Culture-led Urban Regeneration in Zürich West: From an Industrial District to a Creative Hub

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Abstract

This article centers on the Zürich West district in Switzerland, analyzing its urban-regeneration strategies and governance logic under the guidance of cultural governance and creative industry policy orientation. Employing a qualitative case-study approach, the research integrates municipal planning archives, transit and educational institutional data, academic research, and policy evaluation reports to construct a three-layer analytical framework of "institution-space-society." The findings reveal that Zürich West's transformation unfolded in three phases: (1) industrial heritage revitalization and infrastructure renewal; (2) the formation of cultural and educational anchor points (such as Toni-Areal and Im Viadukt); and (3) governance deepening with sustainability orientation (including Transit-Oriented Development, public space redistribution, and social infrastructure integration). The key mechanisms for success include: multi-stakeholder negotiation and dual-stage formalization shaped by the collaborative planning model (Kooperative Entwicklungsplanung); a transit-oriented-development backbone enhancing accessibility; and a local innovation ecology driven by cultural/educational venues. However, culture-led regeneration is also accompanied by spatial commodification and pressures on social inclusion (rising rents, squeeze on nighttime cultural spaces, and the "moral re-ordering" of the sex-industry landscape). Building on the theoretical foundations laid by Evans, García, Pratt and Peck, this paper proposes three policy recommendations: institutionalize cultural-impact assessment; ensure affordability of creative space via diversified housing policies and tax instruments; and sustain resilience of nighttime and grassroots culture through "public-share quotas" and community-benefit-agreement mechanisms.

Keywords: Zürich west; Culture-led urban regeneration; Cultural governance; Collaborative planning; Transit-oriented development

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Problem Statement

Following post-industrial transformation, the majority of Europe's core cities have faced de-industrialization and brownfield-reuse challenges; culture is viewed as an interfacial driver of revival, it can introduce new types of employment and investment into the local economy, while also reshaping place identity and the city brand (García, 2004; Evans, 2005). Zürich West was once a heavy-industry cluster; since the 1990s it has gradually shifted from an industrial hinterland into a creative and knowledge node (see figure 1). The local government adopted a collaborative planning model, combining transit-oriented development (TOD) with cultural/educational anchors (such as the presence of ZHdK at Toni-Areal, and the repurposing of the viaduct at Im Viadukt), driving a phased, flexible and monitorable governance process (see figure 2). The local literature and municipal data both clearly document this trajectory, especially the positioning of the Hardbrücke hub and the tram extension, the cultural-economic significance of Toni-Areal and Im Viadukt, and the office-corridor effect represented by Prime Tower.
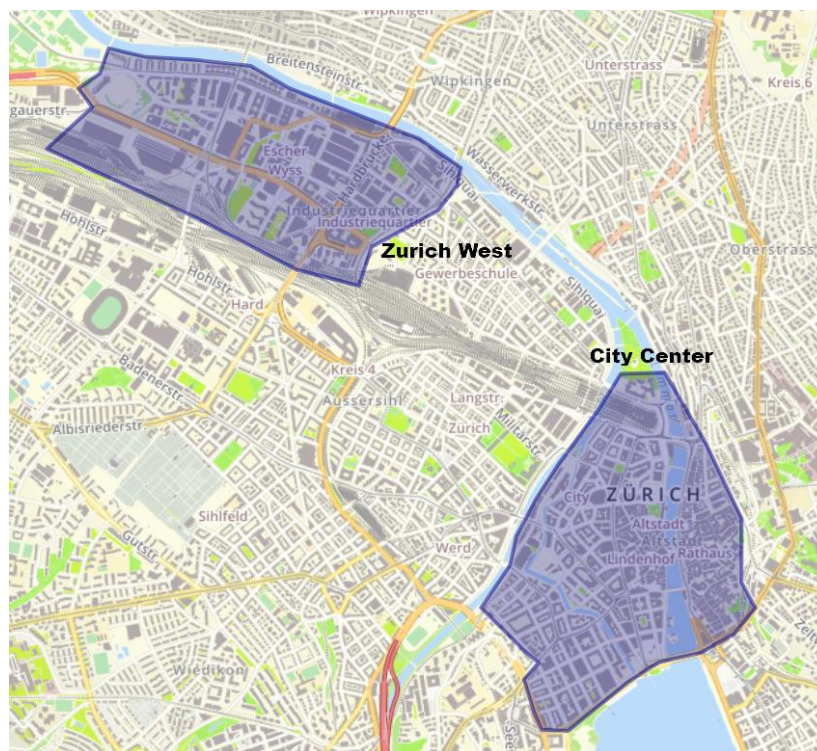
Figure 1 Relative locations of Zurich city center and West District

