

REVIEW

David Emanuel Andersson, *Understanding Creative Cities*, Edward Elgar, 2026

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David E. Andersson's book revisits the theme of creative cities from a distinctive interdisciplinary perspective. At a time when the concept of the "creative city" is widely used but often vaguely defined, the book offers a rigorous and thought-provoking account of the conditions that make urban creativity possible.

From the very beginning of the Preface, the author makes it clear that the concept of the "creative city" cannot be taken for granted. Before developing his argument, he defines the two key concepts on which the entire book is based: creativity and the city. Creativity is understood in its classical sense as the production of something that is novel, useful, and surprising, while a city is described as a densely populated environment where people share common social and economic spaces. Another aspect highlighted in the Preface is the book's interdisciplinary perspective. The author argues that previous studies of creative cities have often examined the topic from the viewpoint of a single discipline, such as economics, geography, psychology, or sociology. By contrast, his objective is to integrate these different perspectives into a broader framework, while acknowledging that such breadth may come at the expense of greater depth in individual fields. This interdisciplinary ambition reflects the complexity of creativity itself, which cannot be fully understood through the lens of any single discipline. Finally, the Preface introduces one of the book's central ideas: creativity is not simply an individual characteristic but is strongly influenced by the urban environment. According to the author, cities foster creativity by encouraging diversity, spontaneous interactions, openness to new experiences, and vibrant public life. Creativity thus emerges from the continuous exchange of ideas among individuals rather than from isolated acts of genius, making the city itself an active participant in the creative process.

The Introduction (Chapter 1) develops the central argument of the book by showing that cities become creative not by chance, but because specific cultural, institutional, and spatial conditions emerge over time. Using historical examples such as Florence, Amsterdam, and especially London, the author argues that creative flourishing depends on a combination of factors, including tolerance for unconventional ideas, secure property rights, economic opportunities, and social diversity. London is presented as a paradigmatic case in which geography, legal institutions, financial innovation, and intellectual networks interacted to attract artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs, eventually making the city one of the world's leading centres of creativity. The Introduction also broadens the discussion beyond economics. Creativity is linked to individualism, openness to strangers, and the circulation of ideas across social groups. Drawing on an extensive body of literature, the author argues that cultures encouraging autonomy, literacy, tolerance, and interaction with outsiders tend to generate more creative environments. Equally important are the informal encounters that occur in dense urban settings, where people with different backgrounds, skills, and experiences meet and recombine existing ideas in unexpected ways. Another significant contribution of the chapter is the connection it establishes between creativity and

urban form. Mixed land uses, high density, short blocks, and buildings of different ages are presented as urban characteristics that create opportunities for spontaneous encounters and experimentation. In this perspective, the city is not merely a physical container of creative people, but an active ecosystem whose institutions, public spaces, and planning policies can either stimulate or inhibit creativity.

Chapter 2 turns to the question of individualism, one of the book's most original and stimulating themes. The author proposes the notion of "cultural individualism", understood as a combination of emancipative values, self-expression values, and aspirations for freedom. As he writes, this form of individualism "does not connote anti-social atomism, egocentrism or selfishness" but is instead associated with cosmopolitanism, pro-sociality, and universalism (p. 13). This distinction is particularly illuminating because it avoids common misunderstandings surrounding the concept of individualism. Building on this definition, the chapter argues that cultural values are an important determinant of creativity and help explain why creative activity tends to concentrate in particular societies and places. Societies that promote individual autonomy, openness, and broad social interaction appear to provide especially favourable conditions for innovation and scientific achievement, although the author is careful to stress that culture alone cannot account for creative outcomes.

Chapter 3 explores the individual level, examining how personality traits—particularly openness to experience—and everyday social environments contribute to creative behaviour. Creativity is presented as the outcome of an interaction between personal dispositions and the opportunities offered by urban contexts.

Chapter 4 further develops this argument by focusing on urban form and planning. The discussion is especially interesting because it moves beyond conventional planning prescriptions and emphasizes adaptability rather than comprehensive control. Diversity, density, mixed land uses, and opportunities for interaction are presented as key ingredients of creative urban environments, whereas overly rigid planning may suppress entrepreneurship, experimentation, and the emergence of local knowledge. Rather than advocating extensive planning, the author argues for planning approaches that preserve flexibility and allow cities to evolve through decentralized processes. As the author writes, echoing both Jane Jacobs and Friedrich von Hayek: "The creative city is a city that allows for local knowledge—or knowledge of the 'particular circumstances of time and place'—to lead to continual entrepreneurial alterations of land-use patterns and the human activities that those patterns make possible. This implies that decisions about land use incorporate more knowledge if they are decentralized, involving numerous independent decision-makers" (p. 92).

Chapter 5 illustrates these theoretical arguments through the concrete historical example of the jazz scene in Copenhagen, showing how creative individuals and the urban environment can mutually reinforce one another. The case study successfully demonstrates how the conceptual framework developed in the previous chapters can be applied to explain the evolution of an actual city.

Finally, Chapter 6 brings together the various strands of the discussion. Creative cities emerge as the product of interactions operating at multiple scales, including individual characteristics, cultural values, appropriate institutional arrangements, and urban environments. Creativity is fostered by diversity, openness, adaptability, and opportunities for social interaction, and is instead hampered by rigid or overly prescriptive forms of planning. The book concludes with a simple but compelling message: cities cultivate creativity by leaving room for people, activities, and experimentation, embracing flexibility instead of excessive control.

Overall, the book offers a persuasive, well-argued, and genuinely interdisciplinary account of the relationship between *cities* and *creativity*. One of its principal strengths lies in its ability to bring together insights from psychology, sociology, economics, geography, and urban planning within a coherent analytical framework. Rather than treating creativity as an innate quality of exceptional individuals, the author convincingly demonstrates how it emerges from the interaction between people and the cultural, institutional, and spatial environments in which they live. The result is a stimulating contribution that

will be of considerable interest not only to scholars of creative cities but also to researchers and practitioners concerned with urban planning, governance, and innovation more broadly.