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Design as a driver for economic growth in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's creative industries are a powerhouse of economic activity which require dynamic and sustainable collaborative networks, but are compromised by limited understanding and support at government level. This is further compounded by an immature and unconnected network of creative communities, many of whom are unfamiliar with the concepts of collaboration and innovation as a positive and embedded part of their design and business processes. In Northern Ireland, the legacy of socio-political difficulty and a pervading risk-averse culture has resulted in low innovation league table rankings which has led to a reduced confidence in its ability to compete globally using design as a driver. The study uses international exemplars to propose a new paradigm for how innovation, design, and the development of a sustainable creative ecosystem can work in an advantageous way for Northern Ireland's economic growth. It offers a novel model of design and innovation and develops proposals for future policies and practices in the pursuit of sustainable internationally-focused creative excellence.

Introduction

Most official Northern Ireland documentation highlighting statistics and reviews for the Creative Industries (CI) fails to specifically recognise design as a distinct and essential factor in economic success. Design in Northern Ireland is characterised by micro and macro businesses of up to 4/5 people, medium-sized agencies and consultancies, and freelance focused networks which constitute the current professional sector. Unlike other areas such as the built environment and education, there is no policy or ministerial advisory committee that promotes the value of creative design practice in Northern Ireland. Similarly, where many economic strategies have recognised and adopted a creative cultural space within capital cities as a driver for tourism (e.g. Shoreditch, London; Temple Bar, Dublin; Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain) Belfast does not have a physical space nor a clear government-backed advocate or advisory body to lead design policy or commission academic research for the creative industries. According to the Northern Ireland Science Park Knowledge Economy Index Report (NISP Connect, 2014), the key impediments to economic success are talent, culture, risk capital, although knowledge sharing within a collaborative environment/network which has been recognised globally as a catalyst for growth. For example, Co-Society produced a report on the best 50 examples of business collaboration, which highlighted that design and innovation is at the core of the process of the majority of the highlighted companies. According to Turiera and Cros, collaboration is the key to a better economy, *"The future is in multiplying the capacities of individual companies to allow for new products and services to emerge, and with them, a new economic power".* Moreover, John Maeda highlights design as a key constituent within the entrepreneurial ecosystem and FastCoDesign advocate its importance within knowledge/technology transfer: *"With design capturing more and more venture capital dollars, there's a shift occurring in tech. Before, tech companies saw design as something to spray on a product at the end—think of the generic beige case you might slap a desktop PC into, but increasingly, the companies that are making the biggest splash are integrating design into every product from the beginning"* (Fastcodesign, 2015).

Given the evolving nature of the design discipline and newer modes of practice (e.g. Service, Experience Design, and App Development), this article outlines existing Northern Ireland networks and proposes a new sustainable design ecosystem which accommodates evolutionary, collaborative and contemporary practices and research.

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Context

Moggridge stated *"Few people think about it or are aware of it. But there is nothing made by human beings that does not involve a design decision somewhere."* (IDEO, 2015)

In recent years, the emergence of a technology-literate world of smart cities, mobile technologies, and new working, governmental, societal, and cultural structures has created a renaissance in the design sector. Emerging disciplines are coming to the forefront to keep up with the demand of a fast evolving sector including User Experience (UX), Service Design, Organisation Design, User Interface, Interaction Design and the use of additive manufacturing and other digital prototyping software tools are now regular practice.

Not only is the design sector an inherently collaborative network where multi-disciplinary professionals work together to solve a problem, but design thinking is also a key component used within other businesses. It is common practice for designers who take a user-centred approach to their work, to co-design alongside their user group and combine forces with other disciplines (engineers, psychologists, anthropologists) to achieve a more effective solution. An example of this type of design practice is IDEO, one of the world's largest and most successful design and innovation companies who originated the term 'design thinking' and place as much emphasis on solving business and cultural needs as the more standardised expectation of brand and product solutions. *"We identify new ways to serve and support people by uncovering latent needs, behaviors, and desires...We help organizations build creative culture and the internal systems required to sustain innovation and launch new ventures"*(IDEO, 2014). In Northern Ireland, there is little evidence of comparable practices using innovative processes or methodologies to companies like IDEO. The region's design sector is compact with the majority of its most progressive companies based in Belfast (Northern Ireland Design Alliance, 2014) (Digital Circle, 2014), and smaller practices serving regional and localised needs. The dominant models of innovative practice are based on larger multi-disciplinary corporations (Kelley, 2008) yet the majority of the Northern Ireland design industry are operating in micro business format: companies with less than 5 people employed (Creative & Cultural Skills, 2014). The aim of this research is to gain insights and understand the dynamics of the NI design sector, and to describe the operating eco-system and its relationship to strategy and policy.

