

Original Paper

The Music City: Harbin's Re-branding and Creative City Planning

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Abstract

In contemporary society, the notion of creative cities plays an increasingly important role in city regeneration and redevelopment, especially for those second-tier cities with rich history and cultural treasures and facing economic issues. This essay will critically analyze creative city theories and debates based upon Harbin, and discuss how Harbin re-identifies itself as 'City of Music' and utilizes creative city planning to stimulate its economic growth and enhance global competitiveness.

Keywords

Creative City, Culture Industry, City Planning, Harbin, East Asia

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, culture is becoming the key to build a new country. The notion of creative cities is being increasingly considered by civil leaders and policy makers in the process of city regeneration, as it provides a concrete guide that how to transform invisible cultural heritages to actual policy making and economic development. Thus, the notion of creative cities plays an important role in contemporary city regeneration and redevelopment, especially for those second-tier cities with rich history and cultural treasures and facing economic issues. This essay will critically analyze creative city theories and debates based upon Harbin, the central city in northeastern China with distinctive local culture and serious bottlenecks in economic development, and discuss how Harbin re-identifies itself as 'City of Music' and utilizes creative city planning to stimulate its economic growth and enhance global competitiveness.

2. Creative Cities Planning and Urban Development

Instead of traditional top-down model, the creative cities, as Jacobs (1958, p. 126) argues, are

culture-focused and human-centered, focusing on how to make a city more attractive by developing its cultural industries and engage more creative class to inspire its economic development. The idea of “soft city” is raised and discussed that a creative city should reflect how its citizens live and look to the integration of culture and arts into daily life and landscapes of this city, which is the first approach of creative cities planning (Jacobs, 1958; Raban, 1973). According to Jacobs (1958, p. 127), “the best way to plan for downtown is to see how people use it today”. Instead of a disorganized community, planners of “soft city” should find what citizens need, how they socialize and where they like to go, so that they could conclude the ideal model of new downtown for people living here. Thus, before concrete policy making, planners should first observe how this city operates, find its strengths and enhance them (Jacobs, 1958), which means their primary task is identify this city’s characters and culture. Every city’s unique cultural codes, also could be seen as its individuality, is hidden in each street, district and their own attractions, which are reshaped by people and merchants from common and simple to individual during long-time development process. And these blocks draw a map of this city’s culture, art and people’s daily life, which is this city’s first image to the public (Jacobs, 1958).

Moreover, as Jacobs (1958, p. 131) argues, creative cities planning should also consider cities’ “natural resources” and “culture heritages”, such as “waterfronts, hills and historic architectures”. A delightful landmark combining a city’s natural resources and its culture, therefore, is usually considered in realistic creative city planning. Such creative city usually has two particular characters: “individuality”, developed upon its unique cultural codes and landscapes, and creative class who are attracted by this city’s “centrality and clustered activities” (Jacobs, 1958, p. 125). New downtown’s model focuses on developing a culture-led living experience to its citizens and tourists, challenging traditional top-down planning process. And such city planning will develop qualified cultural infrastructures, convenient public transport systems and cultural amenities, which are competitive advantages for attracting visitors, creative class and inward investments.

Except for reshape cities’ image and living experience, such culture-led planning also could inspire cultural consumption and economic development. As Florida (2004, p. 223) argues, “economic growth will occur in places that have highly educated people”. Once high-tech talents and creative class were attracted by a city’s individuality and image, they would be the cores of long-term economic growth. The reason why high-tech talents inspire economy is that “knowledge and information are now the strategic resource and transforming agent of the economy” (Bell, 1999, p. 45). As Bayliss (2007, p. 890) argues, “economic success is dependent upon knowledge in the form of complex problem solving, technological innovation, creative exploitation of new markets, and the development of new product or service offerings”. These creative talents enable a city to produce and process knowledge and information continuously. In this context, creative class and high-tech talents are identified as key resources for ‘productive growth’ and economic development (Bayliss, 2007, p. 890), and these talents also could be seen as an essential condition of a creative city.

