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Revealing preferential circulations: how places serve the generation and recognition of novelty

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The literature on innovation processes acknowledge that places are a key ingredient, especially in the creative industries (Cohendet et al., 2014; Currid, 2007). Numerous properties are attributed to them: fostering informal encounters (Andrews, 2019) and the formation of communities (Oldenburg, 1989), allowing artistic niches to have a place for expression (Buchholz, 2019), providing entrepreneurs access to specific facilities (Suire, 2019)... However, many facets remain unknown when it comes to understanding precisely the role played by places regarding innovation journey – from generation to diffusion of ideas (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) – in creative sectors.

Our approach is based on the idea that innovators need resources to carry out their project (Bathelt & Glückler, 2005; Sonenshein, 2013). These may be cognitive resources (knowledge, ideas), social resources (social relationships that offer support, trust, or open up to other forms of resources), material resources (tools, equipment) or financial resources (money to carry out the action). These resources can be acquired through their social capital (Coleman, 1988), but we argue that they can also be acquired through attending places whose affluence provides innovators with a particular capacity for action (Emin & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2016). By attending a place, innovators derive resources directly or indirectly (Lancaster, 2015). However, it is unlikely that all these resources are available in a single location. Rather, they are unevenly distributed among a set of locations that innovators will potentially attend to acquire them. By attending multiple locations, innovators can aggregate different and potentially complementary resources. The patterns of attendance form what we call preferential circulations.

To explore the hypotheses raised by our reasoning, we use the unique, in-depth case study of a creative community located in Nantes (France). The latter is focused on projection mapping, which is a practice that crosses arts and technology, and can which be defined as projection of still or moving images onto volumes using projectors and adapted software

(Watier, 2018). This case seems interesting to us because the community is fragmented into sub-groups defending different visions of projection mapping, which leads us to imagine distinct preferential circulations but intersecting in certain places. Our mixed methodology is based on the analysis of semi-directive interviews with mappers (18 in total, conducted between September 2019 and March 2020), and the analysis of the network of places attended by the community. This methodology allows us on one hand to analyze the structure of the network – which places are most attended, what are the preferred combinations for which actors – and on the other to understand the reasons that motivate actors to attend these places, i.e. which resources are offered by which places and for which actor.

Two main results emerge from the analysis. As might be expected when considering the characteristics of the community, we observe patterns of preferential circulation that intersect at certain points but remain overall dissimilar. Some places attended by the majority of actors are on the edges of the three subgroups: we call them boundary-places. Their role is potentially crucial for *inter*-group connections, and consequently to knowledge spillovers and formation of shared cognitive vision. It turns out that these places are institutional, mainstream, and locally well-known cultural venues. The actors we interviewed usually attend these places to visit exhibitions and concerts (cognitive resource) or to meet friends (social resource). However, these venues do not participate to the creation of links between subgroups, in part because activities directly associated with projection mapping are rare, so community members have few common opportunities to meet there. We also found that some other places are only attended by particular groups and would thus favor *intra*-group connections. In these locations, which are predominantly workplaces for mappers (e.g., music clubs, studios), actors exchange tacit knowledge and skills, and create strong ties, conducive for mutual support and trust. It is also where shared frames of reference are formed and discussed, thus fostering the development of shared visions for those who attend them. In this case, we can say that the place makes the community.

From this first observation we draw our second main conclusion. The motives that we observe are not the same according to the profiles of the actors – the sub-group to which they belong, their shared visions, their relations with the managing teams of the place attended – which indicates different resource needs and seeking. The actors whose activity is emergent and those who regularly collaborate with members of other communities (e.g., musicians, poets, choreographers) have more varied and numerous combinations of locations attended than established actors or those who have a practice focused solely on mapping. This suggests exploratory or exploitative attitudes are developed by community members (March, 1991),

depending on whether actors seek inspiration from other creative practices to nourish their vision (*exploration*) or to reinforce their vision by attending places that coincide with their aesthetic preferences (*exploitation*). We argue that this may lead to different types of innovations based on the assumption that radical innovations require the combination of more heterogeneous knowledge than incremental innovations (Maoret et al., 2020; Sgourev, 2013).

As concluding remarks, we would stress that our contribution lies both in the better understanding of the uses of places by entrepreneurs in the creative fields (highlighting differentiated experiences according to individuals and groups) and in the more refined categorization of the resources provided by places we propose. It also opens research avenues about the embedding of the innovation journey and preferential circulations: we can imagine that the type of venues attended varies depending on whether the actors are looking for sources of inspiration or knowledge to generate new ideas or whether they want to promote and disseminate their innovation. The career stage can also be analyzed through this prism: depending on whether an actor is recognized and legitimate in the field or not, the type of resources sought changes (Montanari et al., 2016), and we can imagine that the types of places attended also change.

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