

Culture Industries and Economic Development

National Public Radio Interview Transcript

David Bergman's work focuses on urban and regional development strategies and the role of culture industries in economic development. He has worked with the film industry, convention centers and tourism, and culture heritage and historic preservation. David is also a lecturer in urban development at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, an internationally recognized architecture school.

You've written about the geography of creativity. How is place a fact of creativity?

In many respects, place is, is going to be the embodiment or something that is tied to the creative process. It's very important to think about the, the realization that creativity has both a social and cultural component to it, and the cultural components are really people, their knowledge, skills, and experience, technology and its application, and the environment or social milieu, in which the creativity is, is embedded. There are other factor conditions, and those are, are more social in terms of institutional support, open communications, shared resources, shared information and infrastructure, and all of this is really dependent on having human contact and interaction, and it's really a place for bound or specific activity. Creativity needs both this cultural and social component in order to take root.

Can place reflect creativity, as well as support and encourage creativity?

Well, you know, one of the things I'd like to do is to unpack this term, creativity, a little bit. Creativity is really a new concept or approach, some different way of doing things, and innovation is part of that, which is how that approach is implemented. They're not wholly separable concepts, but creativity seems to be really the primary force in, in that relationship. In under-girding creativity, I believe it's very important to, to talk about cultural activities, in that those cultural activities go into an interplay between culture, place and experience. It may be useful a little bit to, to step back for a second and define what I mean by place.

Place really has three important components to it. Some of them are objective, things like there are mountains here, or there's a river, or the climate is a certain way. Another component of place is meaning, and this is subjective. That's supported by the cultural activities that take place in an area. It's literary traditions. It's the cultural patrimony of a region or of an area, and, and for some of those things, we can agree or disagree on, but we, we think that there's sort of a common set of received knowledge about what this place means. And then finally, there's the personal component, which is what you bring yourself, the social relations that you have, and, and this is really where place means something different to people. So really what place is, is context.

Let me give you an example. Paris. It's something that maybe has a lot of fantasy energy associated with it, and there are some objective things that we can agree on about Paris, that it's urban, that the climate is a certain way, that the Sienne River flows through it. Some of it is what that place means for us, thinking about French culture, Parisian culture, food, visual arts, cinema, whatever that sort of basket of goods might be, and that has meaning. And finally, there's a personal component to it. For some people, Paris may seem very romantic, based on their experience with the city. Such as being a young backpacker going through the city in the 1970s for example.

For other people, Paris means death and destruction and deportation by the Nazis, so it's very hard to say that any one person is going to have the complete same understanding of place, but these three components, nature, meaning and social relationships, this blending of the objective and the subjective and personal really are the underpinnings of what under-girds place as, as a social concept

Now, as a planner and consultant, you work for places that want to increase the positive associations with those places, particularly in terms of meaning, in terms of actually, I guess the objective environment. You

know, the things they build, and in, in terms of narrative. So how do you, how do you begin to think about your work of improving or increasing the value of a place by adding or enhancing those components?

Yes, that's a very good question. One of the things that I tell my clients is that there is a lot of interest in cities and regions doing marketing and branding themselves. This is really the metastructure, the narrative that under-girds branding. This is something that is much more deep than a marketing approach. It's really a strategy for communities and regions to think about themselves and their specific attributes, and use those as levers for economic development. One of the important ways of doing that is looking at sort of place-bound economic activities, particularly cultural industries and cultural activities, but there's also another very important component of that, which is looking at the amenities in a community, and understanding how quality of life, how the value and understanding about a place helps drive the location decision-making process.

