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# **The limits to artists-led regeneration: creative brownfields in the cities of high culture**

## **Abstract**

Despite the burgeoning literature on creative cities, little explored is the context of cities rich in cultural capital but more orthodox in their approach to preserving the autonomy of culture. This paper discusses the status of artistic spaces occupying abandoned industrial premises ('creative brownfields') in historic cities that traditionally shape their policies around prestigious cultural institutions ('cities of high culture'). Based on comparative insights from St Petersburg and Lausanne, the paper explores the relations and tensions between mainstream cultural governance and creative brownfields. Whilst there is no lack of creative brownfields in these cities, their wider urban impact is found to be marginal; moreover, these sites represent dispersed instances of temporary occupations rather than situated clusters of creative actors. More than co-incidental, this (lack of) spatialisation is argued to result from a particular governmentality – that of high culture – which disregards, rather than promotes, spaces of alternative cultural governance. The paper conceptualises creative brownfields in cities of high culture as the 'soft infrastructure' of cultural production, in contrast with those in 'creative cities' as the 'hard infrastructure' of urban production. The paper also calls for a recognition of the local context of regulation and accumulation in understanding the cultural/urban interplay.

## **Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed a surge of academic interest in exploring how artists-led projects interact with, and transform, urban environments, including the emergence of trendy creative spaces and quarters in previously declining areas (e.g. Cole, 1987; Ley, 2003; Currid, 2009; Colomb, 2012). The role of urban governance and policies has been subject to particular scrutiny. Indeed, following the establishment of the 'creative cities' thesis supported by Richard Florida (2002) and Charles Landry (2000, 2006), there has been no lack of associated policy initiatives worldwide, offering a fertile soil for a critique of the application, variations, implications and limitations of such policies. Of course, not all cities have embraced the creative city thesis equally enthusiastically, but what emerges from extant urban studies is a sense that creative activities represent a spatialised phenomenon that at least produces important material changes to the urban fabric.

In this paper, we want to problematise the concept of 'creative cities' as it is applied in cities which have built their urban strategies around notions of high culture. 'Cities of high culture' – or established 'cultural historic cities' – are cities where urban governance is "closely aligned with traditional cultural policy that seeks to defend and fence from the market a particular local definition of high culture" (Pratt, 2010:15). Such cities are renowned for their high spec and diverse cultural offerings – prestigious museums, fine arts galleries, theatres, operas, concert halls – combined with a heritage of 'grand architecture' (Pratt and Hutton, 2013). So far, the relationships between grassroots/alternative artistic initiatives, settled in former industrial sites, and urban change in these cities, as well as relations and tensions between high-culture governance strategies and creative place-making activities, have hardly been explored. Rather, debates in the context of such cities, as pointed out by Pratt and Hutton (2013:91), have focused "on the role of heritage in attracting tourism and tourist income to cities; especially through the promotion of the niche 'cultural tourism' which

targets upper income groups". By positioning high-culture cities within the creative city discourse, this paper provides an understanding of the extent to which what we call 'creative brownfields' can actually have an impact on urban change in what is a very different cultural governance context from that of the other categories of creative cities.

'Creative brownfields' can be defined as aesthetically distinct, derelict and flexible industrial premises attracting artistic communities and playing a significant role in youth (sub)culture, and in the development of so-called 'cultural quarters' (Pratt, 2009). As noted by Hutton (2006:1839), "the distinctive spaces and built environment of some inner-city districts have been conducive to the revival of specialized industrial production, as well as to a (re)creation of spectacle, consumption, and entertainment". Prominent examples from cities like New York (Zukin, 1988), London (Hutton, 2006; Pratt, 2009) or Berlin (Shaw, 2005; Colomb, 2012) demonstrate how formerly residual brownfields can experience artists-led gentrification. With the creative turn in urban governance, however, 'creative brownfields' are no longer autonomous with respect to the institutions of power, but can instead become singled out as the breeding places of creativity, and even encouraged to emerge as vehicles for area-based regeneration (Evans, 2009; Peck, 2012). In such a context, creative brownfields can be seen as constituting an "iconic cultural infrastructure" (O'Connor and Shaw, 2014:166), participating not only in the experience economy focused on consumption (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), but also in the attraction of human capital: Florida's (2002, 2004) 'creative class'. Such spaces can then be seen as the 'hard infrastructures' of creative governance, with a strong spatial anchor for place-making activities that bring about structural changes at both neighbourhood and city level.

We will demonstrate, however, that in high-culture cities creative brownfields instead actually remain 'soft infrastructures', providing a transient shelter for a range of cultural and creative actors, rather than place-based commitments, or seeds, either material or discursive, for cultural or artists-led regeneration. Drawing then on an interrogation of what 'high culture creative cities' are, the development of the concept of the soft infrastructure of cultural production will allow us to deepen the debate launched by O'Connor and Shaw (2014:167) on the new approaches to the creative city and the nature of "non-instrumental, hybrid public-private, market/non-market policy space". Creative brownfields as spaces of alternative cultural governance, not of cultural policy, do not blend easily with, nor are subsumed by, the mainstream regimes governing the cultural, economic, and spatial development of these cities.

We organise our argument as follows. We begin by further developing the hypothesis that the dynamics encountered by creative brownfields differ in the context of high-culture cities. We then continue with the empirical basis for the paper, which comes from exploring the post-industrial contexts of St Petersburg, Russia and Lausanne, Switzerland. These serve as excellent examples of two high-culture cities which have a range of prestigious cultural facilities and events that act as long-established sources of income and expenditure, and which form key components of these cities' identities and *raison d'être*. We then provide a detailed analysis of two creative brownfields – the Mesto creative space in St Petersburg and Lausanne's Flon District, both of which could have left a significant footprint on the urban creative landscape, but did not. We finally discuss wider lessons that can be drawn from the role of creative brownfields as soft infrastructures, and what this means for the study of 'high culture creative cities'.

## **Creative brownfields: artistic activities in post-industrial spaces**

Former industrial spaces have long been perceived by artists as attractive, having few maintenance constraints but offering large studio spaces in which they can work, perform, and often live. Often conveniently located in central locations, such spaces are easily accessible to their users and customers. Artists “rich in cultural capital but poor in economic capital” (Ley, 1996:301) are happy to rent such spaces cheaply and use their sweat equity to renovate them to suit their particular needs. Property owners authorising these uses aim to minimise property management costs, and regard such tenants as an interim solution to prevent vandalism and property devaluation.

