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## Spatial quality of cultural production districts

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 District development as an urban economic development strategy

This dissertation seeks to explore how and why features of within-city districts are important in location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. Do a district's facilities, aesthetics, parks, and the presence of many other creative entrepreneurs matter in their location decisions? If so, why? It is examining these questions through in-depth interviews, including questions that used maps and pictures, that extends the literature with detailed empirical evidence using a policy-driven, interdisciplinary approach. By providing detailed empirical evidence from three distinct disciplinary perspectives, this thesis intends to provide useful planning knowledge for cities that aim to enhance their economies through arts-based economic development strategies.

Attracting and retaining highly-skilled people, including creative entrepreneurs, is an urban policy goal for cities across the globe (Currid, 2009; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Recently, a new means to achieve this goal has been district development. Numerous Western cities expend considerable effort to attract creative entrepreneurs, such as artists, architects, and designers, to districts dedicated to cultural production. Part of their rationale is that creative entrepreneurs are seen as agents of neighborhood revitalization, and they enhance urban competitiveness in increasingly knowledge-based urban economies (Currid, 2009, Jacobs, 1961, Markusen & Gadwa, 2010, Markusen & Johnson, 2006, Lloyd, 2002, Stern & Seifert, 2010). Yet, evidence on effective planning of cultural production districts as part of an arts-based economic development strategy is scarce. Which place-based characteristics would draw creative entrepreneurs to certain districts?

Districts dedicated to cultural production are usually termed creative or cultural quarters, hubs or zones. This dissertation focuses on such districts, and uses the term “cultural production districts.” Certainly, cultural production districts are different from planned entertainment districts, which feature large cultural venues and are dedicated to cultural consumption. In contrast, cultural production districts are concentrations of small creative firms and artists, who are mostly involved in producing mobile cultural products such as visual arts, architecture, design, and media (for a more detailed definition, see Section 3.2.1 in Chapter 3). Dutch examples of cultural production districts, unplanned or planned, include neighborhoods such as the NDSM Wharf in Amsterdam, the Fashion Quarter in Arnhem, and the Ebbinge Quarter in Groningen. Over the past ten years, these districts have drawn creative services and arts scenes. International examples include the Northern Quarter in Manchester and the Cultural Industries Quarter in Sheffield in the United Kingdom (Brown, O’Connor, & Cohen, 2000), Speicherstadt in Hamburg, Germany (Overmeyer, 2010), Multimedia Gulch in San Francisco, and Silicon Alley in New York (Pratt, 2002).

Within this study, I define creative entrepreneurs as owners of firms in both the commercial and nonprofit creative sectors. Examples of such sectors, which were also included in my respondent selection, are architects, advertising agencies, graphic designers, filmmakers, photographers, and visual artists. These economic activities are dedicated to producing goods and services with mainly aesthetic and symbolic value (for a more detailed definition, please see Section 3.2.2 in Chapter 3). Creative entrepreneurs are seen as agents for neighborhood revitalization and as enhancing urban competitiveness in increasingly knowledge-based urban economies (Currid, 2009; Lloyd, 2002; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Markusen & Johnson, 2006; Stern & Seifert, 2010). Creative district development targets urban neighborhoods as new hotspots for creative entrepreneurs to live and work. Thus, the development of cultural production districts can be seen as a new type of an arts-based economic development strategy.

## **1.2 Relevance for practice and theory**

To date, location theory for creative industries has paid little attention to cultural production districts. It is not clear whether, and how, physical and socio-economic features of districts contribute to location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. Studies have established that their location decisions depend on

a complex variety of factors. These studies have mostly focused on location factors at the spatial scale of the urban region or the firm's premises, such as path-dependent urban production systems or features of office buildings (for reviews, see Musterd, Bontje, Chapain, Kovacs, & Murie, 2007; Smit, 2010; Trip & Romein, 2009). More specifically, the literature provides only limited knowledge about the value of a district's professional facilities, aesthetics, public spaces, and personal services to creative entrepreneurs. These are all tangible features of districts, and the nuts-and-bolts of urban planners working on cultural production districts.

At the same time, creative entrepreneurs, particularly artists, gravitate toward central city districts (Evans, 2009; Hall, 2000; Markusen, 2004; Scott, 2007), including in the Netherlands (Blanken & Koops, 2005; Manshanden & Jonkhof, 2005; Municipality of Amsterdam, 2010). While these observations suggest that district features may matter to creative entrepreneurs, only a small body of research has explored whether and how a relationship exists between location decisions and a crucial level of spatial scale that falls between cities and buildings: districts.

