

Marginality as strategy: Leveraging peripherality for creativity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epn**Gernot Grabher**

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Abstract

This is an account on peripherality, dissociation, and outsiders. It is, however, not a story about a marginal backwater region whose fate is sealed by geography and history; and it does not resonate with the standard narrative of regional suffering imposed by a lack of centrality. In this account, peripherality does not feature as destiny, but as the result of a deliberate choice to shield creativity and dissenting ideas from the mimetic pressures of the mainstream. Moreover, rather than as a static dualism, periphery and center are regarded as relationally constituted and functionally interdependent both with regard to the generation of novelty as well as to the valuation of creativity. This account demonstrates how self-chosen peripherality was leveraged to instigate an architectural movement that elevated outsiders to world-fame as *Baukünstler*, and that transformed a provincial Austrian region into an international center of architectural creativity.

Keywords

Peripherality, outsider, creativity, valuation, architecture

The urban-age concord

Humanity, as we are incessantly reminded, has entered the urban age. To underscore the significance of this prophetic revelation, cities are routinely eulogized as harbingers of progress and emancipation, as the locus of innovation and creativity. The city is no less than the place where the nation's genius is expressed (Glaeser, 2011: 7). And in fact, the historical record of cities in engendering artistic, scientific or societal creativity from the ancient Greece polis over Renaissance Florence, Fin de Siècle Vienna, Modern Art Paris to New York's "Warhol Economy" (Currid-Halkett, 2008) is impressive. Even a cursory glance at

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the genealogy of creativity seems to attest nothing less than the irrefutable “triumph of the city” (Glaeser, 2011).

More recently, though, discords began to mingle with the harmonious choir praising the allegedly greatest invention of humanity. Urban praise is increasingly confronted with the admonition of an “urban bias” (see, for example, Eder, 2018; Shearmur, 2017). The fixation with the unique affordances and achievements of urban places, as the critique maintains, has systematically impoverished our understanding of creativity in the periphery. The term periphery routinely amounts to hardly more than a residual category for all those pitiable places that, despite their historical and geographical specificities, share a syndrome, not to say a destiny. They are deficient places with a fundamental lack of those quintessential urban qualities that fuel innovation: Jacobs-externalities, Florida-amenities, and Glaeser-density. Due to these deficiencies, “peripheral areas are, and are likely to remain, on the receiving end of economic trends” (Rodriguez-Pose and Fitjar, 2013: 370).

The engagement with creativity in the periphery, consequently, is mostly an engagement with options to compensate for the notorious deficiencies of peripheries. A first line of reasoning foregrounds the crucial role of mobility in mitigating peripherality (see, for example, Jones and Corbridge, 2010). Mobility as a means to access sources of innovation beyond peripheries can range from the short-term commute over the temporary copresence at events like trade-fairs or conferences to the longer-term research stay (Brinks et al., 2018). A second strand of inquiry focuses on strategies to compensate for the absence of local knowledge spillovers and of the buzz emanating from high levels of local interactivity by embarking on strategic trans-local collaboration. By establishing formalized collaboration, physical proximity is substituted for by cognitive and organizational proximity (Fitjar and Rodriguez-Pose, 2011; see also Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2014). A third perspective revolves around public policies to mitigate peripherality by establishing innovation infrastructures built around university institutes in particular (Eder, 2018: 9; Melançon and Doloreux, 2013). Regardless of how these drawbacks are compensated for, creativity in these perspectives occurs, if at all, *despite* a peripheral location.

The relational constitution of center and periphery

The first aim of this commentary is to reverse the prevailing perspective in economic geography, and to perceive periphery not as an obstacle to, but as a potential asset for creativity (see, for example, Schwartz, 2003; Singh and Fleming, 2010). Whereas economic geography rarely embraced such a point of view (for a notable exception, see Glückler, 2014), the engagement of sociology with peripherality as an asset for creativity can, in fact, be traced back to Georg Simmel. Although Simmel ([1908]1992) was not concerned with peripherality in geographical terms, his conceptualization of “the stranger” elucidates the benefits of peripherality in a relational sense. Ever since Simmel’s ([1908]1992) portrayal of the emblematic stranger, outsiders, mavericks or misfits, despite their marginality, have occupied a prominent position in the exploration of creativity (see, for example, Jones et al., 2016; Patriotta and Hirsch, 2016): “Actors at the fringes of the field are freer to experiment with unconventional ideas because they are less constrained by role expectations or peer pressures and, therefore, more likely to champion dissenting ideas threatening the accepted canons of the field” (Cattani et al., 2016: 127).

