BEING TOGETHER, DOING TOGETHER AND GOING FORWARD TOGETHER – ECHOES FROM FRANCE'S CULTURAL THIRD PLACES IN TIMES OF COVID-19

[ARTIGO]

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[ABSTRACT RESUMO RESUMEN]

In France, as in many other countries, cultural production and management practices are facing numerous transformations. Being understood as experimental; intermediary cultural spaces that redefine the relationship of culture with the public and the local territory, cultural third places provide a vivid example of this changing reality. Before the current health crisis, the social role of these constructs in regard to the local context were made even more visible. On a first level, this article aims to present the uniqueness of those spaces in the French context. Secondly, it describes the preliminary results of an exploratory study analyzing the reactions and adjustments to working dynamics of a number of spaces in the PACA region, in France, during the first months of the pandemic. Finally, we propose further lines of research.

Keywords: Cultural third places. Creative Hubs. COVID-19. France.

Na França, como em muitos países, a produção cultural e as práticas de gestão estão enfrentando uma série de transformações. Os terceiros espaços culturais, como intermediários e experimentais, redefinem a relação entre a cultura e o público, a cultura e o território local e fornecem um exemplo vívido desta realidade em transformação. A crise sanitária contribuiu para destacar o papel social que eles desempenham no contexto local. Por meio deste artigo, propomos, em um primeiro nível, uma apresentação da singularidade destes espaços no contexto francês. Apresentaremos, também, os resultados preliminares de um estudo exploratório das reações e dos ajustes na dinâmica de trabalho em vários espaços da região francesa PACA durante os primeiros meses da pandemia. Finalmente, propomos novas linhas de pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Terceiros lugares culturais. Hubs Criativos. Covid-19. França.

Francia como muchos países se enfrenta a una serie de transformaciones en las prácticas de producción y gestión cultural. Los terceros lugares culturales, al ser espacios intermedios y experimentales, redefinen la relación entre la cultura y el público, la cultura y el territorio local, y brindan un vivo ejemplo de esta realidad cambiante. Lacrisis sanitaria contribuyó a poner de relieve el papel social que juegan en el contexto local. En este artículo nos proponemos presentar la singularidad de estos espacios en el contexto francés. Además, presentaremos los resultados preliminares de un estudio exploratorio de las reacciones y ajustes a las dinámicas de trabajo en varios espacios de la región PACA en Francia durante los primeros meses de la pandemia. Finalmente, proponemos nuevas líneas de investigación.

Palabras clave: Terceros lugares culturales. Centros Creativos. Covid-19. Francia.

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Introduction

Cultural third places are not a new phenomenon. In France, back in 2001, the "Friches, laboratoires, fabriques, squats, projets pluridisciplinaires… : une nouvelle époque de l'action culturelle" report, written by Fabrice Lextrait, highlighted the ongoing transformation of the cultural and artistic sphere in the country. What was underlined with this report was the emergence of experimental cultural spaces in different urban and non-urban environments, that questioned – in an original way – the conditions of production, mediation and reception of artistic practices.

What was described in Lextrait's report was, of course, a radiography of that specific moment in time. Twenty years later, many of those intermediary spaces might have disappeared; some still exist and function in the same format, while others have emerged and have occupied a new role in the public realm. Today, the term *tiers lieux*, an immediate translation of the term *third place* coined by Oldenburg in 1989, has been widely used in the French context to describe places that represent spaces that question what is possible, provide opportunities to meet, to exchange, to co-create, to experiment, and to re-visit the relationship between art and society. One could say that those spaces are gradually evolving into a movement whose values are grounded on sharing: on doing together (*faire ensemble*) for better living together (*vivre ensemble*) (LEVY-WAITZ, 2018).

At the beginning of the health crisis, third places in France gained quite some visibility thanks to the role they played as agents of socialization and sharing; guaranteeing the distribution of food for those in need, supporting those digitally illiterate or helping through educational means. Another remarkable example has been the production of protection equipment and material for the health workers, such as marks, respiratory systems and distributors of hydro alcoholic gel (LES TIERS-LIEUX…, 2021). The crisis however hit them as well: many have reported that they feel more fragile, especially financially (FRANCE TIERS-LIEUX, 2020), even if they were able to receive financial support from the central and local government.

