



The spatial imaginaries of creative clusters: Examining the role of R&D programmes in creative placemaking

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Creative placemaking
Regional development
Creative clusters
Multi-city regions
Spatial imaginaries
Creative ecosystems

ABSTRACT

Creative clusters – geographic concentrations of creative industries sector activity, its skilled individuals, organisations and institutions – have attracted significant investment globally, becoming an important driver of economic growth. In this paper, we frame investment in creative clusters as a mechanism for creative placemaking. Creative placemaking occupies a dual role as a driver of economic development via arts-led ‘regeneration’ of high streets and flagship infrastructural projects like cultural quarters, yet also as a sustained stewarding of creative places through social engagement and community-centred decision-making about cultural projects. This distinction is typically framed as ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ creative placemaking. We use the Bristol+Bath Creative R+D (BBCRD) programme as a case study to show how this distinction becomes less black and white. BBCRD created a ‘twin city’ spatial imaginary distinct from the geography of existing cultural or placemaking policy remits. The novel contribution of this paper is in how it evidences the intersecting scales of creative placemaking and unpacks the effectiveness of multi-city regionality for creative clustering, using fine-grained empirical data on the impact of top-down placemaking initiatives for the existing creative ecology of a place. This type of data and analysis is largely missing from literature on both clustering and placemaking. Given the continued international replication of the clusters model, recently renewed via ‘supercluster’ and ‘creative corridor’ discourses, we propose that an ecological understanding – that takes place specificity, relationality and scale into consideration – is pressing, and offers a route for complementarity between top-down and bottom-up creative placemaking.

1. Creative R&D clusters as mechanisms of creative placemaking in regional development

Creative clusters – geographic concentrations of creative industries sector activity and their associated skilled individuals, companies, organisations and institutions – have attracted significant investment globally. In the UK, where the creative sector has outperformed most sectors of the UK’s economy over the past two decades, creative clusters were a central mechanism of the government’s 2017 Industrial Strategy via the Creative Industries Clusters Programme. This programme sought to capitalise on the creative sector, investing £55 million. Through such policy interventions, the creative sector has been identified as an important driver of economic growth by making UK regions more economically competitive.

Although definitions of clusters vary, they primarily share a focus on geographical proximity of similar and related industries (Bagwell, 2008). Clustering strategies seek to foster pre-existing subsectors of the

cultural and creative industries, such as fashion, media or games design, primarily to generate economic outcomes. However, existing accounts of clustering largely fail to account for inter-relationality across cultural and creative subsectors and the inter-relationality of the creative sector with other sectors, viewing their economic activity in silo. Nor do they consider the limitations of existing subsector classifications defined by the UK government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport nearly twenty years ago.

In this paper, our novel contribution is in framing investment in creative clusters as a mechanism for *creative placemaking*. Further, following [Courage and McKeown \(2018\)](#), we argue that an *ecological* understanding of creative placemaking is crucial. An ecological perspective takes place specificity, relationality and scale into consideration and expands the geographical dimension of clusters beyond measures of distance. This enables us to innovatively analyse the impact of a cluster in terms of its top-down mechanisms and its bottom-up effects. In contrast, much of the literature on clustering offers macro-level

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104066>

Received 24 January 2024; Received in revised form 13 June 2024; Accepted 15 June 2024

Available online 26 June 2024

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analysis of large-scale statistical data. Our fine-grained, qualitative analyses enable us to make timely recommendations on future clustering policies, recently reinvigorated through international discourse on ‘superclusters’ and ‘creative corridors,’ that are missing from the extant literature (although see [Comunian and England, 2019](#) and [Harvey et al., 2012](#)).

In policy and wider public discourse, creative placemaking occupies a dual role as a driver of economic development via arts-led ‘regeneration’ of high streets and flagship infrastructural projects like cultural anchors/quarters, yet also as a sustained stewarding of creative places through social engagement and community-centred decision-making about cultural projects. While this distinction is typically framed as ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ creative placemaking, if we understand places as having distinct creative ecosystems, comprising assemblages of meanings, practices and materialities that shape creative identities, then this distinction is less black and white.

In this paper, we explore the role of top-down creative sector investment initiatives for shaping creative place identities and supporting local creative ecosystems in regional and place-based development. The Bristol+Bath Creative R+D programme (hereafter BBCRD), funded between 2018 and 2023, was intended to contribute towards regional economic development in the West of England, UK, and boost its creative ecosystem. It funded university-industry research and prototyping for ‘creative technology’ ([Dovey et al., 2023](#)). We use BBCRD as a case study to interrogate the interplay of ‘actually existing’ ([Pratt, 2011](#)) creative sector activity and new formalised creative placemaking investments like clustering.

Incorporating two second-tier cities with different creative identities, BBCRD created a ‘twin city’ spatial imaginary distinct from existing cultural or placemaking policy remits, including those defined by the local and combined authorities. In what follows, we examine how funded participants of BBCRD perceived their creative practice and networks in relation to these intersecting scales of creative placemaking. We do this through asking:

1. How people understand the creative identity of places and situate themselves within these
2. How creative places are enacted (made and negotiated) through their spatial organisation
3. The implications of funded R&D programmes for creative activity within a region

The paper begins by providing our rationale for framing creative clustering as a mechanism for creative placemaking. Creative placemaking has recently resurfaced as a buzzword in planning, policy and funding arenas. We outline the varying (often conflicting) ways this concept has been conceived, before considering how these differing logics intersect with those enacted through recent spatial economic policy in the UK. By then reviewing *ecological* frameworks for understanding the creative economies of places, we outline how such approaches can mediate between the different scales and discursive frames used to make sense of regional creative sector activity, including the spatial imaginaries enacted by creative clusters.

