Bare Geographies in Knowledge Societies – Creative Cities as Text and Piece of Art: Two Eyes, One Vision

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What roles do cities play in knowledge societies? Do places still matter? To what extent are knowledge production processes place-bound and city-specific? This paper examines some dimensions of the multiple relationships between physically experiencing and mentally constructing the city. Primarily, this is a conceptual exercise. Thus, I read part of the literature on cities and creativity through two different conceptual lenses: representational and non-representational theory. The first lens, which I will call the 'right eye', sees the world from the point of view of abstraction and representation. The second lens, which I refer to as the 'left eye', looks at the world from the perspective of the concrete, experience, and dwelling (i.e. non-representation). Both 'eyes' are helpful as theoretical perspectives to analyse the changing role of cities in the knowledge economy. Thus, I argue for a two-eyed, stereoscopic vision of cities in knowledge-based societies.

How can one think of the spaces of thought? Are knowledge production processes place-bound? Could they even be city-specific? And hence: will cities still matter in the growing knowledge economy?

Human societies have always been knowledge-based societies. From the very beginning processes of inspiration, experimentation, and invention lay at the heart of societal development. Yet, with the unprecedented social, cultural, economic and technological changes of the last century the role of knowledge and information as a part of society has grown incredibly. Daniel Bell (1973) was one of the first observers to become aware of the new mechanisms of economic growth in what he called the 'post-industrial society'. He spoke of a new axis around which economic development rotates. In post-industrial societies, he argued, knowledge becomes the central source for the creation of (surplus) value. Scientists, the epitome inventors and keepers of the knowledge, would in his reading turn into the 'high priests' of the post-industrial society (Bell, 1973). In a similar vein Alvin Toffler (1980) predicted the coming of the 'third wave' society. While the first and second waves were triggered by the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the most recent trends of thought in the Western world thrive on new technological revolutions in telematics. According to this vision the spread of information and communication technologies enables the occurrence of a new phenomenon in the ecumene, the 'electronic cottage'. Likewise, in the 1980s the majority of urban theorists conceived of the coming of the post-industrial society as a challenge to urban agglomerations (Castells, 1989). Conventional functions and structures that were associated with the city – for example, the city as market place for the exchange of goods, people, services, and ideas – seemed under siege. Anti-urban dystopias reappeared. In urban and regional studies a

discourse was developed on the 'potential of this development to stimulate a re-birth of rural communities' and, henceforth, destabilize city life and foster spatial fragmentation and dispersal (Gillespie and Richardson, 2000, p. 255).

Does the economic basis of cities vanish with the rise of the information economy? For what reasons might knowledge firms and knowledge workers still choose spatially concentrated locations? Why should cities or regional clusters continue to be incubators for societal and technological change? And to put the questions more precisely: which of the manifold aspects of urban life holds a unique potential to strengthen fundamentally knowledge production processes and in which ways?

In the last decade an extensive literature on the importance – and, to some extent, the non-importance – of cities and regions in the post-industrial knowledge economy has emerged (Storper, 1995, 1997; Malecki, 1997; Keeble e*t al*., 1999; Scott, 2000; Florida, 2002; Oinas and Malecki, 2002). Some authors have argued that local specialization increases competition, concentrates competence and is conducive to innovation and growth (Desrochers, 2001, 369). Other researchers stressed the importance of local diversity across various economic sectors as assets for knowledge gain, knowledge transfer, and invention (Capello, 2001; Duranton and Puga, 2001). In both cases cities and regions are considered to be of major importance for the knowledge production process. They are constructed and perceived of as knowledge environments. Yet, the environmental dimensions themselves that are predominantly discussed in the literature are clearly restricted to merely economic and social aspects of cities as clusters of firms or networks of people. Cities are seen as environments that provide social capital. Their environmental dimensions as physical realities – a bare geographic space, a specific place, an urban landscape – are out of view. The material nature of the urban landscape takes on no intellectual role in the discourses on the creative knowledge city. Within the discussions of regional economists, urban sociologists, and physical planners, the bare geography of the city is out of sight and undervalued. It rarely comes to mind.

