



New trajectories in urban regeneration processes: Cultural capital as source of human and social capital accumulation – Evidence from the case of Tohu in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, culture has gained increasing importance in strategies designed to deal with new trajectories of urban areas. Post-industrial cities seek to revive former industrial, contaminated and waterfront sites and their city centers, as they are aiming to establish themselves in the new arena of the global market place.

This paper looks at the relationships between investments in cultural resources/activities and urban regeneration processes, and in this respect, how culture can be considered a determinant to the accumulation of human and social capital. It examines the transformation of the Saint Michel district located in metropolitan Montreal. The Saint Michel area is experiencing a radical change in its social, economic and environmental profile due to its transition from the industrial-led development model to the post-industrial model in which investments in cultural and creative activities/industries – particularly the headquarters of Cirque du Soleil and TOHU – La Cité des Arts du Cirque – are supplying new opportunities for the local area in a metropolitan dimension. What impacts does such clustering have on the social and human capital of the vast majority of the populations that live within this area?

Based on a theoretical review and empirical investigation, the paper presents some clarification of the role of cultural investment in the definition of an emerging sustainable social scheme within the community to promote the development of local social and human capital. We know that cultural habits do not change quickly, and our research shows that organizations need to be proactive and seek very actively the participation of the local community if they want to see changes. Our case study highlights the fact that it is important to invest actively in mobilization, local information and promotion and to do so with the cooperation of local community organizations to attain some form of bonding with the local population, have the positive effects expected in terms of involvement in the community and act as a lever for local socio-economic development.

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Introduction

In recent decades, culture has become increasingly important for strategies designed to deal with new trajectories of urban areas, and in this respect, culture has been used as a ‘tool’ to revive dismantled industrial and waterfront sites of city centers and derelict areas and as a territorial marketing instrument for a better placing of cities in the post-industrial global market place. The rise of interest in the so called culture-led urban regeneration process has involved cities, and even small towns, which seem to be willing to

use the process as a ‘magical’ receipt for a new position in the worldwide competitive arena.

While much attention has been paid to the way in which such urban clusters provide benefits to the economy through tourism or the so called knowledge economy, little attention has been paid to the relationship between these investments in urban districts, particularly the strengthening of their cultural resources/activities and the impact these investments have on the quality of life of the residents in peripheral districts.

Although paying attention to culture may, at first glance, seem favorable to the creation of new opportunities in the economic and infrastructural dimension, there is a growing awareness that it may end up paving the way to developmental initiatives on the social dimension, specifically on issues of social marginalization and

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exclusion (Tremblay & Tremblay, 2010). Over the past few decades, cities such as Montreal have been developed through strategic planning processes that have tended to concentrate new cultural assets in metropolitan areas (Tremblay & Tremblay, 2006). In the 1990s, the Northeast district of Montreal was given a boost when it was chosen as the host for circus milieu cluster activities. Rather than joining many other cultural activities in the center of Montreal, Cirque du Soleil and TOHU decided to establish their activities in a district that is home to many immigrants and has a certain level of poverty and exclusion. TOHU is distinctive in that it combines circus arts with an environmental project as well as projects that include the local community in artistic activities and create jobs for community members.

In developing clusters of cultural facilities within metropolitan areas, such as those of the Saint Michel District, a question remains to be answered: What effects for the development of social and human capital does such clustering have on those who live in peripheral regions of the city, such as the Saint Michel District, where there are issues of poverty and difficulty with “visible minority” population integration into the labor market (Klein & Tremblay, 2010)? This paper seeks to answer this question with the findings of a survey that explores the impacts of the cultural investments in the area. Our findings should provide some initial insights into and tools for measuring the relationship between the development of these concentrations of culture within urban spaces and social and human capital dimensions of the lives of those who live in peripheral districts.

The aim of this paper is thus to determine what conditions are necessary for ensuring an increased participation of the local community in cultural activities, thus contributing to cohesive local economic development rather than exacerbating division within the city, which involves some districts experiencing strong economic development and many cultural manifestations and other districts being left to themselves, with little cultural activity and local development. It is also the aim of this paper to develop a series of indicators for further research on the impact of cultural and creative districts on communities. It is worth noting that the definition of culture adopted in the study is quite broad and includes opportunities provided by the production, promotion, participation and exposition of various forms of art and culture (activities and facilities). These activities and facilities can contribute to the development of new opportunities for the individual, including cognitive dimensions, which lead to the improvement of human capital while bridging and developing connections and thus to a consequent expansion of social capital within the local population.

