CONNECTING
CREATIVE
COMMUNITIES

CREATIVE HUBS IN MALAYSIA, THAILAND, INDONESIA & THE PHILIPPINES
INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, British Council commissioned a series of reports to map creative hubs in Southeast Asia. Beyond simply identifying and indexing creative hubs, the research was intended to find out about the challenges they face, the impact they make and the ways they operate.

The resulting studies carried out in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines show many shared threads, as well as a larger, complex picture. A broad definition of “creative hubs” can cover a range of groups, organisations, spaces and ideas. Among the four countries, an initial challenge was to define a “creative hub” according to local context.

Globally, the term “creative hub” is used broadly, and can be taken as an umbrella term. The HubKit published by British Council describes a creative hub as:

A place, either physical or virtual, which brings creative people together. It is a convenor, providing space and support for networking, business development and community engagement within the creative, cultural and tech sectors. 1

Such hubs can be for-profit, non-profit, or social enterprises. They can range from an arts programme for teenagers, to a co-working space for startup entrepreneurs, to a makerspace with the tools to build a robot. Some hubs have sprung up in the age of internet connectivity, others date back decades and are based on the enduring practice of community spirit.

We can already see how many paths such research might take. And indeed, it did. In the Philippines and Malaysia, the researchers chose to focus on creative hubs that are primarily driven by community spaces. In Thailand and Indonesia, the focus was co-working spaces, which have mostly emerged from the tech and startup sector.

Ultimately, the compiled research shows that the four countries are diverse within and among one another. If the initial mapping project is a starting point, then this summary report is at best a spotlight: highlighting various creative hubs across the region, and illuminating a few commonalities and opportunities.

DEFINING CREATIVE HUBS

In mapping “creative hubs”, the researchers from each country loosely categorised different kinds of groups and spaces. Each country presented its own reference points. In the Philippines, for example, it was noted that physical spaces are necessary to the definition of a creative hub, and so virtual networks were not included. In Malaysia, on the other hand, the survey of “creative hubs” included event convenors such as festivals, since these play a large role in the development of the country’s artistic communities.

For ease of reference, the following information shows the main categories for different spaces, with creative hub examples drawn from each country’s research.

ARTS & COMMUNITY SPACES
Spaces for the practice and support of the arts and community development, founded by individual practitioners or patrons, usually with a grassroots and organic development. These spaces seek income from a range of sources.

CO-WORKING SPACES
Spaces set up for startups and freelancers to rent a desk or office unit, with a focus on the technology industry. These are usually run by entrepreneurs with the backing of the private sector, but can also be open to a wider community.

NETWORKS
These spaces – sometimes virtual – bring together individuals and organisations with shared interests, facilitating networking and information exchange.

INSTITUTIONAL SPACES
Spaces for learning and development set up by an institution or by the government, with the aim of providing facilities and opportunities for the creative economy.

CLUSTERS
Neighbouring spaces that are rented out to creative businesses, often owned by a landlord who aims to create a sense of community.

EVENT CONVENORS
Rather than being tied to a specific space, these event convenors bring together groups of creative people at events such as festivals.

MAKERSPACES
Spaces equipped with tools that bridge design and technology, often based on a blueprint originating from the US.

1 Art For Grabs, Malaysia

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1 INDONESIA
2 MALAYSIA
3 PHILIPPINES
4 THAILAND
In the 1990s, then-Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad channelled national investment into digital technology, establishing a Silicon Valley-inspired area known as Cyberjaya. Malaysia has continued to invest in technology and the startup sector in the decades since.

At the same time, various artist practitioners and patrons set up their own spaces in the 1990s, including the art residency Rimbun Dahan (1994) and the cross-disciplinary theatre collective Five Arts Centre (1995). Such groups sought to provide alternative platforms in the face of government censorship and strictures on the arts.

In the early 2000s, the creative arts festival Urbanscapes was launched by an independent media company. The festival channelled a new sense of possibility for Kuala Lumpur’s young artists, writers and musicians just as blogging and new media culture emerged. The Annexe Gallery also became a space for exchanges between artists and activists.