Almost all of the official Northern Ireland published government reviews and documentation in the past 10-20 years to 2014, show a lack of focus on design as a contributing sector in the CI. It has been the focus of one recent mapping report by Creative and Cultural Skills (Creative & Cultural Skills, 2014) and given minor recognition in a handful of Government reports (Committee for Culture, Arts & Leisure, 2013). When undertaking scoping research to determine the value of design in the CI of Northern Ireland, there seems to be a lack of understanding or appreciation of its value from within government. This was reflected in the *'All Ireland Creative Industries Conference 2014'*, hosted by the Department of Culture Arts & Leisure (DCAL), when it omitted the design sector from its agenda and chose instead to focus on NI Screen and animation.

Although DCAL are the responsible government body for the Creative Industries, there is still no policy or ministerial advisory committee that promotes the value of design in Northern Ireland. There is no physical space or council that advises on design policy or academic research for the Creative Industries. However, more recently the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have acknowledged the need to drive design as sub-sector of the Creative Industries referring to *"The commissioning of a cross-departmental design policy, in collaboration with the NI Design Alliance, and that consideration is given to developing and supporting a design hub from which government departments and other public authorities could seek advice on how best to enhance the design industries within their remit. The Committee welcomes the work of Invest NI in advancing the design agenda"* (Committee for Culture, Arts & Leisure, 2013).

The holistic overview of the CI in Northern Ireland seems generally reassuring, with at least fourteen industry bodies and/or centres promoting various strands of the nine sectors: NI Screen, Creative & Cultural Skills, NORIBIC, Nerve Centre, Digital Circle, Royal Television Society NI, Honeycomb, NI

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Theatre Association, CultureTECH, Generator NI, Creative Skillset, Craft NI, Oh Yeah Centre, NI Design Alliance. However, only one of these syndicates truly supports design (NI Design Alliance), whilst others connected to design, have a more fragmented and cross-disciplinary allegiance to digital technology.

Due to the growth of a fast moving tech and digital industry, the design sector is becoming increasingly disorientated with how to present itself, how it's perceived and how it fits into the new and emerging world of technology and knowledge economy. When investigating how major cities/countries officially represent design, it is understood that the sector is seen as more of an engine or 'umbrella brand', which allows for different disciplines to be housed 'under one roof'. The Design Council in London has evolved into a design thinking hub where *"Working with designers and other disciplines, we tackle major issues like health, ageing and community cohesion. We help foster innovation in business and public services, and improve our built environment"* (The Design Council, 2014). It is at the forefront of using a more intelligent approach and methodology in helping to make people's lives better through design. In the 'design disciplines' section of their expertise, they have highlighted twelve categories including diverse fields like digital, architecture, policy and service. In the USA, Fast Company magazine is revered as one of the most innovative publications for design and innovation in the world: *"Fast Company inspires a new breed of innovative and creative thought leaders who are actively inventing the future of business"* (Anon., 2014). It acknowledges the prominence of design in *'CoDesign'* which is one of its major online sub-sectors, alongside CoExist, CoCreate and CoLabs. These four sectors are all interlinked using innovation at their root and use interdisciplinary influences amongst all of their categories.

In comparison, the design sector of Northern Ireland includes traditional categories like graphics, branding, communications, product, and web (Northern Ireland Design Alliance, 2014) as part of their portfolio of expertise. It is slow to grasp the relevance of emerging user-centred disciplines like Experience and Service Design and its relevance to successful digital solutions, with only a handful of jobs currently available in this field. In comparison to the London market, there are multiple companies offering UX roles with a continuous demand to fill job vacancies (Just UX Jobs, 2014), claiming a large percentage of the UK design workforce from various backgrounds. However, when seen as a separate community, the digital (web and games) sector is strong in NI and has good networks showcasing platforms and incentives like Refresh Belfast and CoderDojo.

