Curation, Compliance, Consolidation

Understanding the Limits of Innovation Policy's Turn to Creativity

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, innovation policy has increasingly turned to creativity as a resource for economic revitalization, social cohesion and sustainability transitions. In urban redevelopment, creative districts blend innovation logics of a "creative class" and "transformative innovation" with experimental urban governance to address grand challenges and enable broader societal transformation. Building on critiques of the idea that innovation and creativity function as "magic bullets" in the contemporary economy (Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009), we explore the limits of this transformative promise in this article. Our analysis is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork across four creative district projects in Munich, Germany, where normative visions of creativity and innovation are rendered legitimate and governable. Through the conceptual lens of regional innovation cultures (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023), we examine how the creativity-innovation-nexus is locally stabilized and tamed through distinct cultivation mechanisms, summarized as *curation*, *compliance*, and *consolidation*, that reinscribe existing socio-political settlements and market-driven valuation logics of the common good. Paradoxically, Munich's creative districts foster a form of *conservative creative innovation* that constrains the transformative potential of creative innovation by reproducing hegemonic power structures and marginalizing alternative visions of conviviality (Robra *et al.*, 2023). We argue that creative districts—and similar initiatives—risk undermining their potential as open, experimental spaces for radical transformation when they prioritize innovation's productive role over creativity's more politically contested and disruptive capacities

Keywords: Innovation Policy; Creativity; Creative District; Regional Innovation Cultures; Control; Power.

INTRODUCTION

"Future economic growth will be driven by creativity and innovation; so if we want to increase it, we have to tap into the creativity and innovative spirit of everyone."—(early) Florida in an interview (Tucknott, 2009)

"This wonderful area [Munich's Kreativquartier] could be the… steppingstone of the future. It could be a gravitational field for the whole city. One would really have to mess up a lot of things if you cannot get this right."—Andreas Krüger, renowned urban planner for creative districts (Niesmann, 2018)

In recent years, scholarly and public debates about innovation policy have come to embrace "creativity" as key concern, both as an instrumental resource that should motivate cities to create spaces for a flourishing creative class (Florida 2004, 2014), and as a mode of critical engagement towards forms of "convivial innovation" (Robra *et al.*, 2023) in line with the need for social, economic, and ecological transformation in a post-growth era. According to president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, creativity is essential to addressing grand societal challenges and ever-rising competitiveness concerns. This has prompted supra-national developments such as the EIT Culture and Creativity (EIT, 2024) or the New European Bauhaus initiative (European Urban Initiative, 2022) as essential part of the European Green New Deal to marshal "an explosion of creativity" (EU, 2024) across the Union. With mottos such as "beautiful—sustainable together"—, these creative culture projects are imagined as sound economic investments while also making the future more democratic, inclusive, and sustainable through transdisciplinary bridges between science and technology, art and culture (EC, 2019; EU, 2024a). Recognizing the essential role of cities in contributing to said transformations, the push for creative innovation increasingly translates into the promotion of creative districts as an urban development strategy. While they have been popular since the early 2000s as instruments for economic development (Florida 2004, 2014), the latest renditions push the narrative of a mode of creative innovation that brings about superior solutions in conjunction with worthwhile urban futures by combining technological innovation, start-up scenes, and community-based art and (sub)culture approaches. In the pursue of desirable visions for urban housing, mobility, energy efficiency, and social equality (EP & EC, 2009), creative districts thus aim to serve as experimentation sites that seemingly embrace both affirmative and subversive nuances of creativity and respective solutions, which leads to a range of tensions.

Critically asking how transformative the creative turn in urban innovation policy can really be, this article explores the current entanglements of innovation logics in creative district projects. Approaching creative innovation as a form of x-innovation (Gaglio *et al.*, 2019), we begin by putting it in conversation with existing critiques of innovation policies and tendencies of "capitalist culturalization" (Suitner, 2015). Subsequently, we lay out how the creative district approach does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in locally engrained cultures of urban governance and innovation, including histories of potentially subversive (counter)culture and existing urban gentrification challenges. Against this background, we investigate the locally stabilized understanding of creative innovation in four seemingly transformative creative district projects in the city of Munich, Germany: the *Munich Kreativquartier* (KQ), the *Werksviertel-Mitte* (WM), the *Sugar Mountain* (SuMo), and the *Bahnwärter Thiel* (BT). Through the conceptual lens of regional innovation cultures (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023)—which foregrounds how innovation becomes aligned with local identities, economic legacies, and political cultures—we interrogate the transformative power of the creative turn in urban innovation policy. Specifically, we question which underlying ideals of social order are perpetuated within these initiatives, and who gets to express and participate in these respective visions. We find that Munich's approach to cultivating creative innovation can be captured through three empirically grounded mechanisms—*curation*, *compliance*, and *consolidation*—which emerged inductively from our fieldwork. Together, they produce a primarily market-based, high-tech-driven urban transformation pathway shaped by established public and private actors, while alternative visions based on social reform or counterculture resistance are systemically sidelined. These findings are consistent with existing research showing that Munich embraces a conservative innovation culture that aims to preserve, rather than disrupt, socio-economic settlements and technological trajectories. All four creative district projects thus fail to serve as experimental space for diverse, commons-based negotiations about the direction of urban transformations, and instead reproduce Munich's socio-economic order. We argue that the observed conservative mode of creative innovation does not just reinforce existing forms of marginalization, excluding non-male, non-white, non-capitalist, and non-academic perspectives from participating in urban future-making. Innovation policy, moreover, foregoes some of the most crucial aspects of how creativity relates to urban transformation, and in doing so, Munich's creative districts paradoxically limit and under-mine the transformative potential of creative innovation.

