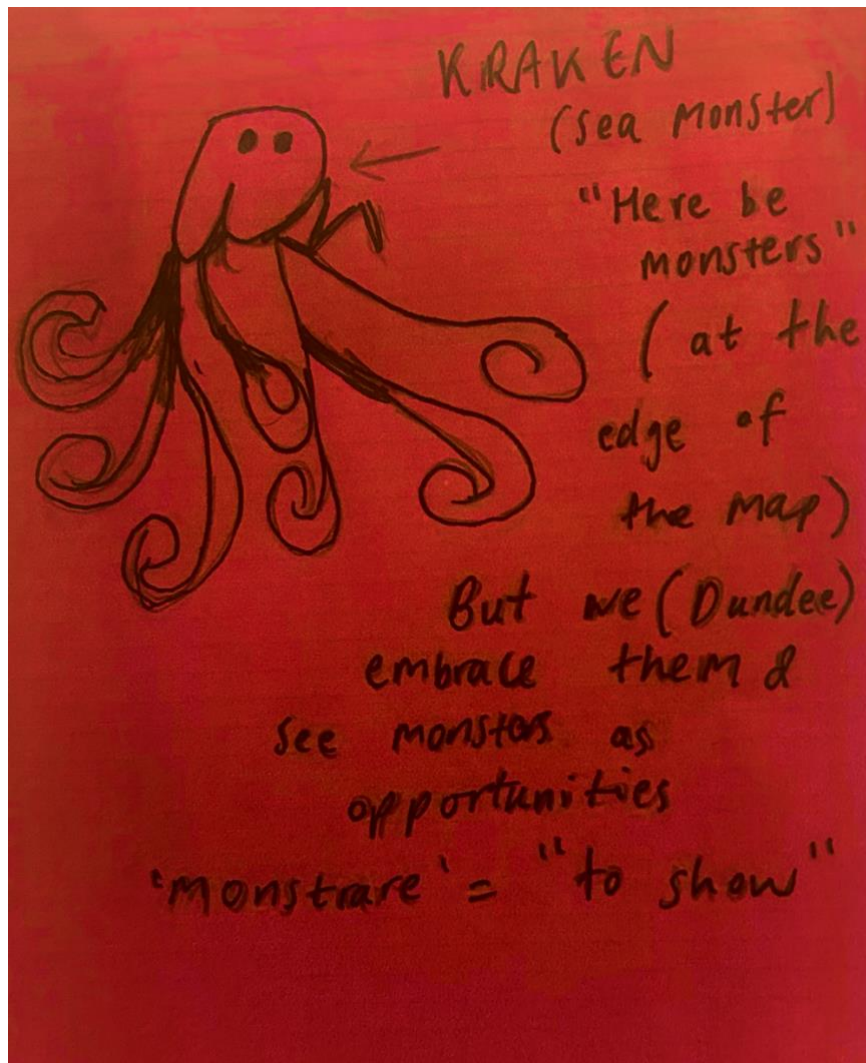


**A city of Monsters:** Creativity within, beyond, and transcending Creative City policy  
in the Actually Existing creative city of Dundee



## Abstract

Geography is undergoing a creative (re)turn (Hawkins, 2019) which requires critical attention to how creativity is defined, as not a solely positive nor negative force (Noxolo, 2025). This dissertation wrestles with the issue of definition, unpacking the multiple creativities at work in the city of Dundee to better understand this creative city. The Creative City policy, championed by Richard Florida, emphasises the role of creativity in catalysing urban economic growth and is broadly criticised as a neoliberal and exclusionary urban policy. Although valuable, these criticisms might be re-enlivened in the creative (re)turn by accounts which explore the creativities enacted in the ‘actually existing creative city’ (Pratt, 2011). This renewed approach to an atypical creative city – Dundee, Scotland – engages with ‘creative ecosystem’ thinking to learn from a creative network at the centre of the creative city. It encounters creativities within, beyond, and transcending the Creative City policy and explores their effects. In Dundee, **within** the Creative City policy creativity is defined in economic terms, revealing an austere Creative City which feels temporary and exclusionary to creatives. **Beyond** this policy, creativity is defined by and with community, although multiple understandings of creativity often contradict to produce disconnect. **Transcending** the Creative City requires a redefinition of creativity to emphasise practices of urban subversion (Mould, 2015), which might enable its reclamation. In Dundee, creativity is defined in transcedatory ways as a problem solver and imaginative force to reclaim the austere Creative City. However, potential transcendence is limited by the harsh reality of the Creative City which precludes imagination in its austere temporariness. This dissertation thus calls for politically engaged studies of the actually existing creative city which listen to their creatively imagined futures and consider the actions necessary to enable them.

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Finally, thank you Nanny, Grandad, and Mum for showing me Dundee, I hope you've got a copy up there Grandad!

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## **1. Introduction**

Creativity is a topical word for contemporary geography, which is undergoing a creative ‘(re)turn’ (Hawkins, 2019) and recent interest in creative geographies with the theme of the 2025 RGS conference (Noxolo, 2025). It is, however, much harder to define than one might assume. Critical attention is required in the new creative geographies (De Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017) as creativity is far from innocent, nor a solely positive nor negative force (Noxolo, 2025). This dissertation wrestles with this issue, unpacking the myriad of ‘creativities’ at play in the city of Dundee to better understand this creative city.

The Creative City is a thesis and urban policy championed by Richard Florida (2002, 2005) which advocates for the role of creativity in catalysing economic growth in cities. Florida defines a new ‘creative class’ which should be attracted to cities, as economic catalysts, through talent, technology, and tolerance-oriented place-based urban policy (Florida, 2002). Whilst welcomed in urban policy spheres, the Creative City theory and policy is widely debated in geographical scholarship which emphasises its neoliberal and exclusionary nature. Although pertinent, these critiques might be re-enlivened in the creative (re)turn by approaches which dissect the multiple understandings of creativity enacted in the contemporary creative city. Moving beyond singular, typical critiques, this dissertation listens to the actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011), its

multiple definitions and contradictions, for a renewed account of the Creative City policy. It does so through a reflective and participatory approach which engages with ‘creative ecosystem’ thinking, a novel concept developed in the Creative Industries which presents opportunities for cross-fertilisation with geography, to learn from a creative network at the centre of the creative city.

Understandings of creativity not only relate to the present, but to the future and its imaginaries; listening to the actually existing creative city also involves listening to this future. Recognising the transcendent creativities at play in Dundee provides a policy-relevant account of the future creative city, its wants and needs, and an agenda for politically-engaged geographies of the creative city.

This dissertation takes Dundee as its case study, the fourth-largest city in Scotland with a population of 149,880 (National Records of Scotland, 2025), located in its east on the Firth of Tay. A historically industrial city, famous for its ‘three Js’: jams, jute, and journalism, Dundee was home to Michelin, Timex, NCR, and many other factories (Keegan, 2018). Deindustrialisation hit the city hard, with the demise of ‘Juteopolis’ and closure of shipbuilding and other industries in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in joblessness and deprivation (Tomlinson et al, 2022). As a small city outside of Scotland’s central belt, Dundee is the atypical creative city. Its size, location, and economic character are often missing from analyses of the Creative City policy, presenting an unexpected case study of the actually existing creative city.

It has undergone a recent revival through an emphasis on cultural regeneration, involving a significant investment into waterfront renewal (Hasard, 2023), a successful bid for the UNESCO City of Design designation in 2014, and development of Scotland’s first design museum, the V&A (UNESCO, 2025). Dundee has a compact and productive creative ecosystem (Creative Dundee, 2025) within which Creative Dundee, a place-based creative network, ‘amplify and connect’ the city. Beginning as a blog in 2008, Creative Dundee have since developed into a funded 5-person organisation providing diverse projects, events, and opportunities to the city’s creatives, and forms the focus for this dissertation. It inhabits an interesting position between the city’s grassroots,

and cultural institutions like the V&A, Contemporary Arts Centre, and inter/national organisations, as an established organisation which lacks power in institutional settings.

This dissertation begins with a literature review discussing the core strands of literature from which it draws its theoretical base and research questions, before outlining the methodological approach which responds to these themes. This is followed by a discussion section which combines analysis, results, and discussion, and a conclusion which summarises findings and suggests implications.

## **2. Literature Review**

This dissertation engages with two strands of geographical literature, creative geographies and the Creative City policy, and a third from the Creative Industries, ‘creative ecosystems’, which presents opportunities for cross-fertilisation with geography. This chapter outlines geography’s creative (re)turn and considers how to define creativity, before describing the Creative City, its criticisms, and reclamation through transcendatory creativities. The concept of Creative ecosystems is introduced to provide theoretical and methodological insight for geographical research into the Creative City, and research questions established.

### **2.1 Creative Geographies**

#### **2.1.1 The Creative (Re)turn**

Geography is undergoing a creative (re)turn in which scholarship is extending disciplinary relations with creative practices, beyond the cultural analysis of the cultural turn (Hawkins, 2019). Creative geographies fall within the ‘Geohumanities’, describing work at the intersection of geographical scholarship and arts and humanities scholarship and practice (Hawkins, 2019). They are a burgeoning field of study, highlighted by the development of special issues, publications (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017), and the theme of the 2025 RGS conference (Noxolo, 2025).

