

Emergent Creative Ecosystems: Key Elements for Urban Renewal Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The paper confronts the spatial concentration of creative activities as an ecosystem, which claims to enhance the dynamic evolution of creative interactions and evolutionary networks of collaboration between entities. Emergent creative ecosystems referred to the spontaneous phenomena, the bottom up development procedure happened in certain urban areas. These urban districts act evidently as stage complexes containing interactive parts, similar to definitive laws of a natural ecosystem. Its organisms do not exist independently but often form interactive groups. Sometimes, single urban species may have pervasive influence on several other entities of this network. The paper examines new key approaches for urban strategies derived from the emergence of creative dynamics, thought the case of Thessaloniki's Valaoritou area; a historic commercial and manufacturing urban district that, after faced the vast industrial decline, has emerged new characteristics. Entertainment activities, café, bars, restaurants have rapidly grew in the area, just after the first one opened. In parallel, there is a concentration of various artist workshops and creative art spaces, a fact that gives to the area a hybrid character.

KEYWORDS

Creative city, creative industry, complex system theory, creative ecosystem, urban renewal strategies, Thessaloniki

INTRODUCTION

The economic value of creative industry has been increasingly recognised in Europe and globally. According to the study "the Economy of Culture in Europe" (KEA, 2006), and the most recent study "The Entrepreneurial Dimension of the Cultural and Creative Industries" (Utrecht School of the Arts, 2010), the economic value of "creative-based industry" has been increasingly recognised and generated around 2.6% of the European GDP in 2003 and employed over 5 million people. The latest research "Building a Digital Economy" (Terra consultants, 2010), estimated that within 2008, creative activities generated 4.5% of the total European GDP. In the recent global financial crisis and its negative effects, either in terms of the

confidence and expectations of investors or in terms of the unemployment, recent developments seem to indicate that the creative industries are not suffering as much as most other sectors.

On the other hand, the key role of place in attracting talent has been also recognized by many researchers. A landmark study by CEOs for Cities (Coleta, 2008) found that 64% of highly mobile global knowledge workers said they were more likely to choose a job because of “where” an organization was located than because of the organization itself. European cities has to play a crucial role for the competitiveness of this growing and flourishing sector and contribute to the European economical competitiveness and cohesion, if their local policies focus to this direction.

Creative economy and creative city concept

Creative industry represents a shift towards the production of culture and creative products and the presence of skilled labour driving the new knowledge and creative economy. There is no a clear or common definition on what professions and activities “creative industry” includes and if there are clear differences between the terms “creative industry”, “creative economy” or “cultural industry”. In Europe, the significance of cultural and creative industry was largely induced by the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) which describes the creative industries as: *“those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.”* (DCMS 2001, p.04). Apart this, various working papers from EU programmes and initiatives from various European countries tried to contribute in a common approach (EU, OMC working group, final report)¹.

The first formulation of ‘creative city’ concept is to be attributed to Bianchini and Landry (1995). That publication arrived in a time that city economy was in crisis affected not only the manufacturing sector. The move of interest in a wider range of services that till then thought to be hardly part of the serious economy, such as culture, entertainment, sport, education, explored the urban economy revival. As Peter Hall noticed, at his preface note in Landry’s and Bianchini’s study, the *“creative city concept provided a seminal channel of thought at a time when existing theories were tired and exhausted”*. This work, taken forward singularly by Landry (2005, 2006; Woods and Landry, 2007), provide an integrated and holistic approach for the cities “transcending narrow thinking” (Landry 2005: p.5) generating a new ‘mindset’. Creativity is the capacity to analyse, unfold and rethinking the urban project. Landry’s approach is to link urban planning with the

¹ “Development Programme for Business Growth and Internationalisation in the Creative Industries 2007-2013” (FI), “KreaNord” (Nordic Creative Industries), “Creative Value – Dutch policy on Culture & Economy” (NL), the “Plan de Fomento de las Industrias Culturales” (ES), the “White Paper on Creativity – towards an Italian model of development” (IT) or the “Third Austrian Report on Creative Industries” (AT) and several others.

requirements of a flexible and changing new environment. His 'toolbox' brings together creative individuals and organisations living in physical networked spaces with strong local identities.