1. THEORIZING CREATIVITY IN INNOVATION

1.1. STATE OF THE ART: CREATIVITY BEYOND MAGIC BULLETS?

Building on existing critiques of late industrial modernity, and technology optimism, recent STS scholarship has increasingly scrutinized how innovation has become a powerful logic and the proclaimed panacea to a multitude of social, ecological and economic challenges, pushing cities and regions to adapt innovation-centric development strategies likewise (Gaglio *et al.*, 2019; Irwin, 2023; Pfotenhauer & Jasanoff, 2017; Wisnioski, 2025). Among other things, both scholars and policy-makers have acknowledged that abstract, standardized innovation frameworks—such as the "linear model" or the "triple helix" of innovation—are inapplicable or even harmful when imported into a specific local context without adapting to the profoundly different institutional, political, and sociocultural contexts (Arocena & Sutz, 2000; Cassiolato & Vitorino, 2011; Delvenne & Thoreau, 2017; Godin, 2017; Irwin *et al.*, 2021; Kuhlmann & Ordonez-Matamoros, 2017; Macq, 2020), and that framing contemporary policy problems as mere deficits of technological innovation "tends to marginalize other rationales, values, and social functions" (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2019, p. 894; Cuevas-Garcia *et al.*, 2024; Vinsel and Russell, 2020). Consequently, calls for counterhegemonic narratives that succeed to address social inclusion and post-growth perspectives led to a multitude of seemingly more systemic innovation approaches with buzzwords such as *social*, *open*, *public*, *reflexive* or *convivial innovation* (Brandão, 2023; Chesbrough *et al.*, 2008; Godin *et al.*, 2021; Godin & Vinck, 2017; Hutter *et al.*, 2018; Pfotenhauer & Juhl, 2017; Rammert, 2010; Robra *et al.*, 2023).

According to Thrift (2022), the explosion of creativity as a value in itself is inherently tied to the increasing pressure to innovate, as underlined by popular a management-adviser's claim that "giants [must] learn to dance" (Kanter, 1990), the notion of the *Homo Silicon Valleycus* as a particularly creative type and the proclamation of the creative age (Seltzer & Bentley, 1999; Thrift, 2000). In urban development, contributions on "creative cities" (Landry, 2008; Reckwitz, 2012; Scott, 2006) and "creative industries" (Hartley, 2005) highlight how the driving forces increasingly jumped on the creative bandwagon with Richard Florida (2004, 2014) famously envisioning the "creative class" to help spur high-tech growth in urban hotspots with creativity having replaced natural resources as key factor in our economy and society:

> "To be successful in this emerging creative age, regions must develop, attract and retain talent-ed and creative people who generate innovations, develop technology-intensive industries and power economic growth." (Gertler *et al.*, 2002, p. ii)

The discipline of urban studies accordingly describes a shift from creativity as a local asset to beautify the city and attract more people to an increasing economic hyper-focus on technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and startup urbanism (Chapain & Sagot-Duvauroux, 2020)—a development which is most famously mirrored by Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal enterprise culture regime in the UK (Peters, 2001). This progression of "creative capitalism" (Kinsley, 2009) or "capitalist culturalization" (Suitner, 2015) was met with criticism from various academic fields, dismissing the idea of the creative class as the next magic bullet in urban development (Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009) as a romanticized and mythical doctrine which is over-emphasizing conservative norms such as performativity and productiveness (Osborne, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 2013) while failing to account for social needs and local idiosyncrasies (Tremblay & Pilati, 2013). Nevertheless, creative innovation remains a staple in urban development, whereby scholars have underlined the value of creative cultures beyond its economization, showing how we have moved from one-sided bashing of either economists or creative cultures to a genuine interest in understanding each other (Hutter & Throsby, 2011).

Here, we encounter an ongoing interest of politicians and policymakers in creative districts[1] as an urban development tool that pushes for life-long learning and the exchange of ideas between actors from diverse backgrounds, synergistically combining technological and social innovation to imagine a worthwhile urban future with sustainable economic development as well as greater social cohesion (EC, 2006; Merkel, 2009; Mølholm, 2014; Moulaert *et al.*, 2007; Sacco *et al.*, 2014). Scholars specifically highlight the embrace of art, protest, and subculture scenes as a way to break out self-replicating patterns (Montuori & Donnelly, 2023), and to rethink existing practices (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013) in a pursuit of socially equitable and locally rooted solutions to urban innovation (Tremblay & Pilati, 2013). This ties to a larger body of research on the co-evolution of art and science (Hutter & Throsby, 2011; Rogers, 2022) with counterculture bringing an unconventional "sense of dissonance" (Stark, 2009) that has historically been vital for scientific break-throughs (Kaiser, 2012). With regard to urban innovation, Thornton (1995) has coined the notion of the rebellious yet economically viable "subculturepreneur", and EU research frameworks have recognized the power of artistic intervention to promote socially desirable innovation opportunities (Rogers, 2022). While many authors have embraced Deleuze's claim that authentic creativity is as destructive as it is productive (Deleuze, 1992; Osborne,

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, we refrain from defining either the increasingly fuzzy creative district approach (Chapain & Sagot-Duvauroux, 2020) or creative innovation as such. Instead, we approach these as actor's categories with an interest in their locally negotiated understanding.

