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Cultural Districts

In general, cultural districts, sometimes also referred to as cultural quarters, cultural neighborhoods, cultural milieus, or cultural clusters are geographical areas predominately in sizeable towns, cities, or metropolises focusing on artistic and cultural activities through the presence of a building structure devoted to accommodate a range of such activities, purpose designed, adapted or even appropriated spaces to create a favorable environment facilitating the provision of such goods and services, and residents with inspiring minds promoting such ideas and working methods.

The building structure is often characterized by a mixture of densely arranged residential and commercial properties that emerged at the transition to industrialization as homes for immigrants and the working poor. Today, these tenements (once multi-family dwellings in the urban core) are endowed with flats in the upper and shop windows in ground floors in the front and working studios, ateliers and lofts in back buildings. The fabric is often attractive, scenic and stimulating by stucco with manifold textures, ornaments and materials.

The designed, adapted or appropriated spaces are supposed to be third places and hot spots for multifaceted activities and open to movement (walk), transactions (gather), and assembly (linger) in order to easy contact and meeting. In addition to various usage possibilities in public-private spaces, they enable options for temporary interaction at different times during the day through potential 'constellations of use' that can be combined in close proximity. Altogether, they create a sense of place with a substantial local meaning.

The residents are assembled from a majority of artists, cultural intermediaries as well as cultural entrepreneurs, pursuing alternative lifestyles, promoting civic values and willing to take risks. Whereas artists (e.g. painters, writers, sculptors) ordinarily produce their art for the art's sake and cultural intermediaries (e.g. curators, cultural commissioners, art teachers) offer their cultural services for the community's sake, cultural entrepreneurs (e.g. art dealers, cultural managers) are mostly interested in economic valorization of these cultural goods and services.

When effectively orchestrated, cultural districts act as spatial forges of creativity with a unique atmosphere providing a sense of place, identity, trust, and tolerance. These districts usually form part of a broader strategy of former industrial cities to ensure the social integration, economic development and the regeneration of urban areas. The main objectives are the revitalization of run-down or abandoned inner-city industrial areas, the preservation of cultural heritage, the strengthening of community life, development of regional brands by architectural icons and the creation or maintenance of jobs and enterprises based on cultural and creative industries. However, many studies have also emphasized negative effects of cultural districts like segregation, precarious working conditions and gentrification trends.

Classical examples of cultural districts are the Lower East Side in New York, Soho in London, Rive Gauche in Paris, Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain in Berlin or the Museumsquartier in Vienna.

There are manifold attempts to classify cultural districts according to particular variables, characteristics or stages in their life cycle. Whereas some studies arrange these entities along locational factors, cultural-based products, or systems of values, others benchmark them in relation to their governance modes, organizational capacities, or financial regimes.

A simple and descriptive typology, for example, initiated by Americans for the Arts groups almost 100 cultural districts with regard to their major functions as: arts districts, arts and entertainment districts, arts and science districts, cultural districts, artists quarters, museum and theatre districts. Taking a more systemic process perspective how culture is produced into account, they ideally contain creativity and innovation zones, exhibition and education zones and/or entertainment and retail zones next to cultural core as the *raison d'être*. Accordingly, cultural districts can be differentiated into cultural arts quarters (promoting the novelty of culture), cultural educational quarters (engaging with the usability of culture) and cultural industry quarters (working around the valorization of culture).

Fuzziness of concepts

According to Roodhouse cultural districts specify an identification of a geographical area in which cultural activities are encouraged to locate, or in other words, physically defined focal points for cultural endeavors. However, these spaces are not merely containers with the above mentioned elements framed by territorial borders for cultural activities, but also exert meanings as cultural locations, places and landscapes. These locations, places or landscapes are above all bound to economic rationales, social ties, and cognitive perceptions that are difficult to capture precisely by spatial scales. Therefore, sometimes they are also referred to as **cultural clusters**, **cultural milieus**, and **cultural neighborhoods** emphasizing different spheres (e.g. high vs. popular culture) and stages of culture (e.g. novelty, usefulness, valorization).

Cultural clusters (in the US and Italy known also as cultural districts) accentuate the valorization of culture and highlight locational features of production (and consumption) complexes based on cultural industries. The mere presence of related cultural businesses in vicinity allows for three general advantages: labor market pooling, sharing of specialized suppliers, and knowledge spillovers from competitors. Moreover, spatial proximity enhances the circulation of capital and the reduction of transaction or transportation. Typically, cultural clusters illustrate a value or commodity chain perspective where a cultural good or service is transformed by commercial activities (e.g. production, duplication, distribution, and consumption) under economic imperatives of market supply and demand. It is equally conceivable that valorization of culture takes place on the same value stage. In both cases, however, and this is the distinctive feature of a cultural cluster, a localized production and consumption system evolves beyond a simple concentration, and agglomeration of stakeholders of the cultural market, and creates networks where enterprises on the same (horizontal networks) or on different value stages (vertical networks) cooperate and compete with each other driven by cultural entrepreneurship and changing consumers' tastes. In order to survive and receive stimulation, these networks depend also on internal inter-sectoral as well as external linkages. The focus here is on cultural industries, cultural consumers and popular culture. Cultural clusters can be differentiated according to market segments (e.g. advertising, music, motion pictures, software), occupational profiles (e.g. architects, silver smiths, writers, designers), products (e.g. fashion, jewelry, furniture, comics) or size of enterprises involved (e.g. small and medium companies, corporate conglomerates).

