Materiality and creative production: the case of the Mile End neighborhood in Montréal

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Abstract. Recent studies on the economic significance of creativity have emphasized the role that quality of life plays in attracting talent to cities. In these studies, quality of life is seen in terms of its role in enhancing consumption. In this paper we build on a corpus of literature that considers how quality of life attributes can enhance creative production. On the basis of a study of fashion and graphic designers in Montréal, we consider the role played by material factors, such as loft-style buildings, low-cost rents, mixed-use zoning, and public space, in nurturing and supporting creativity in one of Montréal's off-beat neighborhoods. We argue that these conditions cultivate creative production by enabling a set of artistic practices and diverse encounters.

Introduction

In recent studies on the economic significance of creativity (Florida, 2002), much attention has been accorded to the important role that quality of life plays in *attracting talent* to cities. The assumption underlying these studies is that quality of life is only valuable when defined in terms of consumption. In this paper we focus on the role of quality of life in nurturing talent and enabling the conditions for creativity. Drawing on the work of a number of geographers (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Drake, 2003; Gibson, 2005; Hutton, 2006), we highlight the significance of the material in creative production. Through a case study of fashion and graphic designers in the Mile End neighborhood of Montréal, we illustrate how place-based attributes, such as industrial buildings, affordable rents, and public places, mediate the embodied practices and social encounters that underpin aesthetic experimentation.

Montréal is a city that is renowned for fashion and design and has recently been designated an international design capital by UNESCO. In 2005 the city became the headquarters of the International Design Alliance (IDA)—an organization that includes members of both ICSID (the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) and ICOGRADA (the International Council of Graphic Design Associations). Measured in terms of employment, Montréal is the sixth-largest center of design in North America (following New York, Boston, Toronto, Chicago, and Los Angeles) (Design Industry Advisory Committee, 2004). According to the City of Montréal, there has also been a 40% increase in the number of designers in the city in the last ten years (City of Montréal, 2006). It therefore provides an instructive case in which to examine the material factors that underlie creative production.

Within Montréal the Mile End neighborhood has a high concentration of creative industries and workers, attracted to the area's low rents, industrial architecture, and other physical attributes (Ackerman, 2007a). It is the center of Montréal's thriving Indie music scene, and with the recent establishment of designers' workshops, fashion boutiques,

and home-furnishing stores, it contains an emerging design scene as well. Mile End is also sprinkled with cafés, bars, ethnic restaurants, and shops. Its vibrant public spaces and independent retail scene contribute to its cosmopolitan and neighborhood feel. We examine how material aspects of the built environment—including the architecture, mix of land uses, presence of public spaces, and low rents—enable artistic practice, fostering a vibrant culture of design. We argue in this paper that these material factors account for Mile End's longevity as a lively creative district. In contrast to other bohemian quarters, where gentrification has diminished creative processes, Mile End continues to nurture such processes.

The paper draws on over thirty interviews with fashion and graphic designers in the Mile End neighborhood, as well as interviews with owners of commercial establishments and community officials. Interviews were semistructured and focused on the characteristics that attracted designers to Mile End (as opposed to other design districts in the city). Interviews also explored the role of place-based attributes in fostering creativity. Café owners were asked about the advantages of operating in Mile End, and about the types of interaction taking place in their space.

Identifying designers to interview for this study was difficult because of the absence of a sample frame from which to draw sample units. The number and location of independent designers in Mile End are unknown due to a high turnover of independent businesses and the fact that many are not listed in trade directories or telephone books. As a consequence, purposive sampling was employed, and initial participants were identified through a review of newspaper articles on Mile End and by attending local fashion and design shows. Then, a process of snowball sampling was used for subsequent interviews. Due to strong local networks, the designers knew many other creative workers in the neighbourhood. Once an initial contact was established and the interview was completed, it was easier to gain access to further participants. We drew from multiple sources in this sampling process so as to not limit ourselves to one network (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). As a result, a range of individuals in terms of age, type of work, and stage of career, were interviewed.

Another challenge we encountered was that the people we were interviewing were independent cultural producers who have to oversee both the business and the creative aspects of their work. They often juggle more than one job, leaving little free time to contribute to an academic study. To offset these difficulties we tried to work around their schedules as best as we could, often conducting interviews outside of business hours and in locations convenient to them (sometimes even their homes).

Interviews ranged between one and two hours in length, and were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded according to theme. Information from these sources was triangulated with articles from design magazines and newspapers on the history of Mile End. The themes highlighted here are those that were most prevalent across these sources.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of theories concerning the increasing significance of creativity to economic development and the role that quality of life plays in this relationship. Emphasis is placed on the relevance of material factors in contemporary analyses of the socioeconomic organization of creativity. Second, we provide a description of Mile End—an area recently characterized by *Wallpaper* magazine as Montréal's most up-and-coming neighborhood (Friede, 2005). In the final sections we assess how the material aspects of the neighborhood provide a framework for creativity by shaping embodied practices and diverse social encounters.

Interpreting the role of quality of life

In the last decade a number of studies have centered on the significance of creativity to urban economic development. With integrated international markets and the advent of new technologies, a focus on the traditional inputs to production—such as land and resources—has given way to a focus on the more productive (or 'creative') uses of such inputs (Florida, 2002; Porter, 1998). Creativity with respect to products and processes is viewed as the basis for competitive advantage, and economic development policy is now concerned with how best to foster creative economies (Currid, 2007; Mommaas, 2004).

To date, much of the policy focus in this realm has been influenced by Florida's (2002) creative-class thesis, which contends that a certain class of people are the 'carriers of creativity' and that a key objective of cities should be to attract and retain this class by offering a strong 'quality of life'. Factors that shape the sociospatial dimension of quality of life can include cultural amenities, diversity, tolerance, and social inclusion. While many of these aspects are social in nature, Florida (2002) also highlights a number of features of the built environment that contribute to quality of life, such as the presence of 'authentic' neighborhoods, historical buildings, mixed land uses, green space, cafés, and the provision of other public spaces. In the creative-class thesis the contribution of such attributes to creativity is viewed as indirect, since they are oriented to consumption. That is to say, quality of life is used to lure people, who in turn bring 'creativity'.