2003), the Schumpeterian (2008) framing of creative counterculture as an ingredient of superior innovation remains predominant. This begs the question whether creative innovation and the approach of creative districts can deliver on its vision of more holistic approaches for urban future-making. Against the background of STS's calls for alternative approaches to the pro-innovation bias (Godin & Vinck, 2017), this research paper thus aims to investigate how creative innovation plays out in creative district projects, specifically including the local context of Munich to avoid a detachment from the idiosyncratic sociopolitical order and state logic, as criticized in Florida's (2014) early conceptualization of the "creative class".

1.2. EXPLORING CREATIVE INNOVATION IN MUNICH'S CREATIVE DISTRICTS

This paper builds on the aforementioned bodies of work and puts them in conversation with the conceptual lens of regional innovation cultures (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023), referring to:

> "[The] unique ways in which regional innovation initiatives and technology developments (their goals, meanings, material organization, and actor constellations) are being brought into alignment with local identity, socio-economic legacies, and unique political cultures." (p. 2)

As self-proclaimed transformative hubs for strengthening the creativity-innovation-nexus, creative districts serve as an empirical focus for investigating how innovation logics are culturally, politically, and materially anchored as part of these alignment processes. Instead of neutral containers, they act as spatial policy tools where situated normative visions of innovation and creativity are rendered legitimate and governable—as Thrift (2022) puts it: "To govern, it is necessary to render visible the space over which government is to be exercised" (p. 677).

Through this lens of innovation cultures, the specific semantic extension of "innovation" to accommodate "creativity" (and vice versa) in the name of "transformation" becomes visible and reveals, as we will argue, patterns of restriction and control. What is more, our approach suggests that much can be gained from looking comparatively at different sites of implementing "creative districts" as an increasingly standardized innovation model in its own right, which is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

Embedded within Munich's specific sociocultural and—political order (see section 3.2), we read the locally established and accepted modes of creative innovation as interrelated with (un)desirable forms of creative cultures in the investigated urban development projects. To explore the transformative potential of creative innovation as featured in Munich's creative district projects, we zoom in on three analytical questions: (1) Which ideals of social order are perpetuated by said creative innovation? (2) Who gets to articu-

late their visions of creative innovation in the urban district projects? (3) How is this form of creative innovation cultivated? Inspired by Brandão and Bagattolli's (2023) invitation to approach ciritical innovation studies as vital resource for STS scholars, this paper specifically focuses on (3) as we want to understand how and why the respective form of creative innovation is cultivated within the creative districts instead of merely criticizing it. Based on our empirical work, we find powerful mechanisms of cultivation are indeed at work in our cases. The three described modes of cultivation—*curation*, *compliance*, *consolidation*—are the result of our inductive research and serve as useful synthesizing heuristic to understand how the role of creativity is understood and enacted in Munich's innovation culture.

2. APPROACH AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

2.1. METHODS

Methodologically, we performed short-term focused ethnographies (Knoblauch, 2005) in four self-proclaimed creative district case studies (Yin, 2009) in the city of Munich, Germany, between autumn 2022 and summer 2024. Throughout that period, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with involved actors from on-site creative cultures including artists and NGOs as well as high-tech start-ups and enterprises, the city administration and council politicians, planning and property administration agencies as well as public and private investors. This main body of research was complemented by an extensive document and website analysis of respective project plans and narratives, a close study of media articles featuring the surrounding discourses and developments, ethnographic observations during four public on-site events as well as ethnographic sketches to make visible our observations and reflect on our own process of knowledge making (Kuschnir, 2016; Taussig, 2011). The collected data was transcribed and coded to work out competing visions of creative innovation, how particular actors are positioned to shape them, and how the hegemony of certain visions over others was stabilized through the creative district initiatives. The thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz, 2006) draws on previous research results from the *Regional Innovation Cultures* group at TU Munich as well as on the city's histories of creative (counter)cultures, which we summarize in the next section.

2.2. EMPIRICAL SETTING

With its current Global Innovation Index ranking as best innovation cluster of Germany (Munich RAW, 2023), Munich, the Bavarian state capital, has successfully cultivated an image as global innovation powerhouse. The aspiration to be recognized as a high-tech region precedes the current innovation era and dates back to what Grüner (2009) has called a "planned economic miracle" of post-WWII Bavaria. This transformation "from agrarian country to high-tech state" (Stoiber, 1994) was buoyed by clever lobbyism, high-tech economic investment programs (Berger, 2002), the strategic attraction of key industries, and the systemic build-up of an innovation ecosystem. Today, Munich is home to major international companies from the established and growing business sectors of automobility, microelectronics, aerospace, and biotechnology, supplemented by major public research and innovation investments in future technologies such as quantum and AI. At the same time, Bavaria cultivates a self-conscious image as Germany's most conservative state. With Munich serving as the seat of the federal provincial government, the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) occupies a dominant role in putting forward a form of innovation that goes hand in hand with cultural traditionalism and agricultural romanticism, as underlined by promotional slogans such as "with laptop and lederhosen" and "with bits and pretzels". Pfotenhauer *et al.* (2023) hence describe how this idiosyncratic mode of "conservative innovation culture…aims to preserve socio-economic orders, rather than disrupt them" (p. 11). Controlling its development "like no other federal state" (Grüner, 2009, p. 5), the city-region's corporatist political culture fosters consensus through a systemically closed decision-making style among close-knit networks of influential institutions (Katzenstein, 1985). The region's economic prowess and historical industrial structure have however put considerable stress on urban development. Hence, Munich is facing challenges including growing social inequalities, increasing rental prices, a heavily car-centric mobility culture, insufficient digital infrastructures, and an overall pressure for greater sustainability and inclusive development. What is more, development initiatives in Munich and Bavaria have historically been top-down and economy-centric, with little room for public debate, civic participation, social justice concern or open dissent, which is regularly dismissed as unpatriotic towards the region's success model of techno-economic development (Berger, 2002; Pfotenhauer & Jasanoff, 2017; Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023). This heavy-handed, top-down approach to development marks an important contrast to other innovative German cities, most notably the notoriously unruly, artistic, and attractive Berlin—which has become a steady thorn in the side of Bavaria's proud success narrative. Consequently, the Bavarian state chancellery has identified a need for urban spaces that go beyond mere technological innovation, recognizing the potential of

