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## Meeting Places & Arenas for Local Entrepreneurship

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### CREATIVE SPACE MAKING IN FREDERIKSHAVN, NORTH DENMARK

The ascendancy of entrepreneurial attitudes among local governments has figured prominently on research agendas at least since the early 1990s. Current rounds of austerity measures across the global North have not made this focus less relevant. There is, on the contrary, a growing pressure on local governments to achieve more with less means available. In this paper Bengt Johannisson's conception of the community entrepreneur is utilised as a way of understanding some of the guises that municipal entrepreneurship takes on in a Scandinavian setting. Specifically it seeks to draw insights from processes of municipally driven meeting place formation as they have unfolded in Frederikshavn municipality, North Denmark.

With Harvey (1989) as a central point of reference an upheaval of critical literature surfaced during the 1990s, which had a common focus on the workings and consequences of an entrepreneurial turn that was seen to unfold in local governments across (and beyond) the global North (see for instance Gold & Ward, 1994; Axford & Pinch, 1994; Cochrane et al., 1996; Hall & Hubbard, 1998; Wood, 1998). This literature has been followed up in the new millennium through a diversity of interrelated debates that may or may not invoke the vocabulary of urban entrepreneurialism. Nevertheless they can be seen to converge on the thematics and problematics that was brought to attention through previous debates on this topic. The collective span of these more recent debates can be neatly illustrated by certain influential edited volumes, including most significantly Brenner & Theodore (2002) and Brenner et al (2012). What remains practically unchallenged throughout this literature is the (sometimes implicit) connection between entrepreneurialism and

neoliberalism. Entrepreneurial practices in local government appear always as concrete expressions of abstracted neoliberal agendas. Often there are good reasons for making such a connection, but as I hope to show in this paper it should not be taken for granted.

This has to do with the meaning ascribed to the 'entrepreneurial'. In the literature mentioned so far entrepreneurial activity invariably implies something associated with conventional notions of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur; i.e. someone who carries out new combinations in search of economic profits. In entrepreneurship studies, however, this notion has been challenged in recent decades. There have been insistent calls for a broader conception of entrepreneurship that allows for the inclusion of activities motivated by other ends than profit. This debate has not been reflected in the urban entrepreneurialism literature, and this has potentially blind-sided such studies to certain aspects of entrepreneurial turns; namely those not associated with motives of profit generation and thereby (partially) unhinged from neoliberal agendas of interurban competition and economic growth. By engaging with an alternative conception of entrepreneurship and applying this as an analytical lens in a concrete empirical case study, this paper shows how entrepreneurial municipal practice can be much more than a symptom of neoliberalisation. The alternative conception in question is Bengt Johannisson's *community entrepreneur*, and the municipal practice observed is the formation of *meeting places* and *arenas* (both terms understood in the meaning ascribed to them by Johannisson [1989; 1990]) in Frederikshavn municipality, North Denmark.

### **MUNICIPAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CREATIVE SPACE MAKING IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY**

The adoption of entrepreneurial attitudes and practices in local governments have come about in a time of economic restructuring and reorganisation of state systems; processes of change which are themselves interrelated and highly complex. It is not within the scope of this paper to take up in-depth discussions of these, but it is important to acknowledge that local entrepreneurial turns, also in Scandinavian municipalities, have to be understood in the context of such wider structural conditions. For the current purposes I find it fruitful, however, to infuse the discussion with some of Manuel Castells' recent (2010) reflections on the implications of an urbanised, globalised and networked society. He holds that, what has changed fundamentally is that functionally the space of flows has come to dominate the space of places, while concrete meaning is still constructed with place as the main point of reference. This means that an imbalance has emerged in which the material world functions according to one set of logic, while the ways in which people think about the world (and the way it works) are governed by a different set of logic. Specifically people tend to pin meaning to specific places. Therefore they also seek to explain various phenomena in a place-based logic, even when those phenomena are better explained in a different logic. From Castells' perspective a logic of flows tend to wield more explanatory power regarding structural conditions and the broad processes of change currently unfolding across the globe. Yet because the space of places continues

to play a central role in the ways that meaning is constructed, societal phenomena are more adequately understood when observed both in terms of the space of places and the space of flows, as well as the ways in which the two relate to each other.