In the initial stages of this research there was a focus on collating the current stance on Northern Ireland government creative industries, cultural and proposed innovation policies. It investigated current creative eco-systems, including established and emerging design cultures. Future research will look at the contribution of micro creative businesses to the social, cultural and economic environment. How do their ripples form? What are the support mechanisms for their initiation, maintenance and growth? What are the behaviours in the workplace of design companies? What sort of early stage eco-system needs to be put in place within NI society to nurture confident risk-takers entering in to the private sector? How does the historic difficulties of Northern Ireland culture affect the life and work of designers who train and work in the country? How diverse is the skillset and mind-set of the NI designer? How does NI Government react to the challenges of becoming a 'creative country/city' given the cultural and political hindrances?

In the wider context of country representation of the Creative Industries in the UK, Northern Ireland is by far the weakest region in the UK. In comparison, a number of formal design/creative industry bodies have been implemented in England, Scotland and Wales. Creative Britain was at the forefront of establishing the creative industry blueprint for the UK. England has an array of collectives and quangos ranging from The Design Council, NESTA and Innovate UK to more focussed initiatives like Tech City. Wales has recognised initiatives like Design Wales and SEE Platform, championing the strategic value of design. Creative Scotland also acts as a national advisory agency for the arts, screen and creative industries. The Republic of Ireland have a good stance in supporting design with an official body for design membership (Institute of Designers Ireland) and the Design & Crafts Council Ireland, which is the national economic organisation for the design and craft industry in Ireland. In comparison, the current model of how design is used and supported by NI government is fragmented and confusing. Minimal design support is offered through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and official government sectors like Invest Northern Ireland (InvestNI) who offer design advice to businesses. As departmental overviews officially show that Design is a sector within the Creative Industries (DCAL), the most efficient way of gaining support as a designer or client who requires design services, is via Invest NI (DETI).

Although Fig. 1 outlines a viewpoint of how the design sector works with Government, it is not reflective of the general day to day operations of how the design sector operates and acquires clients. Ongoing research into the complexities of how the NI Design sector works (internally and externally) will gather data using social science research methods and will be published in future.

Although there is limited research into the NI design sector, Creative and Cultural Skills commissioned a report for the Northern Ireland Design Alliance which aimed to map the design industry of NI in 2014. This report showed that the large majority of thriving design businesses in NI were operating in the communications/graphics and web/interactive disciplines, with the remaining sectors (Interior, Product etc) not as active. It also proved that over half of design businesses in NI were operating at micro level, *"55.6% of respondents to the survey where business owners in their own right, 28.5% of respondents were employed within a design business (not as the owner), and 16% were members of an in-house design team in a non-design business.... Over half of the businesses who responded were either sole traders or businesses that employed five people or fewer"* (Creative & Cultural Skills, 2014). The report also acknowledged that a large proportion of design businesses (73%) collaborate with other designers as a means of optimising their range of services and *"In terms of the NI Design industry, there is clearly an appetite for the creation of a formal design*