creative (sub)cultures and demanding for more attention on their issues in an export report in 2013 (Tzschaschel, 2016).

Munich's recent history of creative (sub)culture and artist scenes could be described as one of increasing marginalization and displacement of bottom-up movements by more controlled, institutionalized modes of civic expression that accompanies the growing prestige and economic success of the city. Two constitutive moments of this history are the so-called "Schwabinger Krawalle"—sometimes viewed as Germany's entry point to the global ´68 anti-war student movement (Hemler, 2013)—and the local manifestation of the 1980ies Punk movement—featuring artistic and rebellious acts against heteronomy, conservatism and the posh and carefree "Schickeria" (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2021; Dombrowski, 2021; Fischhaber, 2010). Both were met with police violence, and disproportionate penalizations such as long imprisonment periods even for under-aged activists. While Munich was the birthplace of the street art and graffiti movement in Europe until the late 1990s, this visual appropriation of public urban space (Kappes, 2014; Papenbrock *et al.*, 2018) was blatantly persecuted by both the city and the state administration (Krone, 2021; Nguyen, 2020). As the former Bavarian state minister Franz Josef Strauß promised in a speech in the 1980s:

> "Here in Bavaria, there is no space for squatters, slobs, anarchists, terrorists, and society innovators. Here at our place, no house squatting will survive even just one day!" (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2021)

Against the constant pressure to stabilize socio-economic order, the formerly vivid creative (counter)cultures arguably lost much of their autonomous and rebellious character over time (Nguyen, 2020). Replaced by top-down institutionalized and commercialized creative actors such as the Positive Propaganda Association, urban art is now framed as a "good business that is worth investing in" (Moises, 2017). Today, critical voices and public perception regularly diagnose Munich with a subculture deficit or creative monoculture, that fails to provide space for alternative explorations of urban futures and instead confronts the remaining scene with the challenging reality of intermediate uses and economization (Hörmann, 2019; Kim, 2016). One columnist cynically concludes: "Munich does not need subculture, and if Munich needs subculture, Munich will buy subculture." (Borengässer, 2018)

It is in this overall context, that calls for "creative innovation" and a push for creative districts as urban transformation tools gained momentum. Our empirical work focuses on four creative district projects in Munich (see Figure 1), all launched since 2012.
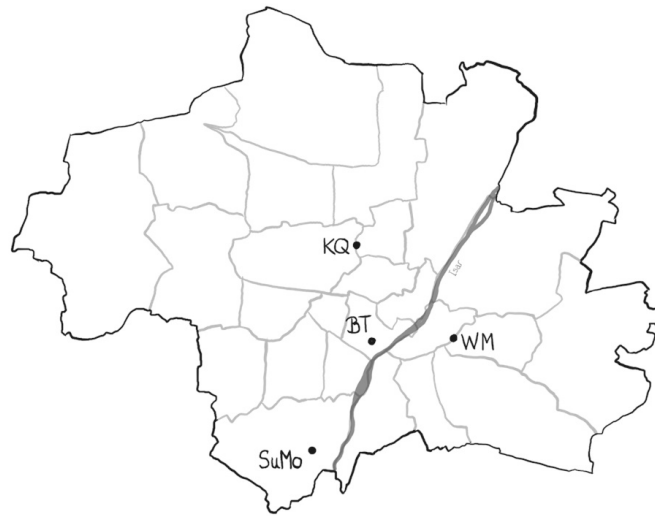
Figure 1. Sketched Munich map depicting the location of the four creative district sites (own sketch from the fieldwork).

With its core aspiration to balance financial and idealistic values by synergistically combining innovation and science with creative economy, subculture and art in an experimental field for new living and working models, the *Munich Kreativquartier* (KQ) won the city's urban development idea competition in 2012 (Landeshauptstadt München, 2021b). Since then, four interlinked yet independent areas are developed on the hitherto self-administered grounds of a historically grown community of independent artists, socio-economic and social justice NGOs, and DIY tinkering studios. Where "formal meets informal creativity", creative innovation shall imagine the city of the future and plant the seed that will transform into "Europe's Silicon Valley" according to Munich's former mayor Josef Schmid (Landeshauptstadt München, 2021a; Moises, 2017).

With a nod to the historic company premises of a traditional Bavarian dumpling factory, and its subsequent 20-year-period as home to Munich's club scene until 2016, eight independent proprietor parties have re-imagined the *Werksviertel-Mitte* (WM) as a "vision of a modern, innovative, and worthwhile city" (Werksviertel, 2020) by bringing together technology start-ups, co-working spaces, shops as well as ateliers. Sustainability measurements such as a green roof with sheep and bees, an on-site powerhouse and composting plant, and an e-car sharing model for residents underline its focus on (digital) innovation and public outreach in the name of ecological sustainability (Werksviertel, 2022b, 2024).

