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**THE CREATIVE CAPACITY OF CULTURE BETWEEN LATERAL PROXIMITY AND NEW
CREATIVE MILIEU**

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Abstract

We are living in second modernity, a period of great changes, in which new technological, productive and consumption paradigms are establishing themselves, while uncertainty prevails along with the affirmation of globalization and the knowledge economy. Old and new economies are at work side by side on the same competitive scenario, and globalization is affecting the image of the world with its progressive urbanization. More and more frequently, multinationals and enterprise networks are tackling the competitive scene, while cooperation is taking the shape of a cultural confrontation among communities, in which the center of gravity of economic development is gradually moving from the so-called industrialized countries to those in transition, and to the developing ones. In these circumstances, scholars of local development are seeking to find new paths of development that stay in between novelty and renewal; in this logic, an interesting challenge may be represented by a few forms of contamination from culture – which is intended to be, first a productive factor having a high idiosyncratic value, and second a source of innovation.

We have already examined the passage from conservation to economic enhancement of art and culture, by analyzing the process of cultural districtualization of cities of arts, seen as High Culture (HC) local systems qualified by two factors: the coexistence in a same place of a set of artistic, cultural, human and environmental resources with a high idiosyncratic value; and a network of economic, non economic and institutional actors who can improve their economy as well. Now, in this paper, we would like to focus the relationship between culture, creativity and innovation, which has not been explored enough so far.

Creativity economy, with its contributions on the creative class, the creative cities, and the creative industries, is certainly an emerging paradigm, but creativity still remains a fuzzy concept, which is hard to define, hard to measure, hard to be given a geographical boundary. From the economic

enhancement of culture and art, we are moving to a new stage of “cultural enhancement of the economy”; the creative capacity of culture and creative thinking have established as strategic engines of development for a new transformation, in which mature sectors and places rejuvenate, and new ones emerge by means of cross-fertilization and serendipity. Can HC Places, such as the cities of art or the cultural districts, i.e. places abounding with significance, relationships, history, be the creative places deputed to attract the creative class and enterprises, and thus give a significant contribution to the new trajectories of an economic development laying midway between the local and the global, between the old and the new? Moreover, in which way can these places of exchanges, meetings, conversations, contribute to fuel the innovative process between exploration and exploitation, between culture and creativity? Entering the debate on culture, creativity, innovation and local development, we offer a theoretical contribution, introducing the concept of “Creative capacity” of culture, lateral proximity and “New Creative Milieu” (NCM), in line with the creative milieu approach (Marshall-Gremi-Becattini-De Bono).

The idea develops also from both the economic evolutionary approach and the copyright and creative economy. Creativity is associated with the spatial dimension of innovation, with some of its features (localisation/urbanisation, clustering, diversity, cross-fertilisation and entrepreneurship) referable to NCM. The NCM is an informal, collective, physical or virtual open space, able to implement a creative absorptive capacity within cultural clusters, cities, regions or other HC Places, and to explore and exploit new combinations of lateral thinking among problem finding and solving. Creative knowledge spillovers are in the air and produce external economies favoured by a (stable or temporary) co-location of creative classes, firms and institutions, which generate by cross-fertilisation economies based on a related-variety approach (creative economies).

1. Introduction: Culture, creativity, innovation and local economic development

We are living in second modernity (Ruccio and Amariglio, 2003), a period of great changes, marked by the setting up of new technological, productive and consumption paradigms, a time ruled by uncertainty, by the affirmation of globalisation and knowledge economy (Cooke and Piccaluga, 2006). The network economy can be considered secured by now, and distinctive phenomena of clustering seem to have taken roots (Asheim et al., 2006), although following tangled tracks; the same can be said for the combination of the ‘local’ with the ‘global’ (Martin and Sunley, 2003). Old and new economies coexist in the same competitive scenario (Daniels et al., 2007), and the effects of globalisation are progressively leading to an urbanised vision of the world. Economic and social scientists are asking themselves questions about the new waves of economic development, which is more and more characterised by territorial competitiveness (Scott and Garofoli, 2007), and by rise-

and-decline experiences not only for products, sectors and technologies, but also for places, cities, countrysides, and other local systems. The new setting is under construction, and there is a great need of exploring fresh ideas, innovative actors, new combinations, different productive factors, original organisational models (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003). On the competitive arena, we increasingly witness the confrontation of multinationals, of networks of clustered firms, while competition takes up the traits of a clash among communities (Okamoto, 2001), were they local or global, ethnic or virtual communities.

