

Insights from Omaha's Slowdown project

With the decline of manufacturing activities, cities seek for new ways to attract human resources and ensure growth in the service and technology industries. The trends in experience economy and in creative industries suggest that cities should improve their *creative capital* and target *cultural consumption* to develop. In this context, the **music scene**, urban manifestation of the relationship between city and music, can be a tool to develop the city and redevelop urban areas, by fostering the creation of creative clusters.

What is a music scene?

The term broadly refers to “*the cultural agglomeration formed around the production and consumption of popular music*” (Seman 2010 p. 207), or more specifically to

a mix of **human and physical capital** with musicians, entrepreneurs, gatekeepers, and consumers all integral as actors while studios, venues, and rehearsal spaces serve as locations for the production and consumption of music allowing for information flows and exchange amongst the actors (Seman 2010, p. 208).

The term originally emerged to define the geographic locations where specific kinds of music developed, like the New Orleans jazz scene or the Nashville country scene. The music scene can be considered as a specific form of **cultural industry cluster**, since musicians and related businessmen tend to aggregate in creative centres across localities and social network to benefit from the geographic **co-location**; furthermore, commercial success is related to the size of the *audience*, encouraging musicians to concentrate in bigger cities (Florida & Jackson, 2010).

The role of communities in creative clusters

Music scenes are based on the *concentration of producers and consumers* that share similar

values and practices, which create a strong community sense (Florida & Jackson, 2010). As will be explored later, one of the strengths of the music is the **social community** sense it fosters, where the common interest for the art is so strong it defines the identity and lifestyle of individuals and brings them together beyond the economic activity.

Similarly to other **creative clusters**, the music scene differs from traditional industrial clusters since, besides scientific and industrial knowledge, it develops *symbolic* and *cultural* forms of knowledge, which are highly specific to the local context and variable by location (Cohendet, Grandadam & Simon, 2010). Creative ideas originate and are interpreted inside the *local milieu*, where three groups meet:

- the informal world or *underground*, individuals that share a deep interest for art but are not directly connected to its commercial world;
- the formal world or *upperground*, institutions and firms with the financial and integration abilities;
- the *middleground* of gatekeepers and intermediaries that interact and collaborate to develop and exploit these creative ideas.

Particularly the **middleground**, which links the formal and informal world, is ultimately the most important actor in the development and selection of creative ideas.

The music scene as a creative milieu

The social component is just as important as the economic component for the music scene, since music tastes are socially formed and live music consumption is a social activity. Thus, a music scene can be considered as a **creative milieu**, defined as

a set of complex networks of mainly informal social relationships within a limited geographical area, often determining a specific external image and a specific internal representation and sense of belonging, which enhance the local innovative capability through synergic and collective learning process. (Camagni, 1991)

As a creative milieu, the music scene draws from the characteristics of the city in terms of its *tradition*, its *built environment* and the *space proximity* it offers.

The music scene is based on the **proximity** and frequent interactions of its members, which also allow for easier transfer of information, and it certainly results from *economies of agglomeration*, but it is also subject to opposite forces. Firstly, while bigger cities allow for commercialization and popularization of music thanks to the size of the audience, the innovation more frequently originates in different locations: musicians coming from rural

background move to larger cities in search of commercial success, creating a migration of innovation too. Secondly, smaller centres may be more attractive to musical talents because of lifestyle and convenience factors. **Decentralization** is made possible by the nature of the art, since musicians usually tour and are less constrained by physical assets, and by the recent digitalization and globalization of the music market. While *digitalization* allows for smaller, independent actors to reduce the costs of production and maintain their sustainability, *globalization* allows for the products to be commercialized outside of the physical and cultural boundaries.

Specifically, new technology is leading towards the dispersal of music production and consumption, creating smaller, *specialized niches* of producers and consumers. The two opposite forces that govern the distribution, concentration and decentralization of the music industry converge in the creation of highly specialized music scenes in middle-sized locations, where particular genres thrive. Lately, the trend has been the rise of **independent music scenes** in smaller cities with a highly educated population, often in university and college towns, which are able to attract musical talent and have a large student population that increases the demand for music.

How can music contribute to the development of a city?

Starting from the premise that art and culture contribute directly to the economic development of a city through the generation of jobs and revenues, their indirect effect consists mainly in the increased creativity made available to other industries. In this regard, art is considered more and more as a source of **competitive advantage** in cognitive-cultural capitalism.

