

Back to the Future of the Creative City

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Constant Nieuwenhuys in his studio, 1967

Sometimes digging into the past is necessary in order to illuminate the present. In this case, contrasting Amsterdam's ongoing Creative City policy with a utopian precursor will hopefully shed some light on the contradictions inherent in the contemporary fusion between creativity and industry. Despite being a recent hype, the Creative City policy has shown remarkable vigour and longevity. Not unlike famous ageing rock bands, even in advancing years it has still been able to maintain a spell on groupies and adherents at local city governments around the western world.¹ However, I do not intend to argue that when it was young and fresh, Richard Florida's Creative Class Rock rang any truer, only that all along the line a different tune is being played than the lyrics imply. Rather, that Amsterdam's Creative City policy – far from intending to make the city's entire population more creative – is predominantly a branding exercise, an expression of a more general shift towards entrepreneurial modes of city government; a shift that is currently being played out through an impressive urban redevelopment of Amsterdam.

The comparison between sociologist Richard Florida – author of two books on the rise and flight of the Creative Class – and a rock star is not unusual. Google 'rock star' with 'Richard Florida' and you will find dozens of descriptions of performances by the 'rock star academic' responsible for introducing pop sociology into regional economics. Amongst his urban policy dos and don'ts, "lacking rock bands" even figures prominently among the reasons why a city could lose out on the economic development race.² This article, however, is not about the peculiar fusion occurring between pop culture and social science, but rather about the utopian claims that are being made for the creative economy. Florida has pronounced creativity to be a "great equaliser", pleading for a 'New Deal' of the creative economy. Likewise, Job Cohen – the mayor of Amsterdam – has pronounced Amsterdam to be a Creative City that will "foster the creativity of all its inhabitants".³

In retrospect, these claims can be seen as somewhat distorted echoes of an earlier utopian project that alluded to the revolutionary rise of creativity. Let's take a short leap back in history, back to the future as imagined by the Dutch avant-garde, and more specifically, the artist Constant Nieuwenhuys. He was one of the founders of the experimental art group Reflex, which later became part of the international CoBrA movement. Discontented with the limitations of the world of art and the "individualistic nature" of painting, Constant abandoned them in 1953 to focus on a more promising exploration of metal and architectural techniques. In 1957, he became a co-founder of the Situationist International (SI) and wrote the renowned tract on Unitary Urbanism with Guy Debord. Until his resignation in 1961, he would play an essential role in the formulation of a Situationist perspective on the contemporary city and a critique of modernist urbanism.

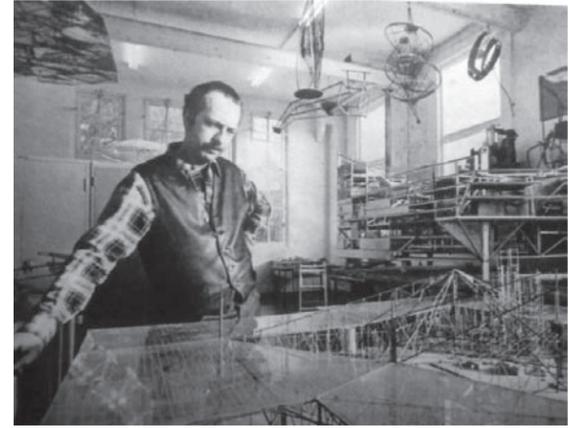
In 1956, Constant started a visionary architectural project that would stretch out over twenty years. A utopian city that went by the name of New Babylon, it consisted of an almost endless series of scale models, sketches, etchings and collages, further elaborated by manifestoes, lectures, essays and films. The project was a provocation, an explicit metaphor for the Creative City:

"The modern city is dead; it has been sacrificed to the cult of utility. New Babylon is the project for a city in which people will be able to live. For to live means to be creative. New Babylon is the product of the creativity of the masses, based on the activation of the enormous creative potential which at the moment lies dormant and unexploited in the people. New Babylon assumes that as a result of automation non-creative work will disappear, that there will be a metamorphosis in morals and thinking, that a new form of society will emerge."⁴