The second aim of this commentary is to widen the perspective on creativity from the generation of novelty to the valuation of creativity. Economic geography so far has primarily been concerned with the conditions for engendering creativity, and neglected that creativity has also to be recognized and accepted as such (for an exception, see Jeannerat, 2013).

As again Simmel ([1900]2003) already reminded us, value is not an inherent property of artefacts. Value has to be performed through negotiations between producer and audience, between individual and field (Hutter and Stark, 2015): Creativity, “is not the product of single individuals but of social systems making judgements about individuals’ products” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 314). Although peripherality might benefit the inception of novelty, centrality is essential for the “nexus work” (Lingo and O’Mahony, 2010) between creator and audience to authenticate the value of the novelty (Sgourev, 2015). These negotiations of value habitually are framed by “cicerones” who dispose of the symbolic resources to validate novelty (Karpik, 2010).

The third aim of this commentary is to push beyond the prevailing understanding of centrality and peripherality as adamant fate sealed by geography and history. On the one hand, actors might deliberately choose a peripheral position as outsider to shield their creativity from the isomorphic pressures of the field (Patriotta and Hirsch, 2016: 882). In this perspective, peripherality does not equal the “focused naïveté” (Merton, 1973: 518) resulting from ignorance of the mainstream, but a deliberate dissociation from the orthodoxy. On the other hand, creative agency might induce a reversal of the attribution of centrality and peripherality. Creative outsiders who transit between center and periphery might catalyze shifts in evaluative frames (Powell and Sandholtz, 2012) in the course of which the former periphery morphs into a center of a new creative movement. Center and periphery, then, cannot be reduced to a static dualism, but rather are relationally constituted and functionally interconnected (Hautala and Ibert, 2018).

The commentary seeks to advance this perspective with a “strategic narrative” (George and Bennett, 2005) of a path-breaking architectural movement originating in the Austrian province of Vorarlberg that later should acquire world-fame as *Baukünstler* [construction artists, literally translated]. A strategic account is based on a subset of historical facts that permits to systematize existing knowledge in a way that promotes theoretical advancement. This analytical strategy is intended to sharpen, illustrate, and ground theoretical arguments, but not to provide an empirical test in a strict sense (Cattani et al., 2017: 970).

Creativity: Peripherality as programmatic choice

Architecture without architects

As the outermost western province of Austria and in maximum (spatial and cultural) distance to the capital Vienna, the federal *Land* Vorarlberg appears as the emblematic peripheral region. Although Vorarlberg neighbors on south-west Germany and east Switzerland, these borders up until more recently, remained surprisingly impermeable in socio-cultural terms; and towards the east, the Arlberg massif for centuries acted and was invoked as a natural barrier to the rest of Austria. The geographical peripherality of the province resonated with a deep-felt self-conception as ethnically and culturally different from the rest of Austria (Barnay, 1988).

In terms of architectural practice, peripherality implied that the region remained largely unaffected by the architectural modernism of the 1920s and the socialist utopianisms. Rather, architecture originated from the rural praxis of self-construction. Deeply enmeshed in reciprocal relations of neighborly help, building was integral part of rural self-subsistence and essential medium for strengthening community coherence (Krammer and Scheer, 1977: 111). Self-construction as a pervasive communal and taken-for-granted competence was traditionally institutionally pooled in *corvée* to perform communal projects like the erection or restoration of churches, the improvement of infrastructures or the repair of damages

in the aftermath of natural disasters. The architecture of private homes, typically, remained anonymous and rather reflected the craftsmanship of its builder-owners than a dedicated design of a professional architect (Land Vorarlberg, 2005; see also Hiesmayer, 1991).

Double existences

Resonating with this tradition of building as communal praxis, the young group of architects that later on were celebrated as the first generation of the Vorarlberg *Baukünstler* first learned and pursued a trade, either as brick layer or carpenter, before studying architecture in an academic context (Purin, 2004). Due to this particular path of socialization, the professional ethos of the *Baukünstler* evolved closer to the self-conception of the builder than of the academically trained architects who, as the *Baukünstler* admonished, lacked the experience and values of proper craftsmanship. In fact, through their “double existence” (Kapfinger, 2003b) as planner and as craftsman, the *Baukünstler* were multiple insiders that occupied a distinctive position at the intersection of two cohesive groups that afforded most favorable preconditions for creativity (Vedres and Stark, 2010). Creativity of the *Baukünstler*, in fact, evolved through a highly localized Schumpeterian process of recombination enhanced by the mutual participation in multiple cohesive groups. The interpenetration of planning and crafts engendered a collective learning system that to the present day proves extraordinary receptive to novel construction principles and combinations of building materials as well as innovative solutions to save resources and energy (Dangel, 2010: 14).