In this intellectual context I would like to try and bring a specific quality of geographic thought back into the arena. Such an endeavour requires a deliberate stance. I will argue for a renewed, fresh look at the (what I would call) 'bare geography' of the city. I suggest that we do not restrict our imagination of the city to a solely mental or social, culturally constructed immaterial reality. I assume that we can look more closely at the relationship between abstract cognition and concrete life in the city, between thinking and dwelling, between physically experiencing the geographic landscape of the city as a *flaneur* and intellectually wandering along the contours of a spontaneous idea or a literally presented concept. It seems to me that it could be exactly this secret relationship between seeing and thinking, experiencing and constructing, that takes centre stage in recent debates on the role of location, spatial concentration and agglomeration in knowledge production processes.

In what follows I would like to think about some dimensions of the optional relationships between physically experiencing and mentally thinking the city. Primarily I will practice this as a conceptual exercise. Thus, I will read part of the literature on cities and creativity through two different conceptual lenses: representational and non-representational theory (Thrift, 1996, 1999). The first lens, which I will call the 'right eye', sees the world from the point of view of abstraction, construction, and representation. The second lens, which I will refer to as the 'left eye', looks at the world from the chosen perspective of the concrete, experience, and dwelling (i.e. non-representation). Both 'eyes' are helpful as theoretical perspectives and tools to grasp the changing roles of cities in knowledge societies. However, I suggest

that most of the recent literature is sharply bent. Until now the lively discourse on the creative, cultural knowledge city does not address both sides. Indeed, much of what has been written on the emergence of creative cities heavily leans on right-eyed arguments, thus, half blinded by the thrills of abstraction. In order to see both sides, the view of non-representational theories has to be thoroughly integrated into a stereographic perspective. In what follows I first try to describe and distinguish between the two perspectives on the world. Then I will apply their views to the issues at stake and read into them some debates on the creative city. Finally, I will argue for a binocular vision of the role of cities in knowledge societies.

Two Lenses

Geographic knowledge production processes have long been pioneered by Nigel Thrift. In 1999 he published an article where he reflected on the underpinnings, preconditions, and preferences of his practicing (pioneering) geography. There he presented three theoretical 'likes' and three theoretical 'dislikes'. All of them are the offspring of the same commitment. They share the jointly sharpened intention of preparing the intellectual ground for a (re)located human geography. In principle Nigel Thrift presented the idea of distinguishing between two different kinds of epistemological (as much as ontological) 'theories' in the social sciences: he spoke of 'representational' and 'non-representational theories' (Thrift, 1999, p. 297).

Representational theories are the ones with which the majority of the scientific community in urban and regional studies is most familiar. Due to the multiple linguistic, cultural, and spatial turns taking place(s) in recent decades, theory-building in geography, sociology, economics, architecture, and cultural studies has become ever more representational. This implies that today most academics are aware that any given account of the world does not contain the object of study but rather constructs a specific representation of it. Hence, Nigel Thrift calls this approach the 'building perspective' (Thrift, 1999, p. 301) because, according to this perspective, to understand the world is to build it. Every representation is a construction.

> This is the view that human beings are engaged in building discursive worlds by actively constructing webs of significance which are laid out over a physical substrate. In other words, human beings are located in a terrain which appears as a set of phenomena to which representations must be affixed prior to any attempt of engagement. (Thrift, 1999, p. 300)

Representational theory then – be it in the incarnation of hermeneutics, system theory, social constructivism, or post structuralism – insists upon the epistemological stand that direct access to ontology, the being of the world, is ever denied. In the words of Ingold (1995, quoted in Thrift, 1999, p. 301): 'Here, then, is the essence of the building perspective: that worlds are made before they are lived in'.