However, creative brownfields are prone to tension with other stakeholders – local authorities, landowners, developers, neighbourhoods and others (Andres, 2013). Such tensions may erupt into conflicts when the size of a creative cluster reaches a threshold beyond which it is thought to require some form of institutionalisation, or when the property is intended to be converted into a different use or faces redevelopment. However, even if property owners might hope to eventually reach a stage of site transition to a more valorised format or degree of gentrification at the time they allow artists in, creative brownfields can instead be driven towards a self-perpetuating sense of identity where the tenants collectively develop a strong ‘place bonding’, and become willing to engage in defensive strategies to oppose their displacement. This may entail the space transforming into a more lasting, even if more regulated, form. As Andres and Grésillon (2013:53) observe, the transformation path of such spaces can take one of two directions: (i) an adaptive process moving towards a more conventional and less conflictual space which is progressively included in more holistic urban policy and politics; or (ii) its disappearance as a spatial entity as a result of the incapacity to respond to and cope with the external economic, cultural and political pressures.

But distinctive place-based identities may, under the conditions of post-modernity, benefit rather than hamper the local property interests (Shaw, 2005). As noted by Currid (2009:368), “artists have long been thought of as agents of revitalization who transform warehouse districts and blighted neighbourhoods into bohemian enclaves that become destinations for the well-heeled, simultaneously bringing redevelopment and reinvestment” (also Zukin, 1988; Lloyd, 2005). Furthermore, with the Florida-inspired cultural turn in urban governance, creative brownfields began playing a key role in the “creative city-economy” (O’Connor and Shaw, 2014), which privileges clusters of multiple creative producers as a desirable urban form (Stern and Seifert, 2010; Evans, 2009). Such policies may directly encourage creative communities in particular locales destined for urban regeneration. Against this background, creative brownfields are increasingly exploited, rather than confronted, by entrepreneurial strategies which seek to capitalise on their ‘creative’ aura. This evolution draws upon the ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and hence on consumption and branding. Creative brownfields contribute to place distinctiveness and the promotion of ‘alternative’ neighbourhoods. Artists here become, willingly or unwillingly, co-opted agents playing a role in the transformation of brownfields – although this may itself become a source of conflict between creative communities and creative-growth coalitions, leading to ‘not-in-my-name’ movements of creative producers in some cities (e.g. Novy and Colomb, 2013). Anyhow, such mechanisms position creative brownfields as the *hard infrastructures* of creative cities, used as key vehicles for urban regeneration and economic development, and which are also highly embedded in cultural development policy. The nature of creative brownfields as spaces of policy is nevertheless challenged in the context of cities of high culture, as the next section will demonstrate.

## Creative brownfields in high-culture cities?

While there has been no explicit definition of ‘cities of high culture’, such cities are arguably characterised by the strong heritage of cultural institutions held in the highest esteem across the world and requiring intensive investment in both human capital and cultural infrastructure. High-culture cities are also characterised by their wide and diverse resources of formal cultural facilities and events. They represent a niche market of cultural production and consumption, and one of their core economic sectors is tourism. Thanks to a very selective level of high-cultural production and consumption, led by internationally known creators, they valorise difference and quality in their branding strategy. This high spec cultural offering allows these cities to maintain their distinctiveness in a context where “all cities build galleries and concert halls to attract investors” (Pratt, 2010:15). The key notion for high-culture cities is therefore their reputation, constructed via historic longevity and consistency (heritage), akin to monarchies (Urde et al., 2007). However, the literature on cultural development has barely touched upon the concept of heritage as a non-price-based competitive advantage (Tokatli, 2013).

High-culture cities are therefore by essence elitist, both with regard to the audience of their high arts establishment but also in the way there are governed. They rest upon a strong cultural management ensuring their coordination, functioning and protection, as well as the financial viability of their cultural facilities. As such, in line with what Pratt and Hutton note when discussing cultural-historic cities (2013:91), they “seek to represent the legitimacy as well as power for local authorities acting on behalf of the citizens to protect local and national heritage and values”.

And yet, as with any other cities, high-culture cities may have, amongst their urban portfolio, a range of derelict buildings which attract creators. The question then arises: can creative brownfields in such contexts be seen as part of the hard infrastructure of urban policy? As we shall argue, the high-culture narrative creates obstacles to this, mediated through the local strategies as to what kind of culture should be prioritised in general, and what kind of culture should be articulated through urban development in particular. While the cultural tradition of such places does attract other forms of culture beyond ‘high arts’, the role given to the local state, and particularly its vested responsibility towards the protection and reproduction of the heritage of ‘high culture’, *de facto* compromises the opportunities for promoting more fluid and bottom-up cultural governance initiatives. We can say that creative brownfields in the cities of high culture remain the *soft infrastructure* of creativity as spaces of alternative governance: these urban spaces are certainly used, as in other cities, as a breeding locus for the creativity of grassroots creators, but these groups’ engagement with these spaces is momentary and operational, not lasting and strategic. The embeddedness of creative brownfields within the wider cultural and urban policy is limited, being little regarded, if not bluntly restrained, by the core pillars of the high culture branding. In other words, creative brownfield space is not converted into the *hard infrastructure* of the ‘creative city’ as a space of policy.

But what, then, is the exact nature of the relationships between authentic producers and urban spaces in the absence of the deliberate governmentality of creative spatialising? Edensor et al. (2010:15) call for theorists to “develop a more open understanding of the transitory and fluid nature of creative practice” and to consider “networks as a more appropriate spatial context within which creative projects can be practiced”. Rather than

seeing bounded places as ones where clusters of creativity emerge and get grounded, they emphasise the chains of relationality through which creativity is redistributed: “the creative currents that flow through networks thus increase the potential for new and emergent forms of activity across a range of sites and locales, as inter-scalar flows, relations and social dynamics connect local practices to wider networks of cultural and economic activity” (Edensor et al., 2010:15). Indeed, lasting place-bounded forms seem to be only minor phenomena vis-à-vis the practices of more fluid, transient and open engagements of creativity with space, given those forms’ loosely aggregated stance, low capital and fixed costs. Although the urban geography of these distributed forms of creativity is less salient than that of more spatially stable forms of ‘clustering’, the former are actually more widespread, and thus demand a more thorough analysis to understand the various ways in which creative communities interplay with urban geography (Boren and Young, 2013). Attention can be drawn to the convoluted ecologies of such communities: the constellations of actors, and their relationships with both internal and external networks, including the role of (transient) space in their dynamics.

