

# Inequality and Politics in the Creative City-Region: Questions of Livability and State Strategy

EUGENE J. McCANN

## Abstract

*City-regionalism and livability are concepts that feature prominently in recent writings on urban politics and policy. Policy discussions have seen the two concepts fused together in such a way that regional competitiveness is generally understood to entail high levels of 'livability' while urban livability is increasingly discussed, measured and advocated at a city-regional scale. It is, then, important to understand how these concepts work in tandem and to delineate the often-elided politics of reproduction through which they operate. This paper begins by elaborating on the politically powerful fusion of city-regionalist and urban livability discourses, using the example of Richard Florida's creative city argument. It then discusses the politics of city-regionalism and livability through the case of Austin, Texas, a city that has framed its policy in terms of regionalism and livability but which is also characterized by marked income inequality and a neighborhood-based political struggle over the city's future. The paper concludes by drawing lessons from the discussion and suggesting that the city-regional livability agenda can best be understood as a geographically selective, strategic, and highly political project.*

## Introduction

City-regionalism and livability (or quality of life) are two powerful and quite problematic concepts that have featured prominently in recent academic and popular writing on urban politics and policy. While worthy of interrogation individually, these two concepts have been fused together in recent discussions. In this paper, I will suggest ways in which they seem to work in tandem, thus identifying issues for discussion in ongoing debates about the utility of the concepts. This approach will also contribute to continued investigations of the political implications of the resurgence of regionalist and livability discourses in contemporary urban policy. Primarily, I am interested in the regionalist discourse in the United States urban context over the last decade or more. I ask how we might understand the politics through which city-regional forms of governance are currently being envisioned, institutionalized and contested. In setting out some preliminary answers to this question, I understand 'city-regionalism' to be a concept with a specific history and with a present manifestation that seems to incorporate particular discourses on, and state strategies toward, society and place. Earlier waves of regionalist thought have been evident since the early twentieth Century (Brenner, 2002: 4–8; Wheeler, 2002: 268–9) but what seems to distinguish a great deal of today's 'new regionalism' is an understanding of the region — as opposed to the nation — as the ideal scale in and through which economic competitiveness can be fostered and maintained (Brenner, 2002; MacLeod, 2001). This perspective sees city-regions to be

primarily and essentially 'sites of exchange, innovation, development, and competition' (Ward and Jonas, 2004: 2121).

Yet Ward, Jonas and others make the argument that city regionalism entails social struggles that are elided in most writing on the topic. City regions are not only sites of economic competitiveness, they are also territories in which social reproduction — a process intimately tied to the notion of quality of life — takes place. The disjuncture between these two views of regional livability creates a tension in contemporary city-regionalism that is worked out through political struggles over such mundane issues as housing affordability and infrastructure provision. I will focus on these tensions and struggles through the example of Austin, Texas, a city that has developed a city-regional vision tied to a vigorous pursuit of urban livability. A key element of Austin's turn to a city-regionalist approach stems from worries over environmental degradation in the fragile karst environment of the Texas Hill Country to the city's west and a desire among local policymakers to articulate policy at a scale that extends their control over the regional pressures impacting the city's neighborhoods and economy.

Austin has recently been caught on the horns of a classic urban growth dilemma. It successfully uses the beauty and recreational potential of its surrounding environment to attract workers and investment. Yet, the success of this strategy has led to increased growth pressures that threaten to destroy the very landscape that make the city attractive. This is a predicament faced by cities throughout North America and, as Jonas *et al.* (2005) describe in the case of Cambridge, UK, it is also evident elsewhere. In the 1990s, Austin's high-tech firms demanded more suburban manufacturing and office sites, while developers built more subdivisions and hilltop mansions west of the city. At the same time, local environmentalists opposed further development on land that, as well as being picturesque, is the habitat for endangered species and lies over the aquifer from which the city draws its drinking water. To resolve the political impasse over development, Austin's politicians began to envision their city's fortunes in regional terms, instituting a 'smart growth' planning framework which used the city's extra territorial jurisdiction (ETJ) — an area beyond municipal boundaries over which the state of Texas allows cities to exercise certain land use controls — to define a region that could be planned in such a way that future development could be accommodated and channeled, not hindered (interviews with planners, 2000). While looking outward to the ETJ, policymakers also turned their attention inwards, to the neighborhoods of the city's core. Neighborhood planning became central to Austin's regionalist livability agenda since inner-city neighborhoods were seen to be the likely locations of future development as the adjacent downtown benefited from regional economic growth and because the neighborhood was seen as the ideal territory for promoting livability. A regionalist vision and a livability agenda framed debate over Austin's future. What does this strategic regionalist livability agenda mean for the way policy is institutionalized? How have certain scales become important to the formulation of a new policy agenda? And what impact has this policy approach had on urban politics? I will seek to address these questions in the following sections while suggesting that there may be important resonances in the Austin case that might shape our understanding of the politics of city-regionalism more generally.