Thus, “the key dimension of economic competitiveness turns on the ability to attract, cultivate and

mobilize creative assets” (Florida & Tingali, 2004, p. 12), which means policy makers should focus on how to attract talented and high skilled groups by their ability to express individuality. According to Florida (2004, p. 276), he explains the factors of attracting and retaining the creative class in a simple formula, which “reflects their lifestyle choices and revolves around his three T’s—technology, talent, and tolerance”. Talents are attracted to those tolerant regions where people “from any background, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation can easily plug in”, and also they prefer cities with “interesting and challenging activities available to them” (Florida, 2004, p. 276). Cities with cultural amenities, “vibrant music scenes”, “street-level culture”, “active nightlife”, and other “cool” activities are ideal choices for them (Florida, 2004, p. 277). Thus, high-level three T’s means a city has the ability to maintain complex divisions of labors, which is also a key condition of creative cities for sustainable economic growth.

Additionally, culture-led planning and creative class could enhance a city’s global competitiveness and attract investment, which is becoming the core strategy of many cities, especially those second-tier cities. As Bayliss (2007, p. 894) argues, “both culture and creativity have become central to promote the city at an international level, attracting investment and the Creative Class”. Cultural events and creative industries could internationally present a region’s value to creative class. Also flagship cultural institutions and world-class events help this region more recognizable on map. A distinctive global image will in turn stimulate employment and tourism, which finally attracts investors and inspires economy.

3. Harbin’s history and re-branding

Harbin grows from a small village in 1899 into a modern city in contemporary China, playing an important role in northeastern economy, traffic and cultural development. The construction of Chinese Eastern Railway became its turning point. “The influence of Russia came with the China Far East Railway, an extension of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and Harbin, known formerly as a fishing village, began to prosper as the largest commercial center of North Eastern Asia” (Harbin Ice, 2023a). Since then, immigrants from 33 countries moved to Harbin, including The United State, Germany and Jews, where they established hundreds of banking and industrial companies (Harbin Ice, 2023b). These initial industrial and commercial companies enhanced Harbin’s industrialization and modernization process. Till 1917, the amount of immigrants, who came to this city for escaping Nazi power or seeking higher life quality, reached the peak point (Sharpe, 1995). As Sharpe (1995, p. 57) argues, Harbin’s population was “over one hundred thousand”, with “over forty thousand were Russian immigrants”. However, due to Japanese invasion and unstable relationship with Soviet Union, increasing immigrants moved back to their hometowns or immigrated to other regions, such as Shanghai or Tianjin (Sharpe, 1995). Although Harbin’s immigrants were reducing, they played a significant role in shaping Harbin’s city culture. Some customs could still be found in contemporary Harbin’s everyday life. For instance, the architecture in Harbin shows a “unique combination of oriental and European architecture styles”,

bringing “the city the name of ‘Oriental Moscow’ and ‘Oriental Paris’” (Harbin Ice, 2023a). Also considering Harbin “had the earliest access to European classical music in China”, its music industry was highly affected by Russian and Jewish music style. In 1908, the earliest Harbin Symphony Orchestra, which is also the oldest symphony orchestra in China, founded (Harbin Ice, 2023a). The immigrant culture is the basis of today’s Harbin culture.