In the framework of a wider research project on the cultural third places in the Region of Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur (PACA hereafter), we have used the opportunity that occurred during the health crisis that outbroke at the beginning of our research to initiate a specific inquiry into how those places adapted in this specific context. We collectively identified a number of different and complementary lines of research that were used as a guide for the analysis. Four different cultural third places were the focus, in this specific region: Le Port des Créateurs in Toulon, La Fabulerie and La Friche Belle de Mai in Marseille, and the Hublot in Nice. Our corpus also included four other spaces from Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, and Romania that allowed us to enrich our views in the topic. The interviews took place between May and July 2020. The chosen methodology consisted in qualitative interviews with the people responsible for those spaces. This field research was, of course, of exploratory

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nature and the results are only capturing the immediate consequences of the COVID-19 crisis to those spaces and the very early reactions. The study will be further complemented in the next couple of months and, hopefully, towards the end of the sanitary crisis (at least that's what we hope to occur in France), to examine better not only how those spaces adapted to the context, but how – given that they are the ones facilitating innovation and creativity – they have managed to re-invent themselves during this unexpected and exceptional period.

In this article, we will examine the characteristics of cultural third places in France through a double comparative view over time and space. What we are mostly interested in is to describe and draw some preliminary understandings in regard to how cultural third places in our region of focus have reacted during the health crisis and what are the main transformations that occurred due to COVID-19. The first part of our article unpacks further the notion of cultural third place and discusses it primarily in a French context. The second part of the article is devoted to present our research project and the main findings from the interviews with the managers of those four third places that constitute our primary corpus of analysis. We, then, discuss and highlight the main trends and observations that we can draw out of these first reactions, and we close the article with a suggestion regarding further research and cross-border opportunities for academic exchange on the topic, in view of the ongoing context in which COVID-19 is still putting conditions on the way such spaces operate.

Understanding Cultural Third Places in the French context

On terms and conceptual clarifications

As mentioned in the beginning, cultural third places are not a new phenomenon. They have not, however, always been named as such in the French context. Borrowing from the translation of Oldenburg's term third place, in the French language the concept of *tiers lieux* has been introduced to describe a great variety of places – some more established and some more recent and emerging – where 'living together' and 'doing together' are their principal *raison d'être*. While recognizing that each of these spaces has its own specificities, ways of working, funding models, and communities, their common denominator is that they facilitate informal encounters, social interactions, creativity, and common projects, thus they are community-driven.

These places in reality are representative of the societal transformation of our times, especially the revolution in our working practices, the needs of the learning society, and the ecological transition. They have, therefore, increasingly attracted the academic community. In France, early works on such places focused on the so-called *friches culturelles* (translated in English as cultural brownfields) and artistic squats. As the editor of the special issue of the *Culture et Musées* journal dedicated on these new territories of art, Emmanuelle Maunaye (2004, p. 13) notes in the introduction, there are different ways of trying to define those

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spaces: intermediary spaces, alternative, emerging, *friches culturelles* or artistic squats have been some of the terms deployed. Maunaye underlines as well that perhaps the common denominator of these forms of artistic and cultural action, that cannot be labeled under the same term, is that they all share a common foundation: they are the result of an answer to the lack of efficient cultural policies.

La Friche Belle de Mai, a former tobacco factory in Marseille, was one of those first places that was converted into a cultural complex that brought together interdisciplinary artistic activity, new models for urban cultural interaction, and embeddedness to the local community (it is not by accident that this space adopted in its name the name of the neighborhood – Belle de Mai – in which it is located). This space has been the focus of various studies that try to decrypt the relation between industrial sites, cultural policies and contemporary art (ROSEQUIT, 2019) or how the collectives in charge of the cultural initiative have been mobilizing a network of actors and changing social relations within a specific community (ANDRES, 2011). Both studies mentioned here, examine further the extent to which La Friche has been one of the key cultural facilities that led the successful application and implementation of the 2013 European Capital of Culture title. Nevertheless, the rise of such spaces and their importance on the local fabric has not been a merely French phenomenon; however, there has been little comparative or cross-border research on the topic. Again with La Friche Belle de Mai as a case study, Andres and Grésillon (2013) examine further the concept of "cultural brownfields", trying to assess

the transformation of three established spaces in Berlin, Marseille, and Lausanne through a study on their internal and external dynamics.

The nature of those intermediary spaces has changed over the years. Maker spaces, fab labs, creative hubs are a few of the terms that have been added on the French and international terminologies. Over the years, in the French language, those spaces began to fall under a flexible and fluid term that allows various interpretations: **tiers lieux**, an immediate translation of the term third places, coined by Oldenburg. The term has since then been used to describe places of sociability and neutral grounds that allow people to meet outside of the family and professional life and give the opportunity for community life to unfold.

