

# Becoming a Creative City: The Entrepreneurial Mayor, Network Politics and the Promise of an Urban Renaissance

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## Abstract

This paper critically explores the ‘politics of becoming’ in a ‘wannabe’ creative city in the United States. It shows how, in Baltimore’s policy sphere, Richard Florida’s theory has served as an ‘intellectual technology’ aiming at the invention of a new macro-actor (the creative class), while related urban regeneration outcomes and prospects appear to be more problematic. In particular, at the city-wide level, the creative class policy has favoured the interests of local politicians and their closer institutional partners; while, in the described context of a socially deprived neighbourhood, the embraced culture-led policy, albeit successful in redesigning a more attractive urban realm and thus in attaining its stated goals, has proved to be concerned more with real estate revitalisation than with issues of social inclusion and life-chance provision. It is concluded that the prevailing institutional imperative of networking and collaboration, as observed in Baltimore’s creative class initiative, overemphasises the importance of the politics of association in contemporary urban regeneration processes, while neglecting the relevance of classic goals of socio-spatial justice.

A strong urban policy is important to put our nation’s future as a strong innovation policy. Of course we can’t legislate urban creativity any more easily than we can legislate economic growth. What we can do, though, is provide the physical and social space needed

for creative and economic opportunities to take root. A simple example of the kind of consideration I’m talking about here would be an initiative in which a city maintained a certain amount of ‘garage’ space. Garages, warehouse, historical buildings, affordable

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housing—all of these are the places where dreams and economic innovations take hold. Whether for company formation, new music, new film, family business, nonprofit or social service providers, cheap but authentic structures have always served as an inspiration and an invitation to take a chance on our city neighbourhoods (Florida, 2005, p. 259).

In order to elect Baltimore's mayor as Maryland's governor, crime had to go down. And when that mayor was unable to do so legitimately, through a meaningful deterrent, his police officials did not merely go about cooking their statistics, making robberies and assaults disappear by corrupting the reporting of such incidents, they resorted to something far more disturbing.

For the last years of his administration, Mayor Martin O'Malley ordered the mass arrests of citizens in every struggling Baltimore neighbourhood, from eastside to west (Thomas, 2008).

## 1. Introduction

The remark of Richard Florida is evocative of the kind of sophisticated and, at the same time, straightforward account of the regenerating potential of culture in contemporary cities that he has offered in his successful work on the creative class. The quotation from David Thomas, the writer of the successful TV series *The Wire* set in Baltimore, draws attention to the more hidden strategy of a city government that at the same time embraced a creative class initiative as a flagship policy in its political-administrative strategy. In neo-liberal cities, seductive culture-led policies do not exclude forms of 'revanchist urbanism' (Smith, 1996). On the contrary, these two seemingly contradictory visions of urban and societal government can be brought together by the governing élites as parts of the same governmental project and practice.

In this paper, we shall focus on the seductive dimension in the current strategies of

urban regeneration in the US, the one based on Richard Florida's ideas about creative class and cities, and we will discuss its implications in the light of the wider context of neo-liberal urbanism. In doing so, we will first offer an interpretation of the invention of the idea of a creative economy as a leading force in urban development strategies and civic boosterism. In this part, the paper largely draws on literature dealing with urban regimes and city entrepreneurialism. Using the illustrative case of Baltimore, a struggling city that has become a highly cited example of 'post-modernist' urban regeneration, the authors will explore the ways in which creative class theory—an example of post-modern 'weak thought' in urban theory, it is argued<sup>1</sup>—has been used as an 'intellectual technology' (see Miller and Rose, 2008) aiming at triggering policy practices and strategies both at the city-wide and neighbourhood levels. This shows how creative class theory is not (only) a body of abstracted theory of explanations and conceptualisations of the urban phenomenon, of economic and statistical indexes, but an 'intellectual technology', a way of making visible and interrelating certain types of actor, their everyday conduct, agency and sense of belonging to the urban political community.

The empirical part of the paper is intended to highlight the way in which the institutional implementation of creative class ideas has given rise to a mode of urban governance that has resulted in the building of a new macro-actor through the re-ordering and repositioning of local cultural organisations and individual artists under the banner of the creative class initiative. This process of assemblage and gathering has been enacted by politically aggregating local actors in some areas and neighbourhoods of the city and, in doing so, by integrating and combining differentiated cultural and urban policies, together aimed at revitalising the target deprived neighbourhoods. From this point of view, the creative class policy in Baltimore has to be

understood in the light of the sophisticated 'network politics' (see Sørensen and Torfing, 2003) mobilised by urban political leaders and their closer institutional collaborators. In the conclusion, it is pointed out that those benefiting from the creative class policy strategy are essentially the political élites, most notably the 'entrepreneurial mayor' in the case of Baltimore (see Le Galès, 2001), as well as a small number of cultural organisations at the city-wide level. At the neighbourhood level, a larger number of artists and cultural actors benefit from the cultural policies of revitalisation, but in this context are the poorer long-term residents who are excluded from the benefits of a policy strategy that has the effect of increasing housing prices and improving the liveliness and attractiveness of the neighbourhood, but appears not to be concerned with the issues of social inclusion and life-chance provision that are most relevant in socially deprived areas.

## 2. Creative Class Theory and its Critics

Although culture-led urban policies have become popular and influential following the appearance of creative class and cities discourse and theory, Richard Florida of course has not been the first scholar to emphasise the role of culture within urban and regional spaces, and beyond. Recent years have witnessed a widespread 'cultural turn' in urban and regional policies. Policies of local economic development, urban regeneration and revitalisation have been in the forefront of these developments. Building from the general background and changes in the global economy (i.e. the growing role of producer services and non-material-production, knowledge-based economies) and in Western society (for example, more time for leisure, the growing cost of culture and entertainment, the evaporation of conventional cultural identities), a number of urban scholars and intellectual

gurus (these latter acting as 'urbanistars' more or less like their 'archistars' counterparts), embracing differing approaches and views, have envisaged an urban renaissance fostered by the economic and social externalities granted by the localisation of artistic, and more generally culturally and economically creative activities (Scott, 1998, 2006; Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002, 2005). From Australia to Europe, from the US to the more Westernised Asian regions and cities, cultural policies and the consequent 'governmentalisation of culture' (Barnett, 2001) have acquired a renewed prominence at the urban and regional levels (see among others, Montgomery, 1990; Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Hall, 2000; Kong, 2000). The contours of this cultural turn in urban and regional policies are broad and in many respects even uncertain and enigmatic, ranging from the cultural being regarded in terms of 'cultural economy', such as in the form of localised complexes of cultural-products industries (Scott, 2000), to understandings and representations of the 'cultural' as a heterogeneous ensemble of cultural and artistic activities taking place at city and neighbourhood levels (Strom, 2004), to a properly normative narrative and also to prescriptive recommendations for local economic development (Gibson and Klocker, 2005).

