Flexibility in cultural production

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Flexibility in the context of contemporary creative industries has become a glamorised phenomenon, a buzzword used to illustrate an ideal working condition for cultural producers. The growth in use of flexibility as a concept in urban discourse must be discussed in relation to the birth of *creative industry* and *creative class* in cities[1]. Since the late 1990s, and particularly within the last decade, neoliberal policymakers[2] have started to highlight their openness and willingness to accommodate creative industries[3] through various strategies and at different scales[4] as a means to instigate economic growth and increase competitiveness.[5] [6] The types of cultural production that are considered part of the creative industry illustrates a polarised debate. Modern (neoliberal) capitalism has co-opted the idea of ~~creativitycreativite~~creative culture, so that almost any desk-based job could be reframed as creative, a system that expects workers to be flexible and adapt to hostile and precarious working environments by promoting profit driven individualism. Practices which might not fit into this sector based, market driven definition of the creative class such as crafts people, performers and industrial makers often find adequate, affordable workspace difficult to obtain.

In the world of architecture, this notion of flexibility manifests itself in the design of coworking spaces, marketed as spaces for creativity and freedom. The trend of coworking spaces sweeping cities around the world, targets vacant, predominantly post-industrial buildings for adaptive reuse to promote innovation whilst optimising the operation of buildings for profit. In the market driven landscape of co-working models, the former is usually a cover for the latter. The prevalent

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[1] FLORIDA, 2002~~, 2008~~

[2] BRIDGES, 2017

[3] BRIDGES, 2017

[4] For example the use of culture in urban regeneration (Evans and Shaw, 2004) and city branding (Jensen, 2005).

[5] Pratt, 2008

[6] SCHLESINGER (2017)

aesthetic of these spaces often lean on their industrial character; vast open plan concrete floors, exposed pipe work, an assortment of mismatched furniture, with the popular accessories of house plants and motivational signs and slogans promoting productivity in trendy fonts. This purposefully 'unfinished' aesthetic is meant to evoke the impression of unlimited entrepreneurial possibilities, again counting on individuals' malleability to be productive and creative in *any* condition. There is a myth that such flexible settings facilitate higher degree of social network and interactions social networking among the individuals, that can balance the pressure and anxiety of being constantly creative. Yet, the less-discussed aspect of flexibility is the labour condition, precarious employment with low and sometimes non-existent wages, multiple jobs, and emotional stress[7] which justifies and even drives the proliferation of precarious working conditions.[8]

Today many workspaces favour certain types of production—prioritising digital production (graphic design, animation, video editing) over physical making (carpentry, printmaking, ceramics) or performance (choreography, music production, theatre).[9] The latter types of production require secure space to keep tools and equipment, to leave unfinished work, or to move, make noise and rehearse. These types of production include noisy, messy, space hungry practices that do not fit neatly into sanitised, desk based co-working environments. The space for digital production, can be less specific, can happen anywhere and can be accessed at any time and by anyone. Such hypotheses have resulted in the proliferation of precarious working conditions masked by the promise of flexibility and creativity, which in reality means the users of these spaces compromise at many levels.

Within the creative industry's discourse, artists or independent cultural producers are framed as so-called *culturepreneurs,*[10] conflating creativity with the ability to dream up 'new products and services to bring to the market.'[11] [12] Theories on the creative economy often merge cultural and economic values, understanding art and culture as a means for creating surplus value: creative entrepreneurialism. The approach to flexibility in these physical spaces and the promise of networking

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[7] Merkel, 2015

[8] Industria, 2020

[9] More about these three generic types in Bingham-Hall and Kaasa (2017)

comes at the cost of privatisation of creativity, either less space for more money, or pushing out types of production that are not as easily marketable or profitable.

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So what does flexibility mean to those producers whose practice sits at the margin of the creative industries and who don't benefit from this model? Dancers, musicians, painters and crafts people have different spatial requirements, be it the size, specific equipment, or visibility. Is flexibility always a form of precariousness?

I am particularly interested in examining these questions from the perspective of small scale, independent cultural producers whose practices have limited commercial opportunities. By looking closely at a few individual cultural producers and their workspaces, I seek to uncover how flexibility manifests in the- relationships between these individuals, the resources they need for their practice, and how their workspaces are designed and managed. To do so, I am drawing on the conversations I had with these cultural producers while visiting their workspaces in railway arches (Elephant and

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[10] DESCRIBES THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW HYBRID CULTURAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL AGENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL INDUSTRIES COHEN, 2015: 515

[11] MOULD, XXX

[12] SENNETT, R (1998) THE CORROSION OF CHARACTER: THE PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES OF WORK IN THE NEW CAPITALISM. W.W. NORTON & COMPANY. NEW YORK & LONDON.