Co-working spaces began to appear following 2010, with more digital nomads and freelancers in search of a space to work. Not all survived, but a few have remained steadfast and others continue to open. WORQ, one of the latest, is backed by members of 500 Startups and Cradle Fund among other investors.

In the past decade, the government has begun to recognise and support the creative economy: MyCreativeVentures was established to provide loans to creative businesses, while Think City was set up to focus on revitalising urban areas and heritage buildings. Just this year, the government established a Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA).

Outside of Kuala Lumpur, Penang has rapidly developed as an arts hub, with a boost from George Town’s UNESCO World Heritage Site status (awarded in 2008). In other state capitals such as Ipoh, Johor Bahru, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching, creative hubs are building local arts scenes and business opportunities for young people.

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At the turn of the new millennium, the Thai government initiated a raft of policies and structures to develop its mission of moving the country towards a knowledge, innovation and value-based economy. In 2001, the Office of Small and Medium Enterprise (OSMEP) was founded to promote local entrepreneurial firms, followed by National Innovation Agency (NIA) in 2003. The Office of Knowledge Management and Development (OKMD) and Thailand Creative and Design Centre (TCDC) were established in 2004.

TCDC became a premier resource centre and an early model of a co-working space. In 2017 it established a permanent home in Bangkok in the former Grand Post Office. Between 2010 – 2015, several entrepreneurs founded their own co-working spaces and makerspaces in Bangkok.

Beyond Bangkok, Chiang Mai is also notable for its creative enterprises. A branch of TCDC was set up in Chiang Mai in 2013. Prior to that, the initiative Chiang Mai Creative City was established by local groups “with the goal to develop Chiang Mai as a creative city through cooperation between government organizations and private organizations.”

The online platform Handmade Chiang Mai, a collaboration with British Council, highlights artisans and makers in the city.
During the period leading up to and following Indonesia's Reformasi in 1998, several independent art collectives were established. Providing a community for artists to develop and express themselves, these included Cemeti Art House (1995, Yogyakarta), Kedai Kabun Forum (1997, Yogyakarta), ruangrupa (2000, Jakarta) and the Common Room (2001, Bandung). These spaces and others like it gained strength from 2005 – 2010, becoming embedded in an alternative cultural discourse that included not only the arts, but also urban activism. 7

In 2010, the first co-working spaces in Indonesia were founded in the major cities of Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya. These spaces answered a need for the burgeoning workforce of young freelancers and tech entrepreneurs. A few years later, there was a boom in these kinds of spaces, as global tech companies also moved into Southeast Asia, with Indonesia – the most populous country in the region – being an attractive gateway.

Bandung, Surabaya and Yogyakarta have grown strong creative, artistic and digital communities. The location of major universities in these cities, with their student and graduate populations, is likely to be a contributing factor. Bandung also benefits from local government support through Bandung Creative City Forum. Other cities such as Depok and Makassar are also seeing creative hubs appear.

The roots of today’s art and community spaces in the Philippines can be traced back several decades. In 1974, the alternative art space Shop 6 was founded. But it was in the late 1990s that such spaces really took off, with active collectives and spaces such as Big Sky Mind, Surrounded by Water, Third Space Art Laboratory and Future Prospects. At the beginning of the new millennium, Cubo in Quezon City was also transformed by an influx of new, creative businesses such as boutiques and art galleries. 8

By contrast, co-working spaces geared towards the tech sector are a more recent development. Co.lab was founded in 2011, and A Space in 2016. Meanwhile, makerspaces have mostly been set up within schools, colleges and museums. The non-profit organisation, Communitere, set up a makerspace and resource centre designed to assist the rebuilding of its local community in Tacloban, Leyte, following Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. 9

Manila aside, other cities in the Metro Manila area are home to creative hubs, including Quezon City and Pasig City. Some hub founders have consciously chosen to move out of Manila, in order to make the arts more accessible to a wider public. Casa San Miguel, an arts centre, was established in San Antonio, Zambales for this very reason. The town's economy was affected by the closure of a naval air base in the 1990s, and the centre aims to reach local young people as well as those from nearby low-income areas.