Castells (2010: 2744) concludes accordingly that

global networks integrate certain dimensions of human life and exclude other dimensions regardless of what the intentions of the actors are. The contradictory relationship between meaning and power is manifested in a growing disassociation between the space of flows and the space of places. There are places in the space of flows and flows in the space of places but the meaning is defined in place terms, while the functionality, the wealth and the power are defined in terms of flow. And this is the most fundamental contradiction emerging in our globalised, urbanised, networked world.

This goes for the adoption of entrepreneurial practice in municipal organisations as well. Political and administrative systems are organised through a space of places logic, when they divide absolute space into jurisdictions based on concrete notions of coherent and meaningful territories and places (nations, regions, municipalities, cities, etc.). What these units are asked to govern, however, works according to the logic of a space of flows. Thus, the challenges that confront both municipal politicians and officials today derive in large part from the tensions that arise in a world functionally dominated by a space of flows, but made sense of, and sought to be governed through, a space of places. This is worth keeping in mind as I proceed with more concrete and contextualised accounts.

### **A WELFARE STATE UNDER PRESSURE**

Like other units in the state system, Danish municipalities are asked to act as if the world was constituted utterly as a space of places. In extension they are held accountable according to this logic, even though most of what they seek to govern remains out of their reach and control, because their territory of jurisdiction belongs functionally to the space of flows. Recent reforms and rounds of restructuring in state systems across the globe reflect often feeble attempts to deal with the growing disassociation observed by Castells. In Denmark the 2007 structural reform offers ample testimony to this. The municipal landscape was redrawn and responsibilities shifted between the scalar levels of the state (national, regional and local). This resulted in an altered political administrative environment that involved (1) an increased burden of tasks and responsibilities, (2) increased inter-municipal competition for national level funds, and (3) an altered geographical structure with larger units containing new intra-municipal (place-based) tensions. The reform, as well as subsequent changes, also adheres to the more widespread tendency towards austerity implemented across Europe in recent years.

Austerity can be treated as an example of how governments handle the disassociation between the space of places and the space of flows. The principles and necessary material foundations of the welfare state—which has been implemented in various guises and to various degrees across Europe—are based firmly within a space of places logic. It is

as-sumed that the world can be meaningfully divided into a landscape of nation states and that this division extends into the functional dynamics of the economy and of social life. The sustained success of the welfare state project, then, depends on a certain level of coherence between the space of places and the space of flows. Economic globalisation and the rapid spread of new means of (technologically aided) communication serve to disrupt that coherence. It accentuates the space of flows and allows it to dominate the space of places as embodied by the nation states. As this situation becomes more outspoken the welfare state is not able to sustain itself as easily as before. In this sense the growing pressure on the welfare state and the push towards austerity is partially explained by capitalist restructuring at a global scale. The state system cannot respond at a global scale, because it is constrained by its own organisation. At the level of the individual nation state the most alluring response seems to be austerity combined with an increased focus on competitiveness that further emphasises a space of places logic (individual places in competition with each other). Policy response to the disassociation, then, work to further accentuate it, whereby a precarious situation emerges, in which the rhythms of the global economy (a space of flows) condition the changing fates of places (nodes in the space of flows), making them occasional victims and beneficiaries of its dynamics.

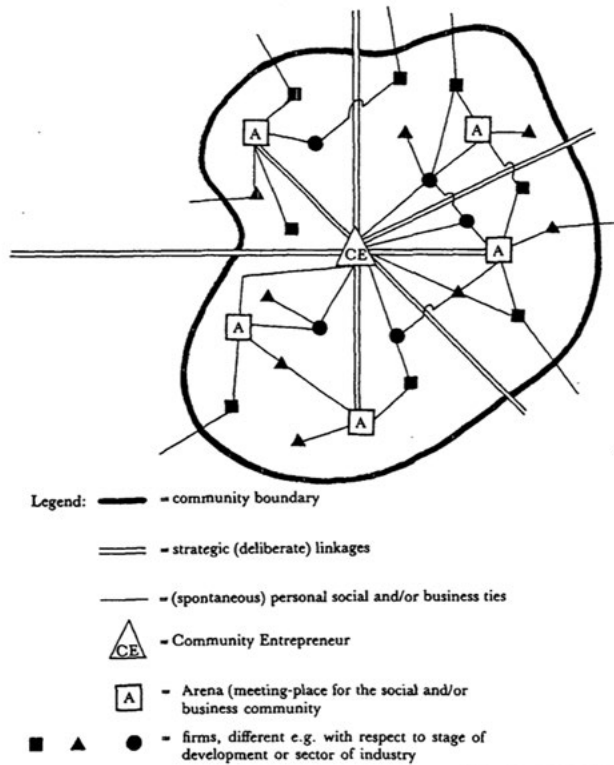
I do not mean to suggest that actions and decisions made at the municipal level of the state are utterly pointless in this situation, because outcomes are simply structurally determined. But municipal actors are conditioned by these deeper structures, and the reach of their actions is limited accordingly. They are not equipped to govern the space of flows, but have to practice the art of the possible within a space of places under increasing pressure. What I am concerned with here is to explore the more or less creative ways in which municipal actors cope with the situation and try to make the best of conditions. I conceive of the role played by municipal actors from an outset that rests on Johannisson's concept of the community entrepreneur. As should become clear in the following discussion of this concept, a centrepiece of community entrepreneuring is creative space making. I therefore complement Johannisson's conceptions with notions drawn from recent debates on creative space making (e.g. Wilson, 2010; Ibbotson & Darby, 2008; Duxbury & Murray, 2010).

