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CREATIVITY IN CONTEXT: TOWARD A MODEL OF EMBEDDED CULTURAL PRACTICE IN THE CLUJ METROPOLITAN AREA

Cristian Pop¹, Norbert Petrovici²

***Abstract:** This article develops the concept of embedded creativity to examine how cultural expression is shaped by labour conditions, everyday involvement, and urban infrastructures in the Cluj Metropolitan Area. Drawing on three empirical studies, including a mixed-methods analysis of cultural labour during the COVID-19 pandemic, a representative survey of cultural participation and well-being, and a structural study of cultural environments, the article traces how creativity unfolds across diverse social contexts. It argues that creativity is a situated and relational practice conditioned by institutional asymmetries, affective routines, and infrastructural access. The article explores three interconnected dimensions: the precarious and stratified conditions of cultural labour; everyday cultural participation and its impact on subjective well-being; and the role of urban infrastructures in sustaining cultural commoning and aesthetic engagement. By combining theoretical debates with locally grounded empirical data, the article proposes embedded creativity as a lens to understand how cultural expression is sustained, constrained, and distributed, calling for a justice-oriented cultural policy that recognizes creativity as a collective, infrastructurally supported urban practice.*

***Keywords:** Cultural Labour; Cultural Participation; Urban Infrastructure; Creativity; Cultural Commons; Cluj Metropolitan Area.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, creativity has become a central concept in academic inquiry, policy agendas, and cultural discourse. From its instrumental role in urban regeneration and economic innovation to its perceived contribution to well-being and social cohesion, creativity is widely celebrated as both an individual asset and a collective resource (Menger, 2014; Oakley, O'Brien, & Lee, 2013). Yet these celebratory framings often obscure the social structures and institutional

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arrangements that shape how creativity is practiced, by whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Banks, 2017; Belfiore, 2022). Rather than treating creativity as a universally available capacity or an intrinsically emancipatory force, this article adopts a sociological perspective that understands creativity as a socially embedded, infrastructurally mediated, and stratified phenomenon – what we term as *embedded creativity*.

Building on prior empirical work conducted in Cluj-Napoca and its metropolitan area (Pop, *et al.*, 2021 and 2023; Petrovici, *et al.*, 2024a and 2024b), the article investigates the uneven conditions, routine forms, and infrastructural supports of creative expression in an urban context. Cluj's evolving cultural ecosystem reflects a double dynamic. On one hand, institutional strategies have increasingly positioned culture as a tool for urban development, visibility, and competitive advantage (Tomiuc, 2016). On the other hand, critical voices from within the independent sector have highlighted the tensions, exclusions, and commodification pressures that shape everyday cultural practice (Branîște, 2022). Drawing from three interlinked research projects, a mixed-methods study of cultural labour during the COVID-19 pandemic; a representative survey of cultural participation and subjective well-being in the Cluj Metropolitan Area; and an analysis of how cultural infrastructures facilitate aesthetic experience and cultural appraisal, this article examines creativity as a practice that is both sustained and constrained by local resources, institutional frameworks, and everyday routines. These projects were developed collaboratively by cultural researchers and local actors, forming part of a broader effort to trace cultural change in post-industrial urban environments.

The study is structured in three analytical sections. The first examines the conditions of cultural labour in Cluj, showing how institutional asymmetries, contractual instability, and the digitalization of work during the pandemic have reshaped the contours of professional creativity (Travkina *et al.*, 2020; Culture Action Europe & Dâmaso, 2021). The second explores everyday cultural engagement, focusing on how informal and routine practices, such as reading, crafting, or attending local events, contribute to well-being, symbolic self-understanding, and aesthetic engagement (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Reyes-Martínez *et al.*, 2021; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). This section introduces the concept of urban cultural intimacy to describe how proximity to cultural spaces and symbolic routines fosters affective investment and identity formation. The third section extends this analysis by investigating how creativity is materially sustained through urban textures, particularly informal and community-run spaces, and conceptually reframed through commons-based practices and co-creation (Lijster, Volont, & Gielen, 2022; Kay & Wood, 2020a; Zbranca *et al.*, 2022). By weaving together empirical analyses of cultural labour, everyday participation, and urban infrastructures, this article develops the concept of *embedded creativity*, which foregrounds the situated, collective, and materially supported nature of creative practices. It, also, responds to recent calls for more inclusive, justice-oriented approaches to cultural policy (Banks, 2017; Belfiore, 2022), while offering a grounded empirical account of how creativity is enacted, evaluated, and sustained in a medium-sized European city where institutional frameworks, economic pressures, and grassroots initiatives continuously intersect.

