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Place imprinting and the arts: A case study of the Amber Collective

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Abstract

Drawing on an empirical case study from the North East of England, the Amber Film and Photography Collective, we develop the idea of ‘place imprinting’ to advance our understanding of the complex relationship between art and locality. In doing so, we emphasise the need to draw together three elements of place: geographical location, material form, and place as meanings and values, to develop the idea of ‘place imprinting’ which is meant to encompass both the geographic and social effects of place (‘place-doing’), and how it is made and re-made (‘place-making’). The way in which these processes apply particularly to the arts is also explored by looking at the literature on artistic clustering, how place works to shape artistic identities and networks, and how artists have transformed the urban fabric. In the empirical section of the paper, we utilise ideas central to place imprinting to frame the case study of the Amber Collective, with an emphasis firstly on factors explaining their relocation to the North East, and secondly on the way in which place impacted on their early organisation, artistic practices and social networks.

Keywords

artistic clustering, arts, collective, culture, Newcastle upon Tyne, place imprinting, regeneration

Introduction

O fairest of the northern waters, river-god,
great Tyne I asked,
Flow through this language now, hydrate
the tongue
Afresh, abolish drought and thirst
And let me drink you in to learn
The meaning of our history, and what
must be.
Send me a guide from your deep source,
A water sprite, a river-girl, to go with me.
(O’Brien, 2011)

The opening lines of Sean O’Brien’s homage to Tyneside, *On the Toon*, speaks poetically about the dual nature of place: both the way in which geography inspires culture, and the way in which culture is closely tied up with geographical place. The poem

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also raises important questions about the relationship between history, geography and culture, locality and social change, place memory and place becoming. Translated into the language of social science, it encapsulates an issue absolutely central to this paper – how do we begin to conceptualise the relationship between the arts and place?

We attempt to address this question, perhaps unsurprisingly given the setting of the opening quotation, with reference to a highly relevant empirical example drawn from the North East of England. Formed in London in 1968 by a group of students at Regent's Street Polytechnic, but relocating to Newcastle a year later, the Amber Collective, an egalitarian film and photography group, began documenting the changing industrial landscape and local working class cultures that they themselves became embedded in. To quote from one of the founders of the Collective, Murray Martin, '... we tend to let our films grow out of the way... where we live, and who we relate to' (Martin, 1999). As part of the wider 'workshop' movement¹ and armed with a commitment to work artistically with local communities, the group has made over 40 films and produced thousands of photographic exhibitions, and has become a regional arts icon since launching the Side gallery and cinema complex in Newcastle's Quayside area in the latter half of the 1970s. Curiously, Amber's cultural importance within the region has rarely been analysed, despite it being an important exemplar of the link between the arts and place (though see Hochscherf and Leggott, 2007; O'Reilly, 2009).

Place, however, remains a contentious concept in urban sociology and cultural geography. In the first part of the paper, we focus particularly on the work of Gieryn (2000) who has emphasised the need to draw together three elements of place: geographical location, material form and place as meanings and values. In doing so, we develop

the idea of 'place imprinting', which is meant to encompass both the geographic and social effects of place ('place-doing') and how it is made and re-made ('place-making'). The way in which these processes apply particularly to the arts is also explored by looking at the literature on artistic clustering (Lazzeretti et al., 2009; Markusen and Schrock, 2006), how place works to shape artistic identities and networks (Bain, 2003; Crossley, 2009) and how artists have transformed the urban fabric (Lloyd, 2002).

In the second empirical section of the paper, we utilise ideas central to place imprinting to frame the case study of the Amber Collective, with an emphasis firstly on factors explaining their relocation to the North East, and secondly on the way in which place impacted on their early organisation, artistic practices and social networks. For instance, what were the factors behind Amber's relocation from London to Newcastle and how did place help shape their early organisational structure and identity? How did place contour the kind of networks and ties they made with the local community and other artists? In terms of place-making, how were they able to contribute to a cooperatively based regional arts infrastructure in the late 1970s to early 1980s, and how did they cope with the impact of culture-led economic regeneration in the latter half of the 1990s? In the conclusion of the paper, we use the Amber case to question prevailing market-led ideas about artistic clustering in creative cities, and critique the rather instrumental role the arts are seen to play in culture-led economic regeneration schemes, while also considering its significance in thinking about place and the arts today.

The complexity of 'place': Geography, material form and meanings

Despite historical absences in the discipline, place has become integral to any

contemporary sociological analyses (Urry, 2004). This has transpired in the context of meteoric shifts in the meaning of the concept, its effects and the way in which one might theorise about the relationship between place and social phenomenon (Gieryn, 2000). Indeed, the increasing significance of place throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has been complicated by more recent economic, political and social-cultural shifts brought on by an increasingly globalised world (Amin, 2002; Massey, 2005). Yet despite quite varied analyses concerning both its fragmentation and homogenisation brought on by globalisation (Harvey, 1989; Soja, 2000), ironically, it can still be argued that place, however it has changed, continues to matter in social analyses (see Paasi, 2004). As Gieryn (2000: 463) argues, 'place persists as a constituent element of social life and historical change'.

