From brew town to cool town: Neoliberalism and the creative city development strategy in Milwaukee

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Received 25 August 2006; received in revised form 31 January 2008; accepted 24 April 2008
Available online 15 July 2008

This research critically examines a new chapter in the evolution of the entrepreneurial city; one distinguished by its reliance on Richard Florida's thesis about the relationship between the creative class and economic growth. Since the 2002 publication of his wildly-popular book, The Rise of the Creative Class, Florida's ideas were broadly assimilated into the infrastructure of urban entrepreneurialism across the United States. This was especially the case in slow-growth metropolitan areas, where it was hoped that a “creative city” development strategy might reverse decades of relative decline. Using Milwaukee, Wisconsin as a representative case study, this paper scrutinizes the actions of that city's image-makers, planners, and municipal actors, who together orchestrated a new round of urban promotional activities and planning strategies. What made this new round of growth coalition activities unique was that it highlighted a distinct set of urban motifs presumably commensurate with creative class lifestyles, cultural practices, and consumption habits. Following MacLeod [MacLeod, G (2002) From urban entrepreneurialism to a “revanchist city”?: on the spatial injustices of Glasgow’s renaissance. Antipode 34(3), 602–614], Maliszewski [Maliszewski, P (2004) Flexibility and its discontents. The Baffler 16, 69–79] and Peck [Peck, J (2005) Struggling with the creative class. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 29(4), 740–770], this work argues that this creative city growth strategy worked primarily to repackage and strengthen the extant downtown-based property-led development paradigm. The marriage of Florida's ideas with municipal action therefore brought into even sharper relief what was already one of the most economically and racially polarized large cities in the United States.

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Keywords: Creative class, Neoliberalism, Gentrification

“More like Detroit, less like Minneapolis” is how a recent policy report cautioned about the economic future of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Lightbourn and Agostini, 2004). The findings of the document were widely reported and debated in the local press, setting off a sustained round of civic soul-searching about the city’s thirty year decline and what might be done to reverse it. The media attention had little to do with the succession of troubling problems underscored in the report, including declining incomes and population losses, which were by this time widely known and understood. Rather, the document’s apparent magnetism stemmed from the novel solution it proposed: attracting significantly more members of what “cool cities guru” and regional economic development specialist Richard Florida characterizes as the “creative class”; his term for highly-skilled, entrepreneurial and college-educated professionals (Florida, 2002). The report also encouraged municipal leaders to break from the past and stop chasing after manufacturing plants. Instead, it urged them to do whatever it takes to make the city more appealing to just these types of young professionals, including the construction of a downtown music district.
new mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, substantial increases in downtown housing, along with more effective marketing initiatives to highlight the region’s “coolness factors” and economic successes (Light-bourn and Agostini, 2004).

Milwaukee’s municipal leaders have since launched a unified growth vision and implemented the first phase of this creative city development template in the city’s central area. A new civic plan entitled “live/work/play” was published and is currently retooling the central area around the presumed lifestyle needs of the creative class. City leaders extol that roughly 3000 new condominium units were added to the city’s downtown neighborhoods, along with new or upgraded bike paths, riverwalks, and pedestrian-friendly amenities. These transformations of the city’s texture were accompanied by an equally radical makeover of the city’s promotional machinery. A young professionals’ association designed to keep Milwaukee competitive in the race for national talent was created, and a wide range of new marketing activities, all of which underlined the city’s “youthful and creative” aspects, were introduced. The pinnacle of these re-imaging efforts was a new logo for Milwaukee which sought to dramatically shift perceptions of the city from industrial to cultural, from production to consumption, and from declining rustbelt to fast-forward sophistication (Romell, 2005).

The focus of place promotion in Milwaukee is therefore converging around attracting the creative class. This marks a discernible and significant shift in the evolution of the city’s articulation of the “entrepreneurial city” (Harvey, 1989; Madsen, 1992; Padddison, 1993; Roberts and Schein, 1993; Kenny, 1995; Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Davies, 1988; Quilley, 2000; MacLeod, 2002). Geographers, for 15 years or so, have been exploring how cities are increasingly required to secure their economic futures through the “speculative construction of place” (Harvey, 1989). This speculative development is now reconfiguring around new demographic, economic and intellectual realities in cities like Milwaukee. Having apparently realized that their city will never be a truly global place, and that the factories and middle-class families are never coming back, Milwaukee’s growth coalitions are now striking-out more modestly, hoping to successfully compete for a larger share of the region’s young and college-educated. The city’s new thinking is rooted precisely in Florida’s theory of urban growth, which maintains that the presence of a large creative class produces economic prosperity in the new economy in the long run (Florida, 2002). Milwaukee’s promoters embraced this hypothesis; and in doing so, both the image-making enterprise and the capital investment strategies orchestrated by the city’s growth coalition were altered considerably.

