



Is the concept of the cultural district appropriate for both analysis and policymaking? Two cases in Northern Italy



Davide Ponzini^{a,*}, Silvia Gugu^b, Alessandra Oppio^a

^a Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Via Bonardi 3, 20133 Milano, Italy

^b Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Via Bonardi 9, 20133 Milano, Italy

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ABSTRACT

In the past 15 years, cultural and creative industries have been center-stage in international and national debates. Policymakers promoted culture and creativity in dedicated initiatives and the need for evidence-based policy has prompted governments to undertake broad-scope cultural mapping, in order to identify spatially-defined systems of cultural and creative activities, such as clusters and districts. This has specifically been the case in Italy where, currently, the term “cultural district” is indifferently adopted for both analyzing a spatial conformation of cultural production and consumption and for promoting specific policies targeting the social organizations managing these activities. It has not yet been questioned whether these two acceptations should be separated or not. In order to address such a question, this paper reviews the relevant national and international literature, provides an overview of Cultural Districts in Italy explaining the contextual characteristics and constraints. It draws on two in-depth case studies: one mainly focusing on cultural mapping and the other on policy intervention. The authors maintain that it is not appropriate to use the concept as an analytical unit as well as a ready-made policy measure, at least with reference to Italy. Significant distinction should be made since the cultural district model has high explicative relevance but it needs to be reconsidered as a policy instrument.

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Introduction

In the last 15 years, greater attention has been given to the role of cultural heritage and creative industries in fostering innovation and economic development in contemporary cities and regions. From different disciplinary points of view, scientific journals have published special issues on this topic. One can mention, for example, *City, Culture and Society* (Colbert, 2011; Stolarick, Hrac, & Florida, 2010); *Urban Studies* (Miles & Paddison, 2005), *Local Economy* (Wilks-Heeg & North, 2004) and *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004). A wide set of policies have been adopted internationally (Council of the European Union, 2007; European Commission, 2010; UNDP/UNCTAD, 2010; UNESCO, 2006). Most notably, the European Commission's Creative Europe program was

announced in late 2011 (European Commission, 2013). It aims at fostering cultural production and diversity in Europe by providing financial and informational support. The UNCTAD Creative Economy Program was started in the mid 2000s with the purpose of supporting governments' action towards creative production and economic development, building consensus and advocacy networks for this sector. National governments in most Western countries have undertaken similar initiatives.

Under this broad umbrella, the pressure for evidence-based policy has fueled an increased interest in mapping the existing urban and regional concentrations of cultural production and consumption (i.e. cultural mapping – a way to collect quantitative and spatial data in support of cultural and creative industries policies; Matarasso, 1999; Pratt, 2004). In Italy, peculiar urbanization patterns and the tight relationship of cultural heritage with the creative industries (Bertacchini & Borriane, 2013; Lazzeretti, Boix, & Capone, 2008), have created a distinct framework for cultural mapping, gravitating around identifying localized cultural ecosystems broadly labeled as “Cultural Districts” (Santagata, 2002), from now shorten as CD.

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Architecture and Planning, Politecnico di Milano, Via Bonardi 3, 20133 Milano, Italy. Tel.: +39 02 23995427; fax: +39 02 239935.

E-mail addresses: davide.ponzini@polimi.it (D. Ponzini), silvia.g.wencil@gmail.com (S. Gugu), alessandra.oppio@polimi.it (A. Oppio).

Specifically the domination of CD discourse in Italian cultural policy is paralleling a significant number of international policy measures and academic contributions that have evolved around the concepts of “cultural cluster” and “cultural quarters”. These terms are used for both detecting and analyzing the spatial organization of cultural production and consumption, as well as for designing policy measures for supporting them, enhancing their spillover effects, and even for creating new organizations and agglomerations. The differences between the two acceptations of the cultural cluster concept have not been thoroughly clarified in the international debate. Our work intends to question whether it is appropriate to couple these two significantly different meanings and it calls for greater consideration.

After a review of the current literature on CDs and clusters, their analytical and policy approaches, the paper describes the Italian cultural policy context, in which a rich and widespread material and immaterial heritage is considered a natural place for linking cultural policy to local development initiatives. Then, after explaining the methodological approach, the paper analyzes two CD initiatives in Northern Italy: one relied mainly on the mapping and analysis of existing cultural assets and was carried out by the Veneto Regional Government, and the other coupled a more interactive approach (including the use of grants) for promoting CDs in non-metropolitan areas of Lombardy.