Constant Nieuwenhuys envisaged a society where automation had realised the liberation of humanity from the toils of industrial work, replacing labour with a nomadic life of creative play outside of the economic domain and in disregard of any considerations of functionality. "Contrary to what the functionalists think, culture is situated at the point where usefulness ends", was one of Constant's more provocative statements.⁵ Homo Faber, the worker of industrial society, was to be succeeded by Homo Ludens, the playful man or as Constant stated, the creative man. This was the inhabitant of New Babylon that thanks to modern architectural techniques would be able to spontaneously control and reconfigure every aspect of the urban environment. Constant took the surrealist slogan "poetry should be made by all" and translated it to the urban environment, "tomorrow, life will reside in poetry".⁶ The work of Constant thus combined an aversion for modernist functionalism with an intense appreciation of the emancipatory potentials of new technology. Mechanisation would result in the arrival of a "mass culture of creativity" that would revolt against the superstructure of bourgeois society, destroying it completely and taking the privileged position of the artist down with it. A society would be created where, in accordance with Marx's vision of art in a communist society, "there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities".⁷ The work of Nieuwenhuys would have a direct and major influence on the rise of youth movement Provo. The Dutch counterculture proved to be an almost perfect incarnation of the Homo Ludens; through relentless provocation, happenings and playful actions, Provo would bring the authoritarianism of the Dutch '50s down to its knees.

Life Is Put to Work

However, developments took an unexpected turn. Automation and consequent de-industrialisation – the outsourcing of manufacturing to developing countries – did not lead to the liberation of the Homo Ludens (or maybe we should grant Homo Ludens a short and partial victory, a short interlude located somewhere in the youth culture of the '60s, before being sent back to work). It is well known that since the '60s the total amount of working hours has grown steeply. Together with the consolidation of consumption as a leisure activity, the expansion of labour time has led to an unprecedented amount of human activity being directly or indirectly incorporated into the sphere of economic transactions through a process Marx would have called 'real subsumption', or the extension of capitalism onto the field of ontology, of lived social practice. Whereas Constant envisioned the liberation of the creative domain from the economic, we are currently witnessing – in sync with the Creative City discourse – the extension of the economic into the creative