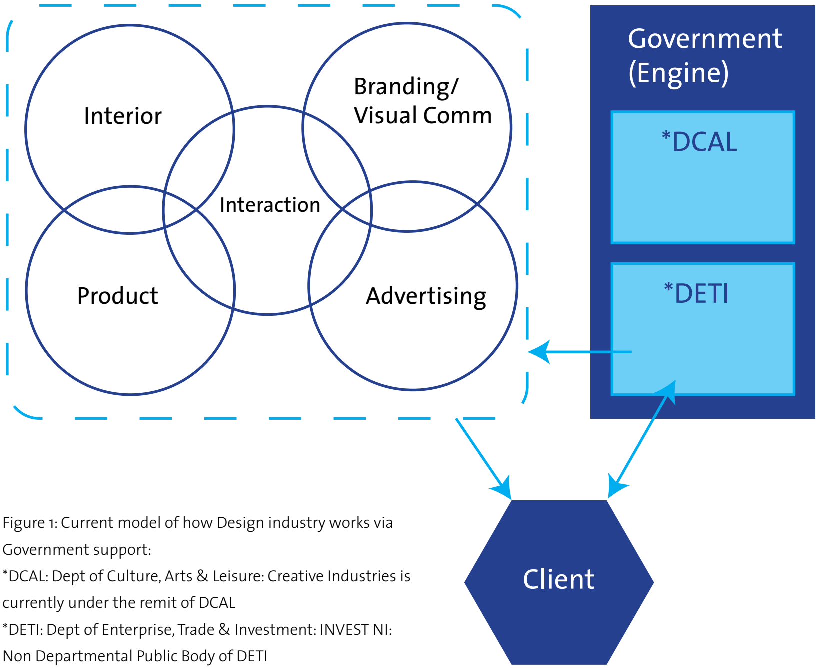

Figure 1: Current model of how Design industry works via Government support:
*DCAL: Dept of Culture, Arts & Leisure: Creative Industries is currently under the remit of DCAL
*DETI: Dept of Enterprise, Trade & Investment: INVEST NI: Non Departmental Public Body of DETI

industry body, with some 44% of respondents stating they would like to access support from this in future" (Creative & Cultural Skills, 2014). The large percentage of designers who claim to be collaborating is currently being examined further to understand whether it is a necessity (lack of skills from within company) or an intentional part of their design process.

It has been recognised and debated during scoping research with the Northern Ireland design community that success, recognition and growth tends to happen with the support of some key influencers. The metaphoric use of *'big fish, small pond'*, has a particular significance in conversations which attempt to underpin the ecological make-up of a design culture in a small population. It is the assumption that these *'key influencers'* help shape the direction of current NI design practice and in some cases could be associated to the formation of sub-cultures within an existing, yet small, design culture. What must be established is whether *'key influencers'* are an integral component in the success of comparative creative cities and established design cultures? Can being an *'influencer'* be equated to either an authoritarian or democratic way of influencing? Is the current eco-system predisposed by an *'influenced'* construct or by a more *'fluid'* organic nature? What would a utopian vision of a NI Design culture be?

When discussing the intricacies involved in creating 'micro-utopias', John Woods argues that *"a transformation of society can take place once we can create visions, ideals and proven methods that are desirable, attainable, reproducible and maintainable"* (Wood, 2007). However, we are already accustomed to new and emerging ways of sharing information using open source, social medias/networks and crowdfunding *"in which decisions can be based on a more local, positive, spontaneous, co-creative and emergent process"* (Wood, 2007). He sees a vision for a *"different type of democracy, one that is a network of equal parts, each responsible for the whole"* (Wood, 2007) and one that allows us to dream in a more holistic way as designers.

Aside from the socio-political acceptance of being part of the UK, Northern Ireland is historically one of the more complex political regions in the world with its difficult history and yet optimistic vision for sustained progression. It is also perceived as a safety net for public sector workers, who as a sector dominate the workforce of Northern Ireland "at least 60% of public spending here is on *wages. There are 220,000 people working in the public service as a whole which includes the police, teachers and others. The civil service alone employs around 24,000 people"* (Telegraph, 2014). There is an element of risk averseness in Northern Ireland society (Dept of Enterprise Trade & Investment, 2013), and after informal discussions with various employees in differing job sectors, it is noted that employees in Northern Ireland tend to have a preference towards a *'job for life'*. This could be to do with various factors including a lack of opportunity, cultural behaviour or a desire to remain rooted and play safe, but it could also be considered a block to innovation. Ongoing research is collating data on the Northern Ireland design sectors' opinion and attitude to risk, innovative practices and perception.