But why has Florida’s “creativity thesis” resonated so strongly among Milwaukee’s elites, and to what extent is this new phase of urban promotion distinct from preceding chapters? This work engages with these questions through a critical examination of this emergent phase of urban entrepreneurialism. Following the work of Kenny (1995), Hall and Hubbard (1996), Brenner and Theodore (2002), MacLeod (2002) and Wilson (2004) this research argues that Milwaukee represents a strategic incubator site for the articulation of innovative neoliberal policy innovations. That is to say, recent growth coalition activities in Milwaukee are essentially experiments emerging within the broader neoliberal syllabus, which, among other things, dictates that urban space be mobilized as an arena for market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption. Moreover, this research shows how Milwaukee’s newest round of growth coalition activities is rooted squarely in a fortified regime of place marketing, property-led development, gentrification and normalized sociospatial inequality. In so doing, this paper both contextualizes and deepens Peck’s (2005) broad critique of the “creative cities” developmental paradigm.

The analysis begins with a brief explanation of what is meant by the term creative class. Through a detailed investigation of planning documents and extensive interviews with Milwaukee stake-holders and land-based interest groups, this research demonstrates how Florida’s ideas were assimilated into the infrastructure of Milwaukee’s urban promotion. This particular section is organized into a two-part discussion of the “politics of place”, the first of which illustrates how the city’s chief promotional organ launched new campaigns to market the city as a premier site for creative class consumption. The second investigates how the latest amendments to central Milwaukee’s built form were designed to produce urban environments that would presumably support creative class lifestyles and cultural practices. This paper concludes by placing Milwaukee’s shifting material and symbolic topography within the broader context of the city’s persistent and extreme economic and racial polarization. In sharp contrast to Florida’s upbeat celebration of diversity, but in accordance by and large with neoliberal political projects everywhere, Milwaukee’s creative city development strategy resulted in the intensification of extant sociospatial contradictions across the economic terrain of the central city.

The creativity thesis

Richard Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class tackles one of the most fundamental questions animating discussions about the city: why do some places grow and prosper, while others do not? Florida’s thesis begins with the observation that the societies of the advanced capitalist world are undergoing a revolution that is equal to the industrial transformation of the 19th century. Echoing the rhetoric of other “new organization” theorists such as Brooks (2000) and Kotkin (2000), Florida describes the contours of a presumably new economy that is characterized less by its dependence on labor input and the location of raw materials, than by the primacy of human knowledge and innovation. In this new economy, human creativity becomes the most highly prized commodity, and a group of highly creative people drives the shape, direction, and the geography of new economic development.

Florida calls this new group of people the “creative class” and maintains that what distinguishes members of this group from others is that they engage in work that creates “meaningful new forms” (Florida, 2002, p. 68).
Florida makes a distinction between what he sees as the “Super Creative Core” of this new class, including scientists, engineers, university professors, poets, novelists, entertainers, designers, architects, and opinion-makers, and a more loosely-defined group of “creative professionals” who work in a wide-range of knowledge-intensive industries, such as financial instruments, high-tech, and the legal and health fields. Florida insists that his creative class has expanded steadily over the course of the 20th century; so much so, that it presently has some 38 million members in the US (or, roughly 30% of the nation’s labor force), and has become the dominant class in American society today (Florida, 2002, p. xxvii).

Members of the creative class are, in Florida’s account, much more likely to be geographically footloose than members of either the working- or the traditional service-class, and are consequently more willing to move to the specific places that offer them a “thick” labor market; ones dense with opportunity in their fields. Befitting a group that is defined by its apparent ingenuity, the creative class is also associated with its own unique lifestyles, values and cultural practices. Florida paints a picture of a people whose creativity seems to define nearly every aspect of their lives, who seemingly thrive on diversity and change, and who crave openness and a variety of experiences. Through his work with numerous focus groups, Florida asserts that the modern creative class is decidedly bohemian and urban in outlook and orientation. Delivered with the sunny demeanor of a pop-psychologist, he then shows how the creative class craves the participatory experience of the diverse urban street, and correspondingly repelled by the alleged monoculture of suburbia and the pre-packaged experience of the shopping mall, the convention center, and the major league sports stadium.

Florida’s claims about the nature of urban growth proceed from these basic observations. The crux of his argument is that regional economic growth is no longer driven by large corporations, but rather by the specific location choices of creative people. Cities that attract the creative class will prosper economically, while those that lose their creative populations will ultimately stagnate. Moreover, cities that are characterized by an extant concentration of the creative class accrue a distinct competitive advantage in attracting even more new businesses, jobs, and the kinds of innovations that ultimately produce sustainable economic growth. Because agglomeration is no longer necessarily about taking advantage of economies of scale, or the proximity of related factories or services, companies cluster in specific places to take advantage of precisely these large pools of highly creative people. In so arguing, Florida turns the standard model of regional economic development on its head; in the new creativity-driven economy, people don’t follow the jobs so much as the jobs follow the creative people.

