Creative cities and the infrastructural fragmentation of socioeconomic space

van Heur, Bas

Published in:
Cities and Creativity from the Renaissance to the Present

Publication date:
2018

Document Version:
Proof

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Part IV
Conclusions
Introduction

Recent debates on creative cities and the cultural industries are in many ways stuck in the past. They reproduce many of the same storylines developed more than ten or even twenty years ago but often leave behind the original normative concerns in favour of more narrowly defined methodological, empirical or theoretical questions. This, of course, is not intended to deny the practical ‘usefulness’ (unfortunately mostly understood as policy relevance) of a continued engagement with the creative city topic, but intellectually, these debates seem only to offer diminishing returns.

In this chapter, and by way of reflecting on the findings and arguments of the contributors to this book, I will try to reconnect this creative city debate to what I consider more fundamental societal challenges, arguing that the emergence of creative city debates and their subsequent material realisation contributes to the fragmentation of urban, regional and national socioeconomic space. This raises serious questions concerning sociospatial cohesion and solidarity because the net effect of this fragmentation is a prioritisation of some actors over others.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, I discuss recent debates on urban infrastructures. Although not a vocabulary commonly used in the literature on creative cities, it seems to me that this new theoretical interest in the role of infrastructure in shaping urban spaces offers a powerful lens to look at creative cities. Also, the development of infrastructures can be understood as intimately intertwined with the development of modern cities, which allows us to understand the fascination with creative cities over the past twenty years as part of a much longer history of modern city building. This has the important effect of theoretically and empirically decentring ‘creativity’ by showing that creative cities are merely one expression of the infrastructural reworking of our cities. Following this theoretical discussion, in the third section, I discuss a number of contemporary and historical examples of creative infrastructures as presented in the various chapters in this volume to show the ways in which the construction of these creative infrastructures contributes to the fragmentation of socioeconomic space.
space. In the closing fourth section, I summarise the main points and reflect on possible strategies to research creative infrastructures in ways that contribute to sociospatial cohesion and solidarity instead of fragmentation.

**Infrastructural Logics**

In what is probably the key reference in current debates on urban infrastructures, Graham and Marvin in *Splintering Urbanism* (2001, p. 8) argue that, especially in the Western world and since World War II, urban infrastructures such as ‘street, power, water, waste or communications networks are usually imagined to deliver broadly similar, essential, services to (virtually) everyone at similar cost across cities and regions, most often on a monopolistic basis. Fundamentally, infrastructure networks are thus widely assumed to be integrators of urban spaces’. Their book sets out to destroy this imaginary by pointing to ‘the emergence of myriads of specialised, privatised and customised networks and spaces’ (p. 9) that contribute to a splintering urbanism and the destruction of territorial cohesion. There are many ways to criticise this claim—were cities ever cohesive to begin with? Did previous infrastructure networks really contribute to territorial cohesion or was this never more than a false belief? But that would be to miss the point. Graham and Marvin’s book’s major contribution is that it puts forward a strong thesis, a thesis with which one can disagree and that opens up productive lines of thought and research directions. Empirical precision is perhaps not the most relevant criterion in this respect.

For me, the book points to three potential research directions, directions that by and large have been picked up and developed by work that was published after its publication. First, and building on an established tradition of science and technology studies (Star, 1999; Tarr and Dupuy, 1988; Woolgar, 1991), Graham and Marvin argue that urban infrastructures have social biases designed into them in the sense that the construction and maintenance of particular urban infrastructures tends to create privileged access for some and construct barriers for others. Second, and this has mostly received attention from urban historians (e.g., Hård and Misa, 2008), urban infrastructures play a key role in organising urban experience. Infrastructures such as railway stations and boulevards but also theatres, university buildings or skyscrapers are part and parcel of the very idea of the modern city, of the city as a site of progress and human emancipation.¹ Third, the social bias of particular urban infrastructures not only has consequences for ‘internal’ infrastructural logics but also for the city as a landscape of crosscutting networked infrastructures (itself part of a wider national and global landscape of infrastructure). The building of premium infrastructures that are socially selective also cuts through existing urban spaces, contributing to a sense of disconnection among people who might be physically close but infrastructurally distant. This has consequences for the kind of ‘social mix’ established in urban areas. The rise of premium infrastructures...
potentially also contributes to the fragmentation and decline of alternative, possibly more progressive spaces, both within and beyond the city. Graham and Marvin characterise this as a process of ‘infrastructural unbundling’ that leads to increased connectivity between premium urban infrastructures across the world, but that bypasses nonvalued users and areas within cities (pp. 167–171).