## **Methodology**

In order to substantiate and further develop the arguments above, we draw on our empirical material gathered from fieldwork in two high-culture cities, St Petersburg and Lausanne. Neither has received significant attention in the literature on cultural historic cities, yet both are excellent examples of how (high) culture has historically influenced urban, cultural and economic development. Despite all their differences in size, tradition, politics and so on, St Petersburg and Lausanne display interesting similarities with regard to their cultural governmentality and the existence of a very strong local state leadership protecting high culture. They therefore represent a fruitful ground for related comparative conceptualisations (Robinson, 2011). Further, the two cities also have had a range of industrial neighbourhoods awaiting socio-economic transformation, including transformation into creative brownfields.

Mesto and Flon – two former industrial sites – are characteristic of creative brownfields in their respective cities. However, despite having had a noticeable effect on each city’s cultural life due to their alternative character, these sites, like many other similar brownfield sites in St Petersburg and Lausanne, have actually made no lasting impact on the cultural and urban development of the cities. Considering the underlying factors behind this in light of the discourses in the dominant literature suggesting that the converse would be true was the starting point of our research hypothesis, and led to the distinction we propose between hard and soft infrastructures. As Comunian (2011:1167) observes: “Literature on ‘creative cities’ and ‘urban regeneration’ does not consider all the possible outcomes in an evolving urban context”. Our cases demonstrate that such ‘alternative’ outcomes – albeit different in context, scale and form – help to identify some parallels between the various institutional philosophies circumscribing the role of creative spaces in cities of high culture.

We conducted around 60 interviews in Lausanne and over 20 in St Petersburg with creative users, policy-makers, planning officers and business tenants, as well as community groups, journalists and academic experts. Those interviews concerned both the overall cultural policy and urban landscape of the cities as well as the development of Mesto and Flon. Interview data was complemented by secondary sources – newspaper articles, policy documents, academic reports and official websites. Data was analysed using a two-scale analysis (city/neighbourhood) looking at economic, social and cultural components, policy

visions and strategies, the nature and evolution of grassroots initiatives, governance arrangements, and forms of power relationships between the range of stakeholders.

### **Cultural and creative spaces in St Petersburg**

Home to five million people, St Petersburg is richly endowed with cultural resources. As the capital of the Russian empire in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the city was one of the major political and industrial centres in Europe. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, it preserved its status as Russia's symbolic 'cultural capital'. Its former royal and aristocratic palaces and private art collections were converted into some of the world's richest public museums and galleries, including those placed under the auspices of the Hermitage and the Russian Museum. The imperial tradition of the performing arts flourished during the Soviet period, centred particularly on the Mariinsky Theatre. Furthermore, the whole historic centre of St Petersburg is entered on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including its most famous cultural venues. The city's cultural inheritance is actively used by the city and by national elites to claim a world city status for St Petersburg (Golubchikov, 2010). Huge public funds from the federal budget go into supporting its cultural venues and events, making it a hotspot for ad-hoc federal spending with regard to the urban scale in Russia – levels of spending which have only been matched by the high-status mega-projects like the Sochi Winter Olympics (Golubchikov and Slepukhina, 2014).

St Petersburg's high-culture heritage is consequently an important factor in the city's economic development. But the role of its cultural heritage is much more than economic. It underpins a certain missionary narrative in the city's tradition with respect to protecting, developing and popularising high culture – also circumscribing the city's broader governance rhythms. For example, the Strategy for Economic and Social Development of St Petersburg until 2030, adopted in 2014 (Government of St Petersburg, 2014), includes the following 'mission and function' for St Petersburg:

St Petersburg is a city that bears a special mission thanks to its distinguished cultural-historic heritage, worldwide reputation, and dynamic contemporary developments... St Petersburg is an important centre of education and training in the field of culture and arts. The city is one of the most popular destinations for both internal and international tourism, offering millions of its guests access to the richest cultural heritage and contributing to the popularisation of Russia's historic-cultural heritage. The city's cultural and tourist functions are backbone ones, their significance must and will only increase.

Among the priorities in the city's cultural policy, the Strategy highlights the following top three: protecting and restoring the city's cultural heritage; providing equal access to cultural assets for all social groups; and popularising the city's cultural heritage among the locals and tourists along with increasing their personal participation in the city's cultural life.

St Petersburg's status as a city of high culture significantly dominates its cultural landscape (O'Connor, 2004). Trumbull (2014), reflecting on the nexus of cultural venues and urban development in St Petersburg, demonstrates the state-led institutionalisation of, and control over, the city's cultural landscape. For example, one of the city's flagship mega-projects has been the half-a-billion Euros construction of the second stage of the Mariinsky Theatre in 2004-2013. As Trumbull (2014:18) observes, "cultural policy among policymakers in the city is still based on an understanding of culture as an exclusive domain that refers to high

culture, whose functions rarely reach beyond cultural production and by no means include broad cultural activities for the public and city neighbourhoods”.

Yet the city government is not in fact antagonistic to smaller and non-traditional creators, but does support many of them through seedcorn funds, opportunities to perform in existing public venues, event funding and so on: many of our interviewees with St Petersburg creative communities, and especially those who have professional qualifications and networks, acknowledged that they had benefited from public assistance. However, firstly, this support is far from being a priority of the city’s cultural policy, and secondly, this support remains a compartmentalised part of the city’s cultural policy that in no way interplays with any spatially oriented or urban strategy. As acknowledged in our interview with the Deputy Head of St Petersburg Government’s Committee for Culture:

The Committee for Culture has a budget called “subsidies for projects” and, in principle, any creative organisation, irrespective of its (non-public) ownership form, can apply with their projects. And we participate in such a project... This is nevertheless against the backdrop that St Petersburg is positioned in the first place as a city of traditional arts – naturally, the traditional cultural heritage is foregrounded.

