Creative Production in the City: A Role for Urban Design?

Juliana Martins examines the practical needs of creative industries that urban design needs to address

1 Urban environment of Shoreditch, East London. All photographs by Juliana Martins: Holywell Lane; Paul Street; Charlotte Road; Xoyo Club, Cowper Street; Cargo Club, Rivington Street; Electricity Showrooms Bar, Old Street; Shop, Redchurch Street; Clere Street; and Rivington Street

Since the mid-1990s, terms such as creative cities, creative clusters and creative industries have gained prominence in policy initiatives and academic debates. Despite the hype surrounding these concepts and their urban relevance, the field of urban design has been, until recently, surprisingly absent from these debates. The creative industries are an important component of the timely reflection on industrial urban design that this issue addresses; can urban designers make a contribution to the understanding and development of creative production in the city?

CREATIVE CITIES, CLUSTERS, AND INDUSTRIES

These terms emerged alongside broader processes that, since the 1960-70s, led to new growth sectors (e.g. cultural/creative sector), and changes in production processes, labour and firm organisation, and locational patterns of industrial activities. In parallel, a growing connection between cultural and local economic policy stimulated the development of cultural-led regeneration policies. During the 1980s, these focused on flagship cultural projects and city marketing, later developing into strategies to promote creative cities and clusters. Creative industries – such as advertising, design, or new media – became increasingly recognised as a tool for urban regeneration and economic development.

These ideas had a massive impact with numerous cities worldwide aiming to foster creative production and consumption. There is compelling criticism of these initiatives (e.g. regarding their association with neo-liberal agendas and gentrification) but limited evidence about the impacts of creative cluster strategies. The subject is complex; there is a variety of policies related to culture and creativity, multiple approaches to creativity and the city, and some key concepts lack clear definitions: 'as these terms have filtered through to the popular media they have lost their precision and specificity (...) the notion of a creative city stands as political and social mantra, as an urban, social or

economic policy, or even an aspiration' (Pratt 2010).

Despite these contentious issues, the creative industries remain a focus of policy interest due to their economic significance; in 2013 the creative economy represented 2.6 million jobs in the UK and 15.5 per cent of London's workforce (Bakhshi et al, 2015).

THE ROLE OF SPACE AND PLACE

Creative industries are city industries; they tend to locate in urban areas, in small quarters of cities, sometimes only a few streets. An example of these micro-clusters is film industries in Soho, London. While traditional industries, to some extent, moved (and were pushed) outwards to suburban areas or other cities/countries, creative industries seem to thrive in inner-city locations, often appropriating and transforming ex-industrial or redundant areas, thus presenting a potential for urban regeneration, and job creation.

The proliferation of these organic clusters alongside academic research on agglomerations of economic activities suggested 'connections between the clustering of cultural industries and urbanity itself' (O'Connor 2010) fuelling the interest of politicians, consultants, and scholars in understanding place-based factors relevant to explain these patterns, and to nurture the creative economy.

There are several perspectives on the relationships between creativity and place. Arguably the most influential is Richard Florida's Creative Class theory that stresses the importance of quality of place attributes, such as amenities, diversity, or vibrancy of street life, in attracting creatives in the global battle for talent. This theory, however, focuses on consumption preferences of a diverse range of workers (mainly at region/city scale) and says little about the characteristics of places where creative industries concentrate and how these support their operation.

An alternative approach focuses on creative production stressing the role of proximity in supporting creative industries' production processes and their patterns of interaction. These studies examine how creative clusters relate to the character of place regarding factors that influence co-location and spatial characteristics of these urban areas, showing that place and specific spatial conditions matter for the operation of creative industries in material and symbolic ways.

The importance of place for creative production suggests that urban design plays a role in accommodating the creative economy in urban environments. Yet, only recently academic research in urban design and spatial planning started to further investigate the characteristics of the built environment that nurture creative clusters. Findings from an academic study that explores this line of enquiry focusing on creative digital production in Shoreditch, East London, illustrate how these industries use and transform space and multiple connections between place and creative production.