[13] MORE ABOUT THESE THREE GENERIC TYPES IN BINGHAM-HALL AND KAASA (2017)

Castle, London), reused market buildings (Barras, Glasgow), and publicly funded meanwhile[14] projects (Belsunce, Marseille). The selected case studies offer specific operational models, in terms of finances, management and occupation of these spaces, which act as infrastructure for cultural production and diversity of what we imagine as creative work in these cities.[15]

The Space, The Barras, Glasgow

The Space is based within a former furniture store, which was converted in 2015 into Scotland's first Pay-What-You-Decide Community Arts Venue run by volunteers from People Without Labels charity. It was awarded a public grant from Keep Scotland Beautiful to reuse the building and create a social hub for homeless people to bring them closer to art and culture. The building operation relies on crowdfunding and donations as well as rent from workspaces and venues to hire which are all diverted to its main social mission - to support the local community - leaving little to no margin for profit. The Barras, the historic neighbourhood is currently undergoing a council led process of regeneration to become a locus for arts and culture, with several new creative hubs opening in adapted derelict buildings over the last decade (such as The Pipe Factory, Barras Art and Design, Glasgow Collective, Many Studios).

Colours of the iron cage

On the ground floor of the four-storey building, behind a big metal garage door which opens onto the street, I meet Sue, a graduate art student and painter in her workspace. While entering her studio from inside the building, I am immediately dazzled with an enormous metal cage built to fit the space. Paint dripping from hung objects has caused chaos on the floor, while cans of spray paint sit in harmony ready for their next performance. Sue explains her interest in pushing the boundaries of what we consider painting, through playing with 'chance, gravity, suspension and luck'. Access to this place has allowed her the freedom to build this cage and has helped her to make her dream world real

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[14] Meanwhile is a term describing a space (like an empty shop unit), a building (like an empty department store) or a place (like an empty site awaiting redevelopment), and the term describes how the space might be used temporarily while it is empty or awaiting a long-term use perhaps yet to be decided.

[15] The characters and incidents portrayed in this essay are real, yet their names are fictitious.

but comes with its own sacrifices. For Sue, the studio is not just a workspace to make art, but is the artwork itself. As the paint drips on the floor creating experimental forms, these improvised actions become part of the artistic process. She shares images and videos of the space and the process of making work live on social media to reveal the incomplete nature of creative work. In Sue's studio, flexibility can be seen in the ability to accommodate the artist's desire to build *dreams* which gains a permanent presence. She believes such support for individual makers historically existed in the neighbourhood, 'the DIY culture of the Barras' in Sue's words. Despite having to make and maintain her own workspace she expressed concern about whether she could find a similar situation somewhere else where she gets access to an street-opening studio within a fifteen-minute walk of the city centre, for two hundred and fifty pounds a month, where her she can dream up experimental work uninterrupted.

Whilst Sue has a monthly rolling contract, she is unsure of how long she can afford to keep her studio. She has negotiated her rent through an open dialogue with the Space's managers who themselves are volunteers in the building with uncertain roles. Flexibility here is a cooperation between the cultural producers in the building, and the management who support culture for its own inherent value rather than as a vehicle for profit.

I leave Sue's studio and wait for the manager to give me access to the first floor. The entrance hall has a ceiling covered with white cloth and is full of colourful images and signs, a collage of different tastes amongst which I spot one of Sue's paintings. Looking around, there is a piano, two guitars and a few drums on the floor in the other corner, next to ten to fifteen pots of small plants fixed to the wall. The doors opening to the entrance hall labelled as 'VENUE' is the 200-standing/60-seated capacity music venue, a gallery, and the beach, a temporary resting space for homeless or vulnerable members of the Calton community. The ground floor allows for an unusual co-habitation of different members of the community (artists, volunteers, musicians, visitors, the homeless); but only the cultural producers renting space here get to access the studios upstairs. The Space is unusual

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compared to other creative workspaces in that it also includes rehearsal space for musicians, alongside a mix of painters, sculptors, craftspeople and designers.