Nevertheless, since the 2000s, creative spaces have become popular in the city, benefiting particularly from the massive, underused industrial heritage of St Petersburg. Indeed, the city’s built environment features a ‘rust belt’ in its inner periphery (between the pre- and post-revolutionary neighbourhoods) consisting of many workshops of redbrick architecture from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these, as well as Soviet-era factories, were rapidly abandoned from the late Soviet period onwards. This legacy appears to have provided an excellent opportunity for various sorts of youth creators looking for cheap yet spacious studios. However, such new creative spaces are scattered unsystematically in brownfields across the city, with no particular desire from the city government or other interests to organise them into ‘clusters’ or ‘quarters’. Thus, despite their actually growing presence in the city’s cultural landscape, the traces of grassroots creative initiatives in St Petersburg have had no significant impact on the built environment or urban regeneration as such. Low-income conversion projects tend, rather, to be ephemeral, appearing unsystematically wherever an opportunity to rent a space reveals itself. They are thus entirely circumscribed by the private real estate markets.

Further, organic conversions have had only limited economic and social impacts on their immediate neighbourhoods. Indeed, artists try to minimise such impacts in order to avoid potential tensions which would lead to their quick displacement due to the highly policed property ownership regimes. The relationships between artists and brownfield landowners were well summarised by a photography studio owner:

Artists are summoned only for one reason – not because they are doing something creative; they are invited simply because they increase the value of space. If there is a factory, redundant and half-dead, the first folks worth allowing in are artists, because, firstly, one can ask them to leave; secondly, they will revitalise it a little – simply because they are staying in it. So, there will be some sort of payback, and it will no longer be an empty building, redundant, but some sort of an art centre.

There have been only a handful of cases of creative spaces organised on a more stable basis. One of the earlier cases is the Pushkinskaya 10 Art Centre, an ‘underground art squat’, which



was settled in an abandoned residential building in the city centre as early as the 1980s. It later received acceptance from city government, and is presently known for its host of non-conformist art galleries, museums, studios and shops. In contrast, most of the well-known 'proper' creative brownfields represent commercially themed conversions of former industrial buildings offering 'art-loft' spaces akin to serviced offices. The most celebrated examples include the Loft Project ETAGI (translated as 'floors'), a glossy art space, and a hostel occupying a five-story building that was formerly a bakery; and the Tkachi ('weavers') creative space, 13,000m<sup>2</sup> of space in a renovated textile factory building offering room for studios, workshops and exhibitions. Although some of these 'art lofts', especially ETAGI, demonstrate flexible policies, they are still known for cherry-picking tenants, while their rents are rather unaffordable for younger and not-so-celebrated artists.

More systematic, area-based (public- or private-led) strategy or interests have yet to be seen. One of the factors has been the city's limited control over industrial land – almost all industrial premises were privatised in the city in the 1990s, resulting in a fragmented pattern of industrial landownership (Golubchikov, 2010). However, if it had been interested, the city could have used its planning and urban regeneration powers to intervene. Certain initiatives brought in with regard to demarcating a creative city, creative quarters and so forth do occasionally emerge, but they are typically peripheral, suggesting that they are signs of operationalised policies. For example, in 2012 some factions in the city government drafted a concept for making creative clusters in St Petersburg; however, the plan has not been taken forward (Zakharov, 2012; St Petersburg Administration, 2012). Some city priority projects – such as the redevelopment of the industrial area on New Holland Island (previously under military use and closed to unauthorised entrants) – do promise to include opportunities for creative industries, but the frame for such initiatives has always been capital-intensive, big-business projects prioritising commercial offices and housing rather than creative clusters per se.

In short, despite their existence in large numbers, their plurality and their popularity, creative brownfields have had no marked spatial impact on the development of the city. Small-scale projects are dispersed across the city, are ephemeral, and are opportunistic in their relationships with space, while the handful of commercially organised loft projects are spatially isolated, one-off initiatives rather than 'clusters'. As soft infrastructures, they do not currently represent opportunities of systematic interest to entrepreneurial elites, who prefer either alternative modes of investment, or, if they fall within the cultural domain, large-scale projects of high art. Existing youth initiatives, moreover, do not grow to the point where their spatial identity is protected. We will develop these points further when considering the case of Mesto; but first we will review the parallel case of Lausanne.

### **Cultural and creative spaces in Lausanne**

Lausanne, Switzerland's secondary city, with a population of 127,000, has never been an industrial city, its main functions being banking and insurance, as well as cultural and health tourism (Racine, 2001). Since the 1980s, the number of tourists has risen quickly, linked to an increasing cultural offering (Ville de Lausanne, 2008). This is anchored in history. In the Middle Ages the city was the Bishop's residence and a pilgrimage destination. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, local aristocrats promoted intellectual and artistic events, attracting artists such as Voltaire and Mozart, positioning Lausanne as a cultural crossroads between northern, southern, eastern and western Europe (Ville de Lausanne, 2008). Today, the city's cultural landscape features flagship institutions such as the Vidy Theatre, the Chamber

Orchestra (once directed by Jesus Lopez Cobos), the Béjard Ballet, and major festivals such as Les Urbaines, the Festival de la Cité and Lausanne Estivale.

The city's cultural landscape thus historically developed thanks to private initiatives; however, since the 1980s it has mainly been funded by the municipality (not by the Canton or the federal government). This model is not unique to Lausanne, and can be found in other Swiss cities (Ville de Lausanne, 2015). It does, however, give municipalities much leverage to impose their vision for cultural development. The goals of the city's cultural policies (Ville de Lausanne, 2008, 2015) include: (i) to support an attractive and dynamic cultural environment by giving priority to professional artistic projects and original creations; (ii) to facilitate access to culture to a wide audience, targeting the younger generations and supporting events that target a wide audience, at a fair price; and (iii) to position culture as a core component of the influence and development of Lausanne, including the promotion of local artists. Similar to St Petersburg, this fits within a traditional conception of cultural democratisation that prioritises the general public's access to high culture (Matarosso and Landry, 1999).