But at this time, although Harbin’s culture was developed preliminarily and had its own characters, Harbin was still identified as an industrial city. From 1951 to 1956, due to Harbin’s geographic advantage and industrial basis, many key construction projects located in Harbin, as a part of the First Five-Year policy, which enhanced Harbin as a significant industrial base of China (Sharpe, 1995). However, with the deterioration of Soviet-China relationship and the outbreak of Vietnam War, many industrial enterprises and factories moved away from northeastern frontier to central regions of China in case of potential nuclear attack (Sharpe, 1995), which caused a decline of Harbin’s industrial development. Since then, Harbin’s economic development has been focused on the primary and tertiary industries, including energy industry, agriculture, forestry and service industry. According to the speech of Hao Lu, the Governor of Heilongjiang Province, Heilongjiang Province now faces serious challenge in economic development: the primary industry’s GDP kept reducing from 2006 to 2018 (The Standing Committee of Heilongjiang Provincial People’s Congress 2018). Energy industry’s share of provincial GDP decreased from 30% in 2006 to 7.5% in 2016, and service and tourism industries are playing a more significant role than before in Harbin’s economic growth (The Standing Committee of Heilongjiang Provincial People’s Congress 2018). According to Fernandes (2023)’s report of Chinese consumer confidence index, Chinese consumption on creative and cultural industries has sharply increased. When the per capita of GDP achieved 5,000 dollars, the spending on health, fashion and entertainment would soar (Fernandes, 2023). As Fernandes (2023)’s research argues, about 86% of Chinese interviewees prefer going to cinema, 81% of them listen to music, 78% of them watch TV drama and 74% of them choose sports event, which means entertainment consumption might instead of energy industry become the new engine of economic development in contemporary Harbin.

With pervious immigrants wave and cultural development, Harbin has formed its unique city culture, which is ‘based on Han culture, combined with Manchu culture and Russian culture’ (Harbin Ice, 2023a). Its special history and local culture make its foods, architectures, music and lifestyle with exotic charm, distinctive from China’s others cities, attracting enormous visitors every year. Harbin’s rich cultural events and amenities are also attractive to creative class and tourists. Harbin Summer Music Concert of China, for instance, is one of the flagship cultural events consisting of multiple symphonic and folk concerts, performances and cultural activities, held every two years in August. Also, as one of world’s largest ice festivals, Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival delicately exploits Harbin’s natural resources and develops Harbin’s ice culture, which enhances this city’s living experience. Harbin’s cultural amenities make this city more recognizable on map, shaping its individuality and attracting more investors and creative talents. Instead of a simple industrial city, these

cultural activities develop Harbin's cultural industries and reshape Harbin's image, which is the first step of constructing a creative Harbin.

As Jacobs (1958) argues, before concrete policy making, city planners should first find a city's strengths and enhance them, identifying a city's characters and individuality. Harbin's city culture is diverse, combined with national culture and western culture, presenting in music, ice, food, literature and architecture. But policy makers do not identify Harbin as a general creative city, but focusing on music aspect. In 2010, Harbin was recognized as "The Music City" by UNESCO (Harbin Ice 2023a), indicating Harbin formally re-identified itself as a music creative city. Although before known as a "Music City" Harbin is famous for its ice culture, policy makers still choose music as Harbin's development direction, as music could bring a more sustainable development model and reflect how people live this city better. According to Fernandes (2023)'s marketing research, in 2016 China, 57% of first tier cities' citizens watched live music, which is even higher than America's average level 51%, which indicates the demand of music consumption in Chinese market is gradually exceeding developed countries' market's. Thus, the huge development potential of music industry in China makes it a better choice than others cultural industries in Harbin. Government hopes music could be Harbin's new image to stimulate local economy. Moreover, with Russian and Jewish culture's influence, music plays an important role in Harbin's local culture development and people's everyday life. As Jindong Cai, a "Stanford professor and frequent guest conductor with Chinese orchestras", argues, "there is a different attitude toward the high arts in Harbin. Every city in China is trying to find its niche, and it's clear that Harbin discovered theirs early" (Fogel, 2023). According to Jacobs (1958), creative city planning should be culture-led and human focused. Such new identification develops from Harbin citizen's lifestyle, which is a successful beginning of Harbin's creative city planning.