With the publication of Richard Florida's first book, "the rise of creative class" (Florida, 2002), the creative industry defined as a distinguished economy sector. Florida introduces the notion of "creative capital" and explains that the creative capital is immediately connected with the economic growth of a city and the attracting of "creative" human resources, the "creative class". The economic success of a city is determined by the presence and attraction of the 'creative class' which is encompassing a wide range of professionals. He defines this class as those whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content. For Florida, this group shares common characteristics, such as creativity, individuality, diversity, and merit.

The above theories and the increasing presence of creative industry lead new planning approaches for certain urban areas. Culturally led urban development began to appear as a concept in the urban planning literature from the late 1980s (Montgomery, 1990 and 2003) and have been inspired by the cluster's concept (Evans, 2009; Scott, 2000; Ford, 2008) in late 2000s. Creative city and creative class theories, and the generated concepts of creative clusters, creative quarters or creative hubs, still lead flagship urban development projects in Europe and worldwide. Even though the signal motion of "death of distance" has been exaggeratedly used in many cases, the above concepts restore the charm of urban place especially that of the city centres.

Creative ecosystem approach

Creative industry gravitates to places because creative and knowledge workers still require specific locations to work and live. This paper confronts the spatial concentration of creative activities as an ecosystem, which claims to enhance the dynamic evolution of creative interactions and evolutionary networks of collaboration between entities. The system consisted by interlinked creative resources, as human resources, policy makers, creators, professionals and entrepreneurs, intermediaries and knowledge transfer channels and also creativity venues, workspaces and platforms either physical or digital. Like natural ecosystems, creative ecosystems have inputs, throughputs and outputs, operating in open exchange relationship with their environments.

Emergent creative ecosystems referred to the spontaneous phenomena, the bottom up development procedure happened in certain urban areas. These distinguished urban districts act evidently as stage complexes with interactive parts, acting in a way similar to the definitive laws of a natural ecosystem. Urban system's organisms do not exist independently but often form interactive groups. Sometimes, single urban species may have pervasive influence on several other entities of this network. Urban organisms most clearly exhibit those characteristics seemingly unique to natural life: growth, development, metabolism and

reproduction.

Methods discussing this approach incorporate the basic logic and the elements of complex adaptive systems theory. Paul Cilliers (2000, pp. 3-5) argues that complex systems are usually associated with living things which may be a bacterium, a brain or a social system, and gives a description of them throughout a list of ten characteristics: (i) complex elements consist of a large number of elements (ii) a large number of elements are necessary, but not sufficiency to define a complex system (iii) the interaction is rich as any element in the system is affected and affects several others, but the system's behavior is not determined by the exact number of interaction (iv) the interactions themselves are not-linear and small events can causes large results (v) interactions have fairly short range and the information comes from the immediate neighbors but also lo-range interactions is not impossible (vi) the recurrency of the system, means that any interaction may feed back onto itself either directly or indirectly, and the feedback maybe positive or negative (vii) the system is open and maybe difficult to define its boundaries (viii) complex systems operate under far from equilibrium conditions as it has to be in a constant flow of energy to ensure its survival. Equilibrium is another way of death (ix) all complex systems have a history, not only they evolve through time but their past is co-responsible for their present behavior. Any analysis that ignore system's time dimension is incomplete (x) elements in the system are ignorant of the behavior of the system as a whole responding only to what is available to its neighborhood.

Networks of knowledge in a creative urban ecosystem: place matters

A creative ecosystem is characterized by interaction and inter-connectivity of the agents acting within it and also between the system as a whole and its environment. Interdependency is also essential in the cultural and creative economy ecosystem as often the cultural product is the result of collaboration across a variety of creative actors and skills and also across private sector and public funding (Comunian, 2011). The interconnection makes knowledge flows from one actor to another. This knowledge is usually tacit as creative professionals find unique ways to expand their work. Physical interactions is a key factor for knowledge flow, especially for the creative individuals, more than other professionals and that's why the interconnections in an urban creative hub are in the range of neighbourhood, or a street. Street, the "basic infrastructure unit", as Landry notes, is been transformed to the basic knowledge line within a creative area providing distinction, variety and flows (Helgesen, 2010).