As an intermediate land-use concept from 2021 until late 2024, a three-member entrepreneurial company planned *Sugar Mountain* (SuMo) as a "happening place at the crossroads of culture, society and sports" (Sugar Mountain, 2022) that insists on its clear delimitation to urban development concepts based on digitization and technological innovation. Presenting creative innovation in the form of citizen-led events, and openly accessible sports infrastructure for kids and families on the grounds of a former concrete plant and Siemens-area, its core idea is imagined to remain as "Sugar Valley" in the subsequent development of hundreds of new offices and apartments in an integrated work-life concept (Zirnstein, 2024).

In 2015, a single private investor was granted a 10-year intermediate use contract for the art and culture project *Bahnwärter Thiel* (BT) on the grounds of the former slaughterhouse rail connection to Munich's cattle hall (Bahnwärter Kulturstätten GmbH, 2022), which was deemed rather unattractive by the city administration due to its lopsided grounds and deep railway ditches. BT was envisioned as a space of experimentation for local artists, workshops, and urban gardeners as well as nightlife, concert, and market space for the general public amidst the several dozen old subway wagons and sea freight containers—oftentimes titled the "last fallow for creative chaos" by columnists (Bremmer, 2016; Schubert, 2019).

2.3. THE PARADOXES OF MUNICH'S CREATIVE DISTRICTS

2.3.1. CURATION

In our fieldwork, we repeatedly traced how valued creative innovation would be carefully selected, staged, and instrumentalized. Aiming to radiate Munich's prestige and economic strength across borders (Tischer, 2016, 2020), it is primarily already established innovation players and hip marketable shops that receive institutional backing in Munich's creative districts. In the KQ, creative economists and integrated living spaces are budgeted with 99 million Euros (Landeshauptstadt München, 2021a), and the Munich Urban Colab—a collaboration between the entrepreneurial strand of the Technical University of Munich (TUM), the Munich city council, and influential DAX-listed companies such as the BMW Group or Infineon—constitutes the flagship initiative, promoted by the Munich Economic Department. The WM similarly foregrounds the number of new startup foundations with partnerships with the Silicon Valley to "stay ahead of the latest trends" in the innovation ecosystem (Werksviertel-Mitte, 2022b). The latest additions to SuMo are prominently funded by a nationally radiant soccer club and a sporting goods manufacturer, and many interviewees criticized the settlement of artsy but expensive shops as a "mere façade" that is "deeply entrenched in consumerism". Meanwhile, creative actors rooted in less

commercially viable scenes such as local artists, dancers, urban gardening projects, repair and political discussion cafés, tinkering spaces and youth establishments, have been driven out due to rising rental prizes or were not granted a lease extension, despite coining the area long before the official (re)branding as creative district, as one interviewee from a DIY workshop at WM remembers:

> "The leader board head would regularly host guided tours with some people from Japan or I don`t know where, leading them through our workshop hall, and showing off how mutually fertilizing this is. But in the end, we were basically kicked out since we were not cool enough, not commercial enough, and could not afford the high rent anymore…It [the WM] calls itself the most start-up-friendly place in Munich, and yes, it might be start-up-friendly but it does not feel very creativity-friendly, at least not if you want to stay self-organized and autonomous."

Here, Scott's (1998) conceptual lens of "Seeing like a state" explains how what can be institutionally read as valuable creativity is determined by limited and economized measuring categories. According to Scott (1998), the belief in scientific and technological progress as motor for societal welfare explains state simplification and administrative attempts to order society in accordance with this belief. While the driving forces of the respective projects explicitly imagined creative innovation is as a joint endeavor, we observe that the value of creative practices and communities, for example, in terms of local meaning production and identity expression (Chapain & Sagot-Duvauroux, 2020) is not depicted and acknowledged in the development process. Consequently, alternative actors' respective visions of creative innovation through "structural reforms" and "changes of lifestyle and daily routines" (BT interviewees) rooted in maintenance and repurposing of work tools and spatial workplace are sidelined. During our conversations, most inter-viewees from alternative creative cultures even struggled to see their own value for the creative district projects themselves. This tendency results in a strong corporatization of Munich's understanding of creative innovation, with a dominant focus on creative econo-my, and high-tech urban transformation, usually in the field of smart city solutions. The aspirations for example became evident in actors' promotional declarations "to shape the city of the future while pushing Munich's high-tech start-up community" (Dr. Thomas, 2020; UnternehmerTUM GmbH, 2021), and both on-site and online stakeholders' push for "technology-driven" (Göhlich, 2020) approaches. Hereby, we encountered an almost religious devotion to creativity as key to efficiently realize the imagined technological solutions to urban challenges, as illustrated by the media use of the phrase "creative cathedrals" (Götting, 2021) to describe the creative districts. In this context, innovation operates as what Winner (2018) calls a *god term*—a rhetorical device that commands unquestioned authority.