Many of these changes have made it difficult to define place simply as a geographic concept (Massey, 2005), although, as we go on to argue, related terms like locality and region remain important in any analyses (Tomaney, 2010). Hudson (2006: 627) argues, "Places" can be thought of as complex entities, ensembles of material objects, people, and systems of social relationships embodying distinct cultures and multiple meanings, identities and practices'. Place today, like the multifaceted term 'community' before it, has become a somewhat catch-all term encompassing people, spaces, material objects, networks, flows, social relations, cultures, identities and practices – making precise analyses of the concept complex. Gieryn (2000), however, argues that place implicitly involves taking into account three constituent elements which need to be considered together: geographical location, material form, and meaning and values.

Notwithstanding the problem of 'geographical determinism' and the 'boundary issue', many urban theorists agree that one

needs to at least take into consideration geographic issues like location, size, scale and centre/periphery when considering the impact of place (Paasi, 2004; Pile, 1999). For instance, we all continue to recognise that the size and scale of cities will have an impact on economic opportunities, social ties and the character of cultural life (see Beaverstock et al.'s (1999) 'world cities' concept). This is not to argue that physical location is just a setting for social structure, relations and processes, but form part of them, asserting real effects. As Gieryn (2000: 466) suggests, place as location is 'an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life'. And, while the notion of geographic place has clearly altered with the impact of globalisation, and its effects on the 'local' (see Robertson's 1995 work on 'glocalisation'), this should not imply that locality is insignificant. Cooke (1988) suggests locality is still the main site of political agency for most of the population, while Escobar (2001: 147) argues, 'People continue to construct some sort of boundaries around their places, however permeable, and to be grounded in local socio-natural practices ...'. Additionally, Tomaney (2010), in his work on regional culture, cogently argues that despite the fact that geographical boundaries are more blurred today, geographic 'centre-periphery' and 'metropolitan-provincial' cultural distinctions are still often invoked in terms of making sense of places.

Similarly, within cities, the material and physical form of place is also central to any sociological analyses (Gieryn, 2000: 465). This includes the historic 'built' environment and urban infrastructure, encompassing industrial, architectural and technological aspects, as well as the material, social structural and cultural life world of a place. As Taylor and Evans' (1996) work on two Northern cities shows, even

contemporary identities are formed in relation to industrial histories, heritage, architecture and the cultural legacies of different cities. While it is clear that the material form of many former industrial cities is being rapidly transformed through urban regeneration (Paddison, 1993), the legacy of historic labour markets, educational opportunities and local traditions continue to shape regional class structures, politics and cultural life (Hudson, 2005).

As Gieryn (2000: 465) argues, social processes like difference, power and collective action '... happen through the material forms that we design, build and use', despite significant changes wrought by the impact of network formation through the internet (Castells, 1996). Urban structures can profoundly impact on the types of social networks, ties and bonds that form (Fischer, 1976). Particularly significant here is Granovetter's (1983) classical work on the strength of weak ties idea, and how this might be influenced, or even inverted, by place. Finally, the physical makeup of cities form part of the visual landscape involved in the construction of place attraction and memory (Lewicka, 2008).

This is not to argue for a simple material/ideational separation of geographical notions of place on the one hand, and 'place constructionism' on the other. Place is as much 'made' through symbolic practices as it is about location and physicality (Massey, 2005). As Gieryn (2000: 465) suggestively remarks, 'Without naming ... a place is not a place'. Indeed, contemporary studies of what might generally refer to as the 'social construction of place' abound in the literature (i.e. see Bell and Haddour, 2000; Shields, 1991; Watson and Gibson, 1995), so much so one might argue that they have come to dominate urban sociology today (see Stedman, 2003). While the 'post-modern' turn in urban studies has been responsible for bringing our attention to the 'fragmented' nature of place

construction (Soja, 2000), more relevant to this paper are approaches focussing in on the transformation of former post-industrial to 'entrepreneurial' cities (Harvey, 1989) and studies connected to creative/cultural cities (Florida, 2002, 2008). The significance of the entrepreneurial city form concerns how 'place-marketing' (Jessop, 1998) can work to redefine 'ordinary' residents' identification with the working-class city through the creation of gentrified landscapes (Smith, 1996). This shift can also involve industrial cities regenerating themselves through culture, and redefining themselves as creative cities (Florida, 2002), producing cultural districts (Mommaas, 2004). Artists in particular may have an important role to play in place-making, regeneration and gentrification (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Ley, 1996).

One way of bringing together these rather disparate elements of place – geographic, material form and identity/ meaning – is through developing the idea of 'place imprinting'. In using the term here, we are drawing creatively on the sociology of organisations, which argues that groups take on both material and ideological characteristics from their founding moment and tend to reproduce elements of these in their organisational structure (see Stinchcombe (1965) for the classic statement on this, and Johnson's (2007) work on applying this to an arts context). As part of any organisational founding, we would argue that one of the important factors shaping it is the impact of place. For instance, in terms of thinking about what place simultaneously 'does' and 'means', Gieryn (2000: 473) argues it '... stabilises and gives durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network forming and collective action; embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities, memories'. In an arts context, place imprinting for us then

involves looking at the factors behind why artists might be drawn to particular places, including the size/scale/makeup of a city, its cultural and artistic infrastructure, and its visual qualities. Imprinting also involves looking at how place can structure artistic identities, work practice and organisational form in terms of subject matter, relationship with the community and the kind of social ties that can form. Finally, place imprinting also involves the impact of artists on places, including struggles over values and meaning, and their relationship to place-making and urban transformation. In the next section, we flesh out these three important aspects of place imprinting with regard to making sense of the literature on artists and place that are crucial to framing our case study of the Amber Collective to follow.