But how can cities win the battle for this talented and mobile cohort? Both the incredible popularity and the distinctiveness of his creativity thesis are found in how this question is answered. In Florida’s calculus, municipal action should no longer focus on tweaking tax structures and chasing large corporations, but rather on providing just the right sort of material and cultural infrastructure in which the creative class will thrive (Florida, 2002, pp. 215–234). The tangible expression of this assertion is found in the “buzzing, trendy neighborhood” (Peck, 2005) characterized by plenty of “on-demand entertainment”, and a multitude of casual “third places”, like coffeehouses and bookstores where numerous informal social ties can be cultivated. Pointing to places like Austin, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, Florida reasons that a good part of their recent economic successes can be explained by their abundance of just these types of vibrant and funky urban neighborhoods that offer an exceptionally wide range of experiential activities. The attraction of the creative class to these particular places is also enhanced by the presumably open and tolerant culture, the large concentration of bohemians and gays, and the particularly urban recreational and nightlife ecologies. Cities that have succeeded in attracting large pools of “creative capital” are, in other words, precisely those that have done a good job of both validating and satisfying the lifestyle, recreation and cultural needs of the creative class.

Florida’s creativity thesis engendered some powerful messages and far-reaching conclusions for urban promoters: if you want to succeed in the new economy, shift your agenda towards improving not only the local business climate, but also the local “people climate” as well. In addition, ensure that the creative class feels both welcomed and satisfied if you want your city to succeed. Together, these proclamations represented the new Florida-inspired urban imperative around which municipal action would increasingly be organized.

**Demystifying the “creativity craze”**

The idea that cities maintain their productive advantage by becoming attractive consumer sites, is not, however, a particularly novel observation. For at least a decade, a steady stream of economic research had crystallized into the “human capital” school of urban growth, which stipulated that a city’s concentration of educated and skilled workers predicts job growth and levels of prosperity (Glaeser, 2004). What is new in Florida’s account is his emphasis on connecting “creativity” with “bohemianism”. His main contribution to the “human capital” conversation is therefore expressively cultural, and this distinction helps explain how Florida broke out so quickly from the ghetto of academic economic theory and rose to near celebrity status. With similar effect, Florida’s fondness for richly describing the texture of his ideal urban neighborhood worked to situate his text as a planning manual which created an immediate buzz among despondent municipal actors across the United States and beyond.

But while there is a considerable body of data to support Florida’s primary assertion about creativity being the driving force in the new economy, his prescriptions for urban planning have come under extensive scrutiny. Perhaps not surprisingly, economists working within the human capital school produced the initial critique. Although generally sympathetic to Florida’s work, Glaeser (2004) ran regressions on the data and found that there was actually very little independent effect from concentrations of
Florida’s illustrious bohemians, after controlling for the more traditional markers of human capital, namely the percent of young adults with college degrees. Hitting harder were other economists such as Kotkin and Siegel (2004), who, after negatively characterizing Florida and his followers as having the passions typical of a religious movement, demonstrated that Florida’s creative urban hubs were in fact distinguished by higher-than-average unemployment rates and even sustained job losses in recent years. The exact same conclusions were drawn by Manhattan Institute scholar Steve Malanga (2004), who pointed out that the existence of vibrant, bohemian neighborhoods was most likely a consequence of economic growth, rather than a cause of it. Florida’s entire theory was therefore based on circular logic. Moreover, Malanga underscored the abundant number of counterfactual data points ignored in Florida’s account, namely the numerous “uncreative” cities like Las Vegas, Memphis and Oklahoma City which were in actuality job powerhouses of fantastic proportions in recent years.

As damning as these critiques were, the most contemptuous assessments of Florida’s creativity thesis came from geographers and urban political economists. Writing in the Baffler, Maliszewski (2004) began the offensive by taking Florida to task for wholly ignoring the intensifying problems of intra-urban inequality and the plight of the working poor. In Maliszewski’s formulation, Florida did not so much produce an imaginative economic theory as he delivered a highly-readable exercise in yuppie self-indulgence. What’s more, the groundwork of Florida’s thin economic philosophy was based upon a set of Orwellian inversions that worked to justify and naturalize the singularly active role he bestowed to the creative class. For example, in Florida’s economic utopia, “job insecurity” and “uncertainty” were perversely celebrated as “liberating” transformations as they released workers from the creativity-squelching big unit structures of large corporations, factories, and unions. Echoing the economists, Maliszewski also showed that Florida fatally mis-took the side effects of a booming economy – such as nouveau restarants, quirky coffeeshops, vibrant music scenes – for the causes of economic growth. Florida’s book therefore got the relationship exactly backward, and his planning prescriptions would result in nothing less than disaster. Florida’s advice to struggling cities was, in effect, to build “Potemkin bohemias”, complete with constructed “authentic edginess” and publicly-supported “street culture” prepared with care in anticipation for the “esteemed dignitaries of the creative class, to arrive” (Maliszewski, 2004, p. 77).

