



The Secular Heretic



ART, ECONOMICS, HERESIES, NON-FICTION, PHOTO ESSAY, PROSE, URBAN DESIGN

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Art and Urban Decadence

written by Beatriz Garcia



Above image: a sign for one of the 'Hipster Free Zones' in Berlin's underground. This is in response to the perception that an overabundance of young people—the 'hipsters'—has led to the rapid gentrification of cities like Berlin. (All photos by the author)

In this essay Beatriz Garcia explores the role that artists play in the gentrification of formerly rundown neighbourhoods in major cities around the world.

he alchemical cycle of city decline and renewal has been repeated many times:

T Decline

- Urban areas fall into disrepair, lose their economic purpose and value.
- Neighbourhoods are abandoned.
- Spaces become derelict.

Creative Phase

- Artists move in, attracted by the affordability. They repair and repurpose crumbling edifices, turn formally unattractive urban strips into hubs of creativity.
- The urban zone recovers its vibrancy, filled by art studios, workshops, makeshift exhibition halls.
- Then come the parties, the informal bars, the small food joints. And the area becomes appealing to art tourists.

Gentrification

- Next appear the connoisseurs, who open art galleries; better restaurants move in; trendy bars; hipster night clubs.
- This development is followed by the arrival of small independent hostels and boutique hotels. Many studios become part-time accommodation.

Exploitation

- The investors return, alongside real estate agents. They open bigger hotels, bigger restaurants, university campuses, office blocks and luxury apartments aimed at wealthy art tourists, financiers and bankers.

Final Phase

- The artists are priced out. No more art studios, workshops or rough-rigged exhibition rooms. Gone the messy parties and informal bars. Out with the art galleries, unless they make big money or have become tourist attractions. The area is prime real estate again with a new economic purpose: it has recovered its value; it is no longer abandoned, other than by the artists who breathed new life into it.

This is the story of lofty lower Manhattan, which was taken up by artists in the 1970s. It is the story of Hackney Wick in London throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. It is the story of Berlin in the 1980s. And the story

of El Born in Barcelona in the 1990s and early noughties. This is right now the story of Le Panier in Marseille, the story of most of Detroit and most of Palermo. Such is the decline-and-renewal cycle of diverse cities, large and small, with or without ports and industrial parks—though those with the latter sites tend to dominate in this type of artist-driven urban transformation.



A street winding around the rapidly gentrifying El Born neighbourhood in Barcelona. One of the flags hanging from the balconies reads: 'We have chosen to stay in this neighbourhood. Out with speculators'. Other flags are signs of the Catalan independence movement.



Le Panier is the old town heart of the city of Marseille. Since becoming European Capital of Culture in 2013, Marseille has experienced a rapid wave of regeneration, accompanied by gentrification such as in this neighbourhood. Pictured above is a shop geared to tourists

that adapts the classic graffiti style—for decades a regular feature of declining parts of the city—into a fresh creative outlook, attractive to visitors.



In Le Panier, freshly repainted and decorated streets alternate with those mired in poverty and vandalism.

Emerging artists have always sought out large, cheap or free space in abandoned neighbourhoods. Warehouses and old factories have been ideal bases for art over the last 30 to 40 years, ever since the types of industry dominant up to the 1950s and 1960s in many western cities started to close down. Such movement has been popular among artists despite the lack of *health and safety*, despite high levels of criminality, poor transport access and poor amenities around these no longer economically productive sites. Artists bring solutions to all of these issues: they convert floor space, repair falling staircases; they relate to their fellows and set up codes of conduct so that various conflicting tribes and factions come to respect each other; they bring their bikes or walk long distances; and they become, as is widely apparent with the millennial generation, bakers and urban farmers as well as coffee makers and bar tenders. These traits are the privileges of youth, of time and imagination. Creativity, skill, the will to live in rough, hazardous conditions, to repair and renovate, and the stamina required to carry out the work necessary to reclaim an environment and make it their own are the traits of community makers, of good neighbours, and are not dependent on council strategy or regulation to come into fruition.

But of course, these artists have, traditionally, not been protected. They have been the vanguard for city regeneration but have been pushed out of the areas they have transformed as soon as the areas have started becoming successful and appealing again. Lack of funds and lack of forward planning—resulting in the need to live in the now, to take risks because there is nothing to lose—have placed these artists in a permanently vulnerable position and, in turn, have transformed the fluid urban areas they inhabit into just temporary or transitional spaces for emerging art and creativity.