Place imprinting and the arts: Artistic clustering and the relationship between artists and place

While the art and place literature is quite varied, we note that most studies roughly parallel the three place themes explored earlier. They are: (1) clustering and the geographic location of artists, (2) how place materially impacts on artists and their practice and (3) how artists transform place and urban space. The first theme will be particularly pertinent with regard to making sense of Amber's relocation to the North East, while the second and third theme will be important in providing a sociological context to the organisations' identification with the area, the structuring of their arts practice and the kind of social ties they are able to form, and finally, the impact they were able to develop in the region.

Research on the geographical location of artists (see Lazerretti et al., 2009; Markusen and Schrock, 2006; O'Hagan and Kelly, 2007) draws our attention to place factors that might predispose artists

to cluster in particular cities. For example, there has been some useful historical work on the clustering of prominent visual artists in cities like Paris and London in the 19th century (O'Hagan and Kelly, 2007). They cite such structures as better transport links to major cities, the increased benefits of sharing skills, being closer to centres of innovation and everyday 'tacit' knowledge of a particular art form, the impact of competition on artistic development and nearness to markets and infrastructural networks (i.e. galleries, arts funders, dealers, etc). With regard to these various factors, Markusen and Schrock (2006: 1664) argue 'size matters' here, including the scale of the market and demand for one's art product, but also the density of human capital, physical resources and arts infrastructure. Lazerretti et al. (2009) also discuss the importance of scale, agglomeration and existing creative industries as factors for clustering.

Emphases on these kinds of factors will always tend to suggest artistic clustering occurs mainly in larger world cities. However, more recent analyses of artistic and cultural clustering demonstrate some slightly divergent patterns. For example, Florida's (2002) work on the success of some mid-size US cities in attracting artists bucks this general trend, while even Markusen and Schrock's (2006) empirical analyses of the dispersal of artists in what they call 'second-tier' US cities show that there may be other factors at work here. For example, artists may trade-off the advantage of larger arts markets and networks, for lower cost of living/affordable space, the opportunity to develop different artistic subjects and the freedom to innovate in their artistic field (Markusen and Schrock, 2006: 1664). In relation to our case study, research in the UK reveals some evidence of an artistic migration in the late 1960s to early 1970s from the centre to the periphery (see Curtis, 2007),

particularly in relation to the community arts movement. A geographical dispersal of funding opportunities in the UK, represented first by the development of regional arts funding boards in the 1970s, and through the mandate of Channel 4 to represent regional diversity in the 1980s, aided this decentralisation process.

A second set of studies concerns the impact place has on artistic identities and networks, and is much more in tune with the case study to follow (see Bain, 2003; Crossley, 2009; O'Reilly, 2009). It concerns, in particular, how the economic, social, architectural and cultural heritage of an area can not only work to 'attract' artists, but also help shape them in terms of how they work and survive financially, as well as what kinds of social bonds, ties and networks are formed with place communities or other artists. For example, critical mass for 'alternative' arts forms, in particular, was perhaps somewhat easier to achieve in the less commercial, provincial UK cities, as Crossley's (2009) analyses of the Manchester punk scene or O'Reilly's (2009) discussion of the North East regional film movement testify. Additionally, artists' work may be shaped by particular places and landscapes directly, whether it be with respect to urban architecture and heritage, or the types of communities they chose to portray (Hochscherf and Leggott, 2007). In the case of developing relationships with other artists, place may help shape artistic leadership (the 'big fish, small pond' idea) or contribute towards collective sharing of space or practice (Dickinson, 1999). Similarly, cultural workers may select places to work and live that take them away from other artists, so they can work relatively undistracted and with greater freedom (Bain, 2003).

Some of the most interesting work here has been conducted by Bain (2003), whose research has focused upon how place can help shape artistic identities and practices.

In her study of artists identities within the Canadian city of Toronto, Bain's tracking of the movement of artists from the well-established arts scene in the west end of the city to a relatively underdeveloped east side neighbourhood throws up an interesting parallel with centre/periphery artist migration within the UK. As one of her artists reveals: 'Certain creative types gravitate to where there is a need and where there is a community (...) It fuels their art, if they are in an area of town that is less developed' (Bain, 2003: 309). This notion relates to the migration of UK artists from London to other parts of the UK in the 1970s, with the idea being that rather than seek out other artists, one seeks out locations that contain a landscape or community one wants to portray. Bain's (2003) work also goes on to demonstrate that place can structure the number and strength of social interactions, networks and bonds not just with other artists, but with one's artistic subjects.

