Creative Serendipity: when art and public entrepreneurship revitalize a downtown

Evangelia Petridou, PhD Student, Mittuniversitetet

Dimitri Ioannides, Professor, Mittuniversitetet

Introduction

St Louis was vast and lonely... its derelict splendours, the huge ornate mansions of a vanished bourgeoisie, the useless skyscraper-tall steel arch through which the citizenry surveyed the view of shabby warehouses and marshalling yards of the Illinois shore. The empty palaces beside the immense eternal river. What an impressive image of the demise of capitalism. (Murdoch, 1976, p. 13)

Murdoch’s description of conditions in St Louis in the 1970s reflects what was happening at that time to many of the once-great American industrial cities. A number of factors, all of which favored suburban development, had already precipitated massive depopulation from these cities’ respective cores in the immediate aftermath of World War II. These included the GI bill and Federal Housing Authority loans, which for the first time in history had made private home-ownership for US citizens extremely attractive. Combined with the Urban Renewal Act of 1949, aimed at revitalizing decaying urban centers by acquiring blighted areas, clearing them, moving tenants elsewhere and giving the land over to private developers (Garvin, 2002; von Hoffman, 2000) not to mention legislation during the 1950s targeting the construction of interstate highways, these forces encouraged the (mostly white) middle class to seek out brand new properties, which were rapidly being built on the rural-urban fringe. Following the Civil Rights’ riots of the 1960s, US cities were plunged further into the worst period in their histories as for the most part the only residents left behind were the poor. To make matters worse by the 70s, widespread construction of suburban malls and office parks combined with the deindustrialization malaise that gripped advanced western economies meant that places like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Saint Louis had entered a period of enormous turmoil (Beauregard 2006).

In retrospect Urban Renewal has been seen as one of the most misplaced federal policies of all time. What effectively began as an ambitious project to clean up inner cities had effectively transformed these into derelict wastelands presenting a multitude of social problems. Any vestiges of
the cities’ history and aesthetics of a glorious past were all too often swept aside. To make matters worse, after 1974, Nixon’s (and later Reagan’s) New Federalism meant there was no easy way back for the American city given the dramatic loss in direct federal intervention in local government affairs. In reality, by the late 1970s American cities of all sizes were left alone to fend for themselves.

The only way to avoid bankruptcy was for places around the country to turn entrepreneurial in an attempt to find and consolidate their respective competitive advantages. In response, major cities like Chicago, San Francisco and the Bay Area, New York and others have seen a gradual restructuring of their economies and a shift from declining industries to more profitable and sustainable sectors such as high tech industries or finance. Alternatively (and/or concurrently), “cities are spending substantial economic and political capital in the pursuit of tourism and entertainment” partially by investing in a tourism/entertainment complex comprising sports stadia, festival malls, museums, performing arts centers, and convention centers (Judd, Winter, Barnes and Stern, 2003, p.51). In smaller cities, transformation has remained rather opaque. Some, such as Gatlinburg, TN or Branson, MO, have turned to tourism with varied success; some are still trying to attract smokestacks in enterprise zones or turn to service economy facilities in the name of job creation regardless of the jobs’ quality.

A recent body of literature across disciplines such as Political Science, Urban and Regional Planning, Economic Geography, Sociology, Policy Studies and others, stresses the importance of creativity, creative people, culture and small community-based, grass-roots projects in the revitalization of downtowns and neighborhoods of cities. Although the vast majority of this literature has focused on major urban conurbations (see for example Florida 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Jacobs 1961,1969; and Zukin 1989,1995), there is some work on rural counties in the U.S. (see, for example Mc Granahan and Wojan, 2007; Wojan, Lambert and McGranahan, 2007) and small cities (see, for example Burayidi, 2001).

The question that arises is whether the process of revitalization of a mid-sized city downtown is similar to the process typical to a much larger metropolitan area. This paper is a case study of the Midwestern city of Springfield, MO. More specifically the paper focuses on the role of creativity in
the revitalization of the downtown areas of midsized cities. We take a two-pronged approach on creativity: first, we focus on artistic creativity and the role of culture and art-related grass roots initiatives, and second, we center on the creative role of public, quasi governmental and private sector actors using the burgeoning literature on political entrepreneurship. Finally, we develop a temporal/functional model of the revitalization process.