Building on these suppositions, Peck (2005) launched the most impressive assault on the mounting creative craze. Dismissing Florida-inspired municipal action as, in effect, “cappuccino urban politics, with plenty of froth”, Peck asserted that Florida’s creativity script was based on a foundation of interlocking and established neoliberal strategies; including intensifying urban competition, place marketing, property-led development and gentrification. Florida’s program for cities could therefore be operationalized around a set of relatively low-cost, well-known, and market-friendly placbos, and as such, it dovetailed nearly perfectly with established urban constituencies and the interests of entrenched urban elites. Far from actually challenging orthodox urban policy packages, Florida’s creativity script recodified and even extended the neoliberal syllabus, while “seductively repackaging them in the soft-focus terms of cultural policy” (Peck, 2005). In so arguing, Peck cleverly showed how Florida’s ideas have risen to prominence not because of their apparent novelty, but rather because of the neoliberalized urban terrain across which they had traveled. Turning the dominant narrative about Florida’s book on its head, Peck displaced the notion that the creativity thesis was a radical new take on urban economics. Rather, it amounted to a conservative celebration of extant urban policy prescriptions that had become commonplace since at least the first round of mid-1970s deindustrialization.

**Be hip and they will come: Milwaukee’s recent round of urban entrepreneurialism**

Perhaps because of these reasons, Florida’s ideas proved to be hugely seductive to leaders in Milwaukee’s growth coalition. Beginning in 2001, local elites began to fundamentally reorient their promotional activities so that they conformed to the contours of Florida’s creative city. Soon after, the city’s main publicity organ began to repaint the city’s imagery in ways that highlighted a range of motifs presumably commensurate with the culture of the young creative, including openness to outsiders, tolerance, social and cultural diversity, active lifestyles, vibrant and funky neighborhoods, and a burgeoning local technology sector. At the same time, municipal action in Milwaukee shifted dramatically towards an intensive focus on central-area real estate investment strategies, nearly all of which were geared towards satisfying some aspect of the lifestyle needs of young professionals. Projects included public funding for numerous new downtown museums, showcase condominium towers, pedestrianization projects, nightlife districts, loft conversions, and façade and streetscape improvements. In what follows, I explore in greater detail how Milwaukee’s growth coalition embraced these distinct elements of the new urban entrepreneurialism.

**Recasting the Milwaukee image: making Milwaukee “Cool”**

Between 1995 and 2005 Milwaukee’s official promotional logo was a vaguely-industrial, gear-like symbol underscored with the slogan “Milwaukee: the Genuine American City”. Ad copy connected with the Genuine American campaign referenced the city’s industrial and working-class heritage, complete with solid architecture, friendly and upright citizens, and family-oriented tourist attractions (Kenny and Zimmerman, 2004). In early 2001, however, it had become clear to civic leaders that it was necessary to author an alternative, more forward thinking, and “hip” narrative about the city. The catalyst for this re-thinking was a series of visits made by Richard Florida at the request of the city’s most influential business coalition, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC). Florida received an extensive...
tour of the city and declared to the surprise of these eager stake-holders that, “This is cool, this is really cool” (Gertzen, 2001). Milwaukee already had all of the essential ingredients to become a leading center of the new creativity-driven economy, Florida maintained, but local boosters needed to focus on effectively spreading the word that the city was a diverse, tolerant, and “cool” place where “you can go sailing, hang out in a coffeehouse, and live in a renovated loft of an old warehouse” (Gertzen, 2001). To the surely bemused crowd, Florida offered this final piece of ostensibly quirky advice: highlight the city’s coolness factor by promoting “the fact that the Violent Femmes, one of the best rock bands ever, are from Milwaukee”. In doing so, Milwaukee could follow the trail blazed by Austin, TX; a fast-growing city where robust economic development was the product of, in Florida’s conceptualization, the city’s association with a “hip” music scene (Florida, 2002, pp. 298–300).

Florida’s advice inspired a series of innovative representational strategies for Milwaukee. The groundwork for these new tactics was laid immediately when the MMAC created an organization called Young Professionals of Milwaukee (YPM); a social network that sought to make the city more amenable and visible “to diverse young talent”. YPM developed a marketing campaign that showcased the “coolest people, places, and urban developments in the metropolitan area”, the first leg of which was directed at local young professionals, reflecting the immediate need of reversing the metropolitan brain drain. The “We Choose Milwaukee” advertisement displayed an image of a multi-racial crowd of well-dressed young professionals framed by a background that stylistically summarized the creative class urban tableau, with numerous outdoor activities, a lively arts scene, and cutting-edge architecture (Figure 1).

The new strategy broadened substantially with the launching of a national advertising campaign which highlighted similar themes, but borrowed more directly from Florida’s amendments to mainstream economic development theory. The advertisement began with, “Companies searching for the best talent must make their expansion and relocation decisions in large part based on where that talent lives. Professionals considering a move must take a hard look at factors such as the ability to make their mark in a livable and enlivened environment. Greater Milwaukee, Wisconsin, gets that message and delivers” (Cigallo-Granger, 2003).

The glossy copy carefully redrew Milwaukee’s economic and cultural terrain through the main motifs of Florida’s idealized creative city. Acknowledging that “place” was very important to today’s young professionals, the advertisement presented Milwaukee’s center as dense with “coolness components”, “fun factors” and vibrant neighborhoods like the Third Ward “where today’s creative class congregates” (Cigallo-Granger, 2003). Im-

1 Richard Florida quoted in Sherman (2002). Florida Praises Milwaukee. OnMilwaukee.com August 13. (OnMilwaukee.com is Milwaukee’s online daily, this article was last accessed January 2008).