## Livability and the creative city-region

The fusion of competitive city-regionalism and livability discourses has, I suggest, been politically powerful in recent years not just in Austin but in many US cities. It is typified by Richard Florida's work on the 'creative class'. For him, successful cities are ones that can attract investment by first attracting a select group of young workers, the nucleus of which is employed in 'science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music, and entertainment, [and] whose economic function is to create new ideas,

new technology and/or new creative content' (Florida, 2004 [2002]: 8). He argues that to be attractive to this group, cities must, among other things, offer a specific lifestyle.

Creative Class lifestyle comes down to a passionate quest for experience. The ideal . . . is to 'live the life' — a creative life packed full of intense, high-quality, multidimensional experiences . . . [Members of the Creative Class] like indigenous street-level culture — a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creators . . . More than anything, they crave intense experiences in the real world (Florida, 2004 [2002]: 166).

This is no spatially constrained, downtown-oriented argument, however. Florida's data are regional. He compares Metropolitan Statistical Areas, not central cities. Furthermore, he expresses a spatially extensive perspective when envisioning the lifestyle choices of his creatives (e.g. Florida, 2004 [2002]: 233–4) and in so doing sets a city-regionalist agenda for the numerous urban policymakers who refer to his work.

The creative class thesis fuses regionalist and livability discourses into a politically powerful combination that has had dramatic impacts on economic development and planning policy in US cities (for a critical assessment of its impacts, see Peck, 2005). Yet, while the creative class thesis mirrors new regionalism in its argument for a spatially extensive articulation of urban policy and in its openness to weak ties and the creative potential of many forms of social diversity, it also reflects much of the new regionalist literature in its narrow focus on lifestyle and livability as assets for economic competition, in its cursory engagement with questions of inequality, and in its unitary and apolitical representation of city-regionalism. This leads us to Ward and Jonas' (2004: 2121) argument that the rise of city-regionalism has entailed a retreat from engagement with 'issues of redistribution, conflict, counterstrategies, and politics'. For them, the 'emphasis on exchange relations and strategic competition, [means that] corresponding attention to the social relations of production, consumption, and redistribution and their underlying geographies of conflict are, at best, limited'. Their perspective echoes Harvey's discussion of the tendency toward structured coherence in the production of an urban region, which 'embraces the standard of living, the qualities and styles of life, work satisfactions . . . social hierarchies . . . and a whole set of sociological and psychological attitudes toward working, living, enjoying, entertaining' while also generating a particular form of urban politics (Harvey, 1989: 140).

In what ways, then, do these political issues continue to shape city-regions? The remainder of this paper will explore the case of Austin, a city that has not only been the poster child for the creative class argument, but has also expressed an explicitly regional vision in its attempts to curb sprawl through its smart growth initiative. Specifically, I will focus on urban politics in Austin from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, a time when the city rose to the top of every list of economically vibrant, high-amenity cities and during which Richard Florida's research in the city influenced both how he conceived of creative cities and how local business and political elites understood their own economic model (Florida, 2004 [2002]: 190–1, 298–300; interviews with Austin business leaders, 2000; McCann, 2004). At that time, Austin's polished image belied a bifurcated urban social structure, increased upward pressure on house prices, related fears of gentrification, and concern about environmental degradation (McCann, 2003: 165). These issues spurred policy responses and political struggles that questioned dominant definitions of the 'good life' and the 'good city'.