New apartments being built in the London suburb of Hackney Wick under the name: Fish Island Village. Promoters use terms like 'eclectic' to market these new spaces, while the long-established artist base and extremely diverse community is priced out of the original Fish Island area.



Local communities attach critical commentary to walls like this one being demolished in Fish Island to make way for new apartments.



Two examples of the Canal boat house used as a main living space for some members of the community over the last few decades around the area of Fish Island. We can see the warehouses at the back, alongside new restaurants and bars, attractive to new visitors and new—more affluent—residents. It is unclear what may happen next to the boathouses—but some may be transformed into visitor accommodation.



A view of old warehouses converted into creative spaces. Many of these warehouses have been reinvented and used by artist communities for decades.

For close to thirty years now, the experiences of these artists and the neighbourhoods they have been able to transform have been hot topics. Cities aspire to be creative hubs; they aspire to appeal to artists because this idea *sells* and is appealing to the discerning tourist. In the 21st century *decadence*—in the right measure—sells as well. It is pursued by the hospitality and retail sectors, as is apparent in the widespread wave of industrial chic characteristic of so many restaurants, clubs and bars as well as shops and hotels. *Faux decadence*, one might call it. This sort of false disrepair is conjured by artists for hire who design staged versions of what appear to be run-down venues. Of course this is deeply inauthentic because in such cases, it is not about saving an area in need of resuscitation; instead it is about pretending a new, otherwise characterless space is falling apart so that it projects the allure of an artist-occupied run-down neighbourhood.



A new culture- and consumerism-led regeneration initiative in London: the Coal Drops Yard, just behind Kings Cross Station, where old industrial sites are being taken over and transformed into shops, art galleries, offices and luxury apartments.



An old factory in Berlin has been transformed into a multipurpose complex. Here we see delegates at a gathering of software/tech developers in a 'chillout' zone. Other spaces in the same factory are being used for formal presentations and business networking. The complex has been named RadialSystem, which also houses dance and theatre spaces.



Bilbao became a global sensation as an example of culture-led regeneration after the opening of the Guggenheim museum in 1997, generating the tag: 'Bilbao effect'. The opening of the museum was part of a broader long-term strategy of urban transformation, including the opening of a new metro system and multiple art centres throughout the city. The project of the island of Zorrotzaure as a new 'aspirational' neighbourhood (promoted as the 'Manhattan of Bilbao') occupying a previously abandoned industrial site, has been planned for decades. Many old factories have been used as sites for art studios and cultural projects over the years. Since early 2019, work has been in progress to develop high-end residential and office spaces, leading to some criticism by art and social activists.



The city of Edinburgh presents itself as the 'world's leading festival city', with a combination of major international art festivals taking place every August. In recent years, there has been growing debate about the sustainability of the Edinburgh Festival model, as

'art' (in the form of artists—in particular, performers—and their artwork) literally takes over the whole of the city centre on an annual basis.