4. Creative Harbin

As Jacobs (1958) argues, creative cities break traditional top down planning model, focusing on grass root culture and citizen's demand. Harbin's music could be seen as a grass root culture, which firstly developed from European classic music and Russian art with immigrant wave in 1900s (The Standing Committee of Heilongjiang Provincial People's Congress, 2018). Its first symphony orchestra is built under the help of "a thriving Jewish community, made up of mostly Russian musicians" (Q, 2016). Although most immigrants moved away afterwards, their music left in this city and was affected by Chinese folk music and common art. Now the biggest music event in Harbin is every two years' Harbin Summer Music Concert of China, with high community engagement. This event "integrates professional performance with mass cultural activities", enhancing mass participation and promoting surrounding regions consumption (Harbin Ice, 2023c). As the flagship cultural activities, Harbin Summer Music Concert of China need hold several hundred evenings and concerts in two weeks, cross tens of performance venues including communities, squares, parks, concert halls and other landmarks, which strengthens city image, helps citizens understand Harbin's cultural identity better and attracts

creative talents. Also such cultural events could use Harbin's properties and cultural heritages in a mixed way, such as Zhongyang Street and Saint Sophia Cathedral, combining Harbin's contemporary music with old architectures and enhancing this city's individuality, which is also a character of creative cities.

In order to promote the image of "Music City", Harbin's government invests billions of dollars to construct cultural intuitions, including establishing Harbin grand Theatre and restoring Harbin music hall (Fogel, 2023). In 2015, the new landmark Harbin Grand Theatre is completed. As "the only building in China honored with the architecture prize that year", the Grand Theatre is designed as Harbin's cultural center in the future (Arch Daily, 2015). "We envision Harbin Grand theatre as a dramatic public space that embodies the integration of human, art and the city identity, while synergistically blending with the surrounding nature", said Ma Yansong, founding principal, MAD Architects (Arch Daily, 2015). There are over 500 world-class performances per year in Harbin Grand Theatre, including symphony concert from Australia, Russian ballet, opera, drama and Chinese folk music, which gives a boost to Harbin's international communication and cooperation. These world-class performances could not only promote city's culture-led regeneration and enhance citizens' living experience, but also attract more visitors and creative talents to Harbin. For instance, the Italian opera War and Peace attracts many audiences and even professional critics coming all the way to Harbin by air (Fogel, 2023), which enhances Harbin's image as "Music City". As a world-class landmark, the Grand Theatre helps citizens understand their city culture and makes Harbin more recognizable in global map, which attracts inward investment and creative class.

As mentioned before in this essay, creative class and high-tech talents are identified as key resources for "productive growth" and economic development (Bayliss, 2007, p. 890). In order to increase the amount and quality of creative talents, Harbin Conservatory of Music is established for developing local musicians and creative groups. Designed as the symbol of Harbin's music culture, the conservatory could enhance Harbin's ability to attract, cultivate and mobilize creative assets (Zhou & Zhang, 2017). Harbin Conservatory of Music strengthens the cooperation with Saint Petersburg Conservatory and communications with Russia, attracting foreign talents to develop Harbin's music culture and industry (Zhou & Zhang, 2017). Additionally, policy makers hope the conservatory develops training quality of Harbin's music groups and art collages, then making Harbin as a music city more professional and persuasive. The conservatory, thus, plays an important role in attracting and training creative talents, enhancing city's ability to produce and process knowledge and information, which satisfies the first key condition of creative cities.

As Raban (1974) argues, city is the reflection of how people live here. Also city could shape people's mind and their lifestyles in turn. Thus, for establishing a music city, policy makers should try to construct a kind of music atmosphere in Harbin, not limited to several cultural centers, but every corner of this city. Such music atmosphere could affect citizen's lifestyle and understanding of local culture, and their understanding and lifestyle, in turn, will reshape this city's image. The first strategy focuses

on Harbin Summer Music Concert. With over half century's development, the Concert has solid mass foundation and community engagement, but lacks of artistry and professional effect. Thus, some of The Grand Theater's performances are added to Harbin Summer Music Concert's events, for increasing its artistry, and Schoenfeld International String Competition is also introduced, for enhancing its professional influence (Music Press Asia, 2023). Harbin Summer Music Concert is designed as a medium in new city planning, disseminating high-quality art and music to the mass and constructing high-level music atmosphere in city.

