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### **Dublin: A Creative City?**

The city of Dublin has undergone a series of dramatic changes in recent years. From the regeneration projects and building boom of the Celtic Tiger era, to the appearance of empty office blocks and vacant shop fronts resulting from recent recession. Dublin, its people and its places, are changing, but new development plans envision a bright future. Dublin City Council (DCC) is determined that Dublin will rise again as a creative city and become a shining beacon in the creative economy.

This is the vision that DCC is trying to effect through its 2011-2017 Dublin City Development Plan. Whether or not Dubliners are on board with this vision, and what physical effects this will have on the form of the city, are issues central to the consideration of urban cultural heritage in Dublin.

#### **A Craze for Creative Theory**

Like many cities around the globe, DCC's vision for Dublin is influenced by the popular theories of Charles Landry's creative city and Richard Florida's creative class.<sup>1</sup> Explained briefly, the basis of Landry's creative city theory is that people hold the key to creativity, and cities that can harness this

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Landry, *The Creative City – A Toolkit For Urban Innovators (Second Edition)*, (London: Earthscan, 2008).

Richard Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class." *City & Community* 2, no. 1 (2003).

creativity will rise to the fore in the creative economy. He emphasises the importance of creating conditions and opportunities for creativity to flourish in cities by “paying attention to how people can meet, exchange ideas and network”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Florida insists upon the importance of people to the success of cities in the creative economy, specifically those talented people working in creative industries, whom he terms the creative class. According to Florida, these people drive the creative economy and therefore a city must cater to their specific needs in order to attract them.

The physical embodiment of these theories is most accurately achieved in the form of the creative cluster. This idea has its roots in the cultural quarter concept and in economic agglomeration theory. A cultural quarter can be described as a geographical area of a city characterised by cultural activity. They are typically mixed-use in nature, comprising cultural and heritage organisations, business, retail and residential uses, as well as being centres for night-life and tourism. They have a distinctive sense of place contributed to by well-designed architecture, and an attractive public realm. A lively day and evening economy typified by markets, festivals, public art programmes and café culture are crucial to the idea of a cultural quarter as a place where people can live, work and play.<sup>3</sup> An economic agglomeration can be described as a geographical concentration of firms within an industrial sector. Firms locating within a cluster benefit from shared infrastructure, resources and networks, as well as a shared image for branding and other general economies of scale.

A creative cluster utilises the elements of economic agglomerations and combines them with aspects of the cultural quarter in order to cater to the specific requirements of the creative industries. The attractive lifestyle of a cultural quarter provides ample opportunity for creative class workers to network and collaborate, while the shared (agglomerated) resources complement the small-firm nature of many creative industries. A creative cluster therefore enables a flow of ideas and produces innovations which drive the creative economy.

However, a number of criticisms have been levelled against these theories. Most notably, it has been alleged that they result in gentrification and social elitism, as they tailor the urban space to suit the imported creative class while ignoring the specific needs of the local population.<sup>4</sup> It appears that DCC, in drawing up its development plan for the future of the city, may have fallen into the popular

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<sup>2</sup> Landry, *The Creative City – A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> John Montgomery, “Cultural Quarters as Mechanisms for Urban Regeneration. Part 1: Conceptualising Cultural Quarters.” *Planning, Practice & Research* 18, no.4 (2003)

Mattias Legner, “The Role and Function of Historic Buildings in Cultural Quarters,” in *Cultural Quarters – Principles and Practice*, ed. Simon Roodhouse (Bristol: Intellect, 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Evans, “From cultural quarters to creative clusters – creative spaces in the new city economy.” In *The Sustainability and development of cultural quarters: international perspectives*, ed. Mattias Legner (Stockholm: Institute of Urban History, 2009), 52.

trap of blindly following international policy trends without due heed to the impact on the cultural heritage of both Dublin city and Dubliners.