This small body of research has found that several assets of neighborhoods correlate to concentrations of creative entrepreneurs: inexpensive real estate; central city location; diversity in class, household structure, and ethnicity; and amenities such as art schools and artist centers (Jackson et al., 2003; Lloyd, 2004; Markusen, 2006; Stern & Seifert, 2010). Additionally, some studies suggest that the visual assets of neighborhoods contribute to location decisions by creative entrepreneurs (Drake, 2003; Municipality of Amsterdam, 2006).

However, such a correlation does not explain a causal relationship. The finding that districts with concentrations of creative entrepreneurs often have these physical and socio-economic features does not show us *why* these creative entrepreneurs decided to locate there. Did these features indeed play a role in this decision? Or is the concentration of creative entrepreneurs a socio-economic district feature that in itself further attracts creative firms? Based on cluster theory, a concentration of creative entrepreneurs could function as a creative cluster at the district spatial scale, which is in itself attractive to creative firms. Thus, although these correlations indicate the kind of district features that creative entrepreneurs seem to find attractive, further empirical evidence is needed.

A causal analysis of the relationship between these district features and location decisions by creative entrepreneurs will also enhance the confidence of local policymakers in assessing their plans for cultural production districts. Local

policymakers and planners assess such plans from their various professional perspectives, such as urban design, economic geography, or urban geography.

Questions for planning practitioners and urban designers involved in place-making include: Does place matter? Should a district offer a certain look and feel to be attractive to work in? And why would that matter: for inspiration, or to show you are a connoisseur?<sup>1</sup>.

From an economic geography perspective, the questions concentrate more on networks of creative entrepreneurs within localities: Would creative entrepreneurs be primarily drawn to certain districts for socio-economic reasons? Would they value the opportunity of inter-firm collaborations and planned and unplanned face-to-face contacts with other creative people within walking distance?

Alongside visual features and business networks, creative entrepreneurs may also be drawn to certain districts for their amenities supporting an easy integration of activities for work and private life. Creative entrepreneurs are an interesting subject at the intersection of the fields of location theory of creative entrepreneurs and gentrification studies with a consumption-side perspective. Creative workers are found to mix work and private life: They rely on their social life to advance their careers. Gallery openings, movie premiers, and other nightlife scenes provide informal networking sites and opportunities to meet new and existing clients and collaborators (Currid, 2007). Perhaps, then, creative entrepreneurs seek out a location because they can work at home, or in the same neighborhood, and so make such a dynamic life easier. If so, to what extent will they take into account their family-related time-space constraints in their location decisions, in particular when they live with children?

### 1.3 Goal and research questions

In view of these knowledge gaps and questions in academic and planning circles, a current challenge in the field related to location theory of creative firms is to obtain insight into whether, how, and why physical and socio-economic features of districts influence the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. The purpose of this thesis is to respond to this challenge.

The main research question of this dissertation is:

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<sup>1</sup> These questions were often discussed in conversations with planning practitioners and urban designers (including those who have co-financed the fieldwork with NICIS in 2008) that I have conducted for this study.

*What is the influence of perceived physical and socio-economic features of districts on the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs?*

Its key subquestions are:

1. *Are physical and socio-economic features of districts perceived as important by creative entrepreneurs in their location decisions?*
2. *Which salient characteristics of the physical and socio-economic features of districts are perceived by creative entrepreneurs as contributing to their location decisions?*
3. *Why are these perceived physical and socio-economic features of districts important in their location decisions?*
4. *To what extent are the physical and socio-economic features of districts perceived as important by creative entrepreneurs in their location decisions vis-à-vis other location factors?*

Chapter 2 lays out the findings of a broad-based review of three streams of literature concerning the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. It also offers the definitions of the main concepts used in this dissertation, and an extensive basis for the main and key research questions and research design of this dissertation. In responding to these research questions in Chapter 3, 4 and 5, I aim to inform economic developers and planning practitioners with operational knowledge for their own planning practice: How to recognize districts with physical and socio-economic features that creative entrepreneurs will find attractive? How do you know it when you see it? And why are these perceived district features important in their location decisions? These chapters delve deeper in the literature of the specific topic of the chapter, as each chapter relates the main research question to a specific subliteration in the field of location theory of creative industries. Further, these chapters offer conclusions, and research and policy implications regarding these specific topics in more detail than the Chapter 6, which offers over-all conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

## **1.4 Research methods**

To explore whether and how physical and socio-economic features of districts matter in the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, my interview team con-

ducted 63 interviews with creative entrepreneurs in three districts in the Netherlands: the Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam, the Lloyd Quarter in Rotterdam, and the Hortus Quarter in Groningen. These districts accommodate relatively more firms in creative industries than do other districts within the same cities. As a second criterion, since my study is exploratory, I selected districts having a broad range of physical features that emerged from the literature review, such as professional facilities, aesthetics, public spaces, and personal services.