Florida's emphasis on the factors that attract creative talent obscures an analysis of the way the built environment cultivates or nurtures creativity. Becker (1982), Bourdieu (1993), and Lloyd (2006) provide useful insights here, arguing that talent cannot be conceptualized as a subset of already formed individuals possessing innate 'genius'; rather, the production of talent must be viewed as an inherently social and geographical process tied to an individual's habitus (Bourdieu, 1993; see also McNeill, 2008). As Lloyd (2006, page 366) argues:

> "Culture work is filled with uncertainty and disappointment; aspirants face both financial and identity risks in the pursuit of their vocations ... . Identification with bohemia's traditions of the edge helps sustain necessary levels of commitment in the face of this reality. It provides a model that incorporates the possibility of failure, at least in the short term. Thus the neighbourhood does not just magnetize creative talent; it also nurtures crucial dispositions."

That is to say, the qualities of a place matter and can incubate and develop creative talent (see also Connell and Gibson, 2003; Gibson, 2005).

Role of the material

How does place matter? To date, contemporary studies that have examined the role of place-based attributes in creative practice have tended to emphasize the significance of social factors (Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000). These studies note how frequent and proximate relations between creative actors facilitate the development of shared norms that underpin an exchange of new knowledge and expertise (Gertler, 2003; Storper and Venables, 2004). Such studies also highlight the importance of bringing together complementary as well as diverse competencies for aesthetic innovation, as a means to ensure that social networks do not become too insular and closed off to new approaches (Grabher, 1993; 2001).

While the social dimension of creativity is indeed integral to understanding the mechanisms by which new ideas are generated and to overcoming a narrow conception of creativity as an individual process, a focus on this dimension may come at the expense of analyzing the role that nonhuman agents play in shaping human practice.

Inspired by the growing popularity of actor-network theory and nonrepresentational theory (which places emphasis on the concrete and experienced), a number of recent articles have called for the need to 'rematerialize' analyses of cultural practices (Amin, 2007; Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Gibson, 2005; Jackson, 2000; Latham and McCormack, 2004; Lees, 2002). Scholars such as Jackson (1996), for example, acknowledge that cultural geography may have gone too far in negating the role of material conditions. This tendency emerged in response to what was viewed as the deterministic bent of earlier cultural geographers, who presented a unidirectional relation between landscapes and culture. A more general antimaterial sentiment within the field was also a response to 'materialist' approaches, such as Marxian political economy, that privileged structural conditions (eg the role of capital) over the realm of ideas and perceptions to explain human behavior.

Rather than eschewing material factors altogether, recent perspectives have sought to acknowledge their role as an actant in cultural practices. This rediscovery of the material encompasses a focus on what matter does, on its capacities and effects, rather than on its essence (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004) and incorporates a broad range of subdisciplines within human geography (Bakker and Bridge, 2006). In cultural geography, for example, it has meant an engagement with the literature on material culture and a closer examination of the relationship between commodities and cultural identities (Jackson, 2000; Miller, 1998). In feminist geography, there has been growing emphasis on the materiality of the body, and attention to the way subjectivities are constituted through the experience of acting in and through the physical body (Nelson, 1999). In economic and environmental geography, there has been an exploration of the ways in which heterogenous materials such as natures, technologies, and buildings are combined under processes of translation (Barnes, 2008; Latour, 1993).

In these approaches, material objects or conditions are not reified and their effects are not viewed as determinant. Instead, a more nuanced view is adopted in which the 'material' itself is seen as socially constructed. As Bakker and Bridge (2006, page 18) note, the material turn encompasses:

"an acknowledgement that the 'things' (commodities, bodies, biophysical processes) that make a difference in the way social relations unfold are not pregiven substrates that variably enable and constrain social action, but are themselves historical products of material, representational and symbolic practices."

An engagement with the material calls into question many of the conventional concepts with which we order the world, such as agency, which is increasingly conceptualized outside the subject–object binary and viewed in relational terms (Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Gibson, 2005).

To the extent that material factors matter, their significance is time and place specific and is dependent on how they are experienced, as well as on their inherent qualities. As such, these qualities should be viewed as instrinsic—rather than extrinsic—to human existence (Amin, 2007; Latham and McCormack, 2004). Entities—whether they be creative products, designs, or urban landscapes—take shape and acquire particular attributes as a result of their relations with other entities (Barnes, 2008; Law, 1999).

With respect to the relevance of urban landscapes more specifically, recent work by Amin (2007; 2008) is instructive. Drawing on Jacobs (1961) and Sennett (2000), Amin (2008) notes that a vibrant streetlife (often associated with mixed-use neighborhoods and the vitality of public spaces) is a critical element in fostering social exchange. He argues that a space's "functional and symbolic interpretation, its material arrangement ... form a compulsive field of action and orientation" (2008, page 11). For Amin, the collective promise of urban public spaces lies "in the entanglement between people and

the material and visual culture of public space, rather than solely in the quality of social interaction between strangers" (page 8). Spaces that are open, crowded, diverse, incomplete, and disorderly—or lightly regulated—are likely to give rise to a condition of situated surplus. In this context, 'situated surplus' refers to the thrown-togetherness of bodies, mass, and matter, where a disposition to others and otherness is enhanced (Amin, 2008). Such sites encompass:

"spaces with many things circulating with them, many activities that do not form part of an overall plan or totality, many impulses that constantly change the character of the space, many actants who have to constantly jostle for position and influence, many impositions of order (from buildings and designs to conventions and rules)" (pages 10–11).

While Amin is concerned more generally with sociability in the contemporary city, the same ideas have been applied when thinking about creativity. Molotch (2003), for example, illustrates how buildings, infrastructure, and iconography support certain kinds of creative production. He contends that the configuration of public spaces influences the kinds of interactions that can take place:

"the look and functionality of the city influences designers as they do their work, producers as they figure out what to make, and consumers as they develop their wants. The built environment and its accessories—directional signs, shop design, advertising regulations, window displays, street hardware—provide durable evidence to people of the kind of place they are in, of how things are done, of what is appreciated and what is devalued" (page 187).

