



## When Weird Worked for Austin: White Paper

By Dr. Joshua Long

Assistant Professor, Southwestern University

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For decades, weird worked well for Austin. When Austinites spoke about weird, we exchanged insider histories of the city's most eccentric and rebellious moments, and we used that knowledge to build solidarity and keep perspective. Weird wildlife meant salamanders, bats, grackles, and an old metal Armadillo. Weird people meant gypsy troubadours in cowboy hats, roller derby girls, and the 181 members of the Texas legislature. Weird was a reason to smile at eccentric strangers, or a good way to maintain neighborly relations (*If Earle wants to build a beer can statue of a dinosaur in his front yard, that's his business*). But weird isn't just a word whispered among nostalgic old Austinites anymore. Weird has become a marketable urban brand.

In a competitive economic landscape where cities wield carefully crafted images of cosmopolitanism, innovation and entrepreneurialism, Austin's eccentric reputation communicates our acceptance of the new ideas and populations that will define the next generation of Austin creativity. And it isn't just Austin that has embraced the weird. Cities like Portland, Boulder, Louisville, Santa Cruz and others have followed the Austin example of keeping it weird by supporting local businesses, encouraging creative industries, and promoting the local tourism industry.

Over time, weird has become a buzzword applied broadly to creative industries, where it is increasingly used to describe innovative corporate culture and "outside-the-box" thinking. Recent articles in *Inc. Magazine* and *The Atlantic* herald weird as good for the workplace, good for branding and good for the urban economy. In Austin, where this particular brand of weird first emerged, creative industries have become a cornerstone of the urban economy worth more than \$4.35 billion in 2012. The lure of the Austin lifestyle—eccentric, creative and start-up friendly—is a major attraction to entrepreneurs, clean and green industries, and skilled workers hoping to land a job in America's latest darling city. You can't throw a taco in this town without hitting a millennial who moved here because they heard about the creative sector jobs available in hip, weird Austin.

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Of course, the irony of weird boosterism and workplace culture is not lost on those Austinites who thought “keeping it weird” meant a rejection of rampant commercialization and unchecked urban growth. Even amongst our local hipster crowd—well known for their love of irony—the normalization of weird is often seen as nothing more than a kitschy slogan aimed at tourists and folks trying too hard to blend in. We all know that every time a venture capitalist in a tie-dyed “Keep Austin Weird” t-shirt pees in Barton Springs, a plastic flamingo loses its wings.

We can make jokes about it, but the reality is that the appropriation of weird has paralleled a citywide identity crisis, and that has had tangible social and economic consequences. For long-term residents, the vanished landscapes of Old Austin (e.g. Liberty Lunch, Las Manitas, the Armadillo...and pretty much all of East Austin) has meant the loss of community and sense of place. For newly arriving college grads, the promise of affordable living near downtown and creative sector employment has quickly given way to the reality of ever-rising rents, dangerous bike commutes, poor public transit, and if they’re lucky, a job as a barista or bartender. For the working class and minorities (particularly African Americans), it has meant displacement, isolation, and the superficial recognition of a community past rather than a community present.

Recognition of *all* Austin residents as assets is a great place to revitalize the weird ethics of diversity and tolerance. Yes, young educated workers are super tech savvy and angel investors kickstart our start-ups, but there’s more to the Austin social fabric than millennials and deep-pocketed boomers.

The Austin working class, minorities in particular, are increasingly being displaced to suburban communities as they feel the pressures of gentrification, rising cost of living and loss of community. Respecting this community must come in the form of property tax protections, social assistance programs, and perhaps most importantly, outreach and education about the ever-changing complexities of such programs (non-profits have argued that many Austinites are either unaware that they are eligible for benefits, or do not know how to receive them).

The homeless—long known as some of the most creative in Austin—are one of the most overlooked resources. Providing services to the homeless indirectly benefits the city budget and helps reintroduce individuals into the workforce. The Austin 100 Homes Campaign estimates that the \$2.4 million annual cost of housing and serving 100 homeless people could save taxpayers \$4.3 million, and other organizations have pointed to the heavy social and financial cost of ignoring Austin’s 1300 homeless

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children. Putting roofs over heads and providing counseling and health services is an investment that saves Austin taxpayers while creating a more sustainable urban society.

Musicians, a cornerstone of the Austin economy and identity, are also in need of assistance. The recent census commissioned by the City of Austin's Music Office confirmed much of what we already suspected: Musician wages have stagnated, venues are paying less, and like so many other populations in Austin, musicians are leaving Austin to find housing elsewhere.

In the past, weird has served as a clarion call to support independent local business and preserve iconic cultural landscapes. In addition to continuing this tradition, it may help to start applying some weird solutions to some of Austin's most challenging problems.

Innovative municipal governments are addressing housing challenges by subsidizing cooperative housing communities, promoting affordable micro-apartments and tiny houses, and fast-tracking transit oriented development zones. Of course, you need transit for transit oriented development. While Austin's bus system has seen marked improvements in recent years, our inability to communicate the necessity of multi-modal transit—and the long-term vision of such a transit system—is perhaps our greatest planning/administrative failure. In addition to traditional approaches (most notably rail and subway), we need to start thinking imaginatively. That means promoting staggered or compressed work schedules, expanding Austin's bike lanes and routes, and experimenting with entirely innovative approaches.

In recent years, Austin has learned that keeping it weird isn't easy. While the use of weird as a branding tool has seen some success, the rapid growth, commercialization, and homogenization of Austin has undermined the credibility of Austin's weird reputation. Rather than shed nostalgic tears for the city that once was, it is time to revitalize the attitudes that first spawned the weird. We've parlayed a weird reputation into a marketable brand that celebrates our creative sense of entrepreneurialism, but we've forgotten about the other weird things that worked well. We are Austin because we recognize our city's most unique assets, be they bats, bohemians, ancient oak trees, or transgender homeless mayoral candidates. We are Austin because we refuse to conform to traditional Texas conventions (whether economic, cultural, or political) while keeping the boots, tacos, and brisket. We are Austin because we prioritize community, diversity, and quality of life over cheaper, faster, and more profitable. These values are the key to a more sustainable future. As long as we keep them, we keep Austin.

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