

# Regions

THE VOICE OF THE MEMBERSHIP

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## CREATIVE REGIONS



- Creative industries and the regions
- Role of networks in high technology locations
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attractiveness and revitalising local economies through the clustering of cultural and creative industries at the local and regional level. Nevertheless, the EYCI is only a communication platform and an awareness-raising campaign with no additional funding. Against this background, a crucial step forward could be a best practice transfer of strategies to stimulate creativity from progressive Member States like the UK with its comprehensive creativity approach 'Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy' or Germany with its 'Initiative für Kultur- und Kreativwirtschaft.'

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## CREATIVE SPACES: THE ROLE OF THE UNDERGROUND AND THE PROSPECT OF LOCK-IN IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Rachel Granger and Christine Hamilton, Coventry University, UK



### Coventry's Institute for Creative Enterprise

Motivated by thinking that culture can be promoted as a driver of economic development, there has been widespread policy consensus about the importance of developing culture and the creative economy as wider attempts to promote growth in cities and regions. While the impact of creative industries differs from area to area as do the conditions and resources for this, several towns and cities have been quick to recognise and exhort the benefits of creative sectors and creative workers and to invest heavily in their creative offer: investing in creative industries as a subset of the cultural economy; showcasing their cultural assets, and implementing strategies to attract creative professionals and retain graduates.

ICE, Coventry's Institute for Creative Enterprise represents one such creative project established to retain creative graduates from Coventry University but also nurturing arts-based enterprise in Coventry and the wider West Midlands region. Since the West Midlands creative economy is now growing at three times the national average – 36% against a

national average of 13% (WMRO, 2009) and with visual and performing arts, and audio-visual sub-sectors accounting for more than half of the region's creative firms (54.2%) Coventry's arts sector has become an area of local, regional and national importance.

ICE, launched in June 2008, is an initiative of Coventry University but like several projects of its kind secured public investment and also enjoys strong ties with stakeholder organisations. ICE is located in a converted warehouse and former printers in the centre of the city and on the edge of the University's business park. As an initiative, it is best described as an educational and industrial flagship, which is home to educational provision from the University's School of Art and Design, houses creative workers and enterprises through its tenancy and shared spaces, but also promotes new creative enterprise through incubation space and business support. As such, it is typical of many creative

projects developed in recent years that seek to bridge the world of education or learning with that of practice and enterprise; contributing to the West Midlands' aspiration to be a 'learning region'.

