The Influence of District Visual Quality on Location Decisions of Creative Entrepreneurs

Annet Jantien Smit

Numerous Western world cities expend considerable effort to attract creative entrepreneurs, such as artists, architects, and designers, to dedicated districts for cultural production. Creative entrepreneurs are seen as agents of neighborhood revitalization and as enhancing urban competitiveness in increasingly knowledge-based urban economies (Currid, 2009; Jacobs, 1961; Lloyd, 2002; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Markusen & Johnson, 2006; Stern & Seifert, 2010). Such cultural district development targets urban neighborhoods as new hotspots for creative entrepreneurs to live and work. As opposed to planned entertainment districts, which feature large cultural venues and are dedicated to cultural consumption, cultural production districts are concentrations of small, creative firms and artists.

Problem: A redevelopment aim of numerous Western world cities is to attract creative firms to formerly abandoned or neglected districts. While some studies propose that visual assets of neighborhoods may attract creative entrepreneurs to certain districts, few have explored how visual features are important for creative entrepreneurs and provided meaningful planning knowledge.

Purpose: This article examines the influence of district visual form as perceived by creative entrepreneurs on their location decisions. It suggests how this knowledge is usable for development of cultural production districts.

Methods: I conducted 63 interviews with creative entrepreneurs in three districts in The Netherlands: the Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam, the Lloyd Quarter in Rotterdam, and the Hortus Quarter in Groningen. These districts accommodate relatively more firms in creative industries than do other districts within the same cities, but they are visually disparate in terms of architecture and urban spaces.

Results and conclusions: This article demonstrates a significant relationship between district visual quality and the location behavior of creative entrepreneurs. Moreover, there is more than one visual model for cultural production districts. Urban design, architecture, waterfronts, and parks may have various forms, provided that they single out one place from other, mainstream places. The overall visual character of the district needs to be perceived as distinctive, whether deliberately designed as such or not. Because the visual quality of the district contributes to increased creative productivity, creative entrepreneurs use their relative freedom of location within cities to achieve quality of place at work.

Takeaway for practice: Cities that aim to attract creative entrepreneurs to certain districts should use strategies to achieve district visual quality. I draw on my findings to point at several planning strategies to inspire flexible, localized approaches to the development of visually distinctive cultural production districts. These strategies can be alternated and adjusted over time, according to a district’s existing visual quality, availability of government resources, and the changing constraints and opportunities of a region’s cultural production system.

Keywords: district visual form, urban design, cultural production districts, location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, Dutch cities

Research support: Dissertation support from Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands. Dissertation Fellowship from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, MA, USA. The Netherlands Institute of City Innovation Studies (NICIS), The Hague, and the municipalities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Groningen cofinanced the fieldwork.

About the author: Annet Jantien Smit (ajsmit@denkbeeld.info) conducted this study during a visiting scholarship in The Netherlands both at the University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and at Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Urbanism. She holds an M.Sc. in architecture. Her interdisciplinary Ph.D. research in economic geography and urban planning focuses on spatial qualities of cultural production districts.

American examples of cultural production districts are neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Gowanus Canal, and Bushwick, in Brooklyn, New York City, which attracted a music and arts scene over the past decades. Yet, evidence on effective planning of cultural production districts as part of an arts-based economic development strategy is scarce. Which place-based characteristics would draw creative entrepreneurs to certain districts?

The location decisions of creative entrepreneurs depend on a complex variety of factors, mostly defined at the spatial scale of the urban region or the firm’s premises, such as path-dependent urban production systems or features of office buildings. While creative entrepreneurs, particularly artists, gravitate toward central city districts (Evans, 2009; Hall, 2000; Markusen, 2004; A. C. Scott, 2007), only a small body of research has explored the relationship between location decisions and a crucial level of spatial scale that falls between cities and building: districts (or neighborhoods). These studies found that several assets of neighborhoods correlate to concentrations of creative entrepreneurs: inexpensive real estate; central city location; diversity in class, household structure, and ethnicity; and amenities, such as art schools and artists’ centers (Jackson et al., 2003; Lloyd, 2004; Markusen, 2006; Stern & Seifert, 2010). Additionally, some studies propose that visual assets of neighborhoods contribute to location decisions of creative entrepreneurs (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2006), or work as a catalyst for individual creativity (Drake, 2003). Very little work, however, has been done to specifically explore how a district’s look and feel would be attractive to creative entrepreneurs.

Therefore, a current challenge in the field of location theory of creative firms is to obtain insight into whether, how, and why the visual form of the district influences location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. The purpose of this study was to respond to this question. Interviews were conducted with visual artists, photographers, architects, designers, and filmmakers in three cultural production districts in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Groningen, The Netherlands. Would district visual features matter in their location decisions?

This article demonstrates a significant relationship between district visual quality and the location behavior of creative entrepreneurs, a highly coveted labor pool in cities and regions across the globe. I argue that creative entrepreneurs perceive a distinctive visual appearance as one key location factor in addition to other factors. Moreover, there is more than one visual model for cultural production districts attractive to creative entrepreneurs. Urban design, architecture, waterfronts, and parks may have various forms and styles, provided that they single a place out from other, mainstream places. That is, the overall visual character of the district needs to be perceived as distinctive, for example, “progressive,” “edgy,” or “a special place,” whether that character was deliberately designed as such, or not. Moreover, such visual quality contributes to increased creative productivity in several ways. Therefore, it may be a new element of the opportunity-driven location behavior of creative entrepreneurs because they use their relative freedom of location within cities to achieve quality of place at work.

In sum, the visual form of the district merits more standing as an additional means of meeting the goal of advancing urban development. District design can be used as a relatively unexplored force to drive development of attractive cultural production districts. Conscious district design can be an additional component of larger arts-based economic development strategies targeting neighborhood revitalization and increased urban competitiveness.