On a practical level, a starting-point in the culturalisation of urban policies is to be found in the renewal programmes that have been promoted since the early 1980s onwards in a number of North American and West European cities. These programmes have been interpreted as paradigmatic examples of post-modern, culturally orientated, urbanism (Harvey, 1989a), because they have materialised under an urban form the cultural logic underlying the functioning of contemporary societies after the decline of Fordism and Keynesianism. Programmes of urban regeneration have been undertaken with the purpose of renewing the image of long-deprived

(and stigmatised) cities and neighbourhoods and, in doing so, of attracting shares of the growing flows of domestic and international tourism. The organisation and implementation of these programmes have fuelled the building of a wide range of public–private partnerships and coalitions, in which a variety of local, regional, national and global actors have become involved, reviving the tradition of ‘growth politics’ in North American cities under the modified context of post-industrial and post-Fordist capitalism (Molotch, 1976; Mollenkopf, 1983; Judd and Swanstrom, 1994; Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Renewal and regeneration programmes, therefore, have contributed to the shaping of a new stage in ‘entrepreneurial urbanism’, centred on the dynamic combination of non-material (cultural atmosphere, sense of vibrancy and enthusiasm, creativity) and material factors (regenerated physical environment, monuments, cultural artefacts) in the revitalisation of urban spaces and economies. Building-sector activities and the regeneration of the physical environment have thus been pursued along with the goal of creating a more vibrant cultural atmosphere, sensitive to the needs of decentralised business interests, coalitions and networks (see Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Evans, 2001).

It is not surprising then that the work of Richard Florida on creative cities has been welcomed with such a strong emphasis and even enthusiasm, especially by the wider public of readers, policy-makers and politicians (Florida, 2002, 2005). Florida offers a highly growth-centred vision of culture-led urban and regional development. In his view, the concentration of ‘creative capital’ represents a competitive advantage for localising high-tech and highly specialised activities and for fostering economic growth. Florida argues that, in order to attract creative people who directly contribute to the local economy, cities and regions are to be pushed to improve their cultural liveliness, social inclusion and

tolerance and, more generally, their ‘quality of life’. Despite being criticised by academics both in theoretical terms and in terms of their urban and regional applications, the creative city and class theory and discourse have been greatly successful, particularly amongst policy-makers and urban leaders. Thus, in recent years, an increasing number of cities and regions in a host of different geographical contexts have based their economic strategies on this rationale, while Florida’s writings have been interpreted—probably well beyond the intentions of the author himself—as sorts of practical guides to urban policy-making. In the same creative-city narrative, one can see more explicit attempts to outline ready-to-use handbooks (Landry, 2000; Roodhouse, 2006). Recent scholarly literature documents (largely in a critical vein) policies of urban and regional development inspired by Florida’s theories in such diverse cities as, amongst the others, Copenhagen in Denmark (Bayliss, 2007) and Wollongong in Australia (Barnes *et al.*, 2006) and, of course, a number of US cities including Austin (McCann, 2007) and Milwaukee (Ward, 2007).

In these case studies as well as in the general literature, the translation of creative class theory into policy practices, discourses and wider city strategies has been questioned by urban and regional scholars: for the vagueness of its applications, for an array of unresolved problems relating to urban and regional governance mechanisms, for its potentially unequal consequences at a societal level and for the difficulty of measuring and assessing its policy effects. In this latter regard, it can be noted how, albeit embracing a strongly normative approach, Richard Florida avoids providing detailed prescriptions about how his theory should be applied to specific contexts of urban policy: his work is deliberately open to any kind of translation and application in the policy field. He does not enter, therefore, the complex sphere of urban policy and spatial planning and does not attempt

to scrutinise the multifaceted relationships existing among actors, resources (political, legal, economic) and the set of socio-spatial practices co-existing in the urban field.

Ironically, this reluctance to offer an analysis of the existing policy contexts and related possible solutions is a missing link between theory and practice in Florida's work, but also a reason for the success of his theory and general vision of urban and regional development. Indeed, the creative class concept is an example of typically post-modern intellectual technology (a 'weak thought' as said before), which is flexible and malleable enough to be applied to an urban-regional entity of any size and type, regardless of its institutional capabilities and the efficiency of governance structures (Scott, 2006), and of its urban identity. Yet, it is nonetheless a fertile and seductive conceptual framework that can be fruitfully used for the implementation of 'fast policies' of local economic regeneration in a variety of urban and regional contexts (Peck, 2002; see also Peck, 2005; Rantisi and Leslie, 2006; Ward, 2007).

This contradictory co-existence of analytical omissions, missing links between theory and practice, and a spasmodic search of an urban policy adapting to the demands and rhythms of 'turbo-capitalism', has led creative class policy programmes to face foreseeable difficulties in connecting different institutional levels and in being coherently integrated into strategic planning processes at a regional level. Some scholars have raised questions about the effective growth impacts descending from the concentration of creative class members even within the more dynamic metropolitan regions of the US (Rausch and Negrey, 2006). Jayne (2005) has stressed the inherent policy-making problems highlighted by the limited impact of the programmes for creative industries in the UK. In a similar vein, Cunningham (2004) has laid emphasis on the problems arising from the isolation of cultural and creative policies, and

their weak integration with wider strategies of urban and regional planning. Moreover, the cross-national comparison proposed by Volkering (2001) shows how the formulation of arts and cultural policies and their multiple combinations can vary significantly among programmes adopting the same creative class labels.

Along with the institutional factors, the socio-spatial implications of creative class policy have also been overlooked by its proponents. Despite Florida's asserted intention to disclose the category of place in the global economy debate, his theory undervalues socio-spatial dynamics that are typical for the kinds of urban development processes it envisages. The most visibly neglected consequence is gentrification. Bridge (2006) has shown how the concentration of cultural capital in urban contexts could induce negative effects and, in particular, gentrification and other related forms of socio-spatial inequalities, making a plea for more cautious policy-making in this field. Regarding this aspect, critics have emphasised how the attraction of creative class members and the consequent increases in income and housing prices at a neighbourhood level tend to gentrify lower- and middle-class areas and to produce marginalisation and exclusion of long-term residents (Peck, 2005; Barnes *et al.*, 2006).