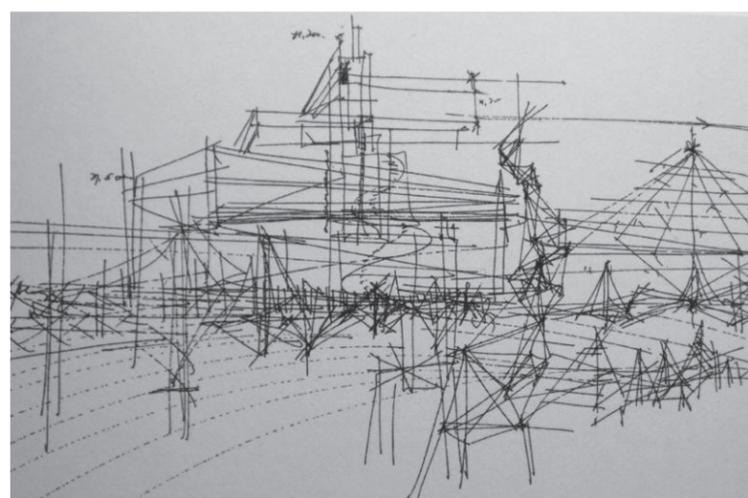
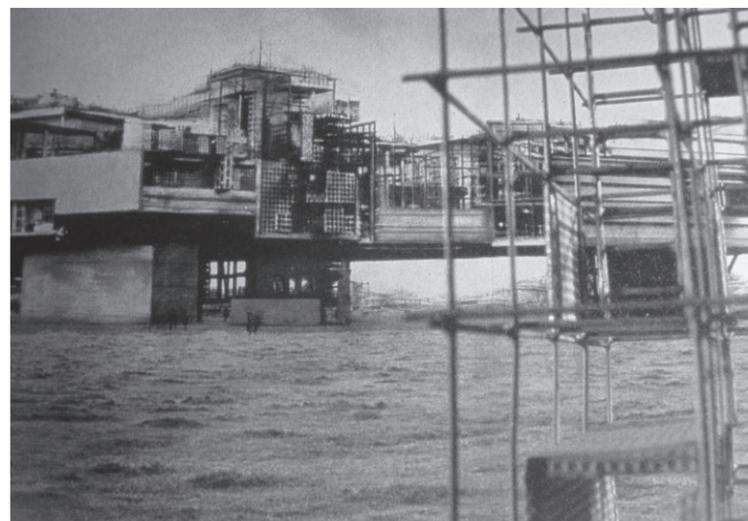
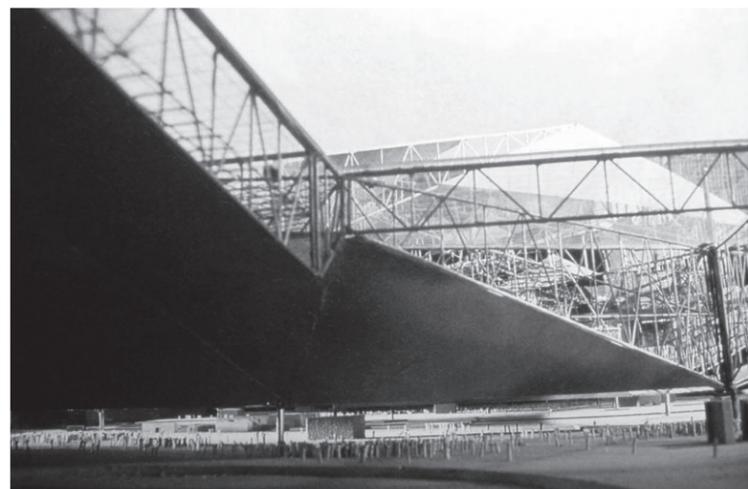
domain. This is exemplified by the transformation of the artist into a cultural entrepreneur, the marketing of (sub)cultural expressions, the subservience of culture to tourist flows and the triumph of functionalism over *bildungsideal* (an educational ideal) at the university. There is an interesting spatial illustration of this dynamic. The once niche economy of the arts occupied a fringe position in the Amsterdam housing market as squatted dockland warehouses. Now that the artistic production has been incorporated and elevated towards a seemingly pivotal position in the urban economy, it has been accommodated into the city through mechanisms such as *het broedplaatsenbeleid* or temporary housing contracts.⁸ The majority of non-functional space in the city, derelict or squatted territories, has now been redeveloped or is in process of redevelopment. There is no longer an outside position.

What distinguishes the earlier utopian creative 'Babylon' from the one referred to by Florida and the Amsterdam City Council? To start with, in the post-Fordist economy, the rise of the creative sector in advanced economies is predicated upon displacement of industrial functions to low wage localities and the exploitation of cheap manual labour. This new functional divide in the global economy and its polarised wage structure is referred to as the New International Division of Labour.⁹ As part of this development, we have seen the rise of global cities whose economic success depends on the presence of high tech innovation and global control functions. These economic nodes co-ordinate international flows of goods, finance outsourced production, market and design global commodities and maintain a monopolist control over client relations.¹⁰ From a macro perspective, the claims of the new creative city as being a 'great equalizer' actually appear as the opposite; it is based on functional inequality. Now let's take a closer look at the city.

Amsterdam™

To properly understand the arrival of the Creative City policy and what sets it aside from its utopian predecessor, we have to place it in a larger context. The Creative City is part and parcel of a greater shift impacting on the city, causing the Keynesian management of bygone eras to be replaced by an entrepreneurial approach. The rise in importance of productive sectors that are considered *laissez faire* approaches to a city's economic well-being has led to increased interurban competition. Amsterdam is pitted against urban centres such as Barcelona, London, Paris and Frankfurt in a struggle to attract economic success in the form

Top:
'New Babylon',
large yellow
sector, 1967
Middle:
Construction of
'New Babylon'
sector, 1959
Bottom:
Sketch of
'New Babylon'
sector 1961-62



of investments, a talented workforce and tourists flocking to the city. The ever-present threat of inter-urban competition is continuously invoked and inflated throughout the policy rhetoric. To illustrate my point, even the discussion on whether to discontinue a prohibition of gas heaters on the terraces of Amsterdam cafés was recently framed in these terms: "it's a serious disadvantage in comparison with cities like Berlin and Paris", according to the leader of the local social democrat party.¹¹ The opinion of the city's population itself was not even mentioned in the newspaper article.