Marketing Lausanne as a city of high culture is one of the pillars of the city's branding strategy (Ville de Lausanne, 2006). The city council refuses to spread money in many different directions (which they refer to as 'sprinkling'), but rather focuses on a limited number of professional companies "to maximise impact" (interview with a local policy maker). Consequently, like in St Petersburg, the city's policy has been characterised by its sectoral support for culture, rather than its use of culture for spatial development (Andres, 2012). As stated by one of our interviewees at the Department of Cultural Affairs, Lausanne City Council:

In Lausanne, we defend a model based on the autonomy of culture. Of course, culture can be considered as an economic and planning leverage. However, this hasn't been done yet in the city, and we are not mixing up culture and [the] creative economy.

In the context of this regulatory environment, highly embedded in a vision of 'high culture' for all, but with a relatively exclusive definition of what culture is, it is not surprising that the scope for grassroots artistic spaces is limited – indeed, any opportunities are often suppressed by the city's cultural apparatus. Compared to other Swiss cities, Lausanne has never been a leader in such initiatives, which elsewhere have produced a set of celebrated creative centres (e.g. the *Röte Fabrik* in Zurich or the *Usine* in Geneva).

In the 1980s, there was a set of more alternative experiences, which either disappeared or became institutionalised. In the past 15 to 20 years, the city's cultural policy has aimed to promote legitimised cultural institutions (museums, theatres) and research-driven initiatives (smaller professional spaces and companies). (Interview, Department of Cultural Affairs, Lausanne City Council)

Yet another factor limiting the development of creative brownfields – and one that contrasts with the situation in St Petersburg – is the city's largely non-industrial cityscape, meaning that only a few such sites exist. The Flon district, a private property of 5.5 hectares originally erected as a storage yard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the most well-known area for grassroots initiatives before it was redeveloped (discussed below). Another prominent initiative, albeit on a smaller scale, was the *Dolce Vita*, opened in 1985 in derelict premises as a regional venue for alternative rock music. Though considered a 'grassroots' space managed by young

cultural activists, the *Dolce Vita* was subsequently supported by the council, which acted as the landlord and sponsor; however, it was closed down in 1999.

Nowadays, small-scale grassroots projects – mainly independent galleries or creative workspaces – are spread across the city in privately owned commercial or industrial units (e.g. L’Imprimerie, Circuit or Standard de Luxe) (Andres, 2012). Only a very few workshops are owned by the council and available for cultural purposes, meaning that competition to secure space within them is fierce. Most small creators have to rely on the private property market; even there, the available space for these organic users is extremely limited:

Renting a workshop costs at least 1,000 CHF a month, which is far too much money for me to pay, even though it is still affordable in comparison to Geneva. This is why I am renting the space with two other people. (Interview, artist)

Not only are there a limited number of spaces available for creators, but there is also an apparent unwillingness from the local council to foster such initiatives. The municipality focuses its attention on large-scale projects with high impact. Smaller scale initiatives are supported occasionally, but they are required to be aligned with cultural democratisation principles that allow wider access to the public. For example, the event ‘Aperti’, mainly funded by the council, allows creative spaces, which are usually hidden from public view, to open to the public one weekend a year. This initiative is a rare illustration of Lausanne’s sponsorship of the creative world that lies beyond high culture. Otherwise, creative brownfields are of no interest to the city as drivers of economic development, place marketing or place-based competition.

Consequently, organic creative communities evolve in micro-localised environments and citywide networks with no prospect of sustainably occupying even a small space, let alone quarters. Instead, they develop supporting tactics thanks to online communities that help to identify available spaces here and there. This is a very fluid landscape:

We are aware that we will be in this building for a couple of years and then we will need to move and find another place. Of course, it won’t be an easy task, but we know that these tenancy agreements are temporary and we accept that. There are a lot of development pressures on those empty units; we are aware of this. (Interview, artist)

We will now delve deeper, reflecting on the patterns and dynamics of creative brownfields as soft infrastructures and spaces of alternative governance in cities of high culture through the experiences of Mesto and Flon. This will allow us to assess the nature of the power dynamics between property, governance and creative industries in more detail, and also to reflect on Pratt’s (2010:18) view that creative and cultural policies and practices are “embedded in place and time; within local communities and practices, and social and regulatory structures. This is not, and logically cannot be, a ‘one size fits all’ area, nor one that is likely to respond to generic policy prescriptions”.

### **The momentary locus of creative energy**

The pop-up Mesto creative space in St Petersburg illustrates the transitory nature of the ‘organic’ organisation of creative initiatives in St Petersburg’s brownfields, including their self-contradictory internal dynamics and complex external relationships with the city’s

institutional environment. Quite symbolically translated from Russian into 'place', Mesto was a community of youth creators who occupied a tower building belonging to the Kalinin Factory on Vasilyevsky Island, a district adjacent to inner city areas. Mesto became rather famous in the city's youth circles, and remains one of the most interesting experiments in artists' use of an industrial building – even if it only lasted for one and a half years between February 2010 and mid-2011.

Mesto was originally an initiative of two theatre managers and actors, Vadim Amirkhanov and Maxim Didenko. Looking for a cheap space, they rented a room on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of one of the Kalinin factory's buildings. Their tutoring, as well as performances and activities, attracted other youth creators to set up their own studios in adjacent premises, and then on lower floors. Within half a year, creators occupied eight floors in the building, so that at its peak the estimated population comprised 100 artists. People were attracted not only by cheap rents (equivalent to €100-200 a month per studio), but also by the opportunity to be together with other creators and do whatever they liked, whenever they liked: to produce and perform art. Mesto's residents described the creative spaces as 'art squats', even if they actually paid rents and bills. Many even began living in Mesto (which was unlawful). The result was an eclectic community of artists and artisans:

There were lots of workshops; every floor had its character. On one floor there were always musicians playing... A floor below, say, artists were making exhibitions. Another floor below, Krishnaites were singing... Mesto residents were very diverse in their activities: there were about five theatre studios on different floors, workshops for clothing, for theatrical scenery, for theatrical properties, a workshop which makes various wood, metal and recycling handicrafts... Very many painters... People of different levels of skill: from fellows of the Artists Society, celebrated and well known in the city, to those who had only recently started to paint. (Interview, video designer)

Many called their community 'a large family', where one could easily interact with others and exchange knowledge and skills, and also help each other materially and mentally – in an environment that supported "the absolute absence of money". The residents highlighted the constant cross-fertilisation of creative ideas, both within and between different artistic activities. The residents described their experience of being part of this as something unique – "a genuine oasis" that provoked creative people to create and innovate – an experience that they could not easily find elsewhere: "When you are within the community of such creative people, you experience a creative burst – you can call it a burst – because it splashes in all directions and you can do anything whatever you start!" (Interview, hair designer). The curators tried to coalesce this energy into collective action. This culminated in a large, two-day festival in October 2010, which attracted, according to the organisers, 5000-6000 visitors, as well as media attention.