Defining Concepts

Cultural Production Districts

The literature distinguishes several types of cultural districts: “planned” entertainment districts, and “natural” cultural districts or cultural clusters, defined as concentrations of cultural resources, including commercial creative firms, resident artists, nonprofit arts organizations, and cultural participants (Stern & Seifert, 2010). A. C. Scott (2004) makes the same kind of distinction between cultural consumption and cultural production districts based on the nature of the products sold (see also Ashworth, 2005; Evans, 2009). Arts and entertainment cultural districts mostly sell immobile products for instantaneous consumption; while creative firms in cultural production districts mostly produce mobile outputs, which can even have global market reach, such as specialized design and media services.

In this study, I focus on districts that have a relatively high concentration of creative firms compared to other districts within the same city, but that were not institutionally designated as cultural production districts. A second characteristic of the districts on which I focus is that the majority of the creative firms located here are involved in producing mobile cultural products, such as visual arts, architecture, design, and media.

Creative Entrepreneurs

The current discourse about the creative economy draws on different notions of cultural and creative entrepreneurs. These definitions differ as to whether they
include only nonprofit activities, such as the arts, or also commercial activities, including architecture, design, and media. However, they all concentrate on economic activities dedicated to producing goods and services with mainly aesthetic and symbolic value. In addition, Markusen distinguished two ways of conceptualizing creative workers: those employed in creative industries, focusing on “what they make”; and those belonging to creative occupations, focusing on “what they do” in order to gauge creative employment based on creative skill content and work process (Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale, & Cohen, 2008).

Within this study, I define creative entrepreneurs as owners of firms in both the commercial and nonprofit creative sectors. My interviewees are architects, advertising agencies, graphic designers, filmmakers, photographers, and visual artists. Thus, this definition includes creative sectors included in principal studies using an industry approach (e.g. Kloosterman, 2004; Pratt, 1997; A. C. Scott, 2000, 2004) or an occupational approach (e.g. Markusen et al., 2008). While I use the term “creative entrepreneur” to point out that my interviewees are not only artists but have specific business obligations as architects and designers, I still use the terms “cultural products” and “cultural production districts” to differentiate the creative sector from other sectors that make products with less symbolic and aesthetic content. I do not include science, engineering, and other high-human capital sectors in my definition of the creative economy (Florida, 2002). Rather, I restrict my definition to sectors producing mainly aesthetic and symbolic value.

**Location Decisions**

I view the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs as consisting of both their location decisions at the time of settlement and their current implicit or explicit decisions to remain located in their district. The interviews subsequently addressed both topics.

Districts have certain visible features, such as built artifacts and natural elements. However, scholars agree that what is visible and what is seen are not the same (see, e.g., Ervin & Steinitz, 2003). In this article, I focus on tangible, visible features that were seen by my interviewees as professionally important, such as urban morphology and architecture, and which are the nuts-and-bolts of urban design and architecture.

**The Unexplored Value of District Visual Form for Creative Entrepreneurs**

A growing literature explores mechanisms by which art and culture enhance urban economic development in postindustrial cities (for reviews, see Currid, 2009; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Attracting and retaining high-skilled people, including creative entrepreneurs, to cities is an urban policy goal across the globe.

Yet, the literature to date mainly describes the aspects of urban quality of place for creative firms and workers (for reviews, see Mustard, Bontje, Chapain, Kovacs, & Murie, 2007; Smit, 2010b; Trip & Romein, 2009), on the spatial scale of cities and regions, not districts. More specifically, the literature provides only limited knowledge about the value of district visual form to creative entrepreneurs, as the following concise review of literature shows.

First, the place-making literature has addressed the value of urban visual form to people. For example, Lynch (1960) investigated the perceived visual elements that aid urban residents to orient and memorize places. In a more normative approach, scholars such as Relph (1976) have addressed the value of place identity in times of increasing placelessness. In looking specifically at cultural production districts, place-making studies have typically focused on planning and promoting cultural quarters (e.g., Wansborough & Mageean, 2000), instead of planning for creative entrepreneurs from a user perspective (Evans, 2009; see also Pratt, 2009a).

Second, location theory on creative industries generally uses two perspectives: one that is firm oriented and one that is worker oriented. The literature with a firm-oriented perspective explains regional clusters of creative firms by path-dependent urban production systems (e.g., Kloosterman, 2004, 2008; A. C. Scott, 2000, 2007) and artists (Currid, 2007; Markusen, 2006). Social interaction between workers within these clusters is seen as a key mechanism to encourage creativity. Concentrations of creative firms within cities are explained by a need for frequent face-to-face contacts in flexible inter-firm networks (see also Bassett, Griffiths, & Smith, 2002; Brown, O’Connor, & Cohen, 2000; Pratt, 1997). Real estate studies concerning creative firms find that certain features of workspace, such as price, image, and accessibility, explain the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs (e.g., Montgomery, 2007).

The literature with a worker-oriented perspective puts more emphasis on the critical role of quality of place in driving urban growth. Quality of urban life is found to be important for creative professionals, among who are creative entrepreneurs. Visual quality of place may be part of a city’s amenities (see, e.g., T. N. Clark, 2004; T. Clark, Lloyd, Wong, & Jain, 2002; Florida, 2002, 2005; Glaeser, Kolko, & Saiz, 2001; Hoppenbrouwer & Louw, 2005; Landry, 2000; Storper & Manville, 2006). Yet, quite a few authors criticize the underlying thesis that urban
competitiveness is enhanced by firms following creative class professionals who choose attractive places to live (e.g., Donegan, Drucker, Goldstein, Lowe, & Malizia, 2008; Storper & Scott, 2009). Brown and Męczyński (2009) showed that aesthetics of cities was not an initial attractor for creative and high-skilled knowledge workers in their decisions to move to certain cities.

