Darwin as ‘Creative Tropical City’: Just how transferable is creative city thinking?

Susan Luckman1, Chris Gibson2, Tess Lea3 and Chris Brennan-Horley2
1School of Communication, University of South Australia
2GeoQuest Research Centre, University of Wollongong
3School for Social and Policy Research, Charles Darwin University

Abstract: This paper contributes to recent debates about how urban policy discourses travel, whether they are transferable and what is lost in their translation. It draws on recent ARC-Linkage funded research on Darwin, a tropical-savannah location which the local government wants to promote as a ‘creative city’. We contextualise our discussion in academic literatures on the creative city, and then discuss the geographical, demographic and cultural characteristics that make Darwin a challenging and distinct context for translation of global theories of creative city rejuvenation. As well as argue a case for more nuanced locationally-specific analysis of the capacity of places to embrace travelling policy discourses, we suggest ways in which creative city research can be refreshed, including through intersection with literatures on (post)colonial urban politics, and through consideration of policy initiatives other than those targeted at ‘creative industries’ per se. We also emphasise that tropical cities in remote locations provide particular challenges to accepted wisdom about creativity-led urban planning.

Introduction

This article discusses the traffic and transferability of policy ideas from place to place (cf. Tarde 1969). It is not an article based on empirical research, but rather a critical review of current ideas in the midst of a research project which comprises both empirical and policy-making phases. The research project in question seeks to map and explore the idea of Darwin, a place in Australia’s tropical-savannah north, as a ‘creative city’. Funded through the Australian government’s Australian Research Council Linkage Project scheme, the project is jointly supported by Darwin City Council, the Northern Territory Tourism Commission and the Northern Territory Government’s Department of Arts and Museums, who are each interested in pursuing new policies to enhance Darwin’s creative industries, liveability and attractiveness to new migrants. Specifically, the research project’s three stated aims are to determine the nature, extent and change over time of the creative industries in Darwin; to interrogate the applicability of national and international creative industry policy frameworks to Darwin; and to identify opportunities for growth and transformation in the creative industries in Darwin.

This article is less a correspondence on research progress or early findings about this city, than it is contemplative account, mid-project, of the dialogic and sometimes messy translations and tensions that occur between researchers and local actors (each with their own desires and concerns), and putatively ‘global’ travelling policy discourses. In this way, we see this paper as a contribution to continuing debates about the ‘doing’ of critical research (Robinson 2003; Sidaway 2000), and the trafficking (or not) of resultant knowledges between the academy and the policy arena (Massey 2002; Ward 2005). By reflecting on the doing of urban research as it unfolds, we seek to highlight how common policy themes travel, and to unsettle our own assumptions about them in the context of an unusual – but important – tropical urban place. From the context of our specific research project and the intellectual and policy entanglements it has generated, we highlight some ways in which creative city policy ideas can be refreshed: through intersection with advances in post-colonial theory, and through consideration of policy initiatives other than those targeted to ‘creative industries’ per se.

The authors all agree that creativity matters (Cunningham 2007), and that it can catalyse new kinds of economic formations in places with profound social meanings (Johnson 2006). These arguments catalysed this research team, underlaid this project’s development, and justified our request for funding. However, we also agree that the current popularity of creativity as a policy tool for urban economic planning runs the risk of masking contradictions, problems and limitations of the creative industries (Rantisi et al 2006; Scott 2006). As well as explore some of these as they pertain to Darwin, we also briefly discuss the need for a plurality of knowledges of the ‘creative city’ to be articulated through our research project. In smaller places like Darwin (with its unusual demographic profile), plurality in research is an inevitable and necessary political commitment. Our essay thus presents our thoughts on the resonances and dissonances that occur when increasingly common and popular, even orthodox, questions about creativity and the economy in cities are asked of unique places where epistemic plurality is required and local challenges are profound.
Travelling scripts: the creative city agenda

Since first championed by the British government in the mid to late 1990s, the idea of branding a whole swath of intellectual property-driven activities the ‘creative’ or ‘cultural industries’ has gained currency around the world (Hesmondhalgh 2002; Landry & Bianchini 1995; Oakley 2004). Underpinning such developments is a growing recognition of the role of creativity and not readily visible, frequently informal economic networks in the contemporary economy, heavily driven as it is by the need for creative content (Scott 2000). Policy agendas for economic development and population management have been reinvigorated by such thinking (Florida 2003; Leadbeater 2000). The most common idea is a desire to facilitate and develop local creative industries through generating new kinds of economic development, attracting certain types of in-migrants, and encouraging greater entrepreneurial exchange between commercial, government and research-centred institutions. This is based on a growing recognition that cashed up professionals are attracted to invest in places which also have a ‘buzz’ of creativity about them. The general theory is that if cities encourage their creative industries, other economic and demographic benefits will be catalysed.