More recent work on infrastructures has largely developed with more theoretical and empirical nuance the provocative hints of Graham and Marvin while adding some new emphases. Two bodies of work are particularly relevant or at least interesting to me. First, various authors have started paying attention to the contestation of urban infrastructures and to the ways urban infrastructures are not only imposed on but also built by marginalised or other actors that do not receive much attention in Splintering Urbanism. As Ash Amin (2014, p. 139) puts it, this has led to the ‘birth of an exciting anthropology of infrastructure’ in which the everyday experience of, dealing with and appropriation of infrastructures becomes the key object of attention. It has also led to a proliferation of new concepts and phrases that aim to describe this new analytical sensitivity, such as incremental infrastructures (Silver, 2014), people as infrastructure (Simone, 2004), infrastructural experiments and passions (Hentschel, 2014), infrastructural events (Bishop and Philips, 2014) as well as Amin’s (2014) vocabulary of lively infrastructures, infrastructural improvisation, infrastructural crafting and makeshift infrastructures. Shared by most of these authors is an interest in the political potential of infrastructure, both in a tactical sense—carving out a space for marginalised actors by subverting existing infrastructures or by occupying the interstitial spaces of urban landscapes—and in a strategic sense by using these spaces as a platform for collective action to pressure the state and corporate actors to open up premium or privatised infrastructures to the urban populace at large.

Second, researchers have analysed infrastructures to illuminate political economic questions concerning the rescaling of the state, economic globalisation and uneven sociospatial development. Boris Vormann (2015), for example, points to how the redevelopment and possible improvement of a particular urban area (in his article, New York City’s waterfront) needs to be understood in the context of the restructuring and possible decline in cities and regions elsewhere (in his article, container port areas in New Jersey). As he puts it: ‘the costs of the new accumulation regime have simply been relocated in a new infrastructural regime. Poverty and pollution have been relegated away from the urban waterfront to other places within and outside the city’ (p. 363). Infrastructural thinking, following such an approach, allows us to connect spaces that on the surface seem disconnected. In combining infrastructural approaches with literatures on global production networks and institutional political economy, this approach also directs attention to the unequal relations among different segments of the regional, national and global labour force and the spatial expression of these inequalities.
Creative Infrastructures

This language of infrastructures is not commonly used in the debate on creative cities, but introducing this language to these debates helps us to better understand what is really at stake in this constant reiteration of the creative city trope in contemporary policy and academic discourses. An important advantage in my view is that this language theoretically and empirically decentres ‘creativity’: creative cities become merely one expression of the infrastructural building and rebuilding of our cities. This has advantages both from synchronic and diachronic perspectives: synchronically, it allows us to decentre creative city initiatives by not seeing it as something extraordinary but as quite similar to related initiatives that operate with different labels: smart cities, knowledge cities, learning cities, experimental cities, innovative cities and so on. The aim should not be to engage in detailed discussions on the genealogy and content of these various concepts but to analyse the ways in which these various concepts and related narratives are mobilised, are ‘put to use’, in infrastructural development.

Diachronically, this approach allows us to decentre creative city initiatives by breaking with the belief that creative cities are intimately linked to the post-1970s decline of industrial cities, the rise of post-industrial economies and urban regeneration strategies in which cultural and creative industries are granted a central role. In referring to empirical examples discussed in the various chapters, I want to use the remainder of this chapter to further develop this claim from an infrastructural perspective. In my view, three types of infrastructures are key when analysing creative cities: mobility infrastructures, leisure infrastructures and work infrastructures. Each type of infrastructure contributes to the connection and fragmentation of socio-economic space within and beyond the city in particular ways.

