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Exploring the Micro-Geography of Music Scenes: The Indica Gallery and the Chelsea Hotel

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"All these places have their moments": Exploring the Micro-Geography of Music Scenes: The Indica Gallery and the Chelsea Hotel

Robert C. Kloosterman, Amanda Brandellero |

Hotspots of Cultural Innovation

In the 1960s, a long list of poets, writers, and musicians flocked to the Chelsea Hotel, 222 West 23rd Street, New York (Tippins). Among them Bob Dylan, who moved in at the end of 1964, Leonard Cohen, who wrote *Take This Longing* dedicated to singer Nico there, and Patti Smith who rented a room there together with Robert Mapplethorpe in 1969 (Smith; Bell; Simmons). They all benefited not just from the low rents, but also from the close, often intimate, presence of other residents who inspired them to explore new creative paths.

Around the same time, across the Atlantic, the Indica Bookshop and Gallery, 6 Mason's Yard, London played a similar role as a meeting place for musicians, artists and hangers-on. It was there, on the evening of 9 November 1966, that John Lennon attended a preview of Yoko Ono's first big solo exhibition, *Unfinished Paintings and Objects*. Legend has it that the two met as Lennon was climbing up the ladder of Ono's installation work 'Ceiling Painting', and reaching out to a dangling magnifying glass in order to take a closer look at the single word 'YES' scribbled on a suspended placard (Campbell). It was not just Lennon's first meeting with Yoko Ono, but also his first run into conceptual art. After this fateful evening, both Lennon's private life and his artistry would never be the same again.

There is already a rich body of literature on the geography of music production (Scott; Kloosterman; Watson *Global Music City*; Verboord and Brandellero). In most cases, these studies deal with the city or neighbourhood scales. Micro-geographies of concrete places are rarer, with some notable exceptions that focus on recording studios and on specific venues (cf. Gibson; Watson et al.; Watson *Cultural Production*; van Klyton). Our approach focuses on concrete places that act more like third spaces – something in between or even combining living and working. Such places enable frequent face-to-face meetings, both planned and serendipitous, which are crucial for the exchange of knowledge.

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These two spaces represent iconic *cultural hotspots* where innovative artists, notably (pop) musicians, came together in the 1960s. Because of their many famous visitors and residents, both spaces are well documented in (auto)biographies, monographs on art scenes in London and New York, as well as in newspapers. Below, we will explore how these two spaces played an important role at a time of cultural revolution, by connecting people and scenes to the micro geography of concrete places and by functioning as nodes of knowledge exchange and, hence, as milieus of innovation.

Art Worlds, Scenes and Places

The romantic view that artists are solitary geniuses was discarded already long ago and replaced by a conceptualization that sees them as part of broader social configurations, or art worlds. According to Howard Becker (34), these art worlds consist "of all the people necessary to the production of the characteristic works" – in other words, not just artists, but also "support personnel" such as sound engineers, editors, critics, and managers. Without this "resource pool" the production of art would be virtually impossible. Art worlds are also about the consumption of art. The concept of scene has been used to articulate the local processes of taste making and reputation building, as they "provide ways of social belonging attuned to the demands of a culture in which individuals increasingly define themselves" (Silver et al. 2295). Individuals who share certain aesthetic preferences come together, both socially and spatially (Currid) and locations such as cafés and nightclubs offer important settings where members of an art world may drink, eat, meet, gossip, and exchange knowledge. The urban fabric provides an important backdrop for these exchanges: as Jane Jacobs (181) observed, "old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must come from old buildings."

In order to function as relational spaces, these amenities have to meet two sets of conditions. The first set comprises the locational characteristics, which Durmaz identifies as centrality and proximity. The second set relates to socio-economic characteristics. From an economic perspective, the amenity has to be viable – either independently or through patronage or state subsidies. Becoming a cultural hotspot is not just a matter of good bookkeeping. The atmosphere of an amenity has to be tolerant towards forms of cultural and social experimentation and, arguably, even transgression. In addition, a successful space has to have attractors: persons who fulfil key roles in a particular art world in evaluation, curation, and gatekeeping.