Hawkins (2019) reveals histories of creativity in geography to demonstrate the entanglements of turns with disciplinary history, naming this (re)turn. Scholars trace creative geographies back to Humboldt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, citing his use of poesis and aesthetics (Buttimer, 2012). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wright's 'Terra Incognita: The Place of the Imagination in Geography' (1947) appealed for modes of aesthetic imagining in geography, and cultural geographers explored landscape painting (Hawkins, 2014). Therefore, whilst engaging with an exciting field of study, this research acknowledges the contributions of its predecessors.

### **2.1.2 What is Creativity?**

Within the creative (re)turn, creativity holds a certain solidity as an uncritically constructed reference point which polices a narrow definition of creativity (Hawkins, 2019). De Leeuw and Hawkins (2017), feminist geographers working in the creative (re)turn, highlight the need for critical creative geography, with rich possibilities for feminist, anti-racist, and queer approaches (ibid.). Noxolo (2025) presents an 'inciteful' (p.2) agenda for the RGS conference on creativity, arguing creativity is not innocent and can be complicit with exploitation, projects of destruction, and large-scale evil (ibid.).

This dissertation wrestles with this issue of definition, seeking to unpick creativities and their sources and possibilities, as an entry point into the creative city in Dundee. It is valuable to unpick the ways in which creativity is understood, as these understandings are enacted in the Creative City policy, its critiques, and reclamations. Understandings of creativity also offer a methodological 'way-in', as an opening for discussion, discussed in the following chapter. This dissertation engages with the capitalist understanding of creativity employed in Creative City policies, as well as alternatives and their reclamation of the creative city. The following discussion outlines these understandings of creativity in a critical creative geography (De Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017).

Geographer Oli Mould criticises how creativity is defined under capitalism as an economised version of itself employed to feed capitalist growth (Mould, 2018). In an



increasingly globalised world, creativity is used to differentiate products, places, and spaces to maintain economic competitiveness (Edensor et al, 2010), fuelling demand for capital accumulation. Mould (2018) describes this as capitalism ‘mobilising its agitators as vehicles for its proliferation’ (p.14), as it co-opts creativity- an often-oppositional force – to ensure its own survival under globalisation. This is a process of creative appropriation for capital accumulation (ibid.), and an economised and sterilised version of creativity.

Mould also argues that creativity under capitalism is an exclusionary force, as it has transformed from an everyday and collective practice to an individualised and privatised practice (Mould, 2018). He traces a history of creativity since the enlightenment in which European capitalists hoarded cultural products by commissioning artworks, producing an individualised creative process and privatising cultural enjoyment (ibid.). The industrialisation of cultural production with the printing press necessitated the distinction of cultural consumption between lesser popular art and revered high art to maintain an exclusive creativity (ibid.). Capitalism has produced an individualised and privatised creativity, which is exclusionary as it serves only the capitalist class.

Creativity has also always been defined outside of capitalist logics; it is important to consider these counter-creativities in our analyses. Historically, the Levellers of 17<sup>th</sup> century England, who valued the commons over self-interest, enacted a collaborative creativity in their sharing of land, counter to the dominant individualistic mode of societal organisation (Mould, 2018). Today, Edensor et al (2010) highlight the multiplicities of everyday, vernacular creativity, rejecting capital’s quest for newness to centre a widely distributed definition of creativity. This approach foregrounds the ‘un-hip, the un-cool, and possibly the downright square’ (p.12), marginal and multiple everyday creative practices (ibid.). This dissertation listens for these multiple understandings of creativity beyond, and hidden within, capitalist creativity. Its critical attention to definition is incited by Noxolo (2025) and responds to de Leeuw and Hawkins’ (2017) call for a critical creative geography, forming the basis for its interrogation of Dundee’s Creative City policy.

## **2.2 The Creative City**

### **2.2.1 Creative City Policy**

The Creative City policy originates in the work of Charles Landry and Richard Florida in the 1990s and 2000s, which advocates for the importance of creativity for urban economic growth. In 1995, Landry and Bianchini described how creativity has always been integral to cities but in recent years has become lost, requiring a revival in urban governance through the fostering of a 'creative milieu'. Seven years later, Richard Florida described a new social class, consisting of those who use creativity in their work, who present an opportunity for urban governance (Florida, 2002). Like Landry and Bianchini, Florida views creativity as the driving force of economic growth, thus the creative class should be attracted to cities through technology, talent, and tolerance to activate their economies (ibid.).

Florida's public appearances, consultancy, and Creative City league tables cemented the thesis' popularity with urban policymakers (O'Callaghan, 2010). It is favoured by policy makers as it provides a solution – creativity- to the crises of late capitalism and its attendant societal problems (ibid.). The following sections outline how geographers have studied the Creative City policy, beginning with conventional critiques before turning to more nuanced approaches. Finally, attempts to reclaim the 'creative city' through transcendatory understandings of creativity are explored.

### **2.2.2 Criticisms of the Creative City Policy**

The Creative City policy elicits intense debate in geographical scholarship, from which this dissertation draws its agenda. Geographers have explored these issues through diverse case studies, from flagship developments (Comunian and Mould, 2014 on Newcastle), to creative 'pop-ups' (Harris, 2015). Their criticisms largely take issue with the capitalist nature of Creative City policies, as a co-option of creativity to fulfil neoliberal agendas.

Peck (2005) highlights the familiar neoliberal talk of Florida's thesis which favours a form of 'creative trickledown' (p.759), offering creative market distribution, rather than social redistribution, as the solution to inequality in cities, and celebrating insecurity and flexibility. He exposes its version of creativity which values cultural artefacts solely in terms of their economic utility for inter-urban competition (ibid.). Mould (2015) argues that the policy is the antithesis of creativity, since its economic hijacking of creativity rejects true urban creative practices and is designed to be replicable, reproducing homogenous urban spaces.

Scholars have further connected the Creative City to austerity regimes, a strategy of neoliberal governance consisting of fiscal purges of the state (Peck, 2012b), which are justified under discourses of creativity (Mould, 2018). Mould unpacks this austere creativity, revealing how creativity rhetoric underpins austerity measures: privatisation is justified by innovation, the public sector is told to manage funding cuts creatively, and public institutions rely on creative grassroots initiatives to provide services (ibid.). The city is 'where austerity bites' (p.625), it is disproportionately reliant on public services and home to the political targets of austerity (Peck, 2012b), thus austerity creates a distinctively urban crisis and presents creativity as its solution.

The Creative City and austerity urbanisms (Peck, 2012b) go hand in hand: whilst creativity underpins austerity, austerity underfunds creativity. Creative City policies receive little resource investment, but significant discursive representation, a symbolic commitment without substantive programming (Peck, 2012a). Creatives struggle in this context, faced with the neoliberal individualisation of the sector through a rolling back of the state to favour self-employment and freelance work, left holding down multiple jobs, unprotected, and forced to relentlessly self-monitor (McRobbie, 2011).

The Creative City policy is also criticised for employing an exclusionary understanding of creativity, a privatised creativity which serves only a single class, thinly veiled by celebrations of universal creativity. Florida delineates the creative class as a 'norm-setting' class which holds a crucial economic role (Florida, 2002), neglecting the assumed uncreative remainder (Peck, 2005). Yet he describes creativity as an impulse

which distinguishes us from other species, and cities as ‘cauldrons of creativity’ (Florida, 2005), claiming everyone as creative (Peck, 2005). These arguments ignore meaningful class distinctions in society (ibid.), yet erect them anew, employing an exclusionary creativity disguised with inclusionary claims.

This exclusion manifests spatially in processes of gentrification, as Florida’s proposals ‘lubricate’ the gentrification process with which they are closely entwined (Peck, 2005). Gentrification describes a generalised middle-class restructuring of place, in which low-status neighbourhoods are transformed into ‘upper-middle-class playgrounds’ (Shaw, 2008, p.1698), displacing working-class residents. Geographers note the relationship between urban creativity and gentrification and criticise Creative City policies as ‘gentrification-friendly’ strategies (Peck, 2005, p. 764), a state-led gentrification enacting spatial exclusion. Although recognising these connections, this dissertation does not directly engage with gentrification in Dundee, given the limited scope of the research.

### **2.2.3 Beyond the Creative City policy**

Scholars increasingly take a more nuanced approach, recognising the Creative City policy’s neoliberal agenda but looking within and beyond it to consider multiple understandings of creativity. They call for analyses of the Creative City which move beyond narrow understandings of the role of creative workers in urban life (McLean, 2014), to pay attention to the hustles at the intersection of cultural policy and practice (Sitas, 2020). These more nuanced critiques are outlined below, before turning to the ‘actually existing’ creative city (Pratt, 2011) and how it informs this dissertation.

