

## **From ‘crap towns’ to ‘creative places’ - local cultural politics and policy transfer**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the situated practices of cultural policies in places. It examines creative economies models for urban regeneration making and economic development, such as Florida’s creative class thesis, based on the attraction of mobile capitals, and considers their application to different scale localities from that of the usual ‘creative city’. It explores three locales in Northern England – the towns of St.Helens, Huddersfield and Macclesfield - where different approaches to shaping and exploiting the creative landscapes of these places provide the basis for economic development. These mundane, unexceptional places, or ‘crap towns’ have declining industrial bases and related economic and social issues which require regeneration responses from local authorities and agencies. The paper compares recent policies deployed in these places, in the context of their cultural histories and geographies and local ‘structures of feeling’, and questions the transferability of models which are predominantly based in different geographies.

### **Keywords**

Creative economies, cultural policy, geographies, mobilities, capitals

### **Introduction**

This year sees the ten-year anniversary of the publication of Florida’s *The Rise of Creative Class* (2002). It heralds more than a decade of what Waitt and Gibson call a “normative ‘model’ of sorts” (2009: 1224) which places creativity as the driver for investment development and urban regeneration, carried captive in the mobile capitals of people who form ‘creative classes’ and who move and cluster in places, which accrue the ‘spill-over’ and agglomeration effects of their bunched consumption preferences, innovative practices and productive capacities (Florida, 2002; Gibson and Kong, 2005). The model has been translated globally, propagating a received understanding of where this regeneration-leading creativity takes place and the kinds of material conditions needed for its production: an urban milieu, which offers suitable space for creative practices, whether heritage spaces afforded by de-industrialisation or purpose-built clean spaces for graphic and digital design, with ‘third spaces’ and ‘cool places’ for frequent meetings, hanging out and sharing knowledge capital (Brennan-Horley and Gibson, 2009; Rantisi et al, 2006). These requirements are synonymous and synergistic with the effects of creativity on these spaces. In the self-fulfilling thesis of the creative class, creative places beget creative places and in turn new social relations and cultural formations:

The knowledge-intensive nature of the creative economy is said to be based in a social rather than material foundation and, by extension, in a new ‘culture’ for creative production” (Rantisi, N., Leslie, D. and Christopherson, S. 2006: 1789-1790)

The importance of geography, territory and locality reflects a broader shift towards place-based policy (Olfert et al). Within UK cultural policy, the systematic formulation of local cultural strategies under New Labour government was based on the principle that local participation in the arts promotes cultural democracy and increases instrumental societal benefits (Evans, 2002; Gilmore 2004; Jancovich 2011). It is not only the creative industries strategists, planners or urbanists who have an interest in producing effects for places through sponsoring, endorsing and investing in creative economies. Cultural tourism methodologies include spectacular creative agency – mega events, flagship cultural institutions, blockbuster shows and public art works – for the perceived benefits they bring to visitor economies by attracting tourists and improving place image. Policy models for urban regeneration assume this contingency of consumption and production as part of the armoury of place-based strategies for regional competitiveness and differentiation, and the arts sector has become adept at targeting this pervasive instrumentalism to divert and accumulate resources for arts and cultural programmes (Gibson 2008; Gilmore 2011; Belfiore 2012).

More recently, the premise that cultural participation is a driver for economic and social capital has become more interestingly embedded in arts policy. Arts Council England have developed new strategies for addressing inequalities in the distribution of cultural participation and the development of cultural capital in localities through their Creative People and Places scheme, which aims to address places with identified low levels of arts participation (Arts Council England 2012). This scheme targets areas where participation rates, as indicated by national survey data on frequency of stated arts attendance and participation, are within the bottom 20% of local authority league tables. Arts organisations in consortia with local authorities and community groups are being encouraged reach out to ‘hard-to-reach’, ‘low engaged’ and ‘dis-engaged’ segments through research and development of new forms of cultural programming.

### **Creative economies strategies and their geographies, temporalities and mobilities**

The narratives of culture-led regeneration replay the contingencies between consumption and production noted in Wright’s work on expansive omnivorous and the abundance of the creative class (2011) and Bille’s testing of the veracity of Florida’s thesis on creative class consumption practices (2010). The right balance, it is argued, is productive of localities as creative places, and creative economies strategies must be sensitised to local vernacular, community heritage and cultural differences (Moss ; Gilmore 2004, Evans 2002, Evans 2010 in Edensor et al 2010), making the prescription of policy models quite difficult to achieve for distinctive places.

The model for place-based creative economies development has predominantly been formulated and discussed in terms of the ‘Creative City’ (Landry, 2008), however a recent literature is emerging which considers how and whether policy transfer is feasible in other sized places and different spaces (Bell and Jayne, 2006; Waitt and Gibson, 2009; Luckman et al, 2009; Harvey et al, 2012).

