

SCIBE

WORKING PAPER NR.

SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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SOCIAL CREATIVITY

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A Working Paper for SCIBE
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Creativity and religion are closely linked. Since ancient times and until very recently creativity was in the exclusive domain of the Gods; human creativity was possible only through divine endowment.

The weakening of the hold which the church exercised over human affairs during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment idea that humans could control their own destiny, the success of the application of the principles and methods of the natural sciences to industrial production during the nineteenth century, all contributed to a parallel process of change in the understanding of creativity; and although creativity was no longer thought to be an act in which humans were mere mediators of divine will it retained its exclusivity through the belief that it was lodged in a few inspired individuals. This is why the vast majority of the existing literature on creativity focuses on individual creativity and comes from the fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology.

However recent research has begun to downgrade the importance of individual creativity. The latest studies suggest that creative ideas are more often generated in active social networks than by individuals working on their own.¹ Furthermore the work of Geoffrey West at the Santa Fe Institute suggests that there is a positive exponential relation between the size of a social network and its creative output.² In parallel to this there has been a

¹ See for example: Kevin Dunbar, 'How Scientists build Models', in: *Model Based Reasoning in Scientific Discovery*, Ward, Smith, Vaid (eds.), Washington DC: American Psychological Assoc., 1999.

² See:

<http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid589138719001?bclid=87675639001&bctid=557131404001>

trend towards the democratisation of the concept of creativity, a change from elitism to populism, from exclusive to inclusive, ending up with the recent suggestion that any everyday act, however mundane, should be considered creative.³ For example, Richard Florida's claims, that "... creativity has become the principal driving force in the growth and development of cities, regions, and nations..."⁴ and that the potential for creativity is evenly distributed throughout the population are part of this trend. His views have become widely diffused, accepted, and are driving the development policies of countless cities and regions in the developed world.

The diffusion of the concept of creativity in the last few decades has inevitably led to its misuse. John Tusa sums this up well,

'Creative', 'creation', 'creativity' are some of the most overused and ultimately debased words in the language. Stripped of any special significance by a generation of bureaucrats, civil servants, managers and politicians, lazily used as political margarine to spread approvingly and inclusively over any activity with a non-material element to it, the word 'creative' has become almost unusable. Politics and the ideology of ordinariness, the wish not to put anyone down, the determination not to exalt the exceptional, the culture of oversensitivity, of avoiding hurt feelings, have seen to that.⁵

If we are to make a meaningful use of the concept of creativity in our research we must come up with a definition which sets criteria which, with some rigor, allows us to establish either the existence, or absence, of a creative act and its 'depth'. By depth I mean the extent to which the creative act introduces meaningful change to the social group in question.

³ See for example: T. Edensor, D. Leslie, S. Millington, & N.M. Rantisi (eds.), *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, London: Routledge, 2010.

⁴ See Richard Florida, *The rise of the creative class* NY: Basic Books, 2002. and *Cities and the creative class*, 2005.

⁵ John Tusa, *On creativity : interviews exploring the process of creativity*, London: Methuen, 2003.

Most definitions of creativity fall far short of this goal. In most cases there is consensus that a creative act must contain something new and useful. However, in many cases the interpretation of these two requirements is so broad that all everyday acts are considered creative. In this understanding of creativity taking a bus to work, instead of the usual underground, constitutes a creative act.

However, if we apply some rigor to the three criteria most often cited as defining a creative act we can begin to distinguish between *social acts* and *social creativity*:

1. New

For something to be considered creative it has to be new. Newness is the basis on which creativity rests, and it has two dimensions:

1.1 For who is the idea or product new? Is it new for an individual? For a social group? For society as a whole? That an idea or product is new for an individual or small social group may only be indicative of the limitations of such an individual or group.

1.2 Newness must be considered in terms of its social relevance. Is the new product or idea relevant to just one individual or small group, or is it relevant to society? I would suggest newness is only relevant when it applies to, and affects the lives of, a significantly large social group.

2. Useful

The requirement that the product of a creative act must be useful serves two purposes:

2.1 To eliminate ideas and products which may be novel but of little consequence to society.

2.2 To establish the 'depth' of a creative act, the extent to which a creative act is useful. A creative act whose outcome affects the whole of society is, in my view, more significant than one which affects the life of one

individual or a small social group. Thus the invention of a product such as the steam engine, is more useful for society than a product which solves a single individual's problem. In a similar way, ideas which are the origin of a paradigm shifts have more creative 'depth' than those which merely refine our understanding. Thus Einstein's concept of relativity, Darwin's association of evolution and survival of the fittest, and Marx's concept of historical materialism, are more creative than the work done by others to confirm or refute these propositions.

In short, the extent of the utility of a creative act grows as it impacts a larger segment of society.