The dominance of entrepreneurial approaches to city politics is the feature of a new urban regime, labelled by scholars as the 'Entrepreneurial City'.¹² With origins in the reality of neoliberal state withdrawal from urban plight in the United States, it has taken some time to arrive in the corporatist Netherlands and filter through the minds of policy makers. In this new urban regime, independent of any specific party in power, the public sector displays behaviour that was once characteristic of the private sector: risk assessment, innovation, marketing and profit motivated thinking. Public money is invested into private economic development through public-private partnerships to outflank inter-urban competition, hence the rise of mega-developments and marketing projects such as the Docklands in London, the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Zuid As in Amsterdam. A concern voiced by critics such as David Harvey is that although costs are public, profit will be allocated to the urban elite, hypothetically to 'trickle down' to the rest of the population. To face this new market reality – where cities are seen as products and city councils operate as business units – Amsterdam Inc. has launched the branding projects *I Amsterdam* and *Amsterdam Creative City*. After coming to power in Spring 2006, one of the first steps of the new progressive city council was to launch a 'Top City Programme' aimed at consolidating the city's 'flagging' position in the top ten of preferred urban business climates:

"Viewed from an outsider's vantage point, Amsterdam is clearly ready to reposition itself. This is why we've launched the Amsterdam Top City programme. In order to keep ahead of the global competition, Amsterdam needs to renew itself. In other words, in order to enjoy a great future worthy of its great past, what Amsterdam needs now is great thinking."¹³

Of course, "creativity will be the central focus point" of this programme, since "creativity is the motor that gives the city its magnetism and dynamism". However, when one looks beyond the rhetoric to the practicalities of the programme, it is surprisingly modest: sponsored expatriate welcome centres in Schiphol Airport; coaching for creative entrepreneurs by major Dutch banks and MTV; 'hospitality training' for caterers; 'Amsterdam Top City' publications in KLM flights; and the annual Picnic Cross Media week, a conference aspiring to be the Dutch Davos of creative entrepreneurs.

In arguably one of the best critiques of Creative City theory, geographer Jamie Peck examines why Florida's work proved to have such an impressive influence on policy makers around the world.¹⁴ According to Peck's sobering conclusion, Florida's creative city thesis was by no means groundbreaking – various authors had published on the knowledge economy before – but it provided a cheap, non-controversial and

pragmatic marketing script that fitted well with the existing entrepreneurial schemes of urban economic development. It offered a program that city authorities could afford to do on the side, a low budget public relations scheme complemented by a reorientation of already existing cultural funding. In Amsterdam, however, this creative branding may appear modest in its budget but is actually extensive in its effects, it is the immaterial icing on the cake of an impressive urban redevelopment of the city.

Amsterdam currently abounds with building works, it is facing what I have called an 'Extreme Makeover'. The city's old harbours are being redeveloped into luxurious living and working environments; in its southern side, a new skyline is being realised, the Zuid As, a high rise business district that is supposed to function as a portal to the world economy. In the post-war popular neighbourhoods, more houses are being demolished than ever before in the history of the city, and a significant part of the social housing will make way for more expensive owner-occupant apartments. The trajectory of the new metro line – a straight line of sand, cement and continuous construction works – crosses the city from North to South and thus connects the new city with the old.

Not only is one of Europe's largest urban renewal operations underway, with demolition reaching historic levels, the image of the city itself is also being reworked. In both the re-branding and redevelopment of Amsterdam, the creative sector plays an important role. Creative industries are supposed to function as a catalyst for urban redevelopment, changing the image of a neighbourhood from backward to hip. Schemes have been put into place to temporarily or permanently house artists in neighbourhoods sited to be upgraded. Though modest in its budget, the *I Amsterdam* and *Creative City* marketing campaigns are conceptually advanced (and extensively present in the public consciousness), for city marketing is the apex of *consumer generated content*, the dominant trend in marketing techniques. Creative hipsters serve as communicative vessels for branding projects; between concept stores, galleries, fashion and street art magazines, the cultural economy expands itself over the urban domain and into the public realm.