Currid (2009) identifies four ways in which art is used as a tool for economic development. One line of research highlights the role of **art as amenity or consumption product**, useful to generate the environment to attract the young cognitive workers that contribute to the city economy. In the quest for human capital, namely highly skilled labour driving economic growth, places that are high in amenities have an advantage. For instance, Richard Florida's (2002) work has focused on the use of art as a soft factor to attract the so-called **creative class**, in the broader context of cities competing for talents. According to his findings, the *three Ts* (talent, tolerance and technology) contribute to the bohemian consumption environment, attracting the creative class and enhancing the creativity of a city. Urban creativity generates a virtuous circle as in turn it attracts high-tech and high-worth firms, seeking for this kind of highly skilled cognitive workers.

Besides attracting permanently skilled labour, art as amenity can attract *temporary visitors* and their spending power. The use of art as a **tourist attraction** is not new, as cities often fill their development agendas with artistic events, festivals and permanent art institutions to attract mass tourism. Cultural consumption is thus beneficial for the residents, but it also

draws additional revenues from temporary visitors, working in synergy with other kind of reasons for tourism – namely leisure and business.

The association of *art and city* also helps attract human capital and investments by **branding** the place. Such association contributes to the uniqueness of the city, since art and culture are not as evenly distributed as other industries. In the case of the music scene, it is noticeable that the uniqueness is even stronger, since scenes tends to specialize in niche genres. In fact, a successful branding is based on the **authenticity** and the unique elements of the city, that is to say those aspects that cannot be replicated by competitors. Culture and heritage are specifically such elements of distinctiveness (Pratt & Hutton 2008) and music scenes are a particularly powerful branding tool since popular music is able to represent places in a credible and authentic way (Botta 2009).

Recommendations on alternative approaches to urban regeneration policies

In fact, cities increasingly recognize the role of art as an overall development and redevelopment tool, targeting residents and tourists at once. The current public policies aimed at urban development through art and culture have taken two different approaches, one being the construction of large-budgeted **flagship projects** (e.g. the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao), the other being organic **community initiatives**, based on the local artistic tradition. While the flagship project is seen as a strategy suitable for developed areas, capitalizing on already established cultural brands, the latter is considered as an inexpensive strategy to redeveloped blighted neighbourhoods.

Starting from this first distinction, public policies towards urban regeneration can be classified according to the sources and inspiration they draw upon, the decision-making process they follow and the ends they pursue.

- With respects to *sources and inspiration*, policies can be divided into **fast policies** or **patient policies**: fast policies are universalist policies that seek to adopt “best practices” of the most successful cities, without acknowledging the local contingencies (Pratt 2013), while patient policies would draw upon the regional context, allowing the lead time and experimentation required to develop successful innovation.

In this sense, large-scale flagship projects should be substituted to the community art spaces that are more respondent to the local context. In addition, community centres are more successful at portraying the authenticity of the city and offer a wider range of activities, compared to the limited event schedules of larger projects (Seman 2010).

- Another common trail of analysis on cultural policies is whether they follow a **top-down** or **bottom-up** approach, a distinction based on the allocation of the *decision-*

making power. On one hand, top-down policies locate the power in the central authorities; on the other, bottom-up policies seek to involve the targeted groups and service deliverers in the decision-making process.

Regarding the policies directed towards cultural scenes, both approaches can be successful, depending on the nature of the policy and the environment they are targeting, although it is generally more likely that a top-down approach will not take into account aspects that are crucial to the actors on the field.

- Lastly, policies can *aim* at promoting **cultural consumption** or **cultural production**. Most of the projects aimed at urban redevelopment through art focused on cultural consumption, following the trends of place promotion and experience economy, that conceive cities as experience goods, with the intention to make the arts visible to the public and distinguish the city from the competition (Pratt & Hutton 2008).

Investing in cultural consumption means investing on the creation of cultural facilities, whereas investing on cultural production means investing on the infrastructure for the supply side of the market. The risk of giving priority to consumption is to alienate the pool of local artists (cultural gentrification), whereas the risk of giving priority to production is to create empty halls without audience.