In the scientific community non-representational theories are less familiar. This is because they operate differently and revolve around the question of how to approach the world academically. On Sunday 5th August 1951 the philosopher Martin Heidegger gave a lecture at the 2nd Darmstadt talks (*Darmstädter Gespräch*) on 'Men and Space' (*Mensch und Raum*). His presentation was published in 1952 under the title of 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (*Bauen Wohnen Denken)*. In a post-war West Germany influenced by war damage, forced migration, housing crises, and desolate city centres, railway stations, airports (i.e. in a recently bombed country, which was itself the aggressor, having bombed first), he lectured on the issues of homelessness. The philosopher spoke to a group of architects:

> However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *real plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The

real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell.* What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling. (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 48f, original emphasis)[1]

Heidegger's vision of dwelling aspires something unrivalled, a longing to bring human dwelling to the plethora of its imaginativeness and possible meanings – or in his own words: 'to bring dwelling to the fullness of its nature' (Heidegger, 2000, p. 49). Taking the idea of dwelling not quite as far as Heidegger did in his transcendental search, yet, thriving on some of the very same states of immediacy, imminence, and illumination of dwelling other authors have used it as a springboard for an alternative ontology and epistemology. This Nigel Thrift calls 'non-representational theory'; a theoretical milieu that presupposes what Heidegger already suggested: that dwelling comes before thinking. We live time-spatially in the world, move, experience and act in it, even before we are expressing it in words, theories, dance, painting, singing, academic writing, political speeches or new pieces of art.

Non-representational theory arises from the simple (one might almost say commonplace) observation that we cannot extract a representation of the world from the world because we are slap bang in the middle of it, co-constructing it with numerous human and non-human others for numerous ends (or, more accurately, beginnings). We act to think, and we only think we think to act because we have let some quite specific forms of life colonize our notion of what constitutes 'humanity'. (Thrift, 1999, pp. 296f)

Creativity in the Knowledge City: The View of Representational and Non-Representational Theory

What consequences do these two different lenses, the right-eyed (representational) and left-eyed view (non-representational) on the world have on the issue of creativity in the city.

The Right Eye: The City and Creativity in Representational Theory

When I lift my left hand to close one eye and only use my 'right eye' (i.e. representational theory) to look at the relationship between the city and creativity, between location and the post-industrial economy of knowledge, I recognize a mostly intelligible picture. I see a rich body of literature on the strengths and weaknesses of various agglomeration economies in the information age. Under this representational perspective the terrain is quite clearly arranged. There is a cushy explanation that has become a common explanatory response to the challenge why it is that cities or agglomerations are still needed in a knowledge-based society: because the creation of knowledge is not an isolated activity. The production, evaluation and spreading of knowledge rest upon the successful flows of information between various participants. In urban and regional research the generation of knowledge is essentially seen as the result of human encounters and social interactions. The innovative capabilities of single enterprises or multiple industries, of cities, regions or nations all depend upon relational qualities, that is on the level of communication and information exchange between different nodes in the knowledge producing network. The rhythms of (urban) interaction, the periodic strengths of weak ties, the capacities to transfer information (rapport between explicit and tacit knowledge) etc. are crucial to the knowledge production process. Especially the fine differences between the degrees of dissemination and transmission rates of various knowledges (which knowledge travels?) are a substantial starting point for urban studies in the search for a causal link between location and the blossoming of knowledge production.

