

PLACES, SPACES AND THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVITY*

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Abstract

Creativity is a major driving force in modern economies, on a global scale, but also on a local scale. In other words, cities may benefit from a highly creative environment in order to foster their development. The aim of this contribution is to depict and examine the dynamics of situated creativity by presenting an anatomy of the creative city based on three different layers, namely the underground, the middleground and the upperground. In order to illustrate this point of view, the culture cluster in the creative city of Montreal is analyzed.

Keywords:

Creativity, cities, communities, cluster

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, cultural activity has often been concentrated in specific areas, therefore providing a particularly creative environment for artists. This phenomenon has led to the multiplication of creative centers worldwide. From a local point of view, however, not all territories have equally benefited from a rising creative atmosphere. Indeed, some cities have gained a growing advantage over other less creative places, as people will tend to cluster in the urban milieus that offer the best opportunities.

Several reasons may explain these agglomeration phenomena in specific cities or territories (as shown in the work of Marshall, 1890; Jacobs, 1969; or Porter, 2000). In his well-known essay, Florida (2002) argues that investment in cultural related facilities and other related amenities may provide a fertile ground for a creative class of workers to imagine new products or processes that will ultimately bring economic growth and wealth. Although this theory has received a significant amount of criticisms, it has opened a large agenda for studies in situated creativity (for some examples, see Turok, 2004; or Scott, 2006 among others). Drawing on this stream of research and in order to fully grasp the underlying creative process inside these creative milieus, we propose to focus on *what* the creative individuals and organizations really do rather than on *who* they are, which is, in our view, the main shortcoming with the most popular approaches. Our aim is therefore to depict and analyze the actual dynamics that may lead to the emergence of highly creative ideas and forms in creative cities.

This perspective requires us to consider the creativity dynamics as a collective process. Indeed, no matter how talented individuals may be, we argue that creativity can only be fully expressed in the joint efforts of different social forms that cooperate in a dense network of collaboration. This collective effort can almost never be achieved virtually (as underlined for example by Grabher, 2001; Amin and Cohendet, 2005; Bathelt, 2005; or Maskell et al., 2006, among many others). In fact, in order for new creative ideas to emerge, individuals, communities and firms must interact frequently with one another through ongoing face-to-face exchanges, by regularly getting together in the different cultural and artistic spaces offered to them by the environment in which they are embedded (as depicted by Storper and Venables, 2004). For this reason, the creative process is mostly situated and is strongly dependent on the local services and conveniences that each entity will have access to.

In the following, we first present our theoretical framework. We then illustrate our point of view drawing on the case of Montreal and its culture cluster, which is recognized as one of the most creative and diversified area in North America.

2. CREATIVITY DYNAMICS WITHIN THE CREATIVE CITY

In order for creative ideas to become marketable goods and services, it is necessary to equip them with the mechanisms, tools and devices that are needed to reveal, enhance, nurture, interpret and enact their true value (as shown in Hartley, 2005). As a result, the actors of creativity in a specific city are not only backed by the formal world of science, but also rely on the efforts of an informal world, deeply rooted in the local milieu (as described by Markusen, 2006). This suggests that agents do not compete one against the other. Instead,

they voluntarily cooperate with one another in closely knitted clusters, and share their knowledge so as to increase their competitiveness (as shown by Maskell, 2001 among others). In other words, creative forces will become viable only if they are supported by the complex coupling of heterogeneous entities working together in different layers of a commonly shared geographical platform.

These different entities include the individual actors in the underground on one hand, from who the creative impulse originates, and firms from the upperground on the other, that provide an institutional background for the integration of these new combinations on the market. The underground brings together the creative, artistic, and cultural activities that are not immediately linked to the commercial and industrial world. Thus, underground culture lies outside the corporate logic of standardization. This function is usually assumed by the upperground. The latter contributes to the creative process by its capacity to finance and unite the different expressions together, by its capacity to integrate dispersed types of knowledge, and by its capacity to test new forms of creativity on the market.