In terms of the on-site aesthetics, we find a specific curation towards slick and expensive buildings, whereby critical voices both from creative scenes and the city council claim that the "mute and dead" industry-chic style hubs and fancy shops fit Munich's "tendency to cover everything in disinfectants, to be clean as a hospital", while leaving "no space for messiness". The following fieldnote excerpt underlines how the differing understandings of value become materially visible:

> Wandering through the KQ premises, I cannot help but notice the visual detachment from the area of the previously settled art and subculture scene (called creativity lab) and the area with the newly built Munich Urban Colab (called creativity platform). I first walk through the lab with its halfway torn down buildings and spot a consumption-critical graffiti spelling out the word "success" using the $- and the €-sign as well as the Gucci-logo. When I head towards the platform, I need to cross a massive construction site that splits one area from the other. Once I have passed it, it feels like entering a different district with the modern architecture of the Munich Urban Colab—a sign in one of the windows reads "We turn visions into value" with a little rocket on it.

Beginning in 2019, the city administration deployed the MGH[2], which legally operates as a capital company and thus adheres to profit-based decision-making, to administer the KQ area. Since then, local actors and critical city council voices moan a loss of autonomy whereby the former policy of self-administration and maintenance is pushed back. Buildings have been torn down over night due to "potential hazards and gainless renovation" from the city's perspective (Lotze, 2015), being replaced with rather expensive start-up containers that would "not match the needs of community-based organizations". Both here and at SuMo, conflicts occurred when residing artists (at KQ) or a residing urban gardening project (at SuMo) wanted to paint outside walls—in the KQ, the city administration declined the request and instead commissioned a Berlin design agency to decide upon the colors. Similarly, the somewhat chaotic appearance of the BT is fenced in by heavy concrete walls, hidden from the eyes of tourists and unknowing locals alike which enforces the impression that it does not fit into the city's established identity—as a residing DIY-tinkerer puts it: "No one would ever believe that this is Munich."

What is more, the increasing loss of "rather fucked-up spaces" where people have "room for failure" without being "scared to break something", and the and overall policy of renewal under a high utilization pressure would dictate the kind of controlled creative innovation that is allowed to happen in the districts, which matches academic research on spatial allowance for playfulness, messiness, and out-of-the-box-creativity (Steers, 2009).

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[2] "München Gewerbehof- und Technologiezentrumsgesellschaft".

Taken together, our observations reveal a strong pattern of *curation* in the presentation, narration, and implementation of Munich's creative districts within the city's broader political economy and urban planning logics. This mechanism subjects creativity to a hegemonial valuation system based on variables of productivity and marketing.

2.3.2 COMPLIANCE

Against the background of missing institutional support and financial pressure, creative actors repeatedly moaned the limited potential for experimental and potentially subversive modes of expression. A representative of the WM Art Ltd, which was installed to manage the on-site art and creative culture efforts, hence stressed that projects such as their *Out-of-the-box-Festival* and exhibition on social transformation and urban development "needs to be aligned with the strategic district plans, it needs to be newly professionalized, distinguished and accurate" to match the overall WM "brand", its board is putting forward. Referring to themselves as a "tick in the fur" of WM, complying with the rules of the host animal—meaning not to disrupt the central social order of the economized idea of creative innovation—is vital. Rather than stirring ideological debate and disruption, art- and (sub)culture-based creatives are forced to buy into and to essentially mimic the established social norms of market-based innovation. When asked what the KQ stands for, a formerly involved artist provided the following metaphorical depiction of this change of creative cultures:

> "You know, for the longest time, there was this big red sign which was mounted high up in the air to one of the buildings, where the Munich Urban Colab is now situated. It read ´Mut` [German for ´courage`] in capital letters. We used to have MUT, now we have the TUM."

Instead of a space for collaborative experimentation with alternative urban futures, the urban gardening and co-working space *Radicchio Radicale* at SuMo moan how the district does not allow for radical rethinking, underscoring that the group's name is less rooted in radical activism but the goal to grow vegetables as well as a feeling of community in the seemingly hostile area of the former concrete plant that was dusted in concrete powder like powdered sugar:

> "I am myself employed in what you might dismissively call creative economy at the Werksviertel, and I hoped to build something here, that is somehow meaningful, where you just have the space to try out things, to learn new things, to think new thoughts. But at the end of the day, this is just as dependent on the patronage of one single man, so it also needs to conform. We are definitely more ´Radicchio` than we are ´Radicale`."

While SuMo's slogan "This is really happening" (Sugar Mountain, 2022) bears the notion of defiance and acting contrary to the established sociopolitical marching lines of Munich, we claim that its apparent success lies in its tame character, as underlined by one city council member's analysis that "Sugar Mountain simply does not hurt anybody.". The following quote from a KQ tenant sums up how an at least semi-stable position in Munich's creative districts is tied to the condition of not bearing too much subversive power, whereby the narrow way of seeing creative innovation like a state also implies the pressure to be seen by the state: "If you want to become part of the box [referring to a secure place in Munich, and thus the social state itself], you have to think inside the box [referring to the resulting form of creative innovation]".

Rather than pushing alternative forms of creative innovation rooted in counterculture and social reform, the unruliness of the remaining actors seems to lie in their attempt to stay part of the creative districts "against all odds" (WM interviewee). As we observed during city council debates on the KQ development, this however pulls individual administrative and funding questions to the forefront while pushing debates about the visions and practices of desirable creative innovation aside. With creative culture members being dependent on different city departments for public funding, the less market-oriented initiatives find their respective future more or less secured, and the differing departments would not only block each other's strategy but also operate on varying mismatching timelines. As underlined by one KQ interviewee's diagnosis that "everybody is fighting for themselves", the on-site efforts to communally coordinate different actors' interests and visions largely failed due to said aggravated fragmentation between involved institutions. This felt need for demarcation and individualization aligns with Reckwitz' (2017) analysis of a society of singularities which would feed into existing inequalities and polarizations.