Understood in this context of intersecting economic narratives that combine to consolidate current creative sector policy, we analyse evaluation interview data from the BBCRD programme in a way that enables us to make recommendations on future R&D and clusters funding and speak to this wider set of policy contexts. Following the literature review, we provide an outline of our methodology as a ‘cultural ecology’ approach to R&D programming. We then demonstrate, through empirical data on perceptions of the BBCRD as a creative cluster, how place imaginaries and relations are constructed and enacted through R&D programming. We conclude with discussion and recommendations.

2. Creative places and their policy landscapes

2.1. Creative placemaking: community belonging to urban regeneration

In this paper, BBCRD – and its enactment through investment in creative cluster development – is framed as part of a wider landscape of creative placemaking. The term ‘placemaking’ typically refers to an urban design process aiming to improve the liveability of public space through taking into consideration the social practices that give places meaning. Placemaking strategies variously include capital investment projects for infrastructure, sustainability and cultural development, promoting tourism and economic growth ([Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014](#)). ‘Creative placemaking’ specifically describes creative, cultural and arts-led approaches towards achieving the same social, material and economic ends. Creative placemaking gained popularity as a concept in the nineties, building from existing placemaking strategies within spatial planning ([Basaraba, 2023](#)). It is typically underpinned by a public–private partnership model, where coalitions of diverse organisations with often competing priorities come together to strategically shape the physical and social character of places around arts and cultural activities ([Courage, 2020](#); [Markusen and Gadwa, 2010](#)).

In urban planning, the use of creative placemaking terminology follows a paradigm shift from thinking about macro urban form and built environment to ‘living environments’: public spaces that are made meaningful through human activity ([Marshall, 2020](#)). Creative placemaking has subsequently become associated with a series of *material interventions* in built environments that might enable ‘users’ of these spaces to feel belonging or a ‘sense of place’ ([Loh et al., 2022](#); [Zitcer, 2020](#)). Creative placemaking is more broadly aligned with a set of *approaches and tools* that “puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions” ([Courage, 2020: 2](#)). By facilitating community-oriented cultural activities within a designated area, such policies aim to foster social cohesion, wellbeing, stewardship and attachment to place ([Courage, 2020](#)).

Common across conceptions of creative placemaking is an emphasis on *influencing relations between people and place*. On one level, creative activity has been interpreted as a key driver of *social engagement* with place. On another level, creative placemaking policy has entailed cultivating distinct *production cultures* within places, such as localised co-working spaces, networks and ‘hubs’ for creative practitioners ([Genders, 2021](#)). Here, the delivery of creative placemaking imperatives has been largely concerned with providing bricks and mortar infrastructure to increase economic productivity and provide attractive places to live.

This emphasis on cultural production as a mechanism for the delivery of creative placemaking imperatives has been mirrored by a shift towards place-based policy in the governance of the creative economy. In the UK, the past two decades have seen cultural sectors increasingly framed in relation to the ‘agglomeration effects’, ‘externalities’ and ‘spillover’ that creative activities foster in places ([Olfert et al., 2011](#)). Such policy directions reflect broader trends in positioning culture and creativity as an economic development strategy. Richard [Florida \(2002\)](#) influentially classified a range of young, skilled, urban professionals as part of a ‘creative class’ that cities should aim to attract in order to compete with other cities in a ‘global marketplace’. Through an urban policy of marketing places towards such individuals by attracting private investment in urban redevelopment and branding ([Peck, 2005](#); [Montgomery, 2016](#)), so-called ‘creative cities’ could maximise economic development through increased tax revenue, tourism and establishment of small businesses ([Chang, 2011](#)).

Critics of the creative cities paradigm, however, have argued that its encouragement of urban re-development and re-branding – in alignment with neoliberal economic logics of global competitiveness for private capital – contributes to processes of gentrification, excluding inhabitants of cities that do not fall within the category of the ‘creative class’ ([Montgomery, 2016](#)). By deciding which cultures should be promoted

and which should not, it is argued, placemaking that follows Florida's blueprint fails to account for the totality of a place's existing history, people and context. This then leads to dispossession, displacement and 'dis-belonging' of those who do not have agency or representation in this process (Bedoya, 2013; 2014; Stern, 2014; Zitcer, 2020).

We can begin to see, then, that there are conflicting expectations and epistemological assumptions around creative placemaking as a concept. Two sets of discourses in particular – one centred upon the social impact of the arts, the other on regional economic development – are both prevalent and often viewed as mutually exclusive (Stern, 2014), reflecting opposing assumptions, especially between funders and practitioners (Zitcer, 2020). This conceptual fuzziness has led several commentators to question the utility of creative placemaking as a term and the uniqueness of interventions said to fall under this label (Courage, 2020; Markusen, 2013).

We will now consider how these competing discourses may serve to frame the context of regional economic policy in the UK over the past two decades.

2.2. Regional economic development policy in the UK

Some of the logics behind 'creative cities' thinking can be observed in regional policy in a relatively recent shift (post-Brexit) that has moved economic development away from London and larger UK cities – in rhetoric, at least – towards devolved regions comprising towns and smaller conurbations that have been 'left behind' (Leyshon, 2021). Becoming tied to an array of policy goals, including economic development, social inclusion, regeneration and health (Gilmore, 2013), culture and creativity have become a central part of a regional development to be achieved through public-private partnerships.

For example, the 'medici effect,' identified in the UK's 'Levelling Up' policy, purports that bringing together diverse people and industries around a thriving cultural centre – specifically high streets – drives innovation and economic prosperity (HM Government, 2022). Such assertions reinforce the notion that cultural provision has spillover effects to boost economic growth and cultural tourism (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014), as well as community wellbeing, by virtue of improved quality of life, access to opportunity and social cohesion. Notably, the Levelling Up White Paper also identifies a link between the creative industries and *pride* in place, with investment in the creative sector identified as one way of addressing the objective of restoring local pride (HM Government, 2022).