The city grew rapidly in the 1990s as its metropolitan region's population increased 32% to over one million people. This growth was largely the result of a massive rise in the city's high-technology sector. Employment in this sector grew by 80% from 1990 to 1999, growth that was most pronounced after 1995. The roots of the boom stretched back to economic development strategies initiated in the 1950s that emphasized the development of 'clean industry' and office jobs while identifying Austin's low cost of living, the presence of state government, and of the state's primary research university

as the keys to future economic development. In the mid-1980s, these themes crystallized in a self-conscious narrative that linked regional economic development and livability (McCann, 2004: 1920–1).

A high-technology economy, a wide range of amenities that foster an elevated quality of life, and an openness to different lifestyles and creative potentials. These have become the standard descriptors through which Austin's economic growth in the 1990s has been understood by analysts, consultants, the popular media and by competing cities. For instance, the November 1999 edition of *Money* magazine's 'Best places to live' section waxed lyrical about the city's livability and economy, concluding that, 'they're lucky in Austin' (p. 134). Florida (2004 [2002]: 300), for his part, argues that: 'The city's leadership and its people continue to try to create a place that blends the ability to be yourself — whoever that may be — with being part of a supportive community that is open to and tolerant of difference and equally accommodating to all forms of creativity'. Austin has, then, acquired a popular image as both a high-tech boomtown and an ideal hometown.

The concepts of livability and competitiveness at the heart of the creative class thesis was not only partially inspired by Austin, but it came, in turn, to directly inspire the visions and policies of local 'new economy' entrepreneurs and politicians. Florida visited the city at the invitation of trade groups at the height of the city's tech boom. Indicating this connection with the tech community, one interviewee asked:

I don't know if you are familiar with Richard Florida's work? . . . He's spoken here at a couple of events. [People in the local business community] talk about his work and I think it's something they live. I mean that many of them appreciate the quality of life, that they like the lake, that they like the hiking, and they know that is what their employees like as well. So not just from an altruistic standpoint, or a personal standpoint, but also from a business standpoint (interview with trade association representative, 12 October 2000).

Similarly, Austin's politicians were aware of the emerging creative class thesis long before the publication of Florida's book and were inspired to adjust policies in line with its argument — aligning cultural policies more closely with economic development priorities, for instance (Erard, 2003).

## Institutionalizing city-regionalism: the role of the neighborhood

In Austin, Texas . . . the name of the game is neighborhood associations (neighborhood activist, Austin, 8 November 2000).

Austin's city-regionalist, livability agenda was institutionalized in 1997 as the smart growth initiative. It was intended to create incentives to encourage future development in Austin's traditional urbanized core while discouraging it in the surrounding region. Related goals were to improve the city's tax base by making public investment and management more efficient and to improve livability through coordinated planning of transportation, economic development, the environment and neighborhoods. The inclusion of neighborhoods in this list was not incidental. The neighborhood scale was seen as crucial to the implementation of the smart growth initiative, a perspective that opens up a whole series of questions about the geographies and strategies at the heart of contemporary city-regionalism.

Austin's regional smart growth agenda had one driving purpose: to turn the prevailing tide of investment away from the Hill Country in favor of new business and residential development in the urban core and, more specifically, in the city's downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. From the perspective of many residents of these neighborhoods, a number of which are Austin's poorest places with its highest concentrations of ethnic minorities, the new policy created the opportunity for an

externally controlled wave of investment and rebuilding to sweep across their neighborhoods, transforming them in the image of new corporate Austin while decimating long-established communities. To overcome this political problem, planners were charged with setting the neighborhood at the heart of their regional agenda. Central Austin was divided into 50 neighborhood planning areas. Each area would be planned in a collaborative manner with all interested residents invited to regular meetings in which a neighborhood plan would be formulated and, eventually, submitted to city council for approval. Through this process it was hoped that the neighborhoods and their residents would become invested in, and supportive of, smart growth and that the neighborhoods themselves would be made ready to accommodate new development through revamped zoning codes.