McLean (2014) offers a feminist approach through participatory action research with Toronto Free arts intervention, platforming the critical potential of artists and activists to challenge neoliberal policies. She highlights participants’ interrogation of Creative City policies and their emphasis on critical dialogue, practices which are often invisible in critiques of the Creative City (McLean, 2014). In South Africa, Sitas (2020) interrogates practices of a graffiti collective, looking beyond Florida and his critiques to

a more contested process of cultural development. Creativity is defined as a collective agency, based on the notion of 'ubuntu' whereby the self is inextricably linked to others, manifesting in community renovations of a community centre as the messy reality beyond Floridian understandings (ibid.). Lobo (2018) connects to the concept of affect, studying a community arts space in Darwin, Australia to reveal the importance of art encounters involving silence, stillness, and tactile engagements. Creativity here is affective and shared, in the underground space of the Creative City beyond the inner-city creative cluster (Lobo, 2018).

These accounts draw upon 'actually existing' creative cities which Pratt (2011) suggests might reinvigorate debates, encompassing a wider terrain than typical critiques with nuanced, reflexive, and evidence-based studies. Thinking beyond Creative City policies to the diversity of social, economic, and political actors in the actually existing creative city responds to the relative and situational nature of creativity and can inform creative policy (ibid.). This approach extends to atypical creative cities too, breaking the confines of the creative class. Creative class notions construct barriers around who, and where, is creative (Edensor et al, 2010) and these need fractured in our critiques to expand analyses beyond metropolitan centres to working class cities and the edge of the urban (ibid.). This dissertation responds to the atypical, actually existing creative city of Dundee, a peripheral and working-class city outside of typical analyses.

#### **2.2.4 Transcending the Creative City policy**

Scholarship has begun to extend these approaches, looking to the far outside of the Creative City policy, to find transcendatory creativities. These transcendatory understandings of creativity exist alongside and outside of capitalist co-option and may enable a reclamation of the 'creative city'.

Mould (2015) argues we need to rescue creativity from its co-option by capitalism through a radical shift in focus to urban creativity beyond the Creative City narrative, for a different kind of 'creative city'. He defines creativity as the ability to create something from nothing, searching for and trying to realise the impossible, rejecting capitalism's

TINA mantra to look for alternatives (Mould, 2018). This transcendatory understanding of creativity operates as ‘urban subversion’ in the Creative City, a fluid, rhizomatic universe of urban practices through which people change the city around them (Mould, 2015). Harris and Moreno similarly argue for the repossession of the Creative City, to salvage its political hope through a redefinition of creativity, informed by cultural producers who help imagine and provoke new visions and debates (Harris and Moreno, 2012).

The reclamation of the ‘creative city’ requires a redefinition of creativity which transcends its capitalist co-option. This moves analyses even further beyond the Creative City policy, to think after its capitalist incarnation, to the future ‘creative city’. This dissertation learns from the transcendatory creativity of the actually existing creative city in Dundee, listens to its present, and explores its future.

### **2.3 Creative Ecosystems**

Drawing on literatures beyond geography, creative ecosystems provide a valuable perspective on the actually existing creative city, and potential cross-fertilisation with geography. Creative ecosystems describe a novel approach in the Creative Industries which recognises the inadequacies of past definitions of the creative sector (Virani, 2023) which centre neoliberal growth-oriented accounts of creativity, and whose top-down emphasis fails to capture the messy realities of cultural activity (De Bernard et al, 2022). They draw upon an understanding of creativity as arising in transactions between individuals in an open and fluid context (Komorowski et al, 2021), to interpret the creative industries as a complex and dynamic system, which sits within broader contexts, operates over multiple levels, and requires interdisciplinary, contextual, and participatory research (Virani, 2023). Case studies interrogate diverse creative ecosystems, from techno music (Vink et al, 2025), to Wood Craft (Vigano et al, 2023), and increasingly across the Global South (Alakwe, 2018, Nigeria). The concept features in policy, such as the UK Creative Industries Sector Plan for 2035 (DCMS, 2025) which describes the dynamic and interconnected creative ecosystem of the UK Creative Industries.

Scholars engaging with creative ecosystems recognise the role played by creative networks; mapping by Komorowski et al (2021) explores their value within creative ecosystems, as place-based organisations which offer support for, and enable services to, local creative industries. They locate these organisations as a central node among actors in creative ecosystems, anchor points for connection, and catalysts for sustainability and value, leading them to advocate for research into creative networks in order to understand the whole creative ecosystem (ibid.). Recognising the centrality of creative networks to wider ecosystems provides a lens onto the actually existing creative city, transcending organisation-based, metropolitan-centric, or area-specific studies of the Creative City.

As an emergent conceptual framework, the creative ecosystems literature lacks clarity regarding its terminology- an ecosystem, ecology, or both- prohibiting a shared understanding of the concept (De Bernard et al, 2022). Despite this, it presents an opportunity to extend geographical research on the Creative City beyond disciplinary confines, offering geographers a greater understanding of the cultural industry (Pratt, 2011). Moreover, urban geography's engagement with the Creative City provides insight for Creative Industries scholarship, with possibilities for cross-fertilisation.

## **2.4 Research Aims**

This dissertation seeks to understand how Creative City policies and critiques manifest in Dundee, looking within, beyond, and past the Creative City literature. It does this through an exploration of how creativity is understood in the city, listening across a Creative City which is underrepresented in geographical literature. It combines divergent scholarship on the Creative City policy to produce a broad view of the actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011). The creative ecosystems literature, and its emphasis upon creative networks, provides a methodological 'way-in' to this approach, to respond to the following research questions:

**Q What does Dundee look like as an actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011)?**

**sQ How does the Creative City policy manifest in Dundee?**

**sQ What exists beyond the Creative City policy?**

**sQ What are Dundee's transcendatory creativities, and how are they reclaiming the creative city?**

### **3. Methodology**

The complexities of the actually existing creative city necessitate an immersive methodological approach to capture how creativity is understood and manifests in this creative city with thick, creative data. This chapter outlines this approach, which employed participant observation complemented by interviews, facilitated by and with Creative Dundee to expose a creative ecosystem by operating at its central node (Komorowski et al, 2021). It reveals the valuable reflections and 'understanding by doing' provided by Creative Dundee, and their influence on my research design. It later considers the creative methods which thicken this account with multi-sensory data and enhance participation. Alternative research outputs, in the form of a blog and zine, extend this dissertation's reach with an accessible and interactive format. A discussion of potential limitations, and ethics and positionality close the chapter.

#### **3.1 A Participatory Approach**

Participant observation and participatory approaches to research can be thought of together (Phillips and Jons, 2012) and are connected, as participant observation allows participants' voices and actions to influence the research agenda (Bennett, 2001). This dissertation employs participatory elements to research the actually existing creative city through a central node of its creative ecosystem (Komorowski et al, 2021), 'Creative Dundee', with, and within, whom I worked. Participatory elements encouraged Creative



Dundee to influence my research design and positioned me within the provision of their activities to generate an understanding by doing.

I executed this approach through participant observation, a widely-applied method in human geography which consists of participating in and observing a community through immersion in its routines and relationships (Cook, 2005). I complemented and contradicted this observational narrative with 20 interviews with participants from creative organisations, businesses, and public bodies in Dundee, recruited through Creative Dundee's networks. Interviews are a popular research method in human geography employed for their flexible, people-oriented, and wide-ranging nature (Valentine, 2005), and often used to extend or add nuance to information acquired from other sources (Hitchings and Latham, 2020). Field diaries and interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo data handling software, through a systematic process of coding which iteratively established themes.

I was based with Creative Dundee throughout July 2025, participating in meetings and everyday routines, engaging with their network of creative practitioners, businesses, and organisations, and attending events and spaces they recommended. Each year they crowdsource the guide 'Creative Things to See and Do in Dundee' which formed an atlas for my time in Dundee, and using which I visited spaces, sourced interviewees, and attended events.



**Figure 1: 99 things to see and do in Dundee (Creative Dundee, 2023)**

Despite my extensive engagement with Creative Dundee and benefit from their input I do not claim to have followed a fully participatory research process, having entered this relationship with an existing idea of research aims which did not change substantially. However, during research design I communicated regularly with Creative Dundee, eliciting their valuable input as residents of, and key creative players within, Dundee. To recruit interviewees, we produced a list of desired participants and an introductory email, sent by Creative Dundee, which opened up their network, proving vital to the research. At points opening myself and my research up to their influence felt challenging, but I recognised the utility of their input, so learnt to be more open to changes.

Their influence on my research design extends beyond the practicalities of interviewees, events, and creative spaces, in the reflective environment they fostered. Regular check-ups on my progress, valuable assessments of the Creative City, and constructive criticism where necessary were essential to my project's development. This influenced my research design, as they encouraged me to look beyond their own activities and take a more city-wide view, emphasising the need to study the grassroots

Creative City in greater detail, which resulted in further interviewee recruitment guided by their insight.