At the same time, the devolution of power to make economic choices in new regional formations like combined authorities (CAs), Gateways and Powerhouses has sought to strengthen the economic competitiveness of regions that do not have globally competitive larger cities. These new geographical constellations created 'twin city' or 'multi-city' regions (MacKinnon, 2022), understood here as polycentric regions, following Meijers et al.'s (2014) definition of twin cities as cases of polycentric urban configurations, and provided a new 'spatial imaginary' (Boudreau, 2007) through which to understand, inhabit and promote places. The enactment of creative policy through these new geographical imaginaries has largely adopted place-based strategies built on bi-lateral working and non-statutory partnerships, such as the Cultural Compacts convened by Combined Authorities (Arts Council England, 2020).

However, uneven development can arise in these new regional formations when they comprise of a combination of first- (or global), second- and third-tier cities. In the example of the Swansea Bay 'city-region' in the UK, Beel and Jones (2021) found that pre-existing administrative and cultural boundaries, different types of employment sectors dominating individual local authority remits and unrealistic commute times all prevented the city-region imaginary from establishing itself. Twin or multi-city regions are assumed to benefit from cohesion and competition, networks and integration, without negative impacts of large city-level agglomeration such as congestion, pollution and crime.

However, Meijers et al., (2014: 36) note that "little is known about how the advantages of polycentricity actually materialize in urban practice" across time, and that the difference in impact on each city within a multi-city regional configuration is also under-researched.

Furthermore, much of the local-level 'Levelling Up' funding is actually administered nationally – and on a competitive basis – through arms-length organisation Arts Council England (ACE) and the UK Government Departments for Culture Media and Sport and Levelling Up (Arts Council England, 2021). This mechanism creates a zero-sum game of winners and losers between different would-be creative places within and across regions at various scales. By and large, such regional economic policy represents a top-down approach to capitalizing on or fostering creative place identities and has been subject to a range of ideological drivers over the past 30 years (Swords and Prescott, 2023).

When viewed through the lens of placemaking, these trends in regional economic policy intervention depart from the community-oriented 'living environments' paradigm that has been prevalent in urban planning discourse, in favour of more universal models of urban development that instrumentalise culture to serve economic competitiveness. However, there remains a gap in the creative placemaking literature evidencing how the former works alongside or in tension with the latter, or indeed how regional economic policy initiatives map onto the micro-relations and dynamics of "the actually existing creative city" (Pratt, 2011: 124).

We will now discuss how the interplay between these discursive frames might be apprehended through an *ecosystems* approach towards creativity and culture.

2.3. Creative and cultural ecosystems

Within existing creative placemaking scholarship, a distinction is often made between one-size-fits-all, 'top-down' placemaking initiatives associated with urban regeneration schemes, and more organic, 'bottom-up' approaches responding closely to a place's unique identity. Cara Courage (2020) identifies how this distinction originates from a perceived disconnect between what people want and need from the places they inhabit, and urban planning decisions administered by those situated outside affected communities. Those who critique the imposition of flagship urban regeneration projects argue that the goal of placemaking should ultimately be "to create thriving, interesting, active places that people want to live and work in as well as visit, without pricing out current residents or making them feel unwelcome, and without losing the individuality and specificity of the place" (Loh et al., 2022: 9). Also described as 'placekeeping' (Roche, 2016), such an approach requires longer-term work with local communities and understanding placemaking as an active and ongoing process rather than a physical end-product (Strydom et al., 2018).

Research on individual cities has highlighted the significance both of material interventions in urban space and of social processes of community organisation for how creative economies operate. In Bristol, UK, Genders (2021) describes how the 'networks' and 'communities' of knowledge exchange and support needed to sustain freelance creative labour, which is often assumed to be 'placeless', are in fact highly place-specific and local. For example, Merkel (2015) and Goodwin (2019) have both emphasised the importance of co-working spaces in cultivating a collaborative, community-based ethos towards organising precarious creative labour and fostering resilience through skills development and psychosocial support. To understand how such relationships between localised communities of practice and urban development are enacted in creative places, Courage and McKeown (2018: 3) suggest that an *ecosystems* framework is needed. They argue that such an approach might be able to "actualise creative placemaking's generative potential" and "transcend the bi-polarities of top-down or bottom-up."

Ecological framings have featured in both government policy and academic discourse on regional creative economies. The term 'creative

or cultural ecologies' was notably articulated by the UK Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries in 2011 as "an alliance between the subsidised and commercial arts; the professional and the voluntary arts; and the arts and the creative industries" (Vaizey, 2011, n. p.). Against an austerity backdrop, the term has more recently been used synonymously with 'clusters', whereby it is argued that resilient creative ecosystems can get on with cultural provision, subsector specialisms and productivity without public funding dependencies (HM Government, 2022).

In academic literature, a more nuanced picture exists. De Bernard et al., (2022: 340) describe how creative and cultural ecologies and ecosystems can be understood in three ways: as an ontological reality made up of complex inter-relations that "always-already exist," an analytical perspective or framing to understand the world, and "an approach to cultural policy, programming and practice." Such a framework recognizes the complexity and interdependency of already-existing creative communities and places, understanding culture as an organism not a mechanism, and therefore much messier, scalar, and more dynamic than linear policy models which treat creative placemaking and innovation as a "process of pulling levers and operating machines to achieve specified outcomes" (De Bernard et al., 2022: 345; Holden, 2015). It also recognizes the multiple forms of value produced through creative activity, including "a wide range of non-monetary values" (Holden, 2015: 2) such as "ideas, inspiration, trust, contacts, technology know how, employment, excitement, access to markets, start up support" (Dovey et al., 2016: 3). These come together as constantly shifting assemblages of relations between meanings, materialities and practices, interacting at different scales. Creative ecosystems are therefore always 'in process' and it is through policy and programming that the risk of exclusion and fixity of creative place identities arises, by "valorising certain art forms and tacitly legitimising the relations embodied in their production" (Barker and Jordan, 2022: 280).