4 This quote is from email correspondence in August 2004 with Dean Amhaus, president of the Spirit of Milwaukee.
itor’s Bureau, which had until this point remained stubbornly committed to the Genuine American package.

The Creative City Development Strategy

The $122 million Calatrava addition not only became the cultural centerpiece of Milwaukee’s image regeneration campaign, it also represented a classic example of the “speculative development of place” associated with the entrepreneurial city (Harvey, 1989, p. 8). This is because the “starchitect” building raised the city’s profile on the international stage, produced an avalanche of positive press, generated measurable increases in tourism, and was instrumental in producing a high-rise residential real

Figure 1  “We Choose Milwaukee”, an advertisement launched by the Young Professionals of Milwaukee.
estate boom in the area overlooking the site, enriching land owners considerably (Murphy, 2003). The building also became an apt symbol of recent growth-coalition activity in Milwaukee, in that it mobilized both private and public funds to support selective economic growth and elite consumption practices, while at the same time successfully merging the “creativity script” with the symbolic economy of the city’s downtown neighborhoods.

The reorientation of Milwaukee’s municipal leaders towards satisfying the lifestyle needs of the creative class began quietly as early as 1999 with the publication of a path-breaking downtown master plan. The unifying intellectual theme of the document was to encourage the professional-class colonization of central Milwaukee through speculative development and zoning changes. The plan sought to increase the physical attractiveness of the downtown neighborhoods by amending the legacy of modernist planning in central Milwaukee through the corrective grammar of New Urbanist design (NeiIlsen Architects, 1999). The combination of monofunctional zoning, large footprint developments, and the restructuring of central area urban space around the automobile had left just a shadow of Milwaukee’s formerly-contiguous, humanly-scaled built form. The plan estimated that upwards of 70% of streetscapes in the central area were outright hostile to the pedestrian. To reverse this inheritance, it called for the complete elimination of one-way streets, multiple pedestrianization projects, and the wholesale conversion of vacant land, surface parking lots, and nearby industrial and brownfield corridors into mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, each with their own distinct identity.

The two largest redevelopment projects resulting from the plan were especially representative of these themes. The first was the demolition of the Park East freeway spur; a one mile-long segment of elevated asphalt that occupied prime real estate and established a solid physical and symbolical barrier between the downtown and the slowly gentrifying neighborhoods immediately to the north (Figure 4). The spur also created an intimidating “dead zone” adjacent to some of Milwaukee’s most popular youth-oriented entertainment districts. Proceeding from the New Urbanist ideal of fostering connections and creating a seamless and accessible urban fabric, the street grid of Park East corridor was rebuilt, a new bridge across the Milwaukee River was constructed, and overscaled streets were converted into landscaped boulevards, complete with monumental planters showcasing native prairie grasses.

A similar design template guided the development of the Beerline neighborhood, a mixed-use district built in a riverfront brownfield corridor. Beerline redevelopment efforts paid special attention to opening up the formerly-inaccessible riverfront property, and re-establishing connections to the adjacent neighborhoods. The downtown Riverwalk was extended along the entire waterfront portion of the corridor, fashioning one of Milwaukee’s most unique semi-public spaces. Pedestrian access to the neighborhoods above the bluff was provided by a series of prominent outdoor staircases as well (Figure 5).
Highlighting the emphasis on outdoor recreation and the reclamation of the river for use by the creative class, the Milwaukee Row Club was invited to make its home in a prominent location in the heart of the new neighborhood. Beerline designers also gave special consideration to fostering an authentic sense of place as well. The primary motif was broadly conceptualized as “industrial prairie”; an aesthetic that combined the regionally-significant “prairie school” of residential architecture with the site-specific muscular rationalism of local industrial design (Gould, 2002a).

Infrastructural improvements like these effectively “primed the pump” and the recapitalization of select downtown neighborhoods spread beyond the initial zones of investment. Since the plan’s publication, developers added an average of 500 housing units per year to Milwaukee’s central area (Gertzen and Daykin, 2003). A total of roughly 3000 new residential units were constructed in just the central business district alone, converting a formerly mono-functional zone into a mixed-use neighborhood in its own right. Property values shot-up accordingly, especially adjacent to the newly-constructed Riverwalk (Figure 6), where they registered a 54% increase between 1998 and 2002 (Gould, 2002b). These same improvements also diluted the barriers between the downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods sufficiently enough that it no longer made sense to use the traditional “downtown versus neighborhoods” dichotomy. Rather, a new characterization that envisioned a larger, revitalizing “central area”, constituted by series of continuous, but distinct neighborhoods, emerged and gained legitimacy in planning and media representations.

