

## SUSTAINABLE PILLARS FOR A CREATIVE CITY. CASE STUDY: CULTURAL HUBS AND ARTIST-RUN SPACES IN THE URBAN AREA OF TIMISOARA.

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**Abstract:** This study, conducted at the beginning of 2025, examines the evolution of the creative city concept and the role of cultural hubs in promoting urban identity and supporting cultural initiatives. Timișoara, European Capital of Culture in 2023, experienced significant transformation in terms of innovative cultural initiatives, with cultural hubs playing a key role in developing cultural actions initiated before and after the implementation of the national program "Timișoara European Capital of Culture." In the European context and amidst increasing diversity in urban connections (both physical and virtual) Timișoara's cultural hubs have become strategic landmarks for defining and promoting the identity of the creative city concept. This study aims to analyze how cultural hubs such as *Ambasada*, *Faber*, *FITT (Timiș County Youth Foundation)*, *Reciproc*, and other artist-run cultural spaces such as *Scârț Loc Lejer*, *Balamuc*, *Indecis*, *MV Sci Art*, and *Casa Jakob Toffler*, contribute to shaping Timișoara's image as a creative city.

**Keywords:** *cultural hub, creative city, creative economy, alternative workspaces, cultural projects*

### 1. Introduction

Culture represents the sum of resources that demonstrate a place's uniqueness and distinctiveness. Past resources can provide inspiration and confidence for the future, as cultural heritage is constantly reinvented, whether through restoring a building or adapting an old craft to contemporary demands. Thus, creativity means not only the constant invention of the new, but also "the ability to appropriately valorize what is old" (Landry, 2008, p.48). The idea of the creative city emerged in the late 1980s along several directions in response to these emerging trends. Initially, it was seen as an aspirational concept: a clear call to encourage open-mindedness and imagination, with the goal of having a significant impact on organizational culture. In its original formulation, the concept of the creative city focused heavily on the potential of cultural industries, as cities were encouraged to concentrate on what made them unique and special. Artistic projects and the reuse of old buildings held special meaning, often, major achievements came from combining the old with the new. In this new urban configuration, creativity becomes one of the main currencies of exchange.

### 2. The concept of creative city

In today's economy, creativity is recognized as a strategic asset (Landry, 2008, p.25). Many Fortune 500 companies use inventive problem-solving methods (such as TRIZ or design thinking) to remain competitive. Thus, creativity becomes a form of urban capital with strategic value, capable of transforming cities into centers of knowledge, culture, and progress. A significant conceptual shift is taking place, focusing on the central role of people and recognizing that the economy is moving from a corporation-centered

system to one driven by people. Cities must now develop not just a business climate, but a *people climate* (Florida, 2002). In the 2000s U.S. context, a new social group or class was emerging, called the *creative class*, made up of demographic segments that valued innovation, expressiveness, and professional freedom. *Clustering* (geographic concentration) plays a vital role in creative spaces, often referred to as *creative quarters*, where the concentration of skills and infrastructure is a central element of the creative economy and milieu. A spatial cluster of activities or concentration of an industry—such as design, biotechnology, or education—thus becomes a valuable urban asset, contributing to the city’s economic and cultural dynamism (Florida, 2002, p.42). Cultural hubs play a significant role in culture-led urban development and regeneration processes, particularly in the context of post-industrial European cities. These often involve the adaptive reuse of former industrial or historical spaces—factories, warehouses, or decommissioned halls—converted into active cultural centers or artistic creation spaces (Bain, 2024). This type of reconversion not only preserves built heritage but also revives economically and socially declining urban areas, reinforcing the role of culture as a transformation agent. Studies on cultural and creative industries (CCI) show that such initiatives can turn abandoned spaces into *vibrant cultural hubs*, revitalizing neighborhoods by attracting visitors, generating jobs, and stimulating the nighttime economy and cultural tourism (Chatzitheodoridis, 2024). These spaces also become inclusive platforms for community gatherings, strengthening urban social cohesion. Many cultural hubs emerge as grassroots community initiatives, born from collaborations between artists, civic organizations, and residents. A relevant example is the Czasoprzestrzeń hub in Wrocław (Poland), which transformed a former tram depot into a cultural center through active community involvement. It hosts dozens of events annually and attracts tens of thousands of visitors, functioning as a vibrant and inclusive community space tailored to local needs (URBACT, 2024). However, integrating such initiatives into formal cultural policies can generate tensions. Studies conducted in the Netherlands highlight a persistent gap between the participatory, grassroots nature of hubs and the top-down goals of cultural policies, which often favor economic and social components over artistic autonomy (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2022). Even after two decades, local authorities still struggle to clearly define the concept of a “creative hub” and align it with public strategies (Pratt, 2021).