Harvey et al (2012) look at the practices, spatial configurations and knowledge interdependencies of a creative cluster in Krowji, a rural location in Cornwall. The of artist-practitioners are dispersed over large rural geographies for much of the time, but come together in ‘temporary clusters’ around networking and training events. These instances of ‘periodic social economy’ (following Norcliffe and Rendance, 2003) involve similar processes to those found in denser, more permanent clusters of practitioner knowledge-exchange in urban milieu, but with added dimensions. These include ‘spill-across’ linkages, where more variegated practice-bases – different art forms, levels of professional development and experience, locations within supply chains – produce the sharing of knowledge across different activities thrown together only periodically. Compounded by the rarity of access to opportunities for ‘spilling’, whether - over or –across, they found that practitioners benefited from gaining access to knowledge that was specifically non-local, from hearing about experiences outside of Cornwall and from the urban context (Harvey et al, 2012: 534). In this case, the routes in and out of ‘the cluster’ for knowledge and experience were as important as the connectivity provided in between practitioners by coming together at some point,

rather than being co-located all the time. Their analysis also finds that disconnections between practitioners and practices are also revealed through co-location, further supporting arguments against an undifferentiated and reductive notion of creative cluster or class, bounded by place. Such conceptualisations appropriate and fix particular spatial configurations of clusters as the primary policy objectives – the incubation space, the creative quarter, the cultural precinct - and feed policy tools which are based on “poorly theorized notion[s] of creative space” and which may not be translatable across different geographies (Harvey et al, 2012; Luckman et al, 2009).

Harvie’s recent work (2011) on temporary installations and pop-up performances in the spaces left by retail migration also challenges the assumption that attracting mobile capital benefits places in the round. Like Florida’s Creative Class thesis, the phenomena of pop-up consumption opportunities, whether arts events or temporary concessions and product lines in department stores, seasonal shops on high streets, are, Harvie argues, both expectant of particular economic outcomes, whilst predicated on, and reinforcing of, social divisions, structural inequalities and the relative freedom of movement of middle class capital.

The creative middle classes can move where they want; disadvantaged classes are displaced or forced to move to where markets send them. Mobile capital flows but in ways that are decidedly uneven, unstable and unregulated, reinforcing class stability rather than class mobility. Cultural strategies ostensibly designed for the city’s growth and liveability risk adversely affecting its liveability, especially for the city’s most disadvantaged citizens. (Harvie, 2011: 17)

Here I want to examine some of these critical assumptions not as a forensic debunking of Florida’s thesis (Peck 2005) or as aggressive decoupling of cultural (policy) from the economic (McGuigan, 2009) but to consider how some of the less exceptional aspects of places present challenges and disruptions to the possibilities for policy transfer. The mundane, the routine, unexceptional patterns of mobility and pathways through everyday life, local knowledge, histories and narratives of places and communities are difficult to incorporate into diagnostic policy models for turning ‘crap towns’ into ‘creative places’.

### **Not-so-creative places**

This paper starts broadly from the question of whether different types of geographies can operate the same creative and cultural policy models for the development of extrinsic outcomes associated with economic development, place marketing and differentiation and regeneration. It concerns a peculiar geography - the town as opposed to the city - discussed in more detail below. This geography is further delineated here by other connotative factors, in part related to scale but moreover linked to the place characteristics and affects, the identity markers of place which come from association with particular regional identities, histories, perceptions and narratives. Thus the places I’m interested in here have been circumscribed by the term ‘crap towns’, a term which came into parlance in England most notably through a series of ‘coffee table’ books which derided the “50 worst places to live in the UK” which had been nominated by the readers of the website magazine, the Idler<sup>1</sup>, in May 2003 (Jordison & Kieran 2003, 2004). According the authors, what started out as a light-hearted article on two places with which they were familiar and which they found both humorous and frustrating in their mediocrity, became a series of books which showcased scathing reviews of these places alongside indices of ‘crap-ness’ – crime statistics, education attainment levels and unemployment figures – and pictures of rubbish-strewn subways and graffiti scrawled on bus shelter walls. These are the mundane spaces and places where ordinary and unexceptional lives are played out, and where aspirations are blunted by disappointing local authorities and the casual violence, drunkenness and drug-taking displayed in blighted town centres on

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<sup>1</sup> <http://idler.co.uk/category/crap-towns/> accessed 21 May 2012

Saturday nights. They are the kinds of places are defined by usually by absence or deficit, by what they are not.<sup>2</sup>

These geographies exist outside the normative frameworks for instrumental cultural policies, primarily metropolitan both in geography and imagination. I selected my ‘crap towns’ primarily through prior knowledge and pragmatic consideration of types of instrumental cultural policies they had each attempted in the last decade or so. I want to explore the relationships between these places, their creative economies and their governance structures in both synchronic and dialogic terms, and ask how we understand the influence of local knowledges, of ‘local structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977; Taylor, Evans and Fraser, 1996) in these contexts? What is it about these localities that they afford certain types of participation, which privilege particular policy transfers and outcomes? How are policy models mediated by local policy actors, the identities, histories and narratives of these places and by the structural conditions of place: class, mobility, demography?