Criticism directed against Richard Florida's conceptual framework and its implementation in a policy context has also referred to the use of sociological categories, of empirical data and social indexes proving the success of a city or region. Critics have pointed in general to the oversimplification of policy mechanisms and recipes and to the adoption of straightforward and monothematic strategies for economic growth and, more specifically, to the more or less unexpected effects on the urban social environments deriving from a creative class policy formulated along the lines of Richard Florida's work. Along these

lines, Oakley (2006) noted that the creative industry labour market and spatial characteristics in the UK are likely to induce or exacerbate social problems and inequalities.

The central concept introduced by Florida—namely, creativity—has been targeted by critics for its fuzziness (Markusen, 2006). It has been argued that, in order to be usable for investigating the spatial and regional implications of the creative class theory, a more accurate identification of the members of the creative class should be provided. In fact, empirical evidence regarding American artistic communities and their localisation behaviour (which is in turn likely to differ from that of other alleged members of the creative class such as lawyers and designers for instance) clearly diverges from Florida's findings (Markusen and Schrock, 2006). Also, the choice of descriptive and analytical indexes has been widely criticised. For instance, some authors have expressed scepticism over some basic tenets of the creative cities theory—notably the one related to tolerance in local communities, expressed in terms of a gay index (Clark, 2004; Nathan, 2005). Also, the role of the creative index as the central factor in economic success in neo-liberal and global competition among cities and places has been questioned (Gibson and Klocker, 2005). Moreover, critics have contended that the presence and liveliness of artist communities do not imply direct and univocal effects within the public realm of a given local context, due to the weak connection to local government structures that these social groups often have (Newman and Smith, 2000; Miles and Paddison, 2005).

A critical analysis of the implications related to the rise and the success of the 'creative class' as a policy subject at urban and regional levels needs to be reconsidered. An explanation can be found by looking into the broader historical and political context in which creative class theory took shape. Evocative of the success of the creative class theory and discourse is the

way in which Nigel Thrift has suggested of looking at the success of the new economy discourse in terms of an 'attempt at mass motivation' that has eventually resulted in the disclosing of a new market culture in contemporary capitalism (Thrift, 2001). Likewise, the 'creative cities' discourse and policy practice can be interpreted in terms of a new 'rhetorical-material flourish' (Thrift, 2001) aimed at forging novel institutions of urban governance, at justifying the commitment to the pursuit of new strategies of urban and regional development and entrepreneurialism, and at enhancing and legitimising the local political leadership in increasingly neo-liberalised urban realms. According to this interpretation, creative urbanism has not to be viewed as a 'natural' stage in the evolution of urban capitalism, but as the result of a complex gathering of public discourses, academic theorising, policy practices and political-economic strategies.

### **3. Creative Class Theory as an Intellectual Technology: Assembling the Macro-actor**

As already said in the introduction to this paper, the enhancing of the creative and cultural economy of the cities has become one of the preferred and in some contexts even hegemonic ways to strengthen local communities' sense of spatial and group-based belonging; to develop the active involvement of citizens in public affairs; and to pursue these goals along with those of urban growth and larger economic development, which remain the driving-forces of American urban politics (Judd, 1988). In this context, creative city theory and discourse have become a powerful toolkit from which politicians and policy-makers have largely drawn in their attempts at reconciling a strategy of economic growth and urban revitalisation with the promotion of a renewed sense of place-belonging within local communities.

Creative class theory has thus been demonstrated to be a potentially mobilising policy discourse. Observing the experiences developed in the US and the first experiments being undertaken in Europe, Asia and Australia, one can note how the creative city initiatives take the form of a discursive-regulatory project which motivates cultural actors and mobilises political-economic interests, not necessarily implying substantial efforts to sustain the artistic community or to alleviate the condition of deprived neighbourhoods and disadvantaged social groups. This 'discursive-regulatory project' can be built on, as the Baltimore case will show, the creation of a newly invented macro-actor, the 'creative class', and the targeting of one or more neighbourhoods that are to become involved in the creative city policy strategy. Using the approach of governmentality theorists, it can be argued that creative class policies have consisted of a process of subjectification by which certain actors have been re-invented by putting them in relation to others and by using the intellectual techniques offered by Florida—for instance, the statistical indexes about cultural diversity and openness, as 'devices of meaning production' (Rose, 1996). In this context, urban governance has not to be seen as a fixed repertoire of institutions and organisations and related contractual relations, but as a specific perspective from which one might make intelligible the diversity of attempts by authorities and their collaborators to shape the action of 'others' (even those others such as the artistic communities whose agency is apparently detached from material and instrumental goals) in relation to objectives of economic growth and competitiveness, urban regeneration, neighbourhood revitalisation and the building of political capital through dynamics of network formation.

As post-structuralist social theorists suggest, macro-actors and networks are to be viewed as assemblages of individual agents, with some actors aggregating, or translating, the wills of

others through a process of 'enrolment' (Law, 1994). In this context, actors derive their intentionality, identity and recognition from the network, rather than from their status as independent agents. It is in this sense that the 'cultural', or the 'creative', as the cultural sphere has been now renamed and repositioned in more energetic terms, should be seen as a collective entity—namely, as a consciously designed macro-actor or network of agency. In other words, creative class policy designates and embodies "the project of assembling new entities not yet gathered" (Latour, 2005, p. 75); the network is not a structure shaping action but a 'summing-up' of heterogeneous subjectivities participating in a common but contingent project (Latour, 1999). This process of enrolment is materially enacted, nurtured and politically negotiated, making recourse to an inherited repertoire of institutions, administrative procedures and actors. The institutions that are mobilised with this purpose are examples of the lean and flexible governance structures today prevailing in the urban field as well as in nearly all domains of societal government.

Like all urban and regional policies, creative class initiatives do not operate in a vacuum, but draw on pre-existing knowledge and institutional practices, governance structures and arrangements (Uitermark, 2005). A creative class policy activates procedures and practices of urban governance being inherited from the local policy context, as we will show with reference to Baltimore and its 'shadow government' legacy. This implies that creative class theory, as also argued before, is not to be regarded simply as an academic theory, but more specifically as an 'intellectual technology' being used by political élites and policy-makers as a generative source of an active governmental rationality. While effective in sustaining the strategies of the political and economic élites, as we shall see, such an instrumental and institutionalised mode of network governance and management confounds the expectations of

those envisaging the democratic potential of experimentalist, 'messy' and molecular forms and practices of urban planning and policy (Wezemaal, 2008).