3. Valid

That an idea or product is new to an individual or group may be merely an indication that they are not very well informed or, alternatively, that it is ahead of its time. Thus, creative ideas or products need to be recognized as such by those who are familiar with its field of knowledge, and also by its potential future users. To illustrate the differences in recognition of a creative idea or product we can refer to Charles Babbage's two early XIXc inventions: one of which, the Difference Engine, was taken up and developed by many others in the second half of the XIXc, whereas the other, the Analytical Engine, which was the first programmable computer, had to wait until the second half of the XXc.

The creation of a new idea or product is in itself not enough; it must also be socially validated.

Social Creativity

In my view, and in terms of our SCIBE project, our focus should be on the social dimensions of creativity. It is at this scale that our assessment of the relation between scarcity and creativity acquires significance.

When it comes to the concept of *social creativity* we encounter yet more difficulties and fewer attempts at definitions. One example of the slack use

of this concept is provided by Manzini and Vezzoli who, after claiming that their focus is on social creativity, write: “The *creative communities* are groups of people organised to obtain a certain result, to solve a problem and/or to open a new opportunity.”⁶ By making *social creativity* equivalent to *problem solving* we restrict creativity’s scope almost exclusively to science, technology and economics and also limit its relevance to socio-cultural processes, which is precisely what makes creativity worth investigating. Semantically defining away the problem is the easy, and not very interesting, way out of the difficulties which the concept of *social creativity* presents.

In our own SCIBE research, where we are trying to establish whether scarcity leads to increased or diminished social creativity, we need a definition of social creativity which would allow us to differentiate between social acts and creative acts and that would enable us to assess the ‘depth’ of creative acts.

Currently the most widely used method for assessing social creativity is through ‘creativity indices’. These derive from *Indicator Suites* which is a method for describing multifaceted and complex social phenomena not in a direct way but rather through related data sets which reveal partial aspects of the phenomenon in question. In *Indicator Suites* the results from each data set are not seen as definitive but as one ingredient to be interpreted in relation to others.

At one end of the spectrum of creativity indices we encounter Richard Florida’s *Creativity Index* which uses just three data sets (talent, technology, and tolerance) and aggregates these into one numerical value which represents the social creativity of a city, region, or country.

The drive to determine the creative potential of cities, regions and countries has taken many forms. For example Australia developed the

⁶ Vezzoli, C. and Manzini, E., *Design for Environmental Sustainability*, London: Springer, 2008, p.34.

Innovative Capacity index, which purports to measure Australia's creative drive in relation to other countries on the basis of one data set. The European Commission has developed the *European Innovation Scoreboard* to measure the creative performance of European countries on the basis of seven data sets.

The simplicity of the indices which aggregate results from a small number of data sets has attracted many followers, especially amongst planners and policymakers, and at the same time has been the reason for their criticism. In order to counter this criticism creativity indices which incorporate many more data sets have appeared. One of the most complex is the *5Cs Model*⁷ which uses near one hundred data sets.

A further development, and loosening, of Creativity Indices has been to suggest that the results from each data set should not be aggregated but rather interpreted. In the *Assembled Creative Sectors*⁸ index the results of each data set are not numerically, but rather graphically, represented. This allows for a greater latitude of interpretation and for the use of imperfect and incomplete data sets.

The nature of data sources are of significant importance to creativity indices. Numerical data drawn from the census or other periodical surveys have the advantage of covering large areas and large social groups in addition to allowing comparisons across space and time. However, at the same time they are limited in terms of explaining the *why* and *how* of social creativity.

For these reasons projects such as the *Cultural Initiatives*, Silicon Valley, based on the claim that culture has a vital practical relevance for the economy and civil society, use questionnaires rather than data sets for its *Creative Community Index*. What makes the exclusive use of questionnaires

⁷ Honk Kong Centre for Cultural Policy Research, *A Study on Creativity Index*, Hong Kong: Home Affairs Bureau, The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, n.d. (c. 2005).

⁸ E. Bertachini and W. Santagata, 'Creativity Indexes', in *Cultural Expression, Creativity and Innovation*, ed. H. a. Y. Anheier, R.I., Los Angeles 2010, pp. 307-316.

possible is that the objectives of this project are to measure cultural vitality in one place over time, rather than comparatively with other regions.

Summary

Social creativity is a complex, multifaceted concept. The challenge for our research, which is trying to establish the influence of scarcity/abundance on environmental creativity, is to find a way to comparatively assess the extent to which different creative acts bring meaningful change to social groups.

A rigorous definition of creativity should go some way to establishing the nature and 'depth' of a creative act. However, this will not be enough to allow for comparisons between creative acts. For this we need to understand the context within which the creative act emerged. Who were the actors? Which were their relationships? To what extent did the creative act affect them? What data is capable and relevant to explaining the creative act? In other words we need to establish the social network within which the creative act took place.

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