The research presented below draws on documentary and secondary analysis and primary research data, incorporating applied research on development initiatives based in each of the three towns, along with stakeholder interviews with policy makers, local authorities and other participants.

### **Three crap towns**

The three case study towns examined here have some commonalities but also clear distinctions, and have been chosen pragmatically for the particular focus they placed on various creative economy strategies, which took place across different time periods. They are based on interviews with identified stakeholders within each locality, and secondary analysis of strategic and historical documents and other data from commissioned research.

#### ***St. Helens***

The borough of St. Helens is on the eastern edge of the Merseyside basin in the North West, and has a population of around 177,500. It comprises a conglomeration of settlements which include the town of St. Helens itself and surrounding satellite settlements of Newton-le-Willows, Haydock, Rainhill, Rainford and Billinge. The local industrial heritage includes coal-mining, chemical manufacturing and, more famously, glass-making, as the home of the Pilkington company, founded on local capital in 1826. It is located to the south of Lancashire, on largely flat inland ground boxed in by four motorways, and almost mid-way between Liverpool and Manchester which the Cheshire plans to the South. In the early 19th century, the borough settlements expanded rapidly from a small village following the development of transport networks beginning with Sankey Canal Navigation in 1762, which allowed mass export of coal mined locally, and which formed a major resource for glass-making and other industrial processes in the town.

Over the last decade, policy interventions based on strategic development of creative economies in St. Helens have drawn on prevailing culture-led regeneration discourses, whilst negotiating the borough’s industrial heritage. The town itself, which is sprawling and decentered, has seen the creation of a cultural quarter with some dedicated creative industries workspace and the investment of lottery funding in a flagship visitor attraction – the World of Glass. This attraction provides interpretation of the glass making industry and history, education and exhibition space, and now housing the Gallery Space which was previously at Gamble Building, owned and managed by the local authority and established following lobbying from a long-standing local Arts Club.

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<sup>2</sup> As a further measure of the ‘death of hope’ in these places, Jordison and Kieran supplement the readers’ entries with the names of famous residents who used to live there or who may have passed through, but are now long gone.

The formal arts infrastructure in the town consists of the Citadel Arts Centre and the Theatre Royal. Both serve local community interests through their programming and neither receive core Arts Council funding. This is of concern for those working in arts strategic development in the borough, not only because of the lack of resource but also because success begets success in public subsidy, and the lack of a local core-funded institution denotes not only a gap in provision but a perceived deficit in competence for regional touring circuits and networks. Despite this, there has been successive championing and advocacy of the arts and cultural industries in St.Helens, with vocal interventions from Council members, and visible leadership by the Cultural Portfolio Holder. The borough has devised successive arts and cultural strategies, with local authority leadership not just in arts service but also in economic development, through events and tourism development, and in particular the high profile large scale public co-commissioning project which provides the focal point for this case study.

### **The Story of *Dream*<sup>3</sup>**

"The aim is not only to put St Helens on the map, but also to have a major positive impact on the rest of the region in terms of the significant economic and cultural benefits it will bring. By the same token, the Big Art Project is also intended to have a huge positive influence locally as a source of pride and as a forward-looking symbol of the Borough's regeneration and new-found identity. We are fortunate to have such a passionate group of former miners from Sutton Manor so closely involved in the development of the project. However the artwork will ultimately belong to all of the people of St Helens, so the more local people that get involved in community engagement activities across the Borough the better." Cllr Brian Spencer, Leader of St Helens Council and who formerly worked at Sutton Manor Colliery himself (St.Helens Star, 2007)

The Sutton Manor Colliery – the site of the public art commission - closed in 1991, and following remediation work, clearing of the former colliery buildings and other structures, the site was landscaped and planted to form a small country park. Subsequently, the site was leased by St.Helens to the Forestry Commission, the government department responsible for the protection and expansion of Britain's forests and woodlands. However, the community of Sutton Manor felt that they had been left with a place of little character and no real indication of its former purpose and importance, and argued for some form of monument to the Sutton Manor Colliery. This desire was noted by the then Arts Development Officer, who had also spotted a competition for entries to be part of the Big Art Project, a public art commissioning initiative from Channel 4, supported by Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts, and The Art Fund, the UK's leading independent art charity. Following a formal bid, in 2006 the Sutton Manor site was selected to be one of the seven locations featured on the Big Art Project series.

