

Creative and Innovation Districts in mid-size European cities: goals, impacts, and future directions



ABSTRACT

This paper explores the urban typologies of the Creative District and the Innovation District in mid-size European cities. These two types of urban districts have some features in common, such as creation of synergies through proximity and focus on urban regeneration, while differing in other aspects, such as their stakeholders and objectives.

Do creative districts always end in gentrification, or are there alternative models? Are innovation districts just corporate business parks with clever branding, or do they create value beyond financial profit?

Hybrid models combining features of both Creative and Innovation districts are possible, and the paper explores several pathways of how such models can emerge.

The paper concludes with recommendations for urban planners, managers, and policy makers.

Keywords: creative district; innovation district; urban development; economic development; mid-size cities

INTRODUCTION

The architect and philosopher Paul Virilio envisaged “the world-city, a sort of omnipolitan periphery” enabled by information and communication technologies, “whose centre is nowhere and circumference is everywhere” (Virilio, 2003). While this prophesy is fulfilled in an overarching sense, the multiple, mutually connected centres of the “world-city” are found in very real urban districts.

To understand the urban typologies of the Creative District and the Innovation District, it is necessary to clearly define each, describing them in economic, social, and spatial terms. On this basis, it would be possible to assess their stated and achieved results and impacts, and recommend policies that support urban development.

CONTRIBUTION OF THIS PAPER

The scientific contribution of this paper is to disambiguate the gap in terminology and understanding between the terms ‘innovation district’ and ‘creative district’ in popular use and the realities of these urban typologies in the European context.

The practical contribution of this paper is to examine the hypothesis that hybrid forms of innovation and creative districts are possible, combining the features of both, to discuss the pathways how this hybridisation has or can take place, and to consider the implications for policy and practice.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Hybrid models combining features of both Creative and Innovation districts are possible, and the paper explores several pathways of how such models can emerge.

METHODOLOGY

Literature review

Semi-structured interviews

Secondary data

Direct observation

RESULTS

Creative districts are usually understood as clusters of creative industry actors located in close spatial proximity, representing sectors such as arts, design, media, entertainment, and their supporting actors.

Innovation districts are similarly characterised as urban areas where key innovation actors are clustered, such as world-class research institutions, leading innovative companies, and a start-up ecosystem including support structures (Katz & Wagner, 2014).

Common features:

1. Focus on urban regeneration

Innovation and creative districts often, but not always, have the shared purpose of regenerating brownfield or otherwise derelict spaces, epitomised by the defunct 19th century factory. Both types of districts feature creative and innovative use, or rather repurposing, of buildings and space.

2. Proximity and diversity as assets

The logic of both innovation and creative districts is that proximity creates opportunity; the spatial clustering of either type of actors enables synergies such as creation and exchange of tacit knowledge, peer-to-peer learning in action and mutual support (Porter, 1998).

3. Place quality

Developing a strong identity of the district, supported by physical infrastructure for walking and other modes of active mobility, ensuring a high-quality, diverse built environment and natural landscape, as well as integration with the urban space surrounding the district are shared objectives.

However, their realisation and the resulting form will lead into different directions, as each type of district will have a certain ‘visual code’ and address somewhat different target groups.

Different features:

1. Purpose:

Innovation districts mean business; they focus on conducting and commercialising R&D, making profit, upscaling of innovations, and attracting investment.

Creative districts focus on creating a safe environment for the creative sector, providing affordable studio and possibly retail spaces, the company of like-minded creatives, and possibly also cultural and tourism value for the host city’s residents and visitors.

2. Stakeholders:

Innovation districts: high technologies, excellent world-class science, large corporations, technology-driven startup environments, and global significance.

Creative districts: focusing on the artists, the creatives in a broader sense, community, and social activists.

3. Investment:

Innovation districts: high-added value, high-stakes research facilities and corporations in industries focused on technology development.

Creative districts: new investment needs to be balanced with affordability of the space for its creative tenants, otherwise the district risks the transition to the next stage: gentrification into a “regular” city district.

Fastenrath et al. propose a new typology, Mission-Oriented Innovation District (MOID), and define it as “an urban area - similar to the size of several blocks or neighbourhoods but smaller than a city - where government, industry, knowledge institutes and civil society are deliberately situated and collaborating in place based, socio-technical innovation to explore, experiment with and scale solutions for addressing societal challenges, all the while working to improve local area revitalisation.”

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

1. Further study of the impact of innovation and creative districts is needed, both in terms of economic value created, but also of their social, cultural, community and spatial implications.

2. In particular, it would be interesting to study whether the strategies, solutions and experiments implemented in innovation or creative districts find further diffusion in the surrounding urban fabric of host cities.

3. The hybridisation of creative and innovation districts into new forms needs to be further studied on the basis of concrete, real-life examples.

CONCLUSION

1. Creative districts as an economic and spatial development strategy seems to be in stagnation or decline, unless they are part of an innovation district. There are several pathways how creative districts and innovation districts can converge explored in this paper.

2. Scale matters for innovation districts, as there must be a ‘critical mass’ of knowledge economy in the host city. The presence of an anchor tenant – a world-class research or innovation institution – is crucial for the existence of an innovation district.

3. The agenda of innovation districts is also changing, and the most advanced districts are looking beyond technological innovation to encompass sustainability, health of natural and built environments, placemaking and community participation.

4. Every city is different, so the transferability of solutions even within one region of Europe can be limited; instead, cases should be studied as inspiration and for the identification of guiding principles, strategies, and approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concludes with economic and spatial-planning policy recommendations for urban planners, managers, and policy makers working with Creative and Innovation districts in mid-size European cities.

1. While larger cities can accommodate a diversity of districts, mid-size European cities need to be clear and strategic about the kinds of activities, industries, and urban typology they aim to develop with a designated ‘district’. Planners need to be very clear as to the definition of what kind of district is being developed, its purposes, stakeholders and objectives. The roles and forms of creative and innovation districts are in flux, and the precise strategy must be designed based on local resources, conditions, and ambitions, supported by national and local policies.

2. The innovation district is still an emerging urban typology, and there are notable differences among the locations so named. The configuration of the innovation district is framed by both the innovation ecosystem and the urban form of the host city, therefore an optimal model is always place-based.

3. The city does not always necessarily need a creative district to support creative industries and actors; there are different ways to solve the need of proximity. Instead of creative districts, cities can provide policy and financial support to “node” type of locations.

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