From this perspective, the concept of the creative city must be analyzed as an urban center that fosters innovation, economic competitiveness, and social cohesion through creative and cultural activity. Gertler (2004) in *Creative Cities: What are they for, how do they work, and how do we build them?* states that creative cities play a vital role in developing the knowledge economy, attracting skilled, educated labor, and offering environments conducive to interdisciplinary collaboration. In this context, *Ecosens Association* appeared in Timișoara in 2015, introducing the concept of social enterprise through EU funding to professionally integrate marginalized people. Its first project, *Reciproc Café*, was a responsible consumption space aimed at ensuring economic sustainability for its beneficiaries. Scott (2016) places creative cities in the framework of the new economy, linking them with production structures, technology trends, and labor markets, emphasizing urban agglomeration dynamics in *Creative Cities: Conceptual Issues and Policy Questions*. Hall (2000) in *Creative Cities and Economic Development* cites Swedish author Ake E. Andersson, who claims the creative city is the future of any metropolis and those with the know-how to manage these projects will be key agents in building the post-industrial economy. Still, this growth

often relies on traditional economic interventions used to justify reconverting old industrial areas. Cities increasingly adopt the “creative quarter” or “knowledge hub” as go-to solutions for urban growth and regeneration. Evans (2009) further illustrates the semantic and symbolic expansion of the cultural industries, from creative industries to the knowledge and experience economy, often concentrated in declining or former industrial areas. Although cities imitate one another and policies converge, the evolution is driven by the analysis of new economic growth models.

From a European perspective, *FITT (Timiș County Youth Foundation)*, an NGO active since 1990, serves as a cultural hub connecting organizations at the European level. Promoting Council of Europe values, FITT received in 2016 the Quality Label for Youth Centres from the Council of Europe for its *Youth House* in Timișoara—the first and only such recognition in Romania—contributing to the international recognition of Timișoara as a city of European principles and values. Another cultural space that qualifies as a hub is *Casa Jakab Toffler* in the newly revitalized Traian Square. This initiative by the *Casa Jakab Toffler Association* promotes social interaction and connection with lived space through a sustainable approach, supporting community cohesion, neighborhood belonging, and the cultural heritage of the Fabric district, while also tackling discrimination and fostering multicultural exchange. *Scârț* is a unique bar and museum in Timișoara founded by members of the *Auăleu* theater troupe, who created a sustainable artistic space. Alongside its eclectic bar, *Scârț* houses the *Museum of the Communist Consumer*, an interactive space with socialist-era artifacts that visitors can explore for free. With its activist identity, *Scârț* has become a social hub, hosting socially themed plays, street performances, and international festival appearances by the *Auăleu* troupe: “An already iconic independent cultural hub, *Scârț* is a bar, a theater space for *Auăleu*, and home to the *Museum of the Communist Consumer*, opened in 2015. The theater began in 2005 in a garage, hence its name and later moved to this space” (Ionuț Suci, 2019). Grassroots community initiatives have become the foundation for many cultural hubs, driven by collaborations between artists, civic organizations, and local residents. These hubs often arise from the need to create spaces for cultural expression and social interaction, transforming neglected or underused sites into vibrant centers for artistic activity. Flego and Tei (2024) conceptualize cultural and creative hubs as vital platforms for the socio-economic development of cultural and creative industries. They emphasize the diversity of these hubs, ranging from regional projects to independent legal entities, all central to fostering innovation and supporting inclusive, sustainable growth. Boswinkel and van Meerkerk (2023) further highlight the growing policy interest in creative hubs, particularly those led by artists, recognizing their utility in urban regeneration and boosting local economies.

This dynamic leads to a tension between two perspectives: one prioritizing artistic expression and autonomy, and the other focusing on economic and social objectives. Such tensions are evident in Timișoara, where the city’s first cultural hub opened in 2015. Since 2016, the idea of an alternative cultural center has evolved through *Ambasada*, Timișoara’s pioneering independent cultural hub and social enterprise. This space brought together professionals from the creative industries, enabling the implementation of innovative cultural projects. Operated by the *Casa Plai Association* (organizers of the Plai Festival), *Ambasada* was developed as a social enterprise in partnership with NESsT Romania Foundation. Its involvement in the European project *Integrated Support for Social Economy Structures (SISES)* established it as a bridge between local cultural activity and the broader Timișoara European Capital

