ‘creative milieu’ regarded as important by Florida. Yet, Cardboard Citizens is clearly engaging with an ‘undesirable’ urban population in a creative way. This creativity is not driven by consumption, economic growth or job creation. This leads us to question; what can (and should) creativity provide and who can be creative?

Image 2 – Down and Out²



Cardboard Citizens 2007

3. Collaborative (developing to developed) - It could be argued there is a linear progression from the developed world to the developing world in terms of current CC policy. In contrast, Cardboard Citizen’s principles are born from the Theatre of the Oppressed. This is a movement born in Brazil in 1971, which then moved to Peru. It is now used in 70 international countries. This willingness to learn from developing countries challenges the global North’s dominance of ‘creativity’.

Image 3 - Navigation³



Cardboard Citizens and Forum Theatre 2008

² A play reacting to the harsh experiences felt by homeless individuals due to inequality and poverty. [Source: <http://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/p2s26.html#gallery>]

³ A piece of drama constructed by asylum seekers, using the methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre. [Source: <http://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/p2s13.html#gallery>]

To conclude, I hope to have shown that organisations such as Cardboard Citizens and the Theatre of the Oppressed use creativity to challenge existing inequalities where I would argue, current creative city policy can exacerbate them. This allows a movement from the practical specific to the theoretical general and broader questions such as:

Who are the creative class? Where is the creative city? And what is the potential for creativity in creating greater social justice?

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Bibliography

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