In contrast, Carlino and Saiz (2008) find that “beautiful” cities (having a high number of leisure visits) featured economic and population growth and disproportionately attracted highly skilled professionals. Similar findings by Florida, Mellander, and Stolarick (2009) show that beauty and the aesthetic characteristics of cities had a significant effect on community satisfaction for a large sample of Americans with diverse income and education levels. The same work concludes that visual factors affect urban and regional development, but these factors remain largely unexplored.

Third, literature on arts-based economic development using an occupational approach defines the places creative entrepreneurs need by assessing what they do actually “on the ground.” An occupational analysis of creative entrepreneurs focuses closely on the nature of work tasks of creative entrepreneurs while an industry approach focuses on the nature of cultural products they produce. For example, Currid (2007) found that cultural producers advance their careers and products by both professional and private social activities in places such as art and nightlife venues, gallery openings, and fashion shows. Markusen (2006) shows that the spatial distribution of artists is a function of preferences for places to live, with artist-employing industries, and with artists’ spaces. While this set of literature sees physical assets as part of a support system for creative workers, their value for creative entrepreneurs is the professional interaction facilitated by such assets, not the visual quality of place.

Brief, detailed empirical work on the effect of district visual features on the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs is scarce. Based on the concepts defined here and related research debates, the conceptual framework driving this study schematizes the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs to be a function of a) the objective visual features of a neighborhood or district; b) the subjective perceptions of these objective visual features of the district by creative entrepreneurs, seen through the lens of importance for their work and firm; c) the background characteristics of the creative entrepreneurs, such as firm size; and d) features of office buildings and urban context, for example, the presence of clusters of creative firms within the city region. This conceptual framework can be used to measure the perceived visual features of the district that influence location decisions, while also considering other location factors. I also briefly address how important the visual features of a district are compared to location factors at other spatial scales.

**Research Sites and Selection Criteria**

The three districts studied are located in three large cities in The Netherlands: the Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam, the Lloyd Quarter in Rotterdam, and the Hortus Quarter in Groningen (see Figure 1). This study aims to nurture the new Dutch planning topic of designing attractive work milieus and office parks. This debate is spurred by, on the one hand, an increasing share of knowledge workers in the Dutch economy and, on the other hand, the predicted scarcity of such workers in the future, as the baby-boom generation retires. Consequently, firms employing knowledge workers increasingly demand higher quality office buildings and their surroundings (e.g., Van Dinteren, 2007).

All three cities currently have economic development strategies that seek to attract and retain creative entrepreneurs as one way to advance urban competitiveness (Bontje & Musterd, 2009; Trip & Romein, 2009). Overall, these programs did not deliberately include policies to enhance the attractiveness of the research districts to creative entrepreneurs. Yet, in all three districts, city-wide economic...
Development policies were translated into project-focused policies. For example, a few former harbor warehouses and schools were refurbished as business incubators for creative firms and artists (see Figures 2–4).

In each city, I selected one research district based on three criteria. First, the primary determinant for selecting districts was to find districts that fit what I had defined as cultural production districts: a relative concentration of creative firms in creative subsectors that produce mainly mobile outputs, such as visual arts, architecture, design, and digital media. To detect this concentration of firms, I used the GIS maps in Figures 2–4. Then, I delineated research districts that I assumed were perceived as “city areas which the observer can go mentally inside of, and which have some common character” (Lynch, 1960, pp. 66–67), in order to be consistent with what respondents perceived to comprise their district.

Second, since my study is exploratory, I selected districts presenting a broad range of district visual features that emerged from the literature review, such as large-scale versus fine-grain architecture and street patterns and waterfronts versus parks. Thus, as a set, these districts are “diverse cases” (for types of cases, see Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Third, I selected the districts for their cross-case characteristics: how they fit into a wider population of what is commonly understood as cultural production districts. While the literature mainly refers to inner-urban areas and redeveloped harbor districts or industrial sites, the Hortus Quarter and the Lloyd Quarter may be seen as “typical cases” of cultural production districts. By contrast, the Eastern Docklands is a “deviant case” because it was totally renovated with 8,000 new dwellings in a modern architectural style: hence, a district where one would not commonly expect a concentration of creative firms. Table 1 describes the type of district visual features of interest for this study and their marked differences.
Methods: Interviews

To explore whether and how the visual form of the district would matter in the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, our interview team conducted 63 interviews with creative entrepreneurs located in these three districts. I chose semi-structured, in-depth interviews to expand the literature, which describes mainly abstract notions of aesthetics of cultural production districts, with detailed empirical evidence.

Since I hypothesized that the visual features of each district would be of relatively small importance in the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, the interviews started with two open questions on location decisions at the time of settlement. In the third question, I asked how they regarded their district as a location. Next, in three subsequent questions, I asked about the district features of professional importance, with follow-up questions on district visual features, if respondents had not yet mentioned them. The seventh question was a ranking question to gauge how the entrepreneurs perceived the relative importance of district qualities vis-à-vis features of their office building and proximity to clients and collaborators within their city. The interviews concluded with questions on the importance of district features for future location decisions.

The 63 interviewees were self-employed or managed up to and including nine employees, corresponding to the average small firm size in creative industries.3

I found almost all respondents from telephone books and municipal databases, followed by cold calling. The various industry subsectors (see Table 2) are not distributed evenly in the total respondent selection, because our selection priority was to obtain respondent selections of equal shares per subsector and firm size in each research district. For the analytical purpose of aggregating interview results from all three districts, I selected interviewees from firms with similar background characteristics, such that I obtained, so to speak, three comparable groups of interviewees (see Table 2).
In each district, I interviewed visual artists, photographers, architects, filmmakers, and graphic designers. Table 3 shows that all interviewees were mostly working on visual content and visual identities, as well described by metaphors like “communication by design.”