Relevant literature is examined in the next section, followed by a brief description of the geography of the case study and the chosen methodology. We then offer an analysis of our findings, ending with concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

The role of creativity

Though the idea of creative individuals and their influence in the late stage of capitalism is not new (see for example Brooks, 2000; Ray & Anderson, 2000), it has been Florida’s work on creativity, innovation and economic development that has sparked heated debates among both academics and practitioners. In the *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) Florida explores the implications of widespread economic restructuring after the 1970s for urban regions and specifically the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. In essence he articulates what this shift has meant in terms of human capital.

Florida’s argument is that human creativity channeled into innovation results in economic growth and higher living standards. What is more, he states that geography matters a great deal and the factors that give one city a competitive advantage over another (e.g., Denver or Austin over Pittsburgh) are openness, cultural richness, a technological edge and the availability of quality-of-life amenities sought after by members of the creative class summed up in the 3 essential Ts: Tolerance, Technology and Talent. Florida argues that globalization has enhanced mobilities to such an extent that individuals make residency choices based on the amenities and services an area has to offer, rather than blindly chase a job to the next city, which offers the employer a tax break at the expense of its residents (2007).
Writing about creativity and place, Lloyd (2002, 2006), though reluctant to fully endorse Florida’s arguments, tells the story of artists working and living in recycled industrial building stock, who were the driving force behind Chicago’s Wicker Park neighborhood transformation from “a relatively obscure and depopulated barrio into a celebrated center of hip urban culture” (2006, p.8). These individuals are the “neo-bohemians” and though the term suggests continuity with their earlier iconic Parisian predecessors, three trends differentiate traditional and contemporary bohemia: 1) the displacement of older economic functions that has produced places for adaptive recycling; 2) the commodification of culture and its increasing importance, and 3) the changing occupational structure of the global city with a highly educated labor force of knowledge workers. Essentially, Neo-Bohemia (or the postmodern city) is the intersection of production and consumption of knowledge and culture.

Creativity and its ties to socio-economic development have been met with skepticism partly because of the difficulty in measuring any relationship the two concepts may have in hard, quantitative terms. Despite this skepticism, there seems to be consensus concerning the following points:

- As the artistic activity in an area increases, the quality of life in the community improves (Florida, 2002a & 2002b; Klamer, 1996; Lloyd, 2006; Markusen 2006; Markusen and King, 2003; Markusen, Schrock & Cameron, 2006; Singer, 2004; Villani, 2004).
- Artistic activity in a city assists in the recruitment and retention of top-rate employees (Florida, 2002a & 2007a; Markusen & King, 2003; Markusen, 2006).
- Art is neither a byproduct of, nor a parasite to, a successful business economy. Instead, art and artists are a component of the economy (Klamer, 1996; Markusen 2006; Markusen & King, 2003).

These points are far from self evident to stakeholders taking part in urban governance; what is more, the public arrangements of artistic creativity do not happen in a vacuum. Indeed, we propose that when dynamic change happens in urban redevelopment, creativity in the private sector (here the
artistic community) is be met at a serendipitous moment by creativity in the public sphere as well. Florida’s (2002) belief is that creativity is multidimensional. It includes “technological creativity (or invention), economic creativity (entrepreneurship) and artistic and cultural creativity, among others” (p.33). The political face of creativity in the context of urban governance is political entrepreneurship and it centers on the astuteness in making coalitions, matching solutions to problems in order to reap the political benefits of a successful policy. In search of this creativity, we turn to the burgeoning literature of political entrepreneurship.

Despite the nuances (and some contradictions) in this abundance of definitions of political entrepreneurs, these definitions share some fundamental premises. Following are the definitions we view as most meaningful because they represent a distillation of the tangle of definitions in the literature.

