

**The Social and Material Foundations of Creativity for Montreal Design
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Introduction

In recent studies on the economic significance of creativity, much attention has been accorded to the important role that quality of life plays in *attracting talent* to cities. The assumption underlying these studies is that ‘quality of life’ is only valuable when defined in terms of consumption. In this presentation, we reconsider the role of ‘quality of life’ in terms of its *productive* contribution to creativity. More specifically, we draw on interviews with fashion and graphic designers in the Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal and illustrate how certain place-based attributes, such as affordable rents, industrial buildings and a culturally rich and open milieu, can facilitate the exploration and experimentation.

Montreal is a city that is renowned for fashion and style and has recently been designated an international design capital by UNESCO. In 2005, the city became the headquarters of the International Design Alliance (IDA). Measured in terms of employment, Montreal is the sixth largest center of design in North America (following New York, Boston, Toronto, Chicago and Los Angeles) (Design Industry Advisory Committee, 2004). It therefore provides an instructive case in which to examine the factors that underlie creative production.

In what follows, we provide a brief overview of theories concerning the increasing significance of creativity to economic development and of the role that quality of life plays in this relationship. Then, we provide a description of Mile End, an area

recently characterized by Wallpaper magazine as Montreal's most up and coming neighbourhood, and assess how the quality of life attributes of this neighbourhood enhance the creative activities of designers there.

Interpreting the role of 'quality of life'

In the last decade, a number of studies have centered on the significance of creativity to urban economic development. With integrated international markets and the advent of new technologies, a focus on the traditional inputs to production – such as land and resources – have given way to a focus on the more productive (or 'creative') uses of such inputs (Porter 1998; Florida 2002). Creativity and innovation with respect to products and processes are now viewed as the basis for competitive advantage and economic development policy is now concerned with how best to foster creative economies.

To date, much of the policy focus in this realm has been influenced by Richard Florida's creative class thesis, which contends that a certain class of people are the 'carriers of creativity' and that a key objective of cities should be to attract and retain this class by offering a strong 'quality of life'. Factors that shape the socio-spatial dimension of 'quality of life' can include diversity, tolerance, social inclusion and the provision of public space.

In the creative class thesis, the contribution of such attributes to creativity is viewed as indirect, since they are oriented to consumption. That is to say, quality of life is used to lure people, who in turn bring 'creativity'. But emphasis in recent studies on promoting

factors that attract ‘creative people’ obscures an analysis of the factors that can cultivate or nurture creativity. The foundations of creativity are assumed rather than examined.

Following Bourdieu (1993) and Lloyd (2004), we argue here that talent can not be conceptualized as a subset of already formed individuals possessing innate ‘genius’; rather, the production of talent must be viewed as an inherently social and geographical process. As Lloyd argues,

Culture work is filled with uncertainty and disappointment; aspirants face both financial and identity risks in the pursuit of their vocations... Identification with bohemia’s traditions of the edge helps sustain necessary levels of commitment in the face of this reality. It provides a model that incorporates the possibility of failure, at least in the short term. Thus the neighbourhood does not just magnetize creative talent; it also nurtures crucial dispositions (Lloyd, 2004: 366).

Here, we explore how attributes of the hip Mile End neighbourhood contribute directly to the creative process by allowing for the production of spaces (both social and material) in which creative dispositions can be cultivated.

Mile End as a creative district

To provide a context for the discussion, it first helps to have a sense of the character of the Mile End district.

While there are no clearly defined borders for the Mile End district, it is commonly referred to as the area northwest of the Plateau – a more established cultural district – and east of Outremont, a French upper-middle class, residential district. In contrast to those areas, which are both predominantly French, Mile End represents a cultural mix. Since the early part of the 20th century, it has witnessed successive waves

of new immigrants, starting with a wave of Eastern and Southern European Jews. Mile End was the principal Jewish area in the city up until the 1950s. Later, it became a centre of the Greek and Portuguese communities, and more recently it has become home to a Hassidic Jewish community (Ackerman 2006).

Due to the presence of the railway, Mile End was formerly an industrial quarter and served as the heart of the garment district for several decades. But by the 1980s, Mile End became economically depressed and derelict due to the loss of industrial activities. However, the rich and diverse architecture of the cultural communities that have inhabited it and affordable rents, made it an appealing site for students, artists, writers and independent musicians. Today, it can be characterized as a bohemian quarter. Is it the center of Montreal's thriving, Indie music scene and with the recent establishment of designers' workshops, fashion boutiques, home furnishing stores, and a design gallery, contains an emerging design scene as well. Mile End is also sprinkled with cafes, bars, ethnic restaurants and shops. Its vibrant public spaces and independent retail scene contribute to its cosmopolitan and neighbourhood feel.

How then do the distinct attributes of this urban, bohemian neighbourhood contribute to the creative process of designers?