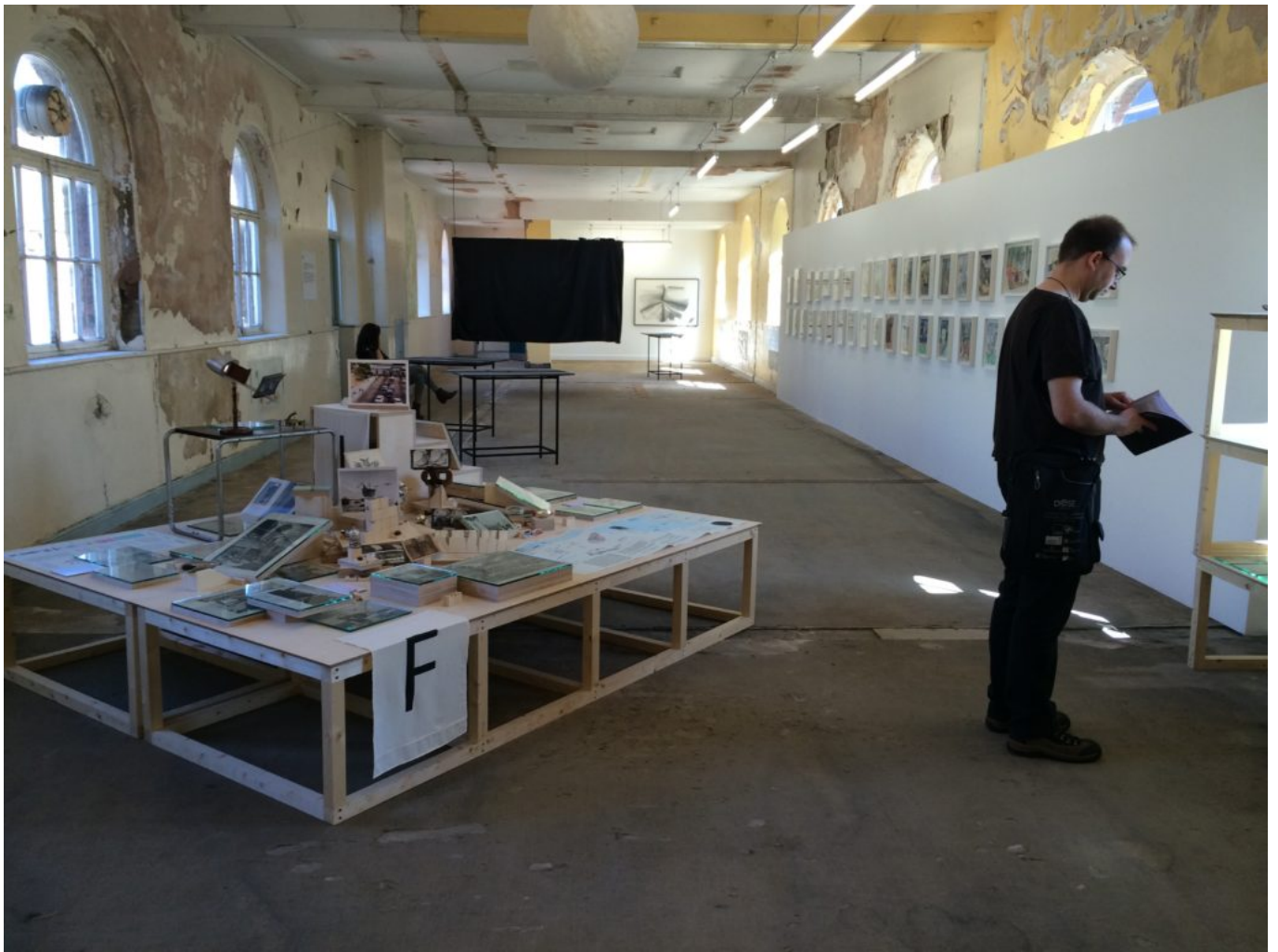
The seaside town of Margate in the UK has suffered decline for decades. Since the opening of the Turner Contemporary art gallery in 2011, however, the town has been working on its culture-led renaissance, with the opening of many new art galleries and art studios. The town has long been a base for artists, attracted by its remarkable light, beautiful coastline and cheap space. At present, the city offers a mixture of sights to the visitor: there continue to be many boarded-up buildings in the city centre, while old and new creative venues gather momentum, due to the perceived success of its major new art gallery.

So, what is next for the artists? And what next for urban *decadence*?

The artists will need to keep moving on, of course; they will continue being nomads, searching for the next frontier. In some cases, they may be protected, as is happening in London, a city that has just launched its Creative Enterprise Zones scheme—but of course with this, come rules, expectations and greater competition.

The natural cycles that lead to authentic decadence, meanwhile, are also inevitable, though impossible to anticipate. Enormous swathes of empty apartments are spreading around the world; these decadent urban areas are no longer the remnants of industry gone stale, but the side effects of impossible-to-sustain market economies, real estate greed and land-purchasing corruption. Whether artists can find inspiration in such hives of residential space remains to be seen—but there have been some signs of creative reinvention, at times under the auspices of publicly anointed special events and festivals, from the take-up of high-rise blocks for the enactment of ‘creative’ (controlled) *demolitions*, to the use of entire floors of empty apartments for the production of *pop-ups* or one-off theatrical *interventions*.

Rural areas are also a new frontier for artists and a frontier for decay. As people move *en masse* towards urban conurbations, artists may need to move out into the countryside, back to creating rural communes, which has been the case in the past, this time spearheading a wave of rural regeneration to complement the by now widely documented wave of urban regeneration.



