Chapter 8

Competitiveness and Creative Cities: Technologies of Neoliberal Urbanization in Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role of technologies of neoliberal urbanization in reproducing new urban spaces that are oriented towards securing a competitive edge. As such, this chapter explores questions about how urban technologies influence the parameters of the reproduction of city spaces and which social representations, actors and networks are involved the process. This chapter contends that competitiveness is not limited to the realm of economics. It also contends that in neoliberal times, “new technologies of power” enable the creation of more polycentric urban areas.

These emerging technologies and applications necessitate an analysis of their place in mobilizing low urban politics. This analysis should be attuned to nuanced articulations of public interests and private initiatives that are enriched by representations of the spatial realities of cities. We are more likely to realize the importance of urban technologies and “street level” everyday urban practices if, rather than treating them as divorced from each other, we ontologically recognize their marriage. Such an approach will help to better diagnose the role that technologies play in moving beyond dualities like public and private.

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Timelines -- Trinity Square Park, Toronto.

...this project chronicles the lives of the homeless through wall-mounted timeline vines in bright green, orange and purple. The timelines, embedded with audio speakers talking about people’s connections to the park and their lives, also display photographs of their subjects (opencityprojects.com).

—Aaron Szymanski, OCAD University

Junction Box -- TTC Shelter, Toronto.

...this project proposed turning a bus shelter into an interactive touch screen where Bluetooth-bearing residents and riders can access information about local restaurants, events and music, or add their own thoughts, pictures or videos to the screen’s database (opencityprojects.com).

—Calvin Lee, OCAD University

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps, the above-mentioned projects by OpenCity Projects consultancy in Toronto tell us more than anything about the limits of how cities search for creativity. These projects not only stretch the limits of creativity, but also inform us about the neoliberal trajectories pursued by “globalizing” cities and their excessive focus on sustaining competitiveness. This chapter looks at these trajectories by specifically focusing on the interstices of creative cities and competitiveness and the role of played by communication technologies. Speaking of creativity, Richard Florida’s “Creative City” (2008, 2006, 2005, and 2002) thesis is a fertile analytical approach for understanding how cities, especially in periods of neoliberal globalization, have become central to the attainment of competitive advantage. Resulting from the internalization of neoliberal values by national governments, local authorities, municipal leaders and other actors, it is now possible to detect a form of “hollowed out” nation state (Jessop, 2002), or the downloading of the capacities, responsibilities and authority of nation states onto cities. Consequently, as Florida’s “Creative City” thesis illustrates, the real economic competition today plays out among cities, not nation states. Florida’s thesis positions the three T’s - Technology, Talent, and Tolerance – as responsible for attracting the “Creative Class”, contributing to the national economy and establishing the requisite framework for sustaining competitive advantage. While communication technologies should not be perceived as the only determinant of “creativity”, they are indicative of the “new technologies of power” which have arguably become the momentum behind the intensification of a neoliberal ethos in urban spaces. As such, Florida’s creative city thesis and its accompanying buzzwords, “creative class” and “creative economy”, celebrate the increasing hegemony of the neoliberal market mentality.

Nonetheless, this hegemony is a contested one, albeit in different forms, intensities and technologies. The mechanisms portrayed as making cities more competitive also inform us that, while competitiveness is a key neoliberal concern in the production of urban spaces and creative cities, innovative technologies work in two directions: (1) deepening the hegemony of markets by marshalling creativity and communication technologies towards the deeper entrenchment of market logic; and (2) impacting the way urban space is imagined, instituted and produced by actors outside the realm of the state. This chapter will focus to a greater extent on the latter dimension, which acknowledges that communication technologies make use of a new conception of space that is not under the hegemony of state actors, but influenced by non-state, civil actors as well. Here, it should be noted that the second conception of communication technologies is not at loggerheads with the first, and does not negate the role of markets in capitalist societies. In fact,
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