Early on in the research design I expressed my eagerness to usefully participate in their activities, which was welcomed, resulting in the development of a workshop on counter-mapping which I gave at their event in June 2025. This opportunity was invaluable in its provision of observational and creative data, and my participation in event facilitation, generating an understanding by doing from the centre of Dundee's creative ecosystem. This understanding by doing developed my understanding of both the facilitation and audience sides of Creative Dundee's activities and offered a wide-reaching lens from the centre of the creative ecosystem.

Wishing to produce a more accessible and engaging record of my time in Dundee, I expressed my interest to produce a resource with Creative Dundee. We decided upon a zine which stylistically resembles my research diary and contains a summarised and playful version of my research design and findings. During discussions a member of the Creative Dundee team suggested I incorporate some interactive elements to elicit reflections on my research. These were incorporated in the form of prompts and activities, and the ability to print and fold the zine yourself, an expression of the interventionary potential of creative methodologies (Hawkins, 2015). The zine is published on the Creative Dundee website and shared with their network in a monthly email newsletter, taking a digital format to enhance access.

Alongside the zine, another member of Creative Dundee suggested I include an online iteration of my reflections, leading to the development of a blog which incorporates my film photography of Dundee into an account of my experience. These alternative research outputs extend the potential reach of my research beyond university examination, to do justice to the time, energy, and generosity of participants.

<p>A zine by Hannah Walton</p> <p>RESEARCH DIARY</p> <p>What is a creative city?</p>	<p>THANK YOU</p> <p>to everyone who contributed to this research</p>	<p>CONCLUSION</p> <p>The Creative City policy doesn't support creatives or creativity</p> <p>We need to re-imagine it!</p> <p>How would you?</p>	<p>FINDINGS</p> <p>④ Creativity can solve problems and help us imagine alternative futures</p> <p>⑤ But it's hard to imagine when the present is tough!</p> <p>→ we need space + resources to play and experiment</p> <p>What futures do you imagine for Dundee?</p>
<p>1 NAME: Hannah Walton</p> <p>NAME: _____</p> <p>Hi I'm Hannah, Welcome to my Research Diary!</p> <p>It's an account of my time researching the 'creative city' with Creative Dundee</p> <p>I want to hear from you too!</p> <p>Look out for these...</p>	<p>2 WHAT IS A 'CREATIVE CITY'?</p> <p>creativity is great for economic growth, cities should attract the 'creative class'!</p> <p>RICHARD FENLIDA (this guy made the Creative City Policy famous)</p> <p>What about inclusivity? justice? care?</p> <p>CRITICISM</p> <p>What does 'creative city' mean to you?</p>	<p>3 RESEARCH PLAN:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews - 'What does creativity mean to you?'</li> <li>Participant Observation - (watching + taking part)</li> </ul> <p>Maps</p> <p>Zine!</p> <p>Photography</p> <p>Event</p> <p>CREATIVE</p> <p>How would you research Dundee?</p>	<p>4 FINDINGS</p> <p>① The creative city is harsh</p> <p>→ Space, people, and funding are lacking and temporary</p> <p>② Community is KEY</p> <p>→ Peer sharing, learning and caring</p> <p>③ Disconnected</p> <p>→ Big institutions feel distant to many</p>



Figure 2: Zine- Printable version and slide-by-slide (Author and Creative Dundee)

### 3.2 Creative Methods

Research into the actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011) must itself engage with creativity in order to produce an informed understanding of its subject matter and



involve creative participants. This dissertation incorporates creative elements into its methodology through its field diary, interview prompts, and research outputs, enabling a depth of understanding, greater participation, and the potential for intervention. Creative geographies have developed vibrant modes of experimental research with creative practices, including place writing, drawing, community-based art, and alternative mapping, which can be valuably engaged in this dissertation to capture messy and unfinished processes, and encourage participation and intervention (Hawkins, 2015). Creative approaches to research consist of the production of knowledge through art practices or technology to move beyond traditional qualitative social science methods (Von Benzon et al, 2021).

My research diary is influenced by creative methodologies, inspired by Hawkins' (2015) ethnographic research with an artist in Cornwall to keep a multi-sensory record which feels created as well as collected. Multi-sensory elements include leaflets and postcards, doodles, film photography, and trinkets, to tell a story of Dundee which evades the capture of codes, thickening the narrative through sight, sound, and memory.



### **Figure 3: A created field diary (Author's Own)**

To further understanding, I asked interview participants to bring an item they felt represented creativity in the city to act as an opening for discussion. Enabled by prompts, interviews provide thick accounts of how creativity is understood in Dundee, providing an entry point into the actually existing creative city. Participant-led physical prompts enlivened participants' descriptions of creativity with visual cues which inspired insightful discussion. It further empowered participation as interviewees were able to communicate in alternative ways (Von Benzon et al, 2021), deepening my account with the inclusion of different perspectives.

An account of the actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011) must also be responsive to the (atypical) city itself, necessitating creative place-based methods to deepen understanding. Place-based interviews reveal relationships to the spaces, communities, and people of the actually existing creative city, taking place in design studios, the V&A, the Contemporary Arts Centre (DCA) bar, on the move, and among the bustle of grassroots spaces. The where of interviewing is an important consideration (Valentine, 2005), and interview locations became valuable points of reference, imbuing transcripts with the sounds, routines, and landscapes of the interview location (Evans and Jones, 2011). However, Dundee's soundscape complicated transcription software, necessitating human intervention which was also required to correct issues arising with accented voices.

Hawkins writes of the communicative potential of creative methodologies to engage non-specialist audiences in geographical causes (Hawkins, 2015); the creation of an alternative account of my research in zine form was driven by such a desire for accessible communication and participation. She also describes their interventionary potential, as this messy and unfinished approach to places opens up possibilities to intervene and change their course (Hawkins, 2015). Although wary of overstating its influence, the event I facilitated with Creative Dundee expressed this interventionary potential in asking participants to counter-map Dundee as a Creative City. The question

‘What makes Dundee a Creative City?’ prompted alternative mappings of Dundee’s actually existing creative city, as well as visions for its future, encouraging creative re-imaginings.

Creative methodologies provide a depth of understanding and engagement with the Creative City missed in traditional approaches, thickening the narrative through images, and heightening participation. Research thus produced creative outputs in the form of images, paper leaflets and souvenirs, and hand drawn maps, producing data which appears chaotic and messy, and requires care in its management and analysis (Von Benzon and O’Sullivan, 2021). Evading capture in codes, these creative outputs were better analysed alongside written datasets, providing context and eliciting reflection throughout analysis and writing.

### **3.3 Reflections**

Whilst I feel my methodology and research design is considered and responsive to my research questions, I am aware of its limitations in regard to the balance of grassroots and institutional participants, as raised in discussions with Creative Dundee. Hearing from those in powerful positions in the city and at the grassroots is essential to developing a layered understanding of the actually existing creative city, thus these issues require reflection.

I responded to this perceived imbalance through further interviewee recruitment with the input of Creative Dundee, though quickly found that as members of grassroots organisations are time and resource-stretched, underpaid for their work, or not paid at all, they are difficult to recruit. I was unable to pay interviewees beyond offering coffee, and following Creative Dundee’s strong belief in Fair Work this became an area of concern. In a future study, the equitable payment of freelancers and grassroots organisers for their time would be an important way to respond to the financial challenges raised in research findings, and enable researchers greater access to the grassroots Creative City.



Concurrently, interviewing large institutions and local elites necessitates consideration of the nature of elite interviewees, drawing upon McDowell's 1998 study of elites in the city of London. My connections through Creative Dundee, just as her connections through her Cambridge college, provided greater access to elite participants, and I occasionally experienced interviewee attempts to demonstrate their relative power and knowledge (McDowell, 1998). Having engaged with this study beforehand, and encountered issues in practice during previous undergraduate fieldwork, I was able to confront these issues in advance and alter interviews accordingly.

### **3.4 Ethics and Positionality**

This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. It followed CUREC requirements, providing participation information sheets to all interviewees and event-attendees, and orally acquiring informed consent to interview and record. It was also necessary to think beyond formal ethics (Darling, 2014) to consider the nuances of group, event, and everyday interactions. Over the course of my month in Dundee I got to know the members of Creative Dundee, spending lunchtimes and evenings in their company, so employed personal judgement and care for my research participants/colleagues when recording observations, prioritising their safety, dignity, and wellbeing over the goals of my research (Picot and Grasham, 2022). I considered carefully the ethics of citation when writing, balancing anonymity, difficult in a small city, with a desire to credit contributors and provide context. For this reason, not all interviews (presented in *italics*) are cited, as some were too difficult to cite without risking participant anonymity.

Positionality reflects an understanding that all research is situated, as knowledge is produced from a particular position (Haraway, 1988), an issue to which I frequently returned. My connection to Dundee is through my mum, who grew up there, and grandmother, who still resides there, providing me with a level of basic understanding and relatability. However, though I mentioned this familial connection, having found it

heightened some interviewees' trust, I was careful to not overstate it. Although I hold a connection to Dundee, I approached participants with a southern accent and Oxford University email and cannot claim to have a lived understanding of Dundee. I remained alert to my connection when it arose in the form of (mis)preconceptions and assumptions, reflecting accordingly.

