The Liminal City: Periphery Becomes the Centre

Alan Munro

For the last fifteen years I have been interested in how people inhabit, navigate and modify cities. I set out (long before mobile internet) to research the ways in which new technology could be fostered in order to aid these activities and thus make cities more convivial. In this role I was active in a number of large research programmes funded by the EU Future and Emerging Technologies action.[1] Later, I became an activist, both studying and promoting cycling as a vehicle for encouraging community in cities culminating in my involvement in organising the two biggest cycle protests ever to take place in Scotland.[2]

I first came to Huddersfield four years ago, on and off and now live here. I have started to look at the town from the viewpoint of an 'outsider' becoming a 'local'. This has led me to consider the role of those secondary (and tertiary) cities and large towns throughout Europe. As cities like London become ever more expensive, will they follow places like New York and San Francisco, pricing out the mix of people that have made these cities remarkable? As they become homogenised and 'safe', will other towns and cities become more attractive to those who are priced out?

Some cities (and towns) have a magnetic power, a 'stickiness' which makes people flock to them. These are meant to be places that people run to or leave other places for. Richard Florida has suggested that for a 'Creative City', there are particular qualities which work to attract intelligent, smart and creative people. However, he warns that one cannot adopt a 'cookie cutter' or box ticking approach to their creation. His research suggests a number of factors for the 'competitiveness' of a city. The three T's of the Creative City, as identified by Florida are 'talent, technology and tolerance':

> Cities thrive on scientific discovery, and creative people head for culturally vibrant places. That's why good science and a good jazz scene often go together [….] In a Demos report published this year, 'Europe in the Creative Age', the US economist Richard Florida builds on his earlier work, 'The Rise of the Creative Class', by comparing 14 EU countries with the US and ranking them according to how they score on the three Ts of creative competitiveness — TALENT, TECHNOLOGY AND TOLERANCE.[3]

I would like to suggest some other reasons why some cities 'work' for their populations. At a glance a Creative City might not look like much. I'd like to suggest that some 'creative cities' might be under one's nose long before they are acknowledged as such.

I started thinking about the Creative City many years ago, thinking about how technology could expand urban experience in a number of interdisciplinary ateliers.[4] My colleague, Rob van Kranenburg and I were invited to Strijp-S, an area of post-industrial buildings in Eindhoven vacated by Philips and intended to be developed as a 'creative hub'. The intentions were good, but the dead hand of an excessively 'top down' approach to planning was evident. By 'top down' I mean an approach essentially conceived from 'grand plans,' pushed forward by entities such as the state, city councils, and 'development bodies' of various kinds. This early visit took place with a view to regenerating this area in terms of company-friendly spaces for new industries – at that time expected to be technology and new media companies of various shades – with shops, cafes, and leisure facilities for these creative types. This is a model for so many developments around Europe, little 'Nerdistans'[5] where the creative classes can be based and where all that creativity will come out. I argued, quite forcefully, that they had missed the point and did not root their ideas of Strijp-S in the reality of how things had developed in cities like Amsterdam.

There was no acknowledgement of the 'bottom up' being so much more important than the 'top down', of how cultural leadership will be able to develop organically if not micro-managed out of existence. I would like to suggest that there is a type of city or town, perhaps scruffy, not necessarily in the centre of things, but cheap and easy to live in, and also creative which I'll call the 'Liminal City.' Through looking at Amsterdam ten-fifteen years ago, I will try to give an idea of what the situation might be like for Huddersfield now.

Amsterdam: Housing Oneself, Creating One's Society

I came to know Amsterdam through project relationships with two small companies (fewer than 20 people) who were based in the top of Keisersgracht in Amsterdam's historic Grachtengordel. Their history is somewhat typical for successful companies of this type. The two founders had backgrounds in social sciences at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, but when they graduated, they realised they were part of that generation who found it difficult to get academic jobs: the previous generation who benefited from the expansion of the universities were still very much in their early and mid-careers. There were thus a limited number of options available to those who wanted to live in the city after graduation who were not yet in a secure career. They could

either attempt to find social housing (with a long waiting list) or they could squat. Buying was not an option — being only for the super-rich, or for speculators.