'45 show' from the nutshell

Upstairs, the first floor is subdivided with plywood partitions into workspaces of assorted sizes. Next to the staircase, there is a six square metre room with glued panels of polystyrene insulation on the walls, which its occupants, podcasters Colin and Joe affectionately call the 'nutshell'. Doubling as a recording studio, Colin and Joe's goal is to reach out to undiscovered artists in the music scene to give them a chance to showcase their voices ~~and~~ in their weekly podcasts ~~are~~ released every Saturday evening at six. Part of the attraction for them in being based in the Space is that the managers facilitate access to the music venue on the ground floor for their live recording of performances when the venue is not in use. In return, as Colin describes, they offered to create podcasts featuring musicians who use the Space's rehearsal rooms or the bands who occasionally have shows at The Space music venue on the ground floor.

The timeline written on a little whiteboard on the wall showcases their workload that, as Joe explains, changes on a project-by-project basis, which allows them to adjust their schedule to work during less noisy times in the building, like weekends and avoiding Mondays when the drummers who have a studio below are in. Flexibility is present not only in the physical rearrangement of the space, but also in the manager's openness and cooperation for enabling the use of different spatial and social resources in the building.

Boxed-in

On the next floor above Colin and Joe, Mona, a product designer, who recently moved to Glasgow has her studio. She is the only one working on this cold day. Her space is one of the eight units of the second floor, east-facing, and smaller than the units with windows opening to Bain

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Street. The spaces is full of different objects and it is difficult to separate which are the artist's work and which are personal items: clothes, blankets left on chairs, photos pinned on the walls, unfinished paintings on the tripod in the middle of the room, brushes, portable radiators, water boilers, sculptures in the making, books, plants, and sketches.

Mona has personalised her space with a built structure on top of dividing wooden panels, covering her unit with transparent plastic sheets all the way to the ceiling. Mona told me 'I thought I can either complain about how cold it is, pay a lot more money or I can box myself in.' To cope she has had to build an infrastructure within an existing infrastructure (the building). Mona has used her own time and labour to make these adaptations to make the space more environmentally comfortable, a compromise she is willing to make in order to save money on rent, which on that floor is £9 per sq ft. Mona adjusts her practice to the size of this unit and compromises her dream of making 'bigger, wilder things' in order to have the opportunity to leave unfinished work without having to store everything or sell it as quickly. But the size of the unit is not the only constraint to her work. Mona uses a furnace, to melt aluminium cans and recast them into sculptural forms and figures. This process needs fresh air and cannot be done inside. Having no open-air workspace, she has to carry everything to the car park next to the building to make her work.

Robert Dashwood Way (or only Railway arches), Elephant and Castle, London

Robert Dashwood Way is a stretch of twenty three Victorian railway arches and according to the information presented by Network Rail on the billboard at a corner of the street. The arches accommodate eighteen businesses, ranging from light industrial trade, car mechanics and auto repair, textile and fashion production to storage for technical equipment and theatrical props. The railway arches were state owned by Network Rail until their sale in 2019 to equity company Telereal Trillium and Blackstone Property Partners and they are now managed privately by the Arch Company. Unlike the northern continuation of railway arches, which have been recently transformed into creative coworking spaces, Robert Dashwood Way has remained untouched. The businesses inside are mostly

invisible, running behind the closed shutters, unlike the balconies and windows of the newly built residentials on both sides facing the road.

The backstage

A white van is unloaded on the street at dusk. Metal boxes are moved carefully on a trolley and pushed into one of the arches, the only one with open shutters. Ali and his business partner John run an audio-visual hire company which supplies major cultural venues and events in London Zone One, such as Borough Market and The Victoria and Albert Museum. The noise of passing trains resonates in Ali's workspace where he is carefully guiding two men moving a LED Plasma screen to the back of the arch between huge boxes stacked on top of each other. Their business London Audiovisual serves as infrastructure for other cultural practices and supplies them with speakers, amplifiers, cables and stands. Rolling the shutter down, Ali shouts at the van driver who is about to leave: 'tomorrow! 6 o'clock sharp! the conference is in Waldorf Hilton', then turns to me and says "we are open whenever we need to be".