The “creative economy” has garnered increasing attention from policymakers around the world. This can refer to a diverse range of industries, from food to films, or advertising to architecture. But the focus is – as the term suggests – economic output. Starting in the 1990s, governments began to pay attention to these sectors, recognising their potential to create jobs and generate intellectual property. 10

British Council’s research into creative hubs is part of a broader initiative to understand and promote the creative economy. However, research from around the world soon showed that the impact of creative hubs cannot only be seen through the lens of economy. As one British Council report puts it, “ultimately a hub is a hub ‘when it unites, inspires and promotes a community.” 11

The impact of creative hubs is in fact wide-ranging, and often the impact is more qualitative than quantitative. John Covey and Andy C. Pratt write in “Creative Hubs: Understanding the New Economy” that the success or failure of creative hubs can only be assessed with “multi criteria evaluation.” 12

In Southeast Asia, the tangible impact of creative hubs can be seen in the cultural and commercial platforms they create for creative individuals and enterprises. They also offer career development through workshops, training or mentorship, and they connect individuals to networks – local, regional, international.

But there’s more. Creative hubs can create spaces for belonging, and for self-development. They may be the places where a child learns about music, or where a student can find an alternative archive of films. They can be support networks for writers trying to publish a book, or for aspiring coders to develop an app.

Creative hubs can be catalysts for revitalising a neighbourhood. Sometimes, they repurpose vacant buildings and create a new attraction for locals and tourists alike. Sometimes, they breathe new life into heritage areas, and therefore raise the urgency of conserving and preserving old buildings. In "secondary cities", they develop and draw in new talent, offering a home for those who cannot or do not wish to live in the capital.
A PLACE TO LEARN

Across the creative hubs surveyed, learning and development was a recurring theme. While we might have expected this from arts and community spaces and makerspaces, it was also mentioned by the founders of co-working spaces for startups.

"Will our community learn something and be able to develop professionally? If it is good for them and for their business we will do it," says Amari Chansaphan, co-founder of Hubba, Bangkok.

Hubba started out as a co-working space, created by two brothers who wanted to work in the startup industry and realised that Thailand lacked a space that could help people such as themselves. However, Hubba has shifted to become an "ecosystem builder", helping to foster learning and development. Every two months they organise a Hackathon, as well as having 5 – 10 workshops per week and networking events.

Since then, Hubba has gone on to establish two more branches beyond its flagship tech co-working space: Discovery Hubba, for fashion and design, and Hubba-to, which is for art, design and crafts. Creative hubs like Hubba offer members a chance to learn new skills which can then be used to develop their business. Similarly, makerspaces such as Makedonia in Jakarta and FabCafe in Bangkok offer workshops and the use of tools such as 3D printers, laser cutters and vinyl cutters.

FabCafe also aims to engage with broader social issues: for example, it organises the "Farm Hack" project which aims to tackle issues in local agriculture. For co-founder Kalaya Kovilvath, FabCafe is also about social and civic engagement. "If we give kids hands on tools, they will know that it is difficult. They would notice the difference between buying things and making things. Then they would value the time that makers spend on thinking and making the product," he explains.

While some hubs have a membership register, others maintain an open-door policy. This means that members of the public can also benefit from workshops. C asean in Bangkok organises a Hump Day learning session on Wednesdays, which has been running for two years and has grown from 15 participants to 200.

"The youngest participant was 15 years old and the oldest one was 72. Both of them wanted to learn about digital marketing," says Dr. Karndee Leopairote, director of C asean.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Beyond technical and professional skills, creative hubs also create a sense of community, allowing people to develop personally. The results may be intangible, but they are nonetheless invaluable.

In Malaysia, one of the oldest co-working spaces, and a design and fashion hub, Kilang Bateri is a platform for small scale entrepreneurs and creatives. The space is a converted former factory in Johor Bahru. With a market-style layout, the space offers retail stalls for vendors selling clothes, crafts, food and more. Kilang Bateri is also a music venue and has a skate park and climbing wall. It is owned by ForeverReady Sdn Bhd., a company of four young entrepreneurs and an angel investor.

In Indonesia, the art collective Projek Rabak has helped several young writers and artists kick-start their careers. Co-founder Mohd. Jayzuan has emphasised that personal mentorship is very important to the creative hub: "We offer not just entertainment, but education as well," he explains. One of Projek Rabak’s members, Jack Malik, described the impact of belonging to the community: "I’ve met so many wonderful people, I’ve gone places. If it weren’t for Projek Rabak, I think I wouldn’t expand that much as a poet, as an artist."