I'll give you a very concrete example. I did some work a few years ago in the state of Wyoming. It was very interesting. The state of Wyoming decided to make culture the centerpiece in an economic development strategy, and this was very innovative, I think, for the state, because they looked back and they said, we can't control our sparse population. We can't control our relative geographic isolation. We can't control the infrastructure, in terms of interstate freeways, airport connections, et cetera, but we can control the quality of life in our community, and we can control what it is that makes Wyoming special, and in so doing, by making investments in cultural industries and supporting cultural activities, arts, humanities, not only do we make this place more attractive, but we also make it a better place for everybody who is here. I think that's an important thing to recognize, that these strategies that are based on improving the sense of place, and looking at the cultural industries, are a little bit different than traditional economic development, which is really about, can devolve very quickly into writing checks to buy deals. This is really taking a community taking stock of itself, or a region taking stock of itself, understanding what its attributes are as a place, and finding ways to leverage that in the market.

It certainly is different than typical economic development, and particularly, that economic development that's been done at most state levels. What's the level of skepticism about this approach?

Well, it's really very interesting because one of the things I spend a lot of time talking about with my clients is finding economic activities that can be part of your export base, that can't be done in China, and that, that puts a fine point on it.

Yes, it does.

Because so many regions that have been focused on manufacturing jobs, or trying to incentivize certain types of investment are, I think, finding themselves in a certain sense where those whole sectors are disappearing. I was actually doing some work, right now I have an assignment in Mussel Shoals, Alabama, where for years, the economic development strategy had been to provide a relatively low-cost work environment, low-cost labor environment, and that industrial activities, such as textiles, furniture, diversified manufacturing, could be done in northwest Alabama cheaper than they could be done in, say, the industrial Midwest, where those jobs were relocating from. It turns out it was sort of a temporary stop before those jobs moved on out of the region, and now are being done in the developing economies in east Asia, in particular with China's accession of the WTO, so what's left? What's left is place. What's left is the skill and experience of the labor force. What's left is sort of local knowledge, and finding ways to really leverage that is of great interest in that community.

They have a long heritage with the music industry and music recording, and a question about how can their cultural patrimony with music be revitalized? Also, with the film industry. There has been some interest in doing motion picture production in that part of the state, and at a small scale, but it can be an important component of economic diversification and also a way to help stabilize their population and young people. They have a couple of institutions of higher learning there. They say, look, you know, we spend a lot of money. We educate our young people, and they're not able to find employment in the area doing the sort of work that they're interested in doing if they have a liberal arts background. What can we

do to help grow the economy here to help stabilize that population, because culture industries are really good at that.

Well, you mentioned, David, the cultural industries, and particularly film and music in Mussel Shoals. Mussel Shoals is a city of how many people?

Well, the whole metropolitan region probably has about 150,000 people between Mussel Shoals, Florence, Tuscumbia, et cetera.

So, a fairly small area. A modest-sized area. Let's talk about the reality of, of music and film, and, and cultural industries more broadly. I mean, how many people can that really employ? I mean, are we at risk here of substituting culture industries for, you know, what ten years ago was biotech and ten years before that was, you know, the other hot fad?

I think it's important that we now are having a seat at the table for culture industries, and recognizing that they do, in fact, contribute to economic revenue and development. In the past, I think the feeling was culture was something you did after a community was affluent, that it was a secondary thought, and the idea that you could use it as some tool for driving economic development is, I think, an important recognition of the value of these industries and opportunities, I think, come about when you put them at the center of an economic development strategy. Does it replace all employment? No, it doesn't, but it can add to your export base. Absolutely.

Now, in some countries, there's really been a real decision to look at cultural industries as part of an overall economic development strategy. In Canada, this has been a very successful approach that's been used by both federal and provincial governments. The ability of the Canadian labor force to produce culturally distinctive products, and, and also in New Zealand, as well. And I've worked with clients in both of those countries. Really seeing that as something that can be the source of competitive advantage in their national and regional economies. So more and more regions around the world are beginning to look at these cultural industries as sort of one of the last pieces that they can still intervene in kind of an industrial policy to try and stimulate new employment, new investment in their regions.

