

SLIDE 1

SLIDE 2

On May 25th 1961, the US President JF Kennedy stood in front of Congress and urged them to aim to do the impossible. The USSR had already sent the first dog and man into space, and the US were getting beaten badly in the space race. He said these now famous words:

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth".

On July 21st 1969, 163 days before the end of that decade, Neil Armstrong stepped out onto the Moon and was safely back on Earth 3 days later.

Not only had JFK fulfilled one of his most ambitious promises, but he did so by corralling a nation's imagination and excitement, but perhaps more importantly, their tax dollars. Clearly this desire to go to the Moon was fuelled by the ideological warfare between the US and USSR that nearly threatened to obliterate them both during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. JFK was able to take advantage of this heightened period of nationalistic pride to eek out more tax dollars from a traditionally conservative country to pay for a publicly-funded space exploration program.

But with this fuel of competitive nationalism, the US eventually triumphed. It succeeded not *only* in envisioning one of the loftiest, most impossible goals ever by a national government, not *only* in actually having the temerity and guts to proclaim this out loud to the general public, not *only* in managing to raise the required money via public funds, but it also actually achieved the stated goal in the given timeframe. It was a triumph of the collective creative imagination to propel humanity onward on its journey of civilisation. But perhaps, it was the last.

SLIDE 3

In what is clearly a deliberate reference to the Moon landings, an Alphabet company, named simply 'X' describe themselves as a 'moonshot factory'. Emanating from the Silicon Valley *modus operandi*, X have a blueprint for multiple moonshot projects. They "look for the intersection of a big problem, a radical solution, and breakthrough technology". Their project include driverless cars, online access for millions of unconnected people via internet-enabled balloons that hover in the stratosphere, delivery drones, contact lenses that enable augmented reality, and a host of machine learning products.

These projects in and of themselves could do wonderful things for communities, people and cities all over the world. They can make roads safer, get millions of people online and offer access to information, move things around quicker without the need for costly infrastructure, allow our eyes to see more than just the immediate things around us. But that they are being thought of within the confines of a trillion dollar corporation suggests that their implementation will be anything but democratic. What is more, by sheer economic force the X lab is eclipsing all other public projects in universities and government research labs that are attempting to do similar things but on much smaller budgets.

Given that X stems from the financial might of Alphabet, they have the room to experiment, and to fail. They can attempt extremely risky and inventive ideas "whether it leads to the simplicity of a fine invention or the mess of failure". But, as evidence that such experimentation is yoked to a financialised motive, X rewards team members that shut down projects that are likely to fail. For all the 'big' thinking and idealism about world-changing inventions, their bottom line is what ultimately counts.

That X are now at the forefront of the planet's latest invention paradigm demonstrates just how intricately linked creativity - with its most radical imaginations - and the over-arching epoch of our time - capitalism - have become.

SLIDE 4

All this means that the most ambitious creative ideas that humanity has imagined, have been commandeered by capital. Last year was the 150th since the publication of Marx's Das Kapital in which he detailed the enclosure of the commons, we now see space exploration becoming a private enterprise, AI almost exclusively being developed by corporations, entire cities built without any democratic or community involvement, and perhaps most damaging of all to our species, the way to beat climate change is apparently more of the same privatisation and consumption that has got us into this state.

SLIDE 5

We are nearly half a century on from when Neil Armstrong proclaimed mankind made a giant leap. And now, as Adidas are so keen to remind us, any giant leaps we make are dictated by private capital. Creativity has been privatised by capitalism.

What is more, its after our collective imagination. Capitalism attempts to stop us from believing in the impossible, or at the very least, reconfigures our imagination so that any realised impossibilities must be profited from first. As Mark Fisher so eloquently argued, the capitalist realism of the 21st century has meant that the very possibility of an alternative form of creativity and societal organisation beyond capitalism has been all-but foreclosed by an all-pervasive monetisation of life to the chorus of "there is no alternative".

SLIDE 6

So what kind of cities is this kind of creativity helping us build? With this kind of creativity (let's call it creativity with a Capital C), everyone is encouraged to be Creative. In our work life, in schools, in our leisure time and yes, in our cities, we are bombarded by messages that by being creative, we will live better, more efficient, self-gratifying and enjoyable lives and we can build more inclusive, democratic, smart and user-friendly cities. Creativity is so ubiquitous in urban development protocols across the Global North and Global South that it is almost invisible. Every new building, plaza, centre, quarter, zone or district is sprinkled with creativity in the hope that it will attract the creative class and the all-important economic 'growth'. Coloured in cool, bohemian and artistic hues, the new city formula of our time necessitates a vernacular of creativity.

From small-scale interventions like parklets to entire neighbourhoods being razed to make way for a smart city (and every pop-up shop, creative industry incubator building and cultural quarter in-between), contemporary cities are awash with schemes and policies implemented in the name of 'making a place more creative'. Even the vernacular of urban revolution – a term loaded with centuries of anti-capitalist struggle – is being used by ex-Mayoral advisors to Bloomberg in New York to implement better cycle lanes.

For all the places that these initiatives have created, we have to ask ourselves, at what cost? Because there is no escaping that there are major problems with this BIG C kind of creativity.

SLIDE 7

The kind of places that are created under the creative city mantra will often be private; where acts of protest, rough sleeping or street vending will be criminalised. They are often securitised and militarised with private guards, CCTV, and defensible and/or weaponised architecture. More broadly, they contribute to gentrification of

the city which has huge deleterious social issues including rocketing rental prices, displacement of marginal subjects and the homogenisation of space. I'm sure you'll remember the controversy around the Box Park in Croydon, which is 45 per cent non-white.

The creative city has become a by-word for gentrification. It is the manifestation of the creativity rhetoric writ large, made concrete for us all to consume at our leisure; that is of course if we meet the criteria, have the available funds and leisure time, and don't do anything other than consume the site the way *they* want you to.

SLIDE 7

For me, the kind of creativity we need to champion instead of this Big C creativity is a creativity that doesn't replicate the existing forms of homogenous and lets face it, unsustainable both economically and ecologically, city life.

Hence, we need to radically rethink creativity and the creative city – we need to ask “what can of city is it that we're creating?” with an emphasis on the ‘we’ – is it simply more of the same? Or is it a fairer, more sustainable and just place? What new ways of being, what new ways of living could there be?

Thankfully, there are examples all over the world, and some right on our doorstep.

SLIDE 8

Take Cheran in Mexico for example. A city that was riddled with an illegal logging crime syndicate and corrupt local politicians. The locals had enough and took matters into their own hands. They refused to partake in elections, political campaigning was banned, the police were fired. They forced out the loggers and the whole city refused to vote in Presidential elections. That was in 2011.

SLIDE 9

Now, the loggers have gone, the trees have been replanted, the city is governed by local people elected via sortation – a form of government that is picked by drawing lots like our jury system, crime has dropped and the quality of life has massively improved.

SLIDE 10

I'm sure many of you would have heard of the Preston model, when in 2011, they implemented an entirely new business model, one in which local spending was made the most important factor of all employers in the city. Like many cities in the deindustrialising North, the public sector is one the largest employers. Given austerity, the default option is to either chase private investors or fall back on PFI contracts. Preston decided to take a different tack and focused on the 6 largest employers to source local producers. They also promoted worker-owned co-operatives through the recently-established Preston Co-operative Network, and started a credit union to combat nefarious payday lenders that were preying on the unemployed.

Then there are transition towns which started in 2006, and aims to reduce dependency on fossil fuels, are rewilding their hinterlands and follow the three Rs: resilience, relocalisation, regenerative development.

These are all large-scale municipal or State-led initiatives that are already in existence, but for me, far more creative than any new pop-up cultural market.

SLIDE 11

But often creative cities with a small city don't come about via the State.