Culture becomes a strategic resource, an useful tool to face the challenge of uncertainty, because of its tangible and intangible assets (Towse, 1997). A radical change cannot be lead by rationality alone, but as the well-known psychologist De Bono put it (1971), it calls for lateral thinking,¹ a kind of thought which goes side by side with vertical thinking, but fostering a kind of innovation capacity related not only to science and technology but to culture, to the arts, to creativity. Places are at trouble (Kotler et al., 1993), but some places full of significance, interactions and history can certainly contribute to find a way out (Augè, 1992). The lesson learnt by districts and clusters taught us that culture can be a flywheel for economic development (Santagata, 2006), capable of linking local networks with global networks. Also, cities of art seen as High Culture (HC) local systems (Lazzeretti, 2004) can be seen as a hub and spoke (Markusen, 1996), can be the meeting (or stop off) points for artists or creative firms, and they can set in motion innovative *filières* for particular events (Maskell et al., 2006), adding to the association between temporary clusters and embedded cultural institutions.

If it is true that culture, in the passage from conservation to economic enhancement, was thought as an asset, it can now be regarded as a source of innovation capable of generating new ideas and improvements. We are now witnessing a new juncture in the relationship between Culture and Economy, a passage to the ‘cultural enhancement of economy’, which stresses a relationship between culture, creativity and innovation which has not been explored sufficiently so far (Cooke and Lazzeretti, 2008). It follows that culture becomes the engine of a creative process which combines and recombines new with pre-existing cognitions, offering a completely different kind of knowledge. ‘Add new work to another one’ wrote Jacobs (1969:59), and the cities function as an open system to attract talented people from various background and stimulates their creative capacities..

In this context, scholars of economic development, who are exploring new paths of development (Becattini et al., 2003) midway across *novelty* and *renewing*, can very well find in the cultural factor

¹ ‘Vertical thinker take the most reasonable view of a situation and then proceed logically and carefully to work it out. Lateral thinker tend to explore all the different ways of looking at something rather than accepting the most promising and proceeding from that’ (De Bono, 1971: 10).

an opportunity of development and contamination. With this essay, after having studied the process of cultural districtualisation in cities of art, we would like to concentrate on the way culture can foster creativity and innovation. To this end, we defined creativity as the ‘Creative Capacity of Culture’ (CCC), and put it in perspective in the emerging stage of cultural enhancement of economy. According to this perspective, culture is not only seen as a productive factor or a flywheel for economic development – following the lesson of cultural clusters and districts – but rather as a source and capability, because it has the power to revitalise cities, districts, sectors, professions, goods or even add to the generation of new ideas and improvements by means of crossfertilisation or serendipity. So the question is: which creative *milieux* are capable of favouring this process? And again: can HC places, like the cities of art we have already explored, be creative places? In order to start and give an answer to these questions, we introduced a new definition, that of ‘New Creative *Milieu*’ (NCM), developed from the GREMI-Becattini-De Bono axis and completed with some contributions derived from the economy of culture, the creative economy, and the evolutionary approach. A final consideration on creative environments and on their research outlook conclude this essay.

2. *The rise of the ‘cultural enhancement of economy’*

Studies on the economic enhancement of culture have recently undergone an important evolution, meeting a turning point that signalled the rise of a new stage in the relationship between Culture and Economy; creativity, rather than culture, has been put at the centre of the debate and economy-led models (e.g. creative city) have gained ampler space compared to culture-led models (e.g. cultural cluster).

This new stage, that we identify with the ‘cultural enhancement of economy’, looks at culture as a source of innovation, and shifts the focus on the human capital, the innovation process and the firm regarded as an innovative and creative actor. At a first stage, culture was mainly seen as an asset needing at first preservation and secondly improvement, from both a cultural and an economic point of view; now the attention is fixed on its capacity to produce new knowledge and on the way its material and immaterial resources are able to generate *novelty* and *renewing*. This trend can be distinguished in the latest studies of creative economy, as well as in those pertaining to the economy of culture, all of which are in fact showing a tendency to converge to a joint research area.

As regards the economy of culture, a first important passage was made from ‘preservation to economic enhancement of culture and art’. Different thinkers contributed to this course: art historians, anthropologists, social scientists, and obviously economists of culture and art

management (Ginsburgh and Throsby, 2006). Culture and economy combined in a successful paradigm, which was first built up in the States, later in Europe, and more recently even in transition and developing countries (Power and Scott, 2004). The initial intent of this research field was to show how culture could be considered a production factor like any other, since it might play a role not only in the traditional sectors of culture, such as publishing or cultural tourism, but also in non profit sectors. An exemplary case is that of museums, which well represents how an object of preservation can turn into the target of various kinds of economic enhancement. At the same time, the idiosyncratic value of resources (Marshall 1890; Harris, 1977) took up a strategic value, just like cultural districts and clusters in their different connotations (Cinti, 2008) became an emerging phenomenon emphasizing the role of culture as a flywheel for economic development. Some authors worked out taxonomies meant to differentiate cultural districts from institutional, industrial, urban or museum districts (Santagata, 2002), while other authors drew attention on their role in territorial marketing (Valentino, 2003), and others pointed up the importance of their resources (Kebir and Crevoiser, 2008). On our part, our contribution was the development of a Cultural Districtalisation Model applied to cities of art, following a multidisciplinary methodology which combines the Becattini-Marshallian approach with that of the cluster theory (Lazzeretti, 2008).