An international art festival established in 1999, the Liverpool Biennial presents artworks in diverse locations around the city. At this edition of the Biennial, a derelict building—the Old Blind School—was occupied as the main space for exhibitions before it was fully ‘health and safety checks’ ready. But upon completion of this edition, the complex was sold to private developers and fully refurbished. Now in 2019, it houses restaurants, bars and offices.

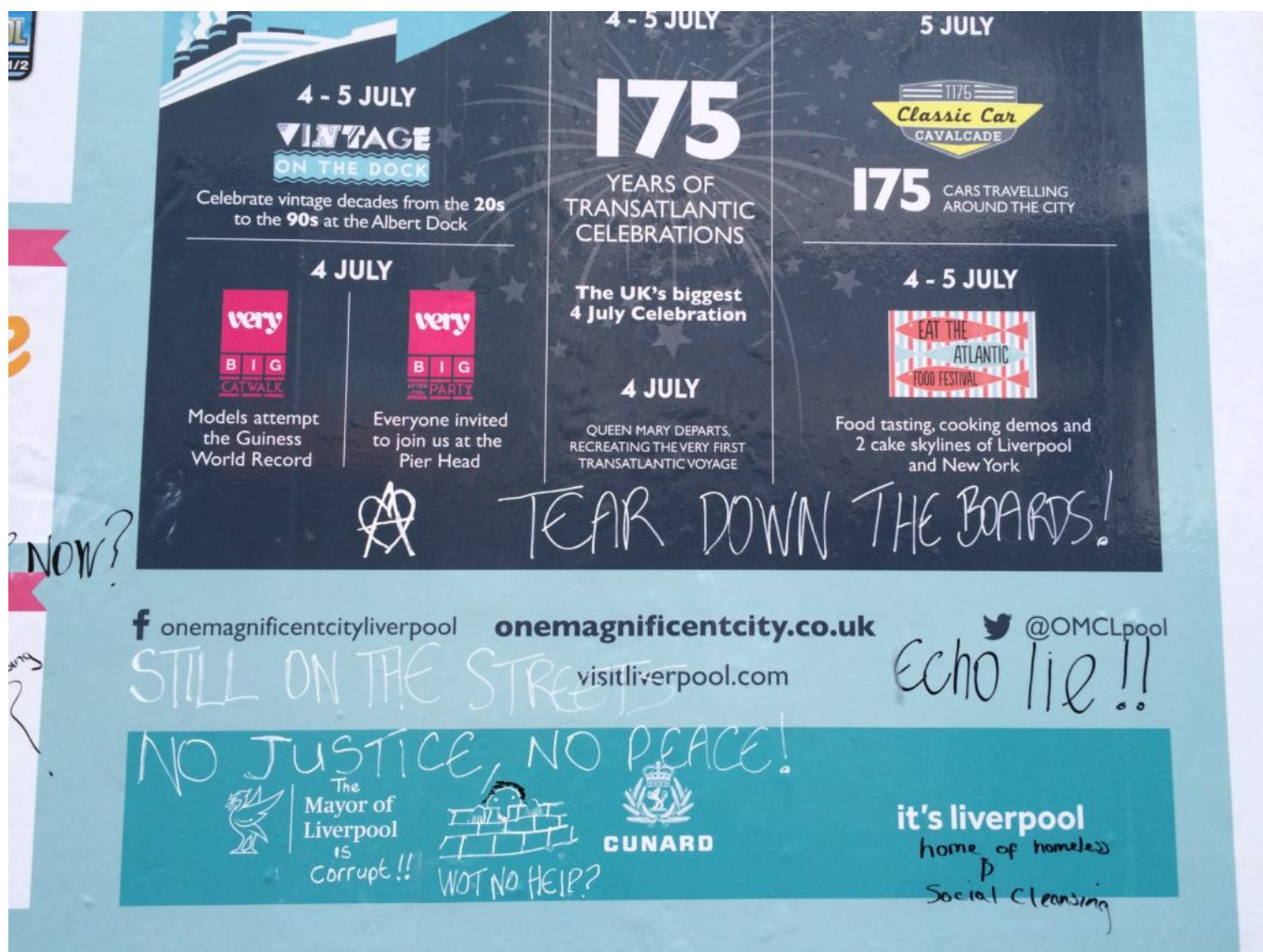


Ropewalks is an historic area in the Liverpool city centre near the seaport, where the rope-making industry for sailing ships used to be located. Featuring a large collection of old warehouses and factories, Ropewalks used to play a central role in the city's commerce, though it fell into disuse until the late 1990s, when the city invested in its redevelopment "to encourage greater use of the area for creative industries and leisure activities."