### **MUNICIPAL ENTREPRENEURS & MEETING PLACES**

In 1989 Bengt Johannisson introduced the notion of community entrepreneurship as an analytical concept with the purpose of understanding the agency of individuals and groups, who provide encouragement and facilitation for potential business entrepreneurs. This was based on observations in peripheral Scandinavian communities which had been rejuvenated through the emergence of a local entrepreneurial culture (Johannisson & Nilsson, 1989; Johannisson, 1990). When municipalities act entrepreneurially it is often with this purpose; to mobilise and facilitate local entrepreneurship. Therefore it can be helpful to consider municipal entrepreneurship as a form of contextual entrepreneurship in which public servants and politicians attempt to enact the local context in ways that

are conducive to potential entrepreneurs. Municipalities are concerned with issues that are much broader than business development, which makes Johannisson's conception too narrow for this purpose. A wide range of non-business entrepreneurship has to be included as well.

The current attention to austerity measures means that initiatives that can potentially delegate municipal tasks and responsibilities to other actors are widely welcomed. Attempts to facilitate and encourage entrepreneurial behaviour in the social, cultural and environmental sectors are all relevant in this regard. It is within these sectors in particular that alternative aspects of local government entrepreneurial turns are to be found. Johannisson's detailed notions of the practices of community entrepreneurs are as relevant here as they are in a purely business oriented perspective. This practice he calls contextual entrepreneurship (which is what community entrepreneurs do). It is a practice of proactively managing a complex environment to mobilise and enact resources and capabilities potentially available in the given context. Importantly the motif for mobilisation and enactment is assumed not simply to be given by the individual interests of contextual entrepreneurs, but also to be associated with an aspiration to enable citizens to pursue their own dreams and ideas (independently of official visions and strategies harboured by the local state).



Conceptual mapping of community entrepreneurship practices in the local community (Johannisson, 1990: 80)

Envisioned spatially this takes place through the formation and development of interconnected arenas. Figure 1 shows how community entrepreneurs work actively with their personal networks within and outside the community in question (creating and managing internal as well as external linkages). Many dreams and ideas among community members are never realised, because the financial and/or human resources are not attained; either because potential entrepreneurs find the task too immense to undertake and therefore abandon the project, or because their network is not sufficient to gain access to vital resources. Network access, however, is not enough. The ability to manoeuvre and mobilise resources harboured by the network requires social skills as well.

Existing meeting places are used as arenas for entrepreneurship and new ones are created. These provide a concrete spatial anchoring, which is important to contextual entrepreneurship, because it is through their creation, management and development that entrepreneurial milieus in the local area are generated and sustained. Occasions (in time and space) are set up to bring together a mix of actors around concrete issues to mobilise collective potential for entrepreneurship. This covers both the establishment of physical meeting places and specific events that the community entrepreneur organizes. In other words arenas for entrepreneurship can be both specific geographic locations and spaces of a more institutional nature without a fixed geographic point of reference. It is through the active management of meeting places in the community that internal linkages are developed and mobilised (to turn them into arenas).