A third body of literature looks essentially at the impact artists have on transforming places economically, culturally and socially. This work is concerned with a variety of issues, including economic impact, the role of artists in urban regeneration, cultural impacts (including questions of identity and social cohesion) and the spatial effect of artists on neighbourhoods, with a particular emphasis on gentrification. While the work of Florida (2002) and Markusen and Schrock (2006) on the 'artistic dividend' and 'creative class', respectively, and how they contribute to the economic regeneration of an area are interesting, they are less relevant to our case study. More useful is Markusen and Gadwa's (2010) work, which looks more at the cultural effects artists have in cities, including their role in promoting social cohesion, stability and identity to an area (in the UK also see Bailey et al. (2004)). Similarly, Lloyd's (2002) research on the US city of Chicago argues that new artistic

urban forms are transforming post-industrial cities in new economic (as both artists as well as their other secondary jobs), cultural (diversity and creativity) and spatial (street/neighbourhood level) ways – what he calls in his work the new ‘urban bohemia’ (Lloyd, 2006).

However, as Cole (1987: 391) argues, there is a dual effect here with artists simultaneously ‘romanticised because of their willingness to live in run down areas with old factories and warehouses or to break down racial and ethnic barriers, and politicized because they displace low-income groups and initiate gentrification’. As such, there are more critical analysis of how artists clustering in particular areas of cities, while initially well intended, might produce more negative effects (Zukin, 1988). While writers like Zukin (and Smith, 1996) appear less convinced about the potential of artist’s values in producing an alternative urban model of development, Ley’s (1996) well-known work on artists as an ‘expeditionary force’ for the new middle-class cultural gentrifiers in 1970s Canada is perhaps slightly more applicable to our case. Again, while Ley’s (2003) later work concedes that a similar process of gentrification occurs by the higher economic capital groups as opposed to what he calls the ‘cultural middle classes’, his work more positively views artists’ aesthetic attraction to ‘marginal’ places, or what Cameron and Coaffee (2005: 40) refer to as the ‘valorisation of the urban fabric of decayed historical neighbourhoods’, as a more valued political force for urban diversity, inclusion and changing notions of place (also see Bain, 2006). In the next section, we utilise material on artistic clustering to help contextualise Amber’s reasons for relocating from London to Newcastle. Additionally, we explore how place impacted on their organisational form, work practices and types of social ties developed. Finally, we examine how Amber was engaged in struggles over place-making in creating an alternative regional

arts infrastructure, as well as coped with the onset of culture-led regeneration.

The Amber Collective and place imprinting

I went to London to learn film skills at Regent Street Poly and in 68’ approached a group of students and said ‘Why don’t we form a group?’ and part of that debate was also what did we do – ‘Let’s go and record, you know, working class life’ ... it sounds corny but that’s what we talked about. And ‘Where do we do it? Do we go to Liverpool, or Glasgow, Bristol’ ... we looked at all those but Newcastle is where I had the contacts ... and I liked Newcastle, I’d been there ... cos I was at university here, I’d taught here, and I knew we’d get some work here, and it was a practical move ... also it was the furthest city from London (...) I found Newcastle a very exciting place visually. (Martin, 1999)

This interview quotation from one of the founders of Amber, Murray Martin, provides some important clues explaining the groups’ relocation from London to Newcastle² in the late 1960s. First, and foremost, was the Collective’s desire to relocate to an area which reflected its artistic concern to document working-class life. Yet the quote also hints at a number of other geographic and material factors about ‘why’ the North East specifically, including its distance from the capital, its visual quality and Martins’ existing social ties in the area. We begin our case study by looking at a rather ‘reverse’ case of artistic clustering away from the capital, before moving on to look at the specific ways in which place helped shape the Collective, and in turn how they began to shape the region artistically.

First, a brief methodological note to contextualise our case study. Our empirical study is drawn from 57 in-depth semi-structured interviews with all the present members of the Amber Collective, a significant number

of former members, and finally a wide range of key individuals involved in the film/arts field deemed pertinent to the organisation (i.e. funders, union, other workshops/film companies, film/TV producers, other theatre/film cooperatives, actors/photographers who worked with the organisation and representatives from communities that Amber filmed). In addition, we have benefited from having full access to a range of interview material produced by Amber themselves, as well as complete access to their 40-plus-year-old set of archive material.

In a separate paper, we analysed the early formation of Amber, and the wider oppositional film movement it was part of, through the lens of social movement theory (Hollands and Vail, 2012). Key to this argument were the existence of political and cultural opportunities, the mobilisation of resources and the formation of social networks (see Tarrow, 1994) in London which were conducive to framing what became known as the 'independent film movement' (Dickinson, 1999). One of the key questions raised here then is this: why would a group like Amber not opt to remain in a place partly responsible for their formation, where opportunities, resources and oppositional networks already existed? Present-day thinking concerning the importance of attracting cultural people to creative cities (Florida, 2008), the benefits of artistic clustering (Markusen and Schrock, 2006) and having a critical mass of film-makers (Dickinson, 1999) would all suggest that it would have been logical for alternative groups like Amber to remain in London. For instance, a former member of another North East film workshop retrospectively considered the potential benefits of forming in the capital rather than in the region:

I mean frankly I think it would have been a much easier thing I think to launch if we had been a London-based workshop, just because this is where head offices are of

Trade Unions. All the stuff that we were trying to be a counter-balance against, you know, we were part of the regional resistance to the London metropolitan media bias... but the reality is that for this as for so many other media projects, a lot of the movers and shakers are physically in London.