The article begins by developing a conceptual framework for the study through engaging with the literature on the measurement and impacts of culture-led regeneration. We argue that little research has focused on the way in which these processes positively and negatively affect the human and social capital of populations. The article then presents the methodology for the study and presents the findings. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the research findings and suggestions for future avenues for research.

Conceptual framework: culture and urban regeneration

There has been an increasing amount of debate over the relationship between culture and local development processes, and in this respect, the role of culture in prompting new opportunities for de-industrialized zones. Research within economic, human, spatial and cultural geography has become progressively aware of the different ways in which culture can affect local development (Tremblay, 2006). What has been in some sense misleading is the role such resources play in boosting new opportunities at both

the economic and social levels and how culture plays a key role in the new post-industrial scene.

One of the trends that has characterized the last decade is a massive increase of interest in culture as major policy leverage for urban change (Miles & Paddison, 2005). Considering the difficulties brought about by standard approaches to strategic urban planning, culture has appeared to many to be a smart move in many respects (Evans, 2009). The construction of urban identity (Gimeno Martinez, 2007), the involvement of the local community (Goldbard, 2006), and the attraction of resources and talent (Florida, 2002) are challenges for which traditional tools seemed to fall short in providing credible solutions and for which culture sounded like a promising approach that was likely to introduce inspirational elements, both at the conceptual and at the policy levels (Landry, 2006, 2008). Moreover, in the breakthrough of the post-industrial transition that is deeply changing the ways in which economic and social value are produced and circulated, culture is playing a new, major role and is by many no longer regarded as an economically marginal sector but as one of the potential engines of the emerging experience economy (Scott, 2000; Baum, Yigitcanlar, & O'Connor, 2008) and a major factor in local competitiveness (Currid, 2007, 2010). There is, however, a far from unanimous feeling that this emphasis on culture- and creativity-led urban policies is not adequately warranted by the available evidence and by a convincing background of case studies (Bontje & Musterd, 2009). What seems certain is that culture is not a panacea that somehow magically ‘works’ to make cities cooler, richer, and trendy (Young, 2006) or creative (Peck, 2005). The idea that culture may have substantial effects on the aforementioned dimensions and possibly others is, in principle, not without a rationale, but why, how and under what conditions this occurs is an issue that must be tackled seriously and systematically. Additionally, the impacts of these initiatives on local communities have not been analyzed to a great extent.

The main conflict between culture and urban transformation processes and local communities occurs between the ‘creative class’ and local society values, necessitating reasoning about culture as an instrumental tool for local development. From the creative class point of view, the emphasis on creativity and creative activities stems from the fact that the latter are those who (according to Florida and others) ‘bring the money’ in the current scenario or are a means of pursuing a socioeconomic goal (to make cities thrive). However, from the local community’s point of view, the emphasis is on the social practices of creativity and their meaning: having the opportunity to live a creative life is an end in itself, and all of its further implications come as a second thought (Markusen, 2006; Markusen & Schrock, 2006). The literature on the relationships between culture and local development processes has so far given relatively little attention, both at the theoretical and policy levels, to issues related to local community development or to the effect of culture on the accumulation of human capital (Castello & Domenech 2002; Judoson 2002) and social capital (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote 2002; Putnam 2001), while in our view, these are fundamental issues. This lack of attention is at least partly because a proper conceptualization of the role of culture in shaping the codes of rationality for the production and accumulation of intangible assets is still lacking. As Sacco and Tavano Blessi (2009) indicated, the fundamental condition for a feasible culture-led local development¹ is the presence of social governance mechanisms that encourage individuals and groups to be intrinsically motivated to

¹ By ‘culture-led’ local development, authors are referring to a local development process in which cultural production and participation (both directly and in their strategic complementarity with other forms of knowledge-based productive activities) play a driving role similar to that of education in classical endogenous growth models (see e.g., Aghion and Howitt, 1997).

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