It has been used as an all-encompassing term for a variety of places that, according to Antoine Burret (2016), are meeting places that allow people to do things together, to experiment with new ways of working, co-existing, and producing. Besides the variety in their forms, their common denominator, as Burret underlines, is the initial intention for a community to meet in this specific space.

The so-called cultural industries turn in cultural policy (BEAUREGARD, 2018) has transformed the way in which such places function and the way they are also seen by policy makers. Deeply rooted into their local environment, these spaces are often described by authors as miracle solution at the service of the revitalization of territories (FLORIDA, 2002) or even a "panacea for all economic ills"

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(GILL; PRATT; VIRANI, 2019, p. 1) despite their limitations (BESSON, 2017) and are also developing into an evolving field of (cultural) policy (AVDIKOS; MERKEL, 2020). In France, in particular, public authorities have identified them as key players for social cohesion and regional development (LEVY-WAITZ, 2018). Taking into consideration these dynamics, researchers in France have been examining these spaces during the last decade from different points of view including cultural commons (DECHAMP; PÉLISSIER, 2018; PÉLISSIER, 2018a, 2021), co-creation (SUIRE, 2016), innovation (AUBOUIN; CAPDEVILA, 2019) or organizational space and digital transformation (MAGKOU; HURET; LAMBERT, 2021?). Besides being an emerging field of research, these intermediary cultural spaces, such as coworking spaces, maker spaces, and creative hubs, have attracted growing attention within the international research community, as well as have been studied from different disciplines, including management, regional development studies, economics, geography, sociology, and other sciences (AKHAVAN, 2021), such as information and communication sciences. Considered to contribute to a wider social, economic, and civil goals within the neighborhood they operate, they have captured the interest of policy makers as well, under a "broader hyperbole about creativity" (GILL; PRATT; VIRANI, 2019, p. 1), creative industries, entrepreneurship, and innovation policies (MULAS; NEDAYVODA; ZAATARI, 2017; POLI; SHIACH, 2020).

Togetherness at the heart of cultural third places

What distinguishes cultural third places from other cultural centers or organizations is that they are community-driven, meaning they both cultivate an inner community but they are also extroverted and wish to engage with the local environment and its inhabitants to co-create and curate meaningful interactions (MAGKOU; HURET; LAMBERT, 2021?). This community and togetherness is obvious in many aspects of their organizational life. Firstly, part of their mission is to allow the co-existence of interdisciplinary artistic practices, that bring together, in an exploratory and collaborative way of working, artists and professionals from the wider cultural and creative field, and also from other sectors. Thus they contribute to the mediating and disseminating of knowledge and the use of different techniques, many of which rely on digital means, making the sharing of competences a fertile ground for experimentation. Secondly, cultural third places come as a response to the evolutions in the way of working. To a large extent they have functioned as mutual survival platforms of precarious employment and community development (AVDIKOS; MERKEL, 2020), but they also provide a response to the reinforcement of a wider labor flexibilization (DE PEUTER; COHEN; SARACO, 2017). Finally, their primary mission is related to the cultivation of relations between communities and building trust among them as an important element of innovation (STORPER, VENABLES, 2004). The first community they cater for are the immediate users and those using those spaces in a regular way. The way their organizational space is structured around open workspaces, community rooms etc., caters to the needs of their users and their different routines, while it allows the

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facilitation of planned and unplanned interactions among them, which can lead to further learning and networking. At the same time, they work towards a community that goes beyond their immediate users, as they try to serve their local communities and put together a varied programming that can attracts people of various backgrounds and interests.

What cultural third places unveil is that emerging forms of "living together" and "doing together" are gaining ground. They correspond to a way of reacting based on the new ways of working together in a fair environment: sharing of collective intelligence, reconfiguration of the ways of working, new logics of networks, sharing of tools and common spaces, lots of room for experimentation and new ways of relating with audiences, users and the wider public.

The institutionalization and legitimation of cultural third places

As already mentioned above, one of the main characteristics of cultural third places in the French territory that distinguishes them from other countries is the institutional view and level of action over them. During the last years, they have been recognized as drivers of social and territorial cohesion. Rooted in a specific setting, urban or rural, they have developed into new spaces for social interaction but mainly into spaces of emancipation and collective initiative, thanks to the opportunities for connection offered by the digital environment and the establishment of a way of doing in line with the collective intelligence paradigm. The "cultural" dimension related to cultural third places derives from the fact that they have

been chosen as facilitators of social ties over knowledge, art, and culture.

In this way, cultural third places in France have entered into a new phase in their existence, corresponding to a phase of institutionalization and recognition by public authorities. What is important to note is that this process has been initiated not by the Ministry of Culture, but the Ministry of Territorial Cohesