

1st THEMATIC WORKSHOP

“CREATIVE CLUSTERS: DIVERSIFYING LOCAL ECONOMIC BASE AND OPPORTUNITIES TO YOUNG PEOPLE”

Ploiesti-Mizil, Romania, October 29-30, 2009
an URBACT event

A brief report by Miguel Rivas
URBACT lead expert

Under the theme “creative clusters: diversifying local economic base & opportunities to young people” a heterogeneous group of around 40 professionals between policy-decision makers, local officers, scholars, experts and creative entrepreneurs joined an intense one-day conference and a fruitful debate in Ploiesti, one hundred kilometres North of Bucharest.

The main task was to open up a discussion on re-thinking local economic bases at the light of the creative economy, namely creativity & innovation binomial, creativity-based business models and creative industries. So the group addressed not only the impulse of new emergent clusters in creative industries, but also the creative issue as a driver to re-view mature local industries in order to foster them with a new growth potential.

The meeting is the first in a series of **five thematic workshops** covering key sub-themes which are articulating the URBACT project on creative clusters at network level. And all of them focused on the reality of mid-sized towns across Europe:

- The second thematic workshop on “creative education: incubating future talent”. It will be held next May 6-7 in Reggio Emilia, a world-class benchmark in the field of creative methods in school.
- Third thematic workshop on “creative entrepreneurs and talented people: attraction and retaining”. We will discuss on tools packages supporting creative entrepreneurs and businesses and also on strategies for branding the creative place. We will meet in a Spanish small town, Enguera, under the format of summer course of the University of Valencia.
- Barnsley, now in the British run for the European capital of Culture 2013 and partner of URBACT creative clusters will host the next workshop on “events and cultural agendas as catalysts”. In this case, the key question will be how to connect cultural policies to economic development strategies at urban scale.
- Finally a fifth thematic workshop will take place in Hódmezővásárhely [Hungary] in 2011 on the theme “promoting the creative city: a new range of facilities and infrastructures”. We will

treat the functional space of creative industries, the built environment of creative clusters. In fact a new generation of urban facilities to creative business and entrepreneurs.

Coming back to Romania, the workshop in Ploiesti was designed in a very interactive format where almost everyone had to play an active role: as speakers, feeding the discussion through case study presentations; as chairs of the working sessions; or as discussants, activating and provoking relevant discussion. At the end, fourteen case studies were presented and two hours and a half were specifically devoted to debate: critical reviews of the presentations, Q&As, lights and shadows, key findings, new ideas, etc.

Just after a previous press conference with the local media, the workshop was officially opened by Mr. Emil Proşcan, Mayor of Mizil, one of the city partners in URBACT Creative Clusters, and local organizer of the workshop. Other officials from Prahova County Council were chairing the opening session as well. Then the meeting was divided into **four working sessions**. Here is a sample of the kind of discussion and some of the findings.



S01. Creativity and the activation of new growth potentials in mature industries.

Mature or traditional manufacturing sectors still matters! The question is about strategies to foster them. Of course creativity is not the only driver for such strategies, but probably we should face the creativity input in business far beyond strictly design. Anyway it is important to be aware of **understanding creativity locally**, avoiding a simplistic [or standardized] view of the concept. Remind all local high tech fantasies, just dreaming on new silicon valleys.

It was clearly showed the power of combining urban regeneration initiatives with economic development strategies. As it was told by Catarina Selada, Paredes city centre [a small town in Porto city-region, Portugal] can recuperate a core role within the industrial district of furniture manufacturing [namely a functional role as productive space] locating new directional functions related to design and

innovation. The Paredes Design City project is basically a physical regeneration project serving a strategy on industrial development and using creativity as key driver.



Paredes Design City [Portugal]

Creativity-based strategies to re-think an industrial district on furniture manufacturing

This was the case-study presented by Catarina Selada, head of policy and research in INTELI, a public think tank devoted to innovative spatial strategies with base in Lisbon. Paredes is a small town located in Northern Portugal with 12.655 inhabitants. It has a young population, a privileged geographical location and a strong industrial economy with a huge representativeness of the furniture sector.



A new strategy oriented to transform Paredes from an industrial district on furniture manufacturing into a Furniture Design City is being defined by the Municipality in interaction with local stakeholders. The vision is to elect design as a driver for the urban and economic development of the city, through the attraction of designers, architects and artists and the promotion of creative activities and businesses.