The story of art and decadence is a never-ending one because economies succeed and fail, they go in cycles, and spaces are never permanently fit for purpose; meanwhile the human imagination is endlessly adaptable, and the need for emerging artists to find an opportunity, to fill a gap, is equally endless.

Of course artists age, they get tired. They need some basic protections as they go through their own cycles. It is the kind of protection that benefits cities as well, as the greed of real estate and the brutal superficiality of tourism-led initiatives can cause serious damage to the slow and meaningful process of community building—or rebuilding—that artists tend to embody when they make neighbourhoods liveable again.



Some community protest graffiti pasted over boarding panels promoting festivals and cultural events in Liverpool. As in so many other cities, there is a stark contrast between attempts by the city to advance its open-air cultural calendar and the growth in vagrancy and homelessness. Liverpool is one of the poorest cities in the UK, while also one of the most culturally active, with tourism trends far outperforming any other major city outside London.



Thus with the rapid expansion of urbanisation, there is ultimately a need to strike a balance between the nomadism of younger artists and the tendency of older ones to settle down. So while the artistic avant-garde will always want the challenge of uncharted territory, free of regulations and scrutiny by policy makers, the no-longer emerging artists and the finally-established creators require and deserve a space of their own. Surely they have a right to benefit from their toil once an area becomes marketable and fashionable due to their hard-won efforts. It is thus in the interest of cities to follow the lead of London with its Creative Enterprise Zones, or partake in the USA's Creative Placemaking Scheme, lest cities stop being cities altogether, replaced instead by bland and characterless urban conglomerates. This emptying out of the city will be the inevitable consequence when fresh creativity and emerging art moves once and for all out of the urban and launches a creative renaissance of the rural countryside. If cities are not careful in this regard, their artsy neighbourhoods will end up as nostalgic theme parks of standardised *decadence chic* with high retail value but devoid of true artistic flavour.



The Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa is a post-industrial complex on the fringes of Palermo. Previously a furniture workshop and a plane hangar, it was transformed into a space for art interventions in the 1990s, but it stopped functioning for over a decade due to a lack of funds and political will. Since 2008, it has experienced a revival as a site for socially-minded cinema, contemporary art exhibitions and performances. The relationship between this industrial site and Palermo's city centre keeps evolving, as the city experiences its own international 'rediscovery' or repositioning as a hub for contemporary art and as a magnet for artists and creative entrepreneurs, in the wake of the success of the itinerant art biennial, Manifesta.



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Manifesta 12
16.06-04.11.18
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PALERMO
2018
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The story of Palermo as a hub of contemporary art has its origins in the opening of Cantieri Culturalli alla Zisa in the 1990s. But the city came to the attention of global art markets and art tourists in 2018, when it hosted “Manifesta 12,” which coincided with the city’s title as Italian Capital of Culture. Other contemporary art interventions had been

planned in parallel, such as the ambitious 'Foresta Urbana' intervention, involving leading names in the contemporary art world presenting their work in iconic public spaces and palazzos.



With the success of “Manifesta 12” in 2018, and after a few years in the spotlight as a cultural and creative hub, Palermo is attracting increasing numbers of young people and a more ‘creatively minded’ type of tourist. The city is adapting to this new demographic, as evinced by the now pervasive ‘bike rental’ stores, including this one, right in the historic city centre.



This is an example of one of many ‘maker markets’ popping up in cities around the world, on the backs of the growing number of young people presenting themselves as ‘makers’—an increasingly popular term that refers to producers of art and crafts, or according to Wikipedia: “representing a technology-based extension of DIY culture.” In places like Liverpool and Palermo (pictured above), maker markets are small-scale affairs, relying almost exclusively on community networks and attracting a few hundred people, mostly