First, political entrepreneurs are actors who operate in the public sphere—whether they work for the public sector, a quasi governmental organization or an interest group—and whose actions result in dynamic change. Dynamic change is not necessarily fundamental change; rather it is articulated in a policy or way of governing which departs from established routines, an innovative policy or way of governing. Second, political entrepreneurs are alert enough to recognize opportunities that is, propitious moments to proffer solutions to perceived problems. The line between real and perceived problems can be rather blurry as political entrepreneurs have the ability to frame issues in such manner as to garner the most public support for them. In fact problems are not objectively identified through clear social conditions. Political entrepreneurs’ critical contribution to the policy making process is their ability to frame issues in such a way that the likelihood of building support for their goals is maximized.

Third, political entrepreneurs must be embedded in the local socio-political fabric in order to have the ability to form a coalition, a team with which to pursue the solution to the problem. Political entrepreneurship is a decidedly social exercise rather than a solitary excursion. Fourth,
political entrepreneurs are willing to invest personal and organizational resources at their disposal, such as time and contacts in order to reap the (political) benefits such as reelection or simply, because they find pleasure in engaging in policy making. Fifth, much like their private counterparts, political entrepreneurs are motivated by (usually political) profit (see for example: Meyani, 2009; Martin and Thomas, 2011; Mintrom, 2000; 1997; Mintrom and Norman, 2009; Roberts and King, 1991; Sheingate, 2003; Schneider and Teske, 1992; Schneider, Teske and Mintrom, 1995).

With this case study we aim to understand the role creativity plays in dynamic change. We show that dynamic change takes place when creativity in the private sector is met with creativity in the form of entrepreneurship in the public sphere. In the relatively flat hierarchy of public governance it would be rather naïve to assume that one group of stakeholders can initiate and implement change in a vacuum. In the following section we examine the context of the case study and we justify our rationale for the methodology used.

**Geography of the study and methodology**

The objective of this study is to investigate the “creative milieu” (Landry, 2000 p.133) in revitalized downtowns of American mid-sized cities through an in-depth case study of Springfield, Missouri. As with any ethnographic study, site selection speaks to its validity. Making generalizations from a single case study has its obvious limitations; however, conclusions drawn here can be seen as part of a larger body of research on mid-sized city downtowns as well as an attempt to test otherwise established concepts. Far from producing definitive answers, this study aims to function as an invitation for further research, with its conclusion serving as a heuristic to be further tested in other sites or used for policy making purposes.

**Where is Springfield?** Located in Southwest Missouri, Springfield is the third largest city in the state after Saint Louis and Kansas City. According to 2010 data, its MSA has a population of just over 440,000, 159,498 of which live within the city. The current unemployment rate is 6.3 per cent with educational and health services being the largest employment in the area (Springfield Area
In 2008, half of the 23,000 children attending Springfield Public Schools (44.7 per cent) qualified for free or reduced-priced lunches, up from 34.6 per cent a decade earlier (de Vera, 2008). Meanwhile, Springfield’s minority (non-white) population was just over 11 percent compared to just over 17 percent for the state of Missouri as a whole (Bureau of the Census, 2010).

Springfield has enough idiosyncrasies to make it a locality enticing enough to examine. On the one hand, it is far enough from larger cities to not be directed affected by their trends, but close enough to not be isolated. On the other hand, it is the largest municipality within a sizeable metropolitan area, which encompasses a substantial area of rural land and communities. Lastly, Springfield is markedly politically and religiously conservative and largely homogenous, thus not exhibiting Florida’s tenets of diversity and tolerance.

The downtown area of Springfield had been vibrant until the early seventies and it had a “big city feel” as there was retail and commercial activity in the area. However, the opening of the city’s regional shopping mall on its southern outskirts during the 1970s meant that by the late 1980s the downtown had been reduced into a space of extreme devastation. As one informant we spoke to put it, conjuring up desert images of desolation, “you could almost see the tumbleweed rolling down the sidewalk in the howling wind”.