In squatting, they found abandoned buildings and took matters into their own hands. Like many of their generation, they learned resourcefulness and the ability to collaborate with different types of people, including major building projects in their squatted buildings. They learned collaborative skills, being able, before the days of mobile communications, to organise branching, snowballing numbers of telephone calls to quickly generate a crowd of hundreds of people if a particular squat was threatened, either by the owner's 'associates' or by the police. They learned to take care of their shared houses, and how to deal with the Gemeente Amsterdam (City Council) and become city dwellers, while still being involved in activism and demonstrations.

This was helped by the relentlessly pragmatic attitude of the City Council, owing much to the liberal climate in the 80s and early 90s in the Netherlands and also the Dutch idea of gedogen (of leaving alone if no harm is done). Some political flavours will see the Amsterdam at this time as chaotic, grubby, and not at all tourist-friendly. But their experience, and the experience of others, shows a different and more interesting side of the story.

The squatters were resourceful, and seem to have led to a spirit of somewhat chaotic freedom in the city.[6] Groups like Hippies from Hell a group of artists, and others gave classes in computing, and more arcane activities such as lock-picking. Other people took things into their own hands: there is a story often told by this generation that the first internet connectivity that was not part of the Academy or provision for big companies was by some of the more technologically literate of these groups. Such actions, using this then very novel communications technology, led to providers like xs4all,[7] which was actually founded by a member of the Hippies from Hell. More in the spirit of the Provos,[8] there were informal means to take over streets and create small 'gardens' through using old oil drums, halved or quartered, as planters in the narrower back streets. One might see it as 'hacking' the city to make it more 'user friendly.'

The relationship with authority, for example the police, Gemeente and other groups, could sometimes be hostile (squats could be fortified, not allow any representatives of the State in) or could be oppositional, but the idea that the relationship was always and straightforwardly oppositional is misleading. For every story of riots and standoffs come other, more interesting stories of compromise and the finding of a way to collaborate. The squat Vrankrijk, on Spuistraat, had a bar in it. This required State representatives to visit it and make sure that it was satisfactory in terms of fire standards. The stand-off was eventually finessed by the fire brigade visiting in civilian gear, thus informally and not as State representatives. Further, squatters might also be on social housing waiting lists, eventually and ironically ending up in social housing as rent-paying customers of the Council. To go back to gedogen: the attitude of 'leave well alone' by the state and Gemeente led to conditions favourable to a town that looked less than tourist-perfect, but was a cheap and creative melting pot, brimming with inventiveness.

To reiterate, squatting did (and there is no way around this) lead to a degree of chaos in the city. It is arguably a key reason why Amsterdam has not been a host Olympic city in recent times. The squatting Amsterdammers directly drew from the experience of Barcelona, and what they saw as its transformation from a liveable city, to one that began to price out the poor, which they saw as directly caused by the Olympics.[9]

The people I knew could not get into the Academy, so they did the next best thing. After the research jobs, the casual academic work and the like, they worked for themselves, setting up small companies. Through their experience of collaboration found through the squats, it was natural for these small companies to work together, and for there to be a collaborative ethos within them. There was a collection of such small companies based in apartments in the old buildings around the old parts of the city, mixed in with art institutions such as Montivideo, the Netherlands Design Institute, etc. If one was going to describe this in an article for Wired one might use the term 'Silicon Canal'. The interesting thing about these companies, often between ten-twenty people, is that they kept in touch through social activities around the Jordaan, and were able to form alliances when needed. This could be through working for 'old technology' conglomerate companies like Philips by consulting for them.

So, what did this liberal spirit and methods of habitation do to the city? I'd argue that they created an amenable city, where a recent graduate could find somewhere to live, places to socialise cheaply, and, crucially, could join the job market way. Buildings lying empty were put to use. Commutes were short, and most things were done by bicycle, or backfiets (cargo bike) for heavy lifting. Small companies, were able to prosper cheaply — wages were not a big issue in a city with both traditional and alternative approaches to housing and socialising, where there was a choice of both rough and ready home-made entertainment in the form of squat-bars, and the 'straight' economy, personified by Philips, Sony-Ericsson, Lostboys.com (a large pan-European internet company of the time, who famously gave every employee a Kronen Swedish Army Bike, decked out in red, with a 'lostboys.com' numberplate). To recapitulate, subcultures were nurtured in such an environment.