The series of five programmes produced by Carbon Media production for Channel 4 told the stories of the locations and groups of people who had won the chance to co-commission a major art work for their chosen site. Its style was documentary but with more than an inflection of 'heightened reality' TV: following a growing tradition of programmes which looked at public services and initiatives through the lens of soap opera, and in the parlance of this format the programme painted the places and characters of these stories in broad brush strokes. Casts were assembled from the agencies and organisations involved to fill the roles of curator, advisor, funder and local commissioners for each locality; members of the public were invariably framed as non-specialists, 'going on a journey', sometimes 'a roller coaster ride' individually or collectively in interest groups, with attendant problems and obstacles involved in delivering large-scale public art projects which provided the plot with appropriate dramatic twists and turns. However, the Big Art Project was seen as a help rather a hindrance for St.Helens and the attention provided by the national media assisted in attracting the £1.88 million total costs of the project which

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix

included remediation work (John Whaling, personal communication). The funds were raised from North West Coalfield Communities Regeneration Programme, Arts Council England, The Art Fund, the St.Helens Local Enterprise Growth Initiative, the Forestry Commission, Northwest Regional Development Agency and European Structural Funding.

The idea of a gateway public art feature was first articulated in the St.Helens City Growth Strategy (2003) which proposed that a major work could help to put St.Helens ‘on the map’, highlighting its location and connectivity. This Strategy set out the plans to be overseen by the City Growth Strategic Board, a new US model for economic development which was private sector-led and one of four pilot areas granted by the New Labour government and established in 2002. Research for the strategy had identified that there were far more tourism and leisure related businesses in the borough than previously assumed providing an evidential basis for a cluster-based approach to tourism development, and instigating a more strategic approach to this as part of overall economic development:

“Until that point, tourism and St.Helens in the same sentence was an oxymoron. People laughed and snickered which was great because it was a) a challenge, but b) it meant that we had no expectation to underwhelm really, so anything we did was a step forward.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition to its inclusion through the private sector-led regeneration strategy, a desire for landmark and gateway public art works became an established part of the broader regional strategic context, in tourism, urban regeneration and sub-regional spatial planning (NWDA March 2010; The Mersey Partnership, October 2009). The momentum for cultural tourism was driven up by the forthcoming European Capital of Culture 2008 designation for Liverpool, and there was also resident advocates and a cluster of public art expertise generated by successive Liverpool Biennial events, and the economic impact studies which accompanied them (TMP 2005, ERNS 2009). Coupled with the enthusiasm of key individuals across a range of directorates which included Economic Development, Planning, Marketing and the Arts Service plus a vocal group of ex-miners, a “perfect storm” of conditions helped to secure the project.<sup>5</sup>

The group of ex-miners worked with Laurie Peake, curator of Liverpool Biennial over two years to select and commission Catalan artist Jaume Plensa from a portfolio of several international artists, and after a research trip to Emscher Park in Germany, the vast industrial heritage initiative stretching across the Ruhr region. Plensa has been responsible many major commissions, including Crown Fountain (2004) in Millennium Park in the centre of Chicago. A decisive factor in selecting Plensa was his ability to use light in his works, as illumination had been identified from the outset as an important and desired element of the artwork, in line with the former motto of both the colliery and St.Helens; ‘ex terra lucem’ – ‘from the earth comes light’. Dream takes the form of a 20 metre high sculpted girl's head, with eyes closed, seemingly in a dream-like state, placed on a plinth which bears the inscription "Dream Sutton Manor" inspired by the small, circular "tally" each miner carried as a means of identification. The image of the girl apparently appeared to Plensa in a dream, and the intention was that the head would include a chamber that could be visited, as well as a light, which would cast a beam from the top of her head skyward. Neither of these elements has been realised. Although there is a door to allow access for maintenance, this is firmly locked and the light was considered to be “distracting” by the highways authorities for motorists passing on the adjacent M62, although environmental lighting was added in 2011 for a brief time before vandalism put paid to it. This has caused a feeling of frustration for those involved in its commissioning, who feel it is still not finished as all of the elements of the scheme were not realised.

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<sup>4</sup> John Whaling, former Economic Development, St.Helens Council, personal communication

<sup>5</sup> Owen Hutchings, current Arts Engagement and Participation Officer, St.Helens Council, personal communication

The influence of the ex-miners group on the creation of this work was significant and tangible – as the Big Art programme documents, the final scheme came about when the group rejected Plensa's first proposal for an oversized miners lamp as not visionary enough, and the artist returned to the drawing board. There were a number of additional community engagement projects running alongside, managed by the borough's major housing association, Helena Housing, including a separate scheme for co-commissioning works in other neighbourhoods, workshops and the educational visits to existing public art works.