Because the underground and the upperground function on entirely different modes, they only rarely interact together. For this reason, we add, in this contribution, a commonly neglected dimension to the traditional perspective. Indeed, we suggest that both the underground and the upperground are linked by communities from the middleground, who act as intermediate structures allowing for the creative ideas to transit from an informal micro-level to a formal macro-level, through the accumulation, the combination, the enrichment and the renewal of distributed bits of knowledge (as portrayed by Lave and Wenger, 1990; Brown and Duguid, 1991; or Amin and Roberts, 2008).

These communities of the middleground play a central role in the situated creativity dynamics, by achieving a process of progressive codification of knowledge, starting from a phase where the actors do not know the characteristics of the novelty, do not know each other, and do not possess the capabilities to communicate, to reach a phase where the novelty is equipped with sufficient shared understanding and codes to become economically viable (as depicted by Cowan et al., 2000). In this view, the functioning of these communities is critical in the sense that they precisely provide the creative city with the local apparatus necessary for new creative ideas to progressively emerge and reach the market for creative goods and services, by allowing them to transit from the underground to the upperground.

According to this perspective, the middleground is able to promote creativity in diverse activities by integrating individuals from distinct backgrounds. It therefore opens both to exploration and exploitation mechanisms. Firstly, this system allows members to avoid lock-in, by ensuring a close connection to diverse styles and traditions. Secondly, by favoring the creation of a common identity, these collective forms limit the risks related to novelty and secure the foundations on which each individual expresses his creativity. As a result, the different communities benefit from the external creativity whenever norms are not fixed, and benefit from the internal creativity whenever such codes and rules need reinforcement. Again, for this phenomenon to happen, the middleground must be deeply entrenched in a specific place, which is in itself a great source of inspiration for its members.

It turns out that each entity forming the anatomy of the creative city plays a specific role in the creative process and therefore fulfills the task other components cannot achieve. If talented individuals of the underground are very active in the beginning of the creative process, they must rely on the communities of the middleground in order to popularize their

creative efforts. In this sense, these communities are essential in the elaboration of a common grammar on which creative ideas are developed. As new expressions are progressively reinforced, firms of the upperground replace the two preceding entities. These formal organizations must rely on the work of the communities, as it is impossible for them to allocate the sufficient amount of time and money necessary for creative material to blossom on the market. This suggests that these three social forms are complementary, and, as a result, can only succeed in promoting creativity if they all act together.

3. CREATIVE CLUSTERS IN MONTREAL

Montreal is considered one of the most creative cities in the world, offering a particularly resourceful environment for individuals willing to change the rules of traditional art (as shown by Stolarick and Florida, 2006 in their analysis). As a French-speaking city in an English-speaking country, Montreal benefits from its North American anchorage, but also from its strong European heritage. This has widely contributed to endow the city with its own culture and traditions, which has proven to be a main asset for the establishment of creative activities in multiple markets. In other words, the city provides an ideal background for the production, the distribution and the consumption of many creative goods and services in a broad range of sectors that can be experimented locally before being exported to the rest of the planet. This favorable setting has led to the establishment of a variety of clusters throughout the city.

We study more specifically the culture cluster within the Montreal metropolitan area, which is the main cultural center in the Quebec province and is the second most important cultural cluster in Canada after Toronto in terms of its creative workforce. Montreal however remains the first Canadian labor supplier in the field of performing arts, film production, book editing and sound recording. As such, the case of Montreal demonstrates a typical example illustrating the role played by the middleground to foster the creative process, by linking the underground to the upperground. For all these reasons, it seemed particularly relevant to focus on this city and on the culture cluster throughout this analysis.

3.1. Background

The cluster strategy was introduced in the Quebec province (and therefore in Montreal) in 1991, based on the idea that, in a competitive world, success could only be reached by combining efforts on a long term basis, rather than competing individually on the short term. This decision led to the creation of the metropolitan community of Montreal in 2003, which helped set up fifteen clusters representing several sectors, all grouped into four major categories (the competitive clusters, the visibility clusters, the emerging technology clusters, and the manufacturing clusters). Among the fifteen clusters, four of them are fully structured, among which the aerospace cluster, the life sciences cluster, the information technologies cluster, and finally the culture cluster.