Helbrecht (2003) and Hutton (2006; 2008) extend these ideas, foregrounding the importance of the concrete, arguing that dwelling precedes thinking; that we move, experience, and act in the world before expressing it in theories, design, and dance (see also Thrift, 1996; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Hutton (2006) draws on Soja (2000) and Markus (1994) to consider how certain spatial forms lend themselves to new creative uses. The "industry-shaping power of spatiality" (Soja, 2000) encompasses a number of elements, according to Hutton (2006). First, the boundedness or compactness of inner-city districts can impart a sense of territoriality and identity to creative workers. Second, landscape and urban design—including streetscapes, small parks, and open spaces—can facilitate creative interactions and the exchange of ideas. Third, Hutton highlights the importance of building types and styles for new industries. Finally, he foregrounds the significance of historical landmarks and associations, which constitute powerful imaginaries with which creative workers may identify (Hutton, 2006).

In a similar vein, Gibson (2005) and Watson et al (2009) argue that creativity interacts with the built environment in complex and dialectical ways. Adopting a relational epistemology, for example, Gibson (2005) examines the material surfaces and technologies that are embedded in music recording studios and their affective influence. He illustrates how sound waves bounce off surfaces and behave in different ways due to the configuration and construction materials used in rooms (2005, page 197). Gibson (2005) also shows how the mythology of the city and the urban landscapes in which studios are located factor into the formation of distinct music styles (see also Connell and Gibson, 2003; Watson et al, 2009).

Engaging with these insights, we explore how attributes of the Mile End neighborhood contribute to the creative process by allowing for the production of spaces (both material and social) in which creative dispositions can be cultivated. More specifically, we look at how material conditions mediate the broader socioeconomic setting and reputation of the neighborhood, give rise to sources of aesthetic stimuli, and mediate the creative identities and encounters of local designers. The 'material' here is defined broadly to include architecture and urban design, as well as land rents as a material

force of production. In focusing on these dimensions, our objective is not to privilege these attributes relative to the role social processes play, but rather to highlight the importance of both social relations and material attributes for creative practice. In arguing that these factors 'matter', we seek to illustrate the interrelation between the material and the social, and to identify the meanings and significance that material attributes assume for creative dispositions when lived or experienced by designers. Following Jackson's (2000) call, our objective is to specify when and where the material matters.

Mile End as a creative district
To provide a context for the discussion, it first helps to have a sense of the character and aesthetics of the Mile End district. For much of its history, Mile End was referred to as Saint-Louis. Although the origins of the community's current name are not certain, it is likely that the neighborhood is named after an East London district (Fine, 2005). While there are no clearly defined borders for the Mile End district, it is commonly referred to as the area northwest of the Plateau—a more established cultural district—and east of Outremont, a French upper-middle-class, residential district. It is bordered on the north by a railway line (see figures 1 and 2).

In contrast to the adjacent Plateau and Outremont areas, which are both predominantly French, Mile End represents a cultural mix. Since the early part of the 20th century, it has witnessed successive waves of new immigrants, starting with Eastern and Southern European Jews. Mile End was the principal Jewish area in the city up until the 1950s. Later, it became a center of the Greek and Portuguese communities. More recently it has become home to a Hassidic Jewish community. Today it is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Montréal, with nearly 30% of residents citing a language other than French or English as their maternal language (Statistics Canada, 2007a).[1] Indeed, its multiethnic character is a defining feature of the neighborhood and one that is inscribed in the physical landscape, as evident by the Portugese front-yard gardens, Greek restaurants with Mediterranean blue and white walls, and the Hebrew inscriptions found on institutional landmarks (Fine, 2005). As Germain and Rose (2000, page 228) point out:

"European immigration had a tremendous impact ... from the tradition of front as well as backyard intensive gardening of both food crops and flowers, to the upgrading of neglected residential architecture, some of it of heritage quality, to the proliferation of 'ethnic' grocery stores and restaurants which would become an integral part of the 'conviviality' that has become so central to the reputation of Montréal. The ethnic difference as well as the humanization of the streetscape helps people of diverse origins to feel at home in their neighbourhoods."

In terms of its urban fabric, the neighborhood has always been marked by contrast. Mile End was initially a streetcar suburb and, in line with the City Beautiful movement, some elegant boulevards with greystone houses were developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s to lure elites from the city proper (Dewolf, 2004). However, with the influx of new immigrants, it quickly became a high-density area with a predominance of apartment buildings and red-brick duplex and triplex houses (Ackerman, 2007b, page 1). Historically, these particular housing forms were a manifestation of the needs and budgets of Montréallers, but they also reflect the fact that local entrepreneurs often had limited capital (Germain and Rose, 2000, page 54). Over time, the community has experienced a process of bottom-up revitalization, as many European immigrants have moved in, bought up homes, and performed their own renovations.