How transferable are such ideas? Increasingly, researchers have focused on the manner in which theories about creativity in the economy have been authored, distributed and received in divergent ways around the world (Wang 2004; Gibson & Klocker 2004; Peck 2005; Kong et al 2006; Rantisi et al 2006). In part, this interest stems from scepticism towards the rather rapid and faddish circulation of ideas about the ‘creative economy’ and ‘creative city’. More theoretically, interest has also been generated on the movement and transferability of ideas about creative economy to diverse places, because of the ways that they might mesh with a new, particular kind of neoliberal governmental strategy – one that seeks to produce more economically productive ‘creative’ subjects and spaces, encouraging places to compete with each other for investment and certain ‘ideal’ types of in-migrants (Gibson & Klocker 2005; Barnes et al 2006). What recent observers have additionally noted is that ideas of creative economies and cities have taken on an increasingly universalist and normatively neoliberal tone when they have been distributed by popular thinkers through networks of policy influence (Osborne 2003). Creativity is ‘folded back’ within a neoliberal governing project. Rather than present alternative ways of imagining the cultural and economic futures of cities, a singular interpretation of creativity is being incorporated by some government actors into a rather uncreative framework, in which private sector solutions to urban ‘problems’ are emphasised, and the ideals of creative, independent, entrepreneurial subjects and the primacy of place competition for mobile investment and professionals remains unchallenged. The paramount danger is that an increasingly formulaic creative city agenda is imposed upon places in a damaging and/or unrealistic manner (Kong 2000), running roughshod over local needs, aspirations and already-existing or vernacular creative expressions.

The irony is that, theoretically, inclusion is seen as fundamental to creative industries thinking, because creative industries tend to grow when there are culturally diverse populations and low barriers to entry (at least for the ‘right’ kind of people). But the vision of an inclusive community remains circumscribed by the neoliberal policy agenda discussed above, as well as by stubbornly persistent social divisions in places (Peck 2005). The critical question that needs to be asked of policy-makers thus becomes one of inclusion of whom, with the obvious corollary of who is excluded. While the mythic starting point of Florida’s model is his revelation that key creative cities were the same cities and regions which sustained vibrant and sizeable gay, lesbian and queer communities, ultimately this model of inclusion still rests on assumptions about access to economic wealth and the capacity to extensively participate in creative consumption practices.

Such naïve discourses of inclusion (with their concealed partialities) can in creative city research projects also shroud lack of acknowledgement of local creative practices which aren’t obviously, but are indirectly, connected to the commercial marketplace – even when such ‘hidden’ creativity may play an essential role in sustaining a healthy cultural milieu. Notable examples are the ‘research and development’ role played by more radical or experimental subcultures, and the creative activities (for instance, in art, music or writing) undertaken by people otherwise technically considered ‘unemployed’. These are social groups who are frequently unpopular – at least in terms of creativity-led public policy – but who are ever-present in the majority of industrialised cities, and often deeply embedded in grass-roots creative scenes. In the specific context of Darwin and other cities whose community has a substantial Indigenous population (discussed in further depth below), opening up creative city research to questions of inclusion and exclusion is essential.
**Locating creativity in a tropical-savannah town**

In Australia, like elsewhere, it has been large metropolitan centres and particular industries that have been the focus of creative city policy development. Queensland leads the charge with its *Creativity is Big Business* document (Department of State Development 2004), the state government’s financial support for the television and film industry on its Gold Coast (Ward and O’Regan 2007) and development of the new Creative Industries Faculty ‘precinct’ and research within the Queensland University of Technology. Both Sydney and Melbourne have invested heavily in the television and film industries in particular (Searle and Bounds 1999). The Government of South Australia went closer to the source of prescriptions for creative regeneration, securing Charles Landry to participate in its ‘Thinkers in Residence’ program out of which he produced the report: *Rethinking Adelaide: capturing imagination*. Larger regional cities such as Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong have also embraced creative city ideas and meshed them within local government cultural planning initiatives (Barnes et al 2006; Johnson 2006). However, despite its potential as a unique niche for creative activity in Australia (premised on its status as a tourism capital and a centre for Indigenous arts), Darwin rarely, if ever, features in discussions and mapping exercises about creative industries at the national scale.