The story of the co-commissioning of Dream and the sense of shared ownership of art work created through this engagement made for both good TV and potential legacy from the initiative. Dream was commissioned and constructed at a time when the grand gestures of large-scale public art held currency with regional and national policy makers, following the totemic success of the Angel of the North, which had by this time become the poster child of a larger project of culture-led regeneration in Newcastle-Gateshead (Bailey, Miles and Stark, 2004; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005) and grand project of Blair's New Labour government (Bailey, et al, 2000; Usherwood 2001, 2004). Through various evaluations, the benefits of the project have been understood in relation to a selection of measurable outputs: the numbers of people involved in related activities, the impact on public perception – of Dream, St.Helens and of role of public art in place-making – as measured through attitudinal questions in questionnaire surveys, and through economic valuation of both broadcast and print media coverage, in terms of advertising equivalence, presumably of St.Helens as a destination (St.Helens Council n.d.).

Dream was realised and launched on 31st May 2009; the scale of the local authority's, and local communities', ambition for Dream did not however end at its construction. Later in the same year, St.Helens Council commissioned some consultancy work to develop the legacy of the project further, and move the art work from the symbolic reclamation of the land, view and heritage of Sutton Manor and its surrounding communities through the marking of the site by the landmark, to a more sustainable element of the borough's visitor economy. This was to take the form of a visitor centre near to the art work, which would provide facilities and amenities for the surrounding Forest Park as well as, importantly, provide a place where spend from visitors to Dream could be collected, through a cafe, tours and talks, and merchandise associated with the sculpture. Configured as a social enterprise which would have a stake and lead role in the management and maintenance of the art work, and based in a sustainable building, this development was unfortunately proved unfeasible, as the economic recession bit and the appetite for public funding of capital developments waned. Although there have been some additional works realised, including the installation of a clicker gate to measure visitor figures, digital augmentation and trails and the official launch of the Bold Forest Park, these fall far short of the original plans for Dream's place as both catalyst and mechanism of tourism-based economic development for the borough.

The public art strategy sitting alongside Dream's legacy, which was to have secured planning gain through section 106 agreements for a community-led public arts programme was also unrealisable through the drop-off in development in St.Helens, and a subsequent reorganisation of the Council has restructured departments leaving no Planning Officers with responsibility for public art and, strikingly, no Economic Development team with responsibility for tourism development or destination management. Instead, focus has turned to town centre developments, for events and tourism initiatives, and in the arts service, to participation and engagement programmes. Dream heralded both the start and the end of public art-led sub-regional economic development.

### **Huddersfield**

The second case study is of a development – the Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative (CTI) – which for a short while became an emblem of creative economies strategies for smaller cities and towns, following its project lifetime from June 1997 until June 2001. The story of Huddersfield CTI has echoes of St.Helens' *Dream*: a surprising model for development, based in creativity, and more usually applied to

larger core cities, is brought in to 'fix' a town suffering from its de-industrialisation and resultant economic decline. In geo-spatial terms the conurbation is also similar. Huddersfield sits as the administrative centre of large group of 11 towns and districts, in the metropolitan borough of Kirklees, which at the time had a population of 390,000; Huddersfield town itself having a population of 120,000 (Wood & Taylor, 2004).

The initiative came about following a period of critical introspection on the part of the governing authority, which was found to have a track record of incompetence, ratified by an independent study by the Institute for Local Government Studies (Wood & Taylor, 2004: 381) suggesting a 'fresh approach' was needed. The relative willingness of the arts sector to get involved when others wouldn't, led by the Cultural Services department, following a report named *A Chance to Participate – the potential of cultural industries and community arts* (1988) Alsop et al which encouraged, through strategic action planning, a more instrumental involvement of the local arts and cultural workers in changing their environment and positioning them as agents of change for urban regeneration. Kirklees Council had also seen a change in leadership and the development of a bidding culture within the local authority to attract public investment, from the new Conservative urban programmes such as City Challenge and Single Regeneration Bid and from European funding. Importantly this new "palace revolution" also recognised the changing role of local government from deliverer to enabler and sought partnerships with and more effective strategic management of external agencies and commissioned services, which included lobbying for partnerships between the Council, the University and the Chamber of Commerce (Landry 2008; Taylor, personal communication).

These combined forces afforded the authority with new levels of competence, and the cultural sector's involvement, supported by a posse of cultural consultants, members of Comedia and the originators of the Creative City script, Charles Landry, Franco Bianchini and Phil Wood, Deputy Director of Kirklees' Cultural Services, ensured that this new confidence was directed at supporting creative economies in the town. This was partly physical: the development of Kingsgate shopping centre provided an opportunity to rethink the spaces, malls, "nooks and crannies" of the town centre, focused on the Kirklees Media Centre, an ex-warehouse turned managed workspace for creative enterprises and the regeneration of other buildings such as chapels into cultural venues. A cultural strategy championing local production and distinctiveness, 'Made in Kirklees', had been produced by the consultants, and for Landry, Wood et al it was also philosophical and theoretical shift, which became formalised in the creation and implementation of a new model – the 'cycle for urban creativity' – the manifesto of the CTI which achieved Euro 3m as an European Commission Urban Pilot Fund project, in 1995.