#### **4. Under, Beyond, and transcending the Creative City**

The following chapter sets out the findings of this dissertation, organised into three themes: creativity under, beyond, and transcending the Creative City. They follow the creativities which emerged in Dundee, and their connections to Creative City policies, realities, and futures, and are broken down into sub-themes for clarity.

##### **4.1 Creativity *Under* the Creative City Policy**

This dissertation recognises the existence of a Creative City policy in Dundee, expressed in council strategy, elite interviews, the built environment, and resident perceptions. Since the early 2000s, Dundee city leadership has placed emphasis upon cultural-led regeneration and the use of culture and creativity in development (Interview, Leisure and Culture Dundee (the trust responsible for cultural provision)), reflecting a Creative City policy. It has bid for various cultural accolades, including UK City of Culture 2017, which it lost, and UNESCO City of Design, which it won in 2014.

Dundee's most recent cultural strategy 'A Creative City 2024-2034' sets out a vision for Dundee as a 'Creative City' through its history, people, and character, as a 'thriving creative and cultural centre' (p.5). It describes a city which celebrates innovation, talent, and diversity, echoing Florida's (2005) emphasis upon technology, talent, and tolerance. Dundee's 'exceptional cultural offering' (p.4) is proclaimed in this document and beyond; its 'reputation for using culture and creativity' (p.9) called upon in council strategies like the City Plan (Dundee City Council, 2022), and councillors who '*can't get in the paper quick enough*' during cultural events, revealing acts of creative place-making. The strategy doesn't hide however from the challenges facing the cultural

sector, outlining its ‘fragile and perilous state’ (Leisure & Culture Dundee 2024, p.6), and presents a hopeful vision for its future:

The city’s population, artists, makers, performers and collections have safe, dry, warm spaces to exist, to make work and to look after work, to share it with the public and to celebrate Dundee’s stories. (Leisure & Culture Dundee, 2024, p. 26)

The Creative City policy manifests in Dundee’s built environment too, echoing the conventions of other Creative Cities in its flagship waterfront development and emphasis upon place-based strategies (Graham, 2023). Florida’s thesis proposes the attraction and retention of creative class professionals through the values of technology, talent, and tolerance, involving place-based interventions to establish a desirable climate (Peck, 2005). In Dundee, the waterfront is being regenerated under the cultural-regeneration emphasis of the city council (Hasard, 2023) and is where a new V&A museum of Design was constructed, opening in 2018. The V&A describes itself as an ‘iconic symbol of ambition’ (V&A Dundee, 2023, p. 5), emphasising an attraction to place which echoes Florida’s thesis.



**Figure 4: V&A Museum (Mclean, no date)**

This dissertation is critical of the Creative City policy and its treatment of Dundee's creatives, but acknowledges its positive impacts too, through the creative confidence it has fostered in Dundee. Those involved in the development of the V&A, new Eden project, and Dundee's bids for cultural accolades, highlight the mindset that an emphasis upon cultural regeneration has afforded the city. An emphasis upon creativity in urban policy encouraged the development of creative organisations and businesses, with a sense around 2008 that *'creativity was really burgeoning and exciting'*, *'helped a long somehow'* (head of a creative organisation) by Florida's thesis.

Confidence was a key theme of these discussions, as many acknowledge, even begrudgingly, Dundee and Dundonian's growing confidence in creativity as a result of cultural regeneration. Leaders of cultural institutions and grassroots organisations spoke of a sense of pride which has developed through the Creative City policy, empowering Dundee and its creatives *'to make a case for partnerships'* and *'make ourselves available for the V&A, the possibility of the Eden project'* (Leisure and Culture Dundee). This is expected to continue to grow as a new generation of Dundonians who have grown up with the V&A and wider emphasis upon creativity have a *'whole lexicon, a whole language, a whole set of possibilities'* open to them which didn't previously exist (V&A).

#### **4.1.1 Creativity is Austere**

Consistent with other Creative City policies, the Creative City in Dundee reflects and reproduces austerity urbanisms (Peck, 2012b) as it underfunds the creative sector. Dundee's Creative City Strategy self-describes its action plan as 'lean' (p.6), which is dominated by recommendations for the sector itself, within an 'existing envelope of support' (p.6). This symbolic commitment without material investment (Peck, 2021a) elicits frustration among residents, who perceive a gap between the promises and lived realities of the Creative City policy. Whilst the cultural strategy critically diagnoses the problems faced by Dundee's creatives and presents a beautiful future vision, the

council's failure to adequately fund the sector limits its positive impact, as an austere Creative City policy.

*And yet, all of those elected members will go, but it's really important. But it's not important enough to stop cutting it.*

Consequently, Dundee's creatives face austerity urbanisms (Peck, 2012b), manifesting in a general sense of temporariness as funding is limited, people can't afford to stay, and space is lacking. This echoes the generalised experience of creatives, who are unprotected and stretched (McRobbie, 2011) under the austere Creative City policy, described as a '*state of crisis*' by members of Generator, an artist-run space. This exposes a contradictory Creative City policy, whose celebration of creativity in policy and '*the Courier*' (the local newspaper) disguise an absence of support for creatives.

The material resources available to creative practitioners in Dundee are stretched by an ever-widening pool of applicants competing for increasingly less money. The demands of larger projects have left '*less money because all the money was going to the V&A*' (Leisure and Culture), with similar concerns for the upcoming Eden project. Moreover, space is a prime concern of creatives in the city, who struggle to find affordable, appropriate, and permanent spaces to make, store, show, and collaborate on creative work. Grassroots offers like Tin Roof, an artist collective offering studio spaces, struggle to survive, and larger offers such as WASPS studios are increasingly expensive.

She tells me there used to be an artist-run studio space which began around 2008- 'Tin Roof'. The space they occupied was in need of repair, the landlord asked them to pay, and they couldn't so out they went. The building is now owned by a brewery, she says it feels strange to go back there. (Field notes)

As a result of the lack of space and money, creatives struggle to maintain a life in the city, joining the cohort of '*reluctant leavers*' (Creative Dundee) who move to Glasgow and Edinburgh for opportunities each year. Consequently, the city has a rather transient population which might prevent a continuity of creative practice:

*I think it hampers the development of something continuous. We talk about it every year around like graduation, there's the big migration to the major cities and so many brilliant talented, creative people end up leaving Dundee.* (Artist and Generator committee member)

The size of Dundee is an often-cited factor in these challenges, revealing the value of a contextual study of creative ecosystems (Virani, 2023) to better understand the actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011). There isn't the same proliferation of opportunities there would be in a larger city as *'people are all hustling for the same thing'* (artist), reflecting the variegated landscape of austerity urbanisms (Peck, 2012b).

The austere Creative City is a temporary one, with short-term leases, short-term residents, and short-term funding pots; it struggles to maintain a sustainable creative practice despite the celebration of creativity by its leadership. It is a 'pop-up' Creative City where austerity normalises a precarity of place, in which creative claims to space are temporary, and labour, as individual responsibility disguises a lack of support (Harris, 2015). This is by no means assumed natural or inevitable by residents who are alert to the political nature of their experiences. Austerity is named, blamed, and fought against, such as by the founder of a grassroots creative organisation who diagnosed the closing of community spaces in the city as *'a political issue'*.

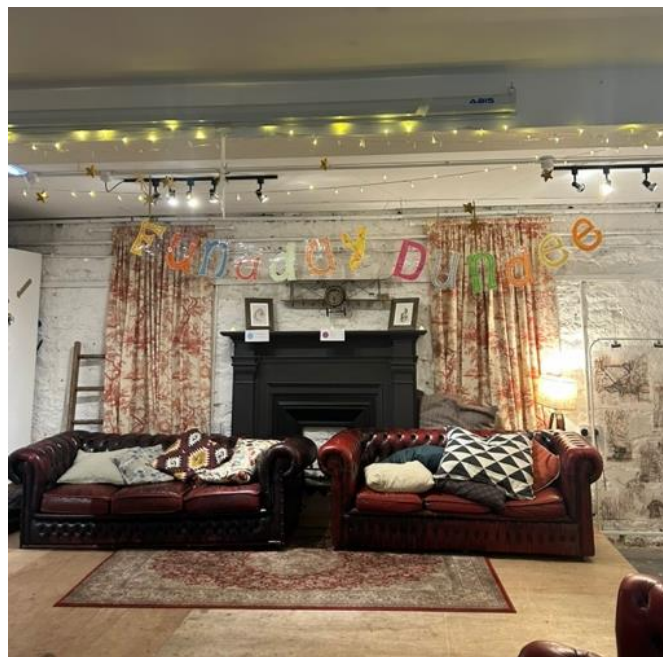
#### **4.1.2 Creativity is In/Exclusionary**

In line with the contradictions of Florida's work, the Creative City of Dundee operates along a dichotomy of in/exclusionary creativity, where creativity is an exclusionary force, disguised by a rhetoric of universal creativity. Creatives, leaders, and organisers alike were keen to emphasise the idea that everyone is creative- *'we're all creative beings'* - and the inherent creativity of the city- its *'genetics'*- echoing Florida's claims to celebrate universal creativity.

