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## **Sensing spaces, playing places. The sensuous geography of urban creativity**

### **Aesthetic roots of urban creativity**

Creativity has always played a key role in urban development, being a benchmark of innovation and competitiveness of cities. (Gospodini, 2002). However, its recent incarnation, which found expression in the original concept of the Creative City, carries a slightly different meaning as it is also extended by sphere of experiencing of the urbanity (Maitland, 2010). Thus, the driving intuition of urban change envisioned by one of the Creative City pioneers, Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities, was to improve quality of urban live through widening urban experience by artistic participation of its citizens (McNulty, 1986). This idea was later developed by exploration of the unused potential of urban spaces by fostering imagination and appealing directly to sphere of citizens sensations, especially through art promotion and cultural tourism (Landry, 2000; Miles, 2013). In this regard it is important to note, that the postulated change in life quality was rather designed to be obtained through perceptual breakthrough regarding the very experience of yet existing cities, not designing new ones or building back better spaces for experiences. This way of thinking reveals not only aesthetic roots of the Creative City concept, but also aesthetic roots of creativity itself, because it is the perception that becomes the original factor in the Creative City development process. Not surprisingly, this point of view is supported by philosophical and psychological sources, where creativity is usually connected with sphere of sensual experience, as "a work's creativity is not an objective fact like length or weight, which can be measured accurately with appropriate instruments and mean the same even when applied to different objects, but is a subjective fact. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) made this plain when he argued that something is creative when experts in a domain apply the term to express their approval, that is, creativity is in the eye of the beholder" (Cropley & Cropley 2008: 155). In this regard, perceptions of the city among public (its citizens or visitors) are not subjective, in such sense, that each subject perceives radically

different the same urban environment (e.g creative versus not inspiring), however, those perceptions tend to vary in an experiential spectrum, which is proper for certain urban space and are a probe of the urban life quality. German aesthetician, Gernot Bohme uses the term of “atmosphere” which can be very helpful in grasping this idea of aesthetically defined common space for citizens. Bohme defines atmosphere as a “bodily felt space” (Bohme, 2017: 92), what indicates the fact that our experiences of certain spaces are grounded in sensations coming from human five senses, but also mediated through interpersonal “*sensus communis*,” the common sense, including and managing the sum of personal citizens experiences (Bohme, 2017). This means that, the process of creative designing of spaces involves interpersonal sphere of aesthetic experience, which is grounded in the sum of bodily perceptions of its inhabitants and visitors.

### Focus on change

The atmospheres, sticking to reading of Bohme, are prone to change as the human sense of space is changeable. Therefore, the German aesthetician calls for their active creation through means of aesthetic education, and what seems extremely important in light of urban creativity, through means of aesthetic economy (Bohme, 2016: 116). Creative urban planning follows this principle, focusing on cultivation of the art of space sensing in process of development of so called, modern “sensual urbanism” (Kitson & Bratt, 2016). The need for acting in such direction was well recognized by Bohme, who identifies the sensual deprivation as one of main features of XXI century capitalism:

For some time now, we meet people who are not socialized by enjoyment but rather tuned for turnover and consumption; who are at bottom incapable of passion; live at a distance from their bodies; represent themselves as cool and unreceptive in their social relationships; and become increasingly relationship-poor, if not unable to commit. (Bohme, 2017: 117)

The problem is also defined in categories of fading of traditional urban authenticity, which is recognized nowadays as a value, which is manifesting more as a quality of experiences or objects, than quality of people (Zukin, 2008, 2011). In this respect, the call from advocates of urban creativity seems very reasonable. The careful reading of Charles Landry gives evidences that the original promise of improvement made on that field, relies on an idea of change of an aesthetic nature, which will encompass also personal, authentic level of experience: “It requires thousands of changes in mind-set, creating the conditions for people to become agents of change rather than victims of change, seeing transformation as a lived experience not a one off event” (Landry, 2005: 3). Siobhan Gregory states that to succeed on that field, the “authentic place” branding should include the “sense of place”, “that is inherent to the “singularities of the habitus” of the community. Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu (1989), is the production, **perception**, and appreciation of practices by those “who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning” (Aitken and Campelo, 2011: 918) (Gregory, 2019: 190).