Created in 2005, the culture cluster (which is part of the visibility clusters) was originally established in order to organize the production and distribution of cultural goods and services in Montreal, as well as to provide Montreal with an international recognition in this domain. This cluster is decomposed into six sub-clusters that contribute in different ways to the cultural life inside the city:

- Movies, audiovisual and multimedia
- Visual arts, design and architecture
- Music and popular shows
- Performing arts and circus
- Books and literature
- Heritage and museology

One of the major aspects of the cultural sector is that it not only influences and bridges most of the other economic sectors, it also plays an important part in the social development of local inhabitants. As a result, this sector is often regarded as contributing to enhance local creativity, by revitalizing the territory, by developing the population's social capital, and by improving individual and collective well-being.

With slightly more than one hundred thousand workers in 2006, the culture cluster represents approximately five percent of the total workforce in the Montreal metropolitan area. In fact, between 2001 and 2006, if some sub-clusters have grown in size (among which the visual arts, design and architecture sub-cluster, the music and popular shows sub-cluster, and the performing arts and circus sub-cluster), others have deflated (among which the movies, audiovisual and multimedia sub-cluster, the books and literature sub-cluster, and the heritage and museology sub-cluster). Overall, however, the number of artists has increased during this period, suggesting a relative dynamism of the cultural scene in Montreal.

Table 1: Culture cluster workforce in the metropolitan region of Montreal

NAICS	Sector	2001	2006	Variation
	All sectors	1765760	1972455	11.7%
	Culture sector (In % of total labor)	97755 (5.54)	100385 (5.09)	2.7%
	Movies, audiovisual and multimedia	15250	13315	-12.7%
5121	• Motion picture and video industries	14025	12830	-8.5%
3346	• Manufacturing and reproducing magnetic and optical media	1225	485	-60.4%
	Visual arts, design and architecture	21100	23725	12.4%
5413	• Architectural, engineering and related services	2455	2850	16.1%
5414	• Specialized design services	6895	8675	25.8%
5418	• Advertising and related services	11750	12200	3.8%
	Music and popular shows	11590	12360	6.6%
5122	• Sound recording industries	865	1045	20.8%
5151	• Radio and television broadcasting	5630	7620	35.3%
5152	• Pay and specialty television	2515	390	-84.5%
7113	• Promoters (presenters) of performing arts, sports and similar events	2065	2725	32.0%
7114	• Agents and managers for artists, athletes, entertainers and other public figures	515	580	12.6%
	Performing arts and circus	10390	13380	28.8%
7111	• Performing arts companies	4140	5605	35.4%
7115	• Independent artists, writers and performers	6250	7775	24.4%
	Books and literature	37360	35605	-4.7%
3231	• Printing and related support activities	17870	16395	-8.3%
4512	• Book, periodical and music stores	3410	3810	11.7%
5111	• Newspaper, periodical, book and directory publishers	10955	10940	-0.1%
5191	• Other information services	5125	4460	-13.0%
	Heritage and museology	2065	2000	-3.1%
7121	• Heritage institutions	2065	2000	-3.1%

Source: Statistic Canada, Canada Census 2001 and 2006.

Note: This table was obtained using the 2002 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). In order to be as precise as possible, the architectural, engineering and related services category (NAICS 5413), which comprises many activities that do not belong to the culture sector, was replaced by the occupation categories C051 and C052.

3.2. Cultural places and spaces

Montreal offers many opportunities for artists and creators to produce and diffuse their work on a local, but also on a global level, whether it is by way of an informal network of connections, or through the more institutionalized pipelines offered by the local places in which these artists are embedded. In fact, it is essential that the different individuals be localized geographically in order to allow the underground to progressively reach the upperground. This however could not be possible without the efforts of a myriad of middleground communities driving the process of creation.