Therefore, a systemic perspective in-

creasingly leads international research on spatial innovation systems. It proceeds from the assumption that the higher the contact density of the participants, and the better the different knowledge and information streams are connected, the more adaptive and innovative both the individuals and the entire spatial innovation system become, be it within a city, a region or a nation. Henceforth, under the representational perspective much of the research interest concentrates on the institutional conditions of the production of knowledge and learning in spatially concentrated production systems. Innovation processes are thus being understood as part and parcel of this, and therefore completely dependent upon interactive, collective learning processes. For the purpose of conceptualizing the manifold modes of interactive learning processes, various theoretical considerations have been elaborated like production clusters, industrial districts, creative milieus, or learning regions (Lawson and Lorenz, 1999).[2] Here I do not have the time, the space or the wish to discuss these approaches in detail. For a recent overview on the role of location in regional economic development see Florida (2002). However, such a detailed discussion is not imperative for the further advancement of the argument presented here. In the intellectual context of this paper all is needed is to highlight the common underpinnings in the various strands of information-agglomeration-concepts – that is their representational, right-eyed point of view. Although their arguments are based on different disciplines, operate in different methodological arenas and play different language games – in my reading – they all articulate with plural voices one phenomenon (Helbrecht, 2004). They shed light on the very same aspect and, thus, belong to the same concept family. One argument resembles another in that they all share an institutional perspective. They regard the production of knowledge to be quintessentially social in character. The economy of information and the generation of knowledge is conceived of as a collective project (Storper, 1997, chapter 5; Scott, 2000, p. 31). The approaches have a right-eyed-focus in common:

- The production of knowledge is regarded as a cumulative process, which profits from the interaction and cross-linking of different discursive participants, be it individuals, firms, networks, institutions or groups.
- Thus theorizing the social, cultural, economic, and spatial conditions, which are essential for the successful co-operation of people in a collective knowledge-production, is considered to be conceptually most important and thus attractive. Empirical studies focus on scrutinizing the interrelations between spatial proximity (e.g. distance, accessibility), social proximity (e.g. sex, age, education, origin) and institutional proximity (e.g. formal alliances, trust).
- With the focus on collective learning processes the classic distinction between the invention, absorption, and spreading of the knowledge is waived.

The institutional perspective illuminates a particular relationship of necessity and interdependence between cities and information economies, between processes of knowledge production and their needs for the locational concentration of certain agents and institutions. Basically it is the dominant role of social networks that leads the argument. So the spatial concentration of social capital is supposed to explain why footloose information industries still concentrate in specific locations despite increasing possibilities for spatial dispersal through globalization, the internet, etc. In the right-eyed view cities are mainly conceived of as being still suitable locations for knowledge production because they ease encounters, offer meeting places, and provide rich opportunities for social interaction. In short, in the representational view cities strictly stand in for social opportunities. They are harbingers of social capital and as such to be exhausted by economic agents.

In this conceptual perspective knowledge economies are only place specific and locally rooted in as much as they require a minimum of spatial proximity in order to enhance and ensure social and institutional proximity. Dense spaces enable dense social contacts – so the representational argument goes. It was the economist Robert E. Lukas (1988, p. 39, original emphasis) who pinpointed this basal insight as early as provocatively in the debate by asking the summary question: 'What can people be paying Manhattan or downtown Chicago rents *for*, if not for being near other people?'. The economic need for spatial agglomeration for the sake of dense social interaction is a particular representation of city life. But neither does it tell the whole story of the post-industrial driving forces of urbanization nor can it offer a complete picture of the agglomerative needs – and even more so sources – of knowledge societies.

The Left Eye: The City and Creativity in Non-representational Theory

How important are bare geographies of cities in urban and regional research? Do the morphology, the physical layout and landscape structures of the bare geography of the world matter to the locational choices of knowledge-based societies? I suppose one could argue so, because when I lift my other hand to close again one eye and use my 'left eye' (i.e. non-representational theory) to look at the relationship between creativity and the city, between location and the post-industrial knowledge economy, I see a new '*complexcity*'. I notice the appearance of a different city, a different understanding of knowledge, and a different role of the physicality of the world for mental processes. From a non-representational perspective the production of knowledge is as much a genuinely physical as well as mental activity. If we take on the dwelling perspective and enter the realms of non-representational theory then our understanding of three important issues immediately changes: (*a*) innovation and invention; (*b*) thinking and knowledge production; and (*c*) the role, the look and the feel of urban landscapes in the knowledge-based economy.