The paper illustrates the deployment of creative city discourse and initiative within the sphere of urban policy and politics in Baltimore. The case study of the paper presents the findings of fieldwork undertaken in Baltimore in 2006. The empirical material is drawn both from in-depth interviews with about 30 qualified informants and actors participating in the Creative Baltimore Initiative and the Station North Arts and Entertainment District and from archive research conducted at the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts and the Maryland State House. Interviews have been based on semi-structured questionnaires and open conversations. In the archival work, authors have looked into the application forms submitted by cultural organisations and individual artists to the Creative Fund and have analysed in detail the official documentation regarding the establishment of the Arts and Entertainment District. Together, the Creative Baltimore Initiative and the Arts and Entertainment District are of central interest to the issues raised by the critical literature on creative urbanism because they shed light on the ways in which creative and cultural cities discourses are incorporated into the urban policy realm at the city-wide and neighbourhood levels, producing in each case different sets of winners and losers.

#### **4. Urban Regeneration, Governance Structures and the Politics of the Creative City in Baltimore**

In order to understand how creative class has actually worked in the context of Baltimore, it is crucial to reconstruct the city's and the wider national medium- and short-term policy context. Since the 1980s, in the US

and elsewhere, cities and regions have experienced a relentless search for new forms of urban governance capable of overcoming the problems linked to hierarchical and bureaucratic structures of government and of giving rise to strategies and initiatives of urban entrepreneurialism (Jessop, 1997). Baltimore is as an interesting point of observation of these developments. When David Harvey published his influential article on the shift from managerialist to entrepreneurialist modes of urban governance, he largely referred to the case of Baltimore (Harvey, 1989b). Baltimore, particularly noted for its experience of downtown and waterfront redevelopment based on the mobilisation of private capital and the invention of innovative forms of public-private partnership, was at the time a deeply investigated case study of entrepreneurial and post-modern urbanism. While the outcome of the regeneration process has been widely debated, finding harsh critics and opponents as well as passionate advocates (see Levine, 1987; Berkowitz, 1987), what the city's urban experience has left is not only a 'regenerated' physical environment but also a mode of governance founded on what scholars have agreed to define as the 'shadow government' of Baltimore's renaissance (Stoker, 1987; Hula, 1990). In the late 1980s and subsequent years, urban political studies in the US were strongly committed to debating the making of urban regimes, to defining the structural determinants of city politics and to outlining the relationship between the economic logic governing the urban process and the 'political logic' for which scholars demanded more attention (for an overview, see Judge *et al.*, 1995). At that time, the Baltimore case symbolised a policy context in which the

synthesis of market and state [made it] impossible to determine whether the 'quasi-public' organisations of the shadow government are public or private concerns (Stoker, 1987, p. 252).



The case of Baltimore, therefore, was presented as an example of a 'lack of clear authority' in the making and the evolution of urban programmes and the definition of the underlying funding sources (Stoker, 1987).

The ultimate consequence of these developments in the sphere of urban governance is that Baltimore's local government has found itself to be partially freed of a host of responsibilities relating to the implementation of regeneration programmes and projects, a trend which has become customary in contemporary cities in the subsequent years. Such responsibilities have been devolved to non-public or quasi-public actors along the lines of the conventional pattern of 'neo-liberal urbanism' (Imrie and Raco, 2000). This has not meant, however, that local government has become a weak and disempowered actor in the urban public sphere. Rather, recent urban history in Baltimore has reproduced the long-term feature of the city's urban politics: the leading power of the mayor's office. In fact, in Baltimore as in other US cities, mayors have played a crucial role in the formation, support and substitution of urban regimes. What is notable to observe here is that this role has not become weaker in the context of the transition to pro-growth, neo-liberal and also culture-led urban policies. The reason for this primacy lies in the fact that members of the city council have been concerned historically mainly with matters relating to their individual constituencies; thus the mayor's domination of city-wide affairs has been substantially unchallenged (Orr, 1992).

Each mayor in Baltimore, especially in the past four decades, has marked his one or two appointments focusing on a specific line of action, capable of drawing consensus and popularity. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, mayor William Schaefer became the protagonist of the celebrated Inner Harbor regeneration;<sup>2</sup> in the late 1980s and until the late 1990s, Kurt Schmoke supported a number of large, up-scale development projects,

including a further waterfront restoration, and also committed local government to a stronger human capital policy. The mayor elected in 1999, Martin O'Malley, a charismatic emerging politician who subsequently became Governor of Maryland in the 2006 elections, has strongly committed local government's institutions and the actors closer to its sphere of influence to promoting the image of Baltimore as a culture-sensitive and ultimately 'creative' city. At the same time, Baltimore has proved to be a good site of experimentation for a creative class policy for several reasons. In fact, Baltimore is, resembling Richard Florida's Pittsburgh, an example of an ex-industrial, working-class city, struggling to improve its material constitution and change its reputation into a more dynamic and thriving city. Then it is also an urban area which has managed to overcome its reliance on the manufacturing sector, specialising in more typically post-Fordist sectors such as logistics and communication businesses and financial institutions or more technologically advanced industrial activities such as chemicals and allied products (Howland and Wolman, 1999). In sum, the city's inherited governance structure, its current political leadership and the most recent transformations in its economic base, along with a revitalised cultural economy (sustained by world-renowned research centres and universities and the newly established cultural districts; see later) have provided positive conditions for the implementation of a creative class policy and the pursuit of a related institutional strategy in Baltimore.

Today, Baltimore is narrated by local institutions and administrations as a potentially creative city not only because of the presence of cultural activities, but also, based on statistical and apparently neutral analyses, for the presence of a successfully developing creative industrial economy within its metropolitan area (Acs and Megyesi, 2007). The goal of

making Baltimore a 'creative city' has been pursued by promoting the 'Creative Baltimore Initiative' at the city level and, at the same time, by implementing a creative and cultural policy at the neighbourhood level. These two processes will be analysed in the coming sections of this paper.

### **The Creative Baltimore Initiative: Mobilising Institutions, Organising Actors**

In 2004, the Baltimore Mayor's Office of Community Investment announced and officially launched the 'Creative Baltimore Initiative', an initiative aiming to

devise a co-ordinated and comprehensive strategy that positions and promotes Baltimore as a diverse, creative, and opportunity-rich city in order to attract, engage and retain creative class residents (more specifically, artists, students, young professionals, creative entrepreneurs and empty nesters) (Mayor's Office of Community Investment, 2004).