These communities often rely on undetectable means of communication, which is why its members gather in specific spaces, such as bars, clubs, museums, art galleries, or performance halls, where new ideas and forms are discussed, commented, analyzed, and validated (or not). In other words, these spaces are where the trends and styles are defined and eventually turn into a buzz. For this reason, word-of-mouth plays a major role in these creative spaces, as it greatly favors the dissemination of new artifacts.

Table 2: Cultural spaces in Montreal (in 2006)

Sector	Number	Ratio Montreal/Quebec province
Movies, audiovisual and multimedia		
• Movie theaters	23	18.1
Visual arts, design and architecture		
• Artist centers	28	44.4
Music and popular shows		
• TV stations	4	14.8
• Radio stations	25	16.3
Performing and visual arts		
• Performance halls	157	28
Books and literature		
• Libraries	11	8.8
• Bookstores	130	33.8
Heritage and museology		
• Museums	63	14.6
• Heritage organizations	58	n/a
• Archive centers and services	101	n/a

Source: Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2008

Montreal offers a wide variety of spaces, both private and public, for artists to implement and/or put forward their work. These creative spaces are highly concentrated within the city (often at a walking distance from each other), which significantly facilitates the interaction among artists from the same but also from very different backgrounds. For example, it is fairly common for individuals from the visual arts industry to collaborate with individuals in the music industry, whether it is for a single performance or simply for an album cover or poster. In fact, Montreal is acknowledged for its blending of different art forms, similarly to what is observed among its multicultural population. It is also important to note that the city has received an international recognition for its combination of art and technology, although

we do not deal with this aspect in this contribution given that we focus exclusively on the culture cluster.

Table 3: Main festivals in Montreal

Sector	Main festivals
Movies, audiovisual and multimedia	Festival des Films du Monde de Montréal (FFM) Festival du Nouveau Cinéma de Montréal (FNC) Les Rendez-vous du Cinéma Québécois Festival International du Film sur l'Art Festival du Film Fantastique Fantasia Festival Sefarad de Montréal – Festival du Film Israélien de Montréal Rencontres Internationales Cinéma et Sport de Montréal (La Lucarne) FESTIVALISSIMO Festival Culturel Ibéro-Latino-Américain de Montréal Vues d'Afrique Festival Magnifico Image & Nation Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal Festival du Film Juif de Montréal Festival de Films pour Enfants de Montréal Festival du Film d'Aventure de Montréal (FIFAM)
Visual arts, design and architecture	Festival International Montréal en Arts (FIMA) Festival Mode et Design de Montréal Festival d'Architecture et Forum des Architectes
Music and popular shows	Festival International de Jazz de Montréal (FIJM) FrancoFolies de Montréal Pop Montréal Coup de Coeur Francophone Heavy MTL Mutek Festival de Musique Electronique Festival Osheaga Festival International Nuits d'Afrique de Montréal Festival Sefarad de Montréal Les Fêtes Créoles Internationales de Montréal Festival International Montréal/Nouvelles musiques Tam-tams du Mont Royal Festival MEG Montréal Festival International de Merengue de Montréal Festival de Musique de Chambre de Montréal Les Symphonies Portuaires Elektra Festival
Performing arts and circus	Festival TransAmériques de Montréal Encore – Festival de Danse International Festival St-Ambroise Fringe de Montréal Festival de Théâtre Amateur de l'île de Montréal Festival Mondial du Cirque Festival Juste pour Rire
Books and literature	Salon du Livre de Montréal Salon du Livre Anarchiste Festival International de Littérature (FIL) Festival Interculturel du Conte du Québec Métropolis Bleu
Heritage and museology	Journées des Musées Montréalais

Creative spaces are often formal meeting points, but they can also be organized artificially, as this would be the case whenever a specific event takes place in the city. As a matter of fact, Montreal is well-known for its numerous festivals, which all offer an ideal platform for artists to present their own work and interact with members of their own community. In many situations, these festivals reward the most promising artists through an elaborate prize system, which undoubtedly contributes to establish one's reputation in his milieu. These festivals are not only destined to one specific sector, however, as they provide an opportunity for artists to also meet with other creative individuals, communities and firms, interested in their activities. In this sense, the festivals provide a temporary space for creative individuals to cluster in one specific place and to eventually receive a wider recognition on the local and global scene.