(a) Innovation and Invention. Inventions do not emerge solely from mental activities. They are not only logically derived products of cognition in a sterile intellectual world. Most often they are the results of quite something else, too. As Jane Jacobs argues the 'mother of invention' is not solely to be found in the field of an intellectual manoeuvre. Innovations are highly motivated by 'aesthetic curiosity' as well (Jacobs, 1985, p. 222). By referring to the research of Cyril Stanley Smith, Jane Jacobs writes (1985, p. 222):

> Metallurgy itself . . . began with hammering copper into necklace beads and other ornaments . . . Hydraulics and many mechanical ingenuities and tricks were first developed for toys or other amusements. 'Rockets for fun came before their military use or space travel' . . . The first successful railroad in the world was an amusement ride in London.

Thus, joyfully exploring the physicality of things – hands on with the sensual dimensions of perceived realities and engaging playfully with the aesthetics of the surrounding world – is an important stimulus for innovation. Invention then is – besides a cognitive, mental capacity – also a physical activity, a sensual gift.

(b) Thinking and Knowledge Production. For both representational and non-representational theory the distinction between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge is of major importance because it marks an assumedly insurmountable difference: the distinct ability either to represent knowledge and therefore be able to transfer it from one person to another or not be able represent it and thus not transfer it through social networks because it is non-explicit. Only explicit knowledge can be retrieved and transferred, taught in the classroom, archived in the

books on the shelves, or handed over from one person to another. Hence, explicit knowledge travels easily from one city to another. It is rather footloose. Whereas tacit knowledge is completely person-bound and thus much more sticky to place. It is by definition personal knowledge because it is ingrained in a human person without him or her knowing of it explicitly. Tacit knowledge is personal expertise, individually acquired experience. It is growing on us as we grow with it. We cannot hand it over to our neighbours, our partners, or our colleagues at work. Thus, much of the recent debate on the local concentration of knowledge, innovation management strategies, and the possibilities of knowledge transfer concentrates on the crucial question of how to transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. This is an important account of thinking and the transferability of thought and, therefore, the place-because-person-boundedness of specific kinds of knowledge.

Looking at this very same phenomenon only with the left eye, i.e. from a non-representational point of view I see even more, something different. A new focus point appears, it comes to view something else. Michael Polanyi, the inventor of the concept of tacit knowledge, thoroughly scrutinized the characteristics of tacit knowledge. How do we achieve it? How do we store it? How do we apply it? The answers he suggested very much constitute one core of the multiple facets of a non-representational perspective. For Michael Polanyi the production of tacit knowledge depends upon an act of conception through indwelling. Such a 'conception of knowledge through indwelling' (Polanyi and Prosch, 1996, p. 37) rests upon a kinship, a parallel maybe an analogy of intellectual and physical activity. 'It can only be lived, can only be dwelt in' (Polanyi and Prosch, 1996, p. 41). Dwelling in a theory like dwelling in one's body rests upon personal judgement, skilful movements and the act of establishing standards of excellence step by step in the course of every new physical exercise or theoretical excursion. Be it an athlete or a university professor, both of them acquire tacit knowledge in their respective fields through individual practices. Personal knowledge results in the establishment of the ability to judge. It encompasses personally acquired standards that operate as spontaneous, almost unconscious appraisers of the value or meaning of certain actions, objects or ideas. Because it is quick, sharp, and spontaneously operating tacit knowledge offers the socially as much as economically most appreciated and sought after incarnation of personal expertise: it is knowledge indwelled.

(c) 'Look and Feel' as Geographical Capital. If inventions arise partly from aesthetic curiosity – that is a physical, playful engagement with the world – and tacit knowledge is acquired through indwelling, then from here onward, from this line of reasoning, it is only a small mental step forward to consider the assumption that thinking and cycling the city might be connected; that the look and feel of an urban landscape can play a role in knowledge production processes; that for particular individuals moving freely in particular worlds of thought dwelling physically in particular bare geographic spaces can be helpful. Dwelling in and dwelling on might be two activities that are more intrinsically connected than we usually appreciate under the scopic regime of a representational, right-eyed point of view.