Of course it is not possible to generalize the findings of two case studies only, but, according to this evidence, the authors maintain that it is not appropriate to use the concept of CD as an analytical unit and a ready-made policy measure, at least with reference to the Italian context. In order to improve the debate on CD analysis and policymaking, significant consideration should be given to critical policy conditions, such as the agenda, timeframe and political interaction implied, the type of knowledge produced and used in the policymaking and implementation process.

Analyzing and planning Cultural Districts: the current debate and its limitations

The growing political attention paid to the clustering of cultural and creative industries in the European policy context has not been easily transferred to national policy arenas and practice. Instead, the regional and urban levels have emerged as a more suitable base for such policies (Andres & Chapain, 2013; Chapain, Clifton, & Comunian, 2013), precisely due to the propensity of cultural activity to cluster at urban and regional scales. Recent contributions have shown the importance of explicitly relating cultural clusters to economic development (Cooke and Lazzeretti, 2008; Scott, 1997, 2004). The terms used to label the models describing spatial organization of cultural production and consumption are not particularly useful in classifying the differences among the so-called cultural clusters, districts or quarters. They are oftentimes interchanged to describe similar phenomena (Cooke, 2005). Nonetheless, these labels provide interesting insights into the spatial organization of cultural institutions and production, making more evident and relevant links between cultural assets, creative activity and economic development, and urban-regional transformations.

In Walter Santagata's definition (2002, 11), CDs are described as “geographically clustered networks of interdependent entities defined by the production of idiosyncratic goods based on creativity and intellectual property”. Similarly, while international definitions refer to a CD as an area of a city, or a neighborhood, other Italian definitions emphasize the relational aspect of CDs (Valentino, 2003), and as a “mix of top-down planned elements and emergent, self-organized activities” (Sacco, Tavano Blessi, & Nuccio, 2008, p. 3). The term Cultural District has been used to designate various types of cultural clusters, from neighborhood level (Mommaas, 2004; Stern & Seifert, 2007, 2010) to city-wide (Frost-Kumpf, 1998) and regional networks (Le Blanc, 2010). Several authors have highlighted the need for greater conceptual clarity by making distinctions and classifications of CDs: Cooke and Lazzeretti (2008) underscored the need to conceptually distinguish between creative businesses clusters and cultural amenity concentrations; Stern and Seifert (2007) pointed out the difference between ‘natural’ Cultural Districts and policy-driven ones. Walter Santagata (2002) distinguished between industrial, institutional, museum and metropolitan CDs.

In general terms, the academic literature has examined CDs by following two broad directions: one aimed at mapping and explaining the clustering of cultural industries or activities (e.g.: Cooke and Lazzeretti et al., 2008; Lazzeretti et al., 2008; Lorenzini, 2011; Pratt, 2008; Santagata, 2002; Scott, 1997) and the other concerned with urban planning and cultural policy interventions for the stimulation or creation of cultural clusters as areas for cultural consumption and production (e.g.: Frost-Kumpf, 1998; Le Blanc, 2010; Mommaas, 2004; Sacco et al., 2008; Stern & Seifert, 2010). The two acceptations are often tacitly adopted and explored across policy and geography studies, without pointing out the similarities, differences and implications that mapping has for policy making and vice versa. This is particularly evident if one considers the ways the same term is used in distant contexts such as Northern America, Europe and Asia. For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, a set of public, private and nonprofit organizations jointly created the Mount Vernon CD in order to revitalize the historic city center by leveraging the great concentration of cultural amenities and historic sites (Ponzini, 2009). In Europe, many cities like Vienna (Cultural Quarter), Berlin (Museum Island) and others, have fostered the clustering of museums and cultural amenities in given areas of the city following the district rationale which in most cases started from cultural mapping (for significant set of cases, see: Roodhouse, 2010). Rising capital cities in the Gulf area as well as in South East Asia have been deliberately using this label as a ready-made policy formula for creating new venues for global cultural tourism (most notably: the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong – see Raco & Gilliam, 2012 – or the Saadiyat Island Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, UAE – see Ponzini, 2011).

In this framework, among the different analytical techniques, cultural mapping has been instrumental in identifying agglomerations of cultural activity and assets, or what Stern and Seifert (2010) would call “natural Cultural Districts”. It is also widely acknowledged as a step in the cultural planning process (Evans & Foord, 2008; Higgs &

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