3.3. Culture and creative communities: some examples

Throughout the years, many projects have emerged in the different cultural sectors. In this section we present some of these projects by insisting on the active role played by the middleground communities. The information collected was compiled mostly using the websites of each one of these communities.

Among the different projects that have emerged from the underground, Kino¹, in the cinematographic field and more specifically in the short film industry, offers a good example of the implementation of a renewed creative form. Founded in 1999, this creative collective is now an international network of experimentation, which has contributed to more than two hundred short films. This project, initiated by television and movie employees as well as by students in the movie sector, was initially created as an association of young directors, in which the latter could present their work and discuss it with others during regular meetings. The representations progressively opened up to the public and rapidly became very popular on the Montreal local artistic scene. The Kino collective soon proposed monthly events as well as what is called “Kino-Kabarets”, a sort of game, in which participants are asked to produce a short film in less than forty eight hours that is then presented during public shows or festivals. This formula has since been replicated in several places around the world, offering Kino an ever-growing audience. The Kino movement now includes more than fifty sections worldwide dispersed in fourteen countries, which are often included in the most prestigious international movie festivals, such as the Berlin film festival or the Venice film festival, among others. As a result, this collective, deeply embedded in the middleground, has been able to progressively promote underground culture to the upperground.

In the visual arts sector, several initiatives have emerged in Montreal in order to disseminate the work of local illustrators, painters, and crafters from the underground. Installed in old cigarette machines gathered in various bars and clubs throughout Montreal, among which the famous Casa del Popolo, the Distriboto² system offers the possibility for artists to install and sell a miniature sample of their work, without having to be exposed in galleries or museums, receiving \$1.75 for each item sold. Launched in 2001, the project has since united more than three hundred artists that have sold over twenty thousand items. In a similar way, the Saint Henri Walking Distance Distro is a free delivery service that collects zines and CDs made by artists living in the Saint Henri neighborhood and delivers them by foot to local subscribers. The artists are then paid through monthly fundraising events highlighting the Saint Henri talents. In both these cases, the artists from the underground are given the opportunity to not only diffuse their own work, but also, and probably most importantly, to see the work of others. This has helped create an important local community of the middleground, therefore creating a platform for the different individuals to interact together and exchange their ideas on a regular basis.

Montreal’s musical scene is also very dynamic, with the efforts of several independent labels, such as Alien 8 Recordings³, Constellation Records⁴, or Bangor Records⁵, among others, that

¹ <http://www.kino00.com/>

² <http://www.distriboto.archivemontreal.org/>

³ <http://www.alien8recordings.com/>

⁴ <http://www.cstrecords.com/>

actively participate in the production, promotion and distribution of a wide variety of local performers from the underground. These labels have established their reputation by an intense collaboration with local venues, such as the Sala Rossa or the Divan Orange, offering the possibility for many small bands to perform. The multiplication of such venues in the Mile-End quarters in particular, situated in the Plateau neighborhood, has contributed to develop a broad network of artists and fans that frequently get together, thus creating an important middleground community in support of the local scene. These locally sustained collaborative projects have enabled some artists to distribute their works internationally. In spite of this, a majority of them still sell most of their records within Montreal, therefore nourishing the local creative environment.

In the performing arts sector, the circus arts, with the famous Cirque du Soleil⁶ as its main representative, play a major role in Montreal, and have progressively helped the city become a world leader in this domain. In 1997, Cirque du Soleil officially grouped its activities in the Saint-Michel neighborhood, following the implementation of an urban development program, which also included the creation of the Ecole nationale de cirque de Montreal and the Tohu, a performance hall, destined to offer an institutional setting for new emerging circuses, as well as for young artists graduating from the nearby school, to present their creations. This project has played an active part in codifying the different rules associated to modern circus and has offered an ideal platform for several other circuses, such as 7 Fingers⁷ or Cirque Eloize⁸, to come forward and reach a worldwide market, by attracting several underground artists towards the communities of the middleground. In this sense, the upperground, incarnated by Cirque du Soleil, has nourished the middleground, and has given the opportunity for renewed creative ideas and conceptions to emerge.