**Methodology.** The research strategy for this study is a single case study. The case study has been a common research strategy in disciplines such as psychology, geography, sociology political science, social work, business and even economics (Yin, 2003). The goal of this research was to investigate whether the concentration of creativity (manifested in the ability to create new forms and to synthesize; to recognize successful strategies and perhaps modifying them and applying them anew) within the spatial boundaries of the downtown area had an effect on its revitalization; to study the synergies among the artists and the public and private sectors that made the revitalization
process possible by fleshing out their stories, and to examine the role of culture in this process. An additional objective of this study was to identify the kind of amenities mid-sized cities and specifically their downtowns have that can give them an edge in the competition for visitors and residents alike.

Elite interviewing was used to gather information from institutional stakeholders, whereas the business owners and developers were identified through snowball sampling. Most of the artists interviewed were the result of a mass e-mail sent by the director of the Springfield Regional Arts Council to all registered artists. Those who chose to reply where interviewed. Informants consisted of city officials, non-profit directors, quasi-governmental officials, university officials, faculty members, a conference organizer, private developers/realtors, small business owners and artists for a total of 61 persons.

We sought to understand the perceptions which informants employ to give shape to their own private downtown as the place where their everyday realities unfold. To that end, we employed a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. The emphasis was on what was said that is, “the told” (Riessman, 2008, p.58), indeed the content of speech. When analyzing the data from the conversations, specific attention was paid to themes such as:

- livability and neighborliness with an urban feel
- (the perception of) ‘grittiness’
- historical richness, a sense of connection to a remote past
- safety, related to the consensus opinion that “Springfield is a good place to raise a child”
- human scale or the ability to personally get involved in the public affairs and the success of the city

Close attention was paid to the language used by the informants. Text analysis yielded dominant themes through the repeated use of words and phrases such as cool, city feel, urban feel, exciting,
bubbling, grassroots. In summary, this project was an effort to capture the spirit of the place (Ford, 2003) by telling the story of the people who took part in the process of transforming downtown Springfield from an empty, boring and uninviting place to a cool, inclusive and desirable urban core. The following section proffers a detailed analysis of the data collected through the interviews. Its first part is a discussion summarizing the timeline the narratives revealed followed by a detailed analysis.

**Timeline.** One of the main goals of this project was to examine whether mid-sized cities behave like larger metropolitan areas when it comes to the revival of their abandoned industrial core. The narratives of those involved in the downtown revitalization reveal a progressive continuum. There was not one single actor responsible for this revitalization, nor was there one single grand act (or any grand acts at all for that matter) which made it so. Instead, Springfield’s downtown revitalization has been a slow process, moving in stages, punctuated by anchoring events. Those events helped the process advance and sparked cooperation between stakeholders. The artists wove the fabric of society; the public sector (including quasi-governmental organizations and non profits) made a cloak out of it; the private sector covered the city with it and sold the final product: the city adorned with its amenities. The cloak image is found in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (Henderson, 1987). In lines 567-585, Lysistrata gives her famous “weaving” speech, detailing her plan to save Athens in the same way women weave fabric. In order to save Athens from the quagmire of the Peloponnesian War, she suggests that all citizens cooperate in making a cloak for her. In current terms, stakeholders have to cooperate in making a cloak for the city in order to save it from the quagmire of urban decline.

Concomitant with this metaphor is a timeline putting downtown’s revival into perspective by detailing its journey through time and landmark events. The first stage is anchored in 1972 by the opening of the first artists’ cooperative in the city and in 1989 by the move of a leading architecture firm (Butler, Rosenbury & Partners) downtown and the opening of the first art gallery (Hyde Gallery). The second stage stretches from 1990 to 1998. Underneath the apparent inertia of the concrete, the
tide is changing. Adaptive recycling is a frequent occurrence in American urban cores nationwide but also in Springfield. The first successful downtown restaurant (Nonna’s) opens around 1991. The Vision 20/20 process (the city’ comprehensive development plan) begins in the early to mid-nineties and adopted by the city council in 1997 (City of Springfield, 1998). In terms of the Grodach and Louikaitou-Sideris typology of local government strategies (2008), Springfield is engaging in the entrepreneurial approach, not necessarily by getting involved in the building of grand-scale facilities, but by essentially farming them out to non-profit organizations and charging them with enacting or facilitating cultural programs. The Urban Districts Alliance (UDA), a non-profit organization functioning as a liaison between the business community and the city, is formed in 1997. Finally, the inaugural First Friday Art Walk (which is basically a self-guided walking tour offered on the first Friday of each calendar month during which visitors stop by various downtown venues and are offered cheese and wine) opens in 1998 with four participating galleries.