In 'Who's Your City?', Florida argues that citizens of some of the most creative and innovative places in the world elected to be there, *"Some three in four residents of fourteen large global cities – London, Paris, Tokyo, Sydney, Shanghai, Beijing, and others – report that they "chose" their city, according to a 2008 survey of more than 8,500 people"* (Florida, 2008). He goes on to discuss two different categories of citizen; the mobile and the rooted. Mobile people are considered more aligned to progressing careers and economic opportunities that require geographical moves. Rooted citizens are tied to place, although it is recognised that they may have differing levels of fortune that make them rooted. Indeed he suggests, *"Not all of those rooted are stuck because of economic circumstance...some are satisfied with their lives, even though they know they could potentially do better elsewhere"* (Florida, 2008). When relating this information to the dynamics of a fast moving job sector in the broader design industry, it is important to gain an understanding of how much movement occurs in the Northern Ireland job market and investigate the patterns of localised job flow (design) both nationally and internationally. What is the contemporary perception of life in Northern Ireland and is it a place that international designers would consider living and working in? A factor that needs to be considered when analysing these questions and responses is the notion of Belfast/Derry being a creative city. How would it compare against other creative cities and does it have the correct infrastructure for a successful outcome?

A number of studies have attempted to evaluate how creative a city is, with the most notable being Landry and Hyams 'Creative City Index' (Landry, 2014) They developed an holistic method of assessing the city and in doing so discovered *"their creative abilities and potential, a precondition for downstream innovations and economic and cultural vigour. This strategic tool provides a rounded framework for thinking so good policies become easier to achieve"* (Landry, 2014). The Creative Cities Index uses a mixture of methods to evaluate a city, with particular relevance to an insider and outsider perspective. Twenty cities have been evaluated including Adelaide, Helsinki, Cardiff and Seville and the results showed a massive diversity of views, particularly where political frameworks were discussed between the young and the old. *"Cities are only creative if they display a culture, attitudes and a mind-set open to imaginative thinking, widely visible. Many cities have inventive projects in them, which does not mean they are creative as a whole. Uncreative places clearly decline and fail, since they do not interrogate their past and present or reassess their resources and future prospects"* (Landry, 2014).

When Richard Florida discusses the 'creative class' and the key ingredients that help form creative societies, he places emphasis on diversity and openness. He argues that a 'creative class' favour a more open-minded and tolerant viewpoint on society, *"What they're seeking is an environment that is open to differences – of gender, sexual practice or race, or even person idiosyncrasies"* (Florida, 2012). This would place Northern Ireland in a creative (ethical) dilemma as it is the only UK country that is yet to legalise same-sex marriages and has a recent history of 'hate crimes' and intolerance towards immigrants.

In the book *'What Made Now in Northern Ireland'*, many authors contribute to the bigger historical and contemporary picture of life in Northern Ireland. In the chapter discussing the partition of Ireland, Dennis Kennedy compares the 'Green South' to the 'Black North', *"...even with its imperfections, the Republic is still viewed as a model, modern European state in stark contrast to a Northern Ireland seen as still wrestling with religious hatreds more appropriate to the 16thC than the 21stC"* (Crozier., Froggatt, 2008). However, given the political flavour of this book, it is relevant to get a more measured social outlook from within NI society, allowing for interrogation into the past and assessment of the present, but also focussing on future possibilities which in totality, are a better fit to the objectives in Creative City Index.

Although Froggatt's book was written before the collapse of the Irish economy, it acknowledges the strong attributes of the Irish brand as seen across the world, which still remain in place today. Now that the Irish economy is in predicted recovery (Duffy et al, 2014), Ireland is starting to understand the relevance and value of the Creative Industries and with particular understanding of the design discipline, is showcasing itself as the Year of Irish Design in 2015. This is a major accomplishment for the Irish Government as it recognises the value and outward reach of good design and the impact that it can have on international perception. In comparison, Northern Ireland still has a sporadic and fragmented approach to dealing with design. At times it seems saturated with start-up workshops and InvestNI advisory assistance, but still lacks a 'one-stop-shop' for a design agenda.