However, even though Mesto's tenants readily reflected on the sense of community and its dynamics, our interviews showed that this sense was never properly grounded in the physical space. The creators' narratives only recognised their being together for some time as the important factor for sustaining their sense of community; in contrast, the role of the particular building they occupied, its location in the city and its external surroundings featured only tangentially in their reflections. This was probably due to a strong sense of the transient nature of their existence and their lack of attachment to place. Everyone sensed the temporal nature of their residence, even if they invested in it materially and emotionally by cleaning, decorating, and otherwise improving the space. People still rationally accepted

the reality that the building had its owner who had absolute say over what was to happen. Indeed, the residents obeyed the owner as soon as he required them to vacate the space. Here, the community's temporal moment (being together for a while) seems to have been prioritised over the spatial moment (being together in one place):

Every project has its time. At that moment, there was a single-minded group that exchanged an energy charge and disintegrated. This is fine, and these people, having had a certain experience, began realising themselves in other spheres. I believe that Mesto outlived itself. There was a big discharge of the potential energy of creativity and it quickly dissipated... People gathered, got experience, knowledge and satisfaction from this process, and went further. It was indeed an incubator. On the other hand, people who have received this will possibly realize this somewhere further afield, and there will be thus more places like this. (Interview, actor)

This suggests that creative communities are predominantly knowledge- and network-based, and that they do not necessarily have to be fixed in one locale, or cluster together as a collective for more than a short time and as part of a brief operational presence/event, in order to exchange experiences and fashion a shared memory impulse. Thus, while the enduring place-clustering of creative activities may happen in some cities, it is not necessary the model replicated in all cities (Edensor et al., 2010).

The reciprocal but non-linear nature of the relationships between place and creativity are brilliantly expressed in this commentary of Maxim Didenko:

The cultural environment is like soil from which everything grows. And soil is a crisscrossing of many fibres. And now all this has intertwined and even if we are in different places, this structure still exists.

Further, on the part of the landowner, the emergent creative function was not seen for its exchange-value potential; the company decided to repair the building and simply convert it into (ordinary) offices. The tenants realised that the owner had used them in a certain way:

Mesto is the opposition to everything. However, we still paid rent, even if small. And it was small because the building was absolutely full of junk, deactivated, which no single commercial structure would have rented. When we came in and cleared all that debris, took all that trash out, when we knocked it into shape in which we could at least somehow exist, then of course we attracted the attention of the very owners to this. (Interview, actor)

Those interested in the sustainability of creative spaces talked of the necessity to establish commercial undertakings, where spontaneity is replaced with the rationality and certainty more aligned with the city's ordered institutional rhythm. The owner of a commercial art loft project located in a converted industrial building put it this way:

I believe that the future lies with business projects with a human face. Because those social initiatives, those semi-squatter ones quickly finish, having hardly started, and leave after themselves not a good memory but a bitter aftertaste... Because massive plans are announced, that everything will be cool, everything will be developing, and then a bloke [property owner] comes and says: "All to leave!" All sigh and leave.

### **A decade of 'non-Swiss instability' in a strong planning context**

The Flon district represents quite a different case because of its temporal dynamics and form: it is a self-contained urban area and, by its nature, is a large-scale spatial cluster (rather than a single building). Even so, the case similarly highlights: (i) the primacy of the temporal over the spatial in the relationships between creative communities and the built environment; (ii) the essentially aspatial approach of the city's elites when it comes to culture; and (iii) the dominance of non-creative urban entrepreneurial strategies and the limited role that the creative city discourses have played in the city's economic rationales. It demonstrates, drawing on Pratt (2010), how a space that could have followed the path towards becoming a creative district is ultimately transformed outside of a creative place-making branding strategy.

The transformation of Flon is unique in Lausanne, as for almost 50 years the district faced planning and governance deadlocks over the proposals for its use and redevelopment (Andres and Grésillon, 2013). Two master plans for its redevelopment were rejected: the first (Ville de Lausanne, 1986) was defeated in a local referendum; the second (Ville de Lausanne, 1993) was abandoned because it was not supported by the owner or the tenants. The Flon was a typical space favourable for temporary uses, representative of how 'indeterminate spaces' provoke urban conflicts in efforts to regain urbanity (Groth and Corijn, 2005). As a set of industrial and warehouse activities it had long been uninhabited, and was attracting a bad reputation: "it was a marginal, badly perceived space where locals were scared to go" (interview, former government officer). Temporary use became a sound option for the owner in the late 1980s. Warehouses were offered at a cheap rent and attracted a wide range of tenants. During this *laissez-faire* period, the power dynamics were characterised by strategies to get commercial returns from the properties rather than by any formal visions resting on more complex governance arrangements. Hence, the organic, grassroots aspect of the area contrasted with the rest of the city centre and its high-culture ethos.

Artists, photographers and galleries settled in Flon, as well as restaurateurs, shopkeepers, nightclubs and so forth. They expended a great amount of effort in renovating these spaces to suit their needs; some of them also used them (unlawfully) as residences:

There was nothing when I arrived in this workshop in 1989. No heating, no water. There was only one socket and one bulb. Gradually I settled down. I installed a heating system as well as a bathroom/toilet. (Interview, photographer)

It attracted more and more interest because of its alternative character and non-conformist activities:

When I arrived in this neighbourhood, I fell in love. It was atypical, not organised, not Swiss! There was a sort of controlled anarchy and instability that attracted a range of interesting people. The owner was happy to rent those spaces at a very interesting price as long as tenants did all the work inside. Outside, we were free to paint the facades, to put some colour on the buildings. (Interview, restaurateur)

These activities produced a certain sense of community and also rebranded the district. Local media called it the little Soho of Lausanne (Peclet, 1994), and users 'Flon-Flon'. One interviewee commented on this sense of new identity:

We baptised a street that had no name; we organised a two-day party which gathered together 15,000 people. Each Wednesday evening, during the summer, we organised barbeques and projected films. We enjoyed some great years. The owner kept one eye closed, sometimes even both. (Interview, restaurateur)

Even when not participating in similar activities, tenants shared a common feeling of living through an extraordinary experience which they wanted to last. This sense of identity cultivated a certain sense of bonding with this area, especially for those who stayed for over a decade.