The third stage is denoted by the opening of a very successful independent coffee shop and an anchor location for the area (the Mudhouse) in January 1999, a venue that continues to function to this day. This stage is marked by an accelerated rhythm of business openings, buildings being rehabilitated, and various events (including street-level activities) taking place.

Though this timeline is particular to Springfield, the broader context is hardly new and well documented when it comes to large cities and its neighborhoods. “People [move] to places you wouldn’t think of moving; first come the artists, then the coffee houses, then the bistros, that’s how it usually works”, said one informant. However, not enough literature exists investigating this anecdotal process in mid-sized cities from the angle of creative individuals taking the chance of moving into a rundown area and the point at which both local governance and the private sector react. Nor do we know enough about what the role of local governance and the private sector is in the whole process.
The following section offers a discussion on stakeholder involvement in the revitalization process.

**Stakeholder narratives.**

*The artists.* The artists were the most active stakeholders in the first stage of the revitalization process, which can be described as follows. Missouri State University (then Southwest Missouri State) opens its gallery downtown. The Springfield Regional Arts Council, a regional non-profit organization for the promotion of the arts in Southwest Missouri, is incorporated in 1978. The first artists’ cooperative has been active since 1972; slowly more artists, mostly college students, are drawn to the area for two main reasons. First, the rents are low. One artist told the story of having studio space in the second floor of a disused building downtown; since he was sharing the space with others, his rent was a little more than $30.00 a month. Secondly, in the words of another artist, “it was cool to have your professors critique your work at your downtown studio in an old, industrial building.”

The material space becomes the symbol linking the aspiring artist with the archetypal image of the bohemian starving artist working in an immense space without such bourgeois luxuries as heat or perhaps running water. Images of 18th century Paris are enhanced by the absolute coolness of late-twentieth century New York; there the archetypal artist creates in a loft in the garment district and has to live through not tuberculosis, but the crime outside her door.

Of course Springfield is nothing like Paris or New York; the city was quite small in the 1970s and 80s and crime had never been a serious problem in the area. However, the industrial spaces carried the perceived connection with an idealized past. Having studio space downtown afforded a fantastical connection to another level: the life and works of a working artist. The perception of grittiness only made the space even more appealing to young, aspiring artists.
The public sector. The local government approach has been ‘private sector led, city
supported’ as a city official put it. This meant that the city acted as a catalyst for private participation
and enabled development. Indeed the city had a comprehensive plan including detailed plans for a
24-hour downtown entertainment district dating from the mid-nineties. It also built the
infrastructure necessary, including roads, sidewalks, and street lights for private developers to
rehabilitate old, industrial stock and for visitors and residents alike to feel safe. However, the City of
Springfield was never in the business of owning and rehabilitating buildings with public funds; its
attitude was entrepreneurial in the sense that it provided the private developers with incentives to
fix existing building stock. It was the position of the city manager that the city could not afford to
spend public dollars updating the buildings downtown so instead it provided solid support to the
private developers in terms of tax credits, both federal and state in order to stimulate economic
development downtown.

The public sector was entrepreneurial in a political sense as well. Tom Finnie, the city
manager of Springfield from 1990 until 2006 was instrumental in revitalizing the downtown
especially in the second phase of the timeline above, after signs of life had been noted in the
downtown area. Finnie was alert enough to recognize that the area was starting to stir to life. Finnie
was able to form coalitions to further his vision of a revitalized city core. Brian Fogle, a banker who
specializes as non-profit executive recognized the value of the downtown and along with Tom Finnie
and the planning department of the city started the process of drafting Vision 20/20—a thorough
process involving citizen focus groups detailing the vision of Springfield by its residents. Finnie was
credited not only with being involved in the conceptual part of the process, but also with
implementing the plan which came as a result. He was successful even in increasing the sales tax
downtown and also exacting a special tax in downtown businesses in a city, which is located in a
state that is decidedly inimical to raising (even consumer) taxes. The area is not without its
problems—no developer has been willing to finance the rehabilitation of the biggest building at the
square while commercial vacancy rate is not at desired levels yet. However, it is hard to imagine this
project succeeding without the leadership and the political entrepreneurship of the city manager. He was consistently visible, making sure voters, public agencies and interest groups had a say in the ongoing revitalization of the core of the city.