The rise of the creative ecologies and ecosystems paradigm is paralleled by recent shifts to ecological and multi-scalar ways of thinking about *place* (Ingold, 2000). The heightened mobility of people, information and capital associated with globalisation has necessarily entailed a scope that can engage with the multiplicity of processes – occurring across varied sites and scales – through which place identities emerge (Massey, 2005). We follow Cresswell (2014) in adopting a meso-theoretical understanding of places that interfaces both the dynamic flows and the identifiable topographies (this city, this region and so on) associated with them. By understanding places as gatherings of materialities, meanings and practices that *assemble* and *disassemble*, scholars can usefully attend to the phenomena unfolding at a range of scales and contexts that influence how people experience place (Cresswell, 2014). In this paper, by bringing a focus on place back into creative placemaking, we intend to understand how the multi-scalar processes, influences and relations animated by creative clusters interact to shape 'actually-existing' creative ecosystems.

This paper utilises De Bernard's three-way taxonomy to examine how the ontological reality of already-existing creative practices interacts with the effects of a specific approach to cultural policy and programming: the BBCRD programme. Creative ecosystems, as an analytical tool and framing for understanding cultural and creative activity, enable us to explore the 'generative potential' (Courage and McKeown, 2018) of this interaction and make recommendations. In the case we focus on, BBCRD, this creative cluster maps on to the multi-city region of the West of England in the UK. BBCRD created a twin city spatial imaginary overlaying (but not mapping precisely onto) the West of England city region as a scale in which to enact a form of top-down creative placemaking. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to explore appropriate scales to enact creative placemaking initiatives, and to interrogate their inter-scalar power, which remains absent from the majority of literature and policy on creative clusters and ecosystems.

3. Bristol+Bath Creative R+D as a case study for creative placemaking in a devolved twin city region

BBCRD was a £6.8 million research and development (R&D) initiative funded through the Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP), a scheme administered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The CICP funded nine 'creative clusters' across the UK between 2018 and 2023. Each brought together businesses, organisations and universities to drive growth within particular creative sector industries. BBCRD was a partnership between the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), University of Bristol, University of Bath, Bath Spa University and Bristol-based cultural production studio, Watershed.

The CICP stems from the Conservative Government's Industrial Strategy and its goal to capitalise on regional industrial strengths and support regional clustering activity to "deepen pools of skilled labour, drive competition, and increase market access" (HM Government, 2017: 225). BBCRD's goal was to develop Bristol and Bath's creative economy by supporting a socially responsible environment for innovation that is inclusive and sustainable, which puts people first, and is underpinned by careful research (Dovey et al., 2023). As a form of twin city regional agglomeration by way of a creative cluster, within a new context of extra-urban Levelling Up funding and policy initiatives, BBCRD provides a 'critical case' (Yin, 2009) to interrogate new spatial imaginaries and the role of creative placemaking in regional development.

3.1. Cultural policy narratives

Through its focus on the cities of Bristol and Bath, BBCRD maps onto two distinct cities with their own strengths in the cultural and creative industries, which have distinct but broader geographical policy remits.

At city-level, the local authority responsible for the city of Bath is Bath and Northeast Somerset (B&NES) and covers rural and peri-urban areas well beyond the city of Bath. Throughout the BBCRD programme, Bristol operated as a mayoral region with a One City office separate but working closely with Bristol City Council (BCC). Bristol is one of 11 UK core cities (Bath is not) that contribute to more than a quarter of the UK economy. There is stark unevenness, however, between the urban centre and peripheral wards, exacerbated by poor transport infrastructure (BBC, 2023).

In creative and cultural policy, city-level cultural policy has been diminished significantly in the last two decades of austerity, alongside all UK local authorities, as public spending has been slashed (Equity, 2023). The two cities' cultural strategies both recognise the importance of their cultural offer for economic growth, in terms of tourism and inward investment. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, B&NES has reshaped its policy to encompass a broader creative ecosystem after finding its reliance on heritage-based tourism had left it vulnerable (Roberts, 2022). Bristol's policy aligns itself to the city's 'edgy' cultural ecosystem, comprising a vibrant freelance and events sector (g). Both cities recognise a wider social remit of the cultural and creative industries, with Bristol City Council seeking to ensure their cultural offer reflects the diversity of the city and that everyone can access it (BCC, 2017). B&NES sees the creative sector as having a key role in strengthening community bonds, civic pride, building understanding and friendships, and growing capacity in the voluntary sector (B&NES, 2011).

BBCRD also maps across the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). WECA is currently delivering Creative Growth programmes awarded by Arts Council England in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with a focus on innovation and economy. Through the West of England Cultural Compact partnership, it is able to steer the direction of local cultural and creative industries activity. The Cultural Compact seeks to put culture at the heart of joined up placemaking. In WECA's Cultural, Economic Development, and Recovery Plans, there is a much stronger emphasis on the creative sectors and their intersection with digital, than in the arts-led cultural sector

concerning the local authorities (WECA, 2022). There is a strong economic growth narrative around creating global demonstrators, gaining international investment and leveraging the expertise of the region's four universities into commercialisation within its Creative Economy, whereas the Cultural Compact stresses the need to tailor support for creative businesses to models beyond the purely commercial and growth-oriented (Roberts, 2022). These creative policy remits reflect the tensions and competing priorities within public-private partnerships, and between funders and practitioners identified in the creative place-making literatures

Within this mixed policy context, BBCRD created its own 'twin city' spatial imaginary informed by conventional wisdom around 'creative cities,' as well as existing networks and partnerships between universities and creative business across the two cities. The new imagined 'cluster', which did not overlay precisely onto the geographical remit of political structures governing the two cities, created ambiguity around the boundary of BBCRD and its intended reach.

3.2. Cultural ecology as a strategic approach to creative R&D programming

A 'cultural ecology' approach to 'policy, programming and practice' (De Bernard et al., 2022: 340) was adopted for BBCRD delivery. BBCRD convened five themed 'pathfinders'. Pathfinders were organised around curated cohorts that brought together industry partners, research fellows, creative businesses and freelancers from across the Bristol and Bath area for regular workshops, research seminar series, and access to university R&D labs, all designed to foster collaboration (see Roberts, 2023 for detail of the cultural ecology-informed cohort approach). Prototype funding worth £25 k–£85 k was awarded to four teams per pathfinder and £1.5 k–£15 k of smaller pots were allocated for 'early ideas', testing and showcasing.

