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# The essential role of place within the creative industries: Boundaries, networks and play

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of place and spatial boundaries for the creative industries. Evidence from interviews with 70 workers in the advertising industry in London reveals the importance of geographical clustering for workers in this sector despite the potential of digital technologies. Creative firms are embedded in place, where the importance of urban aesthetics and social networks leads to tight geographic clustering. The aim of this paper is (i) to explore how and why geography matters for workers in the 'new' or 'changing' economy and (ii) how this creates a shared identity between creative workers. The article concludes that despite technological breakthroughs that have caused the death of distance, it turns out that geography is still important.

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## Introduction

A number of researchers and commentators have been arguing for almost two decades that globalization, especially driven by the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs) heralds the 'end of geography' (O'Brien, 1992), the 'death of distance' (Cairncross, 1997), and the emergence of a 'borderless world' (Ohmae, 1990). These scholars contend that the new age of connectivity and the deregulation of markets by states and increased economic integration have contributed to a marked space–time compression of economic processes. The consensus among these commentators is that technological progress detaches economic activity from its geographical and socio-economic context. This paper aims to investigate these claims and explores why and how geography matters for the creative industries.<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued that the ability of workers to succeed in the creative industries is to depend heavily on personal relationships. In other words, economic action is inseparable from the social relations through which it is enacted (Granovetter, 1974). Noticeably absent from much of the work on social networks, however, is attention to (i) face-to-face networks and whether they are still important within the era of digital technologies and (ii) the spatial dimensions of interactions – that is, studying the formation of networks within these sorts of industries (Currid, 2007; Grabher, 2001b; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005; Ross, 2002). An important question remains whether improvements in the Internet and other

forms of information technology will reduce the significance of location and the demand for face-to-face contact altogether (O'Brien, 1992; Ohmae, 1990; Reich, 2000). This gap is important to address in part to provide additional insights into the contested aspects of globalization; that is, whether it is rendering the significance of location and place redundant.

A particular problem with the conception of place is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries. Geographers have long been exercised by the problem of defining regions, and this question of 'definition' has almost always been reduced to the issue of drawing lines around a place. Yet, places are defined and imbued with multiple meanings by different social groups – it is not a seamless or coherent identity. Places are made, imagined, contested and enforced (Massey, 1991).<sup>2</sup> A 'place' then is defined as much by its position in a particular web of political institutions as by the physical area (boundaries) it occupies (Logan, 1978). Places are essentially dynamic and constituent of negotiated social activities that are constantly being made in and through practice. The ability of firms in such areas to do so is based on 'untraded interdependencies' (Storper, 1999); shared language, conventions, norms, attitudes, and expectations (Gertler, 2004). Instead, then, of 'thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey, 1991, p.5).

In this paper, following Massey's (1991) approach, no attempt has been made to define the spatial parameters of place because to do that would mean to fix the meanings of particular places, to enclose them and endow them with fixed identities. The aim

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'creative industries' has been defined and debated by many scholars. However it is outside the scope of this paper to review this debate (refer to Drake, 2003 for more information).

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible in a paper of this length to detail the nuances of the complex debate over the concept of place (refer to Massey, 1991).

of this paper is to investigate whether advertising workers perceive that the place in which their firm is located is important for their working practices and it has been left to the interviewees to adopt the definition which they think makes sense in reaching their own understanding of the issue. Our current understanding of place and of cultural economies only scratches the surface. The value of place and its significance for creative industries requires more rich empirical work across different sectors and places.<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal and Strange (2003) have argued that studies of agglomeration need to be sensitive to 'the micro geography of agglomeration' (p. 388). I follow the lead of authors such as Pratt (2000), Rantisi (2002), Ekinsmyth (2002), Grabher (2002) and others who argue that we need to understand creative activity as set within a specific context, composed of social relations. As Sunley et al. (2011) insist:

'The value of a situated approach is that it opens up the debate on creativity to incorporate elements previously deemed marginal – such as industry and workplace context, social and cultural exchange and practitioners' own understandings and negotiations of creativity'. (p. 378)

This article is based on several types of data collection, including in-depth interviews (for an 1–1.5 h) with 70 industry workers (majority in full time permanent positions), from new hires, headhunters to CEO's. Interviews were mostly carried out in 2007. Interviewees were recruited from advertising agencies founded between 1864 and 1995. These established and young agencies have grown to become multi-tiered corporate organizations. I interviewed mainly from three large firms (at all different levels and positions) and then I also interviewed CEO's, managing directors from other firms (large and small) as well as industry watchers (such as headhunters, journalists, trade bodies). All interviews were recorded and then subsequently transcribed to allow qualitative analysis. Secondary sources, such as websites, blogs, government reports, trade publications and newspapers were monitored. I also 'hung out' in the bars, cafes, pubs that were frequented by advertising workers in London. Most of the interviews were explicitly based on the recruitment, retention and advancement experiences of employees, in which I asked them about their career development, their working practices, their individual perspectives on working, socializing and the industry in which they work. The quotations used in this paper have been fully anonymized according to the confidential agreement reached with interviewees during this research.