Figure 2 Key nodes in Zurich's western district

1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

This article aims to analyze:

- How culture and the creative industries act as the driving force and governance axis for the urban regeneration of Zürich West.

- How collaborative planning forms sustainable institutional arrangements among multiple stakeholders.

- The risks and corrective mechanisms of culture-led regeneration concerning inclusivity and spatial justice.

1.3. Research Contributions

Theoretically, this article integrates the critique of culture-led regeneration with institutional analysis of cooperative governance, supplementing the "tool-kit" of governance within the creative city discourse. Practically, by examining the phased mechanism, the two-stage planning legislation, and the public-space strategies in Zürich West, the study offers actionable experience for the coordinated advancement of cultural policy and urban planning

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture-Led Urban Regeneration: From Symbol to Institutionalization

Culture-led regeneration holds dual significance in European urban policy: as symbolic capital enhancing urban visibility, and through cultural facilities and activities driving local economy and social cohesion (García, 2004; Evans, 2005). Evans (2005) notes that evaluating cultural benefits must bridge the measurement gap between outputs and outcomes, rather than relying solely on participation rates or tourism revenues. García (2004) argues for elevating culture from an "instrumental intervention" to a core component of urban development strategy. Balsas (2022) reviews the historical and conceptual evolution of urban regeneration, emphasizing that assessment should be based on multi-scalar governance, local embeddedness, and long-termism.

2.2. Creative Cities and Critique: Instrumentalization and Exclusion of Culture

Landry (2000) introduced the "creative city" concept, encouraging problem-solving through creativity and multi-actor collaboration. However, Peck (2005) critiques that "creative-class" oriented policies are easily reduced to investment-attraction recipes and ignore labour structures and reproduction of inequality. Pratt (2011) observes that in the creative city discourse, when culture is tasked with economic missions, its social and critical functions are often sacrificed. Zukin (1995) reveals how "authenticity" is commodified in the urban landscape. This critical tradition reminds us that unless culture embeds mechanisms of inclusion and distribution, it will be hollowed out in the course of new upscale development and touristification.

2.3 Cultural Governance and Collaborative Planning

Cultural governance addresses how power is distributed and coordinated among multiple actors (Miller & Yúdice, 2002). Representing the governance shift, Healey-style deliberative planning stresses bottom-up knowledge and collaboration. In the Swiss context, the procedural design of Kooperative Entwicklungsplanung (city forums, vision negotiation, two-stage zoning/theme plans) is a local practice exemplar that complements formal and informal tools, balancing flexibility with accountability (Cornaro et al., 2007). Their study summarizes both conceptual and operational challenges in urban transformation processes, and points out the importance of using phasing and flexibility to cope with uncertainty.

2.4. Social Inclusion and the Moral Landscape

Rérat and Lees (2011) show in Swiss core cities how new-build gentrification reshapes social structures; Lees (2012) brings a comparative urbanism perspective, emphasizing the diversity and policy-driven nature of third-wave gentrification. In Zürich, governance of the sex industry - via "moral re-ordering"- intervenes in spatial policy of visibility/invisibility (van Liempt & Chimienti, 2017), including regeneration of the Langstrasse district, the 2012 referendum on PGVO, the relocation of street-based sex work and the sharp

rise in police control and expulsion (Wegweisung). These phenomena illustrate how culture and order politics become intertwined in regeneration.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a single case study approach (Yin, 2009), taking Zürich West as the analytical subject. The research questions focus on regeneration strategies under cultural governance and their socio-spatial effects, encompassing institutional, spatial, and social dimensions.