Coordinating the delivery of the pathfinders were an executive board made up of the overall programme director, co-investigators, researchers, and a creative producer team. A steering board comprising vice chancellors from each of the partner universities and key individuals from regional creative organisations also informed the overall direction of programming.

3.3. Interviews

We conducted 53 semi-structured interviews with BBCRD-funded participants and partners, as well as 10 team members who directed and delivered programme activity. For context, we provide a breakdown of the type of engagement in the programme, the location, creative role and organisational type of all 22 interview respondents quoted in this paper in Table 1. All programme-funded participants were invited to interview during the early pathfinders of the programme. In the later pathfinders, we shifted to a targeted approach, working closely with the creative producers interacting regularly with funded participants to identify where we could best achieve representation: across the pathfinders, the range of programme roles, demographics, career stages and locations. Interviews were in person, by phone or video call, lasting 45–120 minutes, and digitally recorded with informed consent.

Semi-structured interviews allowed us to guide conversations according to our research interests, while giving interviewees the opportunity to foreground what they found meaningful (Byrne, 2004). We asked each interviewee questions about their knowledge and perceptions of the creative community in the two cities, the networks, resources and creative hubs they were accessing, and if/how the 'scene' relating to their creative specialism differed across the two places. We asked about the strengths of Bristol and Bath compared to other UK 'regions', and what further support, investment and infrastructure was needed.

Transcribed interview recordings were analysed by qualitative coding, using NVivo software. Initial codes were identified *inductively*, using

Table 1

Breakdown of interview respondents cited in this paper.

Code	Participation	Location	Role	Organisation
P16	Fellow	Bristol	Creative Producer and Curator	Micro business
P17	Fellow	Beyond WoFE	Founder	Freelancer
P18	Fellow	Bristol	University Academic	
P19	Fellow	Bristol	Founder and Director	Micro business
P26	Prototype team	Bristol	Creative Projects Manager	SME
P28	Prototype team	Beyond WoFE	Design Director	Medium-sized business
P29	Fellow	Bristol	Artist and Activist	Freelancer
P30	Fellow	Beyond WoFE	Producer	Employed by large business
P31	Fellow	Bristol	Artistic Co-director	Freelancer
P32	Fellow	Beyond WoFE	VR Producer	Micro business
P34	Fellow	Bath	Theatre Maker	Micro business
P35	Industry Partner	Bristol	Associate Music Director	SME
P36	Industry Partner	Bristol	Executive Producer	SME
P37	Industry Partner	Bristol	Artistic Director, Community Arts performer and facilitator	Micro business
P38	Industry Partner	Beyond WoFE	Marketing Manager	SME
P41	Prototype team	Bristol	Artist and Project Manager	Micro business
P46	Prototype team	Bristol	Creative Director, Playwright	Micro business
T02	Team	Bath	University Academic	
T04	Team	Bath	University Academic	
T07	Team	Bath	University Academic	
T08	Team	Bristol	Research Manager	
T10	Team	Bristol	Producer	

open coding (Cope, 2010: 445). The two authors triangulated their initial emergent themes, checking for consistency, before triangulating to our research questions and existing literature relating to creative place-making, clusters and regional economic policy to produce a refined list of *axial codes* (Cloke et al., 2004: 315).

The arguments set out below substantiate these axial codes. We outline the 'place imaginaries' and 'place relations' shaping pre-existing creative places and the ways in which 'enacting creative places' through BBCRD's clustering is successful or not. Each participant has been given a unique code with T referring to team member and P referring to funded participant.

4. The place imaginaries, relations and scales assembled by Bristol+Bath Creative R+D

4.1. Place imaginaries

4.1.1. The distinct creative identities of Bristol and Bath

Bristol and Bath were described by the majority of participants as having distinct cultural and creative identities which the BBCRD programme's focus on creative technology had to take into consideration.

Bath was understood within a conflicting place imaginary as being both mature in its cultural offer and much younger than Bristol. Cultural institutions in Bath were perceived as traditional and elite. One respondent admitted having "always found it quite intimidating" (P37). Another respondent pointed out that Bath has one large creative company whose "influence manifests throughout the city" (T07) and may preclude other creative activity, in terms of visibility and talent pipelines/retention. Respondents identified that creative work in Bath was siloed, with existing established sectors, institutions and organisations – heritage and publishing, for example – not tapping into the burgeoning

new creative industries including creative and immersive technologies. A few participants saw Bath as an opportunity, characterised by a refreshing openness compared to a saturated and crowded Bristol.

“But Bristol is quite... is quite saturated... I guess I would characterise Bath as being... it sort of very much felt like Bristol did about seven or eight years ago. There’s a real sense of energy and openness and a... it wasn’t crowded sort of landscape, so people were very open to sort of new collaborations and new opportunities.” (P19)

Nonetheless, it is difficult to identify a coherent ‘bottom-up’ creative place identity to match the strong cultural heritage and tourism branding linked to the city, which did not resonate with our participants either.

Interviewees’ responses about the creative distinctness of Bristol were far more impassioned. While it must be noted that we spoke to more people from Bristol, respondents individually found it easier to articulate a creative identity for Bristol, seldom referring to its cultural heritage and speaking more to local audiences than to tourists in relation to cultural offerings. The benefits respondents identified to doing creative work in Bristol were the “critical mass” derived from the co-location of “a massive industry of people working in the same sort of sector in the same sort of way” (P18). This critical mass is also construed as a “rich ecosystem” (P30) and “strong creative conversation” (P31). This conveys that there is also diversity in the creative sector(s) comprising Bristol’s creative community and it is “more open...interdisciplinary and not too tribal” (P31) having “enough competition to make people not feel entitled” (P31). Overall, a sense of there being an established creative identity in Bristol was a resounding sentiment across the responses.

