

# Creative clusters and evolution: industrial to creative glassmaking

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This is a summary of an article due to be published in a special issue of the journal *Geoforum*: Comunian and England (forthcoming) Creative clusters and the evolution of knowledge and skills: from industrial to creative glassmaking. A full version of the article can be found [here](#).

## Introduction

Focusing on craft as an under-investigated sector of the creative economy, this article explores the development of new craft-based glassmaking in the post-industrial contexts of Sunderland and Stourbridge. Questioning how deskilling, reskilling and upskilling occur in these locations, we provide a long-term, evolutionary perspective on creative cluster development. This perspective addresses the role of industrial heritage within new economic and creative systems in post-industrial contexts.

Although craft has recently received attention and investments in creative industries policy debates, it has typically been under-represented and under-valued<sup>i</sup> in literature and policy considerations on the creative economy. This is primarily attributed to challenges in mapping and estimating the sector's size and economic contribution<sup>ii</sup>. With political interest in the creative industries focused on economic growth, greater attention has tended to be given to media, film, music and design industries<sup>iii</sup>. Research on UK cultural quarters and creative clusters has also favoured new digital clusters or artistic urban villages rather than exploring the perspectives of makers. However, we argue that unlike these sectors craft's strong connection with regional industrial heritage<sup>iv</sup> provides an opportunity to explore relationships between industrial, post-industrial and new creative economies. In this paper we examine the translation of industrial knowledge into new forms of creative production and the subsequent development new markets<sup>v</sup>.

As glassmaking includes industrial, technical, artistic and design-based knowledge, it is an ideal context in which to investigate the evolution of new creative production from old industrial systems. The locations of Sunderland and Stourbridge, which have both strong industrial links to glassmaking and a concentration of contemporary glassmakers today, provide key sites in which to explore how knowledge has been preserved and reinvented.

The case study locations illustrated how the glassmaking industry developed through a mix of access to raw materials, transport, labour and international export. However, in line with many UK manufacturing industries, growing competition from new international markets offering cheaper labour and manufacturing conditions led to the gradual collapse of UK glass production throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, industry specific knowledge and skills did not disappear with the factories. Rather, we argue, this regionally embedded or 'sticky' knowledge<sup>vi</sup> evolved and was reorganised through the emergence of studio glass<sup>vii</sup>, the development of glass education<sup>viii</sup>, the clustering of artistic production<sup>ix</sup> and establishment of cultural organisations and events dedicated to glassmaking<sup>x</sup>. This trajectory indicates how, as part of specialized flexible production development<sup>xi</sup>, local industrial knowledge shifted towards the artistic production of glass as an adaptation to the post-industrial period.

## Methodology

This paper draws from in-depth historical desk research on the glassmaking trajectories of Sunderland and Stourbridge, alongside semi-structured interviews conducted across both locations with 16 local artists and makers, two policy makers, and five representatives of local educational institutions and museums. We examined how interviewees from both locations articulated local knowledge dynamics and reflected on their connection with the industrial past and the future of the cluster. From this we explored key themes of historical evolution, embedded or 'sticky' knowledge, local heritage as a brand, and the role of knowledge, networks, institutions, infrastructure, and policy in preserving and reorganising local knowledge and skills.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we argue that creative and cultural production is not just place-specific, it has a heritage, it evolves and can be 'sticky' in terms of located knowledge and skills. Interviewees reflected on both the growth and collapse of their regional glass industry, associating increased imports and factory closures with localised deskilling as industrial production knowledge became redundant. However, they also articulated how skilled workers and their knowledge were reorganised following industrial decline, with reference to the value of place, local networks and institutions. Ex-factory workers also reflected on how they had turned towards artistic production and fabrication work, 'reskilling' in artistic techniques in order to access new markets.