Indeed, Darwin does not fit the usual models for creative industry policies in cities. It is a tropical-savannah city in Australia’s Northern Territory, usually (and officially) designated as ‘remote’, with a comparatively small, culturally-diverse population. It is heavily reliant on public sector funding for economic viability, and is also well-known in Australia for its extractive industries and the defence sector. It has poor public transport and other basic social infrastructures; and unresolved, still conflicted, race relations (Lea 2005; Bauman 2006). It also holds a particular place in the Australian geopolitical imagination, as simultaneously a strategic military ‘outpost’ on the northern frontier, an economic and tourism ‘gateway’ to Asia, and as a focal point for (post)colonial struggles over mineral resources and space (Jull 1991; Povinelli 2001). Moreover, a strong cultural geographical imagination of Darwin as part of an untamed ‘north’ persists (in tourism marketing campaigns, in tourists’ expectations, in literature and art), akin to the northern-most zones of other continents (Ridanpää 2005).

Darwin is a small city with big plans; from a current population of not even 75,000 (ABS 2006), its end of the century projection plan is for a population of one million, not withstanding the inherently risky business of population projections in this volatile region (Wilson and Condon 2006). Darwin is also a city that has known some major setbacks in its short history. Surveyed for European settlement only in the late 1890s, in the twentieth century it was demolished four times, by cyclone (twice), fire and repeated strafing by Japanese bombers during World War II (Alford 1995). After Cyclone Tracy devastated the town on the eve of Christmas 1974, the population halved and probably would not have recovered to its present levels without the Federal Labor government’s decision to reposition defence forces in the North (cf. Beazley 1987). The present population of military personnel and family of approximately 16,000 is boosted by the sojourns of 1.5 million visitors per annum (Tourism NT 2005). As a city prone to repeat disasters with no manufacturing history, it has no mass areas of derelict industrial buildings ripe for re-development.

The Northern Territory’s top three export industry sectors are mining, tourism, and agriculture, but this has not led to expected concentrations of employment or local wealth in the city. With no single industry able to fundamentally alter its overall economic vulnerability, Darwin is also largely propped up by substantial federal government subsidisation, including the capital that is attracted to and for the Territory’s Indigenous sectors (CGC 2001; Tyrrell 2005), although awareness of the importance of public funding is frequently overlooked in favour of exaggerating the centrality of the resource extraction and tourism industries. Indeed, few discussions of the economic development of Australia’s tropical savannah region fail to In this context, early results from the empirical component of this research project – which demonstrated that the creative industries are responsible for 1600 jobs, employing substantially more people than agriculture, mining, finance or insurance, and only marginally fewer than tourism – found traction and surprised the government partners, who were otherwise used to orthodox renderings of Darwin as mining and tourism dependent.

Compounding and contributing to these particular economic characteristics is Darwin’s unique demography. Darwin (like the whole of the Northern Territory) has a much larger Indigenous population (12.5 percent) compared with either the national average (2.5 percent) or any other Australian capital city. Official census estimates of Darwin’s Indigenous population are underestimations; a likely more accurate estimate is that Indigenous people comprise around 30 percent of Darwin’s population, similar to that of the Northern Territory as a whole (ABS 2004).
Substantial differences also exist between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations in terms of age distribution, income, fertility and mortality rates. While the demographic profile of Darwin’s Indigenous population mirrors that for the national Indigenous population (namely, high fertility and mortality rates, a predominantly young population, with few very old people due to shorter life expectancies), Darwin’s non-Indigenous age distribution is also markedly different to that of the national population. Demographically it is middle-aged, with an extraordinarily high rate of population turnover. Approximately one quarter of the Territory’s resident population in 2001 had lived somewhere else five years earlier (compared to less than 10 percent for most other states).