Despite these advantages, other London-based film and theatre workers spoke about some of the counter-pressures created by working in the capital back in the late 1960s to early 1970s:

I think being in London got pretty tough. Whilst it had been a very eclectic, quite large independent film base at the best of times, it struggled to have any coherence (...) But I just think it was all too diverse. And one reason I was happy to leave London is I just found it exhausting. (former member of Cinema Action)
 (...) I'd been in companies in London, you know, where you had nothing to eat (...) And certainly, you know, London is so big, there's so much going on, even in those days. (North East cooperative theatre director)

So while major cities clearly may have much to offer in terms of creative infrastructure (Lazzeretti et al., 2009), the downside according to some of our interviewees was fragmentation, the intensity of work, the problem of scale and the difficulty of making a living in the arts in the capital.

While Amber's decision not to remain in London may have been influenced by some of these drawbacks, their motivation was largely due to two factors: first, they wanted to 'escape' from the commercial pressures of the capital's mainstream media and second, they wanted to relocate to a place where they could artistically work with and document a community. In an interview held in the British Library, one of the co-founders of Amber, Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen, hints at the core of the

Collective's decision to relocate, despite the reservation of certain members:

Some members didn't want to leave London, and the rest of us decided very early on that London wasn't where we wanted to locate ourselves, partly because London was full of film makers anyway, and partly because we wanted to be somewhere more real, part of a community, away from that kind of media. (Kontinen, 2002)

Despite having made a film in London during their student days (*All You Need is Dynamite* about the Grosvenor Square riots) and starting the filming of another one (*Mai*, a film about their colourful landlady), most members of Amber appeared to have few connections or social ties in the capital that may have acted to hold them there.

In fact, there is evidence, both from our interview data and through academic sources, of a more general artistic move out of the centre to the periphery in the early 1970s, which flies in the face of the logic of cultural clustering in large cities today (Markusen and Schrock, 2006). For instance, it was estimated that following the formation of the London Arts Lab in 1967, within a year 150 similar organisations had sprung up all over the UK (Curtis, 2007). Further evidence of an artistic migration to the regions (in this case the North East) was evidenced by the following quotes from our interviewees:

What interested me was it [Newcastle] was 300 miles from London, and I wanted to be somewhere where I could work in an intense way without other distractions or scrutiny, and I could afford. (North East Photographer 1)
(...) so I moved to Newcastle with no knowledge of the place but really liked it and was taken with the idea of – which everybody else seemed to be doing –

going to the regions and setting up film groups with links to the community (...) it was partly the scale of the place; it was much more understandable and you could relate to it so you could make things about history in Newcastle. (North East Filmmaker and Lecturer)

Interestingly, this move from the centre to the periphery for these cultural workers was not just one motivated by geographical distance and scale, but also involved a recognition of the existence of different types of artistic networks and social ties to the local community (see Bain, 2003). Again, interviews with a range of artists who migrated to the North East in the early 1970s highlighted these various factors:

That was the difference that you felt, that when you came here that you knew that you would easily meet like-minded people, and there wasn't that kind of exclusiveness that you'd got used to in London or with other places. (Photographer 2)

But also I was surprised by the friendliness of everyone: that struck me. Like getting on a bus and people talking to you. It never happened in London. (North East cooperative theatre director)

The key difference between some of these cultural workers who came to the North East without really knowing much about it and the Amber Collective's conscious decision to relocate here was that the latter group already had close contact with the city of Newcastle through one of its co-founders, Murray Martin. Martin's previous experience as a working-class art student/lecturer in Newcastle in the early 1960s had a profound effect on developing his obvious passion for the industrial North East of England and the importance of documenting working-class life and culture there (Martin, 2002; Newbury, 2002). As a student/lecturer at Regent Street Polytechnic, Martin was already filming in Newcastle, scripting and shooting much of

the film *Maybe* about a South Shields ferry driver. One of the original members of the group recalled how Martin saw the Northern industrial landscape ‘as a work of art in itself’, and the lengthy quote at the beginning of this section also highlighted his close affiliation with the area.

So while there was debate about why they should move from London and exactly where they would move to, the choice of the industrial North East was not completely incidental. In fact, as one founding member recalled:

And Bristol had quite a lot going for it, in terms of the independent sector was starting to emerge there in film production. So Murray showed an interest in that, but there was the practicality of work at Teesside that surfaced before that became any possibility. (Amber partner 3)

Another founding member also reiterated how and why other cities were not a ‘real’ choice, and that the determining factor was a combination of what the group wanted to artistically record, and the fact that there were already existing ‘contacts’ in Newcastle (Former Amber member 2). However, it is important to note that most members did not move to Newcastle immediately, and in the end only about half of the group actually relocated to the North East. In fact, a recently discovered diary of Murray Martin reveals that he initially struck out for Newcastle on his own for a period, signing on the dole, living with friends and doing a range of research on working-class culture, wondering if the collective dream would actually happen. It was only when the group received a small amount of funding for a regional project and Martin began to utilise his contacts with arts colleges in the region to gain employment for members of the Collective that Amber began to actually take some kind of coherent shape. As one Amber member recalled: ‘The opportunity

to earn a bit of money was definitely the deciding factor [to come to Newcastle]’ (Former Amber member 4).