After completion of the interviews, I analyzed the transcripts and coded each response about district visual quality with three types of labels: by category of district visual features, by type of professional motivation, and by degree of importance for their location decisions. As to the latter type, district visual features could be perceived as “important, but a welcome bonus” or as “very important or even decisive.” I closely followed the words of the respondents in coding responses, a prerequisite for counting quotes with the same labels and quantitatively comparing prevalent topics among respondents (Bryman, 2004). This analysis enables one to both count and qualify the research results: How many respondents found which specific urban design features important, for which professional purpose, and how important? The following section presents the salient visual characteristics of the district reported by the interviewees to contribute to their creative production process and location decisions.

Findings

The Importance of District Visual Form

Are district visual features important to creative entrepreneurs when choosing a place for their firm within a city? I found that they are much more important than could be inferred from the literature (e.g., Drake, 2003; Municipality of Amsterdam, 2006). Spontaneously, 40% of all interviewees stated that the visual form of the district influenced their initial location decisions. They did so in their answers to the first two, open-ended questions: “Why did your firm locate here?
Table 1. Summary of the range of different visual features of the three districts that were important for the selection of research districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District visual features</th>
<th>The Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam</th>
<th>The Lloyd Quarter in Rotterdam</th>
<th>The Hortus Quarter in Groningen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban morphology</td>
<td>New urban structure, as result of area redevelopment of former harbor into mainly residential area. Many large-scale blocks and urban spaces. High-density (250 dwellings per acre) neighborhoods.</td>
<td>Former harbor area, currently redeveloped into a mixed-use area. Medium-scale and large-scale blocks and urban spaces.</td>
<td>18th-century neighborhood located adjacent to the city center, mainly residential inner-urban neighborhood. Small-scale, fine-grain blocks and urban spaces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural character</td>
<td>Modern and new architectural character, due to many medium-rise and high-rise apartment blocks, which added 8,000 dwellings to the district between 1987 and 2003. Much international attention and design prizes for modern architecture.</td>
<td>Transitional character, due to mix of re-used harbor buildings and a few recent medium-rise apartment blocks, and many construction sites.</td>
<td>19th-century, eclectic architectural character, due to mainly low-rise buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, and a few 20th-century medium-rise apartment and university blocks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterfronts</td>
<td>Waterfronts with wide views on the river and former harbor, some wharfs currently in use for house boats.</td>
<td>Waterfronts with wide views on current harbor on opposite side of the river.</td>
<td>Waterfronts with views on former small harbor, currently in use for house boats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical character</td>
<td>Predominantly modern character of architecture and public spaces, with some preserved and reused 19th-century harbor buildings, cranes, and pavements.</td>
<td>Mixed character due to 19th-century reused power plant and warehouses combined with modern style architecture, currently transitioning into increasingly modern character of buildings and public spaces.</td>
<td>Predominantly 19th-century character of architecture and public spaces due to mainly 19th-century buildings and public courtyards within blocks, small parks, and urban park on former town ramparts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: These photographs were used in the sixth interview question concerning picture selection. Table is available in color online.
Source: Photographs by Vipphoto, Groningen, The Netherlands. Published with permission.
If you had a choice, why did you choose this location instead of another one?” In the third question, I asked for the first time in the interview about the district itself: “How do you currently perceive your district as a location for your firm?” While this question still did not specifically mention the visual form of the district, Figure 5 shows that this topic had been brought up by over two thirds of the interviewees.

The Look and Feel of Attractive Cultural Production Districts

If the visual features of the district are important to so many creative entrepreneurs, what, then, are they looking at? To discover the specific visual form characteristics the interviewees perceived in their district, I asked in three subsequent questions about the kind of district qualities of current importance for their firm: one in words, one aided

Table 2. The number of respondents per subsector in creative industries, firm size, and research district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsector in creative industries</th>
<th>N/ Research district</th>
<th>N/ Firm size in number of workers</th>
<th>N/ Research district</th>
<th>N/ Firm size in number of workers</th>
<th>N/ Research district</th>
<th>N/ Firm size in number of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising agencies and graphic designers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects and interior architects</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmmakers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual artists</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents per research district</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The firm size in number of workers includes the entrepreneur.

Table 3. Self-reported work activities and products per cultural subsector included in the interview pool of 63 creative entrepreneurs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsector of cultural industries</th>
<th>Daily work activities</th>
<th>Type of cultural product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising agencies and graphic designers</td>
<td>Graphic and multimedia design work, development of communication by design concepts</td>
<td>Visual and corporate identities for clients by graphic design of websites, posters, books, exhibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects and interior architects</td>
<td>Architectural design and advising work, direction of construction activities, writing on architecture</td>
<td>Architectural advice and design for buildings and urban districts, articles and books on architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmmakers</td>
<td>Scenario writing, film direction, soundmixing, and editing</td>
<td>Concepts and production of artistic and journalistic films, TV programs, documentaries, animations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual artists</td>
<td>Painting, art making and website design, direction of art courses</td>
<td>Paintings, photographs, multimedia art works, installations, websites, art courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographers</td>
<td>Making photographs for clients and own artistic development</td>
<td>Photographs, digital images, portraits, and photographic artwork</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All respondents were asked to self-report their work activities and products in a short questionnaire on their firm and personal characteristics just before the open-ended questions.
by a district map, and one involving picture selection. I also asked about current barriers in their district as a place to work.