The article is divided into three sections following this introduction. Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness in a limited space, the paper provides a detailed discussion of two themes. The first section outlines the spatial and geographical dimensions of the social milieu associated with the advertising sector and why this matters to 'creative' employees. Here I demonstrate the importance of 'feel' for creative stimulation. Second, the paper describes the significance of place-embedded social relations and I assert that proximity is paramount in this industry because of the important role of face-to-face networking. The third section examines the distinctions that are made by employees themselves about the social and spatial boundaries in which they want to work. The conclusion argues that place matters, in spite of decentralizing technology and high rent costs.

### Geographical boundaries: Putting creative work in its 'place'

This analysis turns to address explicitly the significance of place-based cultures of working and socializing that shape the

way advertising work is experienced by workers. Many of the 'new economy' commentators (mainly economic)<sup>4</sup> assume that the role of place is at best limited, or worse still it is non-existent. O'Brien (1992) has given particular focus to this argument though his concept of 'the end of geography', and concentrated specifically on the decreasing importance of geography in finance. The assumption at *The End of Geography* was that the improvements in communications technology and the development and adoption of ICT's would be a necessary condition for an 'end of geography' world. I illustrate, however, that place always makes a difference and more attention needs to be given on *where* things take place as well as *how* they do.

Advertising firms are mainly based in particular localities. The more relations are driven by availability and speed of delivery, the more project networks gravitate towards local concentrations of specialists, professionals and service firms (Nachum & Keeble, 1999). Advertising firms tend to locate themselves in the Soho district of London. This 'ad land' or 'ad village', as many advertising workers call it, is now becoming more dispersed throughout London, but Soho<sup>5</sup> (being used as both a description of geographically bounded spatial form and is simultaneously a social construct) still remains the main hub for advertising firms. Already the centre of the UK's cultural and media activities since the turn of the twentieth century (Tames, 1994), Soho has provided a productive hotbed for the creative industries. This multicultural area of central London hosts many bars, restaurants, late night coffee shops, fashion boutiques and is also the centre of the independent film and video industry.<sup>6</sup>

Advertising firms cluster within Soho for several reasons. Soho offers a range of services from graphic design, photography, music to film direction, production, bars and cafes which are critical physical inputs and services needed to keep the entire advertising industry operating. It also offers the urban 'buzz' (Storper & Venables, 2004) and 'noise' (Grabher, 2002); that is the idea that a certain milieu can be vibrant in the sense that there are useful things going on, intended and unanticipated and therefore lots of information, news, gossip and inspiration that can inform one's work. Most importantly, the role of social network ties – that is, the networks of relations between individuals that provide support, feedback, knowledge, insight and resources – is concentrated in activities within the geographical cluster of Soho, in which creativity can, quite literally, take place through 'geographies of circulation' (Thrift, 2000).

Many workers placed great emphasis on the visual and emotional aspects of places. In particular, a human resources officer noted that 'there is grittiness and a rawness to Soho; it doesn't have that sticky corporate feel.' This statement was illustrative of many workers who suggested that they did not want to work in an area that had a corporate feel. Prior studies related to the topic of creatives, artists and urban aesthetics (Bain, 2003; Lloyd, 2002) have also highlighted the importance of urban grittiness to creative energy and stimulus. Many individuals spoke of Soho as being different to other places because of its local hangouts, unique

<sup>4</sup> For example, economists have developed the notion of 'weightless economies' (Coyle, 1998; Quah, 1999) in which the importance of geography is no longer relevant. It is also fashionable among business gurus, such as Ohmae (1991) to argue that borders have become irrelevant in light of globalization.

<sup>5</sup> The area loosely referred to as Soho is a district of one square mile defined by the following boundaries: Oxford Street to the north, Regent Street to the west, Charing Cross Road to the east and the south side of Leicester Square to the south (Tames, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Chapain et al. (2010), a report that maps the UK creative clusters.

<sup>3</sup> As Sunley, Pinch, and Reimer (2011) suggest that a great deal remains unknown about other design industries other than fashion.

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