What is more, Munich's creative districts paradoxically cultivate a perceived split between the different creative innovation scenes, avoiding potential conflicts rather than embracing them to negotiate urban futures, which leads the intended experimental character to absurdity. When a residing artist duo put the two works *AutoEater*—a vertical car being swallowed by concrete—and *The Smell of Revolution*—a burned-out car chassis—on the free of charge parking lot on-site of the KQ, the MGH charged them with monthly fees for blocking the space. What could have been an opportunity to discuss different visions on urban mobility with individualized e-mobility on one side, and the idea of a car-free city on the other, was hence quickly shut down. To put it in the words of Stirling (2008) when discussing discursive practices in Science and Technology Policy, this approach to creative innovation is "closing down" Munich's socio-culturally established technological

commitments whereby its automobile industry and respective solutions to urban mobility challenges are front and center.

It approaches urban challenges by fixing things in proven ways before allowing a debate on what is deemed broken by the local community, hence not "opening up" (Stirling, 2008) discursive negotiations between actor groups from different backgrounds. Verbally, our interviewees reinforced the detachment between technological innovation entrepreneurs and creative (sub)cultures of social innovation by repeatedly voicing that there was "zero overlap", and "no common ground", dismissively referring to each other's work as "some kind of business stuff" or "artsy occupation". In some cases, the interviewed actors did not even know about each other's existence, and with the insecure intermediate project temporality of many actors, decision-making lies with the established actors. Consequently, the creative district projects' goal of synergistically bringing together different creative innovation approaches seems stuck in a rather artificial realization, whereby different actors are "thrown together" without addressing existing hierarchies and inequalities in what interviewees have called a zoo-like or laboratory-like manner, critically calling it out as the "fairytale of the creative Bullerbyn". This ties back to academic criticisms of the creative class and the "add culture and stir"-mentality (Gibson & Stevenson, 2004, p. 78) with creativity as a goal in itself for innovation politics that however misses to debate its concrete goals and affects (see section 2).

Our empirics thus show a prevalent mechanism of *compliance* whereby creative actors are forced into alignment with rigid administrative procedures and Munich's established understanding of worthwhile creative innovation, if they want to stay or become part of the creative districts. This compliant enactment of creativity hinders the kind of bottom-up, holistic negotiations of urban creative innovation that the districts originally claimed to foster.

2.3.3 CONSOLIDATION

Being confronted with the mechanisms described so far, we encountered a narrow group of creative actors able to participate in the creative districts, filtered by structural demands that favor certain profiles over others. Especially among the less economically viable and less product-oriented creative actors, corporate support, political networking, and financial resources are existential characteristics, and our fieldwork quickly showed that it is the same few names that are re-appearing in the creative district projects. Both the BT and SuMo go back to very established initiators, who have made themselves a name in many creative culture interim and mid-term projects all over Munich. Accordingly, one of

the SuMo initiators stresses that one needs to have the network but also the money to enforce such a project, admitting that other young creatives might have better ideas but are lacking the resources. Along the same lines, initiatives such as Radicchio Radicale also consist of a very specific constellation of high-achieving Munich residents with well-paid jobs and extraordinary qualifications in the professional fields of financial investment, law, and marketing. On a podium discussion on constructing Munich as a worthwhile city of the future, which was hosted by the Munich Urban Colab in May 2022, said initiator of the Sugar Mountain project nevertheless appeared as the counter-voice to purely high-tech-based future-making and advocated for bottom-up urban development that is rooted in local and subcultural initiatives. During the event, he repeatedly pointed out that even himself as a man with exceptionally big resources in terms of finances and networks struggles to foster a space that allows for more society- and subculture-based projects, which highlights the excluding and consequently elitist mani-festation of what strives to be creative spaces in Munich. Other interviewees pointed to the prerequisite to "be able to play the game", that is to understand and work Munich's administrative and funding structures in one's favor. Most interviewees mentioned their academic background with many pro-actively citing Florida's idea of the creative class throughout our conversa-tions, which in term confirms the built-in elitism in Florida's (2004, 2014) own conceptua-lization of the creative class as highly educated actors. At WM, sub-cultural and artistic actors are expected to deliver a long-term financing plan in the face of rising rental prices, thus calling for "another level of professionalization" (WM interviewee).

This narrowing of participation however recreates marginalization mechanisms in terms of gender, race, and class, so that non-male, non-white, non-academic, and non-capitalist perspectives on the meaning of desirable creative innovation remain underre-presented. One prominent example of the respective displacement is the so-called *Huberhäusl* at KQ, where refugees were included in creating and caring for a permacul-ture area that also offered space for artistic performances, and that was demolished without announcement or replacement due to structural instability. All things considered, the resulting remaining form of creative innovation is bound to reinforce Munich's social order of creative innovation, where high-tech- and profit-driven approaches spearhead the hierarchy.

Our findings hence point to a mechanism of *consolidation* through which an elitist group of well-connected, resource-rich, and professionalized creatives remain able to participate in Munich's creative districts. Rather than supporting a diverse creative crowd that represents different urban visions and needs, already marginalized voices are further excluded, narrowing the invited scope of transformative creativity and innovation.

3. CONCLUSION

How transformative can the turn to creativity in urban innovation policy and, more broadly, in economic policy really be? Our research finds that there are significant limits to how creativity can unleash innovation potential in socially desirable directions. Specifically, some of the most unruly and transformative elements of creativity are systemically held in check by an extant political economy. Through the lens of three cultivating mechanisms, we have seen the paradox effect whereby Munich's creative districts theoretically invite diverse creative cultures but practically safeguard the city's ingrained ways of urban future-making, while sidelining alternative practices such as maintenance, repurposing, and social reform-based approaches.

