19. Cultural districts

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The development of cultural districts has become a standard practice in policy-making worldwide at different scales – local, regional and national (Braun and Lavanga 2007). Government bodies have used cultural district policies to regenerate and rebrand urban areas, sometimes focusing on increasing cultural consumption, as in the case of museum districts, other times fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, as in the case of cultural production districts.

In parallel with the development of cultural districts, academic literature on this topic has skyrocketed. In an article by Lazzeretti et al. (2013), the authors review over 1586 academic articles on cluster or industrial districts published in the period between 1989 and 2010. The number of articles published per year has grown from just a few to over 200. Similarly, the number of journals publishing cluster-related articles has also increased exponentially. The authors discovered a long-tail distribution, with a few journals dominating the debate, mostly in economic geography, and a long list of journals representing a variety of disciplines. The analysis identifies three main features behind the power and rise of cluster research: multidisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and global dimension. Among the top-cited scholars, two in particular have dedicated their analysis to deepening our understanding of cultural districts and clusters: Ann Markusen, professor emerita of urban and regional planning and public policy at the University of Minnesota, and Allen J. Scott, professor emeritus of economic geography at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Markusen engaged with the role of proximity for artists' communities and arts institutions, and the role of public policy, while Scott focused on the emergence and development of cultural-production districts, such as the movie industry in Los Angeles. Both have been fervent critics and opponents of Richard Florida's creative-class theory which has preached a single locational behaviour for a very large group of occupations, a formula for successful creative cities (for example, investment in talent, technology and tolerance) and thus a copy-and-paste recipe for cities worldwide (Florida 2002).

In the ground-breaking *Cities in Civilization*, Peter Hall discusses the role of cultural and artistic creativity in the development of cities such as ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence or Paris between 1870 and 1910 (Hall 1998). Certain features seem repeating themselves: (1) rapid economic and social transformation, that is, they were trading places and the global cities of their time, (2) wealth, that is, financial centres, (3) high culture, which meant presence of elite, and (4) in-migration, increasing intercultural urban population. They were cities in transition, troubled cities, uncomfortable and unstable. However, Hall concludes that 'time and chance happens to cities too' (Hall 2000, p. 648) and that there is no formula for success. In the past few decades, testing district and cluster theories in the cultural and creative industries has offered, and still is offering, a challenging and fertile ground to advance theories on urban development, to unravel the causes of urban growth, and to understand the spatial patterns and mobility of firms, institutions and individuals in contemporary society.

This chapter first provides a definition of cultural districts and its roots in the Marshallian industrial district; secondly, it looks at the agglomeration economies that firms, organisations and individuals enjoy because they are not only co-located in the same area, but also highly interconnected among each other. The argument put forward in this chapter is the importance of intense face-to-face interaction and spatial proximity in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods and services.

FROM INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT TO CULTURAL DISTRICT

The concept of industrial districts is not new. In *Principles of Economics* (1890), Alfred Marshall described the industrial district as a geographic area where an agglomeration of specialised firms, especially small ones, has settled down. When discussing the origin of the concept of industrial district, Belussi and Caldari (2008) stress how Marshall believed in industrial districts to rescue the British economy. Marshall was interested in understanding to what extent the industrial organisation of small and medium-sized British firms (for example, the Lancashire textile district) could compete with large vertically integrated American companies. Through the years, the industrial district would acquire a special atmosphere, 'something in the air', which would provide benefits to co-located firms, increase their productivity and efficiency and strengthen their competitive advantage. Among the benefits, Marshall mentioned circulation of information, transfer of know-how and skills, a reduction of input costs, transportation and transaction costs, a local specialised labour pool with clear reduction of search costs, a set of shared rules and practices which would increase trust among firms, and spread and adoption of new ideas. The close connections and interactions among firms would further contribute to their division of labour and specialisation. Belussi and Caldari (2008, p. 338) describe Marshallian industrial districts as:

> characterised by a peculiar combination of competition and cooperation. In districts, firms specialise in particular phases of the productive process: each phase is not isolated from, but, rather, is functional to, the others. The district comes to be not only competitive owing to the presence of many firms but also, and moreover, cooperative where parts interact in an exchange process.

Porter's (1998) definition of cluster is very similar to Marshall's conceptualisation of industrial districts: a geographical agglomeration of horizontally and vertically interconnected companies and associated institutions in a specific field, which compete but also cooperate. According to Porter (1998), geographical proximity improves not only communication, but also reputation and trust among the participants; these elements are fundamental to understanding the dynamics of cooperation and competition.