**Non profit/volunteer sector.** The Springfield Regional Arts Council has been conducting a sustained educational campaign geared toward the consumers as well as the producers of art. The most successful of initiatives involving downtown and the arts and the one with the highest profile, is First Friday Art Walk. It is organized and handled by a group under the umbrella of the Arts Council. It has gone from a quarterly event with four members in 1998 to a monthly event of 25 venues and growing. Nowadays, thousands of people flock into the area visiting the galleries, eating dinner, shopping or having a drink.

The event is a revenue source for business owners, but the general feeling among gallery owners and artists is quite different. They report that First Friday patrons socialize, enjoy the complementary wine and cheese and though they look at art, they do not necessarily buy it. Artists do not report good sales during the event. Regardless, all 19 business owners and 28 artists alike deem First Friday to be an extremely successful event and view it as a community-strengthening event rather than a revenue source.

What really happens during First Friday is that the city is being sold as a desirable place to live. Even happenings that may be thought to have very little economic utility, such as a Poetry Out Loud reading competition for kids act as selling points for the downtown and the entire city in general. As Lloyd (2006) suggests, local artists generate value, even though commonly they are not the ones reaping the financial benefits. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, Lloyd & Clark (2001), (see also Lloyd, 2006) make the argument that to attract the talent, that is, professionals with eclectic and sometimes contradicting tastes, the city has to function as an entertainment machine. As Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2008) put it, “[a]s cities find themselves engulfed in inter-urban competition, they concentrate on developing a broad range of cultural activities to catalyze private
development, increase consumption by residents and tourists, improve the city image, and enhance the local quality of life (p. 350). This is echoed by one downtown business person; he said that the revival of the area is a recruiting tool for his architecture company, as he has to compete for talent with cities like Chicago, St Louis, Kansas city. He went on to say he hoped the energized profile of the downtown area would function as a recruiting tool for the universities in the area as well; an incentive not only for prospective students, but perhaps more importantly for faculty as well.

The University. The city partnered with Missouri State University to create good working places downtown, offering jobs that can retain the talent coming out of the educational institutions. The outcome of that partnership was a nanotechnology center capable of enticing out-of-state companies that have the ability to offer well paying jobs. The Jordan Valley Innovation Center (JVIC) is housed in an old mill and houses university scientists and four companies. The center also has senior affiliates that are not housed in the building, but have the right to share in the resources for a fee. Companies associated with JVIC specialize in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, microelectronic and chemicals, electroactive polymer coatings and advance software design.

Two things have made this center viable and competitive. First, Missouri State University does not have an aggressive intellectual properties policy, making a partnership with a commercial corporation attractive. By allowing the companies to keep intellectual property rights, these companies can move into production faster. The university can collect royalties at a later stage. Second, research undertaken at JVIC is defense related, so by nature it cannot be off-shored; a center in the heartland of the country suddenly becomes attractive. The necessity for a new brand of industry and worker is echoed by nonprofit official who said that

[companies are starting to realize, that, you know, we are going to have to be in place that is attractive to the creative class, and that is an exciting discussion if you are at the forefront of that. It is depressing if you are trying to recreate a town like we had in the 1950s and 60s and you try to get factories in, five free land, those economic incentives – that’s how we did economic development in the 1950s and
60s, but that is not working so much anymore. In fact what you need to do is create a creative economy and market yourself.

The research group at JVIC includes scientists from St Louis, Atlanta, Boston and Houston. According to the same university official, it is a surprise how positive the reaction to the city has been: “they were apprehensive at first, but for the most part people enjoy the community and what it has to offer—the downtown experience, the nightlife and the arts.”