After their study of architecture at the Academy of Arts in Vienna, the key innovators of the first-generation *Baukünstler* returned to Vorarlberg in the early 1960s to set up their own architectural practices. This relocation to the periphery was the geographical expression of their increasing dissociation from the academic training and self-conception of architects. The first-generation *Baukünstler* were particularly critical about the homogenization of the architectural ethos through the academization of their profession that, in their view, reduced the (social) proximity to the crafts and privileged style over construction (Prechter, 2013: 116). Rather than the romanticized “focused naïveté” (Merton, 1973: 518) of ignorant outsiders unspoiled by professional socialization, the *Baukünstler* hence consciously dissociated themselves from the established professional canon they were perfectly aware of.

Civil disobedience

The deliberate dissociation from the unfolding institutionalization of the architectural profession however went even further when the *Baukünstler* refused to become members of the chamber of architects. Since 1957 the profession of architects was an institutionally governed profession, and membership in the chamber of architects was obligatory to pursue the profession (Prechter, 2013: 114). The *Baukünstler*, however, defied the evolving monopoly of the chamber of architects to preside over the profession since they not only were concerned about a further distancing from the crafts, but also an implicit solidarization with the state who alone could grant particular privileges to the profession. It was the protest of those who regarded themselves as legitimate representatives of a socially emerging building praxis vis-à-vis an institution that tried to establish a planning reality governed by the state (Prechter, 2013: 117). After the first acclaimed works of the early *Baukünstler* increasingly had been taken note of beyond Vorarlberg, the dispute with the chamber of architects escalated since they obviously practiced the profession without the obligatory membership in the chamber. To assert their position, 16 *Baukünstler* founded the “Association of the Vorarlberger *Baukünstler*”. This unprecedented act of civil disobedience

(Kapfinger, 2003b: 15) reveals most dramatically that the status of the *Baukünstler* as outsiders was not destiny, but the relational manifestation of an unflinching agenda.

The creative work of the *Baukünstler* both continued and transformed the regional building tradition. Most conspicuously, the continuation does not refer to the formal design vocabulary of an alleged rural Alpine style with its emblematic gabled roof (Dangel, 2010: 14). Programmatically, the conception of buildings did not start from any formal principles or a particular design canon focused on ostentatious representation, but rather from unfolding space from the angles of construction and everyday-usage. The continuation of tradition hence refers to key principles and values of the tradition that involves a rigid economic and formal discipline, a most efficient use of (regional) resources and radically frugal and straightforward (but not simplistic) construction principles without any compromises on constructive quality (Kapfinger, 2003a). The result of this “ingenious simplicity” (Dangel, 2010: 14) was a “hard to surpass synthesis of constructive and spatial rationality” (Achleitner, 1980). With their construction principles for the initially prevailing wooden constructions, the *Baukünstler* deliberately demanded excellence from the crafts in order to reinvigorate their technical skills, sensitivities towards the material and attention to detailing that, in their perception, was endangered by emerging industrial mass production techniques (Prechter, 2013: 114).

From movement to field

During the last decades, the social movement has morphed into an organizational field. The *Baukünstler* in collaboration with the regional planning administration introduced the *Gestaltungsbeiräte* (design advisory boards), a voluntary instrument to enhance the quality of the built environment on the municipal level; in 1985 the *Vorarlberger Energieinstitut* was founded that significantly contributed to the development of Vorarlberg as an epicenter of the *Passivhaus*-approach where low energy building has become the norm (fourthdoor, 2015: 1); in the TV-series “+/-” of the public broadcasting company, *Baukünstler* commented on current projects and thereby expanded the architectural discourse from expert circles into the public arena (Land Vorarlberg, 2005: 2); and with the foundation of the Vorarlberg *Architekturinstitut* that acts as an interface between planners, administration, clients and building companies a further institution to critically reflect the quality of the built environment has been established in 1997.

