

Arts, Culture and the Creative City

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I was recently asked to speak at a conference on the relationship of the creative arts to a wider policy agenda in Australia aimed at fostering innovation and the knowledge economy. Interestingly, the convenors of the session seemed intent on considering how the arts community might respond to the Australian Government's innovation agenda, promoted as a solution in part to the economic dislocations of globalisation and the rise of new technologies in the 21st century.

To be honest, I was a little nonplussed by the implication that the arts needed to become more innovative. Wasn't it a clear and evident truth, I said during the conference session, that the arts and cultural industries have by their very nature always strived to be innovative? Isn't invention at the very core of the artistic imagination? Surely we should see arts and cultural activity as being in the vanguard of the nation's creative enterprise and as drivers of the new economy?

It is fascinating that we can still surprise people with the argument that the arts and related fields are vital to the development of a creative economy. Perhaps this blindness stems from a persistent view in some quarters that arts and culture are somehow enjoyable "extracurricular" activities for those with time and money on their hands. Such people see the creative arts as "high cultural" pursuits that are the province of the educated elites. Nice to have, but not absolutely necessary.

On "creative cities"

You think we would all know better by now. For more than thirty years, for example, we have been thinking and talking about the idea of "creative cities". Since David Yencken (b. 1931), Professor Emeritus in landscape architecture at

the University of Melbourne) coined the term in his 1988 essay in the journal *Meanjin*¹, a host of writers – notably scholar celebrities like Charles Landry (b. 1948), Richard Florida (b. 1957) and John Howkins (b. 1945) – have made much of the necessary connection between arts, culture and the broader creative capabilities of cities. Each of these scholars has described their own, expansive visions for the sustainable twenty-first century city, and all of them have identified arts and cultural activity as important facets of these urban centres.

That is not to say such theorists have all had the same view of the arts. Florida's argument in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*² was particularly focused on the idea that public sector support for arts and culture helped attract creative, highly educated and talented professionals to cities, which in turn drew businesses and capital investment. His ideas gained a strong following, particularly among urban planners. But Florida has also been criticised for encouraging an overly mechanistic approach to the power of the "creative class", and in turn invigorating an elitist view of the arts and cultural sectors as being somehow removed from the interests of the wider public.

I tend towards a broader conception of the way that cities and the arts enmesh and nourish the lives of their inhabitants, and thereby encourage creativity and creative enterprise more generally. This seems to me more suited to the age in which we live, which is characterised by the rise of a more democratic spirit in arts and cultural activity for all, and not just for educated, moneyed elites. This sees creativity as not the preserve of a particular class, but as something that emerges more generally in societies that are prepared to show value and invest in the arts and cultural enterprise.

Participants, not just consumers

We know this democratising force is at work because we feel it. No longer do people simply come to “consume” artistic products – whether in a gallery or museum, a theatre, or a music hall – and go home satisfied with what they have been given. Today, people want to be more actively involved and actually participate in arts and cultural experiences. Our visitors and audiences increasingly see themselves in dialogue with artistic producers, in ways that allow them to develop and to generate their own ideas, and not simply digest those prepared and presented to them.

If this democratic spirit has heralded a new participatory condition in the relationship between artists and their publics, then it has also widened the capacity of artistic and cultural endeavour to stimulate the broader knowledge economy. Broad scale participation in the arts collapses the distinctions between producers and consumers and encourages a wider range of people to think creatively and to express their ideas. This kind of ideational enfranchisement can help power our cities’ economies.

The participatory turn is apposite given the rise of new digital technologies that have placed very powerful creative and communication tools in everybody’s hands. Computers, tablets, mobile phones and social media have all given more people the means by which they can reach and engage publics. Anyone can get online and develop a constituency of interest for their work or artistic practice, as long as they can inspire and stimulate people. They can also build and communicate with a network irrespective of physical location in time

and place. As a result of this, key arts institutions such as museums, galleries and libraries are more often absorbed in dialogue with audiences virtually, as much as physically.

A more challenging, but creative cultural landscape

If the idea of an emerging democratic and participatory mood in arts and cultural practice is transformative, it is also not without its accompanying challenges. In particular, it can be confronting for many arts professionals. Broad-based public involvement and participation in the sector has worked to diminish the claims of connoisseurship, and called into question the privileged, rarely contested role of the expert. In developing his manifesto for creative cities, for instance, Yencken argued that “the demystification of culture and high arts ought to be a major plank of arts policy – often the initiated would be as grateful for such demystification as the uninitiated.”³

While the diminishing power of the expert might sound challenging, I think that these democratising forces are ultimately working in the long-term interests of museums, galleries, performance theatres and the like. Each of these key institutions in our cultural landscape is redescribing their relationships to audiences, and seeing themselves more as enablers and facilitators of experiences and information flows. Rather than acting as temples of high culture, such institutions have the chance to recast themselves as critical to embedding arts and cultural experiences in the daily life of our cities and urban centres. This potentially puts them

at the centre of policy efforts to inspire creative possibilities for all.

I see this spirit infusing what we do in my own institution, the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. All the visitor evaluation suggests that our audiences are drawn from a very wide range of socio-economic groups, and that they see the museum as their place. Moreover, the front-of-house staff tell me all the time that people come through the door intent on telling us what they know and speaking with the Museum and its staff, rather than simply consuming what we have to offer them. And if we are sometimes concerned by the stridency that enters public debates in this age, then I can think of no better antidote to that than encouraging people to engage in real two-way conversations.

The arts as central to creative cities

This is why the place of arts and culture in our lives has never been more important. At a time when changes in the global economy are redescribing the potential sources of our wealth and well-being,

the work of inspiring broad publics to creative endeavour is uplifting for the life of our cities. It also holds promise for harnessing the potential of our people in the drive to develop new economies. This is not a vision of the arts as simply “ennobling” our civic culture, but as central to engaging and stimulating people from all walks of life to think, imagine and create in different ways. It also asks us to think of the arts not as “nice to have” add-ons to the main game of business and economic development, but as foundational to our future well-being and civic culture.

All this explains why I have been so delighted to see the arts acknowledged as central to the Australia-Singapore relationship, alongside our strong ties in defence and trade. Through the establishment of the Australia Singapore Arts Group, I hope our nations will draw closer together in developing our arts and cultural sectors in ways that involve the populations in both countries in the work we do. There is a great deal we can learn from each other as we transform the place of the arts and culture in the changing cities of the twenty-first century. □

This article is based on a speech given at the inaugural Australia-Singapore Arts Group meeting held at the National Museum of Singapore on 12 January 2017.

Notes:

1. David Yencken. The Creative City. *Meanjin*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer 1988.
2. Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*, New York, 2004.
3. David Yencken. The Creative City. *Meanjin*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer 1988.