[1] For the City of Montréal as a whole, the percentage of residents citing a language other than French or English as their maternal language is nearly 20% (Statistics Canada, 2007b).
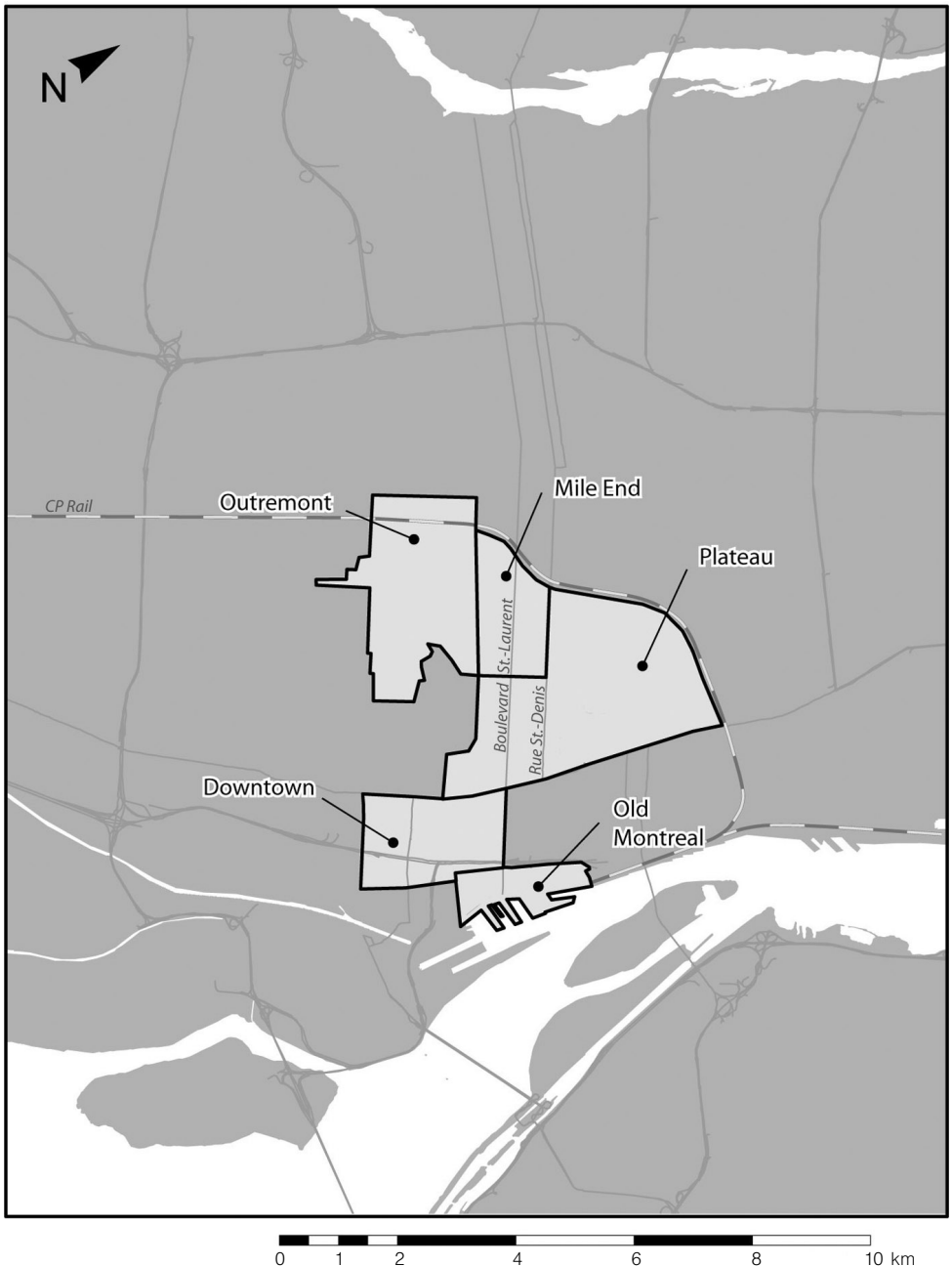
Figure 1. Montreal and its districts (map created by Yuseph Katiya and Jeff Hignett).

As Germain and Rose (2000, page 206) put it:

"ethnic heterogeneity also figures in the persistence of the social class mix of St. Louis/
Mile End, this being the part of Montreal's traditional immigrant corridor where
much of the city's garment and textile industry is located and where incumbent
upgrading by working class immigrants from Southern Europe ... took place in the
1970s, and where substantial numbers of low income recent immigrants from diverse
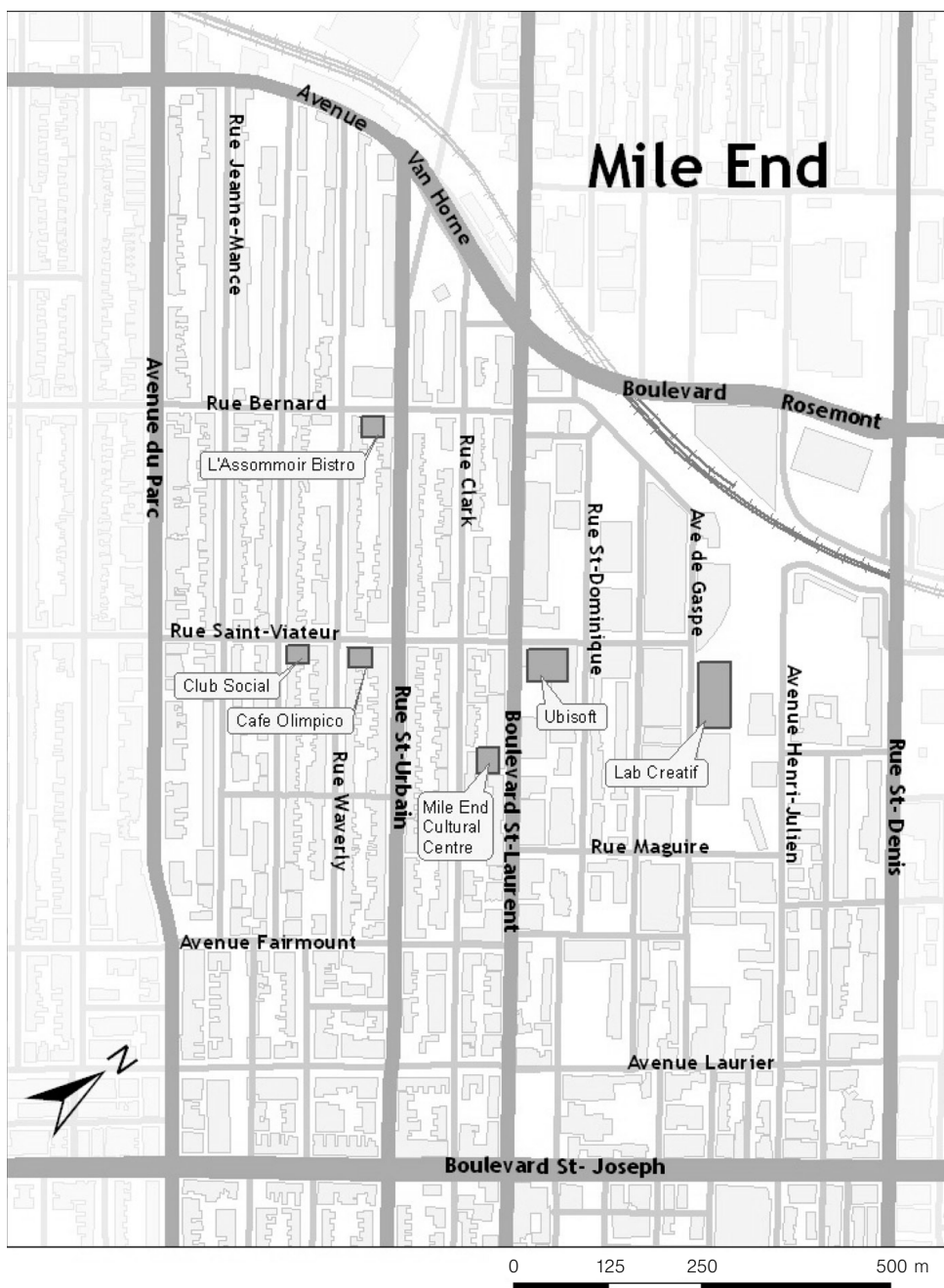countries still live."