THE CASE OF VALAORITOU AREA IN THESSALONIKI

General information / description of the area

The so-called "Valaoritou" area is located in the hard of the historic commercial center of Thessaloniki, given its name from its central Valaoritou Street. Important

commercial centre of the city, already from 19th century, but also during the “gold” Greece’s manufacture era, the area constituted the dynamic heart of the city, hosted basically wholesale fabric and garments, paper storehouses and retail shops, stuffs for domestic use and some spices shops. With the gradual downturn in the industry of the cloth production throughout the country these uses have been reduced, leaving a gap in the economy of the area and many abandoned buildings.

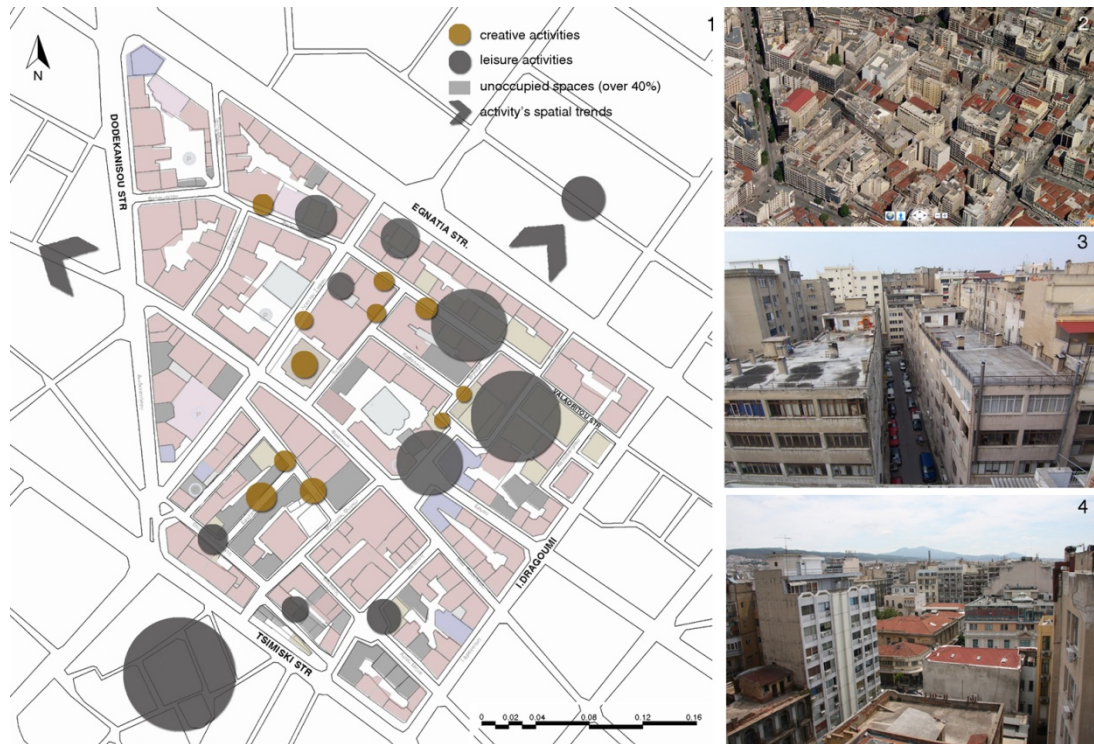


Figure 1. Land uses, creative and leisure activities concentrations.

Figure 2, 3, 4. Area’s density and built environment (photos by Bing Maps and by author)

The area is characterized by an intense building density. The architectural wealth of the area is constituted by buildings from various architectural periods, Eclectic, Art-deco and “industrial-aesthetic” building hosting manufacturing activities. Despite the built density (figures 2-4), a variety of urban elements, such as inner commercial arcades, street arcades and atriums, creates a charming urban environment.