This ‘population churn’ has become a point of public policy focus in the Northern Territory. Not only does it produce particular challenges for service delivery (in health, education etc), but loss of twenty-five percent of the population creates problems of ‘brain drain’, skills shortages and loss of social capital. Of particular note is the effect of population transience on the establishment, maintenance, and continuation of knowledge networks. The Northern Territory Government Treasury has thus made it a top research priority to investigate population churn, and factors that might help Darwin reduce the volatility of population out-movements.

Discourses of Darwin as a creative city have been articulated in this context of population churn. The creative city is seen as a means to produce a more liveable, culturally-attractive city with lifestyle and entertainment offerings for professional workers – those more mobile individuals who might otherwise be tempted away to southern cities with more (perceived) vitality and diversity, especially after short periods working in Darwin to build up a career or retirement nest egg. Ideas of creative city planning as quasi-population planning have a certain salience in Darwin, inflected by concerns about attracting and retaining young professionals to the city, and producing cosmopolitan and skilled citizens who are more likely to ‘put down roots’ in the place, rather than see their time there as a sojourn or temporary career-building phase.

Another of Darwin’s distinct characteristics (compared with most other major Australian cities) is its tropical latitude. While much of its business culture, urban planning and built environment have been wholesale-imported, based on cooler Euro-Australian models (as might be experienced in southern capitals like Sydney and Melbourne), realisation is belatedly emerging that such transplants might not suit Darwin’s tropical climate. Built environments inherited from the 1970s and 1980s (with their emphasis on low-density decentralised suburban nodes), in combination with the extremes of a monsoonal climate, tend to exacerbate car dependency and undermine attempts to produce walkable cultural precincts, while everyday temporal rhythms – cool mornings and evenings, unbearably hot midday sun – necessarily influence the city’s cultural life (and by inference, ought to influence such things as creative city planning). From its latitude are also important seasonal variations in climate: Darwin has dry ‘winters’ (with daytime maximums about 30-32°C), a hot and humid ‘build-up’ (Nov-Dec) and wet, monsoonal ‘summers’ with attendant high rainfall, flooding and risk of category five cyclones (Jan-April). Tourism visitation as well as arts activities peak strongly in the dry winter, but fall away markedly at other times of the year. This has implications for strategies to encourage and support viable and sustainable creative industries on a year-round basis (see below).

It is within this distinct context that our central research aims have been articulated. Although our aims to map creative industries and critically examine policy options for Darwin are not prima facie unique, the context within which these aims are to be pursued necessitates review of existing thinking about creative cities and industries, and articulations of secondary questions: how can Darwin best manage its fluctuating population to enhance the viability of its creative industries? What are its unique creative arts fields, and will the fields normally associated with creativity in other places prove appropriate for Darwin? Indeed, what does ‘creativity’ mean in a remote, tropical savannah city, with serious race relations issues and such a turbulent demography? This particular place throws up important challenges to creative city policy and research in a wider sense, which we briefly, but systematically discuss in the remainder of the paper. These are: challenges of critical mass, homogeneity, social displacement and exclusion; the need for policy thinking beyond the creative industries per se; and challenges faced by cities with anxieties over race relations and the status of Indigenous populations vis-à-vis colonial, settler societies.

Learning from Darwin: challenges for creative city policy research

Critical mass

Darwin’s size and location provides direct challenges to the normative model of creative cities. In Australia, the vast majority of studies have focussed upon major metropolitan centres of over one million people (Flew et al 2001; Gibson & Homan 2004; Landry 2003), locations within striking distance of these capitals (Gibson & Robinson 2004; Henkel 2000), or largely metropolitan-based
industries (Goldsmith & O’Regan 2003). With a population of barely 75,000, of which some 16,000 are military personnel and their families on extremely short rotations, Darwin does not have the human resource opportunities of other Australian cities. By the same token, it is also extremely isolated – it is a minimum 3 hours flying time to the closest Australian city of more than 100,000 people, and longer again to southern metropolises. Thus the neoliberal model of competitive creative cities does not neatly translate: Darwin cannot draw on the local region or networks of proximate places to build its market in the way that European, North American or most Asian cities can. Yet, having said that, Darwin has been a gateway for Indigenous art products and has long proclaimed the importance of exploiting the income and employment potential of Indigenous creative industries as a sustainable livelihood for Indigenous people. This is a local alteration to the neoliberal script of competitive creative cities, although one not without contradictions, especially in relation to racial tensions in Darwin (see discussion below).