In keeping with existing analyses of regional innovation cultures in Munich, we find that creative districts as an instrument of innovation policy paradoxically tame the typically explorative, open-ended, subversive and potentially disruptive character of *both* innovation *and* creativity. We observe a form of *conservative creative innovation* that values creativity primarily as a driver of economic productivity in corporatist visions of high-tech transformation, and reigns in potentially disruptive thinking rooted in social justice and reform. It is governed through fragmented yet coordinated public and private actors whose timelines, priorities and spatial visions do not match the needs of the creative arts and subculture scene. This misalignment results in a perceived split between the respective creative cultures which prevents the initially intended communal negotiation of desirable urban innovation or creative practices and instead enforces a hierarchy of value and populations who are and who are not able to participate in urban future-making. While Munich's creative districts make the local innovation-paradigm seemingly more socially robust, they fail to acknowledge important socio-economic inequalities and recreate existing power hegemonies and marginalizations in terms of gender, race, and class.

In line with the conservative regional innovation culture, and the history of counter-culture in Munich, the conservative taming of creative innovation is imagined as a means to keep the prevailing success recipes intact and to tackle new challenges without having to drastically diverge from the established socio-economic trajectories—to ensure that "Bavaria remains stable" (Bayerische Staatsregierung, 2018). What remains is an extractivist logic of creativity and creative districts which frames creative (sub)culture as a pretty dress for the essential body of entrepreneurial innovation, that does not go beyond creative districts as a tokenistic branding tool (Evans, 2015), reminding of the rather outdated idea of art as a mere beautifier. Not only does this match the academic criticism of the

capitalization of culture, this form of creative innovation as a type of x-innovation also fails to break with the shortfalls of conventional political innovation economies (see section 2), wrongfully treating art and (sub)culture as external to the dynamics of innovation itself (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023).

Our analysis shows that the control mechanisms shaping Munich's specific version of a creative innovation culture are not enacted and enforced by a single individual or group. They are rather deeply embedded in the institutional practices of the city administration, established technology companies, young start-ups, academic institutions, independent NGOs as well as the internalized logics and positionalities of creative actors across all fields. Throughout our ethnographic fieldwork, we encountered a widespread sense of frustration about recognizing yet being unable to escape the conditions under which creativity gets enacted, much in line with what other scholars have diagnosed as the hegemony of technocratic development strategies (Anderson *et al.*, 2007; Macq *et al.*, 2021). With corporate innovation strategies and quantitative market measures dictating what can be read as valuable creativity and by whom (Scott, 1998), our research aligns with Parthasarathy's (2022) conclusion how a more holistic approach of inclusive innovation is trapped in existing political economies that limit its transformational power.

Our research both confirms and goes beyond critical analyses of Florida's ideal of a creative class. On the one hand, we observe how visions of collaborative and systemic creative innovation are based on the fundamentally wrong assumption of equal and symmetrical standings of creative actors in economic and innovation contexts. On the other hand, our case study reveals how creative districts, and the creativity-oriented innovation economy do more than simply enact well-known patterns of commodification and gentrification. Rather, we have seen how creative districts co-configure and stabilize certain entanglements of innovation, creativity, and urbanism in relation to one another under a broader umbrella of a common good, shaped in turn by extant socio-political settlements in a region.

Furthermore, contrary to Florida's work, we find that the relationship between creativity and innovation—and hence the transformative potential ensuing from it—is centrally mediated through the state. This might be particularly visible in the case of Munich, where the city administration is both relatively well-funded and a ubiquitous actor, and where the infrastructures and purposes of both innovation and creative cultures are actively steered by the state (Pfotenhauer *et al.*, 2023). However, this relation to the state is a key juncture for all creative districts, especially when looking at transformations, public

interest and the constitution of citizens-state relationships (Juhl *et al.*, 2025; Macq, 2021; Pfotenhauer & Juhl, 2017). Further research should investigate whether this is a more generalizable verdict on the promise of creative districts or simply the logical progression of the locally stabilized conservative innovation culture in Munich.

Finally, feminist STS sensibilities remind us to be attentive to who is in power and how this power translates into *response-ability* when facing dynamics of exclusion and subjugation (Barad, 2012; Haraway, 2007). In Bavaria and particularly in Munich, creativity remains a staple for imagining worthwhile urban futures—in 2023, the city administration launched the co-creational NEBourhoods project with creatives as central players to re-imagine a city district as part of the EU New European Bauhaus movement (Architekturgalerie München e. V., 2023) just shortly after establishing the Competence Team for Cultural and Creative Economies (Munich RAW, 2024). Recognizing the problematic implications of different creative cultures increasingly drifting apart, a Bavarian study on cultural and creative industries concluded that solution to this widening rift was for the subculture and art scene to orient itself towards the technology-based creative economy (IW Consult GmbH and Cultural Policy Lab Research Services, 2021). However, if we want to allow creative districts the potential to truly act as "hybrid forums" (Callon *et al.*, 2011) that foster transformative synergies between diverse creative actors and practices, we underscore the importance to establish active state mechanisms to counter the limitations of conser-vative enactments of creative innovation. As Robra *et al.* (2023) put it, convivial innovation rooted in commons-based efforts can only co-emerge with a supportive state.

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