However, Harbin Summer Music Concert is held every two years, which means it cannot maintain a stable music atmosphere by itself. The second strategy, therefore, focuses on constantly constructing a music atmosphere in people's daily life, by cooperating with art groups and commercial bands. According to Hao Lu, the governor of Heilongjiang province, plenty of small-scale performances will be arranged in Harbin's every corner, such as shopping malls, restaurants and bookstores, hoping visitors and citizens could experience Harbin's culture and music anytime and anywhere (The Standing Committee of Heilongjiang Provincial People's Congress, 2018). Such policy could enhance Harbin's daily music atmosphere and image, increase employment and make people get used to living in music, which is a real music city should achieve. Meanwhile, these two strategies develop Harbin's cultural attraction and create more culture amenities. As Florida (2004, p. 276) argues, creative class prefers cities with "interesting and challenging activities available to them". Such policies could strengthen Harbin's ability to attract and maintain complex divisions of labors, which is the second key condition of creative cities. As high-tech creative talent is the core of long-term economic growth, policy makers hope such strategies could stimulate local economy and develop Harbin's cultural industries.

Moreover, Harbin's creative city planning also could enhance its global competitiveness and reputation. The title of "The Music City" is both 'a motive for Harbin to go to global' and Harbin's first step to build its global image (Fogel, 2023). World-class theater's establishment and international competition's introduction increase Harbin's opportunities to communicate with other countries, especially Russia, Israel and East Europe, developing Harbin's brand awareness. Also as a part of 'One Belt One Road' policy, such cultural cooperation could enhance both sides' understanding of each other's culture and society, which is helpful for attracting foreign investment, establishing global reputation and future economic cooperation. According to Fogel (2023)'s discussion, "reviving Harbin's musical tradition has also meant strengthening its ties to the city's Jewish past. That is one facet of a larger effort to promote tourism and strengthen economic bonds with countries like Israel". And those cultural events could be seen as a "catalyst between the two sides" (Fogel, 2023).

5. Problems in Harbin's creative city planning

As mentioned above, creative city planning should be a bottom up process, focusing more on grass root culture rather than top town planning. However, it seems Harbin is a little over planning by government. Although new Harbin's image and idea are developed from its own history and culture, community's

power and opinions seems be ignored in new Harbin's planning, which is the first issue. The negotiation between policy makers and citizens seems lacked, and it is difficult to know whether visitors and citizens could really understand new Harbin's music and image.

Policy makers think many Harbin's music event may lack artistry and professional effect, but some citizens hold different views. "Real Harbin's music is not the Italian operas or Russian symphony concerts playing in the theatres. Government ignores local communities' demand", said by a 56 years old male citizen (Sohu, 2023). Such concerns may raise debates like Harbin's music is whose music in the future. However, different from western cities, government's influence is bigger in Chinese cities, especially in northeastern region (Dong, 2005). Policies, therefore, play a more significant role in Harbin's city planning. Also considering creative cities theories are developed in western cultural and political system, distinctions between Chinese and western cities planning are reasonable.

The second issue is Harbin lacks its own music products and brand. Policy makers tend to attract more talents and investment by cultural events, leading to economic growth. However, the music Harbin playing focuses on European classic music, cannot forming Harbin's own brand. Such situation is also because there are not enough local professional creative talents, which is the third issue Harbin facing. Although creative class flows to regions with interesting cultural amenities and Harbin Conservatory of Music has come into use for training local creative talents, the number and quality of talents in contemporary Harbin are still not enough to construct Harbin's own products and brand.

6. Conclusion

In order to transform from an industrial city to a creative city, Harbin's government re-identifies itself as a music city, seeking to develop music and cultural industries in view of direct economic growth and Harbin's global competitiveness. With establishment of flagship cultural institution, like Harbin Grand Theatre and Harbin Conservatory of Music, and promotion of diverse cultural events, such as Harbin Summer Music Concert, policy makers try to develop Harbin's music atmosphere and artistry, constructing an international profile as a cultural, global and classic metropolis to attract creative class.

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