### **The vicious circle. Creative arms race and creative subversion**

However, theoretically recognized, the “authentic place branding” remains utopia. Gregory quotes Peck (2005) with the idea of so called “creativity script” as a big problem itself, as following its procedure: “urban cultural artifacts are “repackaged” and “assets” – especially arts and cultural resources like museums, galleries and arts programs but also social tolerance – to appeal to liberal gentrifiers” (Gregory, 2019: 191). Urban creativity appears then not as an universal, autonomous concept of an aesthetic nature, which is focused on transformation of experience, but presents itself as underpinned and dependent to machinery of creative economy, with its focus on so called “creative class,” running and fueling the whole model of the Creative City (Lindner & Sandoval, 2021). This produces the situation of the vicious circle, where fostering creative places means fueling the creative economy, which directs back its *modus operandi* on creative place making, thus right to the city can be obtained only through “performing acts of consumption” (Kern, 2010: 151). Such a turn of events raises objections not only of groups of excluded but causes discomfort and causes anxiety also among potentially privileged, however very often conservative “middle class” members, as processes of participation in creative places are constructed as a challenge, which somehow burdens participants with coercion of performing “creative lifestyles.” It appears obvious, as if they do not follow patterns of “the creativity script” they also will be isolated in their needs and daily life routines. The quality of “sensible spaces” and “authentic places” produced in this pattern is yet matter of concern of urban critiques such as Sharon Zukin (2008). Not surprisingly, we are nowadays observing vast processes of creative subversion, which can be understood as strong critique of those creative places of seductive nature, directed on sucking people’s emotions and money under umbrella of trendy politics of “creative branding.” This resistance usually concentrates on the already aforementioned matter of who possess the code, and is often presented as a kind of aesthetic war of social and economic consequences. In this regard, Oli Mould proposes the significant division on The Creative City (written with capital letters) which is latter associated with the machinery of creative industry and the creative city (small letters) of subversion, which produces a sphere of an aesthetic autonomy for urban actants. (Mould, 2016). This split, implicates however the situation of never ending arms race of who possess the code to the “creativity scrip.” This happens as the Creative City have developed ability to intercept and take advantage of most of actions of subversion, which are directed on it (Petri, 2020). Moreover, the situation of constant clash, produces itself the sphere of exclusion and enforces following the non-compliant requirements on the creative city followers. This happens as living the way of urban subversion as an imperative is in fact reserved to narrow group of dwellers who can afford to perform the avant-garde lifestyles in the reality of late capitalism. In this respect, yet in the seventies of the XXth century, Daniel Bell presented the hiatus between life expectations concerning the sphere of aesthetic autonomy and economic conditions as one of the main contradictions of late capitalism (Bell 1976). We can however mention experimental attempts of overworking the sphere, such as the concept and implementation of so called TAZ’s , Temporary

Autonomous Zones (Bey, 1991). TAZ is intended to work as a cultural, economic and social uprising, a zone detached from processes of capitalistic performance of urbanity, although once again, life has proven, that most of citizens will never follow its logic as they will recognize it as a challenge of too high level in relation to their threshold of live comfort (Sellars, 2010). Is then the autonomous, aesthetic, urban creativity the domain reserved for the narrow group of the “enlightened,” eternal rebels and only the delusive dream for the rest of us?

### **Affect, creativity and the “play” factor. Embodied urban games and boundary conditions for qualitative aesthetic experience**

The already quoted researches accurately present problematic character of urban creativity, although it seems its full aesthetic potential remains still unrecognized. One of main paradigmatic switches in modern urban studies, which are conducted from position of aesthetics, concerns the aspect they seem to overlook, but which can give us keys to understanding of creativity in wider scope: the affect. The concept of affective bodies has been developed in a philosophical work of Jane Bennett concerning the agency of materiality (2010). Bennett reinterprets Brian Massumi’s modern notion of affect as intensity (2013) and radically widens its scope on all materiality, also the so called “inanimate matter.” Bennett introduces then the new category of “vibrant materiality,” which blurs the division on biological and physical (inanimate) matter (2010). In this notion, affect becomes actant which overcomes human cognitive conditions and becomes universal agency, covering also non-human aspects of cognition (the impersonal affect): “Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects (these distinctions are not particularly salient here) *all* are affective. I am here drawing on a Spinozist notion of affect, which refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness.” (Bennet, 2010: 12). Similar approach concerning the affect is applied in cultural and urban studies by Nigel Thrift in his project of the Non-Representational Theory, where the movement of bodies (or their locomotion) becomes the starting point for further investigations of embodied practices with the use of interdisciplinary methodological apparatus (Thrift, 2008).