Figure 2. Map of Mile End (map created by Matthew Talsma).

More recently, the revitalization process has been aided by municipal government support in the mid-1990s in the form of renovation grants (Germain and Rose, 2000). Along with rent control, these grants have helped to curb—but by no means eliminate (as discussed further below)—gentrification and displacement (Rose, 2004).

In addition to the mixed housing stock, Mile End is a neighborhood marked by a rich industrial heritage. Due to the presence of the railway, Mile End was formerly

a manufacturing—as well as a residential—district and served as the heart of the garment industry, the major manufacturing sector for more than half a century. Many of the stone and brick-faced warehouses and factory buildings that are found in Mile End today were built in the early part of the 20th century to serve the industry. By the 1980s, however, Mile End had become economically depressed and derelict due to the loss of industrial activities. Early on in this period of decline, much of Mile End's built environment was protected by heritage legislation (Ackerman, 2007b, page 2). The preservation of local housing, factories, and warehouse space is important to the identity of the neighborhood and paved the way for its revitalization in the 1990s. The city also had a moratorium on conversions of industrial buildings to condominiums from 1975 to 1993, which helped to preserve the neighborhood's character (Germain and Rose, 2000, page 175).

By the 1990s the rich and diverse architecture and the affordable rents made the neighborhood an appealing site for artists, writers, and independent musicians. As one newspaper editorial describes it:

"For years, Mile End was one of Montréal's best kept secrets. A sleepy, multi-ethnic residential neighbourhood, it didn't even have a name in the 1970s and 1980s when artists, hippies and students were discovering the Plateau. By the 1990s, gentrification invaded Victorian-era grid of streets stretching out from Carre St. Louis, and bohemia was forced to move on, crossing Mont Royal Avenue and into the 40 square block neighbourhood that a century ago was the village of St. Louis de Mile End" (Ackerman, 2007a, page 1).

Discreet Logic, an animation firm, was one of the first cultural industries to move into the area in the early 1990s, renovating part of an old clothing factory. Ubisoft—a computer game developer hiring 1800 programmers and designers—was also attracted to the district in 1997, taking over the building that had previously housed Discreet Logic (Ackerman, 2007a, page 2).

Although Ubisoft is the largest employer in the neighborhood, there has been a revival in clothing design and an influx of other cultural and artisanal studios and shops. In contrast to established design and creative industry districts of the city, such as the Plateau and Old Montréal (both of which include more mainstream and elite firms), Mile End is home to independent start-ups. These small firms are generally priced out of the other areas, but also prefer to be located outside of the established design districts.[2] As one graphic designer suggests:

"Mile End is becoming so cool now. Like before it was the Plateau that was really cool, and now it is starting to move up because that got too expensive. So the people that want to be kind of the outcasts—yet cool—moved up into the Mile End" (interview).

Rather than being real-estate driven, this process of renewal has been more haphazard, with individual designers renting store fronts, lofts, apartments, or, in one case, a garage. The neighborhood's identity as a design hub has been solidified with the development of a government-supported incubator space for fashion designers called Laboratoire Créatif and the recent extension of this lab concept to include graphic designers (interview, community official; Klein et al, forthcoming).

Today, Mile End can be characterized as a lively bohemian quarter, and the dynamism of the area is reinforced by the compact, seamless mix of residential, commercial, and residual industrial spaces. Aside from historical antecedents, such a mix has been encouraged by a policy context that seeks to promote an 'urban village'

[2] There are relatively few interfirm linkages between creative industries in Mile End and those in the core of Montréal, but see below for a discussion of the significance of intradistrict linkages for these designers.

model—a model predicated on intense pedestrian traffic and on local businesses as sites of social encounters (Germain and Rose, 2000). In Montréal's Master Plan of 1992 local commercial arteries (or 'main streets') are viewed as "the places where people meet and interact, ensuring a large part of the neighborhood's vitality" (City of Montréal, 1992, page 31, cited by Germain and Rose, 2000, page 189). Accordingly, the city has facilitated the development of such places by permitting mixed-use forms, such as housing above retail units, and by restricting the development of inner-city shopping centres. Mile End now has six retail streets that are lined with independent businesses. Pedestrian activity abounds, and the neighborhood is located in a borough with one of the lowest rates of car ownership in Canada and the US (Agence métropolitaine de transport, 2005). To add to the mix, vibrant public spaces in the form of park areas, outdoor terraces, back alleys, and sidewalks accentuate the 'village' character (Franke, 2009).

