The current rhetoric surrounding European cities places considerable emphasis on creativity. Local authorities strive to make their cities competitive by attracting investors, tourists and ‘creative elites’. Nowadays, artists, designers and music producers tend to play a central role in what is increasingly an economic approach to urban policy – and are simultaneously expected to counterbalance this. More exciting than lawyers or accountants and cleaner than factory workers, they fit into a culture of trendy cafes, clubs and cultural centres. Creativity complements the intelligent and smooth planning that is often equated with the European character of cities like Amsterdam or Copenhagen – unlike London, which is dependent upon its financial sector, Naples with its traffic chaos or Warsaw, where socialist heritage, patriotic displays and competitive individualism coexist.

On the face of it, it is difficult to disagree with this view. After all, Amsterdam and Copenhagen are well-governed cities with a high quality of life. Here, cultural institutions, independent stores and bicycle paths abound. Social conflict does not seem to exist and an atmosphere of tolerance prevails. Without doubt, they are places that a lot of ‘artistic’ people feel drawn to. Nevertheless, there is also an important flipside to the current discourse and practice of creativity. The dual emphasis on intelligent planning and economic growth makes urban life more and more predictable, which means that there is less and less room for experimentation. In addition, this approach ties into an underlying fear of things falling apart, which has its roots in a specific conception of European cities: they are seen as distinctive because of their social harmony and good citizenship, but these very qualities appear to be under threat from the looming
forces of globalisation and individualisation. This is why local authorities are crying out for creativity, while at the same time wanting to control and restrict it.

While the emphasis on creativity as a priority in urban policy may be recent, the fundamental tension between experimentation and regulation is not. In the 1950s and 1960s, governments in all of Western Europe tried to put an end to the unpredictability that had come to characterise cities during and in the period immediately after the Second World War. Thanks to growing levels of wealth and significant public expenditure they were able to expand housing and infrastructure on an unprecedented scale. However, this development went hand in hand with nagging doubts that were expressed by artists and intellectuals. Was this relatively sterile urban modernity really the be-all end-all it purported to be? Were those high-rises and suburban homes not stifling human expression in favour of a nondescript uniformity?

Criticism of capitalist project developers, modernist urban planners and consumerist city dwellers became an important topic in the culture of the 1960s. Writer Georges Perec dissected the materialistic lifestyle of a young middle-class couple in Les choses (‘Things’, 1965); in Playtime (1967), director and actor Jacques Tati played a bumbling provincial who gets lost in the maze of a Paris office building; and in Il ragazzo della via Gluck (‘The Boy from Gluck Street’, 1966), singer Adriano Celentano reminisced about a run-down street in Milan that had once been home to poor southern Italian immigrants but was now being completely redeveloped. Bohemians who belonged to movements such as the Internationale Situationniste in Paris, the Provos in Amsterdam, the SPUR group in Munich or Subversive Aktion in Berlin took this criticism of functionalist modernity one step further, creating a playful, absurd alternative. They organised happenings, street concerts and other artistic provocations – and in so doing provided the media with a steady stream of sensationalist headlines.

After 1968 the radical left, which had soon begun to focus on local activism instead of trying to bring about a worldwide
revolution, gave this protest a political dimension. It presented capitalist project developers, modernist architects and social democratic politicians with a significant challenge. In some neighbourhoods, this movement gave rise to an entire landscape of alternative cafes and bookshops, squats and ‘autonomous’ cultural centres. But in the 1980s and 1990s, what had begun as radical opposition became, bit by bit, integrated into a new kind of urban life. Capitalist economies became more flexible as the significance of established businesses decreased, markets opened up and consumers began to look for new experiences. At the same time, local governments were trying hard to pacify previously heated conflicts, project a new image to the outside world, and look for alternatives to industry. This resulted, among other things, in not-previously-seen cafes with terraces, organic food stores, subsidised youth centres, music festivals and art-house cinemas. Soon ethnic and sexual diversity were publicly recognised rather than denied. The very idea of the creative city derives from this mainstreaming of cultural critique, political protest and bohemian lifestyles.

For us today, all of this is old hat: nowadays we cannot even imagine cities like Amsterdam or Copenhagen without the customary mix of bars, restaurants and cultural institutions. But this familiarity also places boundaries on creativity – if indeed creativity is associated with experimentation. It results in a mild but recurring sense of boredom. And that is precisely why, ever since the nineties, so many Europeans with an interest in culture have been fascinated by post-reunification Berlin. Berlin shows that history can sometimes take surprising turns and that cities can go through unpredictable changes. The unoccupied spaces and low rents that the city had to offer (and still offers today, although gentrification increasingly limits this) enabled artists, musicians, designers and computer programmers to try out more new things than elsewhere. And although cities like Beijing or Detroit do not draw as many visitors, reports from these cities reveal a similar fascination with radical innovation and areas in which experimentation is taking place.
Of course, the outlook and atmosphere of Berlin – much less of Beijing or Detroit – cannot be replicated elsewhere. But Amsterdam, for example, is clearly lacking an awareness that things could again develop according to a different logic from that prevailing today, and that this does not have to be a bad thing. Local politicians and administrators can hardly be expected to stimulate unpredictability, but they might consider offering more fertile ground for it to take place. They could set aside buildings for cultural activities instead of selling them to project developers – accepting the risk of economic loss without wanting to call the shots on what ends up happening there. This would contribute toward keeping alternative options open instead of closing off future horizons. It could facilitate a broad and experimental approach to creativity, instead of a narrow, economically-motivated one.

By that same token, local authorities should acknowledge the importance of activists, from a purely urban perspective and separate from their respective agendas. After all, these activists not only end up unwittingly creating opportunities for city marketing, i.e. enabling the city to project a tolerant, harmonious image (as the Mayor of Amsterdam recently conceded following the occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the University of Amsterdam’s main administrative building, in 2015). Their primary significance is in the unexpected and surprising developments they herald and the counterbalance they provide to the rhetoric of municipal public relations departments. In addition, the cultural dimension of activism suggests that creativity is not limited to one sector, but ultimately forms part of our broader vision for the city. An underlying fear of disintegration and a predominantly economic focus do not tend to facilitate attempts at new and sometimes radical things. In this context, the geographer Ash Amin rightly argued that if there is such thing as a ‘good city’, it cannot be considered a community, a kind of neighbourhood writ large. Instead, the good city should be seen as a space for diversity, open-endedness and experimentation – in other words: for creative unpredictability.
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Further reading
