

Resourceful Cities

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Space, social networks and the neighbourhood in digital production: the role of events in Tech City, London

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Abstract

Face-to-face interactions and social networking are critical for the operation of digital industries. Several studies about the patterns of concentration of these firms highlight the role of proximity in supporting these processes of interaction and industry events – such as firm’s parties, seminars and other ceremonies - are considered key spatial settings (Pratt, 2000; Neff, 2004). Events thus provide an additional element through which to examine the relationships between the neighbourhood, local space, and social networks. Whilst this debate has focused mainly in residential neighbourhoods, it is of particular importance for working neighbourhoods such as Shoreditch “Tech City” in London. This paper aims to contribute to this debate by examining the role of the events as space-time settings for social (and work) relationships in a neighbourhood of digital production.

The study focuses in the area around Old Street, London, also known as “Tech City” and “Silicon Roundabout”, which is seen as an emergent location for technology firms, mainly related to web design, software development and other digital services. Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews with events providers and workers in digital firms and observation of events in the area, the paper examines (1) the role of events in social interactions within the digital industry and (2) the spatial conditions of events that support the multiple roles they play.

The paper shows that events play a key role in structuring interaction within the digital industry both in what concerns the work practices that involve interaction and the social networks of the industry. They are the most important spatial setting for networking in the area but they are also used for the practices of learning and displaying work. They provide entry points to the industry’s social networks whilst mediating access to them. The degree of accessibility (in spatial, monetary, or personal terms) of the different events seems to establish more or less open spheres of social interaction within the industry, governing the access to the different social networks. In respect to the way they operate as spatial settings, events structure interaction through three interrelated manners: by creating a space-time setting and the collective atmosphere to interact; by providing appropriate spatial conditions for the type of interactions aimed at in each event; and by managing attendees’ interaction through strategies such as controlling access and mediating behaviour.

The findings of the study highlight the complex relationships between space and social networks and the role of particular places in creating opportunities for meaningful interaction. In the case of working neighbourhoods, structured interaction is important to link people in the industry; events are the critical space-time settings for this type of interaction and hence for forming and developing the industry's social networks. The location of digital industry events shows that "Tech City" neighbourhood plays an important role as a place for the industry's social networks but that other areas in London are also relevant suggesting that events may contribute to the subjective definitions of the neighbourhood's boundaries by this professional group.

References

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