Despite this rhetoric, creativity can be an exclusionary force in Dundee, as cultural institutions like the V&A and Contemporary Arts Centre seem intimidating and closed-off to many. Dundonians feel they *'aren't a part of'* creative institutions which are *'just for posh people or people who understand'*, as described by a member of a youth arts

organisation. Just as Florida's Creative Class draws lines around who is a creative, experiences of the Creative City in Dundee are marked by a sense of exclusion, contrasting narratives of universal creativity.

However, we can also look beyond this contradictory relationship between in/exclusion, to the nuanced ways in which Dundonians navigate in/exclusionary creativities. A broad understanding of creativity is employed by many in order to value everyday creativities, illustrated by 'Fun a Day' Dundee. Fun a Day is an international initiative encouraging people to create something every day for a month, to be displayed in an exhibition. The creativities on show ranged from daily outfits, loom bands, paintings, decorated jam jar lids, and poetry, an approach to creativity which is widely expressed in Dundee, where creativity is truly seen to belong to everyone.



### Figure 5: Fun a Day exhibition (Author's own)

The exclusionary character of creativity is rejected by many grassroots initiatives in the city who push for inclusionary representation in the city's cultural institutions, as expressed by ScrapAntics below, a social justice enterprise centring creative recycling. Rather than disguising exclusion with inclusive rhetoric, Dundee's grassroots 'work' to enable everyone's creativity, fighting back against the exclusionary Creative City.

*We work with V&A McManus, DCA, we take our groups up to the Cooper arts gallery up at the University, the arts school, we work at the college so really making sure the community is represented.*

#### 4.1.2.1 The People's creative city

In navigating the in/exclusionary dynamic described above, Dundonians take ownership of the creative city, expressing a vision of an inclusive 'people's creative city', which centres grassroots organisations and individuals in the creation and maintenance of the creative city. They value a creative ecosystem of individuals and organisations beyond large institutions, a recurring theme which prompted my focus on the small scale and grassroots. The creative city includes '*smaller organisations and all the freelancers and all the people that do understand and believe in how creativity can change things*' (Creative Producer), not only cultural institutions.

This understanding of the creative city often cited Dundee's history of community-based creativity, most often 'Witches Blood', a 1987 community theatre production which took place around the city at a time of economic struggle. Local actors, builders, knitters and weavers, musicians, and narrators came together in a 300-strong production which transported its audience throughout the city (The Courier, 2025), representative for many of the '*creative world ... that is just part of what happens here*' which can be traced back to '*singing in jute mills*'. Creativity really is in the 'DNA' of the city, beyond institutional and policy narratives, remembered and fostered today in the people's creative city.



However, this inclusionary approach to the creative city operates and remains at the grassroots, largely ignored by city leadership and beyond. The UK Creative Industries Sector Plan executive summary asserts ‘the creative industries are an economic success story’ (DCMS, 2025), and never strays from this narrative, frustrating those, like a member of Creative Dundee below, whose creative city exists outside this narrative. I found it hard to access Dundee’s grassroots creative ecosystem in part because of this policy emphasis, struggling to look beyond big institutions and economic contributions assumed to define the creative city.

*A lot of the mantra at the moment about creative industries is absolutely about the economic growth and sadly, in Labour’s creative industry sector plan it’s just all about growth. I’m quite disappointed, actually.*

## **4.2 Beyond the Creative City**

Having laid the foundation of a typical Creative City and its neoliberal, in/exclusionary agenda, I look beyond this narrative to the multiple creativities employed in the actually existing creative city.

### **4.2.1 Creativity is Community**

Looking beyond the understandings of creativity previously explored and listening to the actually existing creative city in Dundee reveals the importance of community-oriented visions of creativity, which emphasise a creative ecosystem connected through a central network. Creativity is perceived by Dundonians as necessary for, and developed through, community: *‘it’s about community and based in that... that’s the through thread of all of it’* (Creative Dundee).

A designer from a small studio answered the question ‘What is Creativity’ with the object in Figure 6, a 3D printed model of the Law Hill, which rises up behind Dundee’s West End as an iconic part of the city’s landscape. It came to be through work with a Japanese illustrator who created doodles of Dundee, transformed by the designer into a 3D object through his connections in the city, grounding the importance of community

connection in processes of creativity. Creativity is *'somebody talks to somebody, an idea forming, somebody knows somebody else, they get together, they make something'*, a process entrenched in, and enabled by, community.



**Figure 6: What is Creativity?: Model of the Law Hill (Author's own)**

There is a widespread desire for a strong creative community in the city, and collaboration is valued by creatives, organisers, and institutions. Collaborations are fostered internally, among organisations and individuals in the city, and externally, to bring new opportunity into the city through its wider networks. This discourse often centres on the idea of an ecosystem, with a *'variation of scale, a variation of purpose, but a shared set of values'* (V&A), a *'genuine ecology'*, revealing the relevance of this Creative Industries concept to creatives themselves.

*I think we are proud of something which feels like a genuine ecology with the small and the large and the medium size all needing and feeding and supporting each other.* (Head of a cultural institution)

Here, its small size is a benefit to the Creative City, enabling greater connection across the creative ecosystem, enabling a more *'collaborative', 'real', and 'authentic'* city through *'better human to human connection'* (member of a game design collective).

Within this creative ecosystem view, community values of peer learning, skills development, and care are central and actively encouraged across a diversity of organisations. The sharing of space, knowledge, and resources is favoured under a peer learning approach for the development of a sustainable creative community.

Grassroots organisations consider how they might *‘hire, not buy’*, *‘utilise each other’s spaces so we’re not all keeping spaces warm’*, and *‘share staff and information so we’re not redoing work that’s already been done’*, as expressed by one founder of a creative grassroots organisation.

The development of skills is central to the activities of grassroots organisations, such as Maxwell Community Garden’s garden tool library where once a week gardening knowledge and equipment are offered to the community. Creative communities centre care in their approach to the Creative city, providing environments of safety, kindness, and calm amidst the chaos of the contemporary city, a sentiment I regularly encountered in my visits across the city where I was given books to read, offered fresh bunches of flowers, fruit to try, hugs, and kind conversations. Care is a common value across grassroots organisations in the city, who incorporate ideas like *‘radical hospitality’*, an approach which is *‘beyond this idea of a checklist’* to *‘really think about who you want in a room, and how you make that happen’* (Creative Producer). Similarly, a manager of a creative space described being a *‘curator of people’*, in which they think carefully about how to look after people in their space, and *‘show people that we care’*.

Creative Dundee are at the centre of this ecosystem and enable this creative community through connecting, amplifying, and caring for the Creative City. One member of Creative Dundee responded to the question ‘What is Creativity?’ with an image of a cucumber plant, relating its tendrils to Creative Dundee’s role in the city, as a scaffolding for the creative ecosystem, providing it with places to grab onto and thrive.



**Figure 7: What is Creativity?: A Cucumber Plant (Participant's own)**

As well as connecting the city through its events, 'Amps' membership of creatives, and projects, Creative Dundee play a key role in amplifying the city, acting as a bottom-up place-maker in their shouting out of the city's activities and achievements. They '*hold a mirror back to Dundee*' (Creative Producer) through their website, social media, news mailouts, and events within which they 'Pass the Mic', allowing their community to share news, events, and work.

They are also advocates for the Creative City, through their care for the freelancers and small organisations who look to them for advice, support, and '*allyship*', cementing them as a central node of the creative ecosystem. One member of Creative Dundee suggested '*sometimes they feel like we're going towards being a union*' for creative workers, emphasising their role in '*supporting the smaller player in the city*'.

#### **4.2.1.1 The resourceful creative city?**

Multiple understandings of creativity can exist within the Creative City; a community-centric view may operate amongst the neoliberal logics of the Creative City. The impulse towards community-based, collaborative creativity could be interpreted as a resourceful creativity in the context of austerity urbanisms. As creativity rhetoric is used to justify austerity and provided as a solution to its pressures (Mould, 2018), the

emphasis upon community creativity through peer learning, skills development, and care could represent the survival strategies of the austere city, a resourceful creativity.

With the increasing redefinition of state responsibilities for welfare under public sector retrenchment and privatisation, the voluntary sector has come to be defined as a 'shadow state', as voluntarism absorbs the slack of public sector decline (Wolch et al, 1989). With third way policies at the turn of the century, the shadow state phenomenon has become more pervasive (Skinner and Power, 2017), and this process continues under current austerity regimes. In Dundee, council cuts and national policies cause Dundonians to depend upon the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector in greater numbers:

*It is now right across the board, like my staff team will be using another third sector as their support network, other third sectors will be using us as well as everyone else*  
(Founder of a creative organisation)

It is perhaps in response to these pressures that organisations are forced to employ peer sharing, collaboration, and increasingly care for the austere Creative City, as they are pushed to be more creative. A community centre coordinator described how although it isn't ideal to have '*all these issues around us, it does push us and challenge us- to be more creative*', describing creative strategies they use to survive as an organisation- a resourceful creativity.