The new marketing function of the creative sector is perhaps best illustrated by the recent project of Sandberg called *Artvertising*. It involves the facade of the Sandberg fine arts and design faculty being turned into a huge billboard filled with logos of predominantly major companies and also some smaller cultural projects. Following the model of the Million Dollar Homepage, the sixteen thousand tiles of the facade (35 x 29cm each) were sold for 20 euros a piece, making sure to mention that all the business savvy people of the office park Zuid As would be passing on the adjacent ring road. A small blurb from the website of *Artvertising*:

"Every self considered art or design intellectual ends up twisting his or her nose to the so-called 'commercial world'. Art, culture, criticism is what it matters. But we don't think so. We believe that now, more than always, the world is ruled by commercial and economical relationships. Culture defines, and most important, is defined these days by market dynamics."¹⁵

The Sandberg project is a beautiful illustration of the state of art in the Entrepreneurial City.

Perfectly vacuous, it's like a bubble that's bound to burst. The accomplishment of the project – note also its grammatical bluntness – is that it becomes at once the tool of critique and its object; the embodiment of post-critical art, stretched beyond the cynical dystopias of Rem Koolhaas. However, it did not fail in sparking some resistance during its one month's existence, it was modestly vandalised by a group calling itself the 'Pollock commando', wanting to reclaim the facade as a "public canvas" by throwing paint bombs on it.¹⁶ Besides its uncritical embrace of the new commercial role of the artist as entrepreneur, the *Artvertising* project is also reflective of another tendency in Amsterdam's creative economy: with the borders between culture and economy fading away, the assessment of the value of art and cultural practice has risen in significance.

The Artificial Organic of Real Estate

In a recent article in *Real Estate Magazine*, we can read more about the strange collusion between the arts and real estate. It reads: "the concept of the Creative City is on the rise. Sometimes planned, sometimes organic, but up till now always thanks to real estate developers."¹⁷ The article consequently describes a roundtable discussion on the Creative City by real estate entrepreneurs, organised by René Hoogendoorn. She is the director of 'Strategic Projects' at *ING Real Estate*, the real estate branch of one of the biggest banking conglomerates of the Netherlands. 'Strategic Projects' means, according to Hoogendoorn, that she initiates the development of projects that need 'soul', in this case the Zuid As and the new development in the northern docklands, Overhoeks. She

combines this function with membership on the advisory board of the *Rietveld Art Academy*, the spatial planning department of the employers federation, and the *Amsterdam Creativity Exchange* – a club subsidised by the Creative City policy that, according to its own words, “provides an environment in which business and creativity meet.”¹⁸ It is no coincidence that the last meeting of the Creativity Exchange took place in the old Shell offices of the strategic Overhoeks district, in a way, already providing a taste of much-needed ‘soul’.¹⁹ Hoogendoorn explains that ING Real Estate invests in art and culture up to the point that it increases the value of real estate surrounding it. Interesting examples are *ING Real Estate funding Platform 21*, the design museum at the Zuid As, and the sponsoring of the post-squatter performance festival *Robodock* on the northern docklands. Hoogendoorn and other real estate developers are still struggling with the question “how to assess up-front the net cash value of the future added value of culture”, which shows there is still some way to go for the colonisation of culture.²⁰

Another interesting announcement in the article is that real estate developers have now come to realise the importance of ‘software’ for the successful realisation of real estate ‘hardware’. Cultural institutions and temporary art projects create ‘traffic’, and allow developers to slowly bring property “up to flavour”:

“it’s about creating space! The thing not to do is to publicly announce you’re going to haul in artists; instead, give them the feeling they’ve thought of it themselves. If it arises organically, levels will rise organically.”²¹

The distinction between urban ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ was initially coined as an architectural term by the pop-art architecture group *Archigram* to champion the use of soft and flexible materials like the inflatable bubble instead of modernist ‘hardware’ realised with steel and cement. Together with contemporaries such as the Italian group *Archizoom*, the French collective *Utopie* and publications such as Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City*²², *Archigram* levelled a critique against deadpan modernism, putting forward a more organic conception of the city as a living organism. Urban utopian theory thus acquired its present day computer analogy, where software is the ‘programming’ of the city and hardware its ‘infrastructure’. Much like the SI – experimenting with the bottom up approach through psychogeography and the *dérive* – subjective, organic and ‘soft’ approaches became a focus point for utopian urbanism.²³