In the Philippines, the violinist Alfonso “Coke” Bolipata decided to start a community music project in his hometown of San Antonio, Zambales. The town was not affluent, and he gave violin lessons to gifted children whose families would not have been able to afford such a luxury. Later, this project became Casa San Miguel: a full-fledged art centre, including music, dance and visual arts.

"What are treasured by the students are the self-confidence, personal identity and confidence instilled [by the programme];" note the researchers. Students themselves go on to become mentors as part of a "play it forward" initiative that also instils a sense of leadership. In Indonesia, C20 Library and Collabtive was set up in in Surabaya in 2008 as a community space, with a range of books and films, as well as a space for people to work. “We want to create a library as a place for knowledge production. People can share their ideas to each other here. Our first initiative was driven by this condition: inequality access to knowledge resources among young people in Surabaya.”

Although Surabaya is one of the largest cities in Indonesia, its cultural events did not necessarily match up to its size. C20 was founded by Kathleen Azali, a researcher, designer and developer, with a group of like-minded people. It has since developed into a venue and festival organiser, becoming a hub for young, artistic communities.
DEVELOPING THE ARTS

Creative hubs help to connect the arts to audiences. For the artist, they are a platform; for the public, a means of discovery.

Artist collectives and residencies are particularly crucial in this role. These spaces help artists to develop a body of work, as well as providing guidance on curation, exhibitions and sales. They can also be a rare alternative platform, pushing boundaries in countries where censorship presides over mainstream art and media.

Such spaces include Rimbun Dahan and Lostgens in Malaysia; 98B, Green Papaya, Project Space Pilipinas (PSP) and Los Otros in the Philippines; and Lifepatch, Cemeti Art House and ruangrupa in Indonesia.

Other hubs focus on engaging the public. Every year, George Town Festival in Malaysia brings together local and international performances, exhibitions, talks and other events for a festival that celebrates the city of George Town in Penang. The festival is funded by the Penang state government, but it is also notable for its national impact: people from around the country travel to the festival.

“I think we’re still a long way from building an audience for the arts in Malaysia,” says Joe Sidek, director of the George Town Festival. Yet the festival – now in its eighth year – is undoubtedly proof of a growing audience, and is a reason that the audience keeps growing.

George Town Festival makes a point of giving away tickets to schoolchildren each year, in order to increase public access to the arts. This highlights the festival’s broader purpose to develop the arts landscape and improve access to the arts, even if it means making a commercial loss.

In the Philippines, the artist collective 98B COLLABoratory is currently based in a 1920’s art deco heritage building in Manila, where the group run exhibitions, art residencies, film screenings, weekend bazaars and more. 98B aims to connect visual artists, designers, and creatives together with the general public.

CITY CATALYSTS

Creative hubs like C20 in Sunabaya, Indonesia, and Projek Rabak in Ipoh, Malaysia, can have a transformative effect on secondary cities, become leaders in the cultural landscape and provide a place for creative people to come together.

At a more local level, creative hubs also have a huge impact on their neighbourhoods. While some hubs revitalise abandoned or derelict spaces, others have reinvented heritage buildings. Some provide unique services to neighbourhoods that might otherwise be marginalised due to their location and class stratification.

Kilang Bateli in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, is a former factory on brownfield land which has become a retail and event space. A group of entrepreneurs leased the land and turned it into a place for almost 200 vendors to sell their wares, as well as a venue and skatepark.

“Basically, we use ‘recharge’ as a term. We didn’t want to use ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘renovation’, so we used ‘recharge,’” says Johan Ropi, co-founder of Kilang Bateli. “We always tell people that we are the ‘soul planters’. We find a place, plant in soul, bring in economy, bring activities.”

He estimates that their creative hub has created 350 jobs, as well as providing a social and cultural alternative to the shopping malls and theme parks that were previously seen as the state’s primary attractions.
In Thailand, TCDC has set out to establish Charoenkrung district as a “creative district”. Charoenkrung is one of the oldest areas of the city. However, it has long been considered difficult to access, and it is a stark contrast to the high-rises of commercial areas such as Sukhumvit.