The City Council is creating a set of favorable conditions in order to enhance such strategic vision, such as the creation of physical facilities (live work houses, incubators, etc.) and launching of supporting measures (public procurement policies, financing programmes, etc.) oriented to build a creative and innovative environment.

S02. Re-thinking tourism in the framework of creative local strategies.

What exactly means creativity or creative inputs in tourism? Cultural tourism, urban tourism, experience tourism... for some a creative industry. Nowadays many visitors (do not call them tourists!) wish to experience the city as locals. Frequent travellers are more interested in the ultimate painting exhibition or the musical weekend agenda than in the Eiffel tower-baton mouche kind of circuits. It is having important consequences in the way tourism policies should be faced. Cultural and creativity issues can be crucial arms to revitalize traditional urban tourist destinations as in the cases of monumental Óbidos in Portugal or Viareggio in Tuscany now too focused on the “sun & beach” binomial.

In fact, nowadays in branding the creative place we could brand the business place and the tourist destination at the same time. Nevertheless, it should be aware that one thing is to attract visitors [through amenities] and another one is to attract residents [through real job and market opportunities] even when dealing with high mobile workers or the so-called “creative class”. An unbalanced strategy between these two tasks may cause some damage in terms of future local economic base, as an unexpected effect from a simplistic view of the new literature on the “creative city and the creative class”.

Another key question raised in this session was related to an **active role of the scale** as an attempt to add new values to the existing local brands and build up critical masses of assets connected to creativity in a wide sense. So, almost all partners involved in URBACT Creative Clusters were facing this kind of question indeed: Óbidos and the West Region, Viareggio and Versilia sea-shore, Enguera and the Caroig mountain area or Sinaia and Prahova county [or even the Transylvanian Alps as a powerful place brand]. Also in this sense the concept of “cultural landscape” posed by Enguera can be a useful tool in building new scales of work for economic development strategies based on creativity in “low density areas”.



S03. Fostering new emergent productive realities.

Nothing new if we say that new productive realities in the OECD area are both strong clusterized realities and they are connected to the knowledge economy. In this context in completing the transition to a knowledge-based economy a question raises: can culture be an economic driver?

Like new industries linked to the “greening economies” other ones connected to creativity-based business models are now in the frontier of the new economic landscape. In this sense sectors such as **new media** are the “jewel of the crown”. It is creative and it is tech-based. Cities like Reggio Emilia or Barnsley [both coming from a past background in metal-mechanics and mining & steel respectively] are now engaged in promoting local clusters in new media using University as first engine.

Others like Jyväskylä in Finland have a civic and institutional know-how making new and refreshing readings of the local/regional business fabric [a sort of deconstruction and re-building exercise] combining social trends and business opportunities with the result of shaping new productive environments. Such as the so-called “**wellness sector**” which comprises a wide range of activities from advanced equipments for fitness and sport to music therapy to combat depression or improve disease periods.

Anyway as strong clusterized realities it is crucial the activation of the “triple or quadruple helix”. The role of the local or regional State promoting and managing such strategies will make the difference. At this point there is not a single recipe. For instance, in providing **the new urban space for creative entrepreneurs** [basically a space for interaction mixing different uses] we heard a range of different solutions.

From sophisticated models trying to fill urban non-built gaps with “creative” land-uses [the so-called “in-between-city” model presented by the Vienna Technical University] to the “back to basics” claimed by Codruta Cruceanu just trying to preserve farmers market every weekend in Bucharest. In any case, a question remained floating in the air for urban planners: any alternatives to the inner-city models for creative districts or those based in waterfront redevelopment?

Reggio Emilia: developing a cluster strategy on new media merging different areas

The Municipality of Reggio Emilia [Emilia Romagna, Italy] is now delivering a long term economic strategy supported in three key sectoral competences: education (with Reggio Children a sort of cluster manager); mechatronic (the main industrial background of the area as a world-class cluster, with Club Meccatronica as a cluster manager); and energy and sustainable construction.

So according to Nicola Bigi, from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, the city is not forced to change radically these local assets. Nevertheless the Municipality chose to begin this process to avoid a possible “economic earthquake” in the future. In this context, new media is a glue that can generate positive contamination in every sector.

Developing the new media’s cluster implies an innovation for the other clusters in terms of: i) reinforce the possibility to access a global market using social media; ii) allow small companies to be visible an international level; iii) create a cross fertilization between art and business; iv) help companies to generate a process of creative-based innovation.

A main assumption is that companies are the key factor in the process for talent attraction. As opposite to what a fashionable way to approach the creative city is telling to us, there’s no empirical evidence amenities of cities attract people. Amenities are important to make people stay for a long period, but we cannot work on city’s amenities and wait people to come.