The neighborhood has long been an important scale in and through which urban politics and policy is constituted. The Austin case suggests that the rise of city-regionalism should not be understood in contradistinction to the neighborhood impulse in US urban policy. Rather, it suggests a much more complex and contingent urban political geography. Ward and Jonas (2004: 2128) allude to this issue when they warn of the danger of 'scalar selectivity' in conceptualizing city-regionalism. For them:

treating metropolitan institutions and city-region systems of governance as a functionally separate arena of political struggle and strategy, removed that is from the substance of urban and regional politics and detached from wider scales of state interests . . . [indicates] little attempt to identify the actual geographical configurations of state structures and powers (fiscal, electoral, etc) that enable regionalist economic and political projects to proceed. Nor does one get much sense of the nature of issues and conflicts, strategies and counter-strategies, shaping metropolitan-regional institutional developments.

In Austin, at least, the neighborhood scale and the concerns of the residents of inner-city neighborhoods are not functionally separate from the city-regional scale of governance. Rather, they are functionally and politically central to this particular 'scalar fix' (Harvey, 1989; Brenner, 1998; Jonas and Ward, 2002; McCann, 2003). In this context, city-regionalism and its relationship to a competitive livability discourse can be understood as shaped by the strategic decisions of the state at various scales: decisions to create connections among scales that might generally be considered to be separate and decisions to include interests in decision-making who might not, in other circumstances, be consulted on regional issues. City-regionalism can also be recognized as contested and contestable. It is to this politics that I will now turn.

## Living the Life? Inequality and politics in the creative city-region

[T]he formation of political-territorial coalitions in support of metropolitan reform initiatives . . . cannot be presupposed, as is frequently done in writings on the new regionalism, but must instead be understood as a context-specific, and generally highly unstable, outcome of continual sociopolitical struggles to reshape the institutional framework for capitalist urbanization (Brenner, 2002: 10).

Except in special circumstances, it seems the ideology of the livable city is rarely compatible with criteria of social equity or economic efficiency (Ley, 1980: 238).

Regionalist and livability agendas are the objects and contexts for political struggle, even when these contests are largely overlooked in contemporary literatures. Brenner and Ley allude to this issue in terms of regionalism and livability, respectively, and I will suggest that the importance of the politics of income inequality, housing provision, gentrification, service provision and environmental policy, among others, underlies the contemporary fusion of these two discourses. Socio-economic inequality and housing affordability have been particularly important in Austin's recent politics,



presenting a sobering counterpoint to more celebratory and optimistic representations of the city.

As Austin's high-technology sector grew in the late 1990s, many in the city have identified an increasing bifurcation in income between those working in the 'new economy' and the city's poor, many of whom are African-American and Latino; 13.1% of the city's population was living in poverty compared with a US average of 12.7%. Furthermore, the average wage in the high-technology sector increased by \$26,500 during the 1990s. The average rise in wages for all industries, including high tech, was only \$18,000 — a growth in line with the US average. At the same time, the percentage of affordable housing in the metropolitan region dropped from just over 62% in 1991 to just under 58% in 1998, a figure 8% lower than the national average for that year (Sustainability Indicators Project, 2000). These and other consequences of Austin's success in economic development have been the focus of activism and intense political debate. Activists have questioned the relative benefits of the city's high-technology boom and the image of the city as a good place to live. They have also prompted business leaders to list inequality and urban sprawl as two of the city's major policy concerns.

The question of inequality in the 'creative city' is also evident to Richard Florida. It would be difficult for anyone to spend time in Austin, as he has done, without being aware of that city's cleavages. Yet, a troubling aspect of Florida's prominent writings on the creative city is his cursory engagement with the inequality. The hardback edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class* makes only the briefest mention of the issue. In the preface to the paperback edition, Florida identifies rising inequality as one of the 'danger signs' overshadowing attempts to 'build the broader creative society'. He goes further, noting 'I had a strong hunch when writing [the book] that inequality in our society was being exacerbated by the rise of the creative economy' (Florida, 2004 [2002]: xv). The preface to the paperback edition includes an analysis of wage levels in the creative sector compared with those in the manufacturing and service sectors. This analysis shows that 'inequality is highest in the creative epicenters of the US economy' (p. xv) and a ranking of the top ten city-regions with the highest levels of inequality features five — Raleigh-Durham, San Francisco, Washington-Baltimore, Austin and Boston (p. xvii) — that are also in the top ten ranking of 'creative epicenters' according to Florida's updated 'creativity index' (p. xxii). (Austin ranks fourth in the former list and first in the latter.) Florida expresses concern about the clear correlation — and probable causal relationship — between creativity and inequality, arguing that 'we must improve the pay and more fully tap the creative talents of the legions of people who work in hair salons and other service economy positions' (pp. xvi–xvii). Yet he offers no policy prescriptions on how to achieve wage equality in the creative economy: 'While there is no magic bullet here, sooner or later some place will figure out how to more fully tap the creative talents of much broader segments of its people — and it will get a huge competitive edge as a result' (p. xvii; see also Florida, 2004 in which the question of inequality remains one of a number of 'open questions' and Peck, 2005 for further discussion).

