

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AND URBAN REGENERATION. CASE STUDY: THE OLD TRUMAN BREWERY IN LONDON

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Introduction

Promoting a Sustainable Economy, in terms of cities or regions able to spur economic dynamism and create jobs implies from a public sector policy perspective building a tight network of different initiatives. One of them, with an outstanding importance for the past decade has been the strong support of the so-called "creative industries", recognized as an emerging economic sector in western cities, particularly in those large and medium-size ones, and involving activities ranging from performing arts, advertising, architecture, design or fashion, to music, radio, TV, film or software.

Those sectors have been particularly seen as urban industries and have historically flourished in low rent, full of character, disadvantaged neighborhoods. First 'pioneers' marked the starting point for the gentrification and the so called "regeneration" of those urban enclaves. Moreover, a cause-effect relationship that has often put these companies on the agenda of many governments committed to designing effective urban policies.

CIEs for the promotion of emerging industries and city regeneration

One of the flagships projects for the promotion of creative industries and the regeneration of disadvantaged neighborhoods has been the development of the so-called "Creative and Innovative Spaces" (CIEs), a mix of business support centers or urban technology parks and culture centers. Those facilities have sought to accommodate these companies and become the heart for a cluster of creative industries that would eventually boost their competitiveness and create new jobs.

The development of those CIEs as a tool for economic development and reinforcement of emerging industries as well as city regeneration, became popular years ago due to some examples widely recognized as "success stories" which therefore were and still are being copied all over the world. Something like "The Silicon Valley" which almost everyone has ambitioned to replay in its city or region, as if the spaces on their own and not those who use them -people-, would be the reason of success...

However, to what extent the use of ECIs as a tool for the growth of creative industries work? Which are the foundations on which such a project should be built and the key factors that could increase its chances of success? Although it is certainly difficult to make general statements, we will try to launch the debate through an example of success as a project with no so clear balance though as a tool for urban regeneration. This is the case of The Old Truman Brewery (TOTB), in Bricklane (East London), just in a few minutes' walk from Liverpool Street.

Case-study: The Old Truman Brewery, lights and shadows of a successful project

TOTB owes its name to a former brewery, Truman Hanbury Buxton & Co., who opened in 1666 and closed in 1989, victim of the rise of lager -they used to produce the popular ales- or the difficulties of access to the site for large lorries. After that, business people of the area devoted to the import-export of textiles, decided to buy the site and hire several professionals with experience in event management in order to convert the old factory into a center which would combine fashion and music tightly related in London. That was 1995.

The key to success of TOTB was of course the project but also a mix of the right ingredients. A place that would host grassroots, independent expressions of art and culture, free for people to create,

where everyone had the opportunity to develop their own initiatives and benefit from the proximity of other entrepreneurs in complementary fields. Artists ultimately that would also contribute to the prestige of the site or the venue itself and would therefore be better for all, tenants and management.

But how did it achieve this vision? The scheme was as follows: To achieve the critical mass accumulating enough people with high talent in each of the fields, from which achieved notoriety as a reference space and generate the snowball effect that would attract many more artists and visitors. In other words, an effect that would eventually led to the establishment of a real creative cluster in East London. It succeeded and during the good times (1998-1999) more than 200 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) located in the venue, a place where large events of big corporations such as Nike or Ericsson would take place in order to showcase their latest products. attracted by the 'cool image' of the site.

Bricklane: Regeneration of East London parallel to the rise of TOTB as a creative hub

Bricklane in 1994 was a neighborhood with serious problems of deprivation and crime. Historically first recipient of successive generations of immigrants arrived in the capital and a place where those who succeeded would prefer to leave. In brief a place in trouble but also a center of great cultural diversity (Jews and Bangladeshis in particular) with charming places where you can enjoy a good curry and one of the biggest and best preserved Georgian residential architecture (1720-1840).

Precisely diversity, location or the historic character and authenticity of this place, coupled with low rental prices made it attractive to many creative youngsters, something that grew steadily in parallel with the success of TOTB. New 'tenants' thus contributed to the tremendous growth in the housing market and, therefore, in changing the character of the neighborhood probably forever (gentrification). After pioneers, professionals were attracted to this neighborhood only a few minutes from the City, converting old leather workshops into luxury lofts while at street level, Indian and Bengali restaurants proliferated (which went from under 10 to over 40 in a few years) with its famous curry, to the detriment of a more diverse retail network that had characterized earlier periods.

Meanwhile TOTB lived back to the community. None of the young & creative belonged to the local Bengali community but to the white-British usually from East London or other areas of the capital. Therefore, it could be argued that as such infrastructure (ECI) is not designed to take advantage of pre-existing capabilities from the district or to address their problems, local community would not be in best position to make the most of the opportunities generated.

CONCLUSIONS

YES to ECIs as a tool for the support of creative industries (or other emerging sectors), but better from a solid foundation to ensure best outcomes in terms of social and economic development. Creative industries, professionals of culture, fashion, performing arts and architecture, need integral support, which does not necessarily need to be built upon a physical infrastructure. Funding, training or the rise of cultural awareness in order to generate more demand in the market, are just some of the fields in which it could be even more important to act.

A holistic view of economic promotion initiatives in this area therefore requires an exercise with great caution in assessing the extent to which an infrastructure is essential, in order to avoid building and maintenance costs that could eventually put at risk spending in other areas of action mentioned before . In the case of TOTB, it was a generation of creative youngsters looking for a place to thrive in London, so maybe that's what should have the absolute priority to try to replicate. A 'creative boom' for which would not be essential the existence of an infrastructure such as TOTB which many have tried to replicate in other cities all around the world.

With these considerations in case of focusing on the development of ECI's, the experience of TOTB suggests as appropriate to develop a management plan which would have as main objective to achieve sufficient critical mass to enable the creation of a real cluster of creative activities. That means, best talented people with a projection in specific disciplines from which to generate the 'snowball effect' that would cluster in the area a number of other initiatives seeking access to the benefits of this new location.

NO to the ECIs as tools for urban regeneration. There are serious doubts about the real contribution of these ECIs to the regeneration of neighborhoods in decline. What some experiences seem to show is that these projects were used to pave the way for the revaluation of the property market and attracting visitors from around the city, encouraging residents moving to other areas or diluting their problems as a result of the influx of middle class from outside the area. Therefore, we could conclude that the ECIs although providing services to the entire city, have not contributed as they were supposed to, to tackling the most important challenges of regeneration of deprived neighborhoods such as Bricklane, which was none other than providing solutions (employment, leisure opportunities, etc.) to problems of residents themselves. As these are not taken into account, their involvement is not achieved, or people are not subjects of their own "regeneration", we could argue that there would be still room for improvement in the use of culture or creative industries in city regeneration policies.

Picture: Ekain Laka

There are no comments yet.