The focus of the municipality is to develop those economic sectors and use the new media to create visibility and network in order to strength the attraction process generated by the companies.

S04. Comprehensive perspectives in Eastern Europe

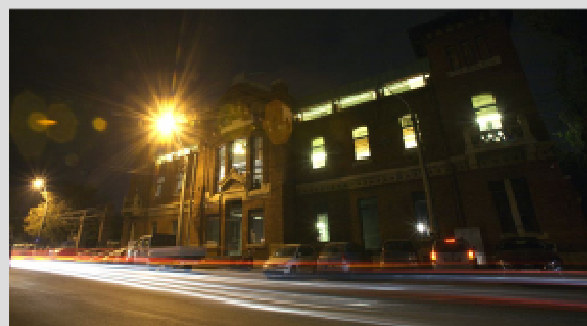
A last working session was specifically devoted to creative industries in the context of the Eastern Europe transitional economies. Can these activities be a driver for a sort of leapfrogging in terms of economic development? If a major challenge for these local economies is to fix young people in towns, can a creativity-based driver play a role for job creation or even for attracting again local talented people who migrated to Western Europe? Some responses can be extracted from a British Council programme aimed at promoting local economic strategies focused on creativity in a number of cities from the Balkan and Eastern Europe [Split, Tirana, Iasi...]. We really expect additional learning on this issue from Mizil [Romania] and Hódmezővásárhely [Hungary], our two city-partners from the East in URBACT Creative Clusters.

***Va Urma*: shapping a creative-based strategy to revitalize a deprived area in Bucharest.**

As independent consultant and former British Council project manager in Romania for arts and creativity, Codruta Cruceanu has a unique position to envision creative-base spatial strategies in Eastern Europe. In session four she brightly commented the *Va Urma* project developed in 2005-2007 by local partners and the British Council in Rahova-Uranus, one of Bucharest's strongly unbalanced (socially deprived) districts.

The attempted holistic vision of this project was based on bringing representatives of the so-called "creative class" (advertising, communication, architects, new-media, social scientists, artists) together to prompt interaction with the local community through cultural activities *with and for* children and teenagers.

Creative listening to what locals and teenagers said implied a **critical review** and sometimes decisions that pointed in opposite directions: the much claimed creation of a mall as an attraction pole was counterbalanced by the creation of a weekly Farmers' Market. It is hoped this will attract people from various other areas in Bucharest to the district raising awareness to what it can offer as much as to what else is needed to keep a more **creative balance** in possible clash areas.



The aim was also to get "creative" people out of their own boxes so that they can practice their creative skills on a social scale in wider communities. Artists whose "creative cooperatives" have a strong social bias also have a critical approach to prevailing entrepreneurial 'business models' based exclusively on 'safe development schemes' such as malls, commercial centres and galleries, residential ensembles - basically a highly speculative, essentially non-creative consumerist model. What happens when trends and fashions prevail over a common-sense, back-to-basics approach? How can the social fabric and community spirit be woven back into the city fabric? How relevant can this be in the long run for mid-sized towns which struggle hard to maintain their population and job levels? What do schools (whatever their level) do as community representatives to participate creatively in the life of their districts or towns? What are their links with the hinterland of the low density area type?

While asking the right questions is easily perceived as the most poignant part of any analysis, one should never forget that long-term results are rooted in the genuine attempt to answer those questions. In order to do that participants at the presentation were warmly invited to focus critically on key questions such as the mystification achieved through gross mythicization of success stories.

Looking around and searching for models, clustering creative professionals of the “artistic/cultural/tourist” type to sound business creative professionals and a new emerging class of young people is key to achieving a critical mass needed to produce growth based on the common-sense rather than the speculative model. Contained rather than exponential growth may be a better success indicator, together with strong moral and ethical values when it comes to low density areas.

Summarizing, this first thematic workshop posed crucial questions for our on-going learning process on local creative clusters within the URBACT framework:

- How to deal with culture and creative activities in a functional way for local economic development?
- Is there a specific agenda for mid-sized towns on this question?
- Threats and opportunities for mid-sized towns.
- Are creative activities really relevant for Job creation in our cities?
- What is the role to play by local governments in such long-term strategies?

This URBACT event was also supported by Prahova County Council and Carol I National Defence University of Bucharest. The workshop was also labelled as an **official event of the Creativity and Innovation European Year 2009**.