**Overarching Threads Keeping the Fabric of Downtown Together.**

Several themes began to emerge regarding the synergies that make the area look and feel more alive. First, cooperation is the “buzzword in Springfield these days” as one nonprofit official put it. In fact, cooperation has been the buzzword for some time. The Vision 20/20 plan was the product of the cooperation of the local governance and the citizens; First Friday Art Walk is the result of galleries working together; the ballet, the symphony, the theater and visual artists all work together in the Creamery Building, where the Springfield Regional Arts Council is housed. They share space and even one utility vehicle among them. Some also believe that the common physical space results in greater inspiration and creativity. It is an almost intuitive idea that in a climate of scarce resources cooperation translates into efficiency. The consensus among informants is that this is not a wealthy city and “there is just not enough to go around”.

Cooperation is common practice among downtown businesses as well. Businesses strive to make a profit. However, the majority of the business owners we spoke to had a passion for the area; most of them knew what the building they were occupying had been used for before and talked with enthusiasm about it; only for four of them having a business in another part of town (outside the downtown) was ever an option and three out of these four do not own a business downtown any longer (as of May, 2008). The active involvement of the downtown community in downtown affairs in combination with the *de facto* ambience of the built environment leads to a feeling of spatial attachment to the central city. When informants speak about their experience in the area, this feeling of attachment to the place is a concept that keeps coming up as very important to them.
Some are local people that had seen the area when it was dilapidated and were elated to take part in its revival; others are from somewhere else, some even from Europe, and they see downtown as the closest thing to a city of their past and thus have identified with it. As one business owner/artist puts it, “if we are not going to be in a big city, we want to be kind of near the city that we’re in. Pushing the limits, designing cool things, goes hand in hand with being in this area.”

This feeling of spatial attachment encompasses fantastical and very subjective ideas of grit and coolness, the idea of the symbolic value of the material spaces, but it also includes the concepts of neighborliness, strong community through cooperation, and most importantly the almost tangible energy permeating downtown.

The built environment, so much more than inert concrete, communicates historical value, aesthetics, beauty and the underpinning paradox of adaptive recycling. The fantastical connections with grit allude to an erstwhile era of urban decline in iconic downtowns of large cities. The symbolic value of the material space attracts a variety of professions; from artists, to web designers, to business owners who bring something new to Springfield. This includes the independent movie theater, and the Fair Trade shop as well as the glass blowing store, the arcade that is full of video games from the 1980s, the avant-garde furniture store and the foreign-owned restaurants.

**Conclusions**

The city of Springfield, Missouri presents an interesting case study of the mid-sized downtown revitalization process. Coming back to one of the original questions in this paper, to what extent does the creative class thesis apply to mid-sized cities, not exhibiting the degrees of talent, tolerance and technology of mega cities? What is the role of culture and the public sector? As a corollary of the increasingly intensifying inter-urban competition on one hand and deindustrialization on the other, cities of all sizes turn to the creation of cultural districts in order to enhance their competitive advantage. The new highly educated workforce dubbed “creative class” by Richard Florida engages in the consumption but also in the production of such districts.
Case study findings suggest that talent, technology and tolerance function in relative terms and do apply in the case of mid-sized cities. An additional pull factor of such places, as opposed to the intense urbanization and anonymity of mega cities, is a kind of spatial attachment and the sense that even one person can make a difference in the community. This in part explains the grassroots, bottom-up nature of the process, which has taken place in three distinct waves, punctuated by anchor events. An important motor behind this process is the fantasies of bohemia the industrial buildings conjure up. They form a link to the city’s erstwhile past and fuel the production of culture into the future.

The governance of the downtown district is a public-private structure functioning on the cooperation between governmental, quasi-governmental and volunteer organizations. The local government as such, has taken an entrepreneurial approach so far, enabling the rehabilitation of buildings without channeling any public funds on the built environment. As the downtown district matures and grows, it would be intriguing to see whether the attitude of the public sector remains the same. Furthermore, comparison with other mid-sized cities would be beneficial.

Belying its recent past, downtown is an energetic place where cultural things happen. It is an inclusive place, a neighborhood of human scale and perhaps the city’s best selling point.
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