The initiative was publicly embraced in the wake of some 'Town meetings' organised by the city government with the contribution of leading local actors. The meetings were devoted to debating the more relevant cultural issues relating to the city of Baltimore and sought to give rise to a permanent consulting process within the local community. The final White Paper that resulted from the consultation process was signed by 79 local actors. The number of the actors signing the White Paper is remarkably high and significant (Baltimore is a relatively small albeit growing cultural scene) and testifies to the willingness of the majority of the actors involved in the city's cultural policy field not to miss the opportunity to take an active part in the Creative Initiative.

Many respondents to the in-depth interviews conducted for this research project pointed out that, at the beginning of the

process, the involved actors perceived the initiative as 'challenging' and 'path-breaking' in the context of a city like Baltimore that had long been somnolent in the field of urban cultural policy. By participating in the making of the creative class policy, these actors were willing to contribute to the shaping of the institutional arrangement of the policy itself. Exploring the basic structure of this institutional arrangement is therefore crucial to the understanding of the ways in which the creative class as a network and macro-actor has been first imagined and then invented, aggregated and politically supported in Baltimore.

The Creative Baltimore Initiative firmly bears the marks of the legacy of an urban governance structure centred, on the one hand, on the decentralisation of regulation and decision-making powers and, on the other, on the central role played by the local political élite and most notably by the mayor's leadership. In the first half of the first decade of the 2000s, Mayor O'Malley embraced a role as promoter of a creative class policy in Baltimore, a city that appeared to be a fertile ground for the experimentation of this policy. Indeed, O'Malley narrates himself as a culture-sensitive person: first, because (like Richard Florida himself) he is an active musician and a member of the creative class, not only an external political sponsor. Moreover, he is an emergent, relatively young (he was born in 1963) and ambitious politician, included by the *Time Magazine* amongst the 'top five big city mayors' in the US. The representatives of the cultural organisations involved in the Creative Baltimore Initiative have underlined the mayor's sensitivity to cultural issues and projects, explaining it in light of his biography and personal interests.

The range of the public and private organisations gathered together in the Creative Baltimore Initiative has been wide and heterogeneous: about two-thirds of the actors involved in the initiative are cultural

organisations and art foundations; then there have been a smaller number of neighbourhood associations and finally a crucial role has been played by the city agencies. In fact, at the head of the consultation and 'gathering' process behind the Creative Baltimore Initiative there have been a small group of non-profit organisations having a close relationship with the Baltimore's local government: most notably, the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance (GBCA) and the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts (BOPA). Albeit both formally of non-profit and independent status, these organisations are active and overt supporters of Mayor O'Malley and his political coalition. As the leader of the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance recalls

When the new mayor [Martin O'Malley] was elected, he started looking into other cities that had the same situation as ours. Out of the vision of two individuals and in this context (I'm a business person, I buy art; he's a politician with a strong sensitivity to art issue) the project of creating a Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance came out. Can we change the cultural community and create a louder cultural voice in the community? We started that conversation in 1999. O'Malley was elected mayor and he changed the city's policy in the cultural field. We supported the mayor. When he was running for election, we didn't exist yet but then in space of three four years we formed. We have remained independent but we are in close relationship with the mayor's office (interview, October 2006).

A turning-point in the evolution of the initiative is represented by the second Town meeting when Richard Florida was invited to give a speech. Florida accepted the invitation through the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts (BOPA) and expressed great interest in Baltimore as a potentially creative city. Reactions of those participating in the Town meeting where Richard Florida presented his ideas were generally enthusiastic

and optimistic about the embracing of a creative class strategy in Baltimore.

The BOPA, therefore, is the organisation that has played a central role in the organisation of initiatives, events and in the management of civil society involvement that have been undertaken under the banner of the Creative Baltimore Initiative. This organisation is an example of the ways in which the governance of culture and creativity has been devolved to 'quasi-public' actors, but at the same time has been firmly retained within the local government's sphere of influence and informal control. BOPA is a non-profit, formally independent organisation, which was created in 2002 as a merger of two city agencies: the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Art and Culture.<sup>3</sup> Today, BOPA operates in explicit support of the mayor's public action, with the mission "to make Baltimore a more vibrant, creative city, in which to live, work and play" (BOPA, 2005).

The process of generating associations in the form of networks and macro-actors, as argued before in this article, is one concrete way in which this politics of active participation is carried out. In Baltimore, civic vibrancy has been stimulated through public provision of grants and community development schemes. Many of these programmes and policy schemes have been promoted within the framework of the Creative Baltimore Initiative. One of the most significant was the 'Creative Fund'. The subsidies formed a 'Creative Fund' which has been allocated to cultural and arts organisations through a competitive call for application. One of the driving objectives of this competition has been to stimulate the self-assertion of identity by each cultural organisation and to show the ways in which an organisation aims to participate in the overall programme through its collaborative partnerships. More than real competition and selection itself (nearly all applicants in the end have been supported by

the Creative Fund, except for few not meeting formal requirements) and more than effective financing (resources were limited, as all interviewees have underlined and complained), the aim of the application contest has been to stimulate self-identification and sense of belonging to the urban policy strategy and thus to generate a politics of association. In conclusion, the grant application process has worked above all as an attempt at motivating local actors, promoting interaction and, ultimately, at gathering them under the banner of a more identifiable and politically manageable macro-actor, named the 'creative class'. In financial terms, the material benefits have been limited. What appears to count more is the rewarding effect of being part of a widely advertised cultural event or a public festival supported by the local government, rather than the concrete support for everyday work and activities.

### **Neighbourhood Change and Culture-led Regeneration Policies: The Station North Arts and Entertainment District**

Station North is a socially deprived area neighbouring two symbolically and also topographically central districts in Baltimore: the Mount Vernon area, the downtown's 19th-century historical centre, and the Charles Village, the area where the campus of the prestigious Johns Hopkins University is located. Plans and policies targeting the Station North district have been largely influenced by the important socio-spatial changes undergone by these neighbouring areas in recent years: Mount Vernon was identified as a cultural district in 1996, since then enhancing its cultural production and consumption scene, and at the same time undergoing a process of expulsion of low-income users and dwellers (Ponzini, 2009); the Charles Village has experienced a large retail space development and a steady increase in housing prices since the late 1990s onwards, as in many other regenerating neighbourhoods in the cities of the US.