Keeping the earlier discussion on Castells' space of flows in mind, an important strength of Johannisson's conception of contextual entrepreneurship is that it comprises a partial reconciliation of the space of flows and the space of places. It is concerned fundamentally with the fates of places and communities, but applies a network perspective that accounts effectively for the dominant space of flows. It provides, in other words, a potential for translation between the functional dynamics in the space of flows and the (re)production of meaning in the space of places. When Johannisson conceives of meeting places as (potential) arenas for local entrepreneurship it is because they comprise functional places in the space of flows; what Castells (1996) refer to as hubs and nodes. Because meaning is derived from place terms, local citizens need distinct places to effectively manoeuvre the less intelligible space of flows. Put simply, the meeting places that contextual entrepreneurs create, develop and manage provide other actors with an access point to the space of flows that allows them to become proactive rather than reactive in relation to the flows of a networked world.

Johannisson attends primarily to the practice of contextual entrepreneurship and the importance of meeting places as arenas in this regard. He does not have a lot to offer in terms of identifying the precise nature of meeting places. Neither does he attend to the influence of material space on the potential of a given meeting to function as an arena for entrepreneurship. Given the assumption that entrepreneurship can be conceived of as an act of creativity, studies on creative space making may be helpful. Rather than

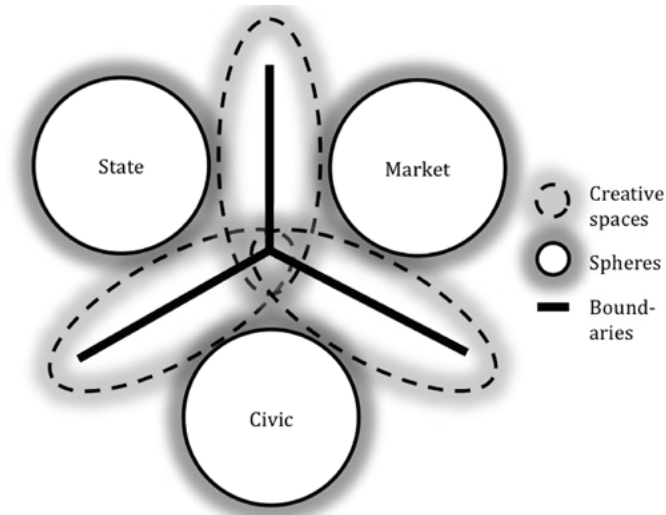
asking with whom creativity resides (as is the tradition in entrepreneurship studies), these studies have asked where it re-sides. In relational terms Wilson (2010: 368) suggests that creativity is a 'boundary phenom-enon' that "thrives at the edge of things, between the gaps". Accordingly Ibbotson & Darsø (2008: 550) conclude that

in order to come up with something new, individuals and groups need to enter a boundary zone, where ordinary, habit-bound thinking and doing are stretched and compressed until novel and extraordinary ideas and solutions can emerge.

The spaces invoked here are not material but mentally constituted. Yet, Wilson (2010) insists that the attention to boundary spaces should not be limited to spaces of the mind. He refers specifically to the boundaries between academic disciplines, social groupings, and organisations as spaces with a special potential for creativity. Where meeting places harbour such boundary spaces creativity should flourish and there should be a potential for utilising the meeting place as an arena for entrepreneurship.

Duxbury & Murray (2010) complements these insights with an identification of challenges that typically arise in the context of incubators, creative habitat projects, and multi-sector convergence projects. These are all material spaces designed to be conducive of creativity, and comprise attempts to create meeting places with the sole purpose of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. They identify (p. 209) three key challenges for public actors in the making of creative space. Firstly they hold that a multifaceted approach "that is sensitive to the changing needs of the creative activity that animates the physical spaces and to emerging multisectoral and blended operational models" is needed; secondly that "a comprehensive planning framework that can facilitate and enable collaborative and decentralised development spurred by grassroots cultural vitality and capacity" needs to be provided; and finally that "the rigidity of 'must have' prescriptive approaches" must be balanced "with more flexible ones that embed stable, long-term cultural-creative facility investment within broader planning processes."

In summary the meeting places that municipal entrepreneurs need to create must be able to attract a diversity of local actors in a way that reaches across the boundaries of local society. Interaction in the boundary spaces thus harboured by the meeting place then has to be generated. This requires mobilisation. External linkages also need to be established, managed and developed, especially with the purpose of providing material and symbolic resources to support entrepreneurial projects. Meeting places in this sense can be both permanent purpose-built environments and ephemeral settings created for one-off or occasional events. Figure 2 shows an example of boundary spaces that could be relevant for municipal actors to direct attention to, but the state, market and civic spheres depicted could be substituted by other relevant entities (municipal departments, social groupings, local industries, etc.).