CREATIVITY AND CULTURAL LABOUR

While everyday cultural participation may foster creativity as a form of personal expression, the professional deployment of creativity is deeply shaped by the material and institutional conditions under which cultural labour takes place. In this context, creativity is not merely an abstract ideal or intrinsic quality as it is a practice mediated by structures of support, recognition, and risk. This section draws on the study *Munca în cultură și cultura muncii* (Pop *et al.*, 2023), which used a mixed-methods approach to document the transformations of cultural work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cluj-Napoca. The data include an online survey with 213 cultural workers, three focus groups with a total of 15 participants, and a structural analysis of 156 cultural NGOs and 9 public institutions. Conducted between 2020 and 2021, the research captured both the structural landscape of cultural work and the subjective experiences of those navigating it during a period of acute disruption.

The findings reveal a fragmented and asymmetrical cultural field. Public institutions provided greater contractual stability, yet were frequently described as rigid, bureaucratic, and slow to adapt. By contrast, the independent sector was characterized by openness to experimentation and horizontal collaboration, but also by chronic instability and lack of systemic support. This fragmentation directly influences how creativity is mobilized and experienced in cultural work: while some enjoy relative institutional security, many others face precarious conditions where imaginative practice is subordinated to project cycles, funding competition, and reputational management. These patterns are reinforced by a broader urban strategy that frames culture primarily in terms of competitiveness and image-making. In her analysis of cultural policy documents, Tomiuc (2016) shows how Cluj-Napoca's local development plans instrumentalize culture as a driver of urban branding and economic growth, while sidelining the working conditions and sustainability of cultural producers.

These observations mirror broader patterns observed across Europe. The precarization of cultural labour, though predating the pandemic, was exacerbated by it, as documented in several EU-level studies (Culture Action Europe & Dâmaso, 2021; IDEA Consult *et al.*, 2021). Freelancers and independent cultural workers, who play a central role in creative ecosystems, are often excluded from employment protections, social benefits, and sustainable career trajectories. The pandemic accelerated these vulnerabilities. Many workers reported project suspensions, income loss, and a general erosion of predictability. Those in freelance and project-based roles were especially exposed. At the same time, the forced shift to digital formats introduced new layers of complexity that increased workloads, created new technological responsibilities, and intensified communication demands. These shifts often came without corresponding resources or training. Focus group participants emphasized how digitalization amplified "emotional and reputational pressure", the constant need to remain visible, responsive, and creatively productive in the absence of material anchors or institutional backing.

Such dynamics resonate strongly with studies on affective and immaterial labour. Gill and Pratt (2008) describe the creative worker as emblematic of the “social factory,” where emotional, aesthetic, and cognitive work are symbolically valorised but materially undervalued. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) similarly argue that the flexibility often idealized in cultural work frequently conceals systemic exploitation, as autonomy is undermined by constant availability, self-promotion, and performance pressure. Christopherson (2008) emphasizes that such conditions are not peripheral anomalies but increasingly constitute the normative organization of creative industries. The digitization of cultural practice also reconfigured the balance between core cultural activities and auxiliary labour. Respondents noted that time and energy were increasingly diverted from artistic production toward communications, logistics, and grant writing. The need to “perform relevance” in digital settings became a major driver of burnout, especially within the independent sector. Similar patterns have been observed across European cities, where the managerialization of creative labour under neoliberal governance has led to widespread fatigue and disaffection (Escalona-Orcao *et al.*, 2020; Montalto *et al.*, 2020; McRobbie, 2002; Lovink & Rossiter, 2007).