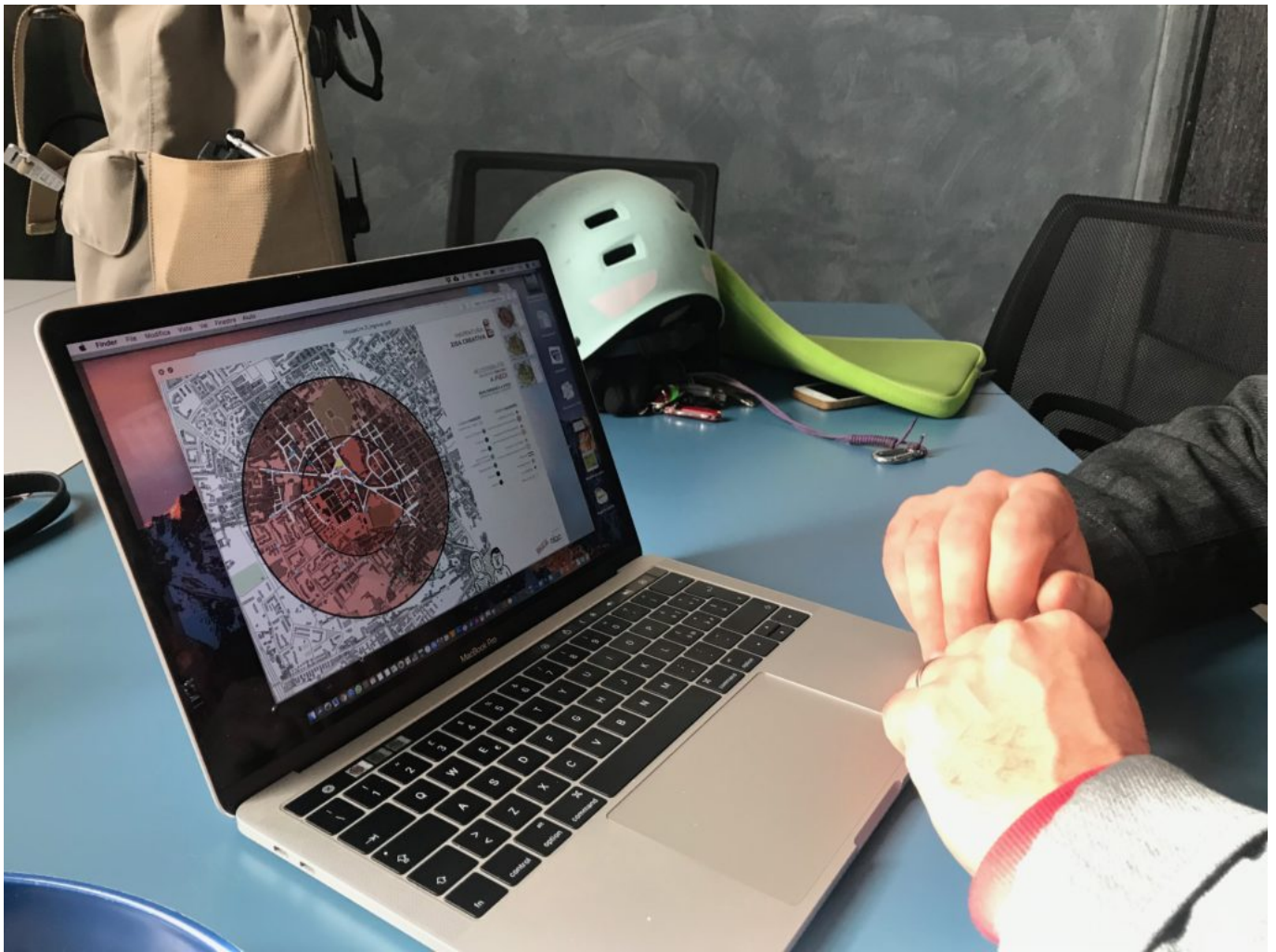
through word of mouth via social media promotions. Underused industrial or other types of heritage sites in emerging—or established—creative neighbourhoods are the usual spaces for such temporary markets. In some countries, like the USA, such gatherings can grow into thousands of people in the form of a ‘Maker Faire’.



Here is one of many studios located within a newly developing creative industries hub in Palermo. These studios are often called 'labs' or 'maker spaces'. They typically consist of multiple rooms or floors within a previously derelict or underused building (ie. an industrial space or another type of heritage site no longer fulfilling its original purpose). These 'labs' are rented to artists and creative entrepreneurs working on similar kinds of projects.