A further step in the evolution of this field of studies was the consideration of culture as a source of innovation capable of generating ideas and improvements, of rejuvenating mature sectors or creating new ones. The analyses of cultural districts and clusters were especially aimed at their creative sides, so that cultural districts gradually evolved into creative districts (OECD, 2005) and started to include areas not just in the States and in Europe, but also in Asia. A representative example is given by the study carried out by Scott (2005) for the film district of Hollywood, which was replicated for the Indian newborn district of Bollywood (Lorenzen and Taeube, 2007). So, just like the first researches in economy of culture appointed to cultural heritage and performing arts, those in creative economy applied straight away to creative firms, knowledge economy and ICT. Moreover, while in the beginning a distinction was made between cultural and creative industries, now the two terms are more and more frequently used as equivalents, and the creative industry as a whole represents today one of the emerging event in modern economy.² The second pillar in this field is the concept of creative city, which is directly associated with those of the cultural city in the

² According to the *cultural* approach, creative industries are those which supply goods and services associated with cultural, artistic or entertainment values (Caves, 2000). The *copyright* approach describes creative industries as being those carrying out activities protected by the laws on copyrights (Towse, 2003). According to the *creative* approach, creative industries crosscut different sectors, in particular those '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: 5). Creative industries include: Advertising, Architecture, The art and antiques market, Crafts, Design, Designer fashion, Film and video, Interactive leisure software, Music, The performing arts, Publishing, Software and computer services, Television and radio.

new millennium (Hubbard, 2006) and the city of knowledge (Trullen et al., 2002). The idea was immediately related to the creative industries (Hall, 2000; Landry, 2000), and later to Florida's creative classes (Florida, 2002). The works of the latter, in particular, gave rise to an intense debate (Glaeser, 2005), and gave a boost to a huge quantity of empirical researches. On this point, we should not forget that attention has recently shifted to an entrepreneurial approach linking creativity, new firms and entrepreneurship (Lee et al., 2004), similarly to the direction taken by urban planners (OCED, 2007).

3. The creative capacity of culture

We are at the start of a new stage in the relationship between Culture and Economy, in which culture is no more only a resource, but mostly a capacity that cannot be spent merely through the spotting of new cultural sectors or cultural clusters/districts, as was previously typical of economic enhancement. Culture has a 'creative capacity' (CCC) able to rejuvenate places, sectors or professions, and to generate ideas and innovations through processes of crossfertilisation and serendipity. This is the leading concept of our reasoning: a notion of creativity closely associated with the notions of culture, innovation and local development, and apt to link with some specific factors and open the way to paths of development in between renewing and novelty.

How does this creativity manifest and express itself? The analysis of the literature to which we refer shows that creativity has a strong correlation with localisation. From Marshall onwards, studies after studies on economic development have discussed this relationship and the advantages produced by co-localisation of specialised firms in terms of agglomeration economies and of knowledge spillovers. Localisation is correlated with creativity, but this is not all, because urbanisation is what matters to all those firms – such as the ones belonging to the creative industry – which take advantage of the effects of knowledge economy and new technologies. Cultural and creative firms – SMEs and big firms in the music and film industry just like restorer workshops – are usually clustered (Maskell and Lorenzen, 2004). This can also be said for the creative classes and the networks of artists (O'Hagan and Kelly, 2006), although what favours their exchanges is mostly proximity in its various form, from physical proximity to cognitive proximity. The other creative engines are variety and diversity (Lorenzen and Frederiksen, 2008). Diversity is what fuels creativity, because of the differences among industries, firms, businesses, people or talents – this is the lesson learnt from Florida and Jacobs. There is no such thing as an ideal size for creativity: there are creative neighbourhoods just like there are creative metropolises, creative firms and creative

workshops. Creativity can take up many different shapes and be found wherever lateral thinking can express itself and provide for it. However, in order to generate ideas and innovations, this kind of thinking needs to be given a certain arrangement and progression, and for that reason entrepreneurial ability constitutes a match point not only for the transformation of ideas into innovations, but also for the creation of new firms. Ideas are the result of events of fertilisation and contamination, which occur in the exchange relationship and are favoured by co-localisation, diversity, and variety. Crossfertilisation is what fuels the innovative process, so that the CCC turns to be the ability to look for new relationships (relatedness). If we look in details into the main paths in which the CCC manifests itself, we find:

a) *Urban renewal*. This first path was wholly exploited, more extensively in the studies of urban planners, but also in those applied to place marketing. A OECD report (2007) specifically devoted to this issue found three main urban-regeneration strategies, which are:

- *City branding*. Place branding tries to apply the same methodology employed in commercial product marketing to geographical locations, and to create and nurture the narratives that give meanings to a place (Julier, 2005); it underlines its core benefits, and style culture (Bennet and Savani, 2003).
- *Physical renovation and flagship developments*. Physical renovation such as flagship city centre development was conceived to bring branding images to reality by giving them material forms. According to this strategy a primary role is taken up by architects who are asked to furnish places with a new image and a new symbolic value: an exemplary case is that of the Bilbao Guggenheim museum (Vicario and Martínez Monje, 2003). An example of flagship development can be drawn from the ‘water front city promotion’ (Baltimore model) (Law, 1993).
- *Culture led and driven strategies*. A last line of attack is the organisation of expositions and events. Museums of contemporary art are in this respect of particular importance in attracting mass tourism and entertainment (Griffiths, 1995); also, international events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Expos, represent a chance of great consequence for urban regeneration, and for the re-activation of other economic *filières*. The Quarter Museum in Vienna constitutes a good example of this strategy (Mommas, 2004).

b) *Economic renewal*. A second path is that of economic renewal, which is not as much systematised, but nevertheless no less important than the previous one. Economic renewal pertains

to the idea that culture can rejuvenate not only places, but also mature or declining sectors, products, and professions. A few exemplifications may better express this notion:

- *Industry regeneration.* A first case deserving mention is design, which from many viewpoints may well represent a new cross-sector technology, as it finds a cross-sectional application: from fashion design for the textile industry to industrial design for the shipbuilding industry (Lazzeretti and Capone, 2007). Design can be successfully combined with the new ICT technologies, and its planning ability improved owing to the simulation of a product virtual progress report, or it can gather new materials for the implementation of new products, as is the case for the ornamental stone sector (Lazzeretti and Cinti, 2007).
- *Product rejuvenation.* A successful case is that of typical products, as reported by Santagata (2006) for the institutional cultural district of wine in the Piedmont's Langhe area, where brands of controlled origin denomination are used like collective intellectual property rights. But the most exceptional case in this sector is certainly Slow Food, an experience which introduces in all respects an original way of signifying food culture, as it stretches the approach to single goods to a whole consumption system (Petrini, 2004).
- *Profession rejuvenation.* Even professions can be rejuvenated and find a renaissance if revitalised by new technology and creativity. An emblematic case is the high-tech artistic craft of the Florentine restorers, who work at a high specialisation level and, because of their localisation in the historical centre of the city, are considered at the same time a creative class, a creative firm and a source of urban regeneration (Lazzeretti, 2003).

c) *Crossfertilisation.* A third path is specifically associated with novelty rather than with regeneration. Jacobs (1961) had already stressed the importance for innovation of crossfertilization of ideas among industries, as well as among economic actors, and the wider community. The central points to consider are the 'relatedness' and the CCC, and the ability to search and build new relationships. The latter can be basically affected by two factors: cognitive distance (Noteboom, 2000), and cognitive proximity. Even this kind of path was not sufficiently codified, so that we can only refer to a few example drawn from our past researches:

- *Inside a cultural cluster/district.* Crossfertilisation can occur with regard to different professional abilities (specialisations) within a same productive *filière* or a same cluster/district and the relatedness is based essentially on social and physical proximity. (e.g. the cluster of art restoration).
- *Among 'related' cultural cluster/sector inside and outside the city.* Another relevant example is given by relatedness among cultural clusters in the same city. For instance, there

can exist institutional actors who are part of different clusters, so that they work as ‘connection knots’. This certainly occurs in the cluster of fashion, in the museum cluster and in the music cluster of art cities. Besides, it is possible to have cluster-to-cluster relationships outside the city, relating a same kind of actors from different places, and even from different countries, like in the case of the relationships entertained by Florentine and Chinese restorers. Also, there can occur phenomena of crossfertilisation between temporary clusters and embedded cultural institutions, for example in the case of the set up of exhibition stands for restored works of art within museum organisations (Lazzeretti, 2004).