For Ali the central location is paramount in order to access their client base, some of which are London's major cultural institutions. Due to the extreme shortage of commercial premises suitable for light industrial practices or storage in central London they chose to adapt their working model to suit the arches less than ideal working conditions. Ali has made many alterations to the arches, such as adding shelves to the walls, adding a mezzanine in the back of the space as well as expanding their business across several arches, Ali tells me 'we've probably changed the layout eight times in the eight years we've been here'. They are willing to compromise on the environmental and material conditions of the arches, such as a lack of heating, Wi-Fi, natural light, the curved ceiling which is not practical for vertical stacking and the added labour of moving equipment between different lots. The noise of passing trains does not affect the work they do, moving, fixing and testing audiovisual equipment, in fact it makes the railway arches a refuge for noisier, messier practices such as performance, light industrial making and music production that would otherwise struggle to find

space within open plan co-working models. It is the conflicts with the residential neighbours living in developments that have sprung up around Robert Dashwood way in the last decade that have created issues for Ali's company, residents complain about the noise they make while loading their vans with equipment early morning or closing the noisy metal shutters at night.

The main incentive for Ali in making these compromises has been the long-term leases offered by the previous landlord Network Rail. Their benign neglect[16] in managing these spaces, which for many years were considered as left-over subsidiary spaces to the railway above and can be adapted without a planning application due to their square footage of less than five hundred square feet. Although the tenants of these arches have the freedom of adapting their space, extra square footage to the premises is counted into the council charges.

The combination of adaptability, affordability and long-term lease that Network Rail has provided as a landlord has given these businesses the stability they require to survive and simultaneously support cultural production in central London. However this is subject to change in the future as the ownership of railway arches has been transferred to the private sector.

Invisible fashion

A few arches down the road, Katie runs her small business as fashion designer behind the almost always closed roller shutter. From 2D illustration through sample making to production all work is done in this space. Her arch was previously used as a storage for their family's Chinese restaurant until Katie got a government grant to start her own Fashion And textile and business. Now that her parents are retired, she takes care of both her own business and her family's restaurant which has been a neighbourhood institution for more than sixteen years. Working early mornings, Katie starts at six am to receive all the ingredients for traditional Cantonese cuisine and then before lunch,

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[16] For many years the railway arches have been considered by-product subsidiary spaces of the train network, undesirable spaces for developers to invest, which has protected them until now. 'Landlord Network Rail has been benignly neglecting them partly due to their sheer number, partly due to their supporting role to the railway'(Kostourou, F., Chua, C., and Karimnia E. 2019, p. 63)

she walks five minutes back to her studio, to check the designers' progress and finish her own work. She returns to the restaurant late at night to take care of cleaning and other duties. Katie acknowledges the convenience of having two businesses next to each other, allowing her the flexibility of bouncing between her fashion business as a day job and the family business.

Katie, like Ali, mentions the advantage of the arches' adaptability and affordability, allowing her to refurbish the space which required a lot of labour as it was rented as an empty shell. Katie's space is completely hidden by a blank roller shutter and she tells me that having no public interface is an advantage 'I want the least daily interruptions'. She added a mezzanine in the back of the arch to provide space for sewing machines, pattern cutting tables, steaming equipment, rolls of fabric and clothing rails. The space is divided between a fashion studio where Katie cuts patterns working with two designers and storage for her family's restaurant. With only six years left of Katies's lease the Arch Company has already warned her that due to the ongoing regeneration in the area there is a possibility of rent increase.

Coco Velten, Belsunce, Marseille

Located a stone's throw from Saint-Charles (Marseille's main railway station) and Porte d'Aix (Marseille's Arc de Triomphe) Coco Velten is a project that offers 55 affordable workshops/offices (10 Euro per square metre), 80 emergency housing for homeless families, a canteen as a meeting point, rooftop terrace as an experimental collaboration, and venues for public programme. Situated within the dense and deprived neighbourhood of Belsunce, Coco Velten is a mixed-use hybrid space connecting culture and public life, envisioned as a catalyst for transforming the neighbourhood, to create solidarity between local stakeholders to collaborate and make experimental work together. Hidden in a gated courtyard, Coco Velten was initiated through a meanwhile occupancy (2019-2021) of an empty late 19th century building. Owned and fully funded by the state, it represents a public-private hybridity through which a third party manages cultural institutions to initiate and develop innovative solutions to complex urban issues. It is co-organised by partners Yes We Camp (responsible for the building and public programmes), Plateau Urbain (responsible for actors and their

employment) and Groupe SOS (responsible for emergency housing). Due to limited funding and the temporary nature of the project, Yes We Camp prioritised basic refurbishments and light touches such as new signage, paint and posters to create safe working and living spaces for occupants. No significant improvements were made to the workspaces, but a canteen, rooftop terrace and other public venues within the building were designed to generate income for the project. From the outdoor space of the canteen where I stand, I can see children running around the courtyard of the îlot Velten, playing on the grass and around the basketball field. A few of them run in and out of the canteen freely and it seems the staff members know them well.