The affective approach has been proposed also in regard of the urban creativity issue. Jan Jagodziński follows Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theory of affect as “intrinsic body” (1987) and combines it with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of affective as the impersonal force of life, the spirit of life (Agamben, 1998) to point on practical possibilities of liberation from as he calls it, the “aesthetics of designer capitalism”:

We can begin by saying that affects are sensations that have their own particular logic, a ‘logic of sensation’ as Deleuze calls it, and this logic of sensation—as aesthetics—sets it apart from aesthetics of designer capitalism, which has been the usual playing field for representational art at the level of body image. Here we have a different understanding of the image facilitated by the inhuman apparatus of digitalization as well as the nonhuman ‘biological’ body that has no image. (Jagodziński, 2020: 174)

The presented approach affirms the affect, as the force to explore urbanity through artistic practice. The practice which is aimed on establishing the aesthetic autonomy of urban experience in independency of the logics of creative industry “in a global capitalist world where everything converges into a single act of destructive creation or creative destruction to keep the system going” (Jagodziński, 2020: 179). In this regard, the artful life becomes the art of becoming, the art of free, creative live (zoë) (Jagodziński, 2020: 175–176). Therefore, Jagodziński puts hope in a modern digital art and education as a possible mode of, as he calls after Ranciere, “dissensus” – a conflict between sensory perception [realm of Zoë] and the way of making sense of it [cognition].” (Jagodziński, 2020: 180), which can help to redistribute senses on the map of the urban creativity. However inspiring, the proposed notion, becomes problematic for the very same reason as the TAZ concept as it demands from its apprentice to introduce some significant, drastic changes in the way of living to fulfill the imperative of the postulated nomadic lifestyle. In this regard, the concept of socially engaged art is well recognized, especially with its problems concerning the matter of social – artistic participation (Habermas, 1980; Kester, 2004, 2005; Bishop, 2006). It is striking that, Jagodziński himself presents his concept as an another way of the Deleuzian minoritarian art, which hardly “embraces creativity in its most open potentiality” (Jagodziński, 2020: 180).

However, not everyone is an artist or can pretend to be like, fortunately there are other ranges of more accessible activities, which can help to sensually transform the notion of urban creativity. In this respect, researchers point on variety of playful, somatic activities grouped under the umbrella of so called “lifestyle sports” (Borden, 2003; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Wheaton, 2004, 2013). Skateboarding, parkour, freerunning, urban freeriding and many others, are activities of which, each one have its own specificity, but all of them share the common denominator: cultivation of movement, through practice of locomotion of bodies (Petri op. cit). The performed form of movement is cultivated through habitual training of perception, aimed on obtaining better interaction with urban structures and textures, e.g. the practice of *traceur* (parkour) doesn't refer respectively to performing vaults and jumps as a form of completing tasks in urban space, but is experienced rather as a form of somatic, spatial integration, – sensing the urban space and reconfiguring the quality of interaction (Lamb, 2014; Castaner, 2014). This situates most of urban lifestyle sports as perceptual urban games, placing them, according to Roger Callois games theory, directly in *ilynx* category (Callois 1961). *Ilynx* are kind of somatic games connected with pursuit of vertigo and their function is simply to disrupt the perception of player in quest to obtain a state of an aesthetic pleasure of somehow difficult nature (Callois, 1961: 23–25). The moment of destroying the stability of perception brings together anxiety and joy and is directly connected with sensations of experiencing increased speed, force of gravitation and rebound, exceeding personal comfort zone. What appears as very important, Callois connects the appearance of the *ilynx* games category with gains of Industrial Revolutions and points on presence of powerful, as he calls them, “vertigo-inducing machines” producing “violence and shock” (Callois, 1961: 26). Among them, Callois counts sport cars, motorcycles but also skis, what makes us think with attention about the locomotive environment

of modern urban spaces, filled with bikes, skateboards, scooters and other, both analog and electric personal transport devices. In parallel, some of activities not demanding mediation through technological artifacts, such as downhill running, falling or sliding (Callois, 1961: 24) also fall into *ilynx* category, what opens up possibility of classifying parkour, freerunning and other sorts of urban movement performances as *ilynx* games.