The economic profile of the area, today, it is characterized by constantly developing activities in the tertiary sector, such as trade (retail and wholesale), services (public and private), leisure uses, services and tourism (figure 1). The area began to have life again about five years ago when the first leisure stores, bars, restaurants and cafes opened, attracting mainly people with alternative interests, who like the original character of the area. Recent years, the area is seeing strong growth in leisure, which presents some unique and original features for the data of Thessaloniki. At the same time, the upper floors of abandoned buildings house craft musicians, recording studios, visual art workshops, theatre companies,

art galleries, designers and architects (figures 5, 6). The general appearance of abandonment and building deterioration may have been a factor in attracting creative individuals. The low prices for rents and the abundance of large empty spaces resulted to the attraction of people active in various creative professions.



Figure 5, 6. Young architects' studios
(photos by: www.arqlab.gr, and www.157-173designers.eu)

Principal characteristics that define the Valaoritou area as a creative ecosystem

It is evident by the above description, that Valaoritou area is an emergent bottom-up creative urban quarter, a self organised system that appears the characteristics of a creative ecosystem. In a closer analysis, and according to the above mentioned Cilliers list (2000, pp. 3-5) for the complex systems, we examine the systemic qualities of the area in a group of six principles. Urban areas, especially those that have raised strong social activities and a sense of community are living systems that can be described by this analytic method. The way in which the principles of ecosystem approach can be applied for the study of spatial, social or economic system of urban areas has been questioned before (Creen, 1999 and Comunian, 2011). Creen (1999) argues that although we can have snapshots of the complexity of a system and its behaviour, it is more difficult to address its evolutionary nature. Cilliers (2000, p.2) also comments that *"in cutting-up a system, the analytical method, destroys what it seeks to understand"*. However, this does not mean that understanding of complex ecosystems is hopeless. Except modelling techniques and mathematic methods that allow us to stimulate the complex systems in general, the qualitative approach and in situ research are of special value for the way we understand creative urban ecosystems.

Open system: Valaoritou area has not fixed boundaries; there are no visible, physical elements that set boundaries and isolate the area by its environment. On the contrary, a visitor sees an uninterrupted continuity of the city's dense urban tissue. However, a certain area can clearly be defined by a researcher than knows the district's specific characteristics. The openness of the system is also consisted

to its dynamic to extend, as seems to happens, recently, in the Valaoritou area (image1).

Complex and hybrid system: A large number of elements interact dynamically for setting up the character of the neighborhood (dynamic leisure activity, studios and design offices, the quite invisible activity of craft musician bands hosted in empty spaces, old fashioned stores, and limited presence of residence usually combined with an artist studio). The interaction involves human and non-human elements, different situations and also different phases of development within the same system: the industrial and post-industrial stages of area's evolution, the crowdly side of the café and bars and the decline side of the abandonment empty buildings.

System's recurrency: There are loops of agent interaction as the effect of an activity may feed back onto itself sometime positive, sometime negative. It is characteristic that the vast expansion of the leisure activities (café and bars) in the Valaoritou Str., just two years after the first opening, and the fuss night atmosphere has became unpleasant and threaten the dynamic of the activity itself.

No-linear and no determined system: Although the complexity of interaction, the system is not determine and no-linear. A small event may causes large results and vice versa.



Figure 7, 8. Streets as places of interaction where ideas flow
(photos by: <http://dynamoprojectspace.blogspot.com> and by author)

Emergent and self-organized system: There is no strategic approach, either by the public sector, either by private investors that have a vision for the area and wants to affect it. The system tends to organize itself through spontaneous individual interconnections. These individual connections are in short range, the agents interacts only with their neighborhoods (or with agents that already know), as they are ignorant of the system as a whole. The basic infrastructural unit where flows happen is the street, as Landry notes (Helgesen, 2010), because people are drawn to (or repelled by) places according to their physical, aesthetic, and emotional experience of the street (figures 7, 8). Most agents simply respond to the market demands or to the real estate values. However, the dynamics resulting from these low level interactions mobilize the evolution mechanisms and give space to the

“emergence” of new forms and structures.