Take for example the iconic skate spot on London's south bank. In 2013 one of the UK's most iconic creative and cultural institutions, the South Bank Centre, announced plans to convert a space under the Haywood Gallery, the so-called 'undercroft', into retail outlets. The space has been (and still is) used by skateboarders since the 1970s. It is one of the most well-known and revered skate spots in the world, and understandably the reaction by the skating community to protect it was swift.

The Long Live Southbank campaign to save the undercroft achieved its goal of stopping the demolition of the skate spot through a combination of official political campaigning (such as the largest ever planning objection in UK history), clandestine activity (for example, undercover filming of private meetings) and creative, artistic practices.

To cut a long story short, in 2015 the South Bank Centre cancelled their plans. It was an important event in London's cultural politics and sent shockwaves through the city's creative industrial sector. It was significant because it showed how subcultural communities can mobilize themselves in a (largely) leaderless collective to take on and defeat gentrification plans by cultural institutions. It was also crucial because it highlights how alternative and subcultural spaces can exist alongside commercial entities without being constantly threatened by the gentrifying powers of the creative city.

SLIDE 12

Much of these initiatives, as subcultural or communally creative as they are, often can't be scaled up because of the appropriative nature of the Big C creative city. Because now, we have the nefarious process of artwashing – where property developers use artistic practice to make a place seem more desirable – this example shown here is of the Balfour Tower in East London which was given an artistic makeover to make it more amenable to the professional class. Areas that are

traditionally working class or council estates are designated (either through official narratives or via more stealthy tactics) art districts or even just given a veneer of 'cool' to attract the 'right' kind of people. That the Balfron has stunning panoramic views over London and less than a mile from Canary Wharf, I'm sure has nothing to do with it.

But what is even more futile, is that at the balfron, and in many other cases of artwashed areas, artists and creative personnel are being used as foot soldiers of this change. Because they have been hemmed into a precarious life by the incessant narrative of creative work, artists and creative institutions have no option but to work alongside developers and urban councils. The hope is that the political message gets heard above the noise of the inrushing capital, and it lasts long enough to make some sort of difference.

Artwashing then is another form of how the doctrine of creativity allows capitalism to disarm its critics by offering them the excitement, stardom and financial rewards that come from succumbing to a market-based, competitive system. It claims resistance as it's own idea and in the process strips it of any anti-capitalists ethics – as this particularly crass example shows.

SLIDE 13

It calms the agitating forces, slowly chips away at stubbornness, glorifies particular aesthetics of counter-culture, argues that messages can be amplified if only they use market mechanisms – as this particularly crass example from Karl Lagerfeld shows. In doing all this, capitalism stabilises the ground beyond itself. But these rewards rarely materialise – or if they do, they are short lived or limited to very few, carefully selected individuals. The rest are left on the margins, exploited and dispossessed. And the cycle starts once more.

SLIDE 13

This is not creativity. That is why so many people, groups and ideologies are against creativity.

SLIDE 14

They argue for a more radical interpretation, one that works toward the horizon of a possible impossibility beyond the injustices of capitalism. And they do this by destabilising the ground and making it *infertile* to the seeds of capitalism – not unlike this artwork produced in the wake of the Arab Spring. Of course, this is dangerous, tiring work because there will always be those that look to appropriate this work for commercial, creative ends.

For me then, creativity as preached by this capitalist narrative is enacting a ‘slow violence’ that grinds down any other forms of societal organisation under the chorus of ‘there is no alternative’.

But a radical, revolutionary creativity shows that there is an alternative, many of them in fact. Capitalism’s greatest lie is getting us to believe the ground that it seeks to stabilise and profit from, is barren and devoid of life. Within the city and beyond, creativity is narrated, via a capitalist ideology, as the force that will change the world for the better. Don’t believe this lie. Believe that creativity is about searching for, giving space to, and trying to realise the impossible.

SLIDE 15

And perhaps a pointer to this, I want to end with a quote from Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities*, which I think sums up the importance of playfulness and subversion far more eloquently than I ever could:

“The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space”.