**The risk of homogeneity**

Arising as they are out of the experiences of larger, less isolated cities, prior policy recommendations for enhancing a city’s creative infrastructure do not graft neatly onto the Darwin experience. Even Charles Landry, who spends a considerable amount of his time travelling the world and advising various governments using his own approaches to maximising local creative potential, acknowledges:

> Distinctiveness is key, for although cities draw from each others’ experiences the danger is that pioneering cities around the world quickly become textbook case studies for city officials. Cities then tend to adopt generic models of success without taking into account the local characteristics and conditions that contributed to those successes. The result is a homogenous pastiche of buildings – aquariums, convention centers, museums, shops and restaurants – that prove to be remarkably similar the world over. (Landry 2005: 42)

In our project we needed to seriously evaluate the assumption that generic kinds of approaches could really be enabled, let alone imposed or willed into being, from the ‘top down’ – even when our willing partners and funding agencies in government were amongst those imagining future planning scenarios based on the generic approaches observed overseas. True to these predictions, the Northern Territory Government’s latest suggestions for a civic ‘makeover’ include a cultural centre honouring the iconic creativity of the traditional landowners of the region (known as the Larrakia Nation); a world war two museum; waterfront redevelopments (including apartments, a large public art installation, a convention centre and a water park); and a tourist restaurant overlooking the harbour (Adlam, 2006). But as Miles (2005: 893) goes on to note, the most likely outcome from such initiatives “is a growth in cultural infrastructure but not in support for cultural producers such as artists, writers and performers”. In other words, templated or precinct-style infrastructure that may appear creative to the touristic eye of ‘creative industry consumers’ may not be the kind of resource that the actual creators need to enable and sustain their creativity. This highlights a tension between government and commercial desires for easily identifiable (and quantifiable) outcomes from public policy initiatives versus the everyday needs of creative practitioners. Marketing already or soon-to-be buzzing parts of a city as ‘cultural precincts’ is a relatively easy way to show evidence of public policy action. But when not planned in conjunction with grass-roots creative industry actors, such approaches run the risk of producing either (underutilised) sites which will eventually be mothballed (having not met the needs of the community they were erected to serve) or, if too successful, a damaging cycle of gentrification that alternatively pressures nascent creative production from the area through rent-price squeezes (see for example, Gibson & Homan 2004). Engaging in policy-orientated creative city research has in our case thus involved a great deal of advocacy work, translating academic critique into palatable suggestions, and persistently reminding government partners in the research that creative city planning requires more than just public art and new consumption-orientated cultural precincts.

**Social displacement and exclusion**

As researchers have also noted for some time (e.g. Zukin 1996), when inner-city (usually ex-industrial) areas are made over to become attractive to the much desired young, urbane, professional creative workers, the transformation can be at the expense of particular segments of the ‘creative’ labour force with vulnerable working conditions, especially artists, musicians, writers and actors, who themselves struggle to afford increasingly exorbitant rents in newly gentrified creative precincts and/or whole cities (Gibson 2006). Yet once again, in considering the Darwin case we were forced to acknowledge its differences from even this script of creativity-led urban regeneration and social displacement. Unlike northern ex-industrial towns in the UK or USA, Darwin has never had a substantial manufacturing base, industrial districts or a gentrifiable inner-city, and its housing costs are already amongst the most expensive in Australia (a function of remoteness, supply shortage and policy incentives for property development as a form of domestic economic vivification). Given this absence of relatively cheap
surplus building stock, such a creativity-gentrification-displacement spiral is not likely in Darwin, with the possible exception of the homeless Indigenous inhabitants of inner-city suburbs, known as ‘longgrassers’, upon whom there is great pressure to vacate the city’s parks and fringe spaces.