In the aforementioned point of view, modern urban games can be considered as a form of somatic adaptation to changing reality of urban environment, filled with machinery, innovative technologies with their interfaces, artificial structures and rapid locomotion. The mechanism of such games relies on exploring the states of somatic disorder (e.g. vertigo) in working boundaries created by certain game scenario. The movement then is performed in an arranged situation, thus in some kind of isolation from the rest of urban reality. However, during the process of repetition it is incorporated back into the stream of common, daily – life experience. The mechanism can be perceived as an inverted version of Constant Nieuwenhuys vision of the New Babylon, where urban citizens from the future were suspected to invent machinery for their psycho-somatic development (Wigley, 1998). However, it appears such machinery yet outrun common experience, and the citizens have to catch up with all the new urban technology which has been already introduced. This can be performed through implementation of *ilynx* games, which appeal to the already described mechanism of urban creativity, as a form of an aesthetic transformation. What is very important, such games are common and easy to perform, regardless of the personal abilities of players. Such games are also scalable, as they follow “challenge – to – skill” formula, thus, they let the possibility to scale the risk factor in regard to personal level preferences.

### **Taking advantage of urban plays. Theory & practice for sensuous geography of the creative city**

The aforementioned concept of creative, transformative urban plays and games should not be considered in isolation from wider theoretical frameset. This is important, as in spite of the fact, that the already described, creative potential of each practice is resting in the practice itself, the situation of those practices in wider theoretical context appears crucial for their agency. For instance, the management of such activities as freerunning and skateboarding, which was following the traditional logics of urban creativity, thus subjecting them to principles of creative economy, led to production of powerful effects in forms of social images (through social and traditional media) and numerous spaces for their practice (such as skateparks and urban workout gyms), but the transformative effect faded very quickly, as they became recognized, as washed out from their initial transgressive force, in process of becoming just another form of capitalization of the aesthetic performance of citizens (Mould op cit; Kern op cit; Petri op cit.). This happened precisely, as they had to be adapted to “place branding script” strategy and assigned to the concept of development of certain urban landscape.

In this context, it is significant to mention, that transgressive urban games and plays, were territorially and formally attached to processes of rapid transformation of urban space in XIXth, XXth and XXIst century. Finally, their place and meaning

in urban plans seems to be result, both of direct planning (Riess, 1991, 2013) and processes of subversion (Mould, op cit.). This phenomenon was in detail described in respect to parkour and freerunning disciplines emergence in Paris suburbs in the end of XXth century (Angel, 2016). This was however valid, until the appearance of the paradigm of the gentrified landscape. As for the timeline, it is worth to note that classic topology of urban games in relation to types of urbanity, proposed by Steven Riess, starts in around 1820 – from the concept of “the walking city,” then transfers to long era of “industrial city” (with its formal affiliations for plays and games, such as stadiums, city halls and sport clubs) in around 1870, which in the 60ies of the XXth century is being replaced by “the suburbanized metropolis,” the hotbed of modern lifestyle sports (Riess, 1991). More of those, became later the medium of urban subversion like skateboarding in 70ies of XXth century. And now, we can see very close time correlation, regarding the rise and the fall of urban subversive sports and the propagation of the “creative script” in modern urban planning. The 70ies and 80ies were the golden decades of urban subversion through urban sports, where the dusk of the millennium becomes the time of their rapid professionalization and removal from the sphere of spontaneous social interaction, in for promotion of values such as security and comfort (Wilcox et al. 2003). This process seems correspond precisely to emergence of new, “gentrified landscape [which] for the service economy develops in the forms of “comprehensive class-inflected” complexes that combine entertainment, work, and luxury retail all under one roof in the form of “live-work spaces” or clustered by geographically delineated “empowerment zones” (Gregory, op cit.: 189). In this milieu, urban games and plays cease to be subversive, as they are more and more underpinned to those new, clusters of “live-work spaces,” and reinforce their function of simulated aesthetic experience (Petri, op cit: 211). The potential of transgression, which was fueling urban games is now being neutralized, because of the strategy of their spatial isolation and avoidance of the element of interaction, which appears as the driving ideology of building the new, creative places of their performances. They still involve the element of challenge-to-skill strategy, however they are designed to be performed as safe as possible and in the strict, spatial isolation from the rest of the “street life,” thus they do not fall into modern urban notion of authenticity which is defined as a “relational, dynamic, practice-related condition that emerges when individuals engage with the world around them” (Piazzoni, 2018: 157).