I chose for semi-structured, in-depth interviews for two reasons. First, in-depth interviews are very useful in explorative research, if the general research question is about what exactly, and why: Which precise types of district features matter in the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, and why? By employing a qualitative mode of enquiry, I intended to expand the literature with detailed empirical evidence. Second, to provide usable planning knowledge on tangible district features, I also sought to uncover the specific characteristics that the interviewees perceived as present in their district. Therefore, I also included innovative questions about the kind of district qualities that were currently important for their firm: in addition to textual questions, one question was aided by a district map, and one involved picture selection.

Chapters 3 - 5 offer more detailed explanations of the methods used in this research: *where* the fieldwork took place, *why* it was carried out through case studies and interviews, and *who* were interviewed. As Chapter 2 argues, the research questions raised should be tackled in an interdisciplinary research, at the intersection of three different fields of theory. As such, each chapter relates the location behavior of creative firms to a different literature sub-stream in geography: place-making, creative cluster theory, and gentrification theory with a consumption-side perspective (see Figure 1.1). These three different sub-literatures each have somewhat different habits and requirements for describing the methods used. Consequently, each chapter describes to a different extent the details of these methods.

To avoid repetition within this introduction of background information and the research design presented in the following chapters, the reader is referred to certain subsections in the subsequent chapters for more specific information about the following topics:

### **Selection of research sites and their physical and socio-economic features**

I selected three research districts based on three criteria: The primary determinant for selecting districts was that they had a relative concentration of creative firms. Such a concentration of creative entrepreneurs is a socio-economic district feature, that I hypothesized, based on cluster theory, as being in itself attractive to creative firms. The second criterion was to select districts presenting a broad range of physical district features that emerged from the literature review, such as a district's facilities for creative firms, its visual features, and facilities for workers outside of work time. Third, I selected the three districts for their cross-case characteristics: how they fit into a wider population of what is commonly understood as cultural production districts. As such, in each city one research area was selected, each of which I assumed (and was confirmed by local planners) would be recognized by respondents as their district, because they are city areas with some shared internal characteristics (Lynch, 1960).

Section 3.4 in Chapter 3 further elaborates on these selection criteria. It also presents GIS maps and photographs that offer basic information over the selection of research sites. Furthermore, these images show where the fieldwork took place. Chapter 3 relates the location behavior of creative firms to place-making, a field that requires such visual background information (see Table 3.1), as well as visual evidence (see Table 3.4).

### **Research design and respondent selection**

Section 4.5 in Chapter 4 on the research design describes the rationale behind choosing case studies and interviews. It also explains why the fieldwork was carried out in this way. This chapter relates the location behavior of creative firms to creative cluster theory. Cluster theory is a subfield of economic geography in which much of the research is quantitative in nature, with large-N databases and surveys rather than case studies and interviews. As such, Chapter 4 explains in detail the methodological reasons for choosing case studies and interviews within this dissertation, and explains their value for this field: Qualitative research may uncover new or lesser-known variables and relationships, which could lead to new hypotheses to be tested in large-N research designs.

Second, Section 4.7 describes most fully the criteria used in the respondent selection process. Table 4.2 details the interviewees in terms of firm size and subsector



of the creative industries.

### **Respondent characteristics**

Section 5.4 provides details about the interviewees in terms of their household characteristics. Chapter 5 relates the location behavior of creative firms to work-life balance. This chapter offers an analysis of a subset of the 63 interviewees, namely of the 23 interviewees with dependent children in their household. To provide relevant background information about their constraints and opportunities in balancing work and private life, Table 5.3 shows who these interviewees were in terms, among other features, of their home-work distance and managerial responsibilities.