Florida’s visits to Milwaukee inspired municipal actors to envision an even more explicitly creative city development template in a subsequent plan entitled “live/work/play”. Local research showed sustained growth in high-

Figure 4 Central Milwaukee Map.
tech jobs and entrepreneurial activity in the central area, and this new plan aimed to focus these activities, and “create a domino effect that would lead to a New Milwaukee experience of energy, excitement and enthusiasm” (Kahler-Slater, 2002a). The plan’s primary goal was taken directly from Florida’s syllabus and outlined ways to increase the density of these “live, work, play” opportunities, and also to physically integrate existing clusters into a continuous stretch of urban territory conceptualized as “the stroll”. These concerns were operationalized through a set of recommendations, referred to as “ignitors”, that were expected to generate new activity and leverage development already underway.

This peculiar vocabulary aside, the plan recommended several specific initiatives that would more firmly secure the creative class foothold in Milwaukee’s central area; including seed money to support adding heating poles to restaurants to allow for year round outdoor dining, attracting stores like Pottery Barn, and building quality pet daycare facilities in the central area (Kahler-Slater, 2002b). A downtown music district that would draw in “diverse” groups of people was also advised, thus attending to the importance of a vibrant local music scene to young creatives (Kahler-Slater, 2002a).

Much of the live/work/play plan remains in its embryonic stages at the time of this research. Only the low

Figure 5 The Vine Street staircase provides pedestrian access between the Brewer’s Hill and the Beerline neighborhoods.

Figure 6 The new Riverwalk and condominium “lofts” in the rapidly-gentrifying Third Ward neighborhood.
hanging fruit, such as the marketing aspects of the plan, have been put into place. These included the designation of a Milwaukee “techzone”, cleverly publicized with a “blue light launch” that invited high-tech companies in the area to hang a blue neon light, rendered in the iconic motif of the universal power symbol, along their public facades. The authors of live/work/play also worked to convince certain companies in Milwaukee’s manufacturing sector to “re-brand themselves and re-surface as technology companies”; a move that repositioned the city’s economic imagery in ways more closely approximate to the popular motifs of the “creativity-driven economy” (Kahler-Slater, 2002b). Live/work/play stressed that securing Milwaukee’s competitive position for young professionals among its peer cities would require a more thorough integration of the new Milwaukee logo into the city’s material landscape. The plan therefore worked towards appropriate signage at the airport, and along freeways and city streets. Meanwhile, branding strategies for smaller-scale areas, such as revitalizing neighborhoods and emerging retail strips, were marked by kiosks and “bright, colorful, and fun signs” (Kahler-Slater, 2002a). Live/work/play went so far as to recommend that local media report more positive and upbeat stories about Milwaukee, and also showcase successful industries and neighborhoods, thereby creating a more positive semiotic terrain about the city for residents of the wider metropolitan area and region (Kahler-Slater, 2002b).

Assessing Milwaukee’s creative city development strategy

Milwaukee’s creative city development strategy produced some visible successes for the city’s growth coalition. Delighted elites and an enthusiastic local media celebrated that the fastest-growing census tract in the metropolitan area was no longer located in the suburban periphery, but rather in downtown Milwaukee. They also cautiously pointed to studies that showed the city was gaining more young professionals than it lost during recent years, reversing an established trend (Land and Dresang, 2003). The property-led residential boom in the central area continued to exceed expectations; so much so that a Brookings Institute study characterized Milwaukee’s downtown as “perched for take-off” (Birch, 2005). National media accounts indicated that Milwaukee’s aggressive promotional activities functioned just as effectively, with Forbes magazine listing Milwaukee as a “bohemian bargain” in 2004, and National Geographic Traveler showcasing the city’s revitalization that had “created a national buzz” (Haq, 2006). These positive narratives were accompanied by a succession of travel reviews in a variety of newspapers, including the Miami Herald, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, and the Detroit Free Press; all of which highlighted the city’s “renaissance”. The most recent of these – and, apparently the most compliant to the desires of local elites – described Milwaukee as a former “beer capital” transformed into a “hip destination” (Creager, 2006).

Beneath the glossy surface of these largely superficial successes there existed a much more complicated and contradictory story; one that raised numerous questions about both the efficacy, and the broader socio-economic outcomes, of Milwaukee’s recent growth coalition activities. The most immediate uncertainty echoed Harvey’s (1989) contention regarding the long-term sustainability of any innovations in urban promotion. Investments designed to make certain cities more attractive as consumer sites are inevitably copied elsewhere, especially in the setting of an increasingly neoliberalized national urban policy terrain. Concurrent with the launching of the new city logo, Milwaukee’s peer cities produced promotional campaigns and planning documents which mirrored almost perfectly the thrust of Milwaukee’s growth coalition. Initiatives such as Cincinnati’s “Creative City Plan” and the “Memphis Tomorrow” were organized around the motifs of youth, technology, and creativity, and thereby made Milwaukee’s aggressive campaigns somewhat moot. Similar initiatives were also in progress elsewhere, and particularly in medium-sized, slow-growth metropolitan areas like Cleveland, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh (Atkin, 2003). The sum total of this parallel activity was to render any competitive advantage within a system of cities ephemeral. Indeed, distraught urban promoters in many of these places might soon ask how many buzzing-trendy neighborhoods and actually-used bike paths can there be?