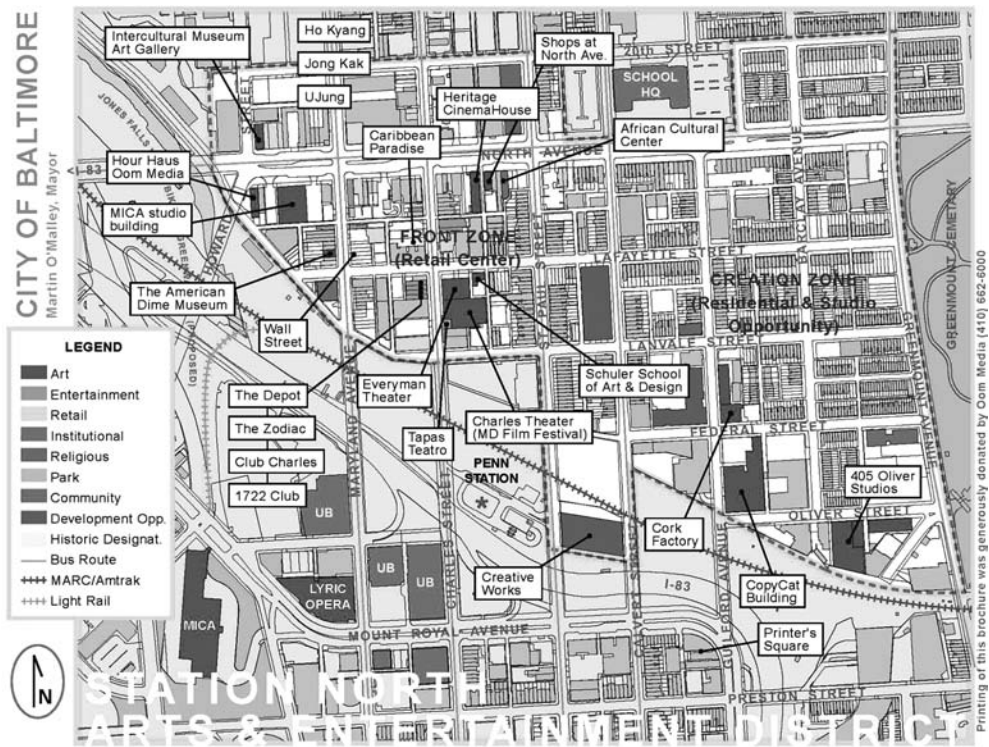
Compared with its neighbouring areas, Station North has a persistently deteriorated image and identity and a weaker socio-economic base: all the rates relating to demographic loss, unemployment, differentials in educational and income levels of the population, the occupancy and vacancy of houses, and crime (especially drug dealing and prostitution) have been significantly above the average in Baltimore, itself one of the most troublesome and socially disadvantaged cities in the US (see Table 1). This situation has not prevented the area from keeping an enduring key position in the material and symbolic geography of the city, for the presence of the central railway station and of a set of renowned cultural and educational institutions such as the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall. A large number of less famous but equally lively cultural institutions and entertainment venues (theatres, cinemas, restaurants etc.) have contributed to the reproducing of a relatively lively social and cultural life in the district. Today's difficult situation of the district is closely related to the more general economic and socio-spatial decline experienced by the whole city of Baltimore during the transition to a post-industrial economy, whose negative effects have been exacerbated in this area by long-term social tensions and hardship.

It is in this context that in 2002 the State of Maryland and the City of Baltimore jointly designated an area of 25 blocks and approximately 100 acres as an Arts and Entertainment District (see Figure 1), with the aim of starting a process of urban revitalisation at the neighbourhood level. Institutionally modelled on the examples of the Providence Arts and Entertainment District and the successful Mount Vernon Cultural District, the Station North entertainment district project was built on the establishment of a non-profit organisation managing the individual programmes and the wider policy strategy, which was called Station North Arts and Entertainment

**Table 1.** Demographic trends, Baltimore census tract 1205, 1990–2000 change

Factor	1990	2000	Number	Percentage
Population	2 298	1 668	(630)	−27.4
Households	819	739	(80)	−9.8
Owner-occupiers (percentage)	15.6	17.1	1.4	9.1
Vacancy (percentage)	30.6	36.2	5.6	18.3
Household income (\$)	18 908	18 089	(820)	−4.3

Sources: US Bureau of the Census (in Gross, 2006b).



**Figure 1.** Station North Arts and Entertainment District.

District (SNAED). As the Executive Director of the organisation recalls

This organisation undertook the mission of promoting and supporting artists and cultural organisations in the District and more generally of creating a vibrant neighbourhood where arts, artists and entertainment venues flourish in the midst of an economically diverse community with an abundance of healthy

residential, retail and commercial offerings, of increasing homeownership and engaging local community and greater public in artistic programmes (interview, January 2006).

The main task of the Station North Arts and Entertainment District has consisted in networking with cultural organisations and in advocating for additional public and private interventions and conjunct actions

in the area. Using tax incentives and other forms of subsidies, the District has encouraged the reusing of abandoned properties for arts and entertainment purposes, as well as the promotion of cultural events and the everyday revitalisation of public spaces in the neighbourhood. At the housing level, the Station North organisation has worked in co-operation with the City's Housing Department and some local civic associations to promote the selling of City-owned properties and to keep rentals affordable for artists and for the existing community. At present, in partnership with the Maryland State and the City government, the Station North District offers tax incentives, abatements and exemptions for arts-related businesses and activities initiated by property owners, developers and artists living and working in the District.

Apart from those just mentioned, other local actors, either of public or public-private status, have become involved in the strategy of urban regeneration: the former include, most notably, Baltimore's Planning Department. This institution has crafted a Planned Unit Development advocated by SNAED (see Figure 2) that has revised previous land use zoning to permit uses of some buildings according to the cultural revitalisation of the District, including mixed residential and commercial/industrial use. For example, the former industrial spaces of the Cork Factory and of the Copycat are expected to generate hundreds of square feet legally available for artists' studios and living spaces, and for galleries, performance and exhibition spaces (the Load of Fun Studios, the Charm City Art Space and the Westnorth Studio).

As regards the public-private actors, a prominent role has been played by the powerful Baltimore Development Corporation which has been delegated by the City Council to acquire key properties and to start requests for proposals in order to foster private housing redevelopment in the area.