## **1.5 Outline of dissertation**

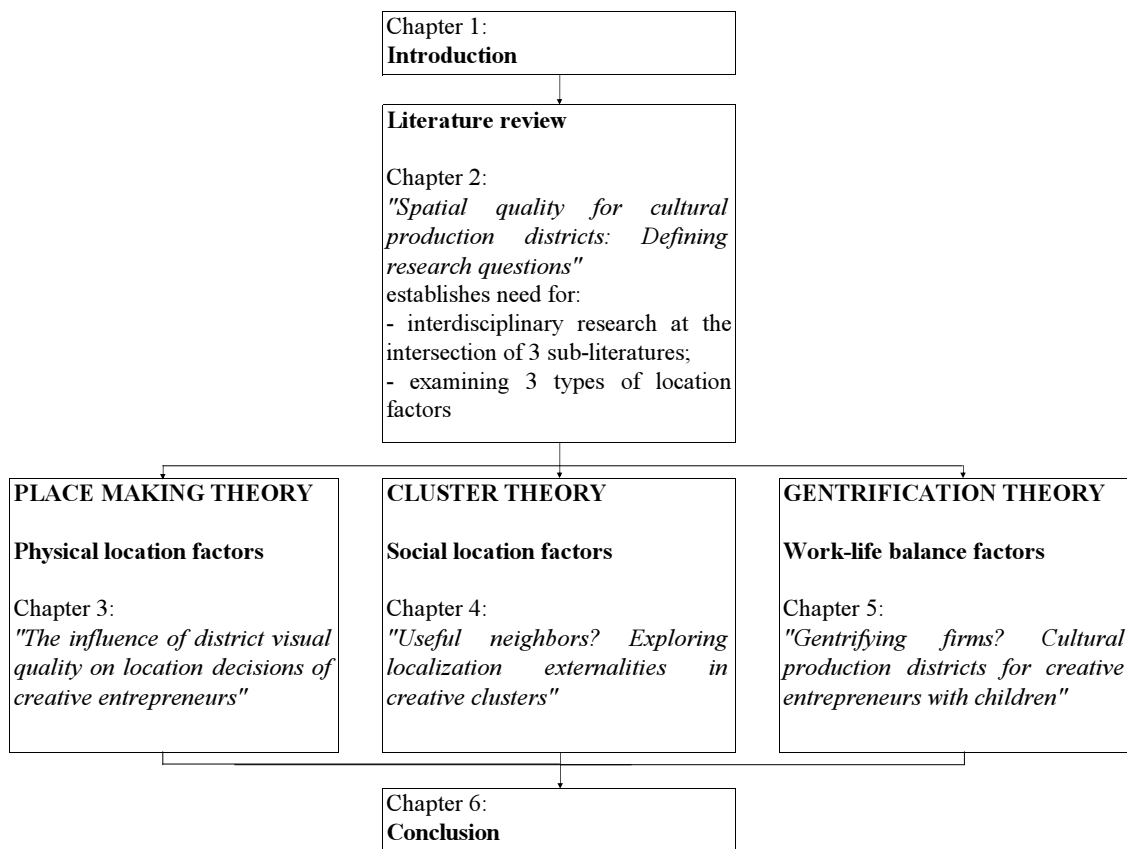
This thesis consists of six chapters. Figure 1.1 provides a schematic overview of the relationship between the chapters.

Chapter 2 summarizes how a literature review has resulted in the key research questions and a research design for this thesis. The chapter substantiates why these research questions should be examined for three types of location factors linked to creative entrepreneurs: physical location factors, socio-economic location factors, and location factors pertaining to work-life balance. Each of these is addressed in one of the three subsequent chapters, which report findings from the 63 interviews with creative entrepreneurs.

Chapter 3 demonstrates a significant relationship between a district's visual quality and the location behavior of creative entrepreneurs. The chapter examines how and why perceived visual features of a district influences the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs.

Chapter 4 shows that creative entrepreneurs exchange less knowledge with related firms within their district than could be expected from creative cluster theory. Further, two location factors, which emerge from the district's creative clusters, may also be two, relatively under-researched, localization externalities.

Chapter 5 indicates that creative entrepreneurs with children carefully weigh up decisions on where to live and work within cities. This chapter relates location



**Figure 1.1:** A schematic overview of the chapters of this dissertation.

theory of creative entrepreneurs to gentrification studies with a consumption-side perspective. Within this line of research, issues of time-space constraints and work-life balance are addressed specifically for households that are urban-oriented in their residential location.

Each of these chapters has been or will be published as an article, and can be read independently.

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