The social dimensions of the urban

First, it is important to draw attention to the significance of a city's social qualities. Cultural and socio-economic diversity can support the production, distribution and consumption processes, for example, by providing opportunities to create and test

products for multiple markets and language groups. Diversity is also significant in terms of how it can contribute to the conception of design.

Specifically, for outsiders, Montreal's bilingual and multicultural character means that the city is more open to informal interactions; newcomers who may speak a foreign language can immediately feel included and can exchange their experiences and practices. For locals, an openness to diverse experiences and practices can facilitate a departure from the established ways of doing things:

We have all these different cultures that are enriching us tremendously. This is why I say Montreal could be a hugely artistic city if it is well supported. Yes, even the design in Montreal could become definitely leading worldwide, because of the mixture of cultures. The disadvantage of being a maestro in Italy doing bags is the knowledge that they have. It becomes their prison. The fact that we don't have this knowledge, as I said it in the past, gives us definitely the possibility of doing much more without even knowing it. Yes, I would say today, I have a huge advantage being in Montreal because I'm not limited to a fifty or one hundred year world way of doing something (Interview, fashion designer, Montreal).

Within Montreal, Mile End is the most diverse area, in terms of ethnicity, language and class, making it particularly attractive to young designers.

Cultural diversity can also mediate global-local articulations in the city. Global forms of knowledge are increasingly significant; but as Donald and Blay-Palmer (2006) note, these networks are more likely to stimulate unconventional thinking when they flow through a vibrant multicultural city with the resources to synthesize and adapt global trends in novel ways:

So I guess as a cultural experience, it's very rich because you always... have to adapt yourself to [something] different. There is quite a big multi-ethnic aspect in Montreal so that is contributing a lot to Montrealers' curiosity. The way we will eat, the way we will buy clothes or our relationships with the arts, with language. I think all these aspects make Montreal a unique place and the fundamental

important aspect in the background of a creator... But I would say the intangible aspect of this is maybe... to be able to go maybe easily towards another culture. Which is not that different but still, the way your brain has to work in order to express yourself in another language. It makes you do the exercise to communicate a kind of global, or universal....

There is a sense in interviews with designers that the neighbourhood is less atomistic and competitive than more established design districts in the city. Two designers that rented an old garage with no heat, in a run down part of Mile End, found the diversity of the area created a relaxed form of community:

D1: It's a very comfortable place when you have a lot of uncertainty about your work and it's nice, it felt like we were kind of at home there...cultural, linguistic, also that kind of socio-economic status. Everyone there is foreign, freelancing, or musicians or just getting by. You don't see business people going up there to lunch, you know....It's kind of like you're in a small town. And we were the graphic design shop on the street and there was, you know, other shops. So it's kind of like a little community... Because it's inspiring- cultural diversity and when cultures come together there's always a milieu that's created, right. That street is very hybrid, very much an eclectic mishmash...

D2: Sort of just the feel that you're in your niche, because it's a security and again a good base for ideas. And it really changed some of my ideasit was a creative space.

Neighborhoods with a diverse range of independent economic actors (including independent suppliers and distribution channels) can afford creatives or potential creatives the opportunity to take part in developing their own creative communities and spaces often outside the dominant economy. They can foster multiple collaborations and spill-across linkages between sectors:

In my case, where I'm a small company, all my pictures I've done with a photographer who is a friend. What we did is I paid for the cost and he uses the pictures for his portfolio. No one really got paid for any of it. The models were his friends and I gave them bags. Or, even for the last fashion show, I paid her in clothes. We do a lot of exchanges. I work with a graphic designer and in exchange she'll take some clothes.. I also like to work with people who are at the same

stage in the sense that we can all learn together. They're open to what it is I am. Sometimes if you work with people who are too professional, they're working at a different speed. They're not patient. When you're still at the beginning, where you're kind of exploring your whole creative process, you want to work with people who are exploring as well, or have less limitations (interview, fashion designer).

In Mile End in particular, designers and design firms benefit from access to a broader aesthetic competence as well as from an acute attentiveness to current cultural trends across a variety of mediums (See also Lloyd, 2004: 361). Immersion in a unique cultural habitus- in this case- a local youth-oriented music and artistic subculture- keeps designers abreast of cutting edge cultural developments. In this way, the practice of design adopts a viral nature, constantly mutating and recombining with other artistic fields, producing new forms and new ways of operating.

The material dimensions of urban creativity

The material dimensions of the urban landscape also stimulate creativity. Molotch, for example, illustrates how buildings, infrastructure, and iconography support certain kinds of creative production. The configuration of public spaces also influences the kinds of interactions that can take place. For Molotch (2003: 187)

the look and functionality of the city influences designers as they do their work, producers as they figure out what to make, and consumers as they develop their wants. The built environment and its accessories- directional signs, shop design, advertising regulations, window displays, street hardware- provide durable evidence to people of the kind of place they are in, of how things are done, of what is appreciated and what is devalued.