While these practical ‘work-related’ reasons, not to mention Martin’s strong influence on the decision to choose Tyneside as a base for Amber were crucial, there were other factors explaining the ‘pull’ the place had on other members of the Collective, namely ‘place attraction’ (Gieryn, 2000). Martin himself referred to parts of Newcastle having a ‘third dimension’ in terms of its visual attractiveness, by which he was referring at least partly to its industrial character. In a similar way, the two quotes below show how the visual landscape of the city was influential in creating a positive reaction for two of the Collectives’ partners in their first visit to Newcastle:

And I do remember the Quayside being really black, all the buildings were completely soot blackened, the bridges, all the streets, all these sandstone buildings. It looked awesome. I mean, I was really kind of thrilled and awed by it. I loved it. (Amber partner 2)

I came up and spent the day, I think, walking round and looking at ... walking around Newcastle basically, and looking at buildings and talking about all kinds of things (...) I thought the place was fantastic, I just loved it (...) My background was kind of northern cities, but there was something kind of visually absolutely staggering about the North East, and Newcastle in particular. (Amber partner 4)

The North East was not only home to a still visible industrial landscape, but also to a comprehensible working-class culture built around a regional occupational structure based on shipbuilding and engineering (Newcastle), steel (Middlesbrough) and coal mining (Durham and Northumberland). In 1971, 40% of the workforce in Tyneside still worked in the manufacturing and primary industries, with 22,000 employed in

shipbuilding and 12,500 in coal mining (Robinson, 1987). One of the key components of the Collectives' philosophy was to artistically work with a community (see Collingwood, 1958) and here was a legible working-class culture and a visually intact industrial landscape. So, with around half of the Collective relocating to the North East by the early 1970s, what were some of the main ways in which place helped shape Amber ideologically and organisationally?

As mentioned, a good number of early Amber members were able to pick up part-time lecturing posts in film/photography schools around the North East, which were seen as the best way to maximise time for artistic work as one could actually live off two days lecturing a week, leaving ample time for Amber projects. Some members did freelance work, honing their skills with the BBC, and the Collective also sent up a side-line business providing slides and prints to local art colleges and schools in the region. While this pattern of 'portfolio working' is a well-established artistic pathway, and was one that could have happened anywhere, the North East had a decided advantage in terms of the relative cost of living compared to London. Similarly, the Collective also decided to both control the extent of outsourced wage labour and 'pool' their earnings (Vail and Hollands, 2012), paying themselves an equal weekly wage and using the Collective pot to advance their film-making. This approach had a number of effects. First, it was an important marker of their egalitarian identity and commitment to the Collective. Second, it meant that economic risks could also be shared, providing emotional as well as financial support in 'hard times'. And third, the relatively low cost of living in the North East meant that members of the Collective could experience 'relative' artistic freedom – a fact which effectively shaped the groups' 'life cheap, live free' philosophy:

(...) because of the particular circumstances that we could extend our days into the evenings and weekends to do stuff together, you know, more joyful stuff (...). 'Let's just go and do that,' yeah. (Amber partner 2)

(...) but economically things were different in those days, and you could live cheaply and you could find a flat for twenty-five shillings a week, you know? (...) I don't remember any real hardship, certainly not economic hardship (...). But there was that kind of, I suppose it was freedom I guess is the word. (Amber partner 4)

This setup, while a difficult balancing act, effectively meant that the Amber Collective was free to pursue its own work and projects outside of any demands from funders. As such, when they did obtain public funding, it was always on their own terms (see also McCall, 1977), a trend which continues to the present day.

A second way in which place worked to structure the Collective early on concerned how different members developed relationships with the local community. Martin's particular desire was to re-connect artistically to his working-class roots, as he explained in an interview: 'I think one of the great tragedies of working class people is they can become designed out their background and can never reconnect (...) and I mentioned it earlier on, that that wasn't going to happen' (Martin, 2002). Some of the founding members who did relocate to the North East found making links harder: 'I also found that I didn't really share the same affection for the North East working class culture (...) and as I've said I found some of the men's attitudes pretty obnoxious' (Former Amber member 2). While part of this issue here concerned this member's own middle-class background, it was also related to a more critical stance about the northern working class which did not fit in with the Collectives' overall philosophy.

Hence this member soon left both Amber and the city to return to London.

At the same time, another member of the Collective, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, clearly not identifiable as English working class but Finnish in origin, eloquently spoke about how 'difference' was responsible for her being drawn into North East working-class culture in a way that made her feel 'rooted' in the community:

I take it when other people say the North East is special. I mean, I don't know the rest of Britain well enough to say that, but it is absolutely unique. But there are, in my experience, right from the beginning, there was the feeling of being embraced by the people, and always poked fun at, of course, because there's a very sharp sense of humour which can absolutely... I mean, you're always challenged by the sense of humour. I was continually challenged to rise to that. You could not get away with being separate or aloof or that different. I was being drawn into being part of life, especially in Byker (...) I felt instantly, somehow, rooted. (Konttinen, 2002)

Relatively soon after moving to Newcastle, and in the wake of losing some of its original members, the Amber Collective made a conscious decision to attract new members that were working class in their origins and from the region if possible. Three new members, all from working-class origins, and two from the North East, were carefully chosen to join the Collective. Additionally, Amber also began to recruit local people as actors, photographers and associates to work with them on projects. By the time they were formalised as a collective legally in 1974 (the 'partnership agreement'), 80% of Amber partners were working class and 40% were from the region.