The recuperation of the utopian language of the ‘60s into neo-functionalism by real estate entrepreneurs is tragically appropriate. In the SI’s ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’, Ivan Chitchevlov argues for a city where everyone could live in their “personal cathedral”. He proposed a city where districts correspond to their inhabitants emotional lives: Bizarre Quarter, Happy Quarter, Noble and Tragic Quarter, Historical Quarter, Useful Quarter, Sinister Quarter, etc.²⁴ In a similar vein, the present restructuring of the Dutch housing market has seen the arrival of “differentiated living milieus”, where planners partition existing neighbourhoods into themed areas accompanied by a discourse of ‘consumer choice’. In the Westelijke Tuinsteden, the biggest redevelopment of social housing in Amsterdam, planners have ‘re-imagined’ the entire neighbourhood in terms of different consumer identities, like ‘dreamer’, ‘doer’, ‘urbanite’, ‘networker’, ‘villager’, etc. When consumer demand from outside of the neighbourhood failed to materialise, however, the planners had to readapt their visions, reluctantly returning to a half-hearted focus on the needs of the local population.²⁵

As Brian Holmes has shown in his article ‘The Flexible Personality’²⁶, the cultural critique of the ‘60s and ‘70s, directed at the authoritarianism and centralized monotony of modernism, was all



too easily met by niche marketing and flexible production. The situationist quest for authenticity could now be experienced through new and ever-changing life style products, as advertisers and fashion designers began to commodify youth subculture. Similarly, the claim of the rise of the creative class has been accompanied by the renewed popularity of “fun and authentic” urban neighbourhoods. With the demise of the effectiveness of the old cultural critique (which cannot progress further than a never ending fear of recuperation), Holmes argues for the construction of a new cultural critique: that of the flexible personality. What better place to start it at, then the present day creative economy.

Notes

1. Even though according to a recent investigation the creative economy in Amsterdam is experiencing decline instead of growth, the City Council still expresses its confidence in the strategic importance of the creative sector. “It’s beyond numbers”, according to Alderman Asscher of *Economic Affairs*. ‘Creatieve Industrie Slinkt’, *Het Parool*, 25 January, 2007, <http://www.parool.nl/nieuws/2007/JAN/25/eco2.html>.
2. Richard Florida, ‘The Rise of the Creative Class. Why Cities Without Gays and Rock Bands Are Losing the Economic Development Race’. *Washington Monthly*,



2 May, 2002, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0205.florida.html>.

3. Speech delivered by Cohen at the Creative Capital Conference, 17-18 March 2005, Amsterdam. See: <http://www.creativecapital.nl/>
4. Constant Nieuwenhuys and Simon Vinkenoog, *New Babylon: Ten Lithographs*, Amsterdam: Galerie d’Eendt, 1963: p. 10.
5. Constant Nieuwenhuys, ‘Opkomst en Ondergang van de Avant-Garde’. In: *Randstad 8* (1964), pp 6-35.
6. Not Bored, <http://www.notbored.org/tomorrow.html>
7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, New York, International Publishers, 1970: p. 109.
8. ‘Het broedplaatsenbeleid’ (literally ‘incubator policy’) is a city policy whereby subsidies are allocated to house artists below the going market rates in specially redeveloped buildings (a significant part of the policy has been targeted at legalising squats). Like baby chickens, the idea behind the policy is that cultural activity needs to be sheltered from the market during its initial phase; when the chick finally turns into a chicken, it should support itself. It is a controversial policy and the artists benefiting from it often complain about the strict bureaucratic requirements. See Justus Uitermark, ‘De omarming van subversiviteit’. *Agora* 24.3 (2004): pp. 32-35. Available online: <http://squat.net/studenten/kraken-is-terug.pdf>.
9. Folker Fröbel et al., ‘The New International Division of Labour’. *Social Science Information* 17.1 (1978), pp. 123-