The interviews produced four broad categories of tangible visible elements of the district, about which the interviewees talked at length and in great detail: 1) urban morphology and public space, 2) architecture, 3) waterfronts, and 4) a mingling of old and new buildings. Yet, these features were often described in relation to a perceived visual character of the district that conveyed a critical “sense of the whole,” something larger than the sum of its parts. Thus, it seems important to define district visual quality not only by the quality of space and design of district visual elements alone, which is tantamount to dismissing the interrelation of the parts into a whole (see also Lynch, 1960). In fact, respondents often described their perception of their district as a place to work by starting off with “this place just feels good.” Next, they clarified such remarks by describing district visual elements, their quality of space and design, and concluded with statements on their district’s overall visual appearance.

Aggregating the interviewees’ responses show that there is more than one visual model for cultural production districts that is attractive to creative entrepreneurs. Urban design, buildings, and natural elements of districts may have various forms, provided that they give a positive and special character to a district’s visual appearance. A mainstream quality of place and design is somewhat below the bar as a place to work; the visual appearance needs to be perceived as distinctive.

The following presents the main specific findings on each category of district visual features. Table 4 shows, using typical quotes and images, how the interviewees described the salient characteristics, both positive and negative, of the quality of place and design that they perceived as important for their work and their firm.

**Urban Morphology and Public Space**

Street scenes, parks, squares, street furniture, trees, and even pavements were perceived positively if they added to an overall “creative appearance” of their district. The interviewees portrayed this as “progressive,” “dynamic,” and “authentic” in the Eastern Docklands; “rugged,” “edgy,” and “indeterminate” in the Lloyd Quarter; and “beautiful in its own way” and “a special character” in the Hortus Quarter. However, respondents in the Lloyd Quarter disagreed on its transitional character because some found its potholes and lack of trees and street furniture an irritating state of incompleteness. Negatively perceived, however, were places within their district described as “overly completed, boring, can be anywhere.”

**District Architecture**

Remarkably, a few new and modern architecture buildings were perceived to add to the authenticity of the district. As Table 4 shows, landmark buildings were particularly appreciated if they fit the spatial scale and atmosphere of their environs. Thus, architectural quality is perceived as more than just beautiful buildings. Instead, it is about distinguishing architecture, diverse and original in size, style, and use of materials. Such architectural elements gave a sense of uniqueness to the overall district appearance. Buildings with such a nexus of appearance and fit single a place out from other, mainstream places.

**Waterfronts**

Many interviewees appreciated waterfronts and bridges, wharfs, and views on the water for the sense of space that they foster, especially so if surrounded by attractive urban spaces and architecture. Therefore, waterfronts themselves were not a sufficient visual feature, and were only perceived positively if they, and their immediate surroundings, added to the overall “creative appearance” of their district. The general consensus was that if views were compromised or disrupted because of new and commonplace housing developments, if the harbor featured even fewer vessels, or if wharfs were made too tidy by restricting the number of houseboats, then the dynamic, edgy, and distinctive character of the district would become “frumpy” and “uniform.”

**Mix of Old and New**

“The combination of old and new gives character to a district” was a sentiment expressed by many interviewees to explain why their district was an attractive place in which
Table 4. Overview of typical quotations describing the positive and negative characteristics of quality of place and design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District visual features</th>
<th>The Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam</th>
<th>The Lloyd Quarter in Rotterdam</th>
<th>The Hortus Quarter in Groningen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban morphology</td>
<td>“If I have clients over, this is a clear location. It is a different place....The new housing development, the public gardens, the canals of the Eastern Docklands...It is something special ...not such a suburban development like so many other areas in The Netherlands.”</td>
<td>“Look, you like of course to be located in areas that are inspiring yourselves, still are challenging....Once development is finished, it becomes boring very soon. That goes for many creative people. Get on your bicycle, go to your cubicle, and sit down at your computer, that you can do everywhere....This place shows not any individuality. This is exchangeable, it can be anywhere.”</td>
<td>“I could not think of working in a business park, that seems truly horrible to me, seems so boring to me. And here, you can just go out. Sometimes, if I need to wind myself up for design work, I go outside to examine front doors or facades....Or if I go to the park, for a walk or just to sit down on the grass, then at once you see the sky, and you have a view.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural character</td>
<td>“I often make appointments for work in the Music Hall [in its bar, with clients]. Then I feel a certain pride....I find the Music Hall very attractive. It is huge, it fits in this setting: In this way, it does justice to the grandness, the roughness, and the sturdiness of the surrounding district....The magnificence of the building. The enormous overhang of the roof....It is in balance, it matches, it is a coherent whole with its surroundings.”</td>
<td>“I do experience the Lloyd Quarter....As windy, typically Rotterdam: ....Waterfronts, views on the harbor, a little bare, chilly....The choices that are made here are sturdy choices. No frumpy choices....For example such a large, beautiful building as the Maritime College ....I am proud of that.”</td>
<td>“I find this building an uninspiring block of concrete. It means nothing to me. It does not fit at all in the neighborhood....New developments should be a bit more exciting....If anything is changed, it should be innovative.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterfronts</td>
<td>“This area derives a professional appearance and charm as well from all this “boat stuff”...old rusted vessels...flower boxes [on houseboats]....That’s exactly the nice thing: the very expensive, high-brow culture, and a few of those “leftovers”....I actually associate messiness with a certain degree of creativity.”</td>
<td>“In practice, artists look for places at the edge of the city. The loose ends. The Lloyd Quarter is not anymore like that....In fact a very strange quality is a district being uncompleted....On this picture you do see the water, but other than that it is all ossified. It is one-dimensional and finished.”</td>
<td>“I just find it terrific to work near a park. Just for the atmosphere. The same goes for the harbor. Your heart opens up if you walk over there. It just makes you bright and breezy....It’s really those things why I will not locate on a business site.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A sense of history was important, not just the individual aesthetic beauty of old buildings. "Whether or not it is a beautiful building, it is about giving some history to a place," an architect explained. Moreover, the interviewees valued heritage preservation negatively when it led to too much tidiness, cultural theming, and commodification, a concern also addressed in Ley's (2003) study of artists. In sum, visual appearance must provide a cultural production district with a sense of the whole that is, in fact, a sense of difference. My research results, therefore, extend and enrich the primarily theoretical notions in the literature that a distinctive character of districts is important for creative entrepreneurs (Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2004; Municipality of Amsterdam, 2006).