The extent to which Florida’s theories are empirically-grounded and predictive of economic growth has remained the most salient question however. Despite the continued local and national popularity of Florida’s urban consultation enterprise, the most recent academic research found no essential relationship between a city’s creative class concentration and economic growth (Rausch and Negrey, 2006). This pattern held true in metropolitan Milwaukee as well. Between 1999 and 2003, almost 50,000 jobs were obliterated, and within multiple sectors of the economy ranging from the expected retrenchment of manufacturing (~29,953), to the more surprising wholesale and retail trade (~10,020), information technology (~1265) and administrative services (~5326) (White, 2004). More devastating still for the city’s growth coalition was that net job losses actually accelerated sharply concurrent with the local experiment with Florida-inspired growth initiatives. The four-county metropolitan area’s net job losses stood at nearly 25,000 in the five years following 1998, representing a contraction of approximately 3% of the overall regional economy (White, 2004). Moreover, these numbers masked the highly uneven socio-geographic pattern of this latest round of economic decline. A staggering 60% of working-age African–American males in Milwaukee’s central city were jobless in the years between 2002 and 2004 (Levine, 2004). What therefore appeared to be a fairly serious recession in Milwaukee’s suburban territory was actually an outright economic collapse of incredible proportions in Milwaukee’s central city. This was especially the case in those neighborhoods shaped by the historical process of racialized residential segregation.

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5 All of these articles can be accessed at http://www.metromilwaukee.org (last accessed in January 2008).
Nearly eight years into its creative city development experiment, Milwaukee remains a city in deep, and rapidly intensifying, socioeconomic trouble. Poverty in the city increased at a rapid clip commensurate with this most recent round of job losses, ultimately pushing Milwaukee ahead of New Orleans to become the seventh poorest large city in the United States in 2006. Fully one in four Milwaukeeans lives below the poverty line at the time of this research (Glauber and Poston, 2007). Meanwhile, the child poverty rate migrated upwards to almost 42%, tying the city with Miami as the forth poorest for children in the United States (Held, 2005). These economic dislocations were drawn with near perfection around both racial and geographic lines. For nearly a decade, the city’s most notable characteristic was the rate of African–American joblessness, which exceeded that of any other large American city, while the disparity between white and black joblessness registered at about 30% points, also over and above by a significant degree every other large American city (Levine, 2004, p. 15). The striking juxtaposition of a downtown saturated with investment dollars surrounded by wide arcs of capital flight underscores the fact that the city’s geo-economic and racial terrain is characterized by the steepest gradients in the United States (Levine, 2002).

Post-justice Milwaukee?

This grim economic reality was either ignored or did not fully register with local elites. Nor did it undercut in any substantial way Florida’s celebrity status among the city’s media, policy makers, or team of public relations experts. If anything, the attractiveness of the creativity thesis seemed to increase in proportion to Milwaukee’s ongoing economic disintegration. Part of the reason for this is that a pliant local media popularized the new creative class salvation narrative and placed the blame for the city’s economic troubles squarely with the city’s alleged parochial resistance to new ideas; a strategy imported directly from Florida’s playbook. The city’s only daily newspaper, for example, published at least a dozen editorials urging local residents to drop their resistance to change, shed their blue-collar identity, and embrace the competitive cultural zeitgeist of the new creative age. A very typical piece recommended that the local working class go so far as to “make room for the creative class” while also admonishing the same cohort to change, shed their blue-collar identity, and embrace the competitive cultural zeitgeist of the new creative age (Stanford, 2004). The local business press was even more aggressive at promoting Florida’s nostrums, and this was especially the case at the rare moments when the property-led downtown development paradigm was temporarily challenged. For instance, in the summer of 2004 the Common Council rejected a $41 million public subsidy to redevelop the defunct Pabst Brewery complex into a new downtown neighborhood with a combination of condominium and upscale entertainment venues. Stunned local policy-makers blamed the city’s presumed culture of retrograde working-class conservatism and wondered despondently, “Do enough people understand that Milwaukee will have to shed its working class heritage if it is to join the ranks of America’s great cities? The City Council vote to reject the PabstCity project suggests there is still much work to be done on this front. It was instructive to learn how relatively easy it was to kill the project. Defending the status quo will always be easier than championing for change” (Lightbourn, 2005, p. 20).

As these discursive moves demonstrate, the assimilation of Florida’s ideas into Milwaukee’s growth coalition had the effect of concentrating the focus of local opinion-makers into a crisp and singular pro-gentrification narrative; one that was powerful and difficult to challenge as it naturalized as inevitable a prescribed set of urban transformations. In so doing, the increasingly confident Milwaukee growth coalition essentially validated one comparatively small and privileged class of consumers, as well as their particular cultural practices, while making nearly invisible representations of the broader population, especially the city’s African–American and immigrant working class and working poor population. Perhaps this should come as no surprise as Florida’s creativity thesis conspicuously omits old-economy workers from the utopian contours of the emerging city, while simultaneously ignoring “obsolete” forms of politics, like unions or class-based political parties, all of which are “breezily dismissed” (Peck, 2005). Celebrations of the creative class by the Milwaukee growth coalition had the overall effect of repackaging gentrification and making it politically digestible to local planners and municipal actors desperate for simple solutions to complex urban problems.