At the same time, tenants still maintained rational expectations about their contractual prospects. The ambiguity derived from the temporary nature of the location has left its mark on the redevelopment trajectories of the area. The redevelopment process only began in 1999, with the adoption of the current master plan (Plan Partiel d'Affectation). The associated planning process attracted much interest from the community of tenants, and became rigorously 'participatory'. Even if the owner had no interest in continuing the creative and other temporary uses of the district, despite their popularity, the municipality and the landowner were eventually forced to agree to respect "the double vocation of the district: a perfectly central area and a slightly unusual space with a particular cachet, its own style and way of evolving" (Groupe LO, 1998:2). The core decision makers here agreed to perpetuate the originality of the area – although, crucially, not its creativity. The municipality then opted to support a high-return commercial transformation rather than try to enforce its own cultural strategy. The reasons for this were, firstly, that creative activities in the Flon were too different from their approach to high culture, and, secondly, the normalisation of the area matched well their desire to offer a traditional leisure/shopping environment for cultural customers and tourists that was close to the key high cultural facilities in the centre. Hence, sustaining the organic character turned out to be merely a strategy to secure popular civil consent (Andres, 2013) – here, the cultural and the creative turned out to be empty signifiers. Even if the owner continued to declare that the image of the district would be maintained by supporting iconic architecture and cultural events, the majority of the previous tenants were forced to leave the area. Only a few original tenants able to afford the increased rents stayed, and profitable companies and chain retailers replaced the others in newly renovated buildings.

Some of the former tenants still surviving in Flon are highly critical of the process, feeling that they were exploited by commercial logic. However, no organised community strategy was mobilised to challenge the redevelopment process as soon as it started; rather, tenants negotiated on behalf of their own individual interests with the landlord (Andres, 2013). The owners were thus able to achieve their goals:

We secured enough income from the Flon-Flon initially. However, our point was to make this branding more and more declamatory and less a reality... We wanted the district to evolve [from this] – although not too quickly. This is why we were keen to preserve some of our former tenants, especially as getting rid of them would have led to a very bad press. (Interview, landowner company)

Today, Flon-Flon no longer exists: the district has been transformed into a commercial and leisure area. No similar creative districts have emerged in the city, which testify from an opposite trajectory to cities 'in crisis', such as in Berlin, where temporary creative experiments awaiting gentrification have flourished (Colomb, 2012). The only reminder of its

former character are refurbished listed buildings, the overall design (layout and heights of buildings), and a small set of original businesses – such as the nightclub MAD, the shop ‘Maniak’, the restaurant ‘Bistrot du Flon’ and the Art Gallery ‘Alice Pauli’. This trajectory is typical of how the district changed through a process of economic gentrification. However, this gentrification has not been accompanied by an influx of new residential incomers and loft transformations, as widely discussed in the literature (Zukin, 1988; Pratt, 2009), but has been solely reflected in new commercial and service incomers.

Apparently, for the city and the landowners, temporary tenants were not valued much as clusters that could add a distinctive dynamic and identity to their strategy of high culture development. The owners’ business plans for the area went beyond the assumption that creativity is a driver for economic development or place marketing. Relationships with creative tenants are no different to those with any other tenants, even though Lausanne positions itself as a city where culture is foregrounded. In the meantime, creative tenants’ bonds with the place and their sense of identity did not prevail over their landowners’ formal contractual commitments, business strategies and rent considerations. As summarised in this commentary by a local planner:

What happened in Flon is very interesting. These organic uses colonised the spaces during a period when they were welcome. They gave a new image to this area, and this image was taken back by the monetary system. Many of them weren’t able to follow this financial trajectory. Of course, we can regret this; however, it was inevitable. One of the problems rested on the desire to compare Flon to Soho in New York. Now, in cities like New York or Montreal these activities can migrate to other spaces. In Switzerland and in Lausanne, we don’t have these spaces and we don’t really want them either. There is no window for them, and as such they can be easily cleared up as the city is too small. (Interview, planner, Lausanne City Council)

### **From the cultural to the creative and back again**

Recent research has emphasised the contingent, non-deterministic and evolutionary character of the development of cultural activities in location. For example, building on the principles of complexity theory, Comunian (2011:1162) suggests *inter alia* that: (i) “The city’s cultural policies and activities interact with a series of other political, social and economic factors; the built and natural environment of the city can also affect the cultural development of cities”; (ii) “It is not possible to understand the cultural development of a city in a vacuum; the specificity of the context and its historical development contribute to the cultural profile, activities and individual existing within the system”; and (iii) “The decision of small players, such as artists, to locate in a specific area of the city can be a catalyst which develops a whole cultural quarter”.

Picking up on this, it seems that both Mesto and Flon-Flon could have become catalysts for the emergence of creative quarters or clusters – as in point (iii) above – but failed to do so, as they materialised only as a soft rather than hard infrastructure within the creative city: the contingencies of the city governance and the built environment (i), as well as the context and path-dependency (ii), prevented this from happening. This can be seen as the interplay between cultural policy, urban development policy and the ‘tradition’ of creative spaces in a number of ways. For a start, urban development in these cities appears to be bounded by highly policed ownership regimes that prevent the seeds of unincorporated, non-profit and low-profit artistic activities from growing too far beyond their sanctioned role as transient



'cleaners' of derelict brownfields. This is facilitated by tight regulations within the institution of development control, which is heavily bureaucratised, both in the general context of strong planning in Switzerland and even in the context of more flexible (development-led) planning in Russia (Golubchikov, 2004). In Lausanne, it is also connected to the assumption that creative spaces will never appear as priority projects, in contrast to, for example, housing, or retail developments. On their part, youth creative groups, which otherwise tend to be socially active and politically oppositional, seem to accept these institutional realities – again, most probably because of the formalised relationships with the property owners, in contrast to the informal squatting that takes place in many other cities in Europe and America.