**How District Visual Form Catalyzes Creative Production**

Why, then, does the visual distinctiveness of their firm’s district matter to creative entrepreneurs? Does it catalyze creative production? I also asked why interviewees found the visual form of their neighborhood important for their work and their firm. Three reasons emerged. The most unexpected reason as compared to what is known from the research literature was that a distinctive district visual appearance makes the district attractive for clients to pay a visit. More than one quarter of interviewees raised this topic. If clients like to come by, they were considered to be more open to the ideas and products proposed by creative entrepreneurs than if meetings were held in the client’s office.

Second, almost half of all respondents expressed the view that their district needs to “radiate creativity” through its distinctive visual appearance because doing so enhances the creative image of their firm and their products. An Amsterdam designer of advertising concepts explained how this contributed to her decision to locate her firm in the Eastern Docklands:

> "Availability, price...I think it is the combination of accessibility and creative appearance. The creative feel is palpable, as the Eastern Docklands is appealing from an architectural viewpoint. That rubs off on your firm. I like it if clients come over that they see the Ocean Liners, and notice that we are located in an area with a creative atmosphere. I like it if clients then are inspired, when they arrive here or leave...It is nice if a client from some remote area also catches a bit of allure."
Third, almost all respondents found it important that their district was, in a broad sense, an inspiring place in which to work through its visual appearance. I often heard phrases like: “It improves your work and creativity, if you work in a nice environment,” and “…you need a sense of freedom to be creative.” A graphic designer stated that such feelings improve her daily work:

Liberally, I find: The space around you also gives you space in your head. And that helps, in turn, your performance. It must be spacious, real thing, and radiating ambitions that are similar to my ambitions. That gives you the feeling of space, and of freedom. Freedom and creativity is important for the continuity of your firm.

The relative importance of such feelings of well being, often expressed as a need to “feel comfortable” in their quarter, can best be understood from quotes connecting district visual appearance to their daily activities: designing, art, picture and film making (see Table 3). Much of their work “always goes on” in their head, be it at their desk or computers as well as after office hours or during short breaks from work (see also Jarvis & Pratt, 2006). As one designer stated, “It is not a nine to five job. When I have a deadline tomorrow and something is not yet perfect, I'll be in bed still thinking about that.” It is important for creative entrepreneurs and their workers that their work place be inspiring in both work and in-between work hours:

If you locate in the inner city, you catch a little up in the hustle and bustle of the city. If you work on an industrial estate, you miss out on that. So that’s not inspiring. Maybe that’s the magic word, the city is for us a much more motivating milieu than an industrial estate….This is a very creative setting. That has been of decisive importance [to choose for this location].

For our profession, this is very important….We aim for our personnel to enjoy going to work. And, this pleasure translates into a few things. One of those things is our office offering happiness, but also its place….You can just walk into town….The park is around the corner, simply to relax for a little while. So, for our workers, it is much nicer to work here than on an industrial estate or in a suburb. I think, with our philosophy and in our profession, it is just one of the most important items: the place.

As this quote from a designer exemplifies, for most interviewees, their district need not be directly inspiring for their product (what they make; see also Drake, 2003). Instead, it need be inspiring for their work process (what they do), in part, as some stated, because it involves considerable computer work. For the same reasons, interviewees stated they would “never, ever” locate in office parks, business sites, or suburban developments. Such “interchangeable environments” were described as “nothing happening there,” “having no atmosphere,” and “can be anywhere.” These sites were almost unanimously regarded, and spontaneously mentioned, by all 63 respondents as places to which it was completely unacceptable to locate their firm.

Much of the work tasks of my interviewees were perceived as quite footloose, as many of them stated: “If I have a telephone, a computer, and a bike, I could be located anywhere.” As Table 2 shows, 38 respondents were self-employed and 17 were managing microfirms of up to four employees. Most of them had chosen their firm’s location themselves. Because their production process consists mainly of thinking, drawing, and talking, in part via digital media, their location choices are far less restricted than those of firms in, for example, construction and manufacturing industries.

It is interesting that the “footloose-ness” of creative entrepreneurs leads to a paradox of place: The creative entrepreneurs could be located “anywhere,” and, accordingly, quality of place becomes more important in location decisions. Therefore, the findings suggest that visual quality may be a new element of “opportunity-driven location behavior,” a concept coined by Stam (2007) and defined as a firm’s behavior toward its location based on opportunities that are recognized by entrepreneurs (e.g., proximity to entrepreneurs’ social networks) as opposed to problem-driven location behavior, which is guided by, for example, a need for more office space. Furthermore, my findings lend support to Markusen’s (2004) argument that skilled workers can more easily work from remote job sites via digital media and, therefore, are more likely to be committed to a region and neighborhood than to specific firms and industries. Although my interviewees still work in large cities, they use their relative freedom of location within these cities for achieving quality of place at work.

The Relative Importance of District Visual Form Compared to Other Location Factors

How important are perceived district visual features, as compared to other factors involved in the decision about location? Most of the literature on creative industries and occupations emphasizes how flexible project-by-project collaborations lead to a frequent need for face-to-face contacts and, thus, for proximity to other creative workers and
...meetings. To relate my study to this important body of work, I used one ranking question. Analysis of the 63 rankings of five location factors showed that the interviewees considered features of their office, such as price, size, and image, as the most important factors in their location decisions. The second most important factor was the district’s visual features and its facilities, such as cafés and stores. Contrary to what could be inferred from the literature, the visual features of the district were prioritized over proximity to clients within their city and ranked above the presence of a network of creative firms in their district.

