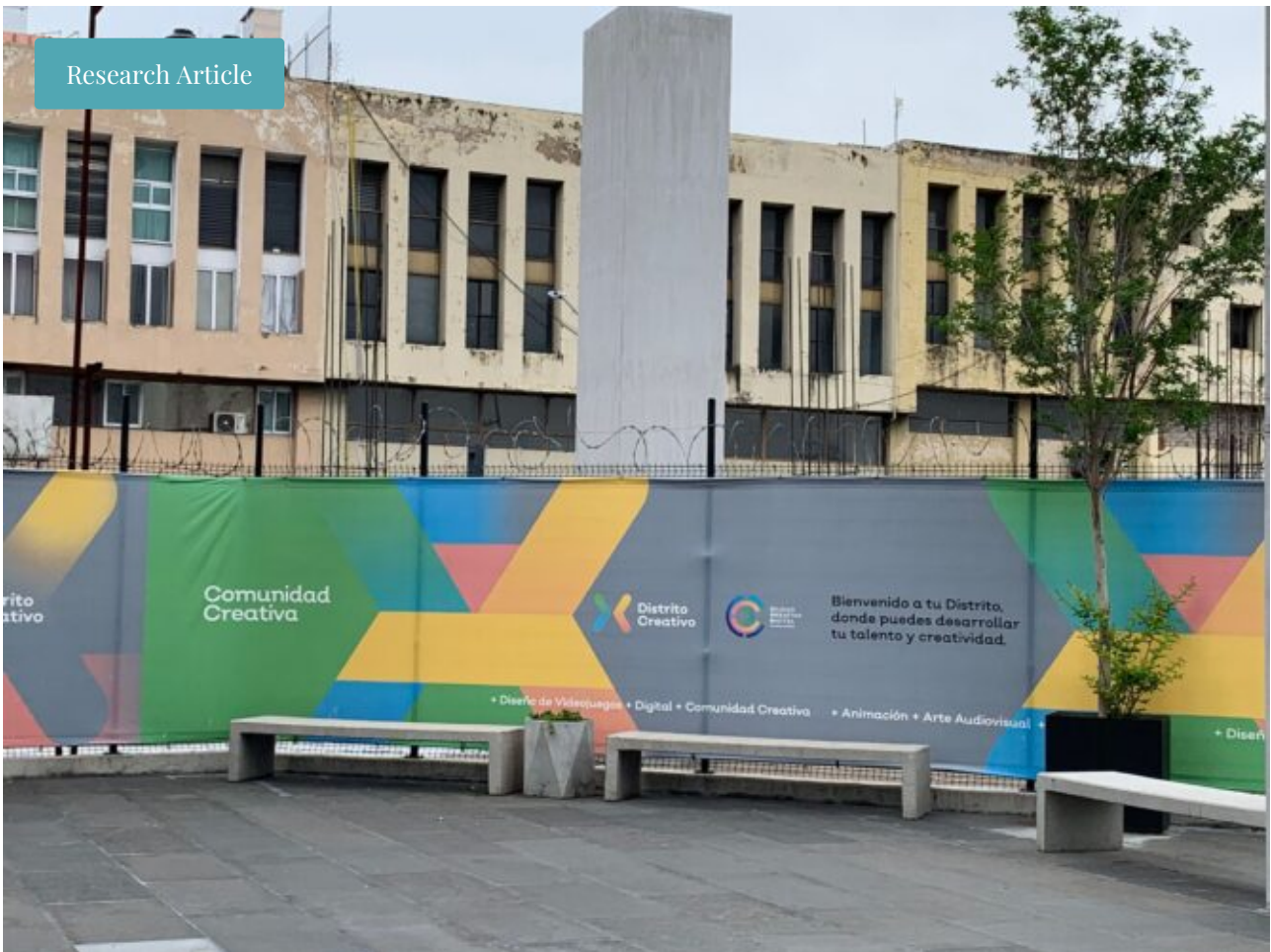


Research Article



The smart meets the creative — The disappointing parable of the first Digital Creative City in Mexico

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In 2012, standing on a podium with a banner that read, “With more technology, we sow the seed for a prosperous Mexico,” the Mexican President at the time, Felipe Calderón, announced that Guadalajara had been chosen to host the *Digital Creative City (DCC)*, the first smart city in Mexico as well as an international hub for the creative industries.