Furthermore, the logic of the valorisation of space through cultural and creative planning in both Russia and Switzerland is less politically localised than in other contexts, such as the US, due to the absence of similar local growth coalitions (Golubchikov and Phelps, 2011). As, for example, Markusen and Gadwa (2010:386) observe:

[In the US], the local built environment industry – developers, the construction industry, real estate brokers, banks, newspapers, and others whose livelihoods depend on the making and maintenance of urban spatial form – constitutes a coalition with an active interest in cultural space development. In many cases, their interests (especially those of developers) dominate cultural planning, facilitated by the deal-making work mode of city redevelopment authorities as well as the absence of broad and more democratic cultural coalitions.

The cultural policies in both St Petersburg and Lausanne, however, have been distanced from the spatialised connotations of creative cities and urban regeneration: these policies do not deliberately promote the spatial clustering of small-scale creative producers. There is a strong predisposition in these cities to consider culture in its high culture connotation: not through the lens of urban regeneration or economist functionalism, but through a more traditional and elitist perception that anchors it in its aesthetic meaning (Miles, 2005). This testifies to the local state's reluctance towards adopting a broader definition of the creative city, and highlights the fact that the self-proclaimed high-culture city occupies a separate category to that of the 'creative city' (Pratt, 2010:17-18). This rests upon the state pursuing the idea of reproducing and preserving the high culture capital, and by no means challenging it with other forms of culture and creativity.

This is despite the importunity of the 'fast policies' (Peck, 2012) of creative-city evangelism. For example, O'Connor (2004:46) provides a first-hand account of an attempt to transfer the 'know-how' of the entrepreneurial narrative to the cultural sector from Manchester to St Petersburg in a project also seen as part of educating Russia's transition to becoming "a modern democratic and market society". The project's consultants were eager to make the case for the "enhanced role of culture in the economic regeneration of the city" (44-45) through the promotion of an ecosystem of small, independent cultural producers such as freelancers and SMEs versus "huge prestigious institutions"; but they realised that for St Petersburg "culture was important, something precious that should have money spent on it – but as a gift to the patrimony *not* as economic investment" (45; original italics). The city's cultural elites considered petty commercialisation as working against the ethos of high art and the autonomy of culture, and thus greeted the project with scepticism. As the project's associates failed to convince the targeted stakeholders to reform the city's cultural sector, they declared the city's cultural administration inflexible, incompetent and corrupt(!). For better or worse, the high-cultural St Petersburg missed its chance to become a copycat of

the 'creative' Manchester. In the same vein, Lausanne's expressed strongpoint of not being viewed as 'creative' attests to its willingness to preserve a very niche approach to culture. Both cities are prepared to keep practicing culture in their own way. High-culture cities, due to their limited number worldwide, referring back to Pratt's (2010) point, are embedded within their own place and time, where uniqueness and distinctiveness shape the essence of what they advertise as being 'high culture'.

Such modalities, of course, produce their own spectrum of the privileged and marginalised; in both St Petersburg and Lausanne, elitist cultural policy has been essentially sectoral, privileging individual large institutions and iconic, purpose-built cultural developments which can attract tourism and potentially have compound regenerative effects on the surrounding areas, but usually with significant public investment, and not as something organised according to the logic of 'clusters'. This approach is different to that taken by those who stress the place-making functions of the creative. There is a rather dispersed and fluid system of creative producers. Those who are situated in creative brownfields are, due to the perception of their imminent relocation, more attuned to their temporality than their spatiality. That said, this creates a more-or-less sustained protest-free environment and complex geographies of creativity based on creators' adaptability.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have problematised the relationship between creative brownfields and urban change in the context of high-culture cities, and have shown that Lausanne and St Petersburg do not see culture as a vehicle for brownfield regeneration or place-making (where 'place' refers to a designated zone in the city). Despite the global circulation of 'fast' urban policies that insist on a creative city (Peck, 2012), we have demonstrated that high-culture cities are a specific category, underpinned by a strong leadership impelling the delivery of high culture policies that rely on a rather restrictive definition of culture for city marketing and branding purposes.

Exploring creative brownfields in St Petersburg and Lausanne, we have argued that the context of regulation and accumulation remains decisive in the actual prominence and trajectories of creative spaces, which are in these cities limited to their status of soft infrastructures, and are thus spaces of alternative governance embedded in various networks, and not spaces of cultural development policy. Whilst there is no lack of organic creative activities attracted to derelict industrial spaces in both cities, these have not been sustained as spatial clusters. Whilst in other formulations of creative cities the collective sense of place or deliberate urban strategies may encourage the emergence of creative quarters characterised by increasing land values and artists-led gentrification, there is no recognition of the exchange value of creative spaces in cities of high culture. Moreover, due to strict contractual relationships with property owners and more policed ownership and planning regimes, creative brownfield actors are more attuned to their temporality than spatiality, and are (dis)organised into dispersed and fluid networks, rather than formed into situated clusters of creative production. Circumscribed by such institutions, they are limited in their capacity to develop defensive strategies. Our research supports the call for a better recognition of nuanced political, planning, and urban dynamics in order to understand the role of artists and creative spaces in urban regeneration in the context of places where high-spec culture and heritage prevail.

Reflecting on the economic function of culture, one can argue that culture is, of course, still a core component of these cities' economic development. However, what differentiates them from other models of relationships between the creative economy and the city (Pratt and Hutton, 2013) is how heritage, akin to reputation (understood in economic geography literature as non-price-based competitive advantages, e.g. Tokatli, 2013), draws upon a long-term aptitude for promoting a high-standard cultural offer, ensuring attractiveness and a degree of resiliency. The branding of 'city of high culture' means constructing it as a product over many years, and this has had a similar sustained track record and embraced consistent core values to what Urde et al. (2007) showed when looking at monarchies presented as corporate brands, and for whom heritage represents a strategic resource. The literature on creative and cultural development has barely touched upon this concept of heritage as a competitive advantage. This calls for further research looking at how heritage and longevity interfere with cultural development and generate other (variegated) forms of city branding and place-making.

Furthermore, by considering creative brownfields as soft infrastructures, this paper invites new insights into the role of similar cultural uses in property capitalisation. Creative brownfields in high-culture cities stand as a temporary under-layer of creative governance, which is ruled by property mechanisms and land use regulations. They contrast with other forms of temporary urbanism that depend on cultural uses in the sense that they only underpin cultural production, not urban production.

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