By relocating to this area, TCDC’s aim was to “stimulate the district’s economy and increase different form of investments in the area and also the areas nearby.” It has worked in partnership with the Creative District Foundation to encourage creative businesses such as art galleries to take up residence in the area, as well as to raise the profile of existing traditional businesses.

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Creative hubs thrive on exchange and collaboration among members. But they are also the starting point for members to make wider connections beyond the hub. This is true for spaces led by artists as well as co-working spaces focusing on technology.

In co-working spaces, the networks arise through the proximity of the various businesses and freelancers who share a space. The hubs can also offer regional and international exposure through their events.

Creative hubs in Indonesia are generally resilient, as they are established in times of socio-political change. They have learned to be adaptable from the very beginning, many times in a hard way,” write the researchers Fajri Siregar and Daya Sudrajat. A similar pattern is seen in the other countries. In Malaysia and the Philippines, creative hubs are often set up by individuals who recognise the need to fill a gap in the creative and cultural sector, and take the task on themselves. The result is creative hubs that are led from the grassroots, often started by a group of friends. In these countries, as with Indonesia, creative hubs cannot rely on government policy or funding for support.

Even as creative hubs develop their own business models and resilience, they still face multiple challenges along the way.
Lostgens

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

2004

4

Non-Profit

Creative hubs which focus on the arts community have an added strain. Co-working spaces for the tech sector can at least charge their members for their facilities. But many art collectives work with members who can’t afford to pay much for their services. These creative hubs often end up relying on their founders to subsidise the running costs.

In Malaysia, the art collective Lostgens relies on its co-founder Yeoh Lian Heng to dip into his own funds to keep operations going. According to Yeoh, Lostgens rarely breaks even, let alone makes a profit. The theatre group The Actors Studio Seni Teater Rakayat is also subsidised by its two founders.

In the Philippines, Project Space Pilipinas’ founder Leslie de Chavez opened his own home, and later his family’s property, for art exchanges. Currently, "de Chavez subsidises daily operations, monthly production of exhibitions and programmes, and resident artist allowances with personal funds earned from his artistic practice." Bellas Artes Projects also depends on one of its founders for patronage.

Creating a strong financial dependency on the founders can place a personal strain on the founders and managers. It also diminishes the sustainability for hubs that don’t have a clear business model.

Comma. It was a pioneering co-working space in Indonesia, founded as an experiment during a time when the concept was still very new. It opened in south Jakarta at the end of 2012 but closed in 2016, after the landlord raised the rent. Creative hubs which focus on the arts community have an added strain. Co-working spaces for the tech sector can at least charge their members for their facilities. But many art collectives work with members who can’t afford to pay much for their services. These creative hubs often end up relying on their founders to subsidise the running costs.

Due to lean finances, many creative hubs are not able to hire many employees. In some cases, this means that founders remain involved in daily operations.

Founders can become burnt out by managing every aspect of the hubs, especially if they are not trained in administration matters. Without a structured team, it’s more likely that a creative hub will close down when the founder decides to move on.

In the Philippines, "the fluidity in structure seen in these groups and spaces allows for ease in adapting to the different needs and circumstances they face," write the research team. "However, it also becomes a limitation in the efficiency of their operations."

Artist-led creative hubs may have no desire to adopt corporate ways of working. However, founders have expressed a need to get to grips with administrative tasks such as tax returns and registering as non-profit organisations.

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Fajri and Daya write of Indonesian hubs: “As many spaces are run without a fixed long-term plan, they evolve and become a steady process ‘in the making’. This is often time their biggest challenge as well as the whole vision is centred within their founders, it is more prone to unsustainable management and decision-making is not the most democratic."

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However, many creative hubs also find themselves based in neighbourhoods where gentrification and commercial development lead to rising rent. FabCafe in Bangkok was faced with a 100% increase in rent this year, but managed to negotiate down to a 50% increase. Because of its location in the rapidly developing Ari district, it anticipates that the rent will only keep rising.

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In Jakarta, co-working spaces backed by venture capitalists "are often established in major commercial districts with an eye on potential customers. As a consequence, the high-rising prices affect membership fees and create the image of the co-working space as an exclusive, premium office space for affluent freelancers."