The CTI was intended, then, both as a pilot and as a model for creative industries-led economic development:

The task was to initiate a wide range of diverse projects designed to find, stimulate, nurture, attract, harness, exploit, recycle, embed and keep creative and entrepreneurial talent, in order to rebuild the prosperity of the town, whilst establishing an exemplary model capable of dissemination throughout the European Union (Wood & Taylor: 382).

The model involved five interlinking stages designed to unlock the "cultural resources and indigenous solutions" of the town – idea generation, ideas implementation, networking/community building, platforms for delivery, and market development (Wood, 2010). Delivery included a range of different mechanisms, including mentors, angels and short-term financing, festivals and programmes, as well as providing managed workspaces, third places and forums, such as the Huddersfield Salon. Huddersfield become known as pioneering the new creative model for competitive advantage through its recognition of the need to service innovation by developing creative spaces in the town, to harness the "scarce and portable skills" of people in a time of increasingly fast-moving mobile capital and a 'brain drain' from



Huddersfield, a town more associated with “cloth caps and brass bands” (Landry 2008: 82). The model was taken out globally through its foremost proponents – the consultants – who continued to promote in other places and by others who exported the legacies of creative industries development which were trialled and pioneered in Huddersfield. These include creative industries-specific skills development agencies, such as CIDA, and methodologies for creative economies mapping, which were developed for the CTI in 1997 and which strongly influenced the mapping documents of New Labour, other local and regional agencies through the Regional Cultural Data Framework and later, UNESCO (Taylor, personal communication).

Huddersfield’s reputation as a creative town seems to have diminished considerably, since the CTI closed down in 2001 and although the Kirklees Media Centre has continued to be successful as managed workspace, the Creative Town brand has disappeared from Council documents and the ‘buzz’ of a ‘creative milieu’ has disappeared. The concerns of the brain drain are back as the evidence of an out-migration of creatives meets the and the rhetoric of ‘crap town’ reinserted as the town centre is emptied of shops, replaced by “cash converters, low value, unskilled labour and some students” (Taylor, op cit; Zientek, 2010). Perversely for Huddersfield, the Florida thesis was applied only retrospectively, and the town has struggled to hold onto its nascent creative class, let alone attract new members.

### **Macclesfield**

Macclesfield is a market town with an industrial history in copper works, button and silk production dating back to the 17th century, and a semi-rural location at the east of the Cheshire plains and to the south of the conurbation of Greater Manchester. The town has an estimated population of 67,600 and under the governance of Cheshire East unitary authority, which has a total population of 363,800. Around 40% of the population live in rural settlements, and Macclesfield is the largest of the towns in the local authority, having been the urban centre for the Macclesfield Borough Council until 2010. As a ‘Silk Town’ Macclesfield saw rapid and relatively early urbanisation and expansion of its building stock for industrial production and housing of the silk workers in the mid-18th century, as the main industry moved from the business of silk and mohair button making and silk throwing and twisting (part of the refining process) to the weaving and production of silk garments. These shifts in production impacted on the spatial needs of the workforce – individual weavers cottages with large third storey weaving lofts, dye-houses and multistorey factory mills still litter the town scape, built in haste in the relative boom times between 1790 and 1814 (Corry, 1817: 75).

The silk industry suffered numerous peaks and troughs: in these early stages its fortunes, and the town, were dependent on trade conditions for its competitors in France, which were at the beck and call of the Napoleonic Wars and consequent legislation restricting imports of silk through trade duties. During a short boom time in the 1820s, over 10,000 people, including men, women and children, were involved in production, and silk manufacturers had to advertise in order to recruit for more workers. The silk industry also brought new human capital to the town, not just a homogenous workforce, but including specialists from other countries and cultures, including Huguenots, Italians and Irish, who were innovating, defining and passing on the necessary design, craft, technical and engineering skills (Pickford, 1988: 25) . These incomers brought certain moral threats and tensions, with their differing cultural and religious practices, changing the class and social structures of the town, and Macclesfield saw period of prolific construction of places of religious worship as “men of different sects found it expedient to erect places for public worship, in which the professors of Christianity might adore the God of their fathers according to the dictates of revelation, and the view of their own understanding“ (Corry 1817: 76). It also saw the development of structures for educating the workforce in arts and design through the establishment of the Useful Knowledge Society and the Macclesfield School of Art (Anonymous 1888).