It is within this immediate context that the most profound outcome of Milwaukee’s embrace of the creative city development strategy becomes salient: the transformation of the local state towards supporting a much more active and potent pro-gentrification approach. This new tactic is most clearly evidenced by the escalating imbalance in municipal expenditures since Florida’s first visit. In the four fiscal years following 2001, Milwaukee’s economic development portfolio totaled $413 million, of which an enormous 71% was invested in real estate and physical improvements; a percentage which far outdistanced any of Milwaukee’s peer cities (Horton, 2006). Projects funded with this public money included the construction of downtown amenities such as the ongoing expansion of the Riverwalk, large retail developments, an upscale downtown office and condominium tower, a new downtown museum, as well as façade and streetscape improvements, almost exclusively in the central area neighborhoods potentially attractive to the creative class. A remarkably slim 1% of this portfolio was invested in workforce development and training, and a comparatively tiny 22% was used to attract, retain or expand jobs within the city (Horton, 2006). The substantive hallmark of Milwaukee’s Florida-inspired municipal action therefore was an approximately $300 million public subsidy directed at pampering the professional classes and lubricating their continued resettlement from one part of the metropolitan area to another.

Consistent with Smith’s (1996) notion of a “revanchist” urbanism and MacLeod’s (2002) study of a “post-justice”
Glasgow, this reorientation of municipal action in Milwaukee produced a new round of deepening spatial inequities buttressed by overlapping regimes of exclusion. Repeatedly, these inequities were brought into extremely sharp focus. In 2006, to give just one representative example, the local parks district announced that 43 public swimming pools – 90% of the city total – would close due to budget shortfalls, thereby undermining the quality of life in many of the city’s poorest neighborhoods (Umhoefer, 2006). The same agency was still robust enough however to earmark a generous $200,000 for the installation of additional public art in the upscale corridors of the city’s downtown area, an ostensibly more essential form of municipal action under the new Florida-inspired urban imperative (Schumacher, 2005).

Gentrification supported directly by the local growth coalition similarly produced a widening zone of intensifying rents, which displaced hundreds of centrally-located manufacturing jobs from the Third Ward and Walker’s Point neighborhoods (Daykin, 2001). In other neighborhoods where the actions of the local growth coalition were especially intense, an exclusive professional-class monoculture emerged. This was particularly true in the riverfront Beerline redevelopment area and in immediately adjacent neighborhoods such as Brewer’s Hill, where the conversion of rental duplexes to single-family homes worked to progressively purge the working-class African–American population from what was once the city’s most diverse neighborhoods (Borowski, 2001). Within these polarized socioeconomic landscapes moral panics over the activities of African–American youth became increasingly commonplace. City officials went so far as to threaten the possibility of launching “Prussian-style crackdowns” – involving saturation patrols and state confiscation of automobiles – on African–American “cruise- ers” along the city’s downtown public lakefront (Diedrich, 2006). Creativity-inspired redevelopments therefore worked to enforce, despite Florida’s rhetorical insistence to the contrary, an increasingly strict monocultural expression in the public spaces of Milwaukee’s central area.

**Conclusion**

Milwaukee’s recent articulation of the entrepreneurial city presents a textbook case study of how cities embody strategic sites for the expression of innovative neoliberal urban policy packages. As was the case in other cities experiencing economic distress, Milwaukee’s growth coalition became captivated by Richard Florida’s thesis about the relationship between sustainable economic growth and the creative class. What was distinctive about Milwaukee’s growth coalition is the way in which the image-makers and municipal actors orchestrated a comprehensive strategy explicitly grounded in the details of Florida’s idealized creative city template. This calculated move buttressed a more powerful round of local place promotion and planning tactics, both of which highlighted a unique set of urban motifs presumably commensurate with creative class lifestyles, cultural practices, and consumption habits. The creative city growth strategy, however, did not represent a radical break with previous chapters of the entrepreneurial city. Although the epiphenomenon of urban promotion was altered considerably, the most meaningful consequence was the repackaging and strengthening of the extant downtown-based property-led development paradigm. Consistent with Peck’s (2005) contentions, the Milwaukee case study demonstrates that the creative city development strategy hardly disrupted the orthodox policy prescriptions first outlined by Harvey (1989), including intensified inter-urban competition, place marketing, property-led development, gentrification, and normalized sociospatial inequality. The marriage of Florida’s ideas with municipal action in Milwaukee did support a celebrated resurgence in the comparatively tiny downtown area, but it did nothing to forestall the economic disintegration of the remainder of the city. It therefore ultimately brought into even sharper relief what was already one of the most economically and racially polarized large cities in the United States.

**References**


Diedrich, J (2006) Cruisers’ cars may be seized; city also will consider ban on “unlawful” vehicle gatherings. *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (22, June).