At the same time, in order to further reconnect with the particular people and places they wanted to study, Amber

members consciously decided to live within the various working communities themselves, something they have continued to do until the present day. They did so, not in an instrumental way, but in a more organic sense, as Martin (2002) explained: 'And the early period, of course, when we were beginning to work in places like Byker, we lived in Byker for two years before we took any images' (also see Konttinen, 1983, 2009). This immersion in the place and culture that you eventually would film in became a familiar pattern for the Collective. For instance, Amber decided to buy an old caravan on the Northumberland coast in order to understand the work and life of sea-coalers in the region, before producing the film *Seacoal*. Similarly, some of them moved to North Shields before doing a film set around the fishing industry (*In Fading Light*) and later the Collective actually bought and ran a community pub in the area where they based the film *Dream On* around. Finally, their trilogy of coal-field films (*Eden Valley*, *The Scar* and *Like Father*) about the gypsy horse-owning/racing and mining communities of County Durham coincided with the relocation of two central members of the group to an ex-mining village, Easington. This kind of 'creative relocation' within the North East would probably not have been possible had the group stayed in London, especially with the property boom in the capital in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, in terms of how place structured social networks, we look briefly at Amber's relationship with other arts groups in the region. Ironically, because their initial move to the North East was based mostly on employment ties, and Ambers' main focus was on trying to develop links with sections of the local community, meant an initial lack of interaction with other artists in the area. In essence, film-making was relatively new to the region, and initially Amber as a group felt rather isolated

artistically (see Martin, 1999). Instead, the Collective tended to focus on photography early on as it was a cheaper medium, making links with local photographers, and gaining some of their initial sources of funding for photography not film. Additionally, many of their early short industrial documentary films were made alongside other photographers and an architectural historian, rather than with other film-makers.

However, as Martin (1999) argued, the North East quickly lent itself to joint ventures and a cooperative working relationship with other artists:

If you move from ... if you're in London you tend to find there are lots of facilities ... lot of editing rooms, lot of gear, lot of everything – if you come up to Newcastle there's sweet f.a. So it made absolute sense that ... and it was characterised that the difference between London film makers, that tended to be individualists, and the regional film makers, who tended to be the collectivists – the collectivism was a sort of practical relationship.

This collaborative, 'gift economy' approach (see Cheal, 1998) to other arts organisations, was really just an extension of Amber's overall artistic philosophy (Vail and Hollands, 2013). Rather than being rushed into partnerships with others, the relationship between the Collective and other like-minded arts organisations in the region happened more gradually and organically. In other words, rather than building up quick superficial networks with lots of other artists, Amber instead chose to build intense close relations with a small number of arts groups and local communities (the opposite of Grattenover's (1983) strength of weak ties idea). This involved supporting other local cooperatives like Live Theatre and Bruvvers, two theatre groups sharing similar philosophies to Amber. For example, Amber shared office space with Live Theatre early on, providing it with rehearsal

space and administrative support. As one former Live Theatre actors recalled: 'No, he [Murray Martin] was really strongly interested in Live Theatre, and for a while, he was spending as much, if not more, time with Live Theatre'. They also worked in conjunction with the director of the Bruvvers community theatre group to produce one of the first plays by a collective in the area. Over time, these groups would share not only premises and equipment, but also local writers and actors.

Finally, in terms of how artists can influence place, we briefly look at Amber's effect on the region. While the bulk of the literature here concerns how artists can transform cities (Lloyd, 2002), with a specific focus on their gentrifying influence (Ley, 1996), this approach is less applicable to our case study for two reasons. First, while Newcastle has clearly gentrified over the last decade and a half (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001), Amber was here at a much earlier point in time, and the process of gentrification was much slower in the 1970s and 1980s than in other cities around the world. Second, while the Collective moved into an area of the city that has culturally gentrified in the last 15 years (the Quayside), Amber has been actively and consistently engaged in voicing its opposition to this processes.

Similarly, the marginal groups of working people Amber have studied have largely been outside the influence of such regeneration, including sea-coalers, gypsy, and decimated fishing and mining communities. The fact that they have continued to represent these communities, and that these communities have largely supported the kinds of representations Amber have made of them as accurate, says something about the Collectives' influence on North East identity and image. Wider assessments of Amber's 'success' in working with and representing local communities have also come from regional and even national funders, including a C4 representative who spoke

passionately about their 'long term commitment to people in the city'. In addition to these supporters, many cooperatively based artists in the region also saw Amber as an inspirational model. Their role in the region as a leader and innovator led to examples of a diffusion of their practice and emulation by other cooperative arts organisations. One regional theatre director hinted at the Collectives' influence on him, when he said, 'I think what Amber did was they made it possible, you know, like you would think, "Oh, well if they can do it, I can"'.

However, it was in the building up of its facilities in the mid-1970s that Amber became a focal point for regional artists to meet and discuss, and consider the possibility of creating like-minded types of art organisations. An early employee of Amber's venue, The Side Cinema, which opened in 1977, talked about the profound effect the Collective had on creating other film workshops in the region:

Once the place was open, the public facilities, it was a great meeting place. The cinema became a discussion space a lot of the time, and people then went across the road and then continued talking in the pub afterwards (...). Well, I was one of the founders of X (another regional film workshop). It was founded in 'The Newcastle Arms' (pub) one night after a screening at the Side cinema.