The book and literature sector, finally, enables many emerging writers to disseminate their work, in the same way as this is achieved in the visual arts or in the music sector. Indeed, along with the usual streams of diffusion from the upperground, such as the Renaud Bray stores that frequently promote local writers, the city comprises many independent bookstores and/or libraries, which serve as channels of diffusion for many underground authors. The Bibliograph/e project, for example, which is a library of more than five hundred zines and artist books, helps create a link between the bookmakers and the public. This library, which is situated as part of Café Toc Toc in the Mile End neighborhood frequently organizes workshops on storytelling and drawing, and has hosted many public readings for the local community. In turn, these workshops have led to the creation of a book, grouping some of the drawings made during one of these workshops, which is now sold for fundraising. This initiative allows the hosts to create and maintain the library, but also provides a certain amount of visibility for the public.

All these projects share in common a collective desire to put forth the local culture, which is represented by a myriad of connected artists. In other words, in all these cases, the collaborative efforts provided by the communities of the middleground contribute to support the local culture and offer the foundations on which different artists can navigate between the underground and the upperground, whether it is through a top-down or through a bottom-up mechanism. For these reasons, the local middleground should be viewed as a major actor in

⁵ <http://www.bangorrecords.com/>

⁶ <http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/>

⁷ <http://www.les7doigtsdelamain.com/>

⁸ <http://www.cirque-eloize.com/>

the dynamics of the creative process in Montreal, and has widely contributed to build up the culture cluster. What appears to be even more important in all the examples above is the fact that the middleground proposes an implicit assessment and validation mechanism, which allows emerging artists to disseminate their work, interact and eventually collaborate with one another. In this sense, the middleground communities not only preserve the development of local culture, they also nourish both the underground and the upperground with new creative ideas.

4. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We have attempted to show, in this contribution, that creative activity is immediately related to a specific geographical milieu. This argument has entailed us to analyze and dissect the specific anatomy of the creative city. Accordingly, in our view, three distinct entities are involved in bringing the creative ideas to the market, therefore allowing new knowledge to transit from the informal micro-level to the formal macro-level: the underground, the middleground and finally the upperground. These different layers of creative cities each play a different role according to the stage of development of the creative process. In this context, however, the middleground communities play an essential part, as critical intermediate structures linking the underground on one side to the upperground on the other, therefore constantly navigating between the informal and the formal world. As such, there still is a great need for empirical work in this area in order to fully appreciate the power of these creative communities.

The culture cluster in Montreal portrays ideally the coevolutive relationships between the upperground and the underground: how the underground, situated in the city, materializes through the development of opportunities provided by creative spaces, and how the upperground fertilizes and feeds the underground through the emergence of communities and via the organization of localized events and competitions. In fact, the culture cluster in Montreal perfectly reveals the importance and significance of the middleground in this subtle creative ecosystem, as it plays a major role in balancing and intermediating situated exploration with potentially global exploitation.

Our view is that this anatomy of the creative city leads to a better appreciation of the relevant policies to stimulate and favor the quality of the creative forces in this specific milieu. Of course, classical policy measures, such as attracting leading firms to play the role of anchor firms (reinforcing the upperground) or attracting talent of the creative class (reinforcing the underground), are positive ways to increase the creative potential of the city. However, the anatomy has revealed the key importance of the intermediate level, the middleground, which articulates the upperground and underground. In this perspective, creative cities must implement major policies for the establishment of creative spaces and the promotion of special events, in order to enable the creative communities, from the same cluster as well as from different clusters, to fully express themselves and exchange their ideas on a regular basis. We have not specifically dealt with the public policy aspect in this contribution, but we do have hope that these issues may find answers in future research on creative cities.

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