A further tension identified by the study concerns the gap between public discourse and institutional practice. While policymakers praise the adaptability and “resilience” of the cultural sector, many respondents felt these narratives masked a lack of meaningful structural reform. Cultural workers were expected to embody creativity, innovation, and civic commitment even as their working conditions deteriorated. This disconnect between symbolic expectations and material recognition was especially stark when comparing institutional security with the fragility of independent initiatives, a contradiction also highlighted in the OECD’s *Culture Shock* report (Travkina, *et al.*, 2020). At the national level, the Romanian cultural sector remains marked by weak collective representation and limited institutional dialogue. As previous studies have shown (Radu & Şuteu, 2020), the absence of coordinated advocacy mechanisms undermines the possibility of systemic change and leaves individual workers to navigate complex challenges alone. Without robust sectoral organization, the burden of resilience is individualized, a pattern also noted in earlier research (Pop *et al.*, 2021).

In this context, creativity becomes a site of tension where symbolic valorisation collides with structural insecurity. Rather than functioning as a purely expressive capacity, it is increasingly instrumentalized, monitored, and stretched thin across managerial demands. These dynamics lend empirical weight to Banks’ (2017) call for a framework of *creative justice*, where labour rights, institutional recognition, and equitable access are central to any meaningful understanding of cultural agency. As the Cluj study illustrates, sustaining artistic work requires more than talent or passion, it requires infrastructural conditions that allow cultural workers to flourish without sacrificing stability, health, or integrity. These findings highlight how cultural agency is shaped by more than personal resilience or aesthetic ambition as it also includes the material conditions and institutional environments in which it is practiced, offering a grounded insight into the embedded nature of cultural creativity.

CREATIVITY AND EVERYDAY CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Debates from the sociology of culture have emphasized the need to reframe creativity not as the exclusive preserve of professionals, but as an ordinary, distributed practice embedded in everyday routines and social contexts (Joas, 1996; Menger, 2014; Warde, 2014). This perspective situates creativity within the mundane activities of daily life, where reading, writing, crafting, listening, or attending local events foreground how cultural meaning is co-produced in the spaces between leisure, reflection, and self-expression. Empirical findings from the Cluj Metropolitan Area reinforce this understanding, showing that amateur art-making, creative writing, and community-based involvement are central to processes of cultural self-understanding and subjective well-being (Petrovici *et al.*, 2024a).

The discussion draws on the study *Consumption and cultural practices in the Cluj Metropolitan Area (Consum și practici culturale la nivelul Zonei Metropolitane Cluj)*, based on a representative telephone survey conducted in January 2022 with 735 respondents. The data collection involved a two-phase methodology with a 50-case pilot study to test survey consistency, followed by 779 interviews, of which 735 were retained after filtering. The sample included residents of both Cluj-Napoca and its surrounding communes, with deliberate oversampling in the latter (33%, or 247 cases) to ensure analytical depth. Minor underrepresentation of men and respondents under 29 (no more than 3 percentage points) was corrected through post-survey weighting using national statistics, ensuring that the final dataset is statistically representative. Educational attainment and occupational status were also found to be well balanced, with a margin of error of $\pm 3.6\%$. The data reveal strong associations between active cultural engagement, such as attending local events, reading, or participating in workshops, and both subjective well-being and aesthetic appreciation (Petrovici *et al.*, 2024a). These patterns resonate with broader international literature on the psychosocial value of cultural participation (Diener & Suh, 1997; Bruni & Porta, 2016; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Reyes-Martínez *et al.*, 2021). Recent evidence using experience sampling methods further confirms these findings, as Verboord *et al.* (2024) show that cultural activities, even when brief and informal, enhance affective well-being across the course of daily life. Their work lends reinforces the argument that creativity is a routine emotional resource, not confined to moments of artistic production or institutional validation.