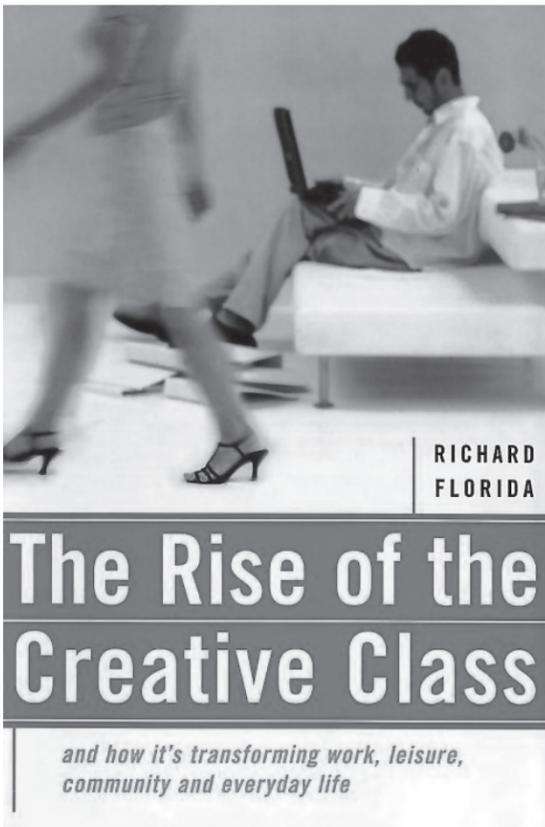


‘I amsterdam’
city-wide
branding,
web banners

- 142.
10. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
11. ‘Kachels op Terras gaan aan’, *Het Parool*, 23 January 2007, <http://www.parool.nl/nieuws/2007/JAN/23/p2.html>.
12. David Harvey, ‘From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism’. *Geografiska Annaler* 71.1 (1989): pp. 3-17. Tim Hall and Phil Hubbard (eds) *The Entrepreneurial City. Geographies of Politics, Regimes and Representation*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 1998.
13. Gemeente Amsterdam, Amsterdam Topstad: Metropool, Economische Zaken Amsterdam (14 July 2006), Amsterdam, <http://www.amsterdam.nl/ondernemen?ActItd=12153>.
14. Jamie Peck, ‘Struggling with the Creative Class’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29.4 (2005), pp. 740-770.
15. *Artvertising*, <http://www.sandberg.nl:106080/artvertising>.
16. Adbust bij het Sandberg Instituut, 22 December 2006, <http://indymedia.nl/nl/2006/12/41476.shtml>.
17. Bart van Ratingen, ‘Ik Zie Ik Zie Wat Jij Niet Ziet, Vijf Ontwikkelaars over de “Creatieve Stad”, haar Mogelijkheden en haar Beperkingen’, *Real Estate Magazine*, May 2006.
18. Amsterdam Creativity Exchange, <http://www.acx.nu/>.
19. Website Overhoeks Development, <http://www.overhoeks.nl/template4.php?c=209>
20. Ratingen, ‘Ik Zie Ik Zie Wat Jij Niet Ziet’.
21. Ratingen, ‘Ik Zie Ik Zie Wat Jij Niet Ziet’.
22. Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, London: Hamilton, 1974. For a good introduction to Archizoom, see: Valentijn Byvanck (ed.) *Superstudio: The Middelburg Lectures*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2005.
23. See also the World-Information.org IP City Edition for a relation between the utopian urbanism of the sixties and the present struggle against copyrights: Wolfgang Sützl and Christine Mayer (eds), *World-Information.org IP City Edition*, Vienna: Institute for New Culture Technologies, 2005, http://static.world-information.org/infopaper/wi_ipcityedition.pdf
24. Ivan Chitchevlov, ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’, trans. Ken Knabb, Interactivist Info Exchange, August 2006, <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=06/08/25/191240&mode=nested&tid=9>
25. Helma Hellinga, *Onrust in Park en Stad. Stedelijke Vernieuwing in de Westelijke Tuinsteden*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005: pp. 143-154.
26. Brian Holmes, ‘The Flexible Personality’ (Parts 1 & 2), posting to nettime mailing list, 5 January, 2002, <http://www.nettime.org>.

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