Yet, the transformation of the social movement into a veritable organizational field did neither result in canonic congealment nor in programmatic depletion (Kapfinger, 2003a: 4). From the 1990s onwards, however, the *Baukünstler* movement underwent a leap in scale (Prechter, 2013: 121). From the initially predominant genre of the single-family home in rural environments they advanced their approach to new building categories like schools, cultural centers, museums, corporate headquarters and airport terminals, and developed truly international project portfolios. While standing by the core principles of rigid economic and formal discipline, ingenious simplicity and attention to detailing of the earlier generations, the current third generation of *Baukünstler* seeks to critically dissociate themselves from their precursors (fourthdoor, 2015: 1). Whereas wood was the building material of choice of the previous generations, the vanguards of the third generation have extended the *Baukünstler* design vocabulary on to novel combinations of wood and exposed concrete. More importantly, their critique on the narrow focus on the solitary building of the earlier generations led into a particular sensitivity for place, the spatial context of the buildings and the spaces “in between” their constructions (Prechter, 2013: 121). The critical engagement with the earlier generations generated variety, and the heedful mutual monitoring within the

field afforded a selection environment that prevented variety from turning into arbitrariness, but instead shaped a distinctive creative trajectory.

Valuation: Mobilizing symbolic resources of the center

New architectural products, styles, and practices enter the world incessantly. Through which processes, however, noise is differentiated from creativity, and irrelevant variation is separated from qualitative advancement? These questions move the quality of newness center stage: How then is a shared understanding of what is common, established and proven suspended by something that is recognized and evaluated as new and significant by arbiters of value (Hutter and Stark, 2015: 2)? And moreover, which “evaluative regimes” (Sawyer, 2015) are employed: symbolic, aesthetic, functional, economic or societal values? Value cannot be reduced to some inherent features of artefacts (Hutter and Stark, 2015: 3). Value, in fact, is a quality that has to be performed through the “nexus work” (Lingo and O’Mahony, 2010) between creator and field to authenticate the value of the novelty.

The value of the creations of the first generation *Baukünstler*, indeed, was far from obvious. Through their particular construction and design approach, the *Baukünstler* had induced a formal dissonance that disrupted traditional perceptions of the rural built environment. The radically economic, small timber-frame buildings of “Japanese strength, lightness and livability” (Kapfinger, 2003b: 9) stood out in an environment that had been shaped by a traditional Alpine aesthetic for generations. Inevitably, the *Baukünstler* also met skepticism and outright rejection from the public and local building authorities, and their first buildings were regularly derided as “shacks” and “boxes” (see also Prechter 2013: 106–107).

Enter Simmel’s stranger

Whereas novelty was generated by leveraging self-chosen peripherality, the performance of value was contingent on the centrality of “cicerones” who disposed of a “symbolic form of authority” to validate novelty (Karpik, 2010: 46). More specifically, valuation set in with the preeminent historian and theoretician of architecture of his time, Friedrich Achleitner. The (initial) disconnectedness between the *Baukünstler* in the periphery and Achleitner who spoke with the authority of a member of institutions of the center (Academy of Arts and later Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna) as well as with the cachet of a representative of the cultural and intellectual center of Austria was essential for the status of a legitimate arbiter of value. Achleitner, in a sense, embodied the emblematic “stranger” of Simmel who, as a non-member, faces the group with the “attitude of objectivity” (Simmel, [1908]1992: 766) and who’s judgements are neither clouded by prejudices nor by commitments or loyalties. In a similar way as impartiality of judges in medieval Italian cities was enhanced by recruiting them from other cities (Simmel, [1908]1992: 766), the (quasi-)objectivity of Achleitner was authenticated through his disconnectedness from the *Baukünstler*.

Moreover, the stranger, dissociated from the steady flow of piecemeal everyday variations, was able to perceive and appreciate particularities that an insider already had internalized and that, hence, had vanished in the subconsciousness of everyday practices (Simmel, [1908]1992). The first meeting of Achleitner with the *Baukünstler* is telling in this regard. In the context of his research on his authoritative compendium on Austrian architecture, Achleitner visited the province Vorarlberg, and after a first viewing of new buildings he turned to the *Baukünstler* in amazement: “Are you actually aware, that all you’re doing here is something truly exceptional?” “I wasn’t aware of this at all”, as the key

actor of the first generation *Baukünstler*, Hans Purin remarked, “I found this all quite straightforward and nothing particularly exceptional” (Purin, 2004: 16; translation by author).