Okay, so there are two parts to the value of cultural industries. One is the jobs they provide and, as you say, the jobs they provide that can't easily be moved to China. The second part of it is the, the narrative they create for a place, and the excitement they create, and some of that then benefits tourism, and you, you've written that place and its cultural signifiers are key to identifying opportunities for the different environments that tourists seek in consumers' minds

Explain what you mean by cultural signifiers, and do they have qualities in common?

Yes, I mean, and it's important to realize that this is not exclusively a tourism strategy in the consumer's mind for tourism, they're looking for an experience that is both authentic and moves them out of their ordinary daily life. Whether that's even something as simple as looking for a beach resort, or looking for something that's more challenging and interactive and experiential, a visitor wants to be immersed in something that has the qualities that they're seeking, and are increasingly looking for authenticity in that. They are increasingly looking for things that will bring them out of their daily life, and also, are increasingly looking for that anticipation, which is an important part of the travel decision, of planning the trip, of thinking about what it's going to be like in a place, reading novels about the place and then going to drive.

I mean, a great example of that has been the whole cottage industry in Savannah, Georgia, where I've also done some consulting. Based around "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," that book which is very place-bound and very specific, has spawned not only a tourism industry essentially of people going to see the sights mentioned in the book, or going to see the sites that were featured in the film, but also has spurred a whole lot of interest in historic preservation in Savannah, in looking at ways to take that story and, and it's not an entirely positive story of the community. It's not without controversy, but find ways that expresses this meta-narrative, this sense of place that makes Savannah a unique destination and differentiates itself from its competitors.

And can you deliberately amp up cultural signifiers?

You know, I think you can, and I think it's by taking them seriously and by making investments in the institutional support that makes them happen. So, in other words, productions in the culture industry really depend on place and the symbolic content that gets tied back into them.

They also require very dense networks of information, so that information about style, trends, and best practices can be easily communicated. So, what they require in the region, in an area that's interested in doing this is that they require educational support, so opportunities to learn, and provide a place for leading practitioners of whatever cultural practice is being done to teach and to train new people.

Cultural spaces within the city, that's not necessarily the opera house or the theater, although that's part of the story, it's also about creating real urban environments where cross-fertilization of ideas, diversity, and the kind of opportunity for chance encounters with ideas and people can occur. Finally, for some industries, it's very important to have guilds and unions, trade associations, as well as other kinds of institutional supports, like exhibition space and performance space. So, there's an opportunity in terms of planning and economic development efforts to put those tools in place, just in the same way that you might have done with something like joint venture Silicon Valley looking to support the development of advanced electronic components back in the '70s and '80s by providing information exchanges, institutional connections, trade associations. You can do the same thing successfully with these cultural industries.

You had a recent assignment in New Zealand on, on the subject of creative tourism, and I, I know that, that as you pointed out earlier, tourism is by no means the whole story. You're talking about an economic development strategy. Tourism is one part of it. It's a way to exploit the narrative that you develop, but you, you advised New Zealand to leverage place, leverage creativity, exploit the margins, and be yourself. We have about five minutes left, David. I want to ask you to tell me more about those strategies?

I think it's important to recognize that there's a challenge to bring cultural products to the market, or experiences that reach a receptive niche, so that products that are based in meaning must consistently carry the stamp of their origination, and looking at ways to take culturally imbued products and find ways that they are mindful of their authenticity, and have the integrity or the brand of the place. So by exploiting the margins, I mean identifying specific niches that are going to be receptive for your product, for people that sort of understand or get what it is that you have in your region if you're attracting tourists or if you're exporting cultural products to them.

The other things are to this sense of being yourself, which is having the sense of what this authenticity is, having the conversation about what do we mean as a community or a region? What is this place really about? What are our values? What are our experiences? What's our common patrimony? And, and having that narrative in place can be the basis of a whole variety of initiatives.

David, thanks so much for being our guest on Smart City

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It was a pleasure. Thank you so much.