Following these recommendations, the design of a policy directed at development through art and culture must be shaped by the identification of local strengths and weaknesses and by the understanding of the specificities of the cultural industry. As far as the latter is concerned, Currid (2009) gives a few useful insights. As thoroughly explored in the premises, a dense **agglomeration** is crucial for the music scene and cultural industries in general, since it provides a greater chance for informal exchange of information and innovation. In these regards, the cluster should include several related industries, because of the interconnected nature of cultural and artistic industries.

Another aspect to consider is the importance of the **social network**. Policies should preserve and strengthen the social and informal ties that inform the artistic community, since they are a source of positive externalities for the industry. Indeed, factors such as the connections and the network are important in the artists' location choices, and the unique combination of competitiveness and collaboration that characterizes cultural industries further reinforces this consideration.

Policies in practice: Slowdown project, Omaha

Omaha, Nebraska, is a medium city (little over 400 thousand inhabitants) in the centre of the USA. It originally developed as a transportation and distribution centre (its nickname is "gateway to the West"), while nowadays its diverse economy is based on skilled knowledge jobs, with great benefits from tourism too. The city's lively music scene originated in the

1920s with a jazz, blues and R&B composition, thanks to the presence of the African American community. Its notoriety in current times is due to the independent rock scene and the presence of **Saddle Creek Records**, which contributed to the trademark “*Omaha sound*”.

It is precisely around the indie scene and the success of Saddle Creek Records that the project of **Slowdown** was developed in North Downtown, a blighted yet central and quite visible area of Omaha, as recounted by the research by Seman (2010). The plan was developed by the owner and the manager of Saddle Creek Records and did not originally involve the local administration nor North Downtown, but the municipality’s planning department showed interest in making Slowdown the first redevelopment project in the area. Their strategy was to use music as an amenity to attract young skilled workforce and to make it a catalyser for further neighbourhood developments. The partnership between Saddle Creek and the City also included a financial assistance of \$1.3 in Tax Increment Financing, while most of the costs were bore by the record company. The Saddle Creek brand and the emerging Omaha brand attracted further private companies that would not have normally been attracted to the city’s demographics.

The final configuration hosts the Saddle Creek offices and warehouses, the Slowdown music venue, an independent cinema (Film Streams, a non-profit two-screen venue), residential space, retail space (offering a mix of trendy national stores and local businesses), a bar and a coffeehouse, providing around the clock activities and social gathering occasions.

- The project can be qualified as following a **bottom-up approach**, since it was developed by the targeted actors, while being a top-down policy at the same time, since the local authorities were responsible of the decision on the location and supported its development as a cathartic flagship project. Overall, the municipality showed a *laissez-faire approach*, aimed at removing the barriers rather than engaging in active initiatives.
- Furthermore, Slowdown can be described as a **patient policy**, since its inspiration did not come from imitation of best practices but rather from the existence of an already cohesive music scene, characterized by a community-based attitude and effort to support independent business practices. In these regards, the City representatives applied a *hands-off logic*, with the purpose of adding value to existing phenomena and encourage their growth.
- Finally, the project targets **both cultural production**, as it locates the offices and production centres of cultural businesses, and **cultural consumption**, since it provides venues for the audience to enjoy music and cinema.

Results and final considerations

Slowdown catalysed the creation of a dense cultural cluster, that associates multiple artistic

industries. The presence of leisure areas and gathering places allows the location to develop a social network around cultural industries, that fosters the informal exchanges so crucial to enhance the potential and creativity of the scene, although it was never directly measured by the City.

The success of the initiative has not in fact been quantified or measured in economic terms, even though it can be ascertained by the new businesses emerging around Slowdown and the **return migration** it encouraged. The return migration provides a precious contribution to the local creative milieu, by spreading to the local, smaller market the competences acquired in larger labour markets, while the return migrant can benefit from lower costs of living and lifestyle improvement. As previously observed, the advanced communication technologies allow for music-related businesses to sustain themselves in smaller locations, creating the context for return migration, as exemplified by the success of Saddle Creek records.

In conclusion, the nature and dynamics of cultural clusters give precise directions to the characteristics of the policies to be adopted in the use of cultural industries to regenerate the urban territory, the most important being the adoption of **laissez-faire measures**, aimed at removing barriers for the already existing cultural aggregations. The music scene cluster has shown to be particularly effective for the redevelopment of **medium cities**, since smaller cities could not reach the audience size required to support the artistic scene, whereas larger cities have a too high cost of living for the artists.

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