In both locations industrial legacies form significant brands. In Sunderland the main brand was the National Glass Centre, a millennium lottery funded regeneration project associated with requalifying Sunderland's glassmaking heritage, while in Stourbridge it was the heritage of 17<sup>th</sup> century glassmaking itself that formed the identifiable legacy. These place brands preserve local knowledge but also encourage new creative talent migration to the region through the localised concentration of knowledge and infrastructure for glassmaking.

As glassmaking knowledge is re-contextualised outside of the factory both deskilling and upskilling occur. Place brands are here linked to both the traditions and innovations that have emerged in the evolution of skills from factory to studio, including the development of new technology-driven skills and applications. The introduction of new technologies, particularly digital technologies, indicates 'reskilling' as material knowledge is applied to new forms of creative production in these locations. The development of new specialised knowledge may also continue to draw researchers and newly-skilled workers to the area.

In both Sunderland and Stourbridge cultural and educational institutions were highlighted as promoting place brands, preserving heritage, exhibiting contemporary works, and facilitating the development of new markets through events and craft tourism. It was also noted that local educational and cultural organisations provide making infrastructure and co-location sites for ex-factory workers, studio glass artists and researchers, thereby facilitating knowledge and skills transfer, retention and adaptation, and the formation of networks for sharing knowledge and supporting creative communities. However, opportunities for industrial knowledge transfer are declining and there is a risk that these skills will be lost as ex-factory glassmakers reach retirement age or reduce their practice.

While educational and sector institutions have the potential to minimise skill loss by teaching 'old' industrial skills to new generations of glassmakers in addition to developing 'new' skills in contemporary glass, we argue that additional policy support is needed. Local policy can preserve old industrial knowledge and facilitate new frameworks of creative production by supporting makers through capital investments, access to facilities and education, and initiatives that support networking, marketing and visibility for makers. Higher education

policy is also key, as courses play a key role in local cluster development and the work and human capital that emerges and can be retained in the area. In our two locations a lack of local coordination between policy, institutions, and makers was associated with a lack of productivity and heightened financial challenges. This highlights a need for a more joined-up approach that can support glassmaking activity and develop new creative production frameworks.

From this position we argue for greater consideration of the resilience of specialised industrial knowledge and skills which have endured beyond the industrial context and have been reorganised in post-industrial, artistic and studio-based making. We also call for further understanding of the role of institutions and policy in preserving and transferring knowledge in post-industrial clusters in order to support the sustainable development of craft-based making in the creative economy.

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<sup>i</sup> Luckman, S., 2015. *Craft and the Creative Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan, London

<sup>ii</sup> Bakhshi, H., Hargreaves, I., & Mateos-Garcia, J., 2013. *A Manifesto for the Creative Economy*. London: NESTA

<sup>iii</sup> Harvey, D. C., Hawkins, H., & Thomas, N. J., 2012. Thinking creative clusters beyond the city: People, places and networks. *Geoforum*, 43 (3), 529-539.

<sup>iv</sup> Brown, J., 2014. *Making It Local: what does this mean in the context of contemporary craft?* London: Crafts Council UK

<sup>v</sup> Pollard, J.S., 2004. From industrial district to 'urban village'? Manufacturing, money and consumption in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter. *Urban Studies*, 41 (1), 173-193.

<sup>vi</sup> Bathelt, H., Malmberg, A. and Maskell, P., 2004. Clusters and knowledge: local buzz, global pipelines and the process of knowledge creation. *Progress in human geography*, 28 (1), 31-56.

<sup>vii</sup> Influenced by Sam Herman's teaching at Stourbridge College of Art and Design in the 1960s

<sup>viii</sup> A specialist university degree in glass was established at Sunderland Polytechnic in 1982

<sup>ix</sup> The national glass network Cohesion was established in 2001 in partnership with Sunderland City Council

<sup>x</sup> The National Glass Centre opened in Sunderland in 1998; In Stourbridge visitor attractions opened in 1984 and 2002 and the International Festival of Glass was established in 2004

<sup>xi</sup> Storper M. & Scott, A. J., 1990. Work organisation and local labour markets in an era of flexible production. *International Labour Review*, 129, 573-591.