In this article, I discuss why and how the Mexican government adopted the smart city project. In doing so, I highlight ways in which the smart city project has been mobilised in Latin America, how it has intersected with initiatives of urban entrepreneurialism, and the struggles that have revolved around this process.

I argue that the Mexican government’s ambition with DCC has been first and foremost about economic development. Through this project, the government has aimed to build a global profile. As part of that strategy, it invited international consultants to join the early planning stages, bringing ideas about technological solutions to efficiency and sustainability issues. The government adopted smart city elements as part of a marketing discourse to sell the project. Still, as political and economic challenges plagued its implementation, the smart aspects of DCC have not been implemented, and the smart discourse has been downplayed.

A one-time opportunity to become a global player

The idea that Mexico was facing a one-time opportunity to become a global player for the creative industries (videogames, film and TV, audio, animation, mobile apps, advertising) appeared in the economic development planning documents of the Mexican federal government in the 2010s (Sandoval Rios et al., 2010, 2013). The premise was that Mexico had competitive advantages that could be used to attract international companies: a growing local industry, a talent pool at a much lower cost, a location on the Southern border of the US, active governmental support, and – strategic in front of a fast-growing Spanish speaking audience– the correct language.

What Mexico was lacking, the Mexican government believed, was an attractive place in which companies such as Disney, Ubisoft, or Marvel would invest. A place with the right mix of knowledge, technology, services, and amenities. To build such a place, the government turned to MIT’s Senseable City Lab for guidance. MIT would write the master plan and decide where in the country “the most important cluster for the creative industries in Latin America” should be located (Presidencia Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, 2012). From a list of cities participating in a national call, MIT chose the city centre of Guadalajara, a 480-hectare polygon in a neglected neighbourhood with significant historical heritage and one of the few green areas left in the city: Parque Morelos. The park was at the heart of the project.

Far from being a stale urban space, Parque Morelos represents a potent symbol for the people of Guadalajara. It is a place that embodies tradition and represents nostalgia for other times. The residents remember Morelos Park as a meeting place for the community, a place to spend Sundays, a place to have a picnic, and where children could play football and enjoy crushed ice with fruit syrup. However, the reorganisation of Guadalajara’s city

centre through government-led megaprojects in the 1980s isolated the park from the economic and social flows of the city. Its exclusion, together with the neglect of local government, transformed the park into a highly deteriorated and insecure public space. Nevertheless, it enjoyed a prime location and low property prices.

In the past 40 years, several urban renewal projects have been proposed to “rescue” the area. The latest among these projects is the athletes’ residences for the Pan-American Games in 2001, which failed because political and economic interests pulled the project to a different location. In that context, DCC was presented as an opportunity to alleviate the urban and social decline of the area. With the help of MIT, the government would kick-off “a project of rehabilitation to convert the centre of Guadalajara into an ecosystem of innovation” (Frenchman & Ratti, 2012:76)

How a “hub for the creative industries” became smart

Geographers have long studied how urban policies move from one jurisdiction to another, the mechanisms through which cities compete with one another, and which actors are involved in those processes (McCann, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2010, 2012).