In line with these findings, all 63 interviewees perceived that their district’s visual character was important for their location decisions. Almost 50% of the respondents described district visual features as “very important or even decisive.”

**Lessons for Arts-Based Economic Development Strategies**

Should planners now prioritize enhancing district visual form to nurture cultural production districts? This explorative, qualitative study has clearly indicated that creative entrepreneurs perceive the visual appearance of the district as very important for their work and firm, and consequently, for their location decisions. I draw two general lessons from these findings. First, while agglomeration advantages and building features are very important to location decisions of creative entrepreneurs, this study plainly shows that, in addition, creative entrepreneurs perceive district features as important to their location decisions. Arts-based economic development policies, therefore, should also include district-focused policies as a means of attracting and retaining creative entrepreneurs to certain districts. District-focused policies can function in addition to the widespread project-focused programs offering, for example, business incubators for creative firms in renovated warehouses.

The second lesson is that one important component of district-focused policies can be to enhance a district’s visual quality of place and design. Creative entrepreneurs found a district’s visual appearance attractive if they perceived it as distinctive, authentic, and giving a special sense of place. One central question for formulating planning strategies for cultural production districts, then, is: How can planning enhance the visual quality of districts to be attractive to creative entrepreneurs?

The study finding that seems most important for formulating planning strategies to improve the visual quality of a district is the following: There is more than one visual model for cultural production districts. As the term distinctive suggests, there can hardly be one blueprint to achieve a distinctive outcome. Future cultural production districts should not replicate the visual form of currently attractive ones. Instead, their visual character needs to be distinctive, whether deliberately designed for or not.

Below, I propose a nonexhaustive range of existing planning instruments that can be adapted to enhance a district’s visual distinctiveness. Before deciding on a strategy for more or less active development of visual quality in districts to target creative entrepreneurs, it is important to remember that all strategies should build on and further develop existing visual quality of place. Thus, all strategies listed below need to place great reliance on professional planning and design expertise. Local planners, urban designers, and architects are experts on whether there are sufficient visual assets and opportunities. Including their practical knowledge and professional assessment pays justice to the uniqueness of each place and helps with tailoring planning strategies to its site-specific threats and opportunities (cf. Carr & Servon, 2009; J. C. Scott, 1998).

**Review of Existing Visual Quality.** One strategy that seeks to improve the visual quality of a district is to preserve its existing quality of place and design. The visual distinctiveness of any urban place may sometimes grow unintentionally over time. This kind of distinctiveness was appreciated by the interviewees as the “own-character,” diversity of architectural styles and public places in the Hortus Quarter, an 18th-century inner-urban neighborhood. In the other research districts, some former warehouses, wharfs, and trees were highly valued visual elements adding to a special atmosphere and authenticity. Therefore, planners should remember that existing buildings need not be heritage, nor very beautiful, if they add in other ways to a special sense of place.

Consequently, urban policies can aim at encouraging certain districts to evolve into attractive cultural production districts without considerable commitment of governmental resources. However, to assess whether a district possesses sufficient visual quality, its existing quality of place and design should be reviewed. Recently, planning institutions have developed advisory programs aiming at recognizing the potential visual markers of neighborhoods and districts. These programs involve multidisciplinary teams of urban planners, geographers, demographers, sociologists, and historians that assess the sense of places of districts and neighborhood within cities (see, e.g., Municipality of Amsterdam, 2010b). Recognizing and protecting potential visual markers is a first step to acknowledging and preserving their economic value for urban development.

**Form-Based Codes.** Local planners can adopt form-based codes to achieve a unique sense of place in individual...
districts. Form-based codes are more significantly enforceable regulations for development, when compared to design review processes. Form-based codes at the district scale commonly involve regulations for street width, curbs, sidewalks, trees, and private frontage of building facades and its setbacks (Talen, 2009).

For cultural production districts, these codes should include criteria to move development toward visual distinctiveness, authenticity, and diversity of architectural styles, built forms, and public spaces. To pursue development of a special sense of place, form-based codes for cultural production districts should leave room for adaptation of a special sense of place, form-based codes for cultural production districts.

Incentive Zoning. In many cities, old buildings have been renovated into new workspaces for creative entrepreneurs by private developers (e.g., Pratt, 2009b). Incentive zoning may be an appropriate strategy to stimulate private developers to add to a district’s visual distinctiveness. Providing incentives to developers to build visually innovative buildings and supportive immediate surroundings could follow the model of New York City’s design regulations for privately owned public spaces. In New York, developers are given additional development rights if they provide spaces for public use on their private property (Kayden, 2000). However, Kayden cautions that to achieve quality of place and design through incentive zoning, high standards of public review and rule enforcement are needed.

Government Investment in Quality of Place and Design. A final strategy for development of cultural production districts is to dedicate considerable governmental resources, both in terms of planners’ efforts and public investments. My data suggest that visual distinctiveness does not depend solely on preserving old or unique buildings; it can also be enhanced by new and contemporary architecture in buildings and public spaces, as in the Eastern Docklands and the Lloyd Quarter. Buildings with innovative use of architectural form and material were highly appreciated here by the creative entrepreneurs, as long as they fit the spatial scale and atmosphere of their environs. Thus, used in conjunction with strictly enforced, form-based codes for the design of buildings and public spaces, government commissions, or brick-and-mortar subsidies for flagship architecture can constitute the appropriate elements of a development strategy that leads to visually distinctive urban design and architecture.

To conclude, these strategies (design review, codes, zoning, or government investment) can be alternated and adjusted over time according to a district’s existing visual quality, availability of government resources, and the changing constraints and opportunities of a region’s cultural production system. I hope these strategies will inspire flexible, localized approaches to the development of cultural production districts.