of Culture project. Notably, *Ambasada* became the first cultural hub in Timișoara to affiliate with *Trans Europe Halles*, a network comprising 90 members across 30 countries. This affiliation enhanced the visibility and connectivity of Timișoara's creative sector, positioning it within a larger European context and encouraging international collaboration. Gill, Pratt, and Virani (2019) examine the "creative hub" as a component of corporate and business ecosystems, analyzing their relationship to creative cities, coworking spaces, and labor cooperatives with a focus on equality and social justice. In the context of Timișoara's preparations for the European Capital of Culture project, *Faber* emerged in 2017. Founded by entrepreneurs from architecture, IT, and culture, *Faber* originated from an initiative to transform an industrial hall within the AZUR complex into a creativity hub. The name "Faber" is derived from the concept of *homo faber*, symbolizing humans shaping their environment through tools and creativity. Like *Ambasada*, *Faber* gained European recognition, becoming a finalist in the *New European Bauhaus 2020* and earning a nomination for the *Mies van der Rohe Award*. These achievements illustrate the growing importance of cultural hubs in the European urban landscape, serving as catalysts for innovation and regeneration while enhancing the international profile of their host cities. The collaborative and entrepreneurial approach of hubs like *Faber* demonstrates how art, technology, and community engagement can reshape urban spaces, making them more dynamic and attractive for both local and international stakeholders.

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*Balamuc – Loc de Joacă* is another artist-run space hosting personal and collaborative projects since 2023. It is an experimental platform with no fixed program run by artists Livia Coloji, Răzvan Cornici, Lucian Barbu, Gavril Pop, and Ana Kun, serving as a collective sketchbook both online and offline. *Indecis*, founded in 2020, follows a similar ethos, an independent, fluid, experimental space born from Timișoara's underground scene. *META Contemporary* has become increasingly visited before and after 2023. Launched by the *META Spatiu Association* in 2017, it connects contemporary artists with the public through exhibitions, residencies, discussions, education,

publications, and events. *MV Sci-Art*, part of this initiative, organizes interdisciplinary multimedia events and, since 2024, runs a café space like *Faber* and *Ambasada*, connecting students, faculty, and artists from local universities. Reflecting on the link between cultural hubs and the creative city, *Andersson and Mellander* (2011) propose a model of interconnectivity between cities and organizations to enhance knowledge sharing through integrated creative communities and sustainable values, driving urban spaces to higher performance. *Gertler* (2024) emphasizes that by providing access to resources and opportunities, creative cities become not just centers of economic production but inclusive environments that benefit entire communities. The concept of “economies of aggregation” refers to the economic benefits from pooling or clustering resources to reduce costs and increase efficiency (Gill, Pratt & Virani, 2019). The *Creative Hubs in Question* volume critically analyzes the role and impact of creative hubs, a central concept in economic and cultural policies yet rarely subjected to rigorous examination. We will thus analyze the *visibility* and *impact* of creative industries clustered around cultural hubs and their contribution to the creative city, reinforcing the city’s reputation both nationally and internationally—in our case, *Timișoara*, European Capital of Culture in 2023.

Comparative Analysis of Nine Cultural and Artist-Run Hubs in Timișoara (*FABER*, *MV Sci-Art*, *AMBASADA*, *FITT*, *Balamuc*, *Reciproc*, *Scârț Loc Lejer*, *Indecis*, *Casa Jakab Töffler*):

According to the first hypothesis, the creative city operates through the aggregation of cultural capital in both symbolic and material spaces (Evans, 2009; Landry, 2008). Most of the hubs analyzed validate this hypothesis, having transformed abandoned, underutilized, or alternative spaces into vibrant cultural infrastructures. These transformations contribute to urban regeneration and a redistribution of symbolic value across the territory. For example, *FABER* operates in a fully restored former industrial hall funded privately, offering space for exhibitions, creative entrepreneurship, and community engagement. It has turned an industrial site into an identity landmark for the city and stands as a key model for urban regeneration with major economic and symbolic impact: “*FABER is an example of revitalization through culture: an industrial hall that has become creative infrastructure.*” *MV Sci-Art* presents a different mode of urban insertion by occupying a ground floor space within a university building (UPT campus), which it transforms into a fluid, multidisciplinary venue open to the general public and oriented around the intersection of art and science. *AMBASADA*, although co-located with *FABER*, retains its distinct profile as a cultural social enterprise—still rare in Romania. By contrast, spaces such as *Balamuc*, *Casa Jakab Töffler*, and *Scârț Loc Lejer* operate in more intimate and unconventional settings (houses, apartments, repurposed old buildings), emphasizing informal, community-centered atmospheres and artistic freedom. These spaces serve as alternative symbolic zones, gravity centers for subcultures, DIY aesthetics, and experimental practices.