- *Among ‘unrelated’ clusters/sectors inside the city.* In the case of diversified cities, sectors which are apparently uncorrelated can have an opportunity of exchange just because of co-localisation. This is the case for the crossfertilisation between the biomedical and health diagnostics sector and the sector of cultural assets, once again in the city of Florence. The presence in the same territory of institutes of applied physics and of protection institutions, and obviously of a considerable art heritage, was probably at the origin of the implementation of laser technologies of optometry for cleaning stone materials (Salimbeni, 2002).
- *Across time.* The last typology we wish to recall is a kind of crossfertilisation which finds its roots in the legacy of tacit knowledge about the old and the new, the first and the second modernity: the rebirth of a *creative district*. This is the case, for instance, of BHM jewellery, a classical Marshallian manufacturing district which has presently been revived as an urban cluster founded on design, marketing and the new and distinct ethnic community of Indians, who brought about a whole set of relationships, especially at an international level (De Propris and Lazzeretti, 2007; De Propris and Wei, 2007).

d) *Serendipity.* The last path we examine is that of serendipity; differently from the previous case, this is quite hard to trace. Usually, under the term ‘serendipity’ is described ‘the capacity of discovering pleasing or valuable things by chance’ (Collins, 1998). Hence, the theme of discovery is crucial here, and it restates how most of the time important innovations take place by ‘pure chance’. Coke, for example, was originally thought up as a medicament and later used in a completely different way, till it became the most popular cold drink in the world; still, its formula has been kept secret, just like for any other medicament. Variety and diversity can have a positive role in this sense as well, as the Pasteur’s lesson goes when he links his original idea of ‘protection by inoculation of germs of weakened virulence’ to his multiplicity of interests and ability to make associations. A topical example for the context of a creative district is that of the metal-detector

technology applied to airports: it was conceived by an Arezzo jewellery firm and implemented for the selection process of metallic alloys to weight gold carats.

4. The New Creative Milieu: main theoretical contributions and a first definition

Resuming our thread of reasoning, we would like to answer the question of which places are better suited to promote creativity. Then we start from the concept of the CCC and rely on our previous considerations. Following the creative *milieu* approach (GREMI-Becattini-De Bono) enriched by the contaminations derived from the economy of culture and the creative economy, we introduce a new definition of creative *milieu* which puts the above-mentioned stage of ‘cultural enhancement of economy’ into context. In a first approximation, by NCM we mean ‘an informal, collective open space, physical, virtual or just ideal, able to implement the CCC within cultural clusters/districts or other spaces, and characterised by processes of lateral thinking and problem finding’. In order to follow our line of reasoning and see how we came up with this first formulation, we now recollect our main theoretical references, and will later come back to our subject matter in details.

a) The main theoretical contributions: the spatial dimension of creativity

In order to identify a theoretical context for NCM, we defined a spatial dimension of creativity with respect to two dimensions, local economic development and innovation processes, and to a constant variable represented by the concept of ‘Marshallian creative atmosphere’. The latter concept represents in fact both the theoretical glue of different past approaches and the antecedent of the current relations held by culture with creativity, and by local development with innovation.

Local economic development. The issue of the spatial dimension of innovation constitutes a first convergence point for the studies on local economic development and on the economy of innovation, as well as a classical topic in terms of territorial competitiveness and endogenous development (Capello, 2007). In particular, the concept of *milieu innovateur* developed by the school of GREMI has a crucial importance, because it focuses on the relationship between local development and innovation, giving special attention to urban environments, which are considered of strategic importance for culture. We would like to recall how Camagni and Maillat (2006) underlined the role played by resources and institutions, and by the governance of innovation, which is capable of combining innovative networks among firms; theirs is a dynamic approach, fully open to the outside, capable of suggesting integrated solutions that link anchoring and

embeddedness, and particularly interesting in the perspective of a renewal of the traditional paths of local development (Crevoisier and Camagni, 2000). Also, the GREMI approach was able to develop, next to the traditional industrial vocation addressing the high-tech sectors, a particular attention to cultural and natural resources (Camagni et al., 2000), as it considered culture and creativity in terms of a new and significant opportunity (Kebir and Crevoisier, 2008): this is why it certainly gave an important *incipit* to our line of reasoning.

A second important contribution comes from the studies of *proximity* (Torre and Gilly, 2000). This issue reappeared at the centre of debate having overcome a specialized view of the concept and moving towards its *diversification* (Lorentzen, 2005); a notion that Boschma (2005) cleverly distinguished by classifying it into five categories: cognitive (based on knowledge gap); organizational (based on control); social (based on trust-social relations); institutional (based on trust-common institutions); geographical (based on distance). Proximity has a great relevance for the CCC, and the distance between sectors, clusters, professions or firms is not only physical or relational, but mainly of a cognitive kind. In the creative city, seen as a hub and spoke, a knot of local and global networks, a place of variety and diversity, distances must be shortened, the opportunities for exchange and conversation must be increased so as to generate new ideas and innovations.