These results are supported by studies of cultural participation and social capital. Cebula (2024) demonstrates that engagement in creative community activities is strongly patterned by the density and structure of local social networks, suggesting that social cohesion and trust facilitate cultural involvement. These findings align with the concept of *urban cultural intimacy* developed in the Cluj study (Petrovici *et al.*, 2024b), defined as a feeling of resonance with the symbolic environments of everyday life, from libraries and music venues to digital platforms and informal gatherings. Rather than relying on hierarchies of aesthetic value,

this intimacy emerges through habitual interaction with books, music, film, and local events, echoing DeNora's (2000) notion of music as a device of emotional self-regulation and Berlyne's (1974) framing of aesthetic experience as cognitively and affectively situated.

These dynamics also speak to the "mundane significance" of cultural participation. Drawing on interview data and community-based research, Ebrey (2016) argues that everyday cultural practices are often overlooked by formal cultural policy yet hold profound meaning for individuals' identity, belonging, and emotional stability. Their insights mirror those of the Cluj respondents, who emphasized how small acts of cultural engagement like reading poetry, joining a community choir, or attending a craft fair, enhance well-being, relational connection, and personal purpose. Such forms of vernacular creativity point toward a broader redefinition of cultural agency. Going beyond the reproduction of the producer-consumer dichotomy, they reflect a logic of co-production where cultural value is negotiated in the act of reception, interpretation, and use (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). This emphasis on situated appraisal aligns with Silvia's (2005) theory of aesthetic appreciation as a reflective and socially conditioned capacity, accessible to a wide range of people when facilitated by enabling support structures. Similarly, Rössel and Weingartner (2016) and Katz-Gerro (2004) have shown that cultural participation is patterned by education, taste repertoires, and symbolic competence, but also facilitated by localized opportunities and access to cultural spaces.

The Cluj findings thus point to a more inclusive understanding of creative agency, overcoming the location of creativity in extraordinary talent or institutional status. Our results highlight its presence in accessible, affectively meaningful, and relational practices. Everyday creativity here is not a diluted version of "real" artistic labour, but it is a socially grounded, experientially rich mode of navigating the world, facilitated by the spatial frameworks and rhythms of urban life. This perspective underscores the importance of recognizing cultural participation as a constitutive dimension of symbolic life, identity-making, and well-being. What emerges is a portrait of creativity as affectively situated and socially distributed that is woven into daily routines, shaped by symbolic environments, and activated through proximity. These dynamics underscore the everyday grounding of embedded creativity.

CREATIVITY, CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE, AND COMMONING

In recent years, creativity has been increasingly examined as an individual attribute or professional resource and, also, as an emergent property of shared infrastructures and collective urban practices. This section draws from the same representative survey conducted in January 2022 in the Cluj Metropolitan Area, previously described, which examined the relationship between cultural participation, cultural appraisal, and subjective well-being. A central concept emerging from this study is *cultural communing* (Petrovici *et al.*, 2024a and

2024b), the collective production of meaning through shared cultural routines, spaces, and experiences. Building on work by Lijster, Volont, and Gielen (2022), the study identifies *urban cultural intimacy* as a key mechanism describing a feeling of proximity and resonance fostered by local urban textures that underpinned regular cultural interaction. These findings echo broader reflections on commons-based cultural resilience, especially in pandemic conditions (Kay & Wood, 2020a, 2020b; Stevenson, 2020). The survey revealed that active and entertainment-related cultural practices, such as attending festivals, workshops, or community arts events, were positively associated with both cultural appraisal and subjective well-being. In contrast, more passive or receptive forms of engagement (such as attending opera or museum visits) did not show a significant mediating effect. This finding highlights the importance of participatory infrastructures in facilitating not only access but also affective investment and cultural expression.