While Porter's definition of clusters became the one most used in both academia and policy-making circles, it was thanks to the Italian economist Becattini that the Marshallian concept of districts was revitalised in the 1960s and 1970s. Becattini (1962) used the concept of Marshallian industrial district to study the agglomeration of many interconnected small firms, mostly family run, and locally embedded in socio-cultural networks. Through empirical research and theoretical development, he delved into the economic development of Tuscany, in particular the industrial organisation of the textile industry in Prato and, later, the Italian centres of industrial specialisation, especially in the Third Italy area (North-East and Central Italy). For the sake of our discussion on cultural districts, it is worth mentioning that Becattini's studies found applications in many of the crafts-based industries that Third Italy gathered together. It is in the concept of the industrial district that we can find the foundations of cultural districts. In their detailed analysis of the most cited publications on cultural and creative clusters, Chapain and Sagot-Duvauroux (2018, p. 21) argue that 'authors have . . . used this concept to label what was either understood as a quarter or as a district previously in the literature without necessarily adding more to either of these original concepts'.

The idea behind cultural districts is that cultural industries rely on local production networks and have strong place-bound characteristics. Santagata (2011, p. 147) defines cultural district as 'a social and economic experience at the confluence of two phenomena: that of localization, as first identified by Alfred Marshall (Marshall 1890), and that of the idiosyncratic (peculiar, unique) nature of culture and cultural goods'. First, the majority of companies and organisations in the cultural industries are small in size, labour-intensive with project-based work and a pool of specialised workers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013; Leadbeater and Oakley 1999). Second, cultural products are idiosyncratic which means they are time- and place-specific (Santagata 2011). They have strong connections with the place where they are produced, its community and history (Rozentale and Lavanga 2014). Furthermore, cultural goods are highly specialised, differentiated and singular (Karpik 2010), where the infinite variety characteristics highlighted by Caves (2000) dominates.

The concept of industrial districts is thus useful to understand why cultural firms co-locate and the benefits they derive from geographical proximity. Similarly to industrial districts, cultural districts can be defined as geographical agglomeration of cultural firms that enjoy positive externalities by being located in the same place. The creation, circulation and transfer of knowledge are essential. Firms and organisations in the cultural districts are exposed to noise (Grabher 2002), 'buzz' (Bathelt et al. 2004; Storper and Venables 2004) or the Marshallian industrial atmosphere. According to Bathelt et al. (2004, p. 38):

> buzz refers to the information and communication ecology created by face-to-face contacts, co-presence, and co-location of people and firms within the same industry and place or region. This buzz consists of specific information and continuous updates of this information, intended and unanticipated learning processes in organized and accidental meetings . . . Actors continuously contribut[e] to and [benefit] from the diffusion of information, gossip and news by just 'being there'.

Through planned and unplanned interactions, innovation, knowledge creation and learning are enhanced.

All the benefits firms enjoy derive from repeated and direct interactions and face-to-face contacts. Face-to-face interaction (verbal, physical, contextual, intentional and non-intentional) becomes the most effective way to communicate and exchange a form of knowledge which is complex, uncodifiable and sticky to a place. Cultural industries, which produce idiosyncratic and singular cultural goods, rely enormously on this type of knowledge. As Santagata (2011, p. 148) explained, 'cultural commodities are idiosyncratic not only because tacit knowledge is needed to create and produce them but also because this knowledge is based on people's prior idiosyncratic experience: personal and collective history count'. Transfer of the tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1953) and savoir-faire is facilitated by geographical proximity, the shared norms and practices and trust firms enjoy in the cultural district. Tacit knowledge can be described as an information system with the characteristic of a local public good, or even a commons. Information and knowledge circulate without restrictions and are transmitted via tacit systems of communication (Santagata 2011).

A particular aspect that may differentiate cultural districts from industrial districts in other sectors is linked to demand uncertainty, or to nobody-knows characteristics (Caves 2000). A cultural district may help reducing asymmetric information, for example, by coordination devices (Karpik 2010) such as place of origin or 'made in' labels which would ensure, protect and signal a certain standard of quality. Santagata (2006) uses the concept of institutional cultural districts, where formal institutions allocate community or collective property rights and trademarks to a restricted area of production. These rights legally protect the cultural capital of a community in a given area. Even in the absence of property rights and trademarks, reference to a place or to a certain area or building has proved to give an aura to the cultural products and firms located there, with clear benefits for the long-lasting reputation of the actors involved (Molotch 2002).

Some types of cultural district are more production orientated, and correspond to industrial districts where many small and medium-size firms produce cultural goods or services, such as textile or movies districts (for instance, Hollywood), while in others the emphasis is more on consumption, such as the museum districts (for example, the Museum Quarter in Vienna). A third category is a mix of production and consumption orientations. Cultural districts become cultural quarters or creative buildings where cultural firms are mixed with shops, cafés and art galleries (for example, the Temple Bar in Dublin, the Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, the Northern Quarter in Manchester, Arabianranta in Helsinki and the Finlayson/Tampella area in Tampere) (Lavanga 2004, 2013; Mommaas 2004; Montgomery 1995, 2003, 2004; Wynne 1992). The variety of cultural districts is reflected in the wide taxonomy of the use of the concepts of districts, clusters or quarters in academia too. Chapain and Sagot-Duvauroux (2018, p. 7) have recently illustrated how some of these concepts seem to be geographically linked: 'For example, "cultural district" is much more associated with publications from Italy and North America, "cultural cluster" with publications from Australia, "cultural quarter" with UK and Ireland'.

EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURAL DISTRICT

Cultural districts belong to the category of endogenous growth models. How districts come into being and how we can explain their development require us looking at the dynamics of the agglomeration economies. When discussing why cultural industries cluster and the benefits cultural firms enjoy by being located close to each other, Lorenzen and Frederiksen (2007) discuss two main agglomeration economies or positive externalities: localisation and urbanisation economies. Localisation economies are agglomeration economies that, in principle, pertain to a particular set of economic activities co-located in a particular place. Urbanisation economies are agglomeration economies that, in principle, have an impact on all economic activities located in a particular place. In the former, benefits come from increased specialisation; in the latter they come from increased diversity. Lorenzen and Frederiksen (2007) argue that non-urban regions often host one district alone, thus co-located firms in that particular district mainly enjoy localisation economies. To the contrary, larger urban areas may host several districts of a diverse range of industries, where firms benefit from both localisation and urbanisation economies. The differences lie in the types of product innovation that are triggered: variety, novelty and radical innovation. Lorenzen and Frederiksen (2007) argue that cultural industries, which fluctuate among those types of innovation and which are mostly concentrated in urban areas, depend on localisation economies together with urbanisation economies. In both, the type of externalities come from industry, labour market, institutions and infrastructure.

In the first group of benefits (externalities of industry), localisation economies comes into play when firms in a specific district are able to coordinate their related knowledge bases; for example, being part of the same supply chain or via temporary project work so common in cultural industries. This coordination becomes responsible for increased product flexibility and variety, while technology and information spillovers across firms may support incremental innovation. Only when other districts are present, mainly in larger urban areas, do firms enjoy urbanisation economies which create the pre-conditions for coordination and spillovers between unrelated knowledge bases that lead to new products and radical innovation. A further category of localisation economies pertains to the increase in efficiency following competition among firms, while positive benefits of the diversity of industry are venture capital investments that may lead to start-ups and increased entrepreneurship in larger urban areas.

The second group of externalities is related to the labour market. While co-location of firms in the same set of economic activities may provide benefits such as an abundant pool of specialised labour, the diversity of skills and overlapping labour markets when different districts coexist in the same place may be responsible for the spread of ideas and radical innovation.

The third group of externalities relates to institutions and infrastructures. In non-urban areas, specialised institutions emerge and accompany the development of the district (that is, technical education and industry associations, but also norms and conventions). They are responsible for the deepening of knowledge and skills, lowering of transaction costs and for efficient communication. In larger urban areas, there exists a diversity of institutions and infrastructures. Higher education institutions and research not only deepen but also broaden the knowledge and skills. Furthermore, pipelines such as airports and fast train connections allow access to global knowledge and ideas, or global buzz. Cultural provision and diverse housing may further contribute to the attraction of global talent. In connection with this, Markusen (2006) found that the locational choices of artists are mostly shaped by investment decisions that cities and regions make in artistic space and organisations, as opposed to an array of amenities as Florida (2002) would argue.

When discussing the rise of Hollywood as centre of the US movie industry, Scott (2005, p. 15) suggests that the question to ask is 'not so much on how the seed of an agglomeration is planted', but 'how . . . the emerging local economic system is subject to a structured and self-reinforcing process of growth and development'. The process is dynamic, with circular and cumulative causation: (1) specialised and complementary producers, (2) local labour markets, and (3) institutional environment – the externalities of industry, labour market and institutions that we have discussed previously. In the early 1900s New York was the centre of the US film industry. However, many companies would shoot in California probably owing to the better weather all year around and the diversity of landscapes. From one studio in 1909, Hollywood went on to host 17 production companies in 1912. According to Scott (2005) it is not so important to understand why Hollywood. Most of the time districts emerged randomly 'but then steadily lock into systematically structured, path-dependent outcomes' (Scott 2005, p. 15). Between 1912 and 1915, Hollywood would take the characteristics of a prototypical industrial district. Additional firms then join (that is, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, Universal Pictures, the Fox Film Corporation) and move in, and 'one by one, but if agglomeration economies are at work, their choice of location will become progressively less random' (Scott 2005, p. 16). Scott (2005, p. 15) recommends looking at 'when and how a simple agglomeration of firms begins to manifest signs of endogenous development dynamics; and how this place then pulls ahead of actual and latent competitors, and how it subsequently acquires a dominant position in extended markets, sometimes over a long periods of time' (Scott 2005, p. 15).