The question is then: how to go beyond the passage from a spatial dimension of innovation to a spatial dimension of creativity? Once again, we take a hint from Becattini (2004) and his notion of ‘creative *milieu*-industrial district’, developed according to the studies of the well-known Cambridge psychologist De Bono (1971). This thinker specifically underlined the greater value of problem finding activities, which are prone to develop lateral thinking in the creative process, compared to problem solving activities that are typical of vertical thinking,³ and also of the ability to ‘explore all the different ways of looking at something rather than accepting the most promising and proceeding from that’. On his part, Becattini highlights the fact that creativity cannot be considered merely as a potentiality, since it is a real fact. He also distinguishes a ‘generic creativity’, that is the ability of an individual or a group to make unusual connections, from a ‘goal-oriented creativity’, which expresses an efficient combinatorial ability. Creative thinking is not in itself undisciplined but follows a logic which is ordered according to four fundamental principles: recognition of dominant polarizing ideas; search for different ways of looking at things; relaxation of rigid control of vertical thinking; use of chance. The latter principle has a particular bearing for

³ A different view is expressed by the economist of culture Santagata (2004: 78), who claims to privilege problem solving to problem finding, in the same line with Simon, who wrote: ‘Creativity consists “in good problem solving”, and the process that leads to creativity is founded upon three general conditions: to be prepared; to be expressive; to risk’ (1986: 1-8).

the CCC. 'Chance' is seen as an unlimited source of ideas, and game is considered the ideal technique for facing it, because playing may encourage to look at the same thing in many different ways. Such an approach may favour trespassing (Hirschman, 1981), that is the use of theoretical paradigms which traditionally belong to a different discipline or subject, in other words, the conversion of ideas that are considered conventional in certain contexts into original ideas for other contexts. In fact, although it is true that 'chance' offers many information and opportunities for making connections, what allows to identify, recombine and give them a new logical order is creative thinking. We think 'connections' represent the strategic nexus that should be highlighted, and try to find them can be as good a practice as frequenting informal environments. Breit (1987) is the first to underline the important role of convivial settings, and Becattini (2004) shows that districts are life and working places likely to create many informal opportunities. Lester and Piore (2004) recently confirm this when they say that Italian districts, as well as universities and the emerging open-source communities, can constitute good examples of a 'public space' prone to conversations *vs.* problem solving.

How can this perspective be related to studies on creative economy? We believe that the concept of creative *milieu*, developed by Florida in the context of the theory of human capital⁴ and based on the three Ts (Tolerance, Talent and Technology), can enrich the idea of creative *milieu* worked out by Becattini-De Bono. Florida, starting from the observation of how competition is increasingly played out at a global level, maintains that localities can create an economic and social microclimate capable of activating and mobilizing the resources that are crucial to growth (Florida and Tinagli, 2005). He also underlines how the choice one makes of 'where to live' is as important as that of 'who to work for': in other words, 'the city is a creative habitat'.⁵

A last concept we would like to recall is that of creative economies. From our point of view, creative economies are those external agglomeration economies which can be explained in terms of both diversity-variety and specialisation. On the same line we find Feldman and Audretsch (1999), who relate innovation to both strategies, as well as Lorenzen and Frederiksen (2008), and Trullen

⁴ According to the 'theory of human capital' (Lucas, 1998), regional development is channelled by the concentration of highly-educated, qualified and productive people, as far as firms manage to create a synergy with them, instead of a mere supplier-client relationship ('talent'). The conventional approach (Glaeser, 2000) explains regional development as the result of the existence of firms able to set off technological evolution ('technology'). The 'theory of social capital' (Putnam, 2000) finds the reasons of local economic development in a community's ability to interact and be the source of social trust and affluence ('tolerance'). In Florida's model, these three elements, previously considered on a case by case basis, are integrated and explained in their interaction as factors of local economic growth.

⁵ '[The] "quality of place" must be understood in broader terms than we have traditionally been accustomed to: while the attractiveness and condition of the natural environment and built form are certainly important, so too is the presence of a rich cultural scene and a high concentration of people working in cultural and creative occupations ("bohemians" or the "creative class")' (Gertler et al. 2002: 1-2).

and Boix (2008), who underline the coexistence of creative cities and knowledge.⁶ In our analyses on cultural districtualisation of cities of art, we evidenced the advantages gained, on the one hand by district specialisation, and on the other by cities' diversity (Lazzeretti, 2008). Becattini himself (2004) reminds us that even in monosectorial districts, the 'coexistence of different competences, and different approaches' resulting from division of labour can yet lead up to new combinations.⁷ According to Dei Ottati (2006), instead, creative economies are semi-automatic economies characterised by continuous innovation; in other words, they are produced by the normal functioning of the district. The Marshallian creative atmosphere shaped by circulation of knowledge and mutual learning encourages industrial creativity, thanks not only to the great number of interacting subjects but also to the fact that competencies, although 'varied', are 'interlinked'.