According to Nick Clarke (2012), the “actually existing comparative urbanism” also happens among urban policy practitioners, who constantly exchange rankings, best practices, urban networks, maps of “best cities,” and so forth. Comparative urbanism and policy transfer have been common practices within the smart city model. Specifically, North-South policy transfer has tended to offer “ready-to-implement” solutions that have produced “imitative urbanism” (Robinson, 2005)

In this coming and going of smart city policies, the role of international consultants or “master planners” (Rapoport, 2015) has been crucial to establishing the Smart City as a global phenomenon. These global “experts” are norm-setters (Rapoport & Hult, 2017), carriers of western modernization and conveyors of the smart city urban utopia. Their role as preachers of the “smart” has been crucial to creating a homogenized city model that responds to the logic of capital without considering local realities and historical conditions (Clark, 2020).

Policy transfer from North to South passes along politically constructed and lubricated channels (Peck & Theodore, 2010) and often bypass evaluation and validation (Clark, 2020). MIT’s participation in DCC helped to legitimate the choice of the site for the project, facilitated its inception into the national and local agendas, and aided the initial allocation of public resources without significant political challenges. Furthermore, the connection with a globally recognized name (MIT) associated with ideas of modernity and innovation has been DCC’s most substantial marketing component and crucial for its branding strategy. A former leader of the project wrote, “This plan is based on the best international practices for redesigning cities, the creation of highly attractive creative spaces with avant-garde infrastructure to promote a high quality of life” (Parga, 2012).

Bits and pieces of two of the trendiest urban policies in the first decade of the millennium

were infused in DCC's master plan: the creative city and the smart city. First, the master plan promised a vibrant social life promoted by lifestyle infrastructure and amenities for the "creative class": coffee shops, bars and restaurants, innovation centers and coworking spaces, the use of patios in architecture to create outdoor areas to work and play in the warm weather, all with a bit of a hipster vibe and exotic Mexican undertones. The project followed the model of the creative city proposed by Richard Florida, in which putting young creatives and tech workers together in a city – preferably a city center – was a recipe for economic growth. The message to local governments was simple: invest in making your city attractive to the creative class; host arts and music scenes; support innovation hubs, art galleries, and museums. The creative class will follow, and with them, consumption, investment, and economic growth (Florida, 2002).

The second policy was the smart city. International competition to attract investment has expanded cities' duties to become providers of services that differentiate them from their competitors (Harvey, 1989). DCC's master plan responded to the digital lifestyle of people working in the creative industries by inserting a technological layer to become a "21st-century place of creative work and culture" (Frenchman & Ratti, 2012, p.159), a smart city for the creative class that would place Guadalajara at the nexus of modernization:

"An attractive place to work in leading-edge digital creative services, but also a physical smart city with a highly interactive, sustainable built environment. A range of digital technologies must be embedded in the urban fabric, allowing increased efficiency and management of precious resources, as well as improving the productivity at work by bringing people together in the virtual and physical space — a living lab to trial new urban technologies and a prototype for sustainable development solutions".

(Frenchman & Ratti, 2012, p.40)

Smart city elements were poured into the DCC master plan as "smart dust" (Frenchman & Ratti, 2012, Vol1, p.40): free city WI-FI and high-speed broadband, digital interactive information kiosks, intelligent street lightings, smart bins, bike-sharing platforms, digital public signs, intelligent urban security system, panic buttons, smart parking, interactive water features with digital elements, buzz maps, interactive sidewalks incorporating information and advertising, an app to "know" the city, amongst others.

Nevertheless, the city's attractiveness is a fluid and ever-changing idea (Clark, 2020). Critiques of the creative city model, accused of upholding gentrification and deepening inequalities, have abounded in academic and non-academic debates (Peck, 2005; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010; Scott, 2006; Zimmerman, 2008; Rickman, 2012; Wainwright, 2017). Even Richard Florida (20013) pointed at shortcomings of his model, accepting that the benefits "flow disproportionately to more highly-skilled knowledge, professional and creative workers." Similarly, critical researchers have highlighted the top-down approach of the smart city model, the hierarchical implications of the use of the term smart, the devaluation of citizen agency, and the privatization of urban governance (Anthopoulos, 2015; Calvillo et al., 2015; Halegoua, 2020; Hollands, 2008; Kitchin, 2015; Marvin et al., 2015; Powells et al., 2015; Clark, 2020). The backlash has contributed to grassroots movements such as #blocksidewalklabs in Toronto and the resistance against the Smart Cities Mission

in India.