System “far from equilibrium”: The system is never fully stable. Its structure and the absence of a local strategic plan imply furthermore its continuous change. There are wide prevalent activities (such as leisure) that following the market demands, appeared stable and growing, and other (such as creative individual activities) that are feeble, even though, the flourishing of the area happens grace to them.

System’s dependence by the history: History of Valaoritou area that lies through the various periods as being the commercial hart of the city of Thessaloniki is co-responsible for its presence behaviors. As a “genius loci”, the area implies in its genetic code, the creative, entrepreneurial and multicultural identity. Furthermore, the architectural value of the diverse built environment is one of the reasons for attracting creative activities.

An area in transition: mind the gap!

We use the ecosystem approach for understanding the character of Valaoritou area and examine how transitions take place in a certain urban context because the area appears this specific spatial, social and economic behaviour. Ecosystem approach allows us to define the systemic dynamics of Valaoritou area, but this is not necessary a success methodology for any other urban neighbourhood. The focus on an ecosystem approach and the further definition of system’s character is a key to reach new solutions for implementing effective and adapted renewal strategies that referred to the identity of place. Valaoritou area assembles important and diverse advantages that constitute the dynamic factors for its evolution into a creative hub, which can influence the city as a whole. At the same time, the area stands in a crucial threshold where various balances threaten to reverse its dynamic and hybrid character:

- Area’s growth causes increasing land values that will displace artists and creative professionals or other uses that might not be able to correspond to the new prices of rents.
- The uncontrolled expansion of leisure activities (especially bars and night clubs) will change the hybrid character of the area and transform it into a mono-functional zone, stable, without any dynamic. This is today the major threat for the area’s evolution as it is going to loose the principal advantage to operate under “far from equilibrium” conditions. The mono-functional equilibrium will be another way for the area's death.
- Moreover, following to the above scenarios, by the completion of a certain life cycle of leisure activity in the urban context (because of the emergence of another attractive hub or under the effects of the economical crisis), the area will lead to a new decline, remaining without any competitive advantages.

A plan that only places structural urban regulations in order to resolve the problems mentioned, ignoring the dynamic systemic nature of the area, it will remains useless. A successful strategic policy approach has to take into account the

living nature of the urban system and the continuing changes that happens. The strategic concept for public intervention in a creative ecosystem area framed to the idea of an organic incremental change, which means that the local stakeholders have to support or generate an action, create a ripple effect, and let the system regain its new equilibrium (figure 9). Building a conceptual framework that articulates the essential components of a living creative ecosystem, as they above mentioned, a strategic policy approach for the Valaoritou area has to consider in:

1. Attracting or retaining creative professionals. Bottom-up initiatives, achieved by the area's agents to strengthen interconnection and networking, organising sub-communities in order to act more effectively within the system's irregularity and to react in the process of change.
2. Attracting flagship creative investments as economic generators (catalysts). It is often a single event, or a specific flagship investment which is seen as the main catalyst for urban development. However, while this provides a simple explanation, there is no understanding of how change is organically embedded in the urban context (Comunian, 2011). The catalyst, according to its dynamic will produce waves of changes within the system that we can not clearly define from the beginning. The changes may be unexpected positive or negative as always there are alternative outcomes and the possibility of failure. According to the new situation resulted after a creative investment has been achieved, new adapted policy measures may be discussed.
3. Building the community strength and support networking and interaction among all system's essential elements. The whole system has to be redefined by the variety of elements (different actors and activities), the sup-communities and the catalysts