Innovation process. How can the innovative process be accomplished? A fundamental input is offered by the economists of innovation, above all by the evolutionists. A particularly crucial concept is that of absorptive capacity (AC), coined by Cohen and Levinthal (1990), which emphasises how 'the ability of a firm to understand and absorb external knowledge is dependent on its own knowledge base'.

In this case, the unit of analysis is the firm with its path dependence and its ability to accumulate, although later on Giuliani (2005) extended it to the cluster⁸ and evolutionary geographers linked it to the related variety approach, thus broadening this perspective to cities and regions (Frenken and Boshma 2003). The latter approach is particularly relevant for our purpose, because it allows us to seize the different typologies of relatedness within crossfertilisation,⁹ and because it considers the notion of related variety in terms of shared complementary competences according to a cognitive base definition (Boschma, 2005), which is a fundamental step in order to introduce the notion of lateral proximity.

⁶ This question is not so obvious, if we look at it in the context of the debate over MAR externality. Glaeser et al. (1992) attribute to MAR externality (Marshall-Arrow-Romer) the event in which an increased concentration of a particular industry within a specific geographic region facilitates knowledge spillovers across firms. By contrast Jacobs (1969) argues that the exchange of complementary knowledge across diverse firms and economic agents is what yields a greater return to new economic knowledge.

⁷ For example, although the culture of textile predominates in the Prato district, other realities that should be taken into account, such as the mechanical, the chemical and the mercantile business, may lead to opportunities for creativity. Also, problem solving that arises at a certain phase of the productive *filière* can constitute the problem finding of another. Here, we can recognize the recombinational function of the Becattinian *impannatore*, who takes the traits of a neo-Schumpeterian entrepreneur.

⁸ 'The capacity of the cluster to identify, assimilate and exploit knowledge coming from sources external to the cluster. It will very much depend both on the AC of each individual actor, firms and institutions and on the interactions between them' (Giuliani, 2005).

⁹ While for the case of a firm or a cluster, we talk about a 'vertical absorptive capacity', evolutionary geographers refers to a kind of intersectorial 'lateral absorptive capacity'.

Finally, a concept directly related to the AC is that of knowledge spillover, which associates the local economic development approach with the evolutionary economics, to which we diffusely referred to. In this essay, we would like to introduce the new concept of creative spillover, a concept which can be related to both creative firms and artists, and is typical of NCM.

The two resulting typologies of spillover are directly correlated to the unfolding of creative thinking, to localisation and to innovation. As we have already observed, creative industries are clustered, and they are also largely protected by copyright (Towse, 2003). Therefore, it is possible to apply to them analyses similar to those used in the biomedical field (Iammarino and McCann, 2006), which can help us investigate the knowledge spillovers deriving not only from firms but also from territories (collective trademarks). Artists networks are also liable of causing creative spillovers. An institutional form for creative spillovers occurs in art schools and colleges and other modes of art education which attract young artists, create an artistic atmosphere and thus provide incentives for artists to stay after their formal education has been completed (Bille and Schulze, 2006). Therefore, another relevant question we intend to deal with is that of the determiners of localisation and the behaviours of the creative class (O'Hagan and Kelly, 2006).

b) The New Creative Milieu: towards a definition

To conclude, we will try and define better the concept of NCM, reflecting on the above-described theoretical contributions. What we can say to start with is that there is no such thing as a creative place in itself, be it a city, a district or whatever else. What qualifies a creative *milieu* is not a would-be creative environment (generic creativity), but a proactive environment (Hitters and Richards, 2002) able to generate innovation and transfer of knowledge (goal-oriented creativity): this is the atmosphere in which the CCC can develop by crossfertilisation, with the 'nourishment' of chance. The CCC is the ability to create ties (relatedness) and it is advanced by lateral proximity, which is basically measurable in terms of cognitive distance. This kind of creativity promotes searching and lateral thinking, and it takes a part in the development of creative economies able to match the strength of cluster/district specialisation with the city's ability to diversify. As a result, the first-approximation definition of NCM as 'an informal, collective open space, physical, virtual or just ideal, able to implement the CCC within cultural clusters/districts or other spaces, and characterised by processes of lateral thinking and problem finding' can now be better discerned, and specifically with the help of the following key points:

- *Creative habitat*. It is a place likely to attract a creative class that elects it as its life and working place. Its attractive quality may be due not only to its human capital, but also to its creative firms. It is characterised by the existence of material and immaterial cultural

resources, and by creative human and social capital. In this setting, social capital is seen by the creative class like a downright strategic resource.