This resourceful creativity is a kind of carework for the austere Creative City, defined by feminists as 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p. 40). The grassroots cares for the creative city in the context of austerity urbanisms, through its aforementioned peer learning, skills development, and kindness. Feminist geographers highlight the laborious nature of care work, viewing it as essential work which should be valued as such (ibid.), a sentiment echoed by members of Creative Dundee in their experiences of care-labour for the creative city.

*We were mapping all the connections, and it was a mental web of things, and then the centre that was me, and it was like, okay, if I'm not there, this is fucked, you know, that*

*kind of thing, so that pressure, was like one of the major things that I would change.*

(Creative Producer)

Larger cultural institutions demand and expect considerable labour from grassroots creative organisations, requiring extensive reporting on environmental and access statistics in order to access funding. This work is required to ‘maintain, continue, and repair the world’ (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p. 40) through access to funding, and is laborious and stressful carework for the creative ecosystem. One founder of an arts organisation I spoke to described how the process of funding applications and required monitoring ‘*finished*’ their relationship with their co-founder, and funding worries often dominated conversations at Creative Dundee:

Funding threaded throughout the day. Funding applications, and Creative Scotland’s required environmental and audience participation monitoring dominates conversation. Funding applications are a material labour, and emotional toll for Creative Dundee, but essential to their existence. (Field diary, Day 1)

Power et al (2022) conceptualise this as ‘shadow care infrastructures’, connecting the decline of the welfare state and rise of voluntarism with the patchwork caring geographies in the post welfare city. Care is deeply intertwined with the austere Creative City which requires extensive networks of care in order to survive, at the centre of which are individuals laden with care work. The question remains whether community-based understandings of creativity are co-opted by the austere Creative City, to carry out the carework it fails to provide, or if these alternative creativities are able to exist within the neoliberal agenda of the Creative City. The Creative City is a messy array of definitions and manifestations, co-opted by or co-habiting within the complexities of the actually existing Creative City.

#### **4.2.2 Creativity is messy**

As established, the actually existing Creative City consists of multiple understandings of creativity; these can also be contradictory, producing a disconnected Creative City. Engaging with these disparate creativities provides a lens onto the conflicts and

contradictions of the actually existing Creative City, highlighting the value of this nuanced, reflexive, and evidence-based approach (Pratt, 2011).

There is a sense among creative workers in the city that creativity and its impact is misunderstood, by those outside the creative ecosystem, and institutions who differently define creativity. The phrase 'I'm not creative', and its variations – '*I'm not a gamer*'- is criticised as untrue and limiting, fuelling creatives push to expand creativity's reach across the city.

At the institutional level, in the council and national government, creativity is misunderstood, and undervalued, neglecting its infrastructural importance, interpreted instead as '*a bit of fluffy dance*'. It is aligned more closely with Florida, as a fuel for economic growth and placemaking, attracting people and money to the city, in contrast to grassroots understandings. Creatives are keen to translate their understandings of creativity's value to the institutional level, through impacting policy, and the work of amplification.

*We work closely with the economic development team... And at the start of our relationship, I had quite hard conversations with them because they were like, so how does Creative Dundee contribute to overnight bed stays, you know, in hotels? And I was like, well, we don't. (Creative Dundee)*

At the small-scale, creatives, creative organisations and creative businesses express feelings of disconnectivity across the creative ecosystem, calling Dundee's collaborative nature into question. Covid-19, as well as funding insecurity, was an often-cited factor for this decline, prompting calls for a '*rekindling*' of the creative community. Although attempts to expand the creative ecosystem are faced with misunderstandings of creativity, within the existing ecosystem the issue lies instead with these external factors of the austere Creative City .

*We're living in a really sort of fractured world where post-Covid everyone was unwell, everyone was scared of one another. They'd become completely programmed to*

*believe that you know, the world is a hugely dangerous place, and people had lost real major connections.* (Manager of a creative space)

At an institutional level, creativity is understood in different ways to the grassroots and individual, producing a disconnect with institutions in the city- the V&A, DCA and others are '*mysteries*'. Many creatives saw institutions, like the universities, and larger businesses, like the games industry, as '*working in silos*' separate from the creative ecosystem. This connects with the exclusionary creativity previously discussed to heighten a sense of distance from cultural institutions.

Small organisations express frustrations at the lack of, or inefficacy of, dialogue with institutions in the city, who may claim to act in partnership but offer these organisations little, ignoring the needs of Dundee's grassroots. There is a sense that these two levels of the Creative City are speaking '*different languages*', with divergent understandings of creativity, priorities, and structures, making collaboration difficult or impossible. Creative Dundee experienced this issue when dealing with the council and property companies in a project on creative space in the city- 'Hapworks'- in which it was hard to '*get all of those people in a room*'.

This disconnect is worsened by the absence of strong cultural leadership in the city: there is no cultural officer at the council, and existing council leadership fails to properly recognise the importance of culture; the creative city lacks a '*chain of command*'. This makes it challenging for Dundee to be represented at a larger scale, and a common vision of creativity and its role in the city is lacking.

The multiple, often conflicting, creativities at play in Dundee prevent the establishment of a common direction and equitable collaboration across the creative ecosystem. These divergent understandings are important to recognise where they impact the ability to collaborate, a practice valued as central to creativity in Dundee, and thus the study of the actually existing Creative City is essential. Listening to the frustrations and tensions at all levels of the creative ecosystem produces a more nuanced and reflexive understanding of the messy Creative City, the first step in attempts to transcend it.



### **4.3 Transcending the Creative City**

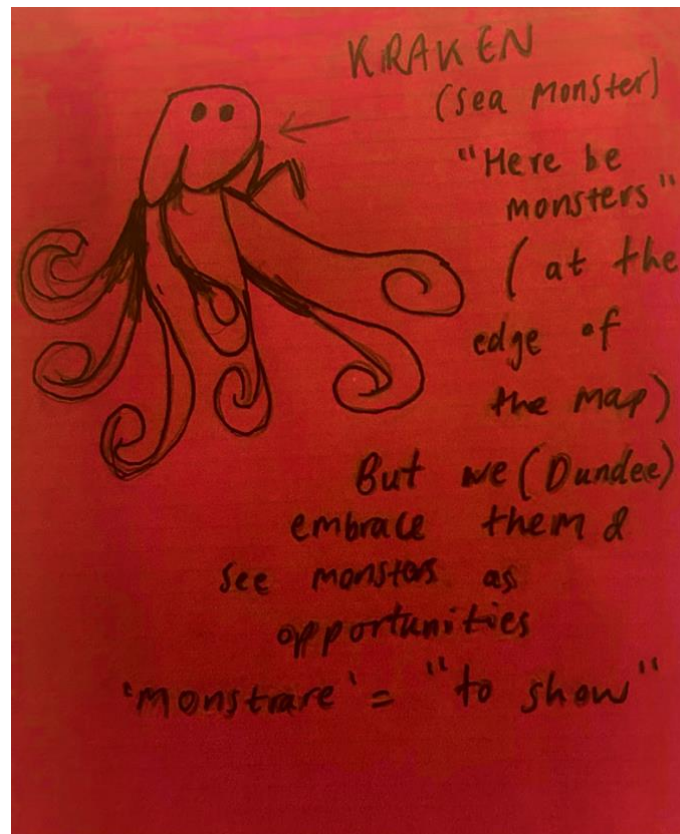
Having looked within, amongst, and beyond the neoliberal Creative City, this dissertation also looks to the future of the ‘creative city’, transcending existing manifestations with alternative definitions of creativity. In listening to these creativities, we open ourselves up to truly alternative visions of the creative city which transcend its neoliberal iteration, and learn how to enable them.

#### **4.3.1 Creativity Solves Problems**

In the austere Creative City, creativity is framed as a problem-solving tool, under a neoliberal rhetoric of creative solutions to public sector cuts (Mould, 2018). Creativity is defined outside of this neoliberal system too, employed to solve the problems it causes and imagine alternatives. Dundee is a city which has faced, and continues to face, many challenges, yet there is a sense of its resilience and ‘DIY’ culture which produces creative solutions.

*There's something about Dundee people or the kind of culture that's inherently DIY I suppose or kind of this history of no one's going to do this for us so we're going to have to find ways to do it ourselves. (Member of a youth arts organisation)*

At the workshop I gave to members of Creative Dundee’s Amps community, I asked attendees to counter-map what makes Dundee a creative City. One attendee, introducing themselves as ‘not creative’, drew upon their knowledge of Euro and Christian-centric medieval maps which depict the geographical unknown as monsters. Their counter-map consists of Dundee as ‘a city of monsters’, a part of the world that isn’t represented – the geographical unknown – and one which embraces its monsters, seeing issues like deprivation and illness as opportunities.