Martin Dijst and Cees Cortie (1988) found in their study of the academic spaces and milieus of Amsterdam that persons who belong to particular knowledge cultures (i.e. scientists, artists, or accountants) also prefer particular locations in the city. David Ley (1997) found a similar result in Canada when measuring the locational concentration of various professional milieus in different parts of the six biggest Canadian cities. In a comparative international study of the locational choices of creative service industries in Vancouver (Canada) and

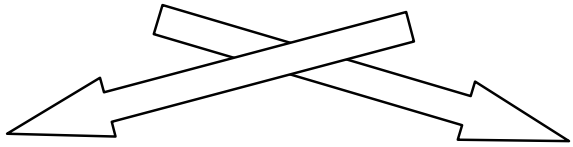
Munich (Germany) I scrutinized possible reasons for the attraction of certain knowledge cultures to specific cities and sites and places within them. I found through interviews and surveys in both Munich and Vancouver that firms in the creative service sector (i.e. design, advertising) choose their locations very strongly on the basis of the 'look and feel' of the building, the 'look and feel' of the neighbourhood, and the 'look and feel' of city – i.e. bare geographies – in order to foster the creative capacities of their employees (Helbrecht, 1998).[3] Urban landscapes can, thus, in the perception and evaluation of entrepreneurs and employees take on the role, importance and meaning of what I would call 'geographical capital' (Helbrecht, 1999) in order to cultivate the creation of knowledge.

Conclusion – Complexcities

The person is centred on his or her body. While this may seem like a blindingly obvious thing to say, the body has until recently been an almost invisible object for the social and psychological sciences, which have preferred on the whole to concentrate upon the realm of rational action and the mind rather than upon the body . . . it would be impossible for us to think without our bodies.

Complexcities
Two Views: One Vision
Ways of Perceiving and Conceiving of the World

Non-representational theory	*Representational theory*
(in)dwelling perspective	building perspective
mindful physicalism	textual mode of the world
physical classification	logical classification
the concrete	abstraction
embodiment	cognition
perception	social construction
practice	theory



Conceptualizing the Role of Cities in the Information Economy

Representational theory	*Non-representational theory*
nodes in networks	urban landscape: look and feel
social interaction	personal indwelling
social capital	geographical capital

AND

the city as text ⟷ the city as piece of art

Figure 1. (*Design*: Ilse Helbrecht (after Thrift, 1999))

> Rather than suggesting we can neatly divide the mind from the body, it is my view that we are bodies of thought. (Burkitt, 1999, p. 1)

The city is both a representation and a lived reality. It is a text and an *oeuvre*, a readable structure and a to-be-experienced piece of art (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 101). Thus the respresentational and non-representational perspectives are not aggressive competitors, theoretical carnivores, ripping the flesh from each other's bones. No, nowadays it is not a matter of either/or. There is no need to choose between representational and non-representational theory. What is more and is at stake is the fundamental challenge to practice and exercise the argumentational art of the 'and', simply because the city is both, it is a text and an artefact, touching and touchable. Thus cities in knowledge societies are 'complexcities' – something to dwell in and dwell on.

Cities in knowledge societies serve as providers of both social and geographical capital. They are complexcities. And it takes complexcities with all their characteristics – as social and physical environments – to cultivate knowledge production processes. With the emergence of knowledge societies new geographies appear, based on the consonance of dwelling in and on the land and the city.

NOTES

1. English version published in Heidegger (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter New York: Harper Colophon Books.

2. For an overview of the conceptual approaches see Storper (1997).

3. Using the German writer and Nobel prize-winner Thomas Mann as an example, in another essay I have tried to excavate some possible ways in which an individual might make use of the urban landscape as – their personal – 'urban think space' (*Denkraum Stadt*), see Helbrecht (2004).

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