The silk industry continued to rise and fall, but declined overall during the 19th century and by the mid-1950s had contracted irretrievably. Today, Macclesfield’s main sectoral strengths for employment are

now in pharmaceuticals, financial services, information technology, and creative industries, and form a key part of the regional knowledge economy workforce. Its biggest employer, AstraZeneca has had a large R & D facility in the borough, which according to the calculations of the former Regional Development Agency account for a quarter of the region's total R&D expenditure ((NWDA 2009: 9). It has a highly educated, relatively affluent population with access, who form part of a mobile managerial class working within the large Manchester travel to work area, attracted in-commuters from as far away South Lakeland in Cumbria and out-commuting mapping onto similar distances, particularly within the economic downturn has impacted on these and averaging house prices in Cheshire East are beginning to fall managerial occupations. It has high quality of life indicators and is one of the most affluent parts of the North West. House prices are consistently the highest in the region, although the faster than national averages (Cheshire East Council, 2012).

Macclesfield offers all the signs of a competitive town, assured of its role in the knowledge economy and replete with its own creative class. According to ABI estimates, the borough has the highest proportion of creative industries workforce in the region with over 10% of the workforce employed in the creative industries and amongst the largest in the UK. Some of this employment is through large-scale established creative businesses, such as advertising agency McCann Erickson in nearby Prestbury, but many businesses are SMEs and new start-ups (NWDA 2009). There are no formal creative industries resources or strategies, bar a now-dormant creative industries network, and the last cultural strategy developed for the borough was dated 2003. Despite the lack of investment from cultural or development agencies, there is further evidence of the cultural capital extant through the official indicators of cultural participation - the NI 11 indicator for Arts Engagement: Macclesfield 53% putting it top of the leader board in the regional top 10%, and consistently high sports participation rates.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these indicators, Macclesfield has suffered a litany of public accounts which define its mediocrity in recent times. The Idler *Crap Towns* provides an entry for Macclesfield, first published in 2004, as follows:

Colloquially known as 'Smacklesfield', the thriving junkie scene deserves some praise for at least trying to find a way of escaping the gloom. Throw in the crime of Liverpool, the rain of Manchester and marinade in the sweet misogyny of local heroes, The Macc Lads, and you're still a good fight short of the real picture. Still not convinced? Then remember, this is a town that is in the SHADOW of Stockport.<sup>7</sup>

In the same year, a national survey of amenities (Local Futures Group, 2004) counted the cultural assets across the UK and assigned their number per square hectare. As a primarily rural borough at the time, Macclesfield was found significantly lacking, nestling at the bottom of the league table - and the town was labelled the "cultural desert" of England, in an article in The Times newspaper, which was picked up by the local press. Local responses were indignant - for local commentators Macclesfield was not without its own charms - citing poetry recitals, morris dancing, brass band concerts and a '80s rock star's grave - but admitting there was only one cinema and no professional theatre for a borough of 150,000 people (Macclesfield Express, 2004; The Times 2004).

A more recent review of assets in 2008 found that the volume of cultural amenities is still low (see Table 1), and the town has a history of unparalleled underinvestment from arts, culture or heritage agencies, in

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<sup>6</sup> NI 11 measures the percentage of the adult population in a local area that have either attended an arts event or participated in an arts activity at least three times in the past 12 months. All arts activities and events are included, not just those funded by local authorities

<sup>7</sup> <http://idler.co.uk/crap-towns/macclesfield/>

either revenue or capital investment. It has no resident Regularly Funded Organisations.<sup>8</sup> The long-standing Conservative-led local authority appears apathetic about attracting investment through culture and creativity and tourism strategies are weak or non-existent.

A legacy of the silk industry, Macclesfield’s heritage stock comprises the second highest number of listed buildings (after Chester). It also has the 2nd highest number of conservation areas in Cheshire and for the Northwest. The town’s transport links to Manchester and the motorway network and as the western gateway to the Peak District suggests an ideal location for attracting visitors, but despite these assets, the development of tourism in the town has been slow and difficult to achieve, and bears poor comparison with other benchmark locations such as Buxton and Chester. Current strategies to develop the town’s appeal and profile as a ‘warmly regarded destination’ are led by a local privately-led economic forum<sup>9</sup> and an upgrade of the Tourist Information Centre have been welcomed, but it hasn’t always been the case. In the 1970s when tourism services were first being developed, the regional TV network Granada TV was so amused by the thought that anyone would want to visit Macclesfield that it ordered a lorry full of sand to be placed in front of the Town Hall, with deckchairs to provide the town with a beach and hence a rationale for tourism<sup>10</sup>.