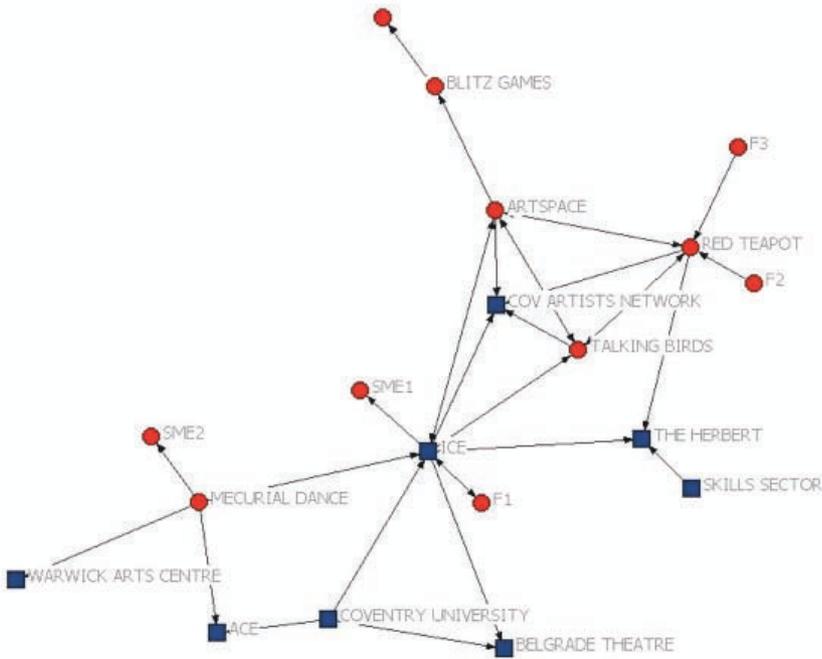
### Creative spaces

Learning Regions, Post-Industrial Complexes and Regional Innovation

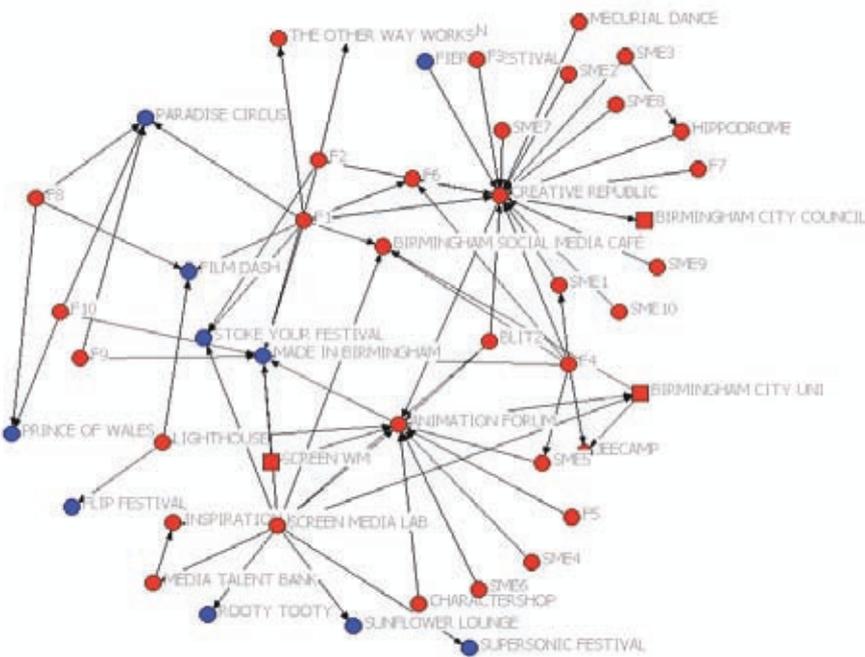


*Social interaction in the ICE Cafe*

A relational map of creative networking in Coventry



A relational extract of visual and digital arts in Birmingham



Systems, which have been much admired and debated in *Regional Studies*, are predicated on the idea of benefits that accrue from proximity – as relations between firms, workers, and institutions – that drive creativity and innovation through a process of socialisation and exploitation. As such they are able to shape that same locality’s growth potential. In a business context, the role of proximity and location has become central to the strategies of firms; competitiveness is seen as being less a product of the firm than the assembled resources, networks

and inputs that are localised in a specific place (Dicken, 1999). As a result, urban areas are increasingly conceived of as places where immaterial exchanges are facilitated, which leads them to be propitious in the creation of new ideas and knowledge. For cities unable to offer this same ‘buzz’ (Stoper and Venables, 2004) or recreate the same haphazard contact between people and firms, creative projects like ICE have been a means of anchoring growth in creative sectors and for places to compete nationally. In Coventry (population 300,000) in which

there is an absence of an especially rich urban environment, ICE has attempted to create the conditions and infrastructure needed for socialisation to occur in the arts sector. The building has been designed not only as a functional, physical centre for educational and business purposes but also to create the space for the socialisation of ideas between actors, through a series of well-designed spaces such as the café area.

As ICE is barely into its second year of operation, is it too early to draw conclusions about its role in the local and regional economy, and art world? While ICE is confident about the success of its early work, it has sought to understand the functional geographies of the sector in further detail, to understand something of the support needed for creativity to occur locally. In this sense, while there have been recent attempts to understand the spatial characteristics of the sector using location analysis (such as spatial mapping using SIC codes and the calculation of location quotients), the use of relational mapping techniques has been powerful in providing a more nuanced view of the local arts sector.

### Mapping Coventry’s creative spaces: Underground scenes and lock-in

Working initially with 133 local actors, Coventry University has been building a detailed picture of how arts-based activities are created and developed in the city, where, and by whom? While a number of cultural assets or spaces have been identified previously as being important to the sector, including the Belgrade Theatre, Warwick Arts Centre, and even Coventry University, it is interesting to note that other spaces and networks are emerging, having been revealed by artists and workers as being ‘highly significant’ drivers in arts-based activity. These include an array of formal and publicly known spaces such as the Herbert Art Gallery and the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry and Warwick Universities, and the Arts Council West Midlands, but were found to be used largely by public sector actors. However, these were supplemented by a more interesting set of semi- and informal spaces, highly significant to arts-based activity and used and frequented by freelance workers, artists, and microbusinesses. These included locally run theatre companies and galleries such as Theatre Absolute, The Lock Gallery and Artspace,

independent bars and cafes such as the Tin Angel, and Red Teapot – an artists' network and online community.