Companies in Hollywood would focus mostly on film content innovation, while developing a star system to increase their market reach. A process of advanced division of labour would increase the industrialisation of the entire movie sector and bring innovation in the process and management of movie production (for example, continuity script and flashback techniques). By the 1920s, Hollywood surpassed New York for number of companies, workers and number of movies produced and exported. After the Second World War, Hollywood gradually reorganised itself from vertically integrated majors into a disintegrated network of firms, following the anti-trust Paramount Decree and the development of television. Specialised services (for example, script writing and film editing) and institutions emerged (such as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Science), firms would work with many subcontractor and freelancers, and benefit from a growing and multiple local labour market. During the 1980s–2000s, a new geography of Hollywood would emerge with few majors, independents and specialised services, a large local labour market, and institutions to support firms and workers. Scott (2005) stresses the importance of place-based resources, from cinematic traditions to icons, symbols, landscapes and the potential of synergies with other cultural industries. In conclusion, this organised production system emerged gradually. Paying attention to the evolution of time and space is key. With time, a loose and chaotic collection of activities can develop into a dense interlocking system of firms. Agglomeration economies and localised increasing returns to scale allowed Hollywood to become one of the most important cultural districts in the world.

In similar vein, Santagata (2011, p. 148) underlined basic components that contribute to the making of a cultural district:

> a) a local community, which is cohesive in its cultural traditions and in the accumulation of technical knowledge and social capital (trust and cooperation); b) a significant development of increasing returns to scale and increasing returns to scope; c) accumulation of savings; strongly entrepreneurial cooperative local banking; d) a bent towards open international markets; e) public financial support along the entire chain of the creation of value; f) a high rate of birth of new firms, often of household size, as a result of social capability and interactive learning; the ability to be district minded, to become a system, and to produce positive externalities.

It is worth noting that point (d) is linked to the opening of the district to global pipelines which would reduce locked-in processes owing to overspecialization; for example, the development of a mono industry unable to adapt to exogenous changes as it is often the case in textile, ceramics, jewellery and other crafts-related districts, such as the Birmingham jewellery quarter discussed by De Propris and Lazzeretti (2009) and the decline of the districts. In this, firms are increasingly benefiting from temporary cluster or temporary organised spatial proximity; it can provide firms with access to knowledge and opportunities for interaction similar to those offered by permanent geographical proximity, albeit in a short-lived and intensified form (Maskell et al. 2006). The study of art fairs, design weeks, fashion trade shows and film festivals offers interesting opportunity to analyse the interplay between local and distant knowledge bases, tacit and codified knowledge, and local and global buzz (Brydges and Hracs 2019; Brydges et al. 2018; Lavanga 2018; Power and Jansson 2008; Rinallo and Golfetto 2011; Skov 2006). Despite digitisation, cultural firms increasingly use temporary clusters to strengthen relational trust, and to reduce asymmetric information and uncertainty in the market for cultural goods and services.

CONCLUSIONS

The chapter discussed the roots and concept of cultural districts; it further delved into the agglomeration economies, that is, the benefits that arise for cultural firms, not just from proximity, but from intense interactions and exchange of knowledge, especially tacit knowledge embedded in the skilled labour force, and supporting institutions. Policymakers around the world have tried copy-and-paste strategies to create cultural districts from the top down. In reality, most of the districts develop slowly. Cultural districts develop in an organic and spontaneous way (almost as a creative commons). Random events may plant the seeds of an agglomeration, but it is the dynamics of agglomeration economies of industry, labour market and institutions that trigger endogenous growth development. However, many attempts fail – in the spirit of trial and error. Feasibility studies that are able to estimate risks and costs, and more importantly, evaluate the impacts in relation to the original objectives, are fundamentally necessary (Markusen and Gadwa 2010).

Finally, cultural districts are an interesting case of cross fertilisation between theory and practice, and they offer a vantage point to understand the dynamic relations between culture, economy and place. A future question to ask is the extent to which new technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence, may render cultural districts obsolete or, to the contrary, amplify the positive externalities firms enjoy in the district. Thus far, spatial organised proximity, in its permanent or temporary forms, seems the most effective way to exchange tacit knowledge, build relational trust and reduce uncertainty in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products and services.

SEE ALSO:

Chapter 14: Creative industries; Chapter 15: Creativity; Chapter 29: Festivals.

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FURTHER READING

The dynamics between place, economy and culture are the subject of the book on Hollywood by Scott (2005). A very recent systematic literature review and a renewed research agenda on cultural districts, cultural and creative clusters, and cultural quarters can be found in Chapain and Sagot-Duvauroux (2018). A more general review and research agenda on the intersections between culture and urban planning is offered by Markusen and Gadwa (2010).