Conceptual mapping of community entrepreneurship practices in the local community (Johannisson, 1990: 80)

### MUNICIPAL MEETING PLACE CREATION IN FREDERIKSHAVN

With a population of 23 000 Frederikshavn is a small third tier city in the Danish periphery. The locality is challenged considerably by (1) global economic restructuring, (2) changing patterns of national and regional demography, and (3) the recent structural reform and subsequent austerity measures in the Danish state system. A complex process of practice transformation has taken place in the municipal organisation since the 1990s, which can be described as a fragmented and partial entrepreneurial turn (Fisker, 2013: 103ff). Aspects of urban entrepreneurship in the neoliberal mould are clearly discernible in this situated transformation. But so too are other emerging practices, which can hardly be ascribed exclusively to neoliberal agendas of state practice. The two cases of meeting place creation included in the following bear witness to this. They also highlight how alternative notions of entrepreneurship may be able to account more fully for the diversity of entrepreneurial municipal practice.

### A RURAL-URBAN MEETING PLACE

Beyond the city limits of Frederikshavn an old restored manor house is found. This is Knivholt Hovedgaard (figure 3), which lords used to own the fishing village Fladstrand - predecessor of Frederikshavn. Today it is publicly known as the 'people's manor house', but as late as 1988 it was an abandoned ruin, with no apparent hope of the renaissance it is currently experiencing. It has come to serve as a local meeting place and a range of citizen driven projects have been initiated here; a meeting place functioning as an arena for local entrepreneurship. With an outset in the municipal takeover of the estate in 1988, I analyse how this meeting place was created and how it works as an arena for entrepreneurship.



When the municipality purchased the estate in 1988, a powerful fraction of the political elite, fronted by social democrats and union leaders, pushed for preservation and restoration due to the historical significance of the place. Initially the agenda forwarded by this group did not involve a plan for the future use of the site; it was merely about preservation. Five years went by before any significant decisions were made. Then, in 1993, a civic association was established with the purpose of restoring and reappropriating the building. At this point the idea of using the manor house as a social and cultural meeting place for local citizens had formed. At the same time, the scope of the entrepreneuring group broadened to include local business leaders as well. In 1995 the civic association was restructured as a semi-autonomous municipal institution. This meant that municipal funds were allocated and that the municipality was represented on the board. The provision of funds meant that a daily manager could be hired to lead the restoration works, which picked up speed at this point in time.

As the buildings became useable various civic associations moved in to house their daily activities. Apart from this a number of flexible event spaces were also created along the way, which both provided a supplementary source of income and positioned the place as a well-known site for cultural activities. Work was undertaken on a project-by-project basis, wherein interest shown by citizen groups or associations prompted the next stage of restoration. Municipal funds only covered basic maintenance, and actual restoration therefore relied on external funding for each project. The board set up working groups to secure funding and other necessary support for each project, and due to the composition of the board they were able to utilise an extensive network from which resources could be drawn. In this way, collaborative interaction emerged with social, educational, environmental, and business actors.

In terms of mobilising additional labour for restoration work four sources are particularly notable.

1. Civic associations and other user groups that provide volunteers who contribute according to their particular interests and professional qualifications. Many of these are retired and as such have considerable amounts of spare time to commit.
2. A steady stream of unemployed citizens in job training (collaboration with the municipal employment centre). The idea is to reacquaint long-term unemployed with working life to enhance their prospect for re-entering the job market.
3. Citizens convicted of minor offences carry out community service sentences at Knivholt. The daily manager estimates that this sums up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a fulltime employee annually.
4. Students from vocational training institutions attain practical experience by participating in large-scale restoration work at Knivholt.

An illustrative example of the projects entrepreneured at Knivholt is the renaissance garden. Like the rest of the estate it was in a state of disrepair and bore little resemblance

to de-pictions of its former splendour. Based on drawings and historical descriptions it was recreat-ed as an opportunity for urban families to tend a garden lot of their own. This is indicative of the ways in which preservation and restoration at Knivholt is made possible by combining past and present. Projects are not aimed at creating museum-type exhibitions, where historical accuracy is key. Rather they are aimed at a respectful reappropriation of buildings and estate to transform it into something that can be an active part of contemporary everyday life for local citizens. Unintendedly the gardening project also became an intercultural meeting place as it turned out that families from ethnic minorities were particularly interested in par-ticipating (Madsen, 2012; Knivholt Hovedgaard, 2013).