This is a revealing statement in at least three ways. First, by arguing that 'some *place*' will resolve the inequalities of the creative economy, Florida downplays the role of the national state in shaping future social and economic policy and echoes some new regionalists' argument that city-regions are now central to the formation of post-national economies. Second, it reveals a vision of livability as primarily an element of city-regions' economic competitiveness rather than being tied up with a much wider range of issues of social reproduction. Third, the statement reveals an unresolved disconnect between creative city discourse and the pressing concerns of those whose incomes did not benefit from and whose quality of life was undermined by the rise of the 1990s' 'new economy'. These problems are made all the more clear by the experiences and political actions of people living in Austin's poorest inner-city neighborhoods. While late-twentieth century Austin gained an image as a high-tech boomtown and an ideal hometown where creatives could 'live the life', the city's politics and policy were dominated by ongoing negotiations between the local state and various activist groups

aimed at mitigating the negative effects of rapid urban growth on fragile landscapes and on low-income people.

As I have already suggested, smart growth and neighborhood planning were intended to create broad consensus on how to manage growth. Moreover, the late 1990s saw increasing concerns about wage inequality. The Austin Living Wage Coalition campaigned for the city to enact a living wage ordinance and corporate accountability regulations for companies receiving public contracts or subsidies. Gentrification also became an increasingly salient political issue through the 1990s as Austin's downtown became the focus of development policies aimed at protecting natural environments on the city's wealthy western periphery. Neighborhood activists from the city's poorest neighborhoods just east of downtown who opposed the neighborhood planning process — and it is worth noting that not all community activists in East Austin did oppose the process — were motivated in part by a fear of displacement and by what they saw as historically rooted class and ethnic inequalities in the city which consistently favored rich, Anglo definitions of livability over poor Latino and African-American definitions. Reflecting on the smart growth program, one activist argued that:

while this government has a policy of buying raw land to protect endangered species, they don't have the same financial commitment . . . to protect human beings that happen to live in *this* area . . . So gentrification is gonna happen because someone wants it to happen . . . [W]e could be protected too, like the aquifers (interview with neighborhood activist 2, 8 November 2000).

These concerns motivated a protracted period of political activism around the city's neighborhood planning process, entailing a marked delay in the early plans. This activism strove, as the quote above suggests, to match the city's regional outlook with a regional vision of inequality in which inner-city neighborhoods would suffer the consequences of regional environmental preservation (McCann, 2003).

Concerns over inequality and gentrification also questioned definitions of livability and 'experience' that are central to Florida's Austin-inspired conception of the creative city. For another East Austin activist, the targets and benefits of livability in the city were clear:

[W]ho benefits from the music industry developing in Austin's streets? Because [high tech companies] want to make sure that their workers . . . are going to come in, that they are going to say, 'Okay, well, what kind of clubs, what kind of fun things do they have down there [in Austin]?' And so it's all for their workers. Because they want to keep their workers happy. So it's nothing about keeping the people that have been here for generations — who are suffering — happy (interview with neighborhood activist 1, 18 October 2000).

In one sense, this activist echoes the new regionalist sense that livability in city-regions is primarily about economic competitiveness. Yet, her diagnosis does not indicate a broad consensus on how to shape the city-region. Rather, it formed the basis for activism against what many perceived to be Austin's rapid corporatization, Californication, and socio-economic bifurcation. This politics was more complex than I can describe in the available space. For instance, activist coalitions around these issues changed depending on the specific concerns while planners, frequently portrayed as agents of deleterious neighborhood change in East Austin, professed strong beliefs in social justice (interviews with planners, 2000). The Austin case suggests that discourses of regionalism and livability are fundamentally entwined with a complex and shifting politics of social reproduction that defines the character of urbanism and urban policy.