Montreal is known for its vibrant public spaces and outdoor life. In the summer months, sidewalk cafes are an important part of everyday life compared to other North

American cities, providing ample opportunities for networking. Stolarick and Florida (2006) also highlight the importance of urban density to this interaction, arguing that non-market interactions depend heavily on spatial proximity, on being within seeing or hearing distance of creative colleagues. Montreal ranks third in North America in terms of population density and benefits from the fact that individuals from all fields and walks of life are forced to rub shoulders.

In terms of material factors, a city can also support or suppress creativity through land rents. In Montreal, studio and living space is relatively inexpensive, creating low barriers to entry. This makes it easier for designers to get started and means that they do not have to take on conventional clients to pay their rent. Consequently, designers can take greater risks and maintain artistic integrity:

Montreal is quite an exciting place to live for a creator because, first the rents are quite cheap. So the quality of living we have here is allowing us to do a lot of activities. Going to theatre, to movies, eating in restaurants because you don't have to put necessarily all your money into rent. You can also rent for a respectable amount, a design studio, a work studio. So the conditions here are well put together, to enhance these aspects. ...Let me put it that way. I think the way we're less taken by, you know like the bills every month, is maybe freeing our mind a bit in order to create (Interview, Graphic Designer)

Molotch (2003: 178) argues, that "art work ...transfers into goods differently, depending on the kind of art in the geographic setting and the types of forces that thwart or facilitate its transfer into products". Low rents provide one means of facilitating this transfer.

Not only do lower rents provide the conditions for innovating in terms of design, but they also free designers to engage in other forms of artistic practice. A majority of designers and cultural workers are interdisciplinary and active in more than one art form

(Molotch, 2003: 179). Here, a graphic designer describes how low rents and supportive artist buildings enabled her to start her own art gallery on the side:

The cost of living here and the kind of cultural importance they put on art and making things and community and being involved, regardless of culture, regardless of age. It's so important for fostering that environment where you can really sort of go out and open a gallery. And you might meet your goal and fail in it after a year and people will still commend you....I like the healthy balance right now that I have in Montreal between making money at what I do and not having to compromise my aesthetic because the support is there for trying (Interview, Graphic designer).

Low rents thus provide the conditions for experimenting, as well as working across fields, by lowering the costs of failure.

Apart from affordable rents, designers have a particular set of spatial needs, including a desire to be in rougher, grittier, "more authentic" parts of the city such as Mile End, as opposed to the pretension and manufactured upscale feel of the Plateau. According to one designer, known for her avant garde styles, "I wanted a space with a raw feel...I didn't want an area already fully branded" (Friede 2005, D1). This area still contains warehouses and factory buildings, which are a carry-over from its industrial past. And a number of designers expressed a preference for these buildings, since they offer high ceilings, open space and natural light. One fashion designer states:

"the space that I found was exactly what I was looking for; I was looking for some light because being in a basement for so many years, I had to go out to see the colors of the fabric. I mean there were some very small windows in the area of the studio. So I wanted to have as much light as possible ... the loft aspect was also interesting; the space itself was nice, wooden floor, an old factory...the place was like that to remind you that Montreal is a place of contrast"

Physical spaces are also central to the creation of an underground economy which depends on low cost, word-of-mouth networking to spread information about

employment opportunities and cultural events (Stolarick and Florida 2006). One graphic designer in Mile End for example, describes how his work revolves primarily around the music scene in the area, making posters and publicity materials for concerts and festivals. He spends his time in a local café, which provides an opportunity for discussing design and culture with other designers, as well as musicians and other creative workers in the area. But the café also facilitates a process of networking that matches him with jobs:

the city breaks down boundaries. Graphic designers do work for musicians and bands and local artists. People know photographers and get them to photograph their band. Musicians also wear stuff... I have my meetings with clients here [at the café] and when I am working with other freelancers. Other freelancers subcontract things to create jobs for other people. We also do a lot of brainstorming while working here (Interview, graphic designer).

Markusen (2006b) suggests that artists (as well as designers) require less formalized spaces of inspiration, where they can make art for their own satisfaction or to share with their own communities – spaces where they can just be (Markusen, 2006b). Cafes, restaurants, and bars, as well as the street, all serve as “third spaces”, as unregulated spaces situated between home and work that facilitate creativity (Lloyd, 2004).

Conclusion

We argue that less regulated, vernacular spaces in the city provide the social and material foundation for nurturing the creation of design talent, mediating some of the risks associated with employment and facilitating an exchange between creative sectors.

A consideration of the productive dimension of quality of life draws attention to the need for more substantial investments in the development of social and cultural

resources which not only benefit designers in an economic sense, but can also shape the social character and physical space of the neighbourhoods in which they are embedded. While creative city policies have focused on attracting talent to the city through the creation of hip gentrified cultural quarters, we argue that greater emphasis is needed on preserving low-rents in the city and sustaining the livelihoods of cultural producers.

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