Mobility infrastructures are possibly the most studied type of infrastructure by historians because these infrastructures are so obviously part of the rise of the modern European city. Not surprisingly, various chapters in this edited volume pay attention to mobility in one way or another. These mobility infrastructures can be natural arteries, although most are heavily transformed as a result of recurring rounds of human intervention. Claartje Rasterhoff, in her chapter on Amsterdam, highlights that ‘the IJ River was the most important channel through which goods, people, ideas and information entered the city’ (page ***). ‘Culture’ or ‘creativity’, in such an infrastructural setting, is nothing special and travels along the same routes as other goods, people, ideas and information. A classic example of human-built mobility infrastructures is provided in the chapter on Paris and Bologna by Francis Demier and Elena Musiani in which they discuss the ways in which the construction of railway stations and boulevards reorders the spatial structure within the two cities as well as the connectivity of these two cities to other cities across Europe. Little information is presented in these chapters concerning the social biases designed into these infrastructures or
how these infrastructures cut through and fragment existing urban spaces, but this is addressed in different ways by two other chapters in the volume.

Gerrit Verhoeven’s chapter on the evolution of early modern travel patterns of cultural tourists perhaps takes mobility infrastructures too easily as a given, focussing largely on architectural landmarks such as palaces, churches, statues and the like, but his discussion on changing patterns of travel behaviour offers a fascinating insight into the geography of cultural tourism within Europe. He shows how travel behaviour of European elites was shaped by infrastructural developments within various cities but also how communication about these infrastructures was essential to an understanding of the actual travel patterns of cultural tourists: travel guides and city biographies became some of the key sources of information on which to base travel decisions. These cultural imaginaries of urban infrastructures, in other words, played a key role in organising urban experience, in changing hierarchies between European cities and in directing cultural tourists to certain sites within cities while neglecting other sites. On an intra-city level, the chapter by Kathy Williams and Dave O’Brien on London achieves something similar by tracing the reordering of urban space via street signage. Their chapter shows how signposting strategies contribute to the demarcation and codification of urban space by directing mobility flows of people towards a select number of sites.

Taken together, analysing creative cities through a focus on mobility infrastructures helps us to grasp that these mobility infrastructures are both relational and ecological, as Susan Leigh Star (1999) in her classic article on infrastructure already hinted at. Mobility infrastructures are (or can be) directly involved in mediating and shaping interactions between creative workers or consumers, but mobility infrastructures are also part of the larger environment that orders these creative interactions. Studies on creative cities mostly focus on the relational side of infrastructures, but to grasp the ways in which these creative interactions are complicit in the wider infrastructural fragmentation of socioeconomic space, this ecological dimension demands investigation. This suggests the need for a shift in perspective and sensibility, away from creative producers and consumers and the infrastructures they use and inhabit to an analysis of those that are not a visible part of, but that are shaped by these infrastructures: the invisible labour of those maintaining and repairing mobility infrastructures, the perception by local communities of mobility infrastructures not as relational infrastructures to use but as obstacles to avoid and move around, and the ways in which infrastructures restructure the ‘in-between’ (Young and Keil, 2014) the creative inner city and other urban spaces rarely investigated by researchers on creative cities.