## Conclusion

A fusion of regionalist and livability discourses has characterized recent US urban policymaking. Urban neighborhoods and their surrounding city-regions have come to be seen not only as sites of social reproduction, but also as key elements in regional

competitiveness. Many US cities, influenced by Richard Florida's work among others (e.g. Landry, 2000), now envision the redevelopment of inner-city neighborhoods as an economic strategy with regional implications. Simultaneously, they regard their economic assets and responsibilities as existing in a city-region stretching far beyond municipal boundaries. The Austin example suggests that this shift to a city-regional, livability orientation should not be taken for granted, however. Rather than being a self-evident and generally agreed upon 'fix' to institutional and geographical problems of urban development, the regionalist livability agenda has become the context and object of a wide range of urban political struggles. To put it another way, 'the *tendency* toward structured coherence . . . exists in the midst of a maelstrom of forces that tend to undermine and disrupt it' (Harvey, 1989: 143, emphasis in original). Frequently, the struggle to stabilize a city-regional coherence revolves around fundamental — and often racially inflected — questions of social reproduction including wage inequality, increasing costs of housing, fears of displacement, the destruction of longstanding community structures, the character, purposes and class relationships underlying environmental policy, and the unequal provision of recreational opportunities.

The Austin example allows us to draw at least three lessons that relate to conceptualizations of city-regionalism more generally. First, the city's rise to notoriety highlights the power of the regionalist-livability discourse — and particularly its 'creative city' manifestation — in reshaping urban policy discussion and legitimating certain sets of policy prescriptions. Second, the local state's response to the negative effects of rapid development suggests a strategic institutional and geographical response to the problems of urbanization. The city did not seek to institute formal regional governance structures but rather used existing state regulations to extend its land use decisions beyond its jurisdiction. Furthermore, its smart growth initiative engaged territories that were simultaneously more extensive (the city-region) and more localized (individual neighborhoods) than the municipality itself in order to legitimate and facilitate new modes of policymaking and accumulation. This suggests that city-regionalism frequently turns on the development of selective, strategically directional, and politically and historically contingent geographical imaginations, rather than on a singular, stable and unitary understanding of what a city-region is. The third lesson indicates that this institutional-geographical complexity is matched by a multifaceted politics around questions of inequality, neighborhood change and urban service provision. This politics and the character of the state's involvement in it have a significant, yet perhaps under-analyzed, role to play in shaping the character of contemporary city-regions.

**Eugene J. McCann** (emccann@sfu.ca), Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia V5A 1S6, Canada.

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## Résumé

*Le régionalisme métropolitain et l’habitabilité (ou qualité de vie) sont des concepts dominants dans les récents écrits sur la politique publique et urbaine. En politique publique, les deux concepts ont été réunis en un seul, de sorte que la compétition régionale englobe en général des niveaux élevés ‘d’habitabilité’ tandis que la qualité de vie urbaine est de plus en plus discutée, mesurée et préconisée à l’échelle régionale métropolitaine. Il faut donc comprendre le mode opératoire combiné de ces concepts et délimiter les politiques de reproduction souvent éludées qui permettent leur fonctionnement. L’article explicite la fusion (performante politiquement) des discours du régionalisme métropolitain et de l’habitabilité urbaine, en s’appuyant sur l’argumentation de la ville créative de Florida. Il s’intéresse ensuite aux politiques de régionalisme métropolitain et d’habitabilité au travers du cas d’Austin (Texas), ville dont la politique publique se structure en termes de régionalisme et de qualité de vie, tout en se caractérisant par une forte inégalité des revenus et par des dissensions politiques entre quartiers quant à son avenir. La conclusion tire les leçons de l’analyse et suggère d’aborder la qualité de vie dans une région métropolitaine dans le cadre d’un projet reposant sur une géographie sélective, une stratégie et une vision politique.*