### **AN ARENA FOR FILM & MEDIA PRODUCTION**

Film and media production has never proliferated in Frederikshavn. During the 2000s how-ever an increasing hobby-level interest in such activities was observed by public servants in the Centre for Culture & Leisure. A local film festival (Laterna Nordica) was established in 2003, and in later years local youth tended to do well in national competitions for youth and amateur film production. Municipal actors aspired to support this emerging milieu and, if possible, aid the development of local businesses in film and media production. This is the context for the second case considered in this paper: FilmMaskinen. It is in many ways quite different from the Knivholt case, but also serves to illustrate many of the same points.

The project that ended up as FilmMaskinen started as an idea hatched within the Centre for Culture & Leisure in 2010 under the working title PixelTown. Concurrently an old power station (Maskinhallen) in central Frederikshavn was being redeveloped as a municipally managed cultural centre designed for concerts, civic association activities, and various citizen-driven initiatives. In this sense the centre was implicitly envisioned as an urban counterpart to Knivholt. As the PixelTown idea matured, it became one of the projects that municipal actors intended to house at Maskinhallen. In 2011 they invited an array of local and external actors to discuss and develop the idea into an operational project. Public servants used their personal networks to identify and attract the external actors, which were primarily invited as knowledge resources and supporting the early development of the project.

Public servants saw themselves merely as initial mobilisers in this process and expected the invited local actors to take over in due course. This turned out to be a challenge. Actors were unwilling to commit to the project and to assume leadership. They expected the Centre for Culture & Leisure to remain in the role of project leader and developer. The only material outcomes of initial meetings was that a small research project was initiated and financed by ApEx in collaboration with the local university to produce a systematic mapping of potential participating actors, their attitudes towards the project, and ideas they might have. Apart from this the first attempt was largely unsuccessful.

Public servants did not give up, however, and continued their attempts to mobilise actors, this time focusing on the ones they had perceived to be most committed. Within the following year this resulted in a narrowing of the project which now focused only on film production. It was also reoriented towards the establishment of an amateur workshop for film production and the development of courses for aspiring youth film makers. This was inspired by an earlier municipal project, E-Music Community, which had resulted in the establishment of similar facilities for electronic music production. At this point the project title was changed to FilmMaskinen, reflecting the decision to house it permanently at Maskinhallen.

While the second attempt has been more successful in generating an operational project, the entrepreunering role is still played by municipal actors. As such the intention to act merely as contextual entrepreneur was not fulfilled as the municipality ultimately entrepreuned the whole project with other actors performing only minor roles throughout the process.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of the univocal articulation of an intricate link between the urban entrepreneurial turn and neoliberalisation, the case of Frederikshavn Municipality in general, and the two cases discussed above in particular, serve to illustrate that such a link is not as straightforward as the literature tends to suggest. Entrepreneurial behaviour observed in the ranks of public servants and local politicians was underpinned by motives and produced outcomes that were not exclusively associated with neoliberal agendas. Urban entrepreneurialism in effect needs to be conceived of as a more heterogeneous phenomenon than it is typically assumed to be. This entails that analytical frameworks which are sensitive to social, cultural and environmental motives for entrepreneurial activity needs to be developed and employed. The paper at hand is merely illustrative in this sense and does not offer a clear route for such endeavours. It does, however, suggest that a requalification of assumptions about and conceptions of entrepreneurship has a vital part to play.

The employment of Bengt Johannisson's notions about community entrepreneurs and their performance of contextual entrepreneurship leads to various suggestions. Firstly, the articulation of meeting places as arenas for entrepreneurship is an aspect that deserves further attention and elaboration. The idea that the ascendancy of a local entrepreneurial culture depends on concrete spatial anchor points – meeting places – seems to have merits both with regards to the empirical cases considered and in relation to Manuel Castells' identification of a growing disassociation between the space of places and the space of flows. Furthermore a potentially fruitful (conceptual) link between contextual entrepreneurship and creative space making was made. It would be highly relevant to investigate further the ways in which meeting places can be made to harbour various kinds of boundary spaces, and in turn how local and external actors can be mobilised to interact across such spaces. Ultimately such knowledge could be used to figure out, which

kinds of organisational constructs and institutional settings that would be required to create, manage, and develop local meeting places that generate the space for creativity needed to turn them into arenas for entrepreneurship.

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