For Guadalajara, the smart and creative city is merely a discursive strategy. The endeavour to align itself into a global narrative has triumphed over the contradictions between its local material and social grounding and its global aim. It seems like DCC is attempting to be part of a movement that is already changing.



Empty lots are being covered. Source: Author

Guadalajara is not on the list of the most “——” cities in the world.

By 2013, the official announcement by the then president, the place, the master plan, the brand, and MIT’s authority backing it all up had set the stage. As one of the major local newspapers wrote, DCC was “the best economic news that Guadalajara has had since the arrival of the railway, back in 1888” (Petersen, 2012). Guadalajara was entering the international stage. The active search for investment started: a flirtatious game with companies, tax cut incentives, international tours, 3D renders, promotional videos, and the promises of a modern future.

According to the business model in DCCs master plan, the total investment required for the first ten years was 79.5 billion Mexican pesos (about 5.7 billion US dollars in 2013). Public investment was expected to be 13 billion Mexican pesos (about 1 billion US dollars), and private investment would cover the rest, 66.5 billion Mexican pesos (about 5 billion US dollars). 80% of private investment would come from abroad, while 20% would come from domestic firms. The business plan clearly warned:

“An analysis of the core companies required to locate in DCC in order to stimulate new growth and attract new businesses (of all sizes) revealed that none of these ‘core’ companies were Mexican. This means that DCC would need to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from multinational companies within digital creative services, which would then encourage other international, national, and start-up businesses to locate in DCC. This would be supported by investments from the Mexican government in the development of new business and industry in the DCC. This is separate in the investments in the development of DCC infrastructure”.

(Frenchman & Ratti, 2012, Vol 3, p. 30)

The master plan underlined that foreign investment doesn’t follow mere promises. Therefore, it was expected that besides developing the infrastructure, the Mexican government would also need to support the development of DCC’s first businesses. In other words, the mayor of Guadalajara was now responsible for setting a risk-free investment stage for the private sector.

But, as it is often the case, the entrepreneurial plans for the importation of trendy policies (and the investment capital that they promise) from abroad met the messiness and complexity of a local context. In addition to the challenges of attracting private funds, there have been accusations of corruption, violation of land use regulations, possible damages to historical heritage, and political disputes about public resources. Furthermore, the changes in political leadership have left DCC with intermittent attention on the political agenda. DCCs attraction of foreign investment has been disappointing. Ten years later, DCC remains essentially an all-public investment initiative.

Thus far, the site comprises three public buildings, which host a government-funded organization that supports the development of the local creative industries, local university initiatives, governmental offices for culture and science, coworking spaces, a few local developers, a big pharmaceutical company, one international videogame company from Romania, and lots of empty office space.

In 2019, the local government, now under new political leadership, decided to relaunch the DCC and take it “from a render to a reality driven by the private sector” (Enrique Alfaro in Pacheco, 2019). DCCs master plan, initially shaped by an eagerness to create innovative projects, is being replaced by a more traditional model of urban entrepreneurialism, one that involves more tax incentives for private firms and less “smart dust.” MIT’s inception of “smartness” in DCC was short-lived, and the government is no longer pursuing it.

Today, the discourse used by DCC focuses on supporting business and rehabilitating the city center. The “smartness” has been left aside for now, and the DCC is once again, at least as presented by the Mexican government, only “a hub for the creative industries.”

In Parque Morelos, the local government fixed the broken sidewalks, trimmed the bushes, painted the benches, cleaned the fountains, painted the zebra crossings, and renewed the streetlamps. There are no sensors yet.

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