**Figure 8: 'A city of monsters' (Creative Dundee, 2025, traced by author for clarity)**

Participants widely understood creativity as a problem-solver- a '*tool for social change*'- as already employed within a diversity of organisations. The ability of creative design to catalyse change in systems was also emphasised, as a tool for recognising problems and enacting their solutions.

*If you understand better, not just how something is designed, why it's been designed that way, then you can surely be better equipped to unpick that and then create something that's maybe more suited to purpose. (V&A)*

#### **4.3.2 Creativity is imagination**

Beyond solving problems created by existing systems, creativity is employed as an imaginative tool in Dundee, fuelling grassroots organisations to envision a transcended creative city future. Across the creative ecosystem, inspiration is taken from Rob Hopkins, an author and co-founder of the global Transition Communities Movement, who argues for the value of creativity to re-enliven our compromised imaginations, and

great pride is taken in his upcoming visit to Dundee. The grassroots of the creative ecosystem recognises this connection and is keen to enact it, taking creative imagination as a primary goal, such as ScrapAntics who 'believe that creativity is core to rethinking our approach to living in, and learning about, the world' (ScrapAntics Website, 2025).

However, creativity's power as a problem-solver and imaginer rests upon certain conditions which enable it to flourish; the same conditions are precluded by the austere Creative City. Dundee's creatives emphasise the importance of suitable and permanent spaces to collaborate, experiment and take risks. Biome Collective, a Dundee-based games design collective, shared a space with Creative Dundee and other creative organisations before Covid, and both organisations praised the '*osmosis*' which was able to occur, allowing them to '*play*', '*experiment*', and '*collaborate*'. Accessible, affordable, and long-term spaces are lacking in Dundee's austere Creative City, alongside a temporary population and resources this prohibits the full functioning of a collective creative imagination. The 'pop-up' austere Creative City policy is not conducive to transcendent creativities; in fact, it actively restricts them.

#### **4.3.3 Creativity is Change**

I ended each interview by asking interviewees their hopes for the future of Dundee as a creative city, a question which proved consistently difficult. Although creative individuals who emphasise the importance of imagination, when faced with their own future participants struggled, a quality missed in coded analysis.

Across the creative ecosystem there is a strong-held desire for a changing creative city which '*stays relevant and appropriate for the times*', an unfinished creative city developing through ever-more creativity. Creative Dundee operates as a '*scaffolding*' for the creative city, a temporary structure which eventually should no longer need to exist.

However, interviewees favoured a future of maintenance, in which '*the institutions we love are still here*', and the creative ecosystem endures. Interviewees found it

*'impossible to forecast that far in advance'*, like Generator committee members who *'just hope generator's still here'*. So, if change is deemed essential, why is it so difficult to describe? This inability to imagine change is a product of the austere Creative City which produces a creative sector *'in crisis'*, unable to think beyond the *'firefighting'* that must take place today. This is what capitalism wants, foreclosing our ability to imagine an alternative form of societal organisation through its co-option of creativity into an individualised, and profitable version of itself, and rejection of any alternative (Mould, 2018).

*It's quite hard to not, I guess let one's gaze at the vision to the future drop when you're having to deal with very immediate risks in the city.* (Head of a cultural institution)

However, the ability to creatively imagine alternatives still exists in the grassroots creative ecosystem, whose activities enact the creative city of the future in the present. Through creative community recycling, arts-led mental health care and youth support, creative gardening, creative community climate action, and the fostering of caring creative spaces, the creative ecosystem enacts an alternative creativity. When imaginations are enabled they are expansive, in grassroots' dreams for *'artists employed full time in the city council'*, universal *'basic income'*, and *'communities knocking at our door and saying we want to work with a creative'*. How might we scale up these transcendent creativities, beyond the grassroots, for a future creative city?

To enable the expansion of our creative imaginations, we need to listen to the creative ecosystem, as this dissertation has sought to do, and answer its demands for space and resources, to make *'things seem possible again'*. Research into the actually existing creative city can play an important political role in this task, advocating for the creative sector and revealing its needs, to help transcend the austere Creative City. This becomes an extra-city issue, *'dictated by different policies'*, tracing the *'hand above'* from which we feed/bite. Creative Dundee produced a power map of the city's creative ecosystem, and beyond, which relates the many players above from whose hand they feed, and bite for change. Research into the actually existing creative city must remain alert to these extra-city connections if it wishes to be politically engaged in the search for transcended creative cities.

## 5. Conclusion

This dissertation set out with the aim to uncover the multiple creativities operating in Dundee, as the atypical 'creative city'. It has done so through an exploration of Dundee from the central node of a creative ecosystem – Creative Dundee – to understand the actually existing creative city from within. Beyond its contemporary formation, this research has attended to Dundee's transcendent creativities, its future imaginations and imaginers, and provided insight into how we might enable them. This concluding chapter briefly summarises the research findings and considers implications for future research.

**Dundee is an austere Creative City**, employing a neoliberal and exclusionary creativity within its policies and in/actions. This is a 'pop-up' Creative City, with temporary funding and space producing a transient population of reluctant leavers, which feels exclusionary to many. Yet creativity is understood outside of these logics too, as Dundonians emphasise a 'people's creative city', which is neglected, ignored and stretched thin in the austere Creative City.

**Creativity is defined by and with community**, as a force for community engagement and a product of collaboration. Connection is highly valued and furthered through the efforts of Creative Dundee who network the city, amplify its activities, and advocate for its needs. However, Dundee's creative ecosystem is stretched by the demands of an increasingly slim state, and the populations it leaves behind, generating intense care work for its creative third sector.

**Creativity is multiply and messily defined**, as a misunderstood and thus misaligned force in the city, producing a disconnect in the creative ecosystem. Small organisations struggle to remain connected under the pressures of the austere Creative City and feel disconnected from city institutions who differently define creativity. Players at different levels of the creative ecosystem are speaking different languages, no longer unified by cultural leadership, which prevents creative connection.

**Creativity is a problem solver** to many in Dundee, with an ability to enact change in the present, and imagine alternative futures. This is already required of the grassroots creative city in its everyday activities, solving problems in order to survive the austere Creative City. However, Dundee's grassroots also employs creativity to transcend this system, through creative imaginations which enact the future in the present.

**Creativity needs to be enabled** in the austere Creative City; its transformative power is precluded by the temporary nature of space, people, and resources in Dundee. The challenges of the austere Creative City require firefighting in the present, inhibiting the creative imagination creatives desire, leaving them unable to imagine a future beyond maintenance. We need to enable imaginative creativity in the contemporary creative city, through investment, extra-city scale actions, and a collective understanding of the power of creativity to enact change.

This dissertation contributes to the creative (re)turn in its critical attention to the creative definitions of a contemporary creative city. It recognises creativity is not innocent (Noxolo, 2025), and has sought to unpick multiple creativities, their intent, and their manifestation in the creative city. It reminds us that it matters how we define creativity (Hawkins, 2019), and explores this issue in a city context, connecting the Creative City with the contemporary creative (re)turn.

It further contributes to the Creative City literature, extending emphasis upon nuanced and multiple Creative Cities with a study of an atypical actually existing creative city (Pratt, 2011) in the East of Scotland. Moreover, it forges a connection with creative ecosystem thinking, presenting insightful opportunities for studies of the Creative City to learn from creative networks as a lens on to the city. This connection has the potential to become a mutual influence, as geographies of the Creative City present areas of cross-fertilisation with creative ecosystem work, an interdisciplinary possibility for geographies creative re(turn).

Finally, this dissertation suggests the potential for politically-engaged studies of the creative city which listen to and reflect upon transcendent creativities. Lobo, McLean, and Sitas have taken significant steps towards this goal with nuanced, evidence-based and participatory studies of the grassroots creative city. Future research could extend this impulse with action-based research into diverse creative cities which listens to their creatively imagined futures and considers the actions necessary to enable them. These actions extend beyond the city-scale, requiring research engagements with devolved, national, and international factors to inform transformations beyond the austere Creative City. Studies would benefit from an understanding of creative ecosystems; a methodological approach which, as I found in Dundee, prompts reflective political engagement. They would also benefit from paying their participants as the austere Creative City is not kind to its grassroots, but research wishing to gain access, trust, and credibility must be.

Dundee is a ‘city of monsters’ which creatively finds solutions to the problems of the austere Creative City and imagines a transcended city beyond them. Within these imaginations we might find an agenda for future research, engaging our own creative imaginations with politically engaged studies of the actually existing creative city, its transcendent creativities, and how we might enable them.

## **5.1 Endnote**

As I write, in December 2025, Dundee’s creative sector remains ‘*in crisis*’ with the threat of City Council budget cuts. In response to a budget consultation, organisations around the city who depend upon council funding for survival have enacted a campaign of awareness. Creative Dundee and UNESCO City of Design have designed a budget gathering at which Dundonians can ‘show [] support, complete the consultation together, and celebrate Dundee’ (Creative Dundee, 2025). Once again the austere Creative City is ‘*in crisis*’, and the grassroots creative city responds, with community, care, and imagination.

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*Traced by candidate for clarity*