

Place Leadership in Culture-Led Development: Comparing Four European Trajectories

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Extended Abstract

Over the last four decades, endogenous growth theories have increasingly emphasised the importance of place-based development strategies that mobilise the distinctive assets, capabilities, and institutional arrangements of specific localities (Barca et al., 2012; Tomaney, 2014). Within this paradigm, the agency of local and regional actors and their ability to co-produce a shared territorial vision have emerged as central components of development trajectories (Beer & Clower, 2014; Sotarauta & Beer, 2021). This has contributed to a growing scholarly interest in the notion of place leadership, understood as the capacity of diverse actors to influence collective action and steer development processes in ways that align with local needs, identities, and aspirations (Collinge & Gibney, 2010; Beer et al., 2019).

Parallel to this shift, many cities and regions—particularly those affected by industrial decline—have pursued culture-led development strategies (Sacco, Ferilly & Tavano Blessi, 2014). These typically involve the symbolic and productive reactivation of context-specific tangible or intangible cultural heritage assets as a means to revitalise local economies, enhance territorial identity, and reposition places within national or global urban hierarchies (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Pratt, 2009; Scott, 2010). Recent global initiatives such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, now comprising more than 350 members across seven thematic clusters (Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts, and Music), and the expanding World Crafts Cities programme, further reflect a growing policy interest in the potential of know-how linked to specific cultural domains to act as engines of place renewal.

Yet, while flagship museums and creative-industry clusters in major metropolitan centres have been extensively studied, much less attention has been devoted to non-core and ‘left-behind’ places that increasingly seek to recover and valorise a specific cultural field and connected know-how—historically central to their economic base and territorial identity—as a strategy to interrupt trajectories of economic marginalisation and rebuild civic pride (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2017). In particular, the literature has not fully addressed the role of place leadership in initiating, sustaining, or failing to sustain, such forms of culture-led development.

This article addresses this gap by examining how and why culture-led development succeeds—or fails—in revitalising the economy and image of non-core places, with a specific focus on the role of place-based leadership and the geography of opportunities within which such strategies unfold. We adopt an explicitly process-oriented approach, asking what sequence of events and interventions shapes the emergence of culture-led specialisation; who exercises place leadership, and how it evolves over time; and what outcomes—symbolic or material—are ultimately achieved.

Empirically, the paper investigates four non-capital European cities and their surrounding regions that have experienced deep structural decline yet sought to reposition themselves by creatively re-legitimizing and re-imagining a cultural field linked to the history and economy of the place: Angoulême (comics), Antwerp (fashion), Limoges (porcelain / fire arts), and Stoke-on-Trent (ceramics). Despite substantial differences in their demographic size, functional position, and national policy environments, these cities share three important characteristics. They have historically accumulated forms of specialised know-how in a specific cultural field; they have experienced prolonged cycles of deindustrialisation or reputational decline; and they have attempted to leverage cultural domains to reconfigure their territorial image and economic

prospects. This provides an analytically rich terrain for investigating how some places succeed in turning cultural specialisation into a recognised identity.

This study follows a process-oriented, longitudinal comparative design inspired by path-tracing approaches in economic geography. Path-tracing, as elaborated by Sotarauta and Grillitsch (2023) and grounded in critical realist assumptions, aims to reconstruct the unfolding of development trajectories by examining sequences of events, critical junctures and the role of actors within them. It is particularly suited to analysing culture-led development, where outcomes emerge gradually, are shaped by layers of historical context. Rather than seeking linear causality, the approach is concerned with how mechanisms become activated over time and under what conditions they generate recognisable outcomes.

The empirical material combines secondary sources and chrono-systemic mapping adapted from Bergeret et al. (2015). Documentary analysis forms the basis for reconstructing the trajectories of Antwerp, Angoulême and Stoke-on-Trent. Policy documents, strategic plans, academic literature and grey reports were reviewed to identify historical turning points, sectoral transformations and the evolution of cultural policy priorities. For Limoges - the main case - the study draws additionally on primary data collected from 29 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2021 with municipal officials from culture and tourism department at the relevant governance levels (municipality and *département*), representatives of relevant cultural institutions, and artists and entrepreneurs in the porcelain and fire arts sectors. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and anonymity was guaranteed following standard ethical procedures. These interviews provided fine-grained insights into the dynamics of leadership, coordination, and institutional change that were less accessible in the other cases.

The findings show that cultural resources do not automatically produce developmental benefits: their activation depends on leadership configurations capable of aligning narratives, institutions and alliances across scales, as succinctly illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Place Leadership in Culture-Led Development: main findings by research questions

Research questions	Antwerp	Angoulême	Stoke-on-Trent	Limoges
RQ1. Sequencing of culture-led specialisation	Legitimation preceded public intervention (fashion media, avant-garde design). Staging via Fashion 93. Consolidation through institutional layering (Academy, FFI, MoMu, regional support).	Legitimation through national prestige of comics. Staging via festivals, urban iconography, museumification. Consolidation through multi-level governance (CIBD, Magelis).	Legitimation rooted in industrial heritage; required reframing. Staging via flagship heritage projects (Middleport Pottery). Partial consolidation with episodic outcomes.	Legitimation anchored in porcelain heritage. Limited staging and weak narrative materialisation. Incomplete consolidation and fragmented trajectory.
RQ2. Place leadership configuration	Stable and cohesive constellation. Municipality as coordinator, supported by boundary spanners, specialised institutions, and regional actors.	Polycentric and evolving constellation. Leadership shifts from enthusiasts and curators to formal institutions across scales.	Fragmented and project-based leadership. Weak relational density and lack of durable coalitions.	Asymmetric constellation. Strong private symbolic capital but weak strategic coordination and shared vision.
RQ3. Symbolic and material outcomes	High symbolic and material consolidation. Fashion embedded in branding, infrastructure, education, tourism, and economic diversification.	Strong symbolic recognition and durable cultural infrastructure. Moderate economic diversification, reliant on public support.	Selective material outcomes and increased visibility. Symbolic identity remains aspirational and weakly diffused.	Strong historical symbolism but limited contemporary recognition. Uneven material outcomes and contested specialisation.

The article contributes to debates on place leadership and culture-led development by demonstrating how agency interacts with temporally and spatially situated opportunity spaces, and by explaining divergent outcomes among cities with similarly context-specific assets and aspirations.

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