By clustering artistic workspaces and adapting the housing supply to the novel cultural vocation and role of the neighbourhood, the Station North organisation has sought to make this area become a hub for creative and cultural industries and activities. These efforts have been complemented with the redesigning of urban spaces and the rehabilitation of row houses, which have favoured the settling of new retail shops and artists' studios. A primary effect of these policies has been the sparking of the real estate sector. Fostered by the Baltimore Development Corporation, local and national real estate investors have redeveloped abandoned areas in the neighbourhood, using the image and the attractiveness of the Arts District as a brand to market them. For example, a development facilitated by the public sector brought the Station North Townhomes to be put successfully on the high- middle-income housing market in 2007 by a real estate firm based in Washington, DC. The typology of the townhouse was formally adaptable to host artists' studios and eventual showrooms in what currently are garages for cars. In this context, Baltimore's historical Railway Express building is currently undergoing a \$11-million renovation to become 40 rental loft units for artists to work and live in, in addition to 20 000 square feet of standard commercial office space. As one of the real estate developers stated

We were initially attracted here by the benefits of the Station North programme, by the positive attitude of the local government and by the seemingly growing cultural scene. Indeed we are going to advertise this operation as a "unique opportunity for homebuyers seeking a sophisticated, urban lifestyle in a convenient and more affordable location" (interview, November 2006).

At the community level, the newly established cultural district has constantly been promoting meetings, workshops and events involving

## Greenmount West Industrial Building PUD Area Map

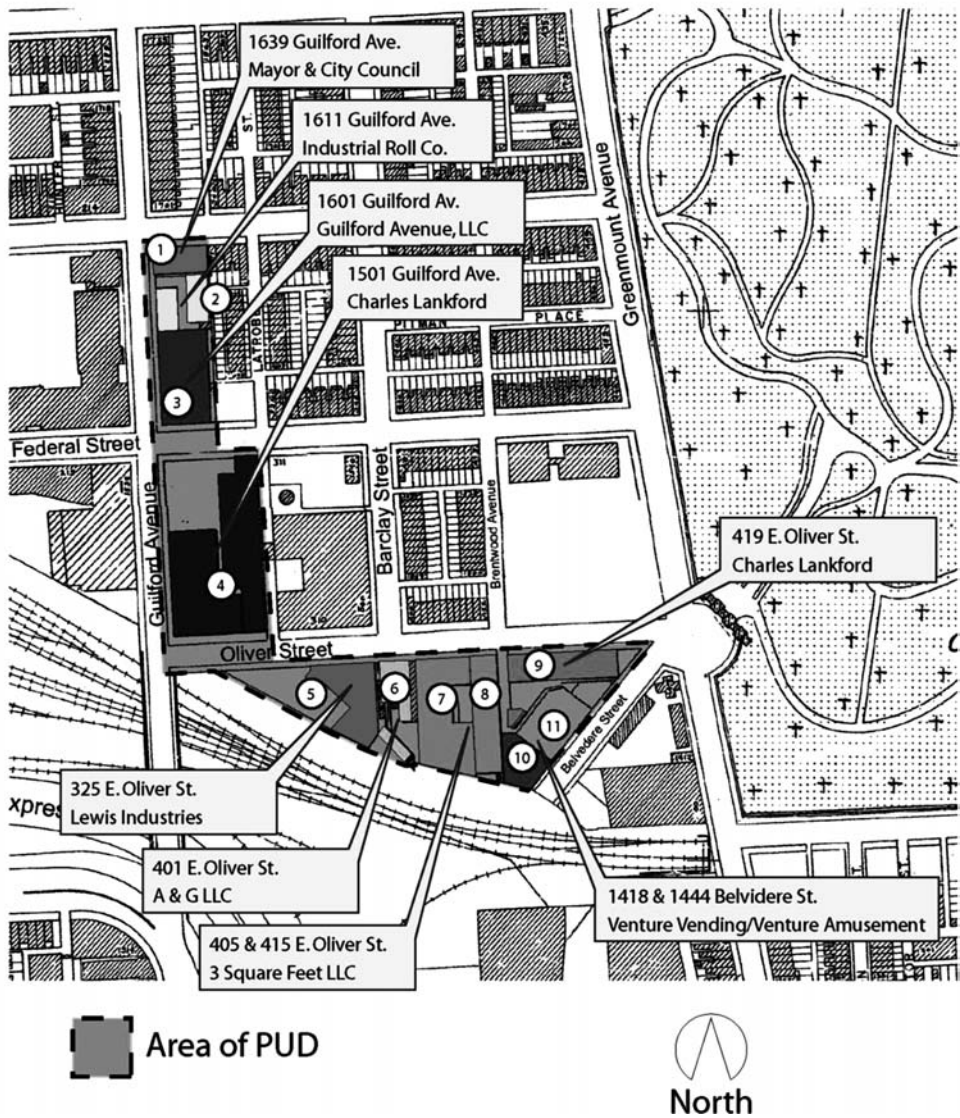


Figure 2. Planned Unit Development (PUD) in the Station North area.

local dwellers, schools, associations, artists and residents, in the attempt to convey a renewed image of the area as a socially mixed and culturally vibrant neighbourhood. As a result of these initiatives and wider policy

endeavours, since 2002 the District has substantially increased the presence of artists living and/or working there, with more than 400 artists owning or renting accommodation in the area (SNAED, 2004); at the same

time, the average sale prices of housing have witnessed significant increases in the past 10 years (Gross, 2006b).

The designation of Station North as a cultural district and the mobilisation of a set of public and private actors and coalitions that have become involved in the regeneration process show how the governmentalisation of culture for urban policy ends and the related discourse on Baltimore becoming a creative city have increased the attractiveness of the neighbourhood, but have also accommodated interests and expectations largely exceeding those of long-term residents, and particularly of those lower in the social ladder.

The cultural and urban revitalisation policies that have been undertaken in the neighbourhood have comprised a wide range of measures and initiatives and corresponding actors, partnerships and coalitions, but have not been generally linked to social cohesion and inclusion objectives. As in other pathways to neo-liberal urbanism (see Miles and Paddison, 2005), this experience of culture-led regeneration policy has proved to be more concerned with the enactment and integration of different policies for economic growth and real estate revitalisation rather than with the pursuit of social inclusion and cohesion goals. The 'spectre' of gentrification has been dealt with by the promise of social mixing and the asserted willingness to keep the original social connotations of the neighbourhood, but over the medium and the long run these appear to be mere rhetorical palliatives rather than effective policy measures promoting the social inclusion of the weaker groups and individuals.

As said before, at the city level, the BOPA has played the role as the main managing actor of the Creative Baltimore Initiative. At the neighbourhood level, the SNAED has acted as the main actor in the creative district policy, integrating a set of already-existing policies on the same spatial base. Overall, the aim of these policies seems to be the triggering of a

heterarchical, decentralised and dynamic process in which local actors commit to constructing and portraying themselves as 'autonomous agents' within the public realm of the city. In the reality of the policy implementation, however, the agency and the identity of the local actors becoming involved in the initiative are rigidly subsumed in the creative city's intellectual technology and get normatively oriented towards the objectives identified by the wider urban governance strategy.