### **A New Vision for Dublin**

The emphasis on re-branding Dublin as a creative city is a relatively new direction in the history of planning in the city. This is largely due to the occurrence of a major economic downturn in 2009, right in the middle of the earlier 2005-2011 Development Plan, a plan which relied on continued economic growth for the fulfilment of its objectives. In light of this, the current development plan adopts a more creative approach in setting out the hopes and aspirations for Dublin's future. Its vision is that:

Within the next 25 to 30 years, Dublin will have an established reputation as one of the most sustainable, dynamic and resourceful city regions in Europe. Dublin, through the shared vision of its citizens and civic leaders, will be a beautiful, compact city, with a distinct character, a vibrant culture and a diverse, smart, green, innovation-based economy....In short, the vision is for a capital city where people will seek to live, work and experience as a matter of choice.<sup>5</sup>

With its emphasis on collaboration with citizens, a distinctive culture and innovative economy, this vision is clearly informed by Landry's creative city concept, while echoes of Florida's creative class theory can be heard in the image of a city in which people choose to locate.

### **The International Influence**

Conditions may indeed be ripe for creative development in Dublin, as in recent years Dubliners have experienced the rapid economic, social and political change common to many cities.<sup>6</sup> However, rather than recognising this potential and responding to the local conditions, DCC's inspiration for this plan came instead from following the policy models of other international cities. Creative city and creative class theories have proved extremely popular among city planners the world over, and DCC operates a practice of benchmarking with other cities as a standard planning tool. This is in line with their aim to position Dublin globally as an attractive place to locate. Thus there is a sense that the new creative city identity for Dublin is driven by anxious city planners keen to keep up with international policy trends, rather than deriving from a collective consensus of citizens.

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<sup>5</sup> DCC, *Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hall, "Creative Cities and Economic Development." *Urban Studies* 37, no. 4 (2000): 639-649.

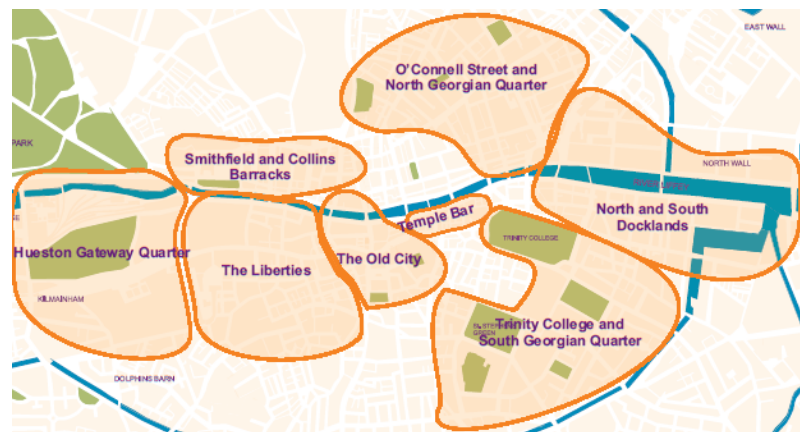


Fig. 1

### Rhetoric or Reality?

It has also been noted that the rise in influence of creative city and creative class theories on city planning worldwide is interwoven with the economic downturn on an international scale, not just in Ireland, because they give the impression of effecting change at a time when very little resources are available to city planners. It has been argued that the main effect of adopting a creative city approach is to change the language of planning on an ideological level, with little corresponding effect on the physical form of the city.

An example is the use of the creative cluster concept, a key element of creative city theory. The cluster concept's combination of economic agglomeration theory and cultural quarter lifestyle aims to attract members of the creative class and become a node for the creative economy. In the maps that accompany the Dublin development plan it is striking that the majority of the city area has been defined as a cultural quarter in some shape or another (Fig. 1). Yet the scale of most of these quarters is much greater than that of Temple Bar, Dublin's original cultural quarter developed largely in the 1990s.

Indeed, these imagined quarters in reality contain only a scattering of cultural institutions and lack the concentration of cultural activity which characterises a creative cluster. Furthermore, the cultural institutions in these environs have been established for many years previous to the rise in creative city thinking. This is indicative, therefore, not of a series of cultural clusters emerging in tandem with the rise in influence of creative cluster theory, but rather of the influence of creative cluster theory working ideologically on DCC planning processes. In this context, the importance of existing cultural institutions is that they can be deployed as a resource that can help to shape a new spatial structure for the city.