Drawing on the work of Patrick Cohendet (Cohendet et al, 2009), it has been possible to conceive of an underground of spaces and activity occurring in Coventry (spreading into nearby Birmingham), which is less occupied by public sector actors, is informal in nature, and while well-known within the sector can often be hidden from view. Such underground spaces create an important space for interaction within the arts world but also raise issues about the sustainability of the sector. For example, there are concerns about the extent to which Coventry's public arts facilities are favourable or useful for arts enterprise given the proclivities of artists and small businesses who converge in underground scenes. In other words is the arts sector being constrained rather than assisted by public investment in centres and institutes like ICE and also by the City's paucity of informal spaces?

The second concern is around the prospect of creative lock-in within Coventry's arts sector due to the apparent domination of public organisations and the relative absence of outward links to firms (SME) and freelance workers (F). While the relational map of Coventry is an extract from the wider network, it highlights the difficulties encountered when a network is heavily subscribed by the public sector, isolated from the other sub-sectors, and when highly interconnected by too few organisations or initiatives.

By comparison, Birmingham's art sector (largely audio visual), which is connected to Coventry via Blitz Games, reveals greater institutional thickness or diversity of actors, which are embedded around pubs, festivals, music shops (underground) and forums and partnerships (middle ground), and which serve to create a richer and more diverse arts scene. Of particular interest is the way forums and partnerships (such as Creative Republic and Animation Forum), online blogs (Paradise Circus and Made in Birmingham), and festivals act as the interface for different parts of the sector, which enable the sector as a whole to interconnect, and which is something not yet evident in Coventry.

### New Challenges – New Steps

Returning to the issue of Coventry and Coventry's Institute for Creative Enterprise, while the plans for ICE were



*Electric Wharf live-work community of creative people, Coventry*

to provide an enhanced educational experience for creative students and to nurture creative enterprise through business support, it is clear that ICE could play a greater role as a catalyst for underground and middle ground activities for the city as a whole. Drawing on this relational analysis of the arts sector, it could be argued that Coventry might benefit from ICE's enhanced role as an enabler of additional underground arts activity in the city, which would lead to greater institutional thickness. This is because while it has a specific function tied to arts-based education and enterprise, armed with the knowledge that businesses and artists favour underground scenes rather than formal public spaces in the actual process of creating and exchanging ideas, ICE's role (albeit

educational and business-based) could usefully support the sector by enabling more informal support infrastructure. In this respect, ICE's involvement in the re-launch of the City's *Emerge* newsletter into a semi-formal creative network for the city, its work on virtual and informal spaces through its 'ICECubes' project, and ongoing work with private developers to invest in residential, commercial, and leisure space for artists and creative enterprises (e.g. Electric Wharf, FarGO) is suggestive of a new and heightened role for creative centres and institutes. The challenge for Coventry as with other cities aspiring to be regional and national centres of creative activity, is to enable investment in underground scenes without facing the dilemma of being overly public-led or public-dominated.

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# Regions

THE VOICE OF THE MEMBERSHIP

Over the last decade, the creative and cultural industries have received increasing attention from researchers, practitioners and policy makers alike both in the UK and internationally. 2009 was designated European Year of Creativity and Innovation to underline the role anticipated for creativity in the future economic development of European nations. A number of questions around measuring the creative economy and understanding its idiosyncratic spatial dimensions – and regarding creative industries and regional policy more generally – remain in need of more thorough investigation. The Regional Survey in this issue, guest edited by Nick Clifton, Caroline Chapain and Roberta Comunian, comprises eight short papers that attempt to do this. The work emanates from the three seminars organised by the RSA Research Network on Creative Industries and the Regions. In particular, the role of place at various levels (city, neighbourhood, regions) in fostering creativity and creative production is examined in contributions from the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic and France.

High-tech business is the theme jointly shared by our In Depth and Research Notes articles. In the In Depth, Helen Lawton Smith examines the formal and informal networks that exist in the knowledge economy situated between Oxford and Cambridge. She looks at their functions and the role of regional policy in their funding. Rupert Waters, in Research Notes, then writes of the advantageous labour market opportunities to those who work in highly skilled clusters. His case study is that of computer scientists working in Cambridge compared with those in the wider East Anglian region of the UK.

The News section centres on the RSA's Research Networks with reports on the recent activities of three of these as well as announcements on the launch of two new Research Networks.



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