- *Creative spillover*. The creative spillovers are knowledge spillovers generated by lateral thinking, which is typical of artists as well as of creative industries and other creative actors. Ideas are ‘in the air’, shaping the atmosphere of creative habitats. An example which may deserve consideration is the Latin Quarter in Paris, which is where the city’s creative class lives and many creative firms and cultural institutions have their premises.
- *Lateral proximity*. Creative lateral thinking is obviously much flexible and eclectic, as it tends to explore the different ‘whys’ of looking at something. Lateral proximity is basically a cognitive proximity favoured by informal *milieux*; it may be fostered by a physical or a relational kind of proximity, but it can also be started on a virtual or an ideal basis. Its effectiveness depend on ‘cognitive distance’ (relatedness), which is measurable in terms of related/unrelated knowledge and on the various typologies of linkages and nexuses which creative actors are liable to find. In the district, this distance may be shortened because of the presence of collective goods and common knowledge, and by the *filière* common goals. In the city, it may be even shorter when it crisscrosses with other typologies of proximity, for example the institutional one, which is based on trust, or the geographical one, like in the case of the Florence cultural clusters. On the contrary, this distance can be wider even in the case of co-location, whenever the actors involved belong to different worlds and have conflicting values.
- *Creative absorptive capacity*. This is the ability to transform generic creativity (exploration) into goal-oriented creativity (exploitation), so as to generate and even transfer ideas and innovations. Such a capacity depends on the tacit knowledge accumulated within a creative habitat and on the path dependence from creative actors. Its effectiveness can be measured in terms of the individual or collective ideas and innovations, normally protected by intellectual property rights. It can also be implemented through a proper governance of innovation that takes into account both cluster-specific and governance-specific factors.
- *Creative economies*. They are external agglomeration economies achieved in creative *milieux*, that is crossfertilisation economies which can compose the advantages of specialisation with those of diversification. Therefore, they are correlated with variety, diversity, and crossfertilisation and serendipity.

5. In search of creativity. Concluding remarks and research agenda

Innovation. The Missing Dimension: this is the title Lester and Piore chose for their recent work (2004). In this period there is a short supply of innovative ideas, and it is interesting to notice how they have many points in common with the issues of our study – CCC and NCM. The search for ideas, and consequently for creativity, cannot merely be regarded as a technological question, or a problem solving case, since it also requires ‘conversations’, creative settings, and – as De Bono taught us – the development of lateral thinking. In this essay we tried to emphasise the strategic role of culture at the start of this new millennium, with the rise of a ‘cultural enhancement of economy’ stressing on it as a source of innovation; we have basically asked ourselves which places are creative enough to promote it. Answering to this question required to give a new definition of creative *milieu*, starting from the analysis of a ‘spatial dimension of creativity’, which was sketched through an examination of the literature that looked at a possible ‘fertilisation’ of the creative *milieu* approach with some clues offered by the economy of culture, the creative economy, and the evolutionary approach. There potentially exists a kaleidoscope of creative places needing investigation, as many as are the attributes of creativity (and of the CCC) still deserving exploration. On our part, the next step we are going to take is to attempt the application of this first-approximation notion of NCM to the case of art restoration in Florence, which we had already investigated in terms of economic enhancement of culture and will look into as a stance of cultural enhancement of economy. We tend to hope for the best, if we dwell on the few exploratory analyses we have carried out on the innovative application of laser technology for restoration, and on the involvement of a creative cluster of economic, non economic and institutional actors.

As for future implications, these considerations about the district moral seems to disclose two important questions: first of all, the shift of the focus of interest from the cultural to the creative district, which may be intended in a strict sense as the one characterised by the presence of creative industries, or in a broader sense in terms of culture revitalisation; and secondly, that the district should now be regarded as a ‘public space’, for which meaning our notion of NCM might constitute a first direction on the path to take. All in all, what we have tried to unravel in this work is a pursuit for a new ‘conversational’ society (Crateri, 2001) which, with the aid of lateral thinking, might go past that kind of economic enhancement of culture drifting to mere entertainment. This is an emergency, perceived not only by sociologists and psychologists, but also by economists, as shown by the significance attached by well-known authors to the convivial dimension of creative settings. Just think of the ‘cafeteria effect’ in the Parisian *milieux* pointed out by Camagni, or the High Table of Oxford and Cambridge economists evoked by Becattini, of Piore and Lester’s Cocktail manager, or – which I dare to include – the Staff House at BHM University. Creativity consists of a social,

individual or collective open-process based on confrontation and exchange: this is why enquiring into creative environments should become an issue worth of a deepest investigation.

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