Other studies on urban governance and cultural participation offer further insights into this dynamic. Klein *et al.* (2025) conceptualize a *culture of proximity*, in which municipalities co-develop decentralized cultural programs with local actors to foster symbolic empowerment and participatory citizenship. Their findings suggest that such collaborative infrastructures, especially when rooted in local specificity, create stronger attachments to place, more equitable access, and robust forms of cultural co-production. These infrastructures are dynamic relational networks through which culture is enacted and shared. Adding a temporal dimension, Nehl and Landau-Donnelly (2025) examine how independent cultural centres mobilize *eventification* as a strategy to structure engagement and build community. Cultural events serve as episodic infrastructures that gather publics, generate visibility, and sustain advocacy. These “infrastructures of togetherness” allow participants to engage with culture and to collectively shape its meanings, supporting civic ties and affective solidarities.

These dynamics are particularly salient in the independent cultural scene of Cluj-Napoca, which has long acted as both an incubator and a frontline of cultural experimentation. As Braniște (2022) documents in her reflection on a decade of practice, the independent sector in Cluj operates within a complex field of tension between autonomy and institutional marginality, between grassroots solidarity and precarious funding mechanisms. While such initiatives create spaces of commoning and foster plural cultural narratives, they often struggle to secure recognition or infrastructural continuity within dominant urban governance frameworks. These observations reinforce the view that independent cultural practices are vital yet vulnerable elements of the urban cultural ecology.

The study’s results align with prior empirical findings linking arts-related interaction to well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Grossi *et al.*, 2012; Blessi *et al.*, 2016) and reflect the broader argument that cultural engagement fosters identity-building, emotional balance, and purpose (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Reyes-Martínez *et al.*, 2021). Crucially, cultural appraisal, that is the evaluative dimension of creativity, emerged as a strong mediator, reinforcing Silvia’s (2005) theory that aesthetic appreciation requires more than exposure but also the reflective and emotional capacities endorsed by meaningful environments. The material geographies of

cultural environments are likewise crucial. Michel (2024) shows how cultural spaces in the suburban peripheries of European cities function as sites of *peripheral centrality*, cultivating symbolic vitality in areas often overlooked by dominant planning paradigms. These findings align with those of Gilmor and Burnill-Maier (2025), who argue that hybrid and non-commercial cultural venues are essential for creative development, especially in districts undergoing gentrification or marginalization. These infrastructures operate not merely as sites for production or consumption, but as social anchors enabling experimentation, recognition, and community belonging. Madureira *et al.* (2025) expand this spatial argument by analysing the role of creative workspaces as arenas of encounter and representation. These environments structure how artistic labour is organized, how symbolic claims are made, how visibility is negotiated, and how cultural identities are shaped across urban zones. They confirm that creativity is inseparable from its spatial conditions that are embedded in the very materialities and proximities that constitute urban life.

Our Cluj data also point to the uneven distribution of evaluative capacity and cultural agency. Access to cultural spaces and the ability to participate meaningfully were stratified by income and education, indicating that infrastructures of creativity reflect and reproduce broader social inequalities. These patterns are consistent with Rössel and Weingartner's (2016) findings on the classed nature of cultural competence and with ongoing debates on *cultural justice* (Belfiore, 2022), which emphasize the need for redistributive approaches to cultural policy. Well-being research further supports the argument that creativity is relational and infrastructural. Cities with robust cultural infrastructure tend to report higher subjective well-being (Briguglio, Camilleri, & Vella, 2020), especially when such infrastructure facilitates community-making and local place attachment. This reinforces the idea that creativity is not an innate trait or elite privilege, but a public good co-produced through spatial design, policy frameworks, and social proximity (Zukin, *et al.*, 2016; Ascolani *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, cultural infrastructure should be reimagined beyond formal institutions and as a textured ecology of formal, informal, and hybrid venues that support affective ties and symbolic experimentation.