To what extent did the Indica Gallery and the Chelsea Hotel meet these two sets of conditions in the 1960s? We turn to this question now.

A Hotel and a Gallery

The Indica Gallery and the Chelsea Hotel were both highly central – the former located right in the middle of St. James's in the central London Borough of Westminster (cf. Kloosterman) and the latter close to Greenwich Village in Manhattan. In the post-war, these locations provided a vacant and fertile ground for artists, who moved in as firms and wealthier residents headed for the green suburbs. As Ramanathan recounts, "For artists, downtown New York, from Chambers Street in Tribeca to the Meatpacking District and Chelsea, was an ideal stomping ground. The neighbourhoods were full of old factories that had emptied out in the postwar years: they had room for art, if not crown molding and prewar charm" (Ramanathan). Similarly in London, "Despite its posh address the area [the area surrounding the Indica Gallery] then had a boho feel. William Burroughs, Brion Gysin and Anthony Blunt all had flats in the same street." (Perry no pagination). Such central locations were essential to attract the desired attention and interest of key gatekeepers, as Barry Miles – one of Indica's founding members - states: "In those days a gallery virtually had to be in Mayfair or else critics and buyers would not visit" (Miles 73). In addition, the Indica Gallery's next-door neighbour was the *Scotch of St James club*. The then up and coming singer Marianne Faithfull, married to Indica founder John Dunbar, reportedly "needed to be seen" in this "trendy 'in' club for the new rock aristocracy" (Miles 73). Undoubtedly, their cultural importance was also linked to the fact that they were both located in well-connected budding global cities with a strong media presence (Krätke).

Over and above location, these spaces also met important socio-economic conditions. In the 1960s, the neighbourhood surrounding the Chelsea Hotel was in transition with an abundance of available and affordable space. After moving out of the Chelsea Hotel, Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe (Smith) had no difficulty finding a cheap loft to rent nearby. Rates in the Chelsea Hotel – when they were settled, that is - were incredibly low to current standards. According to Tippins (350), the typical Chelsea Hotel room rate in 1967 was \$ 10 per week, which would amount to some \$ 67.30 per week in 2013. Again, a more or less similar story can be told for the Indica Gallery. When Barry Miles, Peter Asher and John Dunbar founded the Gallery in September 1965, the premises were empty and the rent was low: "We paid 19 quid a week rent" according to John Dunbar (Perry). These cheap spaces provided fruitful economic conditions for cultural experimentation.

Innovative relational spaces require not only accessibility in spatial and financial terms, but also an atmosphere conducive to cultural experimentation. This implies some kind of benevolent, preferably even stimulating, management that is willing and able to create such an atmosphere. At the Chelsea Hotel and Indica Gallery alike, those in charge were certainly not first and foremost focused on profit maximisation. Instead they were very much active members of the art worlds themselves, displaying a "taste for creative work" (Caves) and looking for ways in which their spaces could make a contribution to culture in a wider sense. This holds for Stanley Bard who ran the Chelsea Hotel for decades: "Working besides his father, Stanley {Bard} had gotten to know many of these people. He had attended their performances and exhibitions, read their books, and had been invited to their parties. Young and malleable, he soon came to see the world largely from their point of view" (Tippins 166). Such affinity with the artistic scene meant that Bard was more than accommodating. As Patti Smith recalls (100), "you weren't immediately

kicked out if you got behind on the rent ... Mostly everybody owed Bard something". While others recall a slightly less flexible attitude towards missed rents - "... the residents greatly appreciated a landlord who tolerated everything, except, quite naturally, a deficit" (Tippins 132) – the progressive atmosphere at the Chelsea was acknowledged by many others. For example, "[t]he greatest advantage of life at the Chelsea, [Arthur] Miller had to acknowledge, was that no one gave a damn what anyone else chose to do sexually" (Tippins 155).

