

Table of Contents

Create Creative Clusters 1

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By David Panos

The Creative London programme is a new city-wide scheme attempting to replicate the creativity-fuelled Shoreditch Effect across the capital's depressed boroughs as an economic cure-all. This latest bout of creative industry boosterism, argues David Panos, shows more signs of desperation than dynamism.

At the end of April 2004, the London Development Agency (LDA), launched their new Creative London programme, a ten year 'action plan' aimed at 'nurturing' the creative industries in the capital. The LDA is one of nine regional bodies set up by New Labour to regenerate local economies and promote the interests of business. For them, 'creative industries' is an umbrella term that embraces everything from advertising, design, film, fashion, new media and architecture to opera, dance, music and art. The sector has been identified as the second biggest in London after finance and it is seen as the most significant potential growth area in the capital's economy. Creative London draws on £500 million of public and private sector investment, rolling out a host of programmes such as the creation of venture capital funds for investment, promotional strategies for different trades such as design, fashion and film, legal advice on intellectual property rights as well as projects to re-brand and promote events like the Notting Hill Carnival and London Fashion Week. Over the course of a decade it aims to create 200 thousand new jobs and increase the 'creative industries' annual turnover from £21 billion to £32 billion.

After the embarrassing 'Cool Britannia' posturing of the late 1990s and the *fin-de-siecle* hubris around the New Economy the idea that creativity is the great economic hope for the capital is far from new, but the relative sophistication of some of the LDA's new plans to harness and 'grow' this sector is novel. Phenomena once considered marginal to the cycle of accumulation have become models for growth. Many of the strategies are designed to stimulate the overall 'creative' power of the capital, emphasising the importance of a 'diverse ecology of small businesses', 'individual artists' and 'hobbyists' to the development of the creative economy. Like so many 'regeneration' strategies, the emphasis is on tiny interventions to stimulate market forces rather than grand projects that might necessitate social spending.

One of the central initiatives of Creative London is the establishment of 'Creative Hubs' across the capital. Graham Hitchen, the LDA's Head of Creative Industries, describes the process of building Creative Hubs as 'identifying the areas where we think there is potential to really consolidate a cluster of activity that might have started to emerge and then dramatically growing that local economy through the creative business sector.' This pre-emptive strategy intervenes into the development of such clusters by giving advice, creating partnerships, and outlining a 'clear plan for growth'. Hubs would be administered by partnerships of private bodies and arts or training organisations with a 'track record in identifying creative talent' and would form a cross-London network, sharing information and pooling strategies.

The precedents for these Creative Hubs can be seen in areas like Brick Lane and Shoreditch. It is a decade since they were colonised by artists, designers and small new media businesses, turning rundown old industrial hinterlands into the most fashionable districts in London. At the time local government and the regeneration industry were largely oblivious to this revalorisation process but today it seems it has been turned into an operating model. One council regeneration worker commented that 'the LDA think that if they had been in control of what happened in Shoreditch it would have been bigger and happened faster' and LDA strategy documents are already making rather far-fetched predictions about areas in South London becoming the 'next Hoxton'. Other Creative Hubs

are currently being proposed for areas as diverse as Deptford, Haringey, Ealing and Croydon.

The Creative Hub strategy promises to provide ‘more opportunities for all Londoners’ but Shoreditch’s transformation into a cultural node and night-time economy has had little positive impact on the ‘local’ (working class) residents in the surrounding area. Its actual effect has been to escalate property prices out of the reach of all but a privileged minority, and drive up the overall cost of living. Ironically, the LDA have also identified this tendency as a problem for business – according to their research one of the biggest concerns for creative startups is the soaring rents in central London. Creative London proposes to respond to this inflation by establishing a Creative Property Advice Service that negotiates with councils and developers to create rent caps and special leases that shield fledgling creative businesses from the very price hikes they stimulate. As the perceived ‘productive’ element in a local economy, the culture industry will get special privileges not meted out to less desirable inhabitants.

Creative London also builds on the existing tendencies to use artists as regenerating ‘urban pioneers’, attracting the upwardly mobile into formerly undesirable areas. One of the most innovative aspects of the program is the creation of a Creative Space Agency to act as a broker between artists and landlords whose property is vacant. Artists will be offered empty space across London on a rent-free basis to mount temporary shows or performances. Initially starting with property owned by the LDA and local councils, the plan is to extend the scheme to the private sector once it has been demonstrated to landlords that artists can act as free security guards whilst simultaneously rehabilitating a fallow property and increasing its value.

Of course, smart developers have been using artists and performers as part of their marketing strategies for some time, offering empty schools or warehouses for shows and performances before they are converted into live/work pads for yuppies. The Creative Space Agency formalises these ad hoc arrangements previously negotiated between artists and developers. Although it will undoubtedly make more space available, projects can be vetted, behaviour regulated, and the process brought under centralised control. Under the guise of making more ‘public space’ available the scheme puts more of the city back to work and by decreasing the number of empty buildings available it can be seen as a pre-emptive strike against squatting and other unregulated activities. Buildings are being offered to artists strictly on a project by project basis – use as a headquarters or residence will be forbidden and the LDA is already jumpy about the potential PR ‘downside’ of having to evict artists who decide to live for free. The Creative Space Agency makes clear art’s exceptional role in the new economy – it is notable that in a city full of vacant property there has been no comparable scheme developed for ‘uneconomic’ sections of society like community groups or the homeless.

Graham Hitchen points out that ‘the important thing about Creative London is that it is not led by an arts agency – we are an economic development agency saying this is economically important.’ Whilst the intervention of the LDA into arts policy is no doubt significant, Hitchen perpetuates a false opposition between the supposedly hardnosed world of economics and the ‘disinterested’ or indeterminate sphere of public arts. Arts agencies have been increasingly forced to justify their existence by proselytising culture’s economic function just as the theory that informs the LDA’s economic policy has become increasingly fixated on unquantifiable notions such as the role of networks and creativity. The theoretical roots of the program can be seen in the work of US theorists like Michel Porter and Richard Florida. Porter’s ideas about business clusters emphasise the importance of institutional support, collaboration, inter-business networking and shared infrastructure over old-style free market cost cutting and relocation, whilst Florida’s ‘Creativity Index’ cites factors like how many gay people or ‘bohemians’ live in a city as indicative of its long term economic potential.

The increasingly influential yet nebulous discourse about nurturing creative clusters and creative hubs is a desperate measure to shore up the economies of Western cities against the onslaught of globalisation. As they lose their remaining manufacturing base and more and more middle class service jobs migrate to Asia many have been forced to re-brand as 'Cities of Ideas'. Provincial towns and ailing industrial quarters have little choice but to create the necessary conditions for an elite centre for 'innovation', wooing the 'creative classes' to rehabilitate their fortunes. Seen in this context Creative London is far from being a manifesto for dynamism. Rather it is a defensive strategy that seems unlikely to deliver much apart from increased precariousness for the majority of working Londoners.

Creative London <http://www.creativelondon.org.uk/>

Creative Space Agency <http://www.creativespaceagency.org.uk/>

The RIse of the Creative Class <http://www.creativeclass.org/>

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