These "commoned" infrastructures make possible the collective negotiation of meaning in ways that resist commodification and challenge hierarchies. They also constitute the *social space* of symbolic power described by Bourdieu (1989), while opening that space to more participatory and inclusive dynamics. Ultimately, the study calls for a shift in policy orientation from logics of excellence and consumption toward values of co-creation, participation, and emotional resonance. This aligns with international recommendations that place well-being and cohesion at the centre of cultural strategy (Zbranca *et al.*, 2022; Cacovean *et al.*, 2022). Medium-sized cities that stimulate plural, accessible, and contextually grounded cultural ecosystems do not merely cultivate artistic innovation as they create conditions for shared belonging and collective flourishing. Such urban structures are more than simply physical anchors, becoming social-material ecosystems

that mediate interaction, recognition, and meaning-making, further reinforcing the embedded character of creativity in urban life.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: TOWARD A THEORY OF EMBEDDED CREATIVITY

This article moves beyond examining creativity as a disembodied ideal or an individualized gift and understands it as an embedded cultural practice that emerges at the intersection of labour, participation, and infrastructure. Drawing on empirical research from the Cluj Metropolitan Area, the study has shown that creativity is both sustained and constrained by material conditions, institutional frameworks, and socio-symbolic ecologies. Our findings invite a shift in how creativity is conceptualized, away from market-centred, talent-based paradigms and toward a relational model grounded in everyday life, collective agency, and infrastructural support. The first strand of analysis focused on the structural conditions of cultural labour, revealing how institutional asymmetries, project-based funding, and digital precarity have reshaped professional creativity. Cultural workers in Cluj operate within a fragmented ecosystem where symbolic valorisation coexists with material insecurity. These tensions mirror broader dynamics across Europe and underscore the urgent need for what Banks (2017) and Belfiore (2022) have called creative justice: a framework that foregrounds labour rights, institutional recognition, and equitable access to the means of cultural production.

The second strand turned to everyday cultural engagement. Survey data confirmed that vernacular practices, such as reading, crafting, or attending local events, are central to well-being and symbolic self-understanding. Here, creativity functions as an ordinary mode of meaning-making. The concept of urban cultural intimacy was introduced to capture how proximity to cultural routines fosters emotional resonance and aesthetic engagement. This finding reinforces the broader claim that creativity is not reserved for elites, but distributed across the social field, shaped by opportunity, recognition, and access. The third strand examined the spatial and collective infrastructures that sustain creativity. The notion of cultural commoning highlighted how creativity is enacted through more than individual acts, that is through shared spaces, collaborative routines, and community rituals. From informal venues and festivals to public libraries and independent cultural centres, creativity becomes possible through spatial frameworks that facilitate encounter, experimentation, and collective appraisal. This echo calls from the literature to understand culture as sector that provides platforms of togetherness, facilitating the co-production of symbolic value and civic belonging.

Together, these three dimensions, labour, participation, and infrastructure, form the contours of what we term in this article as embedded creativity that is a situated, relational, and justice-oriented model of creative practice. Embedded creativity resists the abstraction and commodification of creativity by rooting it in

lived realities, institutional arrangements, and spatial proximities. It draws attention to the conditions under which creativity flourishes or falters not simply the presence of talent or inspiration, but the existence of empowering environments, meaningful routines, and participatory support structures. This perspective has important implications for cultural policy. Surpassing privileging excellence, innovation, or audience numbers, policy frameworks should recognize and support creativity as a distributed public good, one that emerges through routine engagement, shared resources, and social investment. Cities like Cluj-Napoca, with their evolving cultural ecosystems and participatory experiments, offer valuable insights into how embedded creativity can be fostered, sustained, and scaled. Yet they also reveal the risks of neglect with underfunded independent sectors, symbolic recognition without structural support, and deepening inequalities in access and involvement.

Future research should further explore how embedded creativity unfolds across different urban contexts, especially in relation to class, ethnicity, and generational experience. Comparative studies across cities and longitudinal tracking of cultural engagement could yield richer insights into the temporal and spatial dynamics of creative engagement. Qualitative research on informal practices, affective labour, and grassroots infrastructures would deepen our understanding of how creativity is lived, shared, and contested beyond institutional frameworks. Ultimately, this article argues for a more grounded and plural vision of creativity, one that sees it not as a possession or a metric, but as a collective capacity conditioned by and shaping the everyday life of cities.

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