3.2. Data Sources and Collection

- Official and technical documents: the city government's Zürich-West Development Concept, regional design principles, public-space/transportation project documents, etc.;

- Institutional information: ZVV (Hardbrücke tram extension), ZHdK (Toni-Areal campus);

- Academic research: Cornaro et al. (2007) case-study of Zürich West, literature on urban society and cultural governance;

- The user-provided file "Zürich West.docx" as a key reference for localized observation and secondary compilation. Descriptions of infrastructure, cultural anchors and landmark-economy in the manuscript were cross-verified with municipal and academic data.

3.3. Analytical Framework and Validity

The study codes following the logic of "Institutional arrangements → Spatial forms → Social impacts", and ensures narrative consistency via triangulation (municipal documents/academic literature/institutional information). In terms of temporal context, decision-making and construction nodes (2011, 2014, 2017, etc.) were cross-checked to reduce source bias.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Regeneration Process and Key Milestones

- Activation of industrial heritage sites and infrastructure renewal (1990s–2010): After heavy industry relocated, the municipal government and landowners engaged in collaborative development, converting linear grey-spaces such as railways and river banks into public and community venues; for example, at Im Viadukt, the under-arch space was repurposed into markets and arcades, forming a "cultural economy of everyday life".

- Formation of cultural and educational anchor points (2010-2015): Toni-Areal was transformed from a dairy factory into the headquarters of ZHdK (2014), creating a teaching–research–performance integrated hub; the long-term demand of culture/education made the district's daytime and nighttime flows and activity patterns more diverse.

- TOD and sustainability orientation (2015–present): The Hardbrücke tram extension crossing the main line (2017) strengthened the junction with the S-Bahn, significantly shortening the commuting time from the West district to the centre, and provided a premise of accessibility for subsequent development; following this, strategies of public-space redistribution and social-infrastructure packaging continued to deepen.

4.2. Collaborative Planning Toolkit: From Informal to Two-Stage Legalization

The collaborative planning of Zürich West consists of "City forum →Vision coordination → Bilateral negotiations and statutory procedures → Thematic statutory planning" (Scholl, 2022): on informal platforms a shared development concept is formed, and a two-stage (One-step → Two-step) planning mechanism is used to increase flexibility, allowing large functional zones to undergo initial concept review, while the usage of individual parcels is postponed until just before implementation (reducing uncertainty and transaction costs).

Cornaro et al. (2007) summarize that this process faced "conceptual challenges" (high density, varied phasing, flexible uses and unclear sustainability assessment criteria) and "operational challenges" (political disagreement, institutional insufficiencies, lack of experience in cost-and-risk estimation, legal uncertainty), and the two cases (Zürich and Basel) have both pursued a long-term balance between sustainability, economic and social needs.

4.3. Coupling Cultural/Educational Anchors with Urban Everydayness

Toni-Areal introduced higher arts and culture education and performance, creating a stable demand for knowledge and culture (Jiang & Zhang, 2009); Im Viadukt translated historic infrastructure into "stay-able" everyday publicness. Together, one high-profile and one grassroots site, they counterbalance the risk of single-landmarkification, and form a sustainable cultural-ecological chain.

This is consistent with Evans (2005) who argues that the "culture–society–economy triple objectives require institutional guarantees"; concurrently, it responds to Pratt's (2011) caution about the creative city's "instrumentalization" of culture: through institutionalized governance (cooperation and two-stage legislation) symbolic capital is transformed into inclusive publicness.

4.4. Tensions between the TOD Framework and Landmark Economy

The Hardbrücke tram extension turned the West district from a peripheral area into a subordinate hub, promoting commuting accessibility and mixed-use development; however, the office-corridor effect led by Prime Tower also pushed up rents and investment expectations, squeezing small cultural venues (Rérat, 2012a).

Critiques by Peck (2005) and Zukin (1995) point out that when culture becomes an appendage of urban branding and real-estate narratives, grassroots culture and entrepreneurial niches are easily displaced. Therefore, TOD and landmark economy must be placed within a "public-redistribution" framework, through regulation of ground-floor access, small-scale commercial spaces, and open street-level space to sustain street life and community-economy diversity.