How then do the distinct attributes of this urban, bohemian neighborhood contribute to the creative process of designers? In the sections that follow we analyze how material dimensions—in terms of the neighborhood's built form, land rents, mixed-use character and public spaces—play a role in enabling a set of practices and encounters that cultivate creative dispositions.

Materiality, built form, and aesthetic practice

Attributes of the built environment in Mile End directly mediate creative practices in both functional and symbolic ways. As mentioned above, this is a neighborhood that still contains warehouses and factory buildings. A number of designers expressed a preference for these buildings as workspaces, since they offer high ceilings, open space, and natural light (see also Hutton, 2008; Ley, 2003; Zukin, 1989). According to one fashion designer, this type of building was more conducive to her work:

"the space that I found was exactly what I was looking for; I was looking for some light because, being in a basement for so many years, I had to go out to see the colors of the fabric. I mean there were some very small windows in the area of the studio. So I wanted to have as much light as possible" (interview).

As Markus (1994) argues, industrial lofts can easily be reconfigured for new uses. Such flexible spaces are critical for designers who, in contrast to artists, often have to balance aesthetic and commercial concerns (not producing art solely for art's sake). These large spaces enable them to engage effectively in the different dimensions of design. To quote one fashion designer who adapted her space:

"I just put down some walls and I also made a showroom for myself here. I actually have two offices. Designers have different personalities, right? So I have ... an administrator office. That's where the computer is, where I'm sitting right now, where I do my accounts payable. And then I have another office for the creative part ... . I have this strength ... that I can block, in my mind, and I focus on what I'm doing. I know that if I'm sitting on that desk, it's time to create and there's nothing else. There's no computer in front of me. There's no telephone. I just do that" (interview).

In the case of fashion designers in particular, many also noted the benefits of being able to adapt their spaces to allow for retail or display in the front where they have access to large windows, and production/design functions in the back. Similar to the European immigrants of the past, designers in the contemporary context are altering their existing spaces and adding new layers to the material and cultural landscape of the city.

In addition to the functional value of the existing building stock, there is also a symbolic dimension to these spaces, since they serve as aesthetic stimuli for creative production, allowing designers to extend their "imaginative capacities" (Drake, 2003).

Several designers discussed how the older architecture in the neighborhood inspired them. According to one fashion designer:

"The loft aspect was [ ] interesting; the space itself was nice, wooden floor, an old factory ... . The place was like that to remind you that Montréal is a place of contrast" (interview).

Another graphic designer states:

"there's definitely a grungy twist here. Just the architecture, the whole feeling of ... run down. Crooked and paint flaking everywhere and crooked floors ... . And the colour palette is very cool" (interview).

For this designer the aesthetics and colors of the neighborhood find their way into the graphic designs emanating from Mile End—and Montréal in general—which are characterized by graffiti-like textual styles and a predominate use of grey, black, and white color schemes.

Indeed, a number of the designers interviewed expressed their desire to be in rougher, grittier, more 'authentic' parts of the city such as Mile End, as opposed to the pretension and manufactured upscale feel of the Plateau. According to one designer, known for her avant garde styles:

"I wanted a space with a raw feel ... . I didn't want an area already fully branded" (Friede, 2005).

These preferences corroborate the findings of Bain (2003), Connell and Gibson (2003), and Watson et al (2009) that artists favor marginal spaces, which are incomplete, free, and flexible, and thus offer the possibility of redefinition. For Watson et al (2009), new creative uses of older warehouses and factories turn cracks within the built environment into "lived spaces and imaginative landscapes" (page 871). Such preferences also illustrate that an engagement with the materiality of the urban should include an appreciation of the 'look and feel' of the built environment and its affective economies (Latham and McCormick, 2004, page 706; Hutton, 2006; 2008; Gibson, 2005).

When describing her studio space, one fashion designer captures the symbolic attachment to place in the following way:

"It's large. It's all in white. It's pure. It balances me out. That's what I feel. Actually, before me, there was a very well known painter, [an] artist. There's even the sink, where you can still see the paint in the sink. This was her atelier. I figure, if she's inspired, I'm going to be inspired here too" (interview).

When compared with design, art is viewed as more experimental—particularly since it is relatively less circumscribed in the early phases of conception by commercial or technical constraints (Leslie and Rantisi, 2006). Mile End's recent history as an artist enclave is a history inscribed in the architecture and, thus, adds to its appeal for designers. Like the examples cited in the previous paragraph, the case of the former artist studio further illustrates how the lived materiality of the urban—in particular its design, architecture, and heritage—is actually comprised of assemblages (Rose, 1998; see also Latham and McCormack, 2004). These assemblages provide a set of possibilities and influences from which designs emerge. And a city's fashions and product designs, in turn, fuse with the identity and fabric of the city, generating new assemblages.

The diversity of building types and architectural styles is another aspect of the built form that exposes designers to different styles and art forms. As one fashion designer who works in Mile End notes:

"It's definitely trendy ... there are a lot of small art galleries. It seems to be the city that embraces the arts in all forms ... it's a city that would allow for a lot of inspiration just because it feels like it's not as cold as, say, Toronto, which has a

lot of tall buildings and is a very modernized, big city. Montréal has a mixture of old buildings. It's just a mix of a lot of different styles" (interview).

Another graphic designer describes the street where she had her studio in Mile End:

"it's inspiring ... that street is very hybrid, very much an eclectic mishmash ... it really changed some of my ideas. Often I would go work on the street, not on the street but in the café on the street for a change of environment and I think that different possibilities arose" (interview).

Both Amin (2000) and Grabher (2001) argue that exposure to diverse practices and styles is central to a process of creativity, as it helps creators think 'outside the box' and to depart from established conventions. The density and diversity of cultural artifacts in the neighborhood provide such an exposure and reflect the broader aesthetic competence of the neighborhood. Immersion in a unique cultural and material habitus keeps designers abreast of cutting-edge developments. This form of situated surplus—of excess contained in a confined physical space and of spaces with many types of entities circulating within them—contributes to creative practice in multiple ways (Amin, 2008). In this way, design can adopt a viral nature, mutating and recombining a range of creative stimuli.