The second hypothesis, that creative cities become globally competitive through cultural networks and international exposure (Gertler, 2004; Gill & Pratt, 2019), reveals a varying degree of internationalization among the hubs, offering a strong basis for differentiated analysis. At the top of this spectrum is *FABER*, with participation in events such as Milan Design Week, features in international publications like *Le Monde*, and a consistent presence in European networks, establishing it as a cultural brand ambassador for Timișoara. *MV Sci-Art* develops international relations through institutional partnerships in Norway, Slovakia, and Austria, and runs transnational

projects funded through SEE and EEA grants. These collaborations facilitate epistemic and intellectual mobility between art and science, enhancing both the academic and artistic profile of the city. AMBASADA, as a member of the *Trans Europe Halles* network and through its role in organizing projects such as *JazzXand* hosting international delegations, acts as an interface between the local creative city and broader European cultural ecosystems. In contrast, Indecis and Casa Jakab Töffler maintain occasional international presence through exhibitions or residencies but lack stable cultural networks. *Balamuc – Loc de Joacă ș’altele*, despite some international visibility (e.g., in Athens or Art Encounters), remains rooted in the local underground, favoring informal, non-institutionalized collaborations. The third hypothesis, suggesting that the creative city relies on flexible, participatory networks and environments that foster dynamic cultural interaction (Scott, 2016; Ferilli et al., 2016) is most clearly illustrated by the degree of co-creation, public openness, and participatory mobilization. From this perspective, Balamuc, AMBASADA, Reciproc, and MV Sci-Art are the most representative. *Balamuc – Loc de Joacă ș’altele* presents a radical openness model, where visitors are “invited to the table,” erasing hierarchies between artist and audience. Zines, drawing workshops, and collaborative exhibitions reflect a participatory, shared, and de-institutionalized culture aligned with postmodern creative city theories. AMBASADA, through its *Building.a.community* initiative, constructs a social infrastructure of co-creation, providing physical space and logistical support to local creative entrepreneurs, an example of a cultural hub functioning as an incubator for civic, social, and alternative economic initiatives. *Reciproc* stands out with a unique participatory cultural gastronomy model where sustainable food, urban agriculture, and migration intersect in a space for mediation and social dialogue, including outreach to the Ukrainian community. FABER and FITT, while maintaining more formal structures, also include participatory mechanisms such as open events, youth training, and partnership-building. For instance, FABER organizes workshops for children and former industrial workers, indicating noteworthy social transversal engagement.

Overall, the nine Timișoara-based cultural and artist-run hubs confirm, to varying degrees, the three hypotheses of the creative city as a space of cultural capital, global networks, and flexible co-creation. FABER, *MV Sci-Art*, and AMBASADA stand out as the most comprehensive aggregators, with clear urban impact, internationalization, and sustainable infrastructure. Balamuc, Reciproc, and Indecis bring participatory and experimental vitality rooted in informal networks, social proximity, and authenticity. FITT, *Scârț* Loc Lejer, and Casa Jakab Töffler play an intermediary role, blending community missions with more niche or institutional programming. This diverse palette of cultural models reflects a plural and emergent cultural urban ecology, where the creative city is not a monolithic model but a network of tensions, hybridizations, and distributed energies. Together, these hubs contribute to Timișoara’s image as a dynamic and multifaceted creative ecosystem. While this study is based on a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative interviews and thematic grids with quantitative content analysis of social media activity, it is subject to methodological and epistemic limitations. One key potential bias stems from the researcher’s prior familiarity and collaboration with some of the interviewed cultural managers, which may foster trust and richer data but also affect critical distance and the interpretation of responses. Some interviewees may have presented more diplomatic or curated answers, knowing the researcher personally or being aware of the study’s local relevance. This “insider bias” may

downplay internal tensions or challenges. Hence, researcher reflexivity becomes crucial as an epistemic control mechanism.



Figure 1. *Mind Map visualisation of the Conclusions (made with Whimsical App)*

The conclusions are especially relevant to Timișoara’s specific context as a post-industrial, multicultural, and culturally transitioning city and should not be extrapolated without contextual adaptation. For example, FABER’s role as a “model for urban regeneration” might be replicable only in cities with comparable infrastructure and entrepreneurial networks. The study covers the period from December 2024 to March 2025 (for digital data) and fall 2023 to spring 2025 (for interviews), overlapping with the post-Timișoara 2023 European Capital of Culture phase. This period likely influenced both discourses and strategic repositioning efforts, as many hubs are still undergoing reflection and recalibration. This research offers a layered and generally positive portrayal of Timișoara’s cultural hub network. Still, academic rigor requires acknowledging the researcher’s insider position, epistemic constraints of self-reported data, and the influence of digital algorithms in content selection. By embracing these limitations, the analysis becomes not only a mapping of the creative city but also a critical research exercise, where knowledge is produced relationally, through engagement with the field, its actors, and the reflective practices of the researcher.

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