4.5. Governance Execution of Social Inclusion: From Cooperative Housing to Night-time Culture

The governance logic of Zürich West extended from cooperative procedures to social dimensions: residential quotas, social facilities and open space were set within zoning and development agreements, and cooperative/non-profit housing was used to reduce net displacement risk (based on municipal principles and West-district practice). At the same time, the preservation of night-time cultural spaces required noise buffers and usage controls to ensure compatibility of culture and residence, avoiding the "activate first, displace later" path dependency (Rérat, 2012b).

4.6. "Moral Landscape" and Visibility Governance: Insights from Langstrasse

In Zürich the governance of security and visibility, through the PGVO (2012) referendum, moved street-based sex work to controlled peripheral spaces (for example the "sex-work parking spaces" in Altstetten); police expulsions (Wegweisung) in the district also increased significantly. Research indicates that while this establishes a more controllable market boundary and order, it simultaneously reduces sex workers' bargaining power and safety accessibility, showing that "publicness" in regeneration carries a logic of "cleansing" (van Liempt & Chimienti, 2017).

For culture-led regeneration, this governance orientation reminds us: the question of "what is visible in the city" itself becomes one of cultural policy and spatial justice.

4.7. Dilemmas of Process and Governance Resilience

Cornaro et al. (2007) conceptualize "complexity dilemmas" and "risk dilemmas": open and informal procedures can enhance social sustainability and innovation, but also lengthen processes and increase uncertainty; all-in one comprehensive solution raise risk, yet may create the image of a forerunner and drive market and policy momentum. The long-term cooperation and phasing in the West district are in fact a dynamic balance between "high standards and feasibility" amid such dilemmas.

4.8. Summary

The regeneration of the West district shows that culture-led does not equate to "building landmarks", but must in institutionalized governance configure culture with everyday life, public space and social inclusion in coordination. Its success lies in embedding cultural anchors, TOD and cooperative procedures into long-term governance; its challenge lies in controlling the spill-over of real-estate commodification and maintaining the growth space for night-time and grassroots culture.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Research Conclusions

- Governance dimension: The procedural design of collaborative planning and the two-stage statutory framework enable informal consensus to be converted into formal regulation, enhancing flexibility and accountability, and achieving a long-term balance among sustainability, economic feasibility and social demands.

- Spatial dimension: Toni-Areal and Im Viadukt serve as dual anchor points at high and low levels; the Hardbrücke tram extension establishes a TOD backbone, which, interacting with the landmark economy, shapes a mixed-use corridor.

- Social dimension: Culture-led regeneration enhances symbolic capital and quality of life, yet maintaining affordable cultural space and housing requires cooperative housing, tax instruments and usage regulation; the case of sex-industry governance shows that moral landscapes' reconfiguration will also profoundly affect cultural diversity and spatial justice.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

- Institutionalize cultural impact assessment (CIA): incorporate indicators such as cultural participation rate, public-space utilization, local commercial diversity, and night-time culture index into regeneration performance in order to feed back into governance and calibrate resource allocation.

- Mechanisms for spatial affordability: use cooperative housing, differential land pricing and tax reductions to sustain small-scale cultural venues and studios; introduce small-area, short-lease and social-innovation-friendly clauses into ground-floor space.

- Public-share quotas and community-benefit agreements (CBA): set minimum quotas for "night-time cultural space" and "non-profit cultural facilities" in development agreements, and use CBAs to impose constraints on noise, traffic management and public-space maintenance during the operational period.

- Integrated governance of TOD and culture: link nodal interchange and walkability with cultural nodes (museums, performance venues, campuses) to create a "15-minute cultural living circle" (Moreno et al, 2021).

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study relied primarily on documents and secondary data, and did not conduct a large number of in-depth interviews; future research could combine actor-network analysis and resident surveys to quantify cultural impact and social inclusion; additionally, it could track the co-effectiveness of climate resilience and social infrastructure in the "second-generation regeneration" phase

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