This identity has unique characteristics, comprising DIY communities made up of small projects and independent creatives coming together. This special energy allows for experimentation and less orthodox expression of values (P41) and means that radical work gets made and seen by audiences in Bristol, with those audiences more conditioned to take risks.

“Bristol just has such a special energy because, you know, often real kind of creative and radical work comes out of kind of communities that have... that are... are maybe less visible, or like... Or... or less privileged, and kind of have to like fight for like the values a bit more.” (P30)
“...it feels to me very much like a yes city. People are willing to take a risk and a chance, and the audience you have are more likely to push boundaries or go and see slightly unusual stuff.” (P36)

In combination, these characteristics support the way that Bristol has been promoted externally as having an ‘edgy’ creative identity (BCC, 2017). This imaginary piggybacks off the global recognition of Banksy and his street art but understands it through a more local lens. For many Bristol-based creatives, Bristol is a place to be proud of working and living in, a place to produce and consume creative experiences, a place to creatively belong.

4.1.2. How do creative places foster pride and belonging?

Amongst Bristol-based respondents, there was strong identification with Bristol through their creative work. In some cases, this was about wanting Bristol to be their first audience or context for prototyping:

“We’re very committed to Bristol so... what we create as a vision or as an idea, we very much want to prototype here.” (P28)
“...we want Bristol to feel like we know this is our home, and we love Bristol ...we’re not going to be, like, oh let’s just go and do a show somewhere else. Its like, no, Bristol first.” (P38)

Expressions of love and commitment to Bristol as a city were nuanced in relation to the networks and hubs creatives connected within Bristol. In Bath, the sense of pride and belonging associated with hubs was also evident.

“I just needed a space to organise the meeting... and I used The Studio for that, and I was somehow proud of that.” (P01)

“I have felt quite overwhelmed getting that residency at [Bristol creative hub], because it actually feels like... I’ve been allowed to come in from the cold.” (P37)

While creative hubs can be difficult to access without the right connections or pathways, they also provide spaces of inspiration, pride and belonging, “centres that people sort of gravitate to” (P19). Hubs were also at times viewed by our respondents as elite spaces and as “gate-keepers of young people’s creative progressions” (P26). Those who had strong creative networks described them as closely linked to particular cultural hubs, with only a few mentions to significant creative networks spanning both Bristol and Bath beyond BBCRD’s own network. Respondents solidly located power related to creative placemaking, through building and making visible creative communities, within city-based hubs, their associated networks and partnerships.

4.2. Place relations

Does it make sense to cluster across two cities with distinct creative identities? Our respondents answered both yes and no. They understood where working across the two cities was successful and beneficial, recognising circularity and reciprocity of creative work between the two locales, with a degree of porosity and ‘betweenness’ experienced in creative work across the two cities, supported by their proximity. A ‘psychological distance’ between Bristol and Bath was also noted, however, as a result of their distinct creative identities, the perceived unequal relationship between the two cities, and the lack of cross-over between hubs and networks.

4.2.1. A ‘twin city’ creative cluster

For some of our respondents, it was logical for the creative cluster to incorporate Bristol and Bath. Those with knowledge of local policy contexts were able to articulate this well:

“I think it’s perfectly logical because they’re... nine miles apart... when you look at so called twin cities around the world, there’s a lot of similarities in the... problems that... they face. So, at least Bristol and Bath have the advantage of being under the single combined authority.” (T07)
“I think it’s a good match, and... whatever people’s political thoughts are about it, ...it’s to work as a region.” (P29)

For some creatives, it did not “seem unusual to think of Bristol and Bath in the same kind of bracket” (P35). Respondents noted a circularity involving younger freelancers gravitating towards Bristol for support networks and maturing companies moving into Bath. This combination of freelance and established companies meant that the cities “work well together” for another respondent (P34). The ease of movement between Bath and Bristol was associated with a 10-minute train commute, with one respondent likening increasing connectivity to “that idea of it being a corridor” (T04). The same respondent also noted how a “psychological” distance did exist between the two cities despite their proximity. This can probably be explained by the two cities’ sectoral and cultural differences rather willingness to travel, since it can take longer to travel across Bristol than between Bristol and Bath.

Several respondents acknowledged the strength in bringing the two cities together: “we’re lucky because we have, well, at least four universities. That’s a major help because they also come with venues” (P29). Others identified that more energy needed to be put into Bath, in order for it to “step out of the shadow of Bristol” (P18). When asked to consider Bristol and Bath together, a common narrative emerging within our interviews was that Bath appeared as a poor relation to Bristol (P19). Bath is variously referred to as “the rubbish younger brother to Bristol” (P38) “the underdog, the little sister” (P34) to Bristol, and somewhere that “gets forgotten about” (P18). While the cumulative strengths of the two cities are advantageous, one city is clearly seen to benefit more than the other.

4.2.2. Scales of professional practice

Part of the creative distinctiveness of the two cities is the scale at which the creatives based in them are working, which creates very different creative ecosystems that affect the coherence of their creative identities. Creatives in Bristol and Bath were linking professionally with other UK regions, primarily London, with one respondent claiming to have “a totally different idea of each of the cities” in understanding their communities’ relation to London (P01). It was a much more common narrative, however, for creatives based in Bath.

“... it’s almost a cliché in Bath of the successful entrepreneur who’s relocating their family to Bath... they’ve got an eye on London and they’ve got an eye on their international partners, but they’ve come to Bath because that’s where they want to put their family.” (T07)

There was a clear perception amongst respondents that Bath creative companies were facing towards London for clients and networks (more than they were facing towards Bristol) and that Bristol creatives were more inward-looking towards their own city. Bristol has “this kind of hold so people end up there and don’t move out... they love it so much, but then they wonder why their ideas don’t graduate past Bristol into the wider fields... [they are] working within these very, very specific microcultures which actually don’t really apply outside Bristol” (P17). This “bubble-like” (P16) version of Bristol is perceived to have pros and cons, as somewhere inclusive but without the ability to extrapolate that into wider professional spheres. Bristol can be read as a place to live, work and base your network, whereas Bath was more likely to be understood as a place to live rather than to work. This difference in scale is reflected in the degree to which respondents referred to interconnected networks and hubs within or across cities.