Ironically, much of Darwin’s creative potential lies in its racially mixed public spaces. If forms of radical alterity are the key ingredient for creative distinction and the necessary subversive element for avoiding franchised and lifeless ‘precincts’, then Darwin’s Indigenous population would appear a vital part of the mix. This is certainly acknowledged in the routine policy genuflection to Aboriginal art and ceremonial forms as tourist attractions and potential sources of sustainable livelihood. Yet Indigenous people who behave differently or are deemed out of place or repugnant are quickly moved on, no matter what role they might play in the revitalisation of Darwin’s creative reputation (see also Povinelli 2002; Lea 2006). As Allen Scott (2006, p. 15) has also recently argued, ‘any push to achieve urban creativity in the absence of a wider concern for the conviviality and camaraderie… in the urban community as a whole is doomed to remain radically unfinished… It involves basic issue of citizenship and democracy, and the full incorporation of all social strata into the active life of the city’. In a city like Darwin (where sensationalist media coverage of ‘anti-social’ night-time behaviour is commonplace – see for example, Calacouras 2007 – and now, part of the rationale for a declaration of a ‘national emergency’ in Indigenous affairs) such issues are highly politically-charged, and not merely academic.

Tropical creative city: thinking beyond the creative industries

When considering actions which governments and other agencies can make to facilitate the growth of a robust and diverse creative economy, in our project we felt the need to move beyond thinking only of ways to directly enable the arts, cultural and/or digital technology, and into other indirect areas of decision-making with no prima facie connections to the creative industries, but which nonetheless directly affect motivated individuals and organisations. As such, policy dialogues with government arising from this project have already surpassed the realm of arts and cultural policy to also incorporate housing, tourism, urban planning, education, family policy and so forth and have involved interviewing participants in the creative industries from the amateur and informal to corporate ends of the spectrum. Something as basic as access to affordable 24 hour (or at least beyond 9-5pm) childcare is potentially as beneficial to enhancing Darwin as a creative city as any kind of direct cash injection into the arts per se. This is especially so given the numbers of workers supporting the city’s burgeoning tourist industries, whose performances are held at night, or who are otherwise working unconventional hours, as is often the case when project-driven labour is the norm for many creative practitioners. Similarly, a policy message for government is to value the (relatively) informal economy of the city’s famous open-air markets, which play a pivotal role in contributing a unique creative ‘vibe’ to the city of Darwin, yet if neglected could just as easily become conveyor belts for marked up artefacts from south-east Asia over local practitioner product and activity.

A creative postcolonial city?

As mentioned, Darwin has a large and diverse resident and mobile Aboriginal population. As a group, Indigenous people are also internationally renowned for their distinctive cultural output, from visual arts and music to digital production, television and broadcasting. Increased flows of ideas, information and people that might result from creative city planning could enhance further the viability and success of Aboriginal cultural production, as in-coming migrants are central to the health and ongoing sustainability of any contemporary creative milieu. Incomers (including tourists) simultaneously become new audiences and new sources of creative influences for resident Aboriginal artists and designers. Certainly in-migration of arts workers from ‘the south’ since the 1980s has substantially improved awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal cultural production in the distinctive environment of Darwin. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and innovators have benefited from expert exchanges and global interaction to feed into their work, and, in turn, to feed their styles into the work of others (Michaels 1986; Hinkson 2002; Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004). These sorts of aims (cultural flow, artistic influence, networking) appear to us more fitting reasons for seeking greater numbers of creative class professionals from southern states as ‘desirable residents’, rather than the usual emphasis on their bringing with them entrepreneurial skills, investment and cultural capital (especially given the need to find ways of accepting racial alterity).

Indeed, another challenge arising from this research has been its intertwining of post-colonial theorising about space and race with creative cities policy discourses, which to date have had little to say on how creative activity can work to entrench or explode inherited colonial forms. For all that the concepts of post-colonialism have suffered fierce criticism since being unmoored from their roots in literary theory and the analysis of colonial diasporic texts (see, for example, Anderson 2003; Robinson 2003; cf. Hall 1996), potentially, creative city advocacy can work to decolonise civic space. In policy, this would require more than simply accommodating ‘safe’ alterity or archaising a tokenistic
recognition of past colonial misdeeds through museum displays (cf. Morton 2004). Just as supporting creative industries more generally requires acknowledgement of the links between necessary social infrastructure, forms of income inequality and urban development, so an appreciation of the hidden dimensions of race in urban planning can inform genuinely creative policy-making.