Emulation by its peers, trust from the communities it represented and success amongst the workshops producing for Channel 4, all meant that Amber had a more general effect on the culture of the entire region. A former Northern Arts head revealed what he saw as the Collective's legacy: '(...) my perception would be that Amber had a kind of catalytic effect on a whole series of cultural forms and companies that emerged in the North East in the 80s and it continued into the 90s'. Ironically, this catalytic effect, rather

than diffusing the Amber approach, may have worked to contribute to the very cultural regeneration movement that they were opposed to. As arts collectives went out of fashion, and the working class decomposed, alternative art and film groups like the workshops may have begun to look somewhat anachronistic by the mid-1990s. While there remains a lineage of North East talent linking back to Amber (see Hall, 2011), many arts cooperatives have either folded or adopted boards of directors. Although Amber still clings on, with its offices, the cinema and gallery on the Quayside, it increasingly is surrounded by corporate bars and more expensive forms of culture (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). In the conclusion, we examine some of the lessons our case study has for thinking about art and place today.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored how place impacted upon the Amber Collective's decision to relocate and how this structured both their early organisational form and the kind of social ties that they developed in the region. In doing so, we utilised the idea of place imprinting to demonstrate how artistic clustering can work in reverse (from the centre to the periphery) and how place can play an important role in structuring artistic identities. Similarly, we have also looked at the impact of the Amber Collective in the area, particularly through its links with the local community and leadership in forming an alternative regional arts culture. In the remainder of the conclusion, we extract two key issues from our analyses, to illuminate thinking about the relationship between the arts and place today.

Firstly, the analyses raise the issue of what place means today for artists and arts organisations. In terms of our case study, it was clear that place was incredibly

important to the Amber Collective, both in terms of what their art was about and the freedom that it gave them, but also how they organised themselves and how they were able to relate to the local community and other arts groups. Their relocation to Newcastle was predicated on escaping the commercial pull of the London media, and in applying their artistic philosophy of working closely with local communities. In hindsight, this distancing from the centre proved to be a valuable discourse in both the creation of a regional film identity in the North East and Amber's 'underdog' success in obtaining Channel 4 funding years later. As a member of London's independent film movement said: 'But they [Amber] just seemed to understand how to use the regional context in a way that a lot of other people hadn't' (Former Cinema Action member).

As our case study, and other commentators have reminded us, while place continues to matter (Gieryn, 2000), some things have clearly changed. In the first place, regional film-making is now at an all-time low, with the collapse of Channel 4 and its independent film branch in the 1990, and the recent restructuring of the UK film infrastructure. The dismantling of the UK Film Council, the creation of three UK film hubs outside London, with Manchester representing the 'north', and the downsizing of the regionally based Northern Film and Media (NFM), hardly look likely to revitalise a North East film renaissance. The problem already, as a spokesperson for NFM argued, was regional talent being 'sucked south', and anyway, it is debatable whether film-makers in the North East today actually identify with the region in quite the same way as Amber, and the other film workshops in the area, did. Most of the young North East-based film-makers we interviewed did not really see themselves as 'regional' film-makers, saying that international and global

recognition was paramount. Neither did they see the need for any kind of regional film-making affiliation or structure like the North East workshops, despite struggling to make a living working in the area.

Modern day approaches linking art and place together appear to be significantly different from the more organic, regionally based, community-serving approach exemplified by the Amber Collective. This contemporary, yet largely instrumental approach, welds together geography with the market and appears limited largely to either 'what can place do for your art' (i.e. an arts version of the competitive 'who's your city?' idea – Florida, 2008), or similarly 'what your art can do for a place' (i.e. the idea of art tied directly to culture-led regeneration, Phillips, 2004). These rather instrumental and individualised debates about art and essentially place 'branding' (Evans, 2003) miss out on longer term regional strategies promoting artistic cooperation and sharing of skills. Similarly, they tend to promote formulaic 'social inclusion' cultural strategies which focus on educating the masses about 'good art' (Bourdieu, 1996), rather than developing more organic and participatory links between artists and local populations (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005).

Yet, one wonders in an era of 'art in hard times', whether there are emerging possibilities for developing a less instrumental relationship between art, place and market (McCall, 1977). For instance, have technological changes in film-making and distribution made it possible to not only make inexpensive independent films, but make them literally anywhere and distribute them via the internet? Will artists of the future move from even second-tier cities experiencing place branding to smaller semi-rural communities in order to seek out stories rooted in more legible places? Will global networks of alternative film-makers replace regional affiliations tied

together by place? Whatever the future scenario might be, there is much to gain and learn from the Amber model and experience, even if modern conditions dictate different organisational forms and ties, and more varied approaches to place.

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Notes

1. Amber was part of the 'workshop' movement which operated under a trade union backed agreement with Channel 4 which set out very different principles and structures for small groups involved in film-making, including collective management; non-hierarchical working relations; flexible division of labour and continuity of employment; and integration of production, distribution and exhibition (Dickinson, 1999).
2. Although Amber's main base of operation has largely always been in the Quayside area of Newcastle, the groups artistic concerns and choice of subject matter have been with the North East area rather than just the city itself and has often been reflected in them relocating where they live in the region (hence we use the city/region interchangeably here).

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