4.3. Enacting creative places

4.3.1. Working across multiple places

BBCRD was designed to foster R&D across the cities of Bristol and Bath. In programme evaluation, respondents frequently discussed the spread of activity across the two cities.

The BBCRD team identified an unequal spread of creative R&D across the cities, evidenced by discrepancies in numbers of applications to the programme, with Bristol-based applicants significantly outnumbering Bath applicants. Several interviewees suggested that this discrepancy reflected the differences in numbers of people working in the sector across the cities. Nonetheless, the programme aimed to support the creative sector across both cities, so the team ended up “juggling the need to have a geographical spread of what we fund but equally wanting to fund the top-quality applications” (T10). Respondents questioned how effectively BBCRD supported creative sector individuals and businesses across both cities. For example, one team member argued that those based in the Watershed community in Bristol benefitted more than anyone else, “just because of where they’re situated, and because they’re networked” (T08). Equally, team members could feel like they were acting against their own creative community in order to have geographical spread.

When discussing organised programme activities, respondents often suggested that these were equally situated across the two cities. An R&D cohort established prior to the COVID-19 pandemic felt “embedded in the two cities” (T10) because in-person activities were organised in both Bristol and Bath. Activities that brought programme participants together in person in Bristol and Bath developed the sense of a creative community being embedded across both cities. This “physical relationship” (T10) established between the cities was then undermined by COVID-19 social distancing policies, which forced programme delivery online for remaining cohorts. For BBCRD team members, the inability to sustain activity physically in each city meant Bristol was perceived to hold the heft of power and opportunities, reinforced by application numbers skewed towards Bristol, and perpetuating existing notions of Bath having a less developed creative sector.

These dynamics led some team members to question whether having one model of doing creative R&D across both cities was appropriate. They considered whether BBCRD could have done more to celebrate the distinctiveness of Bath and Bristol as places.

“That is something I think was missing, was that Bristol and Bath had really different identities... in the project it’s kind of the same, rather than celebrating the quite specific unique parts of each.” (T02)

“What we never really did is we never really celebrated the difference of the two.” (T08)

In highlighting how the creative communities in Bath and Bristol are at different stages of development, with each having unique characteristics, respondents suggested that having a one-size-fits-all approach to building creative R&D clusters is inappropriate. Rather, the suggestion here is that regional creative placemaking policy should celebrate the distinct qualities of each place touched by programmed activity, in order to have the greatest overall impact across the geography of clusters.

4.3.2. Fostering accessible creative places

For BBCRD, a common concern among team and funded participants related to whether the programme was truly accessing all parts of existing creative ecosystems and “bring[ing] new voices to the conversation” (T09) or only reaching established members of certain creative communities. Where Bristol was perceived by many interviewees to already be the “focus of a lot of the innovation activity” (T09) in the region, Bath was frequently described as a satellite. For this reason, parity across the funded cluster in terms of who could participate in the programme was understood to be hard to achieve.

Inequality of access was also observed within the individual cities of Bath and Bristol themselves. A consistent claim made by interviewees stated that inclusive programming meant different things in the two cities, due to the differing demographics of Bath and Bristol. In Bath, for example, research participants identified geographical disparity as a key challenge to inclusivity within the programme. Creative sector activity in the city centre was seen as dominated by affluent, white and male individuals, while other areas of the city remained disconnected from this activity:

“Inclusion and diversity... has very different meaning in... Bath than it... does in Bristol. The demographic in Bath is very different, and from an inclusion point of view, the issue in Bath is to do with communities that are hugely disadvantaged and very disconnected with the rest of the city, and that was not something that the cluster was able to... to address or think about.” (T07)

While inclusion was regularly remarked upon by participants as a central pillar of the BBCRD programme as a whole, the above observations implied that there are differing contexts for inclusivity and accessibility within creative placemaking policies.

For this reason, some interviewees went further to suggest that creative R&D support needs to be more localised and targeted to have a significant impact on communities within funded regions:

“I think when we give people a chance from different lived experiences and you target that support locally in that way, you’re nourishing the space around you. I feel like that is where funding should be targeted, not to people who already have a big profile.” (P11)

For our respondents, then, enacting equitable, inclusive and accessible creative placemaking is not simply about achieving parity between places within a region that have varying characteristics in terms of the make-up of their communities. Rather, it is about identifying the already-existing differences within individual places and undertaking localised, targeted activity to support those who might not otherwise be able to access or benefit from creative R&D programming.

We will now discuss how these findings contribute to the wider field of research on regional economic development and creative placemaking.

5. Discussion and concluding comments

From our data, it is evident that the ways participants in the BBCRD programme understood Bristol and Bath as ‘creative’ varied significantly between the two cities. Yet the programme brought together these two places under the single banner of a creative ‘cluster’, with shared governance, funding opportunities and organised activity.

Existing scholarship on multi-city regions has suggested that their success is dependent on the complementarities between the cities involved, which includes factors such as territorial identities, infrastructures and governance, whether pre-existing or new (Meijers et al., 2014). Cultural boundaries and varying employment sectors dominating individual local authority remits prevent the ‘city-region’ imaginary from establishing itself (Beel and Jones, 2021). Our data demonstrated how similar kinds of intra-regional relationships shaped how creative practices were organised across the Bristol and Bath ‘cluster’. Part of the lived realities that shape how creative practices are organised within geographical areas is the relations between places within defined regions. Participants referred to the circularity and betweenness of creative work alongside a sense of psychological distance between the two cities.