Another element of urban materiality that mediates design practice is land rents. The built environment in Mile End is not only functionally and aesthetically suitable, but also affordable. Embedded in the physical landscape are low rents, which facilitate aesthetic innovation by increasing the ability to take risks and enabling experimentation in diverse artistic fields.

Firstly, relatively inexpensive studio and living space enhances risk taking by creating low barriers to entry (interviews; see also Pilati and Tremblay, 2007). It is easier for designers to get started and they do not have to take on conventional clients to pay the rent. Indeed, the significance of this factor was expressed by nearly all designers interviewed and is captured in the following quote:

"Montréal is quite an exciting place to live for a creator because first the rents are quite cheap. So the quality of living we have here is allowing us to do a lot of activities. Going to theater, to movies, eating in restaurants because you don't have to put necessarily all your money into rent ... . Let me put it that way. I think the way we're less taken by, you know like the bills every month, is maybe freeing our mind a bit in order to create" (interview, graphic designer).

Secondly, low rents contribute to creativity by facilitating experimentation with multiple art forms. A majority of designers are active in more than one creative field (Molotch, 2003, page 179). Here, a graphic designer describes how the low rents and supportive artist buildings enabled her to start her own art gallery on the side:

"The cost of living here and the kind of cultural importance they put on art and making things and community and being involved, regardless of culture, regardless of age. It's so important for fostering that environment where you can really sort of go out and open a gallery. And you might meet your goal and fail in it after a year and people will still commend you ... . I like the healthy balance right now that I have in Montréal between making money at what I do and not having to compromise my aesthetic because the support is there for trying" (interview).

As another graphic designer puts it:

"I never had this really restrictive feeling. Some designers do their own ... magazines in their free time ... . I have a friend who's an illustrator and last year she made up her first book ... . It's true that how much you pay for your rent has a lot of influence ... . So that leaves a lot of liberty for working less or having more money for something else such as these projects (interview).

As the discussion above illustrates, material factors in Mile End provide the conditions for creative practices (within a primary field and across fields) by mediating the risks of experimentation, providing aesthetic stimuli, and balancing the aesthetic and commercial dimensions of creative work. As Molotch (2003, page 178) states:

"art work ... transfers into goods differently, depending on the kind of art in the geographic setting and the types of forces that thwart or facilitate its transfer into products."

In this context, low rents coupled with the availability of suitable workspaces provide one means of facilitating this transfer (see also Drake, 2003).

The discussion also corroborates a context-specific reading of the material (Amin 2007), as it illustrates how the urban landscape built up in an earlier era is now being used and interpreted in new ways. Today the industrial heritage that sprinkles the district, coupled with derelict, rough, and incomplete spaces associated with deindustrialization, bring into strong relief the district's 'alternative' status in a post-industrial urban economy. Mile End is an 'in-between' space and, accordingly, there is a sense among designers that the landscape is *emergent* rather than given and that they have the potential to benefit from and contribute to its constitution through their presence and work.

Materiality and diverse encounters

The sense of possibility in this liminal, 'edgy' neighborhood is also facilitated by the material attributes that give rise to a supportive set of social relations. Apart from the built form, the low rents and mixed-use quality of the neighborhood allow for the emergence (and concentration) of a range of independent economic actors, including independent suppliers and distribution channels. The number and diversity of independent actors, in turn, afford designers the opportunity to develop communities often outside the dominant economy. As one newspaper editorial notes:

"a handful of vintage and indie creation shops are making it possible for dozens of young designers to sell their work, thereby contributing to recognizable street fashion" (Ackerman, 2007a, page 3).[3]

This was echoed by a number of designers as well, for example:

"For me too, there are a lot of boutiques, smaller boutiques that a couple of friends run, like Lustre on St. Laurent, and they started it because they were making clothes and they actually sew within the store and I will go in there and I will buy a skirt for a lot more than I would buy at any other chain because it is made by these people ... and I know they will support me in return (interview, graphic designer).

Designers find Mile End less competitive and atomistic—and more community oriented—than more established design clusters:

"It's a very comfortable place when you have a lot of uncertainty about your work and it's nice, it felt like we were kind of at home there ... cultural, linguistic, also that kind of socioeconomic status. Everyone there is foreign, freelancing, or musicians or just getting by. You don't see business people ... .It's kind of like you're in a small town. And we were the graphic design shop on the street and there were other shops. So it's kind of like a little community" (interview, graphic designer).

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[3] There is a dominant narrative in the press about the 'off-beat' character of Mile End. This narrative creeps into the identity of the designers in the district who then perform these alternative creative subjectivities. This illustrates how material factors are not 'pregiven' but are themselves products of a mixture of material, representational, and symbolic practices (see Bakker and Bridge 2006).

Mile End is thus characterized by diverse encounters between a range of independent economic actors as well as by collaboration across artistic fields (eg photographers, graphic and fashion designers) (see also Lloyd, 2006, page 36l). These diverse encounters are in part shaped by the material characteristics of the neighborhood. Situated in one of the most dense cities of North America, Mile End—like many inner-city neighborhoods—is compact; a site where bodies, mass, and matter collide, and where people from all walks of life are forced to rub shoulders. Adding to the sheer density, the urban design features of the neighborhood—the public and open spaces and the streetscape—enhance a sense of intimacy central to the creation of an underground economy that depends on low-cost, word-of-mouth networking to exchange codified information (such as employment opportunities or cultural events) as well as the more sticky, tacit kind (Stolarick and Florida, 2006).

One example in Mile End that illustrates the role that such spaces can play in the construction of underground economy is the Club Social café. Club Social has its origins in the late 1980s as a private Italian social club for men. The club remained private for roughly five years and served as a place where elderly men could mingle and play board games or cards. It was subsequently opened to the public in 1994 as a café after people in the neighborhood, including women, wanted to enter (interview, owner). Today, the composition of the clientele reflects changes within the neighborhood more generally, and its mixed socioeconomic demographic. Elderly Italian men still play board games there. However, as many members of the Italian community have moved northward, there are now local artists and designers sitting next to the Italian men, and lattés being served alongside the traditional espressos (interview with owner; Dewolf, 2004).