Similarly at the Indica Gallery, Miles, Asher and Dunbar were not first and foremost interested in making as much money as possible. The trio was itself drawn from various artistic fields: John Dunbar, an art critic for *The Scotsman*, wanted to set up an experimental gallery with Peter Asher (half of the pop duo Peter & Gordon) and Barry Miles (painter and writer). When asked about Indica's origins, Dunbar said: "There was a reason why we did Indica in the first place: to have fun" (Nevin). Recollections of the Gallery mention "a brew pot for the counterculture movement", (Ramanathan) or "a haven for the free-wheeling imagination, a land of free expression and cultural collaboration where underground seeds were allowed to take root" (Campbell-Johnston).

Part of the attraction of both spaces was the almost assured presence of interesting and famous persons, whom by virtue of their fame and appeal contributed to drawing others in. The roll calls of the Chelsea Hotel (Tippins) and of the Indica Gallery are impressive and partly overlapping: for instance, Allen Ginsberg was a notable visitor of the Indica Gallery and a prominent resident of the Chelsea Hotel, whereas Barry Miles was also a long-term resident of the Chelsea Hotel. The guest books read as a cultural who-is-who of the 1960s, spanning multiple artistic fields: there are not just (pop) musicians, but also writers, poets, actors, film makers, fashion designers, and assorted support personnel. If innovation in culture, as anywhere else, is coming up with new combinations and crossovers, then the cross-fertilisation fostered by the coming together of different art worlds in these spaces was conducive to these new combinations. Moreover, as the especially the biographies of Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, Leonard Cohen, and Patti Smith testify, these spaces served as repositories of accessible cultural capital and as incubators for new ideas. Both Leonard Cohen and Patti Smith benefited from the presence of Harry Smith who curated the *Anthology of American Music* at the Chelsea Hotel. As Patti Smith (115) recalls: "We met a lot of intriguing people at the Chelsea but somehow when I close my eyes to think of them, Harry is always the first person I see". Leonard Cohen was also drawn to Harry Smith: "Along with other assorted Chelsea residents and writers and music celebrities who were passing through, he would sit at Smith's feet and listen to his labyrinthine monologue" (Simmons 197).

Paul McCartney, actively scanning the city for new and different forms of cultural capital (Miles; Kloosterman) could tap into different art worlds through the networks centred on the Indica Gallery. Indeed he was credited with lending more than a helping hand to Indica over the years: "Miles and Dunbar bridged the gap between the avant-garde rebels and the rock stars of the day, principally through their friendship with Paul McCartney, who helped to put up the shop's bookshelves, drew its flyers and designed its wrapping paper. Later when Indica ran into difficulties, he lent his friends several thousands of pounds to pay their creditors" (Sandbrook 526).

Sheltered Spaces

Inevitably, the rather lenient attitude towards money among those who managed these cultural breeding spaces led them to serious financial difficulties. The Indica Gallery closed two years after opening its doors. The Chelsea Hotel held out much longer, but the place went into a long period of decline and deterioration culminating in the removal of Stanley Bard as manager and banishment from the building in 2007 (Tippins). Notwithstanding their patchy record as viable business models, their role as cultural hotspots is beyond doubt. It is possibly because they offered a different kind of environment, partly sheltered from more mundane moneymaking considerations, that they could thrive as cultural hotspots (Brandellero and Kloosterman). Their central location, close to other amenities (such as night clubs, venues, cafés), the tolerant atmosphere towards deviant lifestyles (drugs, sex), and the continuous flow of key actors – musicians of course, but also other artists, managers and critics – also fostered cultural innovation.

Reflecting on these two spaces nowadays brings a number of questions to the fore. We are witnessing an increasing upward pressure on rents in global cities – notably in London and New York. As cheap spaces become rarer, one may question the impact this will have on the gestation of new ideas (cf. Currid). If the examples of the Indica Gallery and the Chelsea Hotel are anything to go by, their instrumental role as cultural hotspots turned out to be financially unsustainable against the backdrop of a changing urban milieu. The question then is how can cities continue to provide the right set of conditions that allow such spaces to bud and thrive? As the Chelsea Hotel undergoes an alleged \$40 million dollar renovation, which will turn it into a boutique hotel (Rich), the jury is still out on whether central urban locations are destined to become – to paraphrase John Lennon's 'In my life', places which 'had their moments' – or mere repositories of past cultural achievements.

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