In this situation, a possibility of rewriting the creative branding script to include elements of the “authentic,” social-material interaction to balance the effects of gentrification, appears as a tempting idea. However, such voices, calling for empowerment and inclusion of citizens in wider context of urban performance are present in the debate, they tend to be marginalized (Makeham, 2005). It is not surprising, as those postulates of including “the performance in its entirety” (Makeham, op cit.: 152) are difficult to assimilate by key investors, as they mean directly: to pay more, wait longer for the profit, and accept bigger risk. This standpoint is expected only to grow stronger in the forthcoming era of the “stakeholders capitalism,” where more and more spheres of public goods and services, which were so far managed by local, urban authorities, will be taken over by global corporations through different forms of business -social

partnerships (Schwab 2017). This trend indicates, that possibilities of reworking problems generated by the gentrified landscapes will not be realized on general level of urban governance and the quest of creative placemaking can be defined only in categories of personal, local experience. Thus, instead of feeding empty hopes for balanced, urban spatial policy responding to matter of somatic autonomy of citizens, we should rather pay more attention directly on processes of practical, somatic exploration and management of transitional and ephemeral urban spaces, where such autonomy can be realized individually or collectively. Such places were described precisely in urban geography in categories of “no-man’s lands” (Woods, 2000), “terrain vague” (Sola-Morales, 1995) or “marginal spaces” (Gandy, 2013), where authors advocate for the possibilities of their further exploration of an aesthetic nature (Gandy, op. cit.; Edensor, 2005). In this regard, Edensor and De Silvey point on processes of aesthetic exploration of landscape through somatic activities, such as explorative walks (2012). The range of such practices can be widened by adding other locomotive activities of an exploration nature, such as parkour, freerunning, street skating, urban freeriding and many others, which can constitute the basis for development of critical, sensuous geography of landscape (Rodaway, 1996). However, such geography implicates also changes in notion of the landscape itself, as it is now considered as interactive and affective (Christensen, 2017). In this respect, Edensor points on the issue of landscape affordances, as crucial element of sensuous interaction of explorative walking through industrial ruins:

I consider the sensual characteristics engendered by strolling through ruins, drawing attention to the encounter with the ruin’s peculiar affordances and unusual materialities, productive of a range of sensory experience that coerce the walking body into unfamiliar states (Edensor, 2008: 123)

Such notion of ruins (as an example of terrain vague or a marginal space) leads us to wider understanding of those types of spaces, as preferred locations for creative, embodied processes of reconfiguring meanings of urban places. This can happen, as such spaces are in some sense emptied from previous meanings and contexts, the cultural layer of attached somatic habits and rituals, thus direct interaction through the presence of their materialities becomes dominant. According to Edensor, such practice helps to “enervate the walking body” (Edensor, op cit.: 123), what can be understood in categories of sensual enhancement of the sphere of urban experience. Therefore, future recommendations for sensuous urban planning should include and reconsider the presence and function of the no man’s lands, as locations left over for play and exploration to retain balanced development of the creative city.

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### **Abstract**

Urban creativity tends to be defined as a driving force of the ongoing changes in modern cities. While being a formally neutral term, the "creative," in practice usually identifies all "good" sides of processes of urban transformations, especially those concerning the rise of spaces for sensual experiencing. The Creative City makes then a certain promise of aesthetic inclusion, enhanced participation, and autonomy for its citizens and visitors. However, the Creative City itself is neither an autonomous concept, nor the self-sufficient urban entity, but is entangled in economic, organizational, and social aspects of urban performance. All this makes us ask, is its promise trustworthy or rather empty?

**Keywords:** creativity, urbanity, space, place, sensuous geography

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