Opera houses, theatres and cinemas are examples of buildings usefully understood as nodes in urban infrastructural networks of leisure and cultural consumption. Although studied in detail by architectural historians, the focus tends to be on the buildings in isolation from its context with little analytical and empirical attention paid to ‘the networked infrastructures
that knit buildings together, binding and configuring the broader spaces of metropolitan life’ (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 18). A number of the chapters in this volume move in the direction of such an integrated analysis, although this could be further developed. Alida Clemente and Rossella del Prete, in their chapter on Naples, offer an interesting description of the central role occupied by the San Carlo Theatre in the cultural life of the city: commissioned by Charles of Bourbon, the theatre soon became one of the main places for aristocratic sociability and increasingly also for the bourgeoisie. As part of this shift, the theatre ‘strengthened the hierarchy between the official cultural industry of music operas and the smaller entrepreneurial theatres and their comic operas’ (page ***)

Different leisure infrastructures emerged in different parts of the city that catered to different audiences, with a clear hierarchical relation established between both forms of arts. Over time, however, this hierarchy became itself an object of contestation, leading to a sociospatial repatterning of cultural leisure within Naples. Other chapters in the volume also address leisure infrastructures: Giovanni Favero and Anna Moretti offer a history of the Venice International Film Festival to trace the increasing disconnect between the site of the film festival and the wider creative dynamics of Venice, and Mikkel Thelle analyses the infrastructural remaking of harbour areas as places of cultural heritage and cultural leisure. Both chapters raise interesting questions about the status of peri-urban areas (i.e., areas outside of the core city centres) as areas for creative activity. This is now slowly being addressed in research on contemporary cities (e.g., Edensor et al., 2009; Gibson, 2012), even though by and large, the dominant focus remains on the urban core. Both chapters also usefully point to the difficulties of developing connections between city and periphery via various infrastructural solutions, which links back to the debate on mobility infrastructures and the work by Douglas Young and Roger Keil on the urban in-between as discussed in the previous section.

Finally, work infrastructures focus on the production side of the creative city, those spaces dedicated to the actual ‘making’ of culture. Some of the chapters in this volume mention and discuss the role of educational institutions in urban development, which is indirectly linked to the topos of creative work: Guy Saez, for example, in his study of the innovation-led territorial regime of Grenoble, describes the importance of applied higher education and research for the development of the city. Sam Griffith’s chapter on Sheffield’s cutlery industry addresses the topic more directly by mapping in detail the spatial structure of cutlery production within the city. Adopting a methodological approach based on space syntax theory, he maps the spatial locations and concentrations of different segments of the cutlery industry. Although interesting, this method does not really allow us to say much about the ways in which the internal differentiation of this particular ‘creative’ industry reinforces or transforms the existing unevenness of socioeconomic space. The chapter by Bert De Munck and Anna
Bellavitis offers more helpful insights in this respect because it productively links the spatiality of work infrastructures to questions concerning creative labour and urban-regional hierarchies. One important observation made by the authors is that we should understand the current celebration of the innovativeness, creativity and cultural tolerance of (especially larger) cities as part of a much longer history of ‘myth making’. Discussing the concern in the Renaissance with the ideal city, they show how this ideal type relied on one key assumption and instance of circular reasoning, namely that ‘the urban context created a superior race of people, while the city as a material thing was, alternately, produced by the superior skills and ingenuity of these citizens’ (page ***). Turning this claim into material reality, however, involves a lot of work that rarely surfaces in the official narratives and post-hoc histories of these cities. Fran Tonkiss (2015, p. 389) in her afterword to a special issue on infrastructures also recognises this when she writes about the ‘mundane labour . . . which hides in plain sight in the everyday economies of the city’ and when she supports Star’s call to “surface the invisible work’ of infrastructure’ (2015, p. 389). In the case of Renaissance cities discussed by the authors, this becomes clear when they discuss Venice as a city that demanded continuous building, engineering and planning work for its very existence to be possible. More closely tied to the topic of creative cities, De Munck and Bellavitis convincingly argue that the spatial sorting of economic activities—with large cities focussing on higher value added activities and smaller towns on more mundane goods—is not only a ‘natural’ economic agglomeration effect but also the result of concrete interventions by city actors. This ranged from promotional narratives that established a close link between product quality and the urban body politic, political agents officially restricting the production of more ‘refined’ products to the larger cities, to urban producers that actively ‘raided the countryside and small towns to eradicate competing industrial activities’ (page ***). These observations also offer an important political economic antidote to studies on our current age that privilege larger cities on a mix of theoretical and methodological grounds (Wachsmuth, 2014).