Conclusions

This explorative, qualitative study has clearly indicated that creative entrepreneurs perceive district visual features as very important in their location decisions. I acknowledge explicitly that a district’s visual distinctiveness is not the one and only factor affecting the location decisions of creative entrepreneurs. Yet, it seems one among other key location factors emphasized in the literature. Until recently, both location factors at the spatial scale of the district and visual quality were generally overlooked. Their surprising importance as compared to what is known in the literature displays a need for future research into such location factors.

One research perspective would be to understand perceived district visual features as part of a broader narrative of a place, a sense of place that also includes its cognitive distance to other places, and its past and future storyline. Could such an inclusive sense of place influence how locational or real estate disadvantages are perceived? For example, can visual quality drive development of far-out places, or of places with a “seedy” history?

Another avenue for research would be to explore whether and how district visual appearance is perceived as professionally important in other places and industries. This article used evidence from creative entrepreneurs located in The Netherlands. Would, for example, creative entrepreneurs in the United States be equally critical to the visual environs of their firm? And what about other industries? An initial exploration of entrepreneurs in wholesale trade, construction, and manufacturing industries suggests that they have a very different understanding of which district visual appearance constitutes a visually suitable industrial estate for their work and firm: Industrial estates are perceived to look good if it is obvious that there are active firms on orderly lots, traffic on the roads, radiating the spirit that work “gets done here” (Smit, 2010a).

A third line of research may be merging an industrial and an occupational approach in research on location decisions. The visual appearance of a district catalyzes...
creative production, because it acts to reflect creativity of individual firms and their product (what they make), and it inspires their work process (what they do). These findings suggest that it would be useful to combine both a focus on the product produced (industrial approach; see, e.g., Kloosterman, 2004; A. C. Pratt, 1997; A. J. Scott, 2000) and on the nature of work tasks and skill content (occupational approach; see, e.g., Markusen, 2004; Markusen et al., 2008) to more fully appreciate the behavior that drives the location decisions of both firms and workers. I suggest focusing on work styles as a new perspective joining the industrial and occupational approaches. Work style, in turn, may be conceptualized from both the characteristics of products and firms and the characteristics of the work tasks.

For example, product and firm characteristics could include product content, ranging from symbolic to functional, and product mobility, ranging from digitally mobile to in need of physical transportation, as well as zoning constraints on particular industry sectors. The characteristics of work tasks could, for example, include the nature of work, ranging from knowledge-based, deskbound work to hands-on, physical work as well as the type of cultural capital required. This inclusive perspective, of what workers make, and what they actually do, adds to our understanding of location decisions. It augments our existing knowledge of the constraints and opportunities driving firm location decisions, including often overlooked variables, such as visual appearance and other district features. For planning practice, such knowledge could help with understanding how district visual form can be a new type of support structure for creative entrepreneurs in arts-based economic development strategies.

In sum, the visual form of a district merits more standing as an additional way to advance urban development. Pursuing district visual quality as a component of economic development strategies requires many local policymakers and economic developers to develop a wider perspective. This perspective includes cultural and visual factors that are difficult to measure in conventional ways. But other studies have come to similar conclusions. Gentrification studies with a consumption-side perspective also show the increasing role of taste and lifestyle in neighborhood upgrading processes (Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2002). The value of visual quality is also suggested by studies focusing on broader constituencies (Carlino & Saiz, 2008; Carr & Servon, 2009; T. Clark, 2004; T. N. Clark et al., 2002; Florida, 2002; Florida et al., 2009; Glaeser et al., 2001; Hoppenbrouwer & Louw, 2005; Love, 2008).

My findings, combined with these studies, lend support to the argument that planning for visually distinctive districts should be an important element in future arts-based economic development policies.

Acknowledgments
The author is very grateful to four anonymous reviewers who were very generous in their comments and advice. The author thanks the following for their useful suggestions: Armando Carbonell, Carl Steinitz, Erik Stam, Marietta Haffner, Veronique Schutjens, Jan Jacob Trip, Anne Riselada, Jos Olshoorn, Jos Gajet, Koos van Zanen, Ewald Engelen, and Robert Kloosterman; and the research assistants who helped in conducting the interviews: Michael Pavičić, Nadine Hendriks, Joni Hayen, Jos Olshoorn, and Marijke Kuijer.

Notes
1. Where influence of district visual quality on location decisions of creative entrepreneurs is concerned, I adhere to Gerring’s (2005) discussion of causality in the social sciences: By studying the influence of variable X on Y, the aim is to obtain insight into which X (e.g., district visual quality) enhances the chances of effecting Y (e.g., location decisions of creative entrepreneurs).
2. I searched for districts that GIS maps showed as quantitative exceptions by containing relatively many firms in creative industries compared to other districts within the same cities. Our GIS maps of the cities Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Groningen, where the three research districts are located, were made using LISA databases that list all firm establishments subscribed at the Chamber of Commerce and that belonged to one of the following subsectors in creative industries: publishers, interior designers, architectural services, advertising and graphic designers, photography, fashion designers, movie and video production, radio/television program production, performing arts, news agents and journalists, libraries, museums, and nature protection. These GIS maps only show creative firms that fitted a more detailed list of subcategories within these subsectors, based on five-digit codes in order to include particularly the type of firms most involved in producing semiotic and symbolic content. The GIS maps show firms of all sizes. Yet, the average size of creative firms in the three research districts was 2.8 workers.
3. The composition of the respondent selection corresponds to the structure of all firms in the creative industries in The Netherlands. The owner-manager is the only worker in about two thirds of all creative firms, and 95% of all creative firms have fewer than 10 employees (Stam, De Jong, & Marlet, 2008). In 2009, Dutch creative firms had on average three workers including the entrepreneurs (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2010a).

References


