# 12. Placing the Digital Economy: the Spatiality of Work in 'Tech City', London

Juliana Martins

Juliana is an architect and urbanist. Currently, she is finishing her PhD and teaches urban design modules at the BSP (as PGTA). Previously, she studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture and worked as architect, urban designer, and policy adviser, both in public and private sectors, in Lisbon and London.

keywords: space, work, creative cluster, digital industries.

email: j.martins@ucl.ac.uk
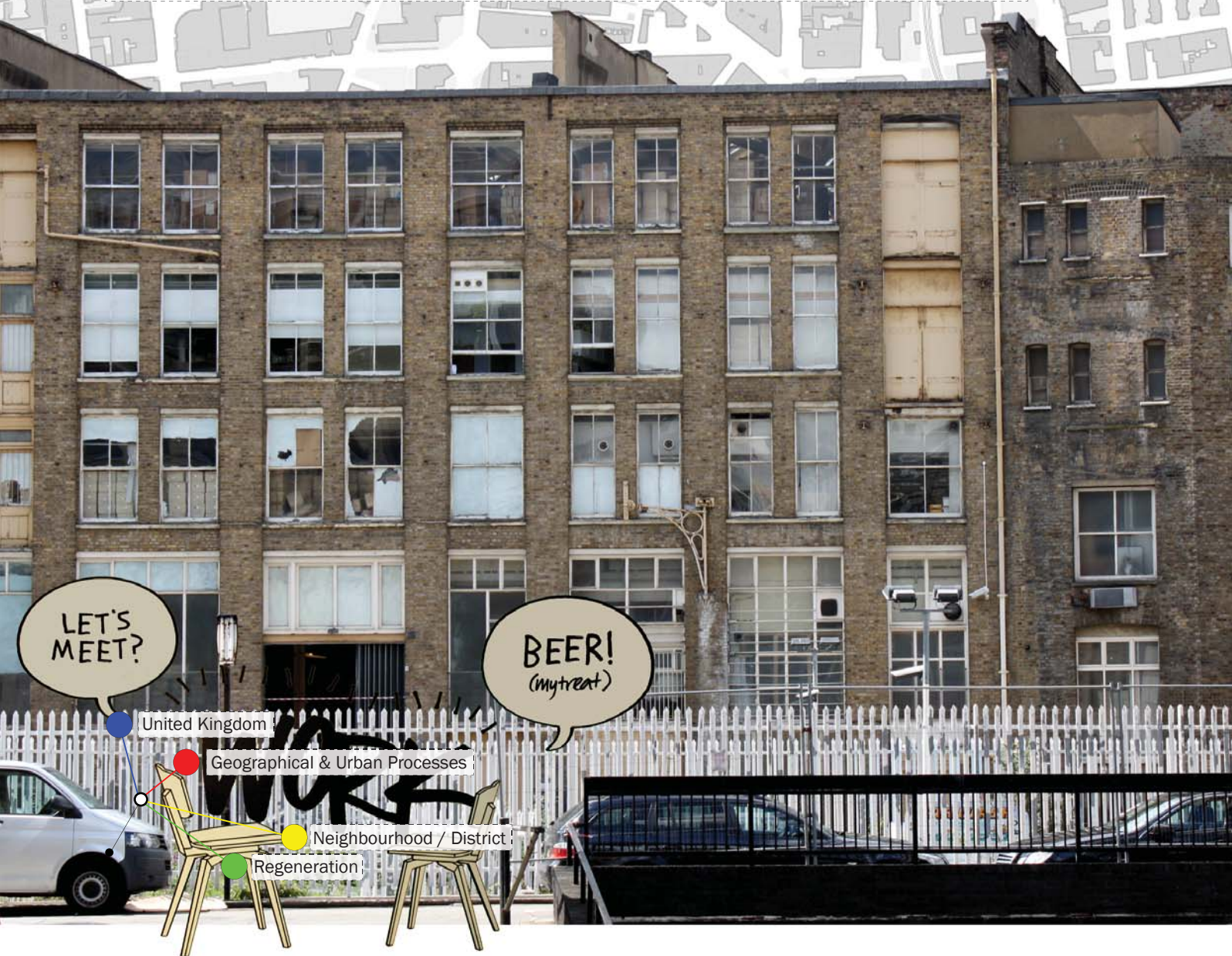
In the past 20 years, a wealth of literature and policy initiatives have focused on 'creative cities' and 'clusters', the 'creative class', and 'creative industries'. These debates are associated with two parallel developments: First, the reassessment of space in the (global) economy and the 'rediscovery of the city' that took place from the 1980s onwards in several fields of academic enquiry (Amin and Graham, 1997). This work challenged earlier predictions (Toffler, 1980) that questioned the importance of space in economic, social, and work relationships in face of technological and economic transformations. Second, changes in cultural and local economic policy, which became increasingly intertwined and brought culture "to the centre of policy-making as a potential economic resource" (O'Connor, 2010, 31). Policies initially focused on flagship cultural projects and city marketing and later developed into strategies aiming at fostering creative cities or clusters. Scholarship and policy on these issues, however, stem from distinct conceptual and empirical bases (Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Florida, 2002; 2005; Pratt, 2011) suggesting that 'the nature of the relationship between the creative economy and the city, in real or aspirational governance terms, is far from settled' (Pratt and Hutton, 2013, 92).