CREATIVE DIGITAL INDUSTRIES IN SILICON ROUNDABOUT

Shoreditch is a typical example of post-industrial transformations of inner-city areas into creative industries' clusters. After the demise of the furniture/printing industries that thrived between mid-19th and mid-20th centuries and a period of decline, the area became popular with artists that moved in by the early 1990s. Later, it attracted new media industries and was its epicentre until the crash in 2000. The area continued to draw in a range of creative industries and is a hotpot of creativity in London.

Recently, an emergent cluster of tech and creative digital firms developed in the area which is now known as Silicon Roundabout (nickname coined by Matt Biddulph in 2008), and Tech City, since the British Government setup the Tech City Investment Organisation in 2010. Although creative digital industries (e.g. new media) would less likely be grounded in particular places, digital workers/firms seem to find Shoreditch

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2 Examples of buildings where workspaces are located: Tea Building; Techhub in the Tea Building; and The Trampery
3 Wall drawing at Google's Campus, London

attractive and suitable for their production processes.

In many ways, Shoreditch's characteristics resonate with those found in other creative clusters, namely an edgy character, industrial heritage, overall small grain development, concentration of cafes/bars, and vibrant nightlife activity. Its distinctive features include: a compact but fragmented urban structure with large busy roads defining intimate areas of small streets; a diversity of building types encompassing post-war redevelopments and recent projects; and a low quality public realm with few green spaces and parking lots, derelict buildings, and railway infrastructure that impacts on the street level experience.

The study shows that characteristics of the area's built environment, at several scales, are important for creative digital production. Three findings are worth highlighting:
● First, office space is essential for digital firms. As noted in other clusters, former industrial buildings seem particularly suitable offering flexible and large spaces and an aesthetic that workers appreciate. But digital firms in Shoreditch occupy a wider range of building types and innovative models of workspaces. Informal shared offices are common because these firms tend to be small, especially start-ups. Co-working spaces, which grew significantly in the past few years, are crucial for providing affordable desk-rental options appropriate for creative micro-firms and freelancers. These highly curated offices aim to provide additional services, and opportunities for interaction and collaboration between businesses. Google's Campus London
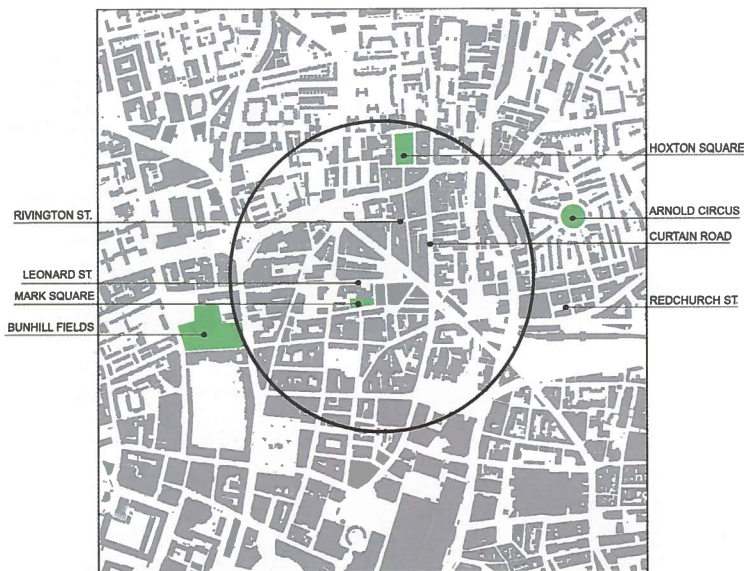
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for instance includes events' spaces, social areas, and a free co-working-café, operating as a hub for creative/digital industries.
● Second, digital workers use spaces outside of the office for work-related practices in what can be defined as an 'extended workplace' (Martins 2015). Creative work is characterised by a mix of work and play and social practices such as networking or socialising are an important part of work. In Silicon Roundabout, creative workers use cafes and bars for several work activities, but also members clubs and even public spaces. The extension of work into the semi-public and public realm seems to instigate the adaptation of some spaces (e.g. Ozone Coffee offers a proper meeting room to let). Additionally, industry events such as parties are pivotal to support digital production, especially some forms of interaction. These organised and temporary gatherings are paradigmatic of how creative digital industries appropriate and adapt existing spaces for their activities and needs. These patterns of space use reveal interdependencies between the area's night economy that sustains an offer of appropriate venues, and creative practices.
● Finally, characteristics at the neighbourhood scale are relevant to support digital industries. Factors include location/accessibility, mix of uses and their combination in a compact area, and the type/scale of buildings. The look and feel, in particular the industrial heritage, grit streetscape, and street art, are praised by workers and contribute to the area's appeal. Interestingly, legibility and quality of the public realm, often associated with good urban environments, do not seem important for digital production; instead, the lack of these spatial qualities seems to create more secluded and suitable urban spaces for these industries.

