

Report of the RSA Research Network on Experience Economy and Spatial Strategies. Culture and experiences in spatial planning, development and innovation

DATE AND PLACE OF EVENT: 3rd - 4th December 2009, Institute of Sociology, University of Neuchâtel

ORGANISER(S)' NAME(S):

Local Organisers:

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The experience economy represents a turn, not only in business strategies but also in local development strategies. Local planners focus increasingly on quality of place and quality of life as an aim in itself and as a tool for attracting citizens, tourists and businesses. On the other hand, businesses focus increasingly on non-material features of their products such as narratives and images which relate to the customers perceptions. It seems that no city or region can afford to stay unnoticed, and place branding is part of the play in the global competition.

The first RSA-supported workshop of the Research network on Experience Economy and Spatial Strategies was organised at the University of Neuchâtel the 3rd and 4th of December 2009. The event was a great success. 21 participants from various European countries took part to that event. The audience was composed of a balanced mix of professors, advanced researchers, young researchers, students and regional consultants from various disciplines such as economics, geography, planning, sociology, anthropology or marketing. Half of the participants were RSA members. 14 very complementary presentations took place in plenary sessions. We would like to thank all the participants for their creative and rich contribution to the discussion.

Under the specific title "Producers and consumers in the Experience Economy: What territorial shapes?", the workshop's call had been challenging the complex market interrelations occurring in an experience-based economy. The original argument was that, although the role of customers in innovation processes has been emphasised by different studies, his place – especially regarding the end-customer – has largely been "neglected" by theories devoted to territorial development and economic geography (Grabber et al. 2008). A large field of investigation is still open and is even getting of greater importance through the development of cultural and creative industries as well as of new communication technologies. In the experience economy, the role of the end-customer is central because he participates in "personal" and "memorable" way to the experience staged by a seller. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), "the customer is the product". In that sense, the activity of the producer cannot be separated from the activity of the consumer.

The submitted contributions were split up into four thematic sessions. The first session dealt with different theoretical questions regarding various current debates in regional sciences. Specificities in or complementarities between central/urban and peripheral/rural areas in the Experience Economy were discussed (Anne Lorentzen). Also, differences between service-based, cultural-based, creative-based and experience-based economies appeared to be a very central issue for future research challenges (Christine Liefoghe). The need to adapt traditional territorial innovation models toward a broadened conceptual framework emerged as a common crucial issue for further studies within the research network (Steinar Normann, Olivier Crevoisier, Hugues Jeannerat and Pedro Araujo).

The second session was organised around converging empirical cases in the field of food & drink production and tourism. Different mature empirical studies illustrated the complex systemic interdependencies within and between sectors as well as between different actors that occur in the process of experience creation (Jesper Manniche). In such a complex system, experience-based innovations were presented as place-based processes (Isaac K. Arthur and Anne Lorentzen) as well as time processes (Kovács Dezső). An important question raised by that session was also: "Is the experience economy a new economic sector or is it rather a resource applicable to every economic activity?" That question appears to be still very open.

The third session dealt with governance issues in setting a local experience-based economy. Accessing specific distant knowledge and anchoring it within the traditional local context in order to develop new experience-based activities was presented as a determinant governance challenge (Tage Peterson and Karin Topsoe Larsen). On the other hand, it was shown that local governance might face potential conflicts or mistrust between different local players regarding the use of artistic creation for business purposes (Arild Danielsen, Are Thorkildsen). Finally, a research about economic impacts of festivals was introduced into the discussion as a critical aspect of governing experience-based activities locally (Line Grønstad).

The last session took place the second day and was dedicated to production-consumption issues in the experience economy. The socio-economic construction and reconstruction of experience was presented as a co-creation process between various actors and activities taking place in front stage as well as in backstage (Roar Samuelson). In the line with that idea, experience co-creation, such as aesthetic life, is to be perceived in a particular spatial and institutional context (Anne Welly Ryan). Further, co-creation can also be considered as a situated process taking place within a specific production-consumption community where consumers are knowledgeable and participate directly to the valuation of the experience (Hugues Jeannerat). For instance, their cosmopolitan interest influences the kind of experiences they expect and search for (Eiri Elvestad).

The workshop closed with an open discussion regarding the future theoretical issues that should be addressed within the research network. On the one hand, it was noticed that the concept of experience economy still needs a stronger definition. It is important to understand better what is new with the concept of experience economy. This is a critical aspect for establishing a coherent and pertinent research program. On the other hand, it is also necessary to identify what theoretical add on can the network bring to the concept of experience economy. In what way are we different to marketing or psychology? Analysing the experience economy as a complex production-consumption system that take place within and between different territorial configurations seems to be the core of the further research questions that will be addressed by the research network. Such research questions show the need for new methodological and conceptual tools and will certainly drive to a rich multi-disciplinary approach. Those challenges will be addressed further during the annual RSA conference in Pécs in May 2010 as well as during the next

workshop of the research network that will take place at the Aalborg University in September 2010.

Author: Hugues Jeannerat, December 2009