What makes the café so appealing? According to the owner, who lives upstairs, it is the 'ambiance' and a warmth that the space exudes (interview). The space itself is small and houses a few tables in the interior, a television that broadcasts special sports events, a bulletin board where local shows and activities are advertised, and a corner wall reserved for exhibiting art or photography. The café also has an outdoor terrace. Prices are affordable and people can stay as long as they like. Moreover, its central location at the intersection of two major streets in the neighborhood means there is constant traffic in and out of the café and, hence, a lot of exposure for creators or their products (interview, owner).

The lively, accessible, and open atmosphere makes this café an ideal meeting space. In describing the function it serves for local cultural producers, the owner calls it a 'launching pad':

"it is a place where [designers and artists] can take care of all their business ... . For example, I want to speak to you. 'Listen, I will meet you at the Social Club'. This is our launching pad. We met, we had our discussion [and] from here, other things will happen" (interview).

This sentiment was validated by a number of the designers, who regularly held meetings there. One graphic designer, for example, describes how his work revolves primarily around the music scene in the area, making posters and publicity materials for concerts and festivals. He spends his time at the café, which provides an opportunity for discussing design and culture with other designers, as well as musicians and other creative workers in the area. The café also facilitates a process of networking that matches him with jobs:

"the city breaks down boundaries. Graphic designers do work for musicians and bands and local artists. People know photographers and get them to photograph their band. Musicians also wear stuff ... . I have my meetings with clients here [at the café] and when I am working with other freelancers. Other freelancers subcontract

things to create jobs for other people. We also do a lot of brainstorming while working here" (interview, graphic designer).

Another designer, specializing in prints on t-shirts, describes how the café served as the site for an informal event where creative workers came together to exhibit their products. The space and the entertainment were provided for free and, since it was a location that everyone knew about, the event could easily be publicized through word-of-mouth. She explains that by hosting an event at the café, she and her colleagues are working on

"creating a community rather than just selling stuff in stores. And it's cool because it brings people together and we want to see who buys our stuff and we want people to want to promote to each other and to their friends" (interview, graphic designer).

Watson et al (2009) note the importance of having flexible, multifunctional sites that can be used for diverse purposes, including performance, exhibition, networking, and collaborative production. This is a valuable material asset that exists within Mile End.

In her analysis of artists' centers, Markusen (2006) suggests that artists (as well as designers) require less formalized spaces of inspiration, where they can make art for their own satisfaction or share with their own communities—spaces where they can just 'be'. Cafés, restaurants, and bars, as well as the street, all serve as 'third spaces', that is, unregulated and nonhierarchical spaces situated between home and work that facilitate social interaction and creative exchange (Lea et al, 2009; Lloyd, 2006; Watson et al, 2009). As Watson et al (2009) suggest, these spaces allow for chance encounters between cultural producers and industry professionals, encounters that blur the business – social divide. In the case of Mile End, Club Social is an example of such a 'third space'.[4] As a microcosm of the neighborhood, the café is a dense, accessible, and affordable site: that is, one that breaks down boundaries and allows for diverse and informal creative encounters.

Conclusion

In this paper we follow Gibson (2005), Hutton (2006; 2008), and Watson et al (2009) in arguing that material factors nurture creative dispositions by cultivating physical and sensual stimuli, mediating some of the risks associated with creative employment, and facilitating an exchange between creative sectors. Moreover, in line with recent calls to rematerialize culture and cultural practices (eg Jackson, 2000), we subscribe to a relational view of the material, acknowledging its socially constructed nature and establishing how its meaning varies with specific times, places, and experiences.

Our study further suggests that the prevailing policy agenda influenced heavily by Richard Florida—that is, one that emphasizes quality of life as a means of attracting talent—is limited and fails to capture the dynamic ways in which quality of life can nurture home-grown talent. Contemporary creative city programs remain centered on the creation of hip, gentrified cultural quarters. In many cities around the world, gentrification and culturally led regeneration replaces creativity and edgy aesthetics with a sanitized cosmopolitanism (Hutton, 2009). One of the advantages of Montréal is that low-rents dynamics have staved off gentrification for longer than in other cities and neighborhoods. In places like Mile End, proposed government investments to beautify the neighborhood (eg improvements in street lights and furniture and the modification

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[4] In addition to Club Social, there were other cafés and restaurants in Mile End which were cited as spaces of encounters for designers. One bistro, L'Assommoir, for example, hosts fashion shows on Friday evenings, using a 22-seat dining table as a runway. The owner provides free publicity and music for the show, and through the event, designers can connect with local DJs, other creative workers, and potential clients (interviews, fashion designers and bistro owner).

of older warehouse buildings for upscale residential development) threaten this advantage, as gentrification is already setting in (Fine, 2005; Heffez, 2009).

In response to these measures and the more general process of gentrification, residents in Mile End have recently formed a Citizens' Committee, which has held regular meetings at local cafes and sponsored a forum to propose a collective, grassroots vision for the future of their neighborhood. The vision includes a set of proposals intended to safeguard the "creativity, conviviality and possibility" of Mile End, including a public market where local cultural producers can sell their products and congregate, more green space, a local community center where activities and meetings can be held, the provision of space for artists, and affordable rents for residential and commercial properties (Franke, 2009; Heffez, 2009). Many of the proposals emphasize physical aspects of the built environment.

The findings of our study validate these policy proposals. A focus on the productive dimension of quality of life draws attention to the need for substantial investments in the development and upkeep of such material resources, which not only benefit designers in an economic sense, but also shape the social character of the neighborhoods in which they are embedded. Rather than promoting gentrified cultural quarters, we argue that greater emphasis is needed on preserving affordable rents and accessible public spaces in the city, with particular care being taken to avoid the oversurveillance of such spaces that is all too common today (Amin, 2008; Lea et al, 2009). Such measures are more likely to engender the networks, artifacts, practices, and identities that underpin creative production.

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