
'You Have a Glorious Opportunity'

Sarah Browne reports on *Dublin: Creative City Region*, with keynote speaker Richard Florida, October 2007

Dublin: Creative City Region, was a conference was organised by the Dublin Regional Authority and Dublin Employment Pact, with the aim of generating greater awareness in the Dublin city region of 'the concepts of creative cities, the factors shaping creative cities and international developments in creative city regions'. (1) It also aimed to identify initiatives which can be taken at national and at Dublin level to ensure that Dublin is a leading player in the global creative economy and society into the future.

The conference was built around a presentation given by Richard Florida, US economist and urban studies theorist, and originator of the idea of the 'creative class'®. Speakers came from Dublin, Brussels, Beijing and the US, and included Gráinne Millar, Cultural Development officer from Temple Bar Cultural Trust and Dr. Joyce O'Connor, Chair of the Digital Hub and Dublin Inner City Partnership. Colm Butler from the Department of the Taoiseach and John Gormley, Minister for the Environment also addressed the conference. Attendance at this event was particularly interesting given that I seemed to be outside of the intended audience, which appeared to be largely composed of public officials. Despite being a dialogue about the 'creative city' there were only a handful of arts practitioners or administrators I recognised and the conference was not advertised widely in fora I would be familiar with as an artist – however 'culture' and 'creativity' can get confused.

Florida is best-known for his best-selling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class – and how it's Transforming Work, Leisure and Community Life* (2002), where he develops the idea of a 'creative economy' (as the successor to the 'knowledge economy') and puts forward the notion of the emergent 'creative class' of the title. He sees creativity emerging as the defining feature of contemporary economic life, and a key issue in the book is the relationship between people, creativity and place, particularly in relation to the development and regeneration of cities.

Florida himself is part of a broader trend in culture where economics is becoming 'pop': described as a public intellectual (and he has earned a PhD so I don't wish to imply he is in any way underqualified), his manner of delivery draws on that of the motivational speaker, informed by the legacy of North American television and evangelicism. In Ireland, Eddie Hobbs and David McWilliams are the celebrity economists (surely a new phenomenon) who have become vocal pundits in the national media, particularly McWilliams, whose economic background has seeped into a large scale social trendforecasting, books and TV programmes. From this perspective, the exchange between the field of economics and mainstream popular culture is more fluid and fluent than it has previously been.

The people Florida defines as members of the creative class are distinguished by their participation in work that has as its fundamental aim the development of 'meaningful new forms', for example,

scientists, entrepreneurs, professors, artists, researchers, writers. There are also the 'creative professionals', who draw from complex bodies of knowledge in order to facilitate creative problem solving in specific situations, for example, physicians, lawyers, managers, and so on. The creative class, according to Florida, is slowly gravitating away from traditional corporate communities and towards what he calls 'creative class centres', and more recently, 'creative city regions'.

He describes a dramatic reversal where instead of people now moving to where the *jobs* are, corporations and other employers must now move to where the best – creative – *people* are. These centres are not successful due to the traditional reasons associated with economic development, but rather because creative people choose to live there: specifically, Florida believes that for a region ultimately to be successful, it must possess what he calls the '3Ts' of economic development: *technology*, *talent* and *tolerance*. To attract creative individuals, stimulate ongoing innovation and generate substantive economic growth, a location must have all three of these components. This was really the intended focus of the day: how to make Dublin a creative city region that could entice further creative people, hence generating further economic growth and development?

Colm Butler spoke about the need to 'brand Ireland as the island of ingenuity', and claimed that 'Irish managers can think outside the box'. He referred to the structure of Irish music being modelled on a 8 beat rhythm 'to encourage participation' and his presentation was seeded with notions of an essential 'Irishness' (not far from the national stereotype - creative, fun, gregarious, ingenious, entrepreneurial) that urgently needed to be tapped. The latest advertisement by the IDA similarly mixes economic objectives with iconically Irish cultural products: a Louis le Brocquy drawing of Bono is captioned, 'The Irish Mind'. (2)

In contrast, Kieran Rose's presentation was an aspirational tirade against the forces of retrogression and nostalgia, highlighting Dublin's need for 'tolerance for strangers but intolerance for mediocrity' and calling for a confident re-interpretation of the city's identity. In agreement with Florida, he described both how economic success is fundamental to social success, and that in general, diversity powers this success. He claims that there are essentially two possible mindsets – self-limiting versus open or liberating, and that the latter is necessary for Dublin to fulfil its possible destiny as a 'superperformer in Europe'. In relation to social tolerance, he described how people are coming to Ireland to learn about our equality legislation, and how a sense of ambition and a 'can-do' approach should also extend to social progress, ie. civil progress, for example the issue of gay marriage. Facts such as the illegal status of gay marriage and abortion were important points to take hold of in the miasma of self-congratulation the conference sometimes threatened to disappear into.