Whereas creative hubs aim to be inclusive, this price stratification leads to exclusivity.

In Kuala Lumpur grassroots creative hubs have little hope of renting buildings in the city centre unless they are in out-of-sight locations such as the upper stories of shoplots. While this arguably helps to decentralise creative spaces, it can also be seen as a kind of marginalisation. Overtime, "unseen" creative spaces perpetuate a culture where their contribution is overlooked and undervalued.

Part of a global network, FabCafe is a makerspace and café which integrates art, design and technology. The members range from school children, to university students and professionals. Facilities include a 3D printer, laser cutter and vinyl cutter. Various workshops are run throughout the year. First established in Ari, FabCafe will set up two new branches within TCDC and in the Charoenkrung district.

Co-working spaces also have to battle perceptions. In Indonesia, "the second most common challenge [after financial sustainability] is educating the market. As the industry is still very much in an infant stage, the services are only well understood among small target groups. Creative hubs are often mistaken for an upgraded coffee shop, providing nothing more than a working table and speedy internet connection."

At the same time, creative hubs sometimes lack the foresight or resources to properly document their own work. This lack of documentation and marketing creates further issues when creative hubs apply for sponsorship and corporate grants.

According to the research from Indonesia, "all spaces [are] impactful, but none are really aware of what they have created. Hubs need to document and archive their activities more seriously."
For co-working spaces, renting out physical space and facilities is the core business model. Freelancers or small businesses will pay a membership fee to use office space either in the short or long term. Makerspaces can charge members for usage of their equipment.

Clusters in the region can be seen as up-scaled versions of co-working spaces. For example, 33Space in Bangkok was a motel until the landlord and manager decided to repurpose the low-rise block into office units for businesses in the art, design and IT sectors. Similarly, Zhongshan Building in Kuala Lumpur rents out its space to a variety of creative businesses and artists, forming neighbouring units such as artist studios, a record store, a library, and more.

Other kinds of creative hubs can also benefit from space rental. For example, some art residencies charge visiting artists for the usage and experience of their space. Others, such as Project Rabaki in Malaysia and Casa San Miguel in the Philippines, use some of their space as guesthouse accommodation.

Beyond simply renting out the space as a venue, creative hubs can also generate income from organising events, or setting up retail ventures such as a shop or café.

Creative hubs are already adept at forming local, regional and international networks. But it’s worth noting that networks are particularly useful for creative hubs that are not located in major cities. For these hubs, such connections are even more vital for future collaborations and shared knowledge.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT**

Many creative hubs are started by individuals or groups with a shared dream, so their operations can be fluid and unpredictable. Training in matters such as online marketing, data tracking, tax returns, registration of their entities and financial planning would help hub managers to improve operations and future sustainability.

**FUNDING & FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

Currently, most creative hubs – especially in the arts sector – rely on short-term funding and grants, which are often tied to a specific project. While those help their overall revenue stream, long-term funding would help them to prepare for the future and plan ahead. While not all creative hubs operate for-profit, financial planning will lessen the strain on founders.

**SPACE**

When creative hubs don’t benefit from renting or owning their own space, partnerships can help to step in. Commercial or institutional partners can make a big impact on a hub’s possibilities by leasing out spaces at a discounted rate, or even working together to reinvent an unused space.

**ADVOCACY**

Creative hubs are often led by passionate people who are also the best advocates for their hubs. However, it is also helpful to have a wider support base. In some cases, arts and community hubs are marginalised from the mainstream because of their political activism. Partners can help to speak up in support of such hubs and their contributions to society.

**CONNECTIONS**

With only a few exceptions, creative hubs in the tech and arts sectors don’t tend to cross over. Without creating forced partnerships, it may be worth exploring how hubs from the two spheres could connect and collaborate, using case studies from hubs that bridge arts, community engagement and technology.
REFERENCES


FOOTNOTES

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The image contains a document page with text in English, discussing various initiatives and locations related to creative hubs and communities. It mentions the creation of a co-working space, the relocation to a bigger space, and various activities ranging from co-working spaces to film screenings and entrepreneurship talks. The document also includes references and footnotes for further reading.