Achleitner’s critical contribution to the performance of valuation was not confined to the role of a distanced historiographer, but increasingly involved multiple contributions as moderator, mentor and, in fact, evangelist. Particularly as external evaluator in the routinely controversial authorization procedures of first generation projects, Achleitner leveraged his undisputed institutional authority in the field of architecture against parochial local authorities. Through his expert assessments as well as his public lectures in which he polemicized against a misinterpreted rural style, he gradually shifted the perceptions and standards of local authorities (Prechter, 2013: 107). The transformation of evaluative regimes (Sawyer, 2015) also laid the groundwork for proceeding with initially controversial avantgarde-projects like the much-acclaimed *Kunsthaus Bregenz* [museum of modern art Bregenz] (Kapfinger, 2003a: 9).

The exoticism premium

With regard to the perception of the valued object, peripherality also shapes the reception and valuation of cultural objects: peripheral actors, and in particular the “authentic outsider” (Fine, 2003), are more likely to be appealing sources of cultural artifacts (Phillips, 2011: 421). In settings like architecture that reward novelty, peripheral actors are more likely to have their creations successfully labeled as “exotic” (Johnston and Baumann, 2007), and are more highly valued precisely they are distant from the center and the mainstream (see also Cheyne and Binder, 2010). Fine’s (2003) diagnosis on the self-taught artists resonates with the self-chosen unorthodox formation of the *Baukünstler* as craftsman-cum-architects: Self-taught artists “lack *social capital*, ties to elite communities, and (they) are not fully integrated professionals in this mainstream art world. It is their *lack* of, rather than their attributes, that defines them ... their reputation to be established by others” (Fine, 2003: 156; italics in original).

In particular the valuation of the *Baukünstler* by Otto Kapfinger, Achleitner’s successor in the position of the undisputed Austrian architecture historian and theoretician, conveys a conspicuous appeal of foreignness and exoticism of Vorarlberg (Kapfinger, 1999). Kapfinger consistently seeks to link the *Baukünstler* with the, at least in an Austrian context, unique mentality and allegedly typical alemannic traits. He regards the “in the rest of Austria unconceivable act of civil disobedience” (Kapfinger, 2003b: 15) of the foundation of the “Association of Vorarlberger *Baukünstler*” as an expression of a traditionally anti-bureaucratic self-conception and a deep appreciation of autonomy within the province. Epitomized in their mantra “Einfach bauen” [“construct simply”], Kapfinger (2003b: 23) also related the distinctive economic discipline and formal frugality of the *Baukünstler* to the continuity of the proverbial unromantic pragmatism of the province of Vorarlberg.

Counter-intuitively, peripheral actors have a disproportionate influence on the creation of a canon (Phillips, 2011: 425). Presumably the pinnacle of the discovery and acclamation of the “authentic outsider” (Fine, 2003), a region that for long seemed caught in its provincial tradition and self-stylization as a cultural exception within Austria (Barnay, 1988) was the resumptive statement of the architecture review of the design magazine *Wallpaper*: “Having scoured the globe we were unanimous in our decision to name Vorarlberg as the most progressive part of the planet when it comes to new architecture” (Houseley, 2000: 176). The *Baukünstler*, then, had transformed a peripheral region into a leading center of architectural creativity.

Between and between center and periphery: Marginality

In this commentary, the remarkable story of the *Baukünstler* has been employed as a “strategic narrative” (George and Bennett, 2005) to problematize the notion of center and periphery as pre-given geographical categories that offer unique opportunity structures for creativity and notoriously hostile environments against the generation of novelty respectively. Rather than as destiny sealed by geography and history, peripherality was the deliberate programmatic of the *Baukünstler* who dissociated themselves from central institutions representing and governing the architectural mainstream. The status of the *Baukünstler* as authentic outsiders (Fine, 2003) also yielded an exoticism premium in the authentication of the value of their creations through arbiters of value who embodied the symbolic authority of the center (Karpik, 2010). Center and periphery, hence, cannot be reduced to a static dualism, but rather are relationally constituted (Hautala and Ibert, 2018).

The notion of marginality (or at least a particular reading of it) allows to capture the specific position of between and between center and periphery, insider and outsider, mainstreams and mavericks. Moving on from Robert Park’s (1928) conception of the “marginal man” as a troubled victim of the simultaneous membership in two cultures, the “marginal men” of the *Baukünstler* leveraged creative agency from their position on the boundary between center and periphery. This position of self-chosen marginality and deliberate rejection of the mainstream allows to funnel ideas in both directions from center to periphery and vice versa. The periphery, then, cannot be reduced to a receiving end (Rodriguez-Pose and Fitjar, 2013), but affords a space for the sharpening and radicalization of novel ideas (Sgourev, 2018).

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