

# Urban Agency?

## Towards a New Urban History of Europe Since 1500

### **Unscrewing the Creative City: The Historical Fabrication of Cities as Agents of Economic Innovation and Creativity**

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**Call for Chapters:** If the following mission statement appeals to you and if you would like to participate in the ensuing book project, please forward abstracts (max. 400 words) to the above address before 7 June 2013. Selected papers will be presented as preliminary chapters at a conference to be held in Antwerp (Belgium) in December 2013. Publication of the book is planned for 2014.

**Mission statement:** In the past decade, much has been said and written about why cities are creative. The torrent of publicity surrounding the much-discussed books by Allen J. Scott, Richard Florida, and other authors caused such concepts as the 'creative' or 'cultural economy', 'the creative class' or the 'creative city' to spill over into the academic discourse of sociologists, economists and human geographers discussing economic innovation and creativity. As cleverly noted by Martina Hessler and Clemens Zimmerman in one of the few historical books devoted to the subject, however, much of the ongoing debate has consisted of 'conspicuous euphoria, hysteria and affirmation' by policymakers and creative thinkers alike, all fuelling the belief 'that creative industries, the creative class and culture will be the engine of the economy, and that cities will be both the condition of this development and its beneficiary'.<sup>1</sup> Studies on the creative city thus tend to blur the distinction between that which is to be explained (how and why creativity becomes clustered in cities) and that which can explain the process of economic innovation and creativity (the 'agency' of the city). The city appears as some sort of force of nature – a kind of 'natural' breeding ground for 'life cycles' of economic invention and creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hessler and C. Zimmermann eds., *Creative urban milieus. Historical perspectives on culture, economy, and the city* (Frankfurt and New York 2008) 12 and 20.



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In *The economy of cities* (1969), Jane Jacobs (the ‘grandmother’ of the current ‘creative city’ debate) assumes that the natural endowments of cities – the typically dense, close living arrangements within a heterogeneous population and the resulting interactions – created a specific kind of ‘milieu’ in which innovation and creativity was bound to flourish. Historians have also had few reservations about automatically equating cities with places of economic progress, creativity and modernisation. For example, in *Cities in Civilization* (1998), Peter Hall considers creativity and innovation as a sort of generic determinant of global urban culture itself, ready to be tapped as soon as certain conditions (e.g. size, prosperity, schooling and communicative networks) are in place. This project aims to break away from such unquestioning, abstract or intuitive use of the city as an explanatory agent in research on the creative economy. Our goal is to open the ‘black boxes’ on which the notion of the creative city rests.

With the help of the metaphor of black boxes, Bruno Latour and others notoriously refer to scientific (or other) modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects that ‘no longer [need] to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference’.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, we will systematically question and historicise the ideas (e.g. freedom, tolerance, diversity), actors (e.g. entrepreneurs, artists, inventors, scientists, bohemians, gays), institutions (museums, academies, universities) and inanimate physical ‘actants’ (e.g. art, commodities, machinery) that make us intuitively associate cities with creativity and innovation. Rather than seeing these ideas, actors, institutions and materials as signs of the creative and innovative potential of cities, we will focus on the physical practices, discourses and related power struggles and conflicts that have resulted in the belief and, ultimately (perhaps), the reality that certain cities have been breeding grounds for creativity and economic innovation.

### **Specifically, contributors should relate to the following research questions:**

- How has economic creativity and innovation been made and unmade in speech acts and performative processes situated in space and time, and driven by the discerning agency of animate actors and inanimate ‘actants’?
- How did the creative city become the relational, ‘networked’ product of these historically altering ‘urban assemblages’?

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<sup>2</sup> M. Callon and B. Latour, ‘Unscrewing the big Leviathan: how actors macro-structure reality and how sociologists help them to do so’, in: K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel eds., *Advances in social theory and methodology. Toward and integration of micro- and macro-sociologies* (Boston 1981) 285.

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Applicants are challenged to rethink their own research on the creative city by looking at creativity and economic innovation as not solely constituting 'objective' activities taking place within the urban fabric, nor as something that is merely a 'brand', 'identity' or a constructed representation. In our book, the 'creative city' becomes conceptualised as an emerging and unstable material and symbolic achievement (or 'assemblage') of concrete historical processes governed by ideas, physical actions and materials.<sup>3</sup> As such, contributors are encouraged to make critical use of approaches associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) or to reflect on the meaningfulness of such approaches for their own lines of research on the creative city.

**Contributions:** With regard to the type of contributions, our focus is predominantly on European case studies from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. We also welcome historiographic and conceptual papers, including works by non-European experts. Although this 'call for chapters' was written by historians, and although it encourages an innovative grasp on the 'creative city' throughout history, interdisciplinary perspectives are welcomed.

**Background:** This book is the first volume in a series devoted to the subject of 'urban agency', the aim of which is to produce a new, multi-authored history of modern Europe in four volumes, reflecting the current state of research in the field. Organised by two major centres of Urban History, Antwerp and Leicester, the series will represent current cutting-edge research on Europe's urban inheritance, and it will help to define the parameters of debate for the next generation of research. To this end, the general editors, Bert de Munck and Simon Gunn, have written a paper setting out the rationale for the project, as well as the principal ideas behind it. This platform text can be obtained from Bert De Munck ([bert.demunck@ua.ac.be](mailto:bert.demunck@ua.ac.be)). In practical terms, the project has emerged from the international research community 'Urban Agency: Setting the Research Agenda of Urban History', funded by the Scientific Research Council, Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen) and initiated by the Centre for Urban History in Antwerp.

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar approach to the city, read I. Farias and T. Bender eds., *Urban assemblages. How actor-network theory changes urban studies* (London and New York 2011).