Important too here is the capacity of the arts and popular culture to play a role in negating entrenched imaginaries of the north as ‘frontier nature’, as ‘nature’ opposed to southern, urban ‘culture’. In the context of Aboriginal creative industries, fostering the health, sustainability and distribution of original, contemporary cultural products has the potential to unsettle and partially reverse images of ‘the northern frontier’ and Aboriginal culture as ‘primitive’ or ‘remote’ from European cultural influences (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004). Important too are the wider distribution of cultural products that themselves speak for the increasingly hybridised and diverse experiences of urban Aboriginal people (Behrendt 2006). Although we certainly wish not to reproduce the ‘naïve belief’, as Langton (1993: 27) has put it ‘that Aboriginal people will make “better” representations of [Aboriginal people], simply because being Aboriginal gives “greater” understanding’, there is no doubt that opening up spaces for Aboriginal creative producers to exhibit their work and begin viable careers in these paths can produce decolonizing outcomes by generating capacity to express and contest dominant discourses and representations. This opening up of opportunities to combine income-earning potential with cultural expressions constitutes an important challenge when considering questions of how creative city planning might intersect with a postcolonial urban agenda.

Conclusion

Darwin is very different to previously analysed creative cities; it is remote (both physically, and figuratively), comparatively small, defined by its colonial/postcolonial anxieties, and has a substantial population churn, losing up to a fifth of its population between any census period, but also consistently gaining a steady flow of in-migrants. As colleagues investigating population turnover in the Northern Territory have observed “Darwin must constantly negotiate a paradox of place, of attracting people by its otherness, but enticing them to stay through its capacity to match lifestyle expectations of elsewhere” (Roberts & Young, unpublished manuscript). The mix of existing activities (tourism, visual arts, music, etc.) is uniquely configured; this includes the fact that Darwin is both a site of production by residents and a service outlet for arts and cultural production from both its hinterland and its Southeast Asian neighbours. It has the twin challenges of remoteness and uneasy racial tensions; and all the opportunities typical of a multicultural place with vibrant Aboriginal culture and proximate to attractive ‘natural’ landscapes.

Given Darwin’s geographical characteristics, and the substantial and numerous policy challenges we have outlined here, can the incongruity of northern hemisphere creative city planning strategies ever be resolved? Is there any residual utility in research methods and policy options gleaned from creative city research elsewhere, and can these have any real potential in this setting?

It cannot be overemphasised that existing literatures on creative industries often describe models of cultural development, imported from elsewhere, that are largely incommensurate with Darwin’s aspirations and socio-spatial conditions. Creative city thinking is at best only partially transferable. The more neoliberalised versions of creative city thinking (which emphasise competing with large international cities for ‘glamour’ industries and mobile transnational professionals) appear to make even less sense. This paper has outlined some of the ways in which a research team, in the midst of a project that seeks to be both critical, and to provide genuine policy recommendations, has negotiated the mismatch between putatively ‘global’ policy norms and local complexities.

As we have attempted to illuminate at various points here, just because a purportedly ‘global’ policy discourse about creative city planning appears incommensurate with local conditions is not by itself a rationale for jettisoning altogether the pursuit of creative city policy options. The odds are stacked against remote, small places, but these odds create productive tensions. What this case study highlights for the wider study of creative cities and urban policy-making is that discussions about realistic propositions, suitable policies (that encourage inclusiveness and redistribution rather than favoritism) and hoped-for benefits must remain attentive to endogenous conditions, as well as wider social and political concerns. Creativity is no panacea, and creative city planning ought not to replace more fundamental concerns of social justice and inclusion. Creativity can, however, engage policy-makers more laterally on issues of lifestyle and the sustainability of local population bases; it can assist in shifting the fixation many policy-makers in places like Darwin have with established and more highly visible industries such as mining and tourism; and it can open up opportunities to include more radical or subaltern groups in the civic imagination of city futures. But without this kind of ‘situated entanglement’ (Instone 2004: 135) between specific industries and initiatives and whole-of-city
thinking, the creative industries planning agenda runs the risk of unwittingly contributing to the continued neoliberalisation of policy, or further (colonial) marginalization of particular social groups in the city.

Acknowledgements
This research was supported under the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Project funding scheme (project number LP0667445). Thanks to Chris Brennan-Horley, Donal Fitzpatrick, Julie Willoughby-Smith and Francesca Baas Becking for on-going input and assistance with the research project.

References


Henkel, C. (2000) *Imagining the Future: Strategies for the Development of 'Creative Industries' in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW* (Clunes: Northern Rivers Regional Development Board in association with the Northern Rivers Area Consultative Committee).


Tourism NT (2005) December Quarterly Report, 