## 5. Conclusion

The described politics developing around the target of making Baltimore a creative city, in contrast to its long-term reputation as a dangerous and unliveable place, have taken the form of a complex set of both inherited and novel network-building dynamics, enrolling a number of unevenly institutionalised and empowered agents, which has resulted in the invention of a new macro-actor—namely, the urban creative class. In this context, cultural organisations are treated merely as 'pre-existing objects' needing to be positioned in a wider policy framework. The ordering and the mobilising of these actors, practices and procedures give rise to a contingent institutional arrangement originating from the creative city's intellectual technology, this latter being constituted by a host of knowledge and performance tools capable of shaping the agency and the sense of belonging of local actors, including normative policy narratives, statistical indexes and local economy reports, consultants' advices and ready-to-use handbooks, open consultations and other community meetings. At the wide city level, urban leadership reaps a number of benefits from this 'politics of becoming' (see Gibson-Graham, 2006), while the advantages for cultural organisations in being part of the newly created collective actor under the creative banner are less clear. The latter have the opportunity to acquire visibility and to gain



symbolic reference from their membership to the local creative community, but the actual support given to their activities is limited and they have to find more effective forms of institutional support, both organisational and financial. At a neighbourhood level, cultural organisations manage to benefit from culture-led urban policies, by also integrating policies with different goals (regeneration, economic growth, mixed-income housing development), but in this context the long-term residents, especially those in the lower classes, are typically excluded from the benefits of the policies themselves.

Again, in line with the legacy of Baltimore's shadow government in the 1980s and the related neo-liberal turn in urban policies, a key factor is to create support for a contingent governing arrangement relating to the urban regeneration strategy. This goal can be pursued either in the form of downtown physical regeneration, as happened in the 1980s, or in that of the more recent cultural policies aimed at making Baltimore a creative city. Within these processes, culture and, more specifically, urban 'creativity', as culture itself is now redefined in more energetic terms in the context of 'turbo-capitalism', are mobilised by local leadership as relational resources in the politics of networking.

These conclusions lead us to a broader reflection on the creative city theory, on the one hand, and on the practices of urban governance in advanced liberal societies, on the other hand. Richard Florida's ideas have been critically evaluated within urban and regional studies especially in regard to their internal consistency and rigour (see Markusen, 2006; Scott, 2006). Other authors have placed emphasis on their possible implications for urban policies and most particularly on their contribution to softer but equally unjust forms of neo-liberal urbanism (Peck, 2005; Barnes *et al.*, 2006; Ward, 2007). This paper has sought to contribute to this critical literature on creative class ideas by investigating and

discussing their direct institutional implications when they are translated into a practice of urban policy.

It has been pointed out that, in the Baltimore experience, the creative class policy has consisted of a process of symbolic and material reordering of subjects and of the repositioning of these subjects in the urban public sphere under the rubric of a newly invented macro-actor. In terms of decision-making method, this experience has been heavily constrained as the city-wide consultation process has been confined to the beginning part of the policy initiative, to the gathering stage of the macro-actor, while few substantial efforts have been devoted to encourage mutual and permanent exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences between urban leaders, policy-makers and cultural organisations. This lack of institutional imagination and experimentalism has prevented those leading the policy process from becoming aware of the needs of the artistic and cultural community; as a consequence, the city-wide 'Creative Baltimore Initiative' ended up being an instrumental intellectual technology, on the one hand dealing with the allocation of given material and political resources and, on the other hand, institutionally enabling the disciplining of cultural actors. Besides, at the neighbourhood level, despite the promised delights of urban renaissance and social mixing, culture-led initiatives have not engaged in policy measures tackling or just preventing the probable gentrification effects sparked by spatial revitalisation dynamics.

In conclusion, the Baltimore experience sheds light on the uneven geographies of power generated by a creative city policy within a context of neo-liberal urbanism: cultural actors can be either losers or winners, depending on the scale of the policy and their size and bargaining capacity; the political and economic élites and their more closely associated institutional partners can opportunistically benefit from these strategies, although these

benefits are likely to be contingent and volatile; the less-affluent communities of urban-dwellers are those not gaining any direct and immediate benefit from a creative class policy and are those who are, in all the evidence, affected by the rise in housing prices and living costs that spatial revitalisation brings on the local level. This 'politics of becoming' developing in 'wannabe' creative places like Baltimore and its deprived neighbourhoods confirms the neo-liberal character, albeit presented in a deliberately seductive and progressive fashion, of culture-led policies, where the institutional imperative of networking and collaboration directs all the attention to the goal of enhancing the sense of membership to a more or less spatialised 'creative' community and, in doing so, obfuscates the importance of 'classic' goals of socio-spatial justice and emancipation in contemporary capitalist cities.

## Notes

1. In the 1980s, Italian proponents of 'weak thought', a heterogeneous group of philosophers and sociologists in search of a post-foundationalist and post-rationalist explanation of the world, suggested thinking productively about the apparent antinomy between dialectics and difference, coming to the conclusion that a 'weak thought' is to be concerned with the symbolic forms of the being (Vattimo, 1983). The work of Richard Florida on cities can be understood along these lines: it refuses to hold a pre-fixed ontology of the urban phenomenon (all cities are potentially creative, including ever-struggling and hard places in which to live, like Baltimore) and leaves open a multiplicity of pathways to the creative city, without prescribing any specific policy framework.
2. Schaefer is one of the best examples of powerful mayors that Baltimore has ever had, probably along with the charismatic figure of Thomas D'Alesandro in the 1960s. David Harvey has written the following about Schaefer had grown in Baltimore's Democratic party machine politics, and he was everything a machine politician should be. He believed strongly in a partnership of business and private enterprise for furthering the city's development and in an elaborate and often ruthless politics of social control over the city's neighbourhoods. To offend the mayor was to risk retribution; to play along with him meant patronage and access to city services (Harvey, 1991, pp. 236–237).
3. It is interesting to note that, at the time of writing (January 2009), Sheila Dixon, the African-American mayor elected in 2007 when O'Malley was sworn in as governor, known as Baltimore's first female mayor, has been indicted on charges of bribery and corruption. Even though Mayor Dixon says that she is being unfairly accused, these recent events exemplify the degree of controversy faced by mayors in Baltimore.
3. Its revenues originate from a variety of public and private sources, including a 33 per cent of Baltimore city operating budget, a 20 per cent of corporate contributions, a 20 per cent of Government and foundation grants.

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