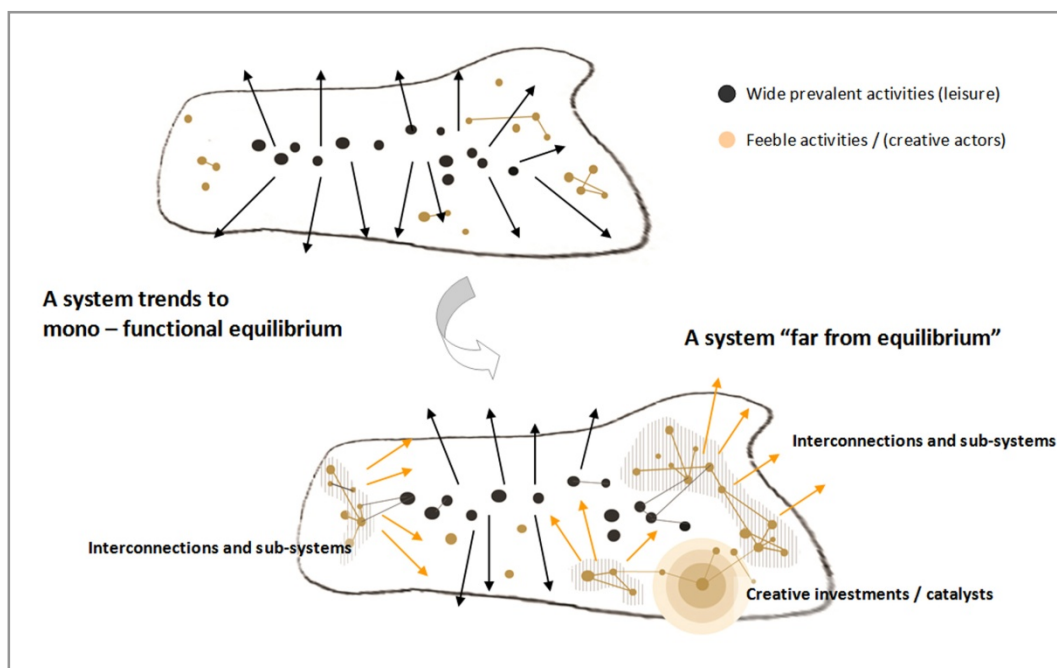


Figure 9. Policy strategy concept: organic incremental changes

CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that we should consider about emergent urban areas attracting creative activities and professionals as dynamic and living ecosystems. This approach provides new key aspects for urban regeneration strategies that may derive solutions to resume regeneration problems such as gentrification effect.

Place matters: Creative activities gravitate to certain urban places. Talented knowledge workers, as people who have choices, know that companies can no longer guarantee their own survival in an unstable economic environment. Less dependent on their companies than they were in the past, knowledge and creative workers have increasingly come to recognize that place works as their first comparative advantage.

Creative urban ecosystems and new policy issues: Creative urban dynamics has to be reached by a new systemic approach either in the field of analysis or for setting up policy strategies. There are no common solutions for creative ecosystems as they are living organisms in a continuing wave of change where their essential elements act in daily positive or negative interaction and feed-back. The knowledge networks in an urban creative ecosystem are networks of tacit knowledge, a flow in action. The policy approach for creative ecosystems framed to the idea of organic incremental change must bridge the gap between the bottom-up investments in the cultural infrastructure, with the understanding of the emergent structures arising from actors' activity in the area.

Sustainability: The ecosystem approach espouses urban regeneration strategies that focus more on enabling self-organization in response to changing and flexible environments. Like natural ecosystems, creative ecosystems have inputs, throughputs and outputs operating in open exchange relationship with its environment. Multiple layers and levels of the system may be integrated to form a complete complex system. Such systemic approach has, by nature, the capacity to ensure sustainable solutions for urban problems.

Acknowledgements

Some of the remarks presented in this paper referred to the Valaoritou area are gathered over research studies and projects carried out in the area between 2010 and 2011 such as:

- *Valaoritou SmArt Green Quarter*, workshop organised during Ecoweek Workshops in Thessaloniki (28/3 – 3/4 2011). Supervisors: P. Nikiforidis, B. Cuomo and P. Tarani, architects. Results available on line: <http://ecoweek.netfirms.com/ecoweek.gr/ecoweek2011/workshops.html>
- *Re-Urban Valaoritou*. Diploma Thesis by A. Christaki, V. Doumba, Department of Spatial Planning and Development, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
- *Creative SMEs' Hubs*, proposal submitted for funding under INTERREG IVC, by Municipality of Thessaloniki / Department of Cultural and Education Affairs. Working team: P. Tarani, P. Remoundos, N. Gountaras, Y. Fallas, A. Kalfopoulos, A. Christaki and V. Doumba.

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