Critical contributions to understand this relationship come from 'productionist' approaches (Indergaard, 2013) which examine the cultural and creative industries as an industry (Scott, 1997; Pratt, 2011). Studies highlight their tendency to concentrate, particularly in inner-city areas, the role of proximity in supporting production processes and associated human interactions (Pratt, 2011; 2013), and that spatial characteristics of places matter for their operation, both in material and symbolic ways (Hutton, 2006; Lloyd, 2006). However, empirical evidence remains limited in what concerns the diversity of spatial patterns in different industries. More importantly, the concrete spatiality of these processes is under-researched and lacks theoretical formulations.

This research aims to expand current knowledge by examining the relationship between space and digital production in Shoreditch, East London (2009-2012). It seeks to identify the spatial conditions that, at multiple scales, mediate and support the operation of digital industries in inner-city locations. The study develops a new approach in this field of enquiry by investigating these relationships through the spatiality of (digital)

Image: Juliana Martins

work. Drawing on studies from economic and human geography and sociology, work is conceptualized as a range of six activities (producing, meeting, networking, learning, displaying work, and socializing) performed across four spatial settings: the extended workplace, workspaces, industry events, and the neighbourhood. The creative digital industries are particularly relevant for the debate because they both use and develop technologies that supposedly challenge the importance of place in economic activities. The research design is a qualitative case study using three data collection methods: semi-structured interviews with digital workers and other industry actors, direct observation of selected spatial settings, and secondary data. The area is an emergent cluster of digital firms (Foord, 2013; Nathan, Vandore, and Whitehead, 2012) also known as 'Silicon Roundabout' and 'Tech City'. Since 2008, it has received growing media and political attention, particularly with the set-up of the Tech City Investment Organisation by the UK Government in 2011, thus providing a less explored but very relevant case.

The original contribution of the research will be threefold. First, it provides an empirical and detailed account of the spatiality of digital work in 'Tech City' which has not been examined to date. This analysis reveals a network of spaces (base, ancillary, and events) used for work in complementary ways, suggesting a reconfiguration, and extension, of the 'workplace' in these industries. While unraveling the critical role of multiple settings in supporting digital work, it also shows that this spatial extension is limited and associated with the nature of work and the specific spatial requirements of the tasks involved. The office still plays a central role in digital production. Second, the study identifies macro and micro spatial conditions that mediate and support these work patterns and advances the conceptualization of functional, social, and symbolic aspects of these relationships, as well as the role of human agency in these spatial processes, expanding the understanding of why and how place matters in the digital economy. Third, the analysis reveals that 'structured interaction' and micro-processes of spatial segregation and exclusion are critical to support a range of work practices and social interactions in digital production. In contrast to influential accounts that associate creative cities and industries with diversity and tolerance (Florida, 2005), at the scale of these spatial practices, processes of selection and the quest for sameness seem to underpin the operation of these industries within urban space(s).