But to say that this liminal creativity was only fertile soil for these big companies trying on some 'dot com colours' would be a misrepresentation. What came out from this mixed milieu was not just corporate-friendly. Some of these companies also sponsored innovative graphic art work like Joop van Bennekom's creation, RE Magazine (1997-2004). But the same milieu also filled the small art institutes, places like De Balie, De Waag (Institute for Old and New Media), Netherlands Design Institute, which first backed the innovative design/ideas conference, Doors of Perception (2003).

As van Kranenburg and I noted in our discussion of Eindhoven:

> The two most successful Dutch new media labs, Waag Society for Old and New Media (Amsterdam) and V2 (Rotterdam) grew out of a pervasive left-critical, hackers and squatters culture. In less than fifteen years they have grown into academic nodes on the SURFNET network, the Dutch academic network. This is unprecedented. Never before in any age has a group of autonomous, critical individuals been able to get their ideas, narrative, theories and projects accepted as credible in terms of the existing academic discourse in such a short time span. How was this possible? Because of the liberal climate in the '80s and early '90s in the Netherlands that did allow for bottom up creative initiatives, with a mixture of some state help and also the Dutch idea of gedogen of leaving alone if no harm is done. It is probably incalculable how much this liberal attitude helped the emergence of this culture and the companies and institutes that developed from it.[10]

Creative City/Liminal City

Maybe we should not be so hasty to move to these Creative Cities. We will find property expensive, the food expensive, the middle class areas we want to live in hopelessly overpriced. I would suggest from this discussion of Amsterdam that there might be other cities and towns, sometimes not the first cities, but the second and third rank, the less pretty, 'un-touristy' and less expensive. Reflecting on Huddersfield, it has a faded charm, but it is by no means in its prime. But there is space, and property is cheap, even when compared to the cities nearby. It has good transport links with these cities, and on to far bigger cities south. It has a university supplying graduates, a renowned music festival; a little, a start. In its up and coming quality, there may be hope for it attracting just the people who might well create new possibilities for it.

The connections, abilities to network, and possibilities in the first rank of cities is all very well, but artists and other creatives need other things — in particular, an ability to find cheap accommodation, inexpensive means of socialising, an ability to change their surroundings without the dreaded hand of the state bulldozing their communities: the ability to live in the cracks, where the flowers can grow...

Notes

1. I participated in two particular research themes. I3 was a precursor to the populated web we see today and some of the interconnected devices that we use. The Disappearing Computer saw ahead to the idea of smart internet-enabled devices which could sense the world around them – and a world which could sense them. Both were funded by DG Infso Future and Emerging Technologies action – the most blue-sky of the EU information technology research actions.

2. Pedal on Parliament is a national campaign for better cycle infrastructure in Scotland. It explicitly references Dutch and Danish approaches especially. The first protest in 2012 saw 3000 cyclists riding to the Scottish Parliament and the second saw 4000 cyclists riding the same route. It has gained much attention in the national press and has seen a refocussing of funding, seeing proposed funding cuts in active travel being reversed. It is active at a parliamentary level in the Scottish Parliament.

3. See Melissa Mean, 'Boho Boffins: Why Cities Need Science and Jazz' in Scotland 2020, edited by G. Hassan, E. Gibb and L. Howland. London: Demos/ Scottish Book Trust, 2005.

4. I have taught and led ateliers in the relatively new field of Interaction Design. I was invited to both i3 and Convivio summer schools Amsterdam: Autonomedia, 1994.

5. A term coined by Richard Florida for a certain type of 'cookie cutter' approach to provision for the technology industries.

6. ADILKNO, Cracking the Movement: Squatting Beyond the Media. Translated by Laura Martz.

Notes

7. Xs4all was one of the first providers of commercial internet in Amsterdam, and the first to provide internet connectivity to private individuals. It is an interesting example of a company which was prepared to show a more political side.

8. The Provos were a Situationist, Dadaist, and anarchist-inspired political and artistic movement in the late 1960s in Amsterdam with connections both to the Universities and The White Bike project. It is notable that many of the White Plans produced by the Provos reflected both environmental and egalitarian concerns.

9. ADILKNO, Cracking the Movement, 132.

10. R. van Kranenburg and A. J. Munro, Briefing Document: On Eindhoven's Creative Industries. Amsterdam, Virtueel Platform, 2005.

doi: 10.5920/radar.2014.1414