Despite the new contemporary art trends and the increasing attention Palermo is getting from the more affluent and discerning type of tourist, the city continues to struggle with longstanding issues such as a poor public transport infrastructure and deep-rooted problems concerning the maintenance of public space, such as regular rubbish removal. The accelerated growth in tourism and the temporary resident demands of a new generation of highly mobile creative entrepreneurs may bring new income to the city. But without strategic, well-coordinated action by municipal authorities, such rapid growth may also aggravate its urban infrastructure problems.



Cities undergoing culture-led regeneration are being interrogated from many angles. On the laptop pictured above is an example of an initiative led by architects and urban planners in Palermo—similar examples can be found in Barcelona, Liverpool, Rijeka or Marseille. These initiatives consist of developing new ways of mapping space and its social significance, engaging with communities and their stories to produce more meaningful maps that reveal the best ways of connecting the changing uses of built infrastructure (such as an old industrial site) to its surrounding neighbourhood. (NOTE: the picture was taken in a studio within Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa.)

Let us take a moment to consider the notion of *decadence* and the ways it has been associated with art and creativity over the last decade.

Decadence is a confusing, slippery, abstract and sometimes contradictory term that over time has changed in meaning and yet has retained much of its old connotations. For instance it may be understood as an excessive indulgence in pleasure and luxury, leading to a decline in morals, standardised skills, methods and norms, as well as a loss of spiritual firmness that impoverishes art, science and intellection. Yet at

the same time, *decadence* can be appealing to artists and creatives because, as Verlaine put it, it is

all shimmering with purple and gold and the gleam of precious stones...made up of carnal spirit and of unhappy flesh...[it] conjures up the paint of the courtesans, the sports of the circus...the bounding of wild beasts... [I]t is Seneca declaiming poetry as he opens his veins...¹

The latter associations have been appropriated by the hospitality and retail sectors, as well as the real estate tycoons who reap the financial rewards of gentrification. For them, *decadence* is part of the zeitgeist, evident in the corporate expression of what we have called *faux decadence*. But inevitably its overuse and superficial application has transformed the notion of being decadent into a joke and a commodity, with no capacity (or intent) to challenge, shock, or indeed, inspire. In this sense, as Richard Gilman writes in his book *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, “the word ‘decadence’, exists in the thin air of the *pretence* of extremity, a device for the imitation of moral or spiritual concern.”²

I would argue that artists are well aware of the dangers of such market-driven abuses and imitations and that most discerning individuals and communities can tell the difference between real, unsettling, provocative, creative decadence and faux—stale or decorative—decadence. Now, the big question remaining is whether the new wave of publicly funded, non-profit initiatives being established to protect artists as well as the diversity and risk-taking capacities of cities, can also protect the integrity of art—and avoid the corporate contrivances of faux decadence.

Are the aforementioned *Creative Placemaking* and *Creative Enterprise Zone* schemes able to operate as an alternative to the materialism imposed by the market? Or may they threaten to further codify art into the cutthroat system of capitalism, and in doing so, kill whatever is left of the independent spirit of artists? In other words:

Can you *protect* artists from the corrupting influence of faux decadence while *enabling* the sort of decadence they need (Verlaine’s “carnal spirit and unhappy flesh”)?

Can artists take risks, challenge norms and speak truth to power while accepting publicly funded support in ring-fenced, non-gentrified urban areas?

Can the avant-garde of art exist in basic comforts, with basic protections, with stability and public acceptance?

These are all valid questions that we cannot answer yet, as we enter—in a few, supposedly enlightened environments—a new era of art and creativity-friendly urban centres. We know how the emptier side of materialistic faux decadence looks. Let's debate next how publicly sanctioned urban decadence can best develop without compromising the authenticity of the discerning and free-spirited artist.

Dr. Beatriz Garcia is Senior Research Fellow in Communication Studies at the University of Liverpool and Culture Advisor to the International Olympic Committee. Since 1999 Beatriz has been at the forefront of research on the rhetoric, impact and long-term legacy of culture-led city regeneration interventions. She has conducted fieldwork on the cultural impact of every edition of the Olympic Games (summer and winter) since Sydney 2000. To conduct this research, Beatriz has been funded by international bodies such as the European Parliament, European Commission, International Olympic Committee, United Cities and Local Governments, British Council, and British Academy and Research Councils UK. See: beatrizgarcia.net; iccliverpool.ac.uk; impacts08.net; culturalolympics.org.uk

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