Ethical Practice

Leyla is a fabric designer who rents a studio in Coco Velten where she and her design collective met during an interdisciplinary exchange programme. Her practice is focused on reducing waste, rehabilitation and reuse and she chose to work at Coco Velten because she shares similar social values and environmental commitment consistent with the project's mission. Leyla shows me her work, unfolding patterns and ornaments made of recycled materials collected from the neighbourhood in collaboration with members of the local community. Leyla points at the colourful tiles hung in one corner of her studio which were made in a workshop she ran for kids to uncover Belsunce's social, spatial and material history through collecting found objects.

The flexibility in the social and cultural use of the building manifests at Coco Velten at different scales. On the one hand, the project's public performance at the level of hosting events such as the Manifesta Biennale, provides many opportunities for cultural creatives to meet; similarly through the events staged at the building and the canteen, which according to Leyla has expanded their professional network and initiated collaborations. On the other hand, its physical and social openness to the neighbourhood can result in lost visitors and children playing in the corridors, which can be a distraction for those renting workspace here. The workspace Leyla and her colleagues share at Coco is small and more suited to desk-based work and as she explains, there is not enough space for running

workshops, building prototypes, storing materials, and meeting clients. Now that they have two separate offices, they can better focus on work, but Leyla thinks it sometimes hinders sharing information.

Leyla appreciates the organisers' ethics, openness, and willingness to run the building as a democratic platform for different actors interested in civic projects. While most of the practices that rent space within Coco Velten could operate within a co-working space this model is elevated by being a social enterprise. Managing such social enterprise is a day to day experimentation to avoid commercial activities outweighing social and cultural objectives or staff burnouts.

Conclusion

As explored in these workspaces, flexibility is not a mission or goal, it is just an integral and inevitable part of small-scale and independent cultural production to survive austerity and to resist the marketisation of creative industries. The flexibility which these (co)working spaces offer is in their possibility to experiment, to adapt the space and to care about other values than profitability. Flexibility manifests itself in these individual's improvised tactics and adjustments out of creativity, constraints, or care, or all of them at once.

Flexibility as experimentation: The Space

Compromise, lack of suitable environmental and spatial conditions has meant that cultural producers in The Space have had to build their own infrastructures. Whilst this condition (lack of funding and material comfort) should not be romanticised it has given the people working there more freedom for experimentation. This experimentation was also observed in each individual's practices and the way it has shaped the work they produce, but also in ways different tenants exchanged skills and resources in the building.

Flexibility as adaptation: Robert Dashwood way

Flexibility here has been defined by compromising ideal or adequate space for affordability, location and opportunity to reconfigure. The railway arches are less than ideal in terms of noise, light, form, or

ventilation, but they have offered unlimited possibilities for the reconfiguration, and their long term leases created affordable, stable workspaces when they were under the ownership of Network Rail. The invisibility of these spaces ~~benefits~~ supports practices which do not benefit from public display or footfalls and need privacy in order to produce their work. <u>Flexibility in spatial adaptation is possible when there is a long-term lease or enough stability for the producer no matter how uncertain their practice gets.</u>

Flexibility as inclusiveness: Coco Velten

Flexibility here has been defined by a social and economic model through which the space is granted under the condition of inclusivity and care for social and environmental values. Renting space at Coco Velten is contingent on being prepared to interact and collaborate with the buildings surrounding the community as part of its commitment to the cultural regeneration of the area. The cultural producers renting space here need to have alignment with the ethics and mission of the building for this model to work.

Each of the cultural producers interviewed has made some kind of compromise, in terms of their space and its unfinished infrastructure. ~~Flexibility in spatial adaptation is possible when there is a long-term lease or enough stability for the producer no matter how uncertain their practice gets.~~ Flexibility is the compatibility between constraints of space (its form, material, regulations), individual's creativity and social support. The arguments unfolded in this essay providing multiple different readings of what flexibility is and can be - beyond a buzzword linked to coworking spaces. The photogenic spaces of the coworking model only fulfils the needs of a very specific type of cultural producer and are more akin to precarity. Melting materials, spraying objects, making sculptures, recording podcasts, storing expensive and bulky audio-visual equipment, sewing clothes, or initiating community projects can't happen in these types of spaces. However it is these practices, and the voices and stories behind this work that are vital for feeding the cultural life of our cities.

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