The lexicon of the 'creative economy' slipped and slid throughout the course of the day. In Florida's absence (literally flying off to another engagement), speakers referred to the 'knowledge economy' which that very morning he had definitively dismissed as being 'over', and in fact, 'the last gasp of the industrial age'. Even the DRA website fudged this issue by covering all bases, describing the current economy in the conference materials as the 'creative knowledge economy'. Proposals for action were thin on the ground amidst the hard statistics and sometimes woolly rhetoric.

The competing interests of the various speakers, and the shifting terms of their engagement with Florida's language/ ideas ultimately made me wonder, what is this creativity that is being spoken about, and who is it for? Florida is chiefly an economist, but referring to Jane Jacobs, his work does emphasise the social benefits of creativity and cultural diversity, in terms of the quality of life possible for citizens, and he says that 'this is not just about building an economy, it's about building a society'. To see

creativity reduced to a figure on a balance sheet is, aside from being a bit dispiriting, not a sound basis for encouraging social inclusion. CEO of Dublin Chamber of Commerce, Gina Quinn's approach to the issue demonstrated a shockingly acquisitive attitude for example, saying 'We've got to *keep* those people here, *keep* their knowledge, *keep* their creativity!' To value the creativity and social participation of migrant populations solely in economic terms is worrying indeed.

Likewise, the understanding of what forms 'creativity' might take was highly varied between the different speakers, with various splits between the arts and the other industries. Gianluca Monte spoke about a study prepared by his firm, KEA, for the European Commission titled 'The Economy of Culture in Europe'. The ambitions of the report included the aim of 'putting a figure on creative value'; considering Europe's competitiveness in the creative sector internationally; and giving economic evidence that the cultural and creative sector deserves policy support. The breakdown of definitions of the arts he provided was instructive: music is defined as a 'cultural industry' not as a 'performing art' (presumably because of its income generating capability and its status in relation to copyright law); architecture is a 'creative industry' along with design and advertising. He described culture as being a 'powerful catalyst for the tourist sector'. (3)

Jordi Pascual, from the Institute of Culture at Barcelona Municipal Council, focused on the regeneration of Barcelona as a city through the creation of diverse cultural initiatives. He did this in a manner that acknowledged the economic value of culture, but also spoke strongly against the danger of cultural initiatives being co-opted for political ends. In the specific social and political context of Catalunya, culture in Barcelona was identified as a key element because it had been oppressed, not just because of its instrumental value. He was the only speaker in the programme to mention the word

'gentrification' and also discussed at length the dangers of commodifying culture for the purposes of urban regeneration, at the expense and neglect of what is intrinsic to it.

In Quinn's presentation, IADT Dun Laoghaire and NCAD were not included within her list of Dublin universities and institutes of technology. The images of Dublin visual culture she showed were the Spire, the Molly Malone, and the now defunct Floozy in the Jacuzzi, although in fairness these were generally presented as exemplars of the creative use of language used by city residents to appropriate the structures. Interestingly, this very example points to a creativity borne of resistance and aesthetic displeasure, a linguistic creativity that is fluid and wielded by those without power or access to visual systems of representation.

This is one of the problems with the (arguably elitist) idea of the creative class. What is at issue here is the conflict between high-end, income-generating creativity, and creativity in its other forms – as a tactic of social resistance, as a hobby and so on; that is, creativity that does not generate significant income for those who practice it. It remains difficult to imagine how under capitalism inequality will be challenged and all workers will be able to develop their unique creative skills to progress their careers and quality of life – who will be left flipping the burgers?

The other significant problem is for the members of the creative class itself (artists included), as many of them/ us are not aware of their/ our membership in this broad and powerful class of people. The creative class is a socially dispersed and disconnected one. Does such a class structure promote individualism? Is it a socially retrogressive rather than progressive force – in Florida's own words while referring to the second election of George W. Bush, such individualism can lead to a severely passive or reactionary political environment.

Notes

1. *Dublin, Creative City Region*, at Royal College of Physicians, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. October 18 2007. see brochure at www.dra.ie/PDF/creative-e-brochure.pdf
2. see www.anne-madden.com/LeBPages/newsIDA2006.html
3. report available at www.keanet.eu/Encoculture/ecoculturepage.htm

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