Famous examples of cultural clusters are the motion picture production complex in Los Angeles, Third Italy apparel production complex in North East Italy or the diamond cluster in Antwerp (Belgium).

Cultural milieus emphasize the usability of culture in third places and point to communities as well as the place-based nexus between cultural intermediaries and citizen (but also artists, and cultural entrepreneurs) centered on cultural infrastructure. The work of cultural intermediaries (e.g. curators, patrons, cultural politicians, art teachers) is to promote, select, create tastes and make judgments about culture characterized by infinite variety in order to elucidate citizen. The main task is to strengthen democracy, the civil society, and civic engagement by establishing a common understanding of place through activities like information about cultural events, education of cultural techniques and preservation of cultural heritage. The spot light here is on policy-makers, cultural promoters, cultural spokespersons and citizen – not on producers and consumers – participating in negotiations and a cultural dialogue in order to enrich and provide the community with a variety of free or inexpensive high and/or popular cultural activities. These activities foster trust, reciprocity, routines, tolerance, social relationships and cohesion, but also contribute to cultural innovation granting cultural milieus with a singular aura or a certain atmosphere. Underlying prerequisites are active institutions, social embedding, recognized interrelations and operational networks with local governments, universities, schools, research centers and cultural agencies that enable face-to-face contacts and learning. These processes happen in so-called third places, for instance in cafés, bar, cafeterias, social centers or other informal public gathering places, which are comfortable, easy accessible and distinguish themselves from the other two regular social environments of home and the workplace. Cultural milieus embrace publicly funded operas, theaters, museums, libraries, archives, and charitable organizations, foundations and associations dealing with cultural issues. Most cultural clusters are built on intact cultural milieus (e.g. the Third Italy district or the Swiss watch-making cluster, where strong institutional links persisted over time and where tacit, non-codified, knowledge is transferred from generation to generation). Examples for well-known third places promoting cultural milieus were the Romanische Café in Berlin, Café de Flore in Paris, Café Hawelka in Vienna or the Café Greco in Rome all mainly in the late 19th to early 20th century.

Cultural neighborhoods (often also referred to as cultural or artists colonies) underline the novelty or 'look and feel' of culture and the gain their significance through landscape perception based on cultural images of artists and cultural individuals. The emergence of cultural images involve the very the act of creation, in other words, the 'light bulb' moment, where formerly unrelated and hidden properties of perceptive and cognitive abilities collide resulting in so-called 'a-ha' (understanding), 'aahh' (astonishment) or 'haha' effects (delight). Those effects facilitate novel cultural insights, impressions and experiences in peoples' minds originating from streetscapes, amenities, temporary events or iconic architectural ensembles in the guise of signature buildings, monuments or landmarks of historical or contemporary internationally-acclaimed architects. Although highly subjective, also shared cultural experiences are conceivable propelled by myths, rumors, legends or gossip. Therefore, manifold aesthetic, symbolic, cognitive, authentic, or expressive values are attached to these cultural neighborhoods and secure the branding, distinctiveness of and attention for those landscapes as well as stimulation for artists. The focus here is mainly on artists and cultural individuals involved in high culture activities (e.g. visual or performing arts) and their perceptive capacity to create novel cultural experiences through inspiration by the surrounding environment and the meaningful assignment of cultural landscapes, first and foremost, as art for the art's sake. Experimenting, cultural laboratories and workshops without commercial pressure are highly desirable. Instances for iconic landmarks are the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Spain), the Opera House in Sydney or the Zeche Zollverein in the Ruhr Area. Ensembles of architectural set pieces are the Times Square in New York, the Grove in Los Angeles, or the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. However, no matter how inconspicuous cultural neighbourhoods (e.g. ensembles of bars, café, parks or squares, run-down industrial areas) are to the general public, they can be very stimulating to the cultural individual. Examples for cultural neighborhoods are Greenwich Village in New York

City, Carl Street Studios in Chicago, Provincetown, MA, Auvers-sur-Oise in France, La Ruche in Paris or Kazimierz in Cracow (Poland).

Both creative cultural neighborhoods (or colonies) and flourishing culture milieus are often, but only exclusively, prerequisites for successful cultural clusters (or districts). From an economic perspective, it has not been finally clarified yet if the growth of cultural clusters tends to be encouraged more by business-related (e.g. reduction of costs through agglomeration, given infrastructure) or person-related locational factors (e.g. amenities, tolerant communities, recreation possibilities). The relationship is dependent on the sector, production logic, occupational profiles and the very nature of cultural goods and services. For instance, whereas Dutch fashion designers have emphasized amenities like bars, cafés or public squares as most important for their work in cultural districts, stakeholders from the motion picture industry in the US confirmed the agglomeration of business companies as decisive.

In a nutshell, cultural districts became preferentially very popular in formerly industrial cities as an effective revitalization measure strengthening social integration, economic development and the regeneration of urban areas in the last two decades. However, they are not just hollow territorial entities but rely on a complex interplay of cognitive, social, and economic combined with spatial logics. Also referred to as cultural clusters, milieus and neighborhoods they possess their own history, traditions, routines, economic base and atmosphere with distinctive locational factors, third places and iconic landscapes. Therefore, a simple transfer of best practices or successful schemes of cultural districts on a one to one basis from one location to another is a hazardous exercise and risky venture for cultural and urban policy makers, just because cultural districts are almost impossible to design and there is no blueprint. It should be noted, however, that this typology is subject to diverse debates and conceptual ambiguity depending on the context, discipline and purpose.

Further Readings

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