In sum, digital workers have work patterns that make particular spaces and spatial characteristics important, and display new ways of using and transforming the existing urban fabric.

A ROLE FOR URBAN DESIGN?
Factors relevant for creative production are not solely spatial (e.g. availability of skills or funding) but characteristics of place(s) – which are intrinsically connected to urban design practice – also matter. As Drinkwater and Platt (2015) say: 'although there is little that urban design itself can do to initiate clustering, once the conditions favouring clustering have developed organically, then urban design, stewardship and coordinated action between the urban actors all have a role in supporting (...) these clusters'.
    It is problematic, however, to provide clear guidelines for designing, planning, and managing such complex and inherently dynamic productive urban contexts. Hence, perhaps the main task ahead is to further explore how urban design can

4 Shoreditch figure-ground and 400m or 5 minutes' walking area: public spaces and streets used by digital workers for work or socialising. Source of Base Map: ©Crown Copyright and Database Right 2015. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence)

contribute to delivering and managing spatial environments that accommodate these forms of production and their successful integration with other urban dynamics. Design itself can be a tool to question, investigate, and develop solutions for these challenges. Some insights for further explorations can be drawn from Silicon Roundabout and existing literature:
● **Focus on production, not solely consumption:** to understand relationships between creative industries and place it is paramount to focus on production, to appreciate what these industries are, and how they are organised and operate in space. Critically, a distinction needs to be made between cultural quarters with tourist and cultural activities and creative industry clusters where production takes place.
● **Diversity of patterns/needs:** although there is no agreed definition regarding which industries are part of the creative sector, it includes quite different activities (e.g. film, fashion) that may have distinct patterns of space use, and spatial needs; there is no one-size fits all answer in this context.
● **A multiscalar and multidimensional understanding of place:** relationships between creative production and place operate at several scales and need to consider functional aspects (e.g. suitability of building types), social dimensions (e.g. opportunities/support for social interaction), and symbolic associations (e.g. place attachment and character).
● **Creative industries do not operate in isolation:** these industries thrive in locations with a rich set of residential and other economic, social, and cultural/leisure activities. Thus overlaps with other uses of urban space(s), their competing needs, and potential conflicts must be considered to support this mix and manage the impacts on pre-existing and of new activities. This includes preserving the conditions that allow creative firms to operate, particularly when there is pressure for change, as in Shoreditch where the scale/type of redevelopment impacts on affordability and availability of spaces for creative work.

Local creative economies could be further nurtured if a deeper understanding of creative industries' spatial practices and needs was available; urban design can make a contribution here expanding its role in contemporary urban development. These industries' new forms of using and shaping urban space(s) also offer opportunities for urban design to test and rethink its principles. ●

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