The notion of a coherent creative cluster across Bristol and Bath was the product of a regional economic funding mechanism and a logic of geographical proximity. Unlike many newly-imagined economic regions, Bristol and Bath share a combined authority, WECA, and are well-connected by public transport. In these respects, clustering the two cities together was logical for many participants. For the most part, however, the ‘cluster’ did not align with the lived experiences of creatives within the two cities. Our respondents pointed towards the need to attend to the distinctiveness of Bristol and Bath as places, rather than attempting a one-size-fits-all approach. The logic of a coherent creative cluster did not adequately grapple with the characteristics of the creative ecosystems operating across this region. From this, we can draw learnings about the appropriateness of international replicability: not only for creative clusters, but clustering and economically-driven spatial agglomeration of multi-city regionality too.

Participants expressed that there is a ‘need’ for a creative cluster to be sustained, in order to address inequalities resulting from the differing maturities of the creative ecosystems in each city. As it stands, though, participants suggested that ‘more energy’ is needed in Bath to achieve this. Here, we can reflect on the sustainability of the top-down dynamic of creative placemaking in the form of government funding for clusters, where funded activity is time-limited and delivered through partnerships between universities and cultural organisations. As Copeland and Diamond (2022) have noted, piecemeal and small-scale investment in regional economic development projects is typically inadequate to address long-established structural inequalities across and within regions.

Another facet of intra-regional disparity manifested in the relationships with other places in the cluster region outside the cities of Bath and Bristol. While differences in creative sector activity varied between the two cities themselves, the disparity was even more stark between these urban centres and areas of the cluster region outside them, echoing an urban bias identified in clusters thinking (Harvey et al., 2012). This is not a new observation within the wider field of regional economic policy, which is largely still premised on cities “as panaceas for a myriad of economic and social challenges, in the process of ignoring the needs of the ‘marginalised strata’ within the city and of ‘non-metropolitan places’ beyond the city” (Waite and Morgan, 2018: 384). A similar critique levelled at creative placemaking programming is the imperative to avoid a disconnect between the activity that happens in such schemes and what is actually needed by the individual places in question (Roche, 2016; Loh et al., 2022). Our participants’ focus was repeatedly aimed towards the need for more localised, targeted activity as a method of attending to distinctive qualities of places in the region and increasing cultural access and inclusion.

The perceived deficit in accounting for differences between places was attributed less to the cluster as a mechanism of regional economic funding, and more to the delivery and distribution of funded programme activity. BBCRD’s application process was one identified touchpoint for how programme activity and funding was ultimately distributed, with the geographic variations in quality and quantity of applications received impacting perceived fairness of opportunity across the two cities. This led to the perception among multiple participants that those who benefitted most from BBCRD were those who were already the most networked in local creative ecosystems. This echoes prior research indicating how regional economic funding might have the unintended effect of *exacerbating* inequality by creating competition between individual entities in different parts of the region, rather than addressing pre-existing intra-regional inequalities (Waite and Morgan, 2018).

Within regions, the success of such funding depends on how programmes operate and deliver sensitively to local place-based contexts and concerns. This means putting ‘place’ back into placemaking strategies, which we argue can bring top-down and bottom-up creative placemaking together productively. However, we question the extent to which new forms of regional clustering and economic growth policies in the creative economy actually move away from creative cities thinking to consider supporting creative ecosystems more holistically at their intersecting scales. This paper has outlined how creative placemaking – the continual re-assembling of creative practices, relations and identities – is evident at multiple scales and mechanisms of operation: the work of individual creatives/businesses, programme staff, institutions, regional authorities and government funders. As ‘global–local negotiations’, how creative placemaking initiatives understand local creative sector activity continues to be informed by transnational policy imaginaries of successful creative places (Rughhapan, 2021).

In enacting creative placemaking through R&D clusters, then, our analysis identifies a tension between the regionality of creative R&D programmes and the distinctiveness of individual places within funded programme regions. Creative R&D activities organised across multiple places will confront both intra-regional economic inequalities within the sector and perceived or actual differences in the creative communities operating within particular places. These factors may call into question the effectiveness of attempting to foster a regional creative identity across different places, as opposed to celebrating the distinctiveness of each place within a funded region. However, this paper has brought attention to the generative potential of creative placemaking at this scale when these contexts are understood and embedded within programming. These findings will be of particular relevance for future research on multi-city clusters like superclusters and creative corridors across the global north and south (Doloreux and Frigon, 2022; Mengi et al., 2020; Müller-Mahn, 2020). City planners and regional placemakers across the world persist in replicating one-size-fits-all Richard Florida-esque or Silicon Valley-aspiring creative policies, widening their geographic scale to gain competitive advantage globally. This case study evidences how such policies can be more successful by paying attention to the specificities of creative places, which has significant implications beyond the UK.

A prominent strand of the wider literature on creative placemaking concerns the question of who such policies benefit. Where diverse communities within a place have not been part of decision-making processes or endorsed activities, creative placemaking has been considered by some commentators as a sugar-coating for gentrification (Lew, 2017). In the context of creative R&D, we might consider: who can access the programmes through which it is enacted? How included do different groups feel? And what wider impact might be achieved for communities across the places where such programmes operate? Despite renewed emphasis on place-based policy, creative clustering continues to operate as an internationally replicable, one-size-fits-all approach. A place-based focus, through placemaking partnerships that bring together top down and bottom-up needs and goals, offers an opportunity to increase the success of clustering programmes and mitigate negative

impacts of clustering, such as exacerbating existing inequalities and reducing the diversity and resilience of existing creative ecologies. There is considerable need for deeper research into how creative placemaking programmes such as university-mediated creative industries clusters interact with the lived realities of those working in local yet scalar creative ecosystems. This will help to ensure that future creative sector interventions reduce existing inequalities within regions, supporting delivery that enables fairer opportunities to belong to creatively different yet thriving places.

6. Funding Acknowledgements

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/S002936/1].

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Liz Roberts: Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jack Lowe:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/S002936/1].

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