**Table 1: Cultural Assets per square kilometer in the former borough area of Macclesfield (reproduced from NWDA 2009)**

Culture & Amenities Indicators	Macclesfield	NW
Cultural Amenities per sq. km	141	176
Listed Buildings per sq. km	6	22
Heritage Sites per sq. km	25	10
Buildings at risk per sq. km	6	10
Conservation areas	43	37
Local Amenities Score	110	156
Public Sports Pitches per 000 population	0.3	-
Emp. Creative Industries (%)	10.7	6
Retail floorspace 000 sq. m	299	14,641

In the broader North West region, tourism and visitor economy strategies have long been concerned with place differentiation, and have invested in detailed mechanisms for benchmarking places according to their cultural and retail assets, transport links and appeal for particular segments of the tourism market (Lee and Gilmore, 2012). Making Macclesfield a distinctive destination for visitor economies based on town centre and retail assets may be harder than in other places, according to recent evidence from the New Economic Foundation, which ranked the town 4th worst in the country in its league table of ‘clone towns’.<sup>11</sup> Political will to change the town’s external perceptions and to break the apathy towards regeneration and place-making within the town has been galvanised recently, led and adopted by

<sup>8</sup> Now National Portfolio Organisations

<sup>9</sup> Make It Macclesfield, see <http://www.makeitmacclesfield.co.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication, Olive Ambrose, who was the first Tourism officer, Macclesfield Borough Council. Indeed historically tourism-related activities have been out-migration: the town’s traditional Charter fair day St.Barnabas Day on 21st June became in the late 19th and early 20th century the wakes week, when the silk mills would close, and almost the entire town population would leave by bus, sharabang and train to go to seaside resorts such as Rhyl and Blackpool.

<sup>11</sup> This report surveyed towns between 5,000 – 150,000 population on their independent and home grown businesses versus chain retail offer in the high street, and found Macclesfield the worst offender in the North West region, based on 2009 figures. This angered the local press who responded by conducting their own survey to demonstrate that 30% of the town’s shops were independent store (Turner 2010).

volunteers active in the town, many of these new settlers who have come “for schools and the hills”<sup>12</sup> and are now anxious to develop cultural strategies in the town which promote local participation and production, including arts and cultural events, listings, an annual festival and a highly successful food and drink street market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these strategies are having effects, with new independent shops with local suppliers and a large number of art galleries appearing over the last year.

## Conclusions

This paper has attempted to discuss the possibility of policy transfer from big cities to ‘crap towns’ by considering the ‘other geographies’ of creative economies. The anomalous Macclesfield, indicatively the most creative place with high rates of cultural participation and numbers of resident creative class, but low levels of amenities, infrastructure and consumption opportunities, visitor or creative economies development, suggests the creative class thesis doesn’t transfer easily to all geographies, or rather more accurately it is that the creative spatialities of places are disrupted by different kinds of mobilities. Although the empirical data – of *where* Maxonians consume – isn’t available, the close proximity to the city of Manchester’s cultural offer and the familiarity of the managerial classes with travelling around the region for work suggests that the mobile of Macclesfield are going elsewhere.

Furthermore, there is a lack of confidence, or competence, on the part of the local policies for stimulating visitor economies to attract the capital of tourists, or to create spaces or third places to support further economic development from resident creative enterprises<sup>13</sup>. This policy vacuum in Macclesfield is beginning to be filled by private individuals and third-sector initiatives which are mainly small-scale and led by more recent incomers; however these must both compete for the attentions of mobile creative class and engage with the hidden or quietly less mobile, in order to raise aspirations in the town beyond conservative mediocrity.

In St.Helens and Huddersfield the case study initiatives both aimed to harness ‘indigenous cultural resources’ for economic development, and were successful, albeit only temporarily. In St.Helens, the combination of community engagement in public art with visitor economy strategies helped to mobilise the cultural capitals of local community groups, and its success was based in community cultural heritage, as well as local ownership of the project. The economic recession, restructuring of the council and the lack of ‘capture’ for economic capital of visitors has blunted the original vision for *Dream*. In Huddersfield similar issues around sustainability and the erosion of the ‘creative milieu’ has failed to keep the creative class from drifting away from a run-down and dispirited town centre. What makes a creative place it seems is not solely creative people, but finding ways to develop the material affordances which support the social relations as well as economic conditions for contingent cultural consumption and production.

Harvey et al’s (2011) ethnography rural clusters of creative practitioners (in Krowji) remind us of interdependencies between cultural policies and the foundation of situated practices within the histories of place:

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<sup>12</sup> Olive Ambrose, personal communication

<sup>13</sup> Perversely, research shows more evidence of cultural policies to support creative economic development in the town in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through philanthropic and subscription-based societies, than in the current age of instrumental cultural policy, the subject of a forthcoming research paper.

“the personal connections between key actors in the organisations, which has evolved and matured within the last decade, but which was built on cultural and policy legacies that extend back into previous centuries” (Harvey et al, 2012: 538).

As arts policies such as Arts Council England’s *Creative People and Places* turn instrumentally to increasing the cultural capitals of place, through strategies for engaging communities in local creative economies, it will be important to look back at cultural histories of places and not sideward to the Creative City, and to see at who stays still as well as who is able to move, in order to create more sustainable strategies for other geographies.

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**Appendix**



*Dream* Jaume Plensa (Photograph: A. Gilmore)