**Concluding Comments**

In this chapter, I reflected on the contributions in this edited volume from the analytical perspective of infrastructure. Various chapters in this volume implicitly refer to particular infrastructures, and my goal has been to situate these references more explicitly within the current debate on urban infrastructures. In my view, this allows us to better understand the creative city discourse as part of a wider discourse in which other labels with ‘family similarities’ are used: ranging from learning cities or experimental cities to knowledge cities or innovative cities. Drawing on the *Splintering Urbanism* book by Graham and Marvin, I argued that urban infrastructures 1) have social biases designed into them; 2) play a key role in organising urban
experience; and 3) cut through existing urban spaces, possibly destroying the social cohesiveness and solidarities of existing communities. I then discussed various chapters in the volume by identifying three types of urban infrastructures relevant to the study of creative cities: mobility infrastructures, leisure infrastructures and work infrastructures.

How to move forward from here? Assuming that my basic thesis—the development of urban infrastructures contributes to the fragmentation of socioeconomic space within and beyond the city—is correct, I see a number of productive research directions. First and in relation to mobility infrastructures, more work is needed on the actual migration biogeographies of creative workers: where do they come from? What are the spatial forms of their career trajectories? And how do imaginaries about the status of certain cities and other sites as creative (or not) organise the urban experience of creative workers? At least as important, however, is that we start paying attention to the invisible labour supporting these mobility infrastructures, and to the urban in-between with actors impacted by but not immediately part of these infrastructures.

Second and in relation to leisure infrastructures, a lot of work has already been done on issues such as city branding and the redevelopment of former urban industrial areas into leisure areas for the (upper) middle class. This, to me at least, seems not a particularly fruitful area to continue work in. What would be interesting is to conduct a more substantive analysis of the position of buildings within various cultural fields because buildings often constitute a kind of infrastructural fix for social relations within cultural fields, with each new building (both in its construction as well as later use phase) shifting the coordinates of the cultural field. The ethnographic literature on the everyday use, subversion and appropriation of infrastructures becomes particularly relevant here.

Third and in relation to work infrastructures, quite some work has been done on labour dynamics within particular spatially circumscribed settings. Most recently, much ink has been spilled on coworking spaces, co-creation, living labs and the like, with authors either celebrating the emergence of a new labour subjectivity or criticising this emergence as precarious and insecure. Although interesting, it seems to me that we need to think in stronger infrastructural terms about creative labour. Drawing on the political economy literature on infrastructures, this would involve tracing the ways in which the established myth of the creative metropolis contributes to a regional, national and global division of labour in which the most reputable types of creative labour are the exclusive domain of the larger cities, whereas other types of creative output are ‘outsourced’ to other places. All these developments raise critical questions about sociospatial cohesion and solidarity because these infrastructures produce an uneven geography of selective (dis)connection between the ‘creative city’ and its wider regional, national and global environment.
Note

1 Referring to buildings and even the urban experience as part of infrastructures raises the question what is not an infrastructure. I share this worry of conceptual overstretch and above all observe conceptual overlap and slippage between discussions on infrastructure and those on institutions. Both debates point to reproductive elements (institutional or infrastructural) that contribute to social order. Recent institutional theory also emphasises the process of institutionalisation and the interaction of different institutional logics, which brings it very close to the debate on infrastructures that is heavily inspired by the tradition of science and technology studies and ‘assemblage’ thinking. Similarly, research on infrastructures has moved away from technology-centred explanations by addressing more strongly the organisational and institutional context of infrastructures. I discuss these issues in some more detail in Beaulieu, Rijcke and van Heur et al. (2012). In the context of the current debate on creative cities, the main contribution of infrastructural thinking is that it directs analytical attention to the role of interlinked material objects and the built environment and the ways in which ‘creative’ actors are enrolled in the wider project of uneven urban development.

References

Literature

van Heur