Fig. 2

Further evidence of this form of ideological thinking can be found in the development plan's use of "Innovation Corridors" (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> Evolving out of the creative cluster concept, the plan refers to three Innovation Corridors leading north, east and south from the inner city, which are to "provide a focus for regional innovation and clustering".<sup>8</sup> However, these corridors have no physical presence in the geography of the city. The areas they cover are not characterised by proximity of creative or even similar industries, or indeed by any external element such as a unifying public realm. In reality they are much more conceptual than material. This is borne out by the fact that they have no presence in the zoning policies contained in the plan.<sup>9</sup>

### Citizen Collaboration

If the adoption of creative city theories in Dublin city planning is yet to effect any real changes to the form of the city, it also remains to be seen whether DCC will be successful in altering the image of Dublin in the collective imagination of its citizens. A fundamental tenet of creative city theory is that people hold the key to creativity and that cities which can harness this creativity will become successful. DCC, in its formulation of the development plan, has gone some way to engage citizens. In its draft stages a series of public surveys and focus groups were conducted, and alterations made to the plan in accordance with the feedback obtained. This collaborative approach is being continued throughout the period of the plan. The "[Your Dublin, Your Voice](#)" project is an online survey communicated electronically to citizens in several phases, and represents DCC actively

<sup>7</sup> DCC, *Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> DCC, *Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017*, 134.

seeking feedback on the plan in the hope that this engagement will give people a greater sense of ownership over the plans for their city.

Yet how successful this will be remains in doubt. The nature of the “Your Dublin, Your Voice” project limits the scope for collaboration to only those citizens who engage with the online survey. Indeed, the number of participants in the project is only in the region of 3,000 people, hardly representative of Dublin’s population.<sup>10</sup> A consensual rebranding of Dublin as a creative city, while unlikely to be unanimous, seems even more unattainable through these limited methods.

### **New Place-making**

If urban cultural heritage deals with a collective citizen identity represented in the physical form of the city, then a key example of how this evolves, or is manifested, is Dublin’s Digital Hub (Fig. 2). Aspiring to be a new centre for digital creative industries in Dublin, plans for the Digital Hub began to develop in the early years of the century. The regeneration project was to create “an international centre of excellence for knowledge, innovation and creativity focused on digital content and technology enterprises.”<sup>11</sup> It is located on the site of the former Guinness factory in the Liberties area of the city (Fig.3). Once a manufacturing centre, the area and the way of life of the local people had been shaped by the brewing industry. A new era of technological development was to breathe a new way of life into the Liberties and put Dublin firmly at the forefront of the creative economy.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case. While the architectural heritage of the area has been respectfully preserved, the social heritage has been dissipated as the local community does not feel an attachment to the new rebranding of the area. Even though a Community-Public-Private-Partnership was established to develop the Digital Hub in collaboration with the local community, this has been described by some as mere tokenism. Local people feel they have been neglected in favour of catering to the needs of a new talented international workforce.

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<sup>10</sup> 2011 figures

<sup>11</sup> Digital Hub, <http://www.thedigitalhub.com/> (accessed January 6, 2011).

**Fig. 3**

It remains to be seen how the rebranding of Dublin as a creative city will affect Dubliners' sense of heritage and identity. As it is, the new image of a creative Dublin seems to have been imported and imposed by DCC rather than developed organically. In terms of the physical form of the city, so far there have been very few changes in the city's spaces and structures. Given the straitened economic conditions in which the city and the country finds itself, it seems likely that the resources will not be available for any major regeneration projects in the immediate future, to give substance to creative city goals for Dublin that remain largely ideological. Dublin is in an interesting period of both change and stasis.

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**Fig. 1** – Main Cultural Quarters Map - DCC, Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017, 99.

**Fig. 2** – Dublin City Region Economic Strategy Map (showing Innovation Corridors) - DCC, Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017, 128.

**Fig. 3** – Photo of Digital Hub on location of old Guinness brewery buildings.