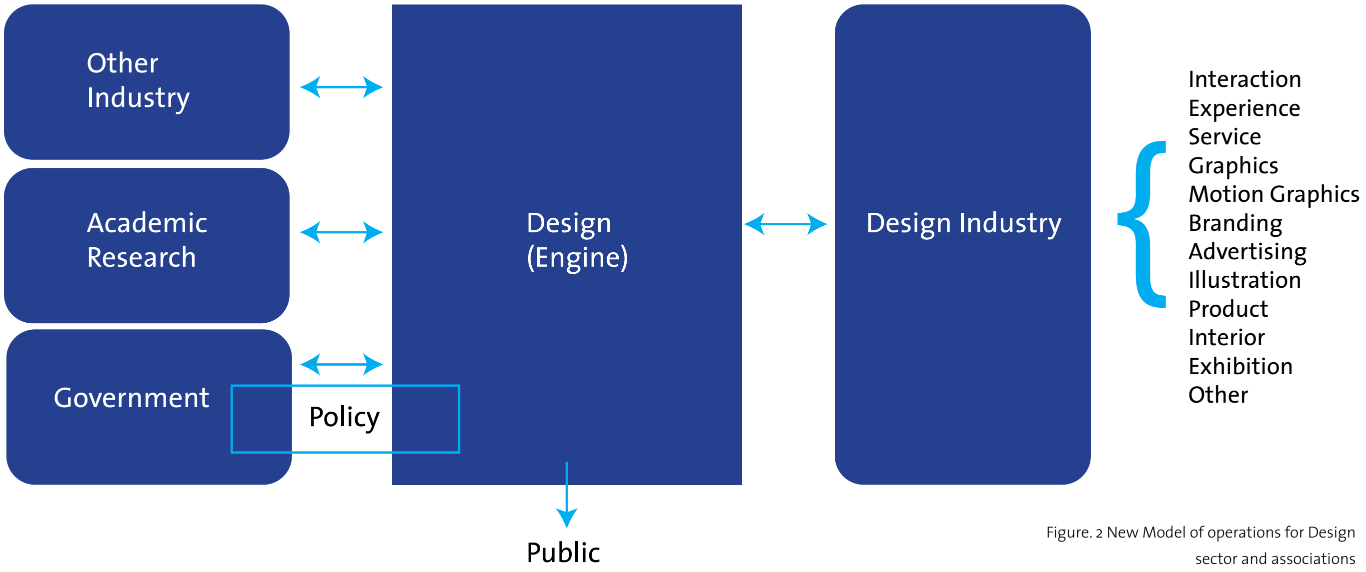

Figure. 2 New Model of operations for Design sector and associations

As a *'new'* Northern Ireland emerges, accepting its history and political legacies, there is a chance to reconsider identity and how the cultural and creative industries might shape it, acknowledging its own 'creative class'. With its strengths firmly rooted in music, arts, film and TV, the government recognises the immediate value of successful artists and productions such as Game of Thrones and globally recognised musicians when portrayed to a worldwide audience. Although recognised as a huge economic success, these ventures are still relatively small in official CI employment statistics for Northern Ireland and therefore there is a desire and need to capitalise further on CI disciplines which are well populated and have the potential for future innovation. Design industries can act upon this due to the strong creative population in NI and can use innovation as a core strength, broadening its horizons to be acknowledged as an integral part of the knowledge economy.

As ongoing research into this area provides new insights, one of the key objectives is to propose a new sustainable model of operations for how the design industry works with Government and its own sector. In Fig. 1 the current model shows a fragmented approach where Northern Ireland Government are seen as the 'engine', distributing funds and initiatives via DETI. As the Creative Industries is housed within DCAL, this suggests a confusing configuration for how the design sector is handled and perceived. Fig 2 suggests a new model of operation, which removes the sector from both DCAL and DETI, creating a new model of how a central design *'engine'* could influence policy, support the design sector, collaborates with other business and be transparent to the public. Putting a design *'engine'* central to the core of the model, strengthens its position as an influencer and partner to innovation. It also creates a foundation structure that can flourish through collaboration and be pitched against the world's leading innovative business communities. In a recent study (KPCB, 2015), Maeda reported designer/engineer ratios of 1 to 4 or 1 to 5 in early stage start-ups. In previous years this would have been reported as 1 to 15 or 1 to 30. The contemporary mixture of design, business and engineering / science is acknowledged as a catalyst to innovation by Maeda, who proposes that *"Great design is not just about 'design'. To achieve great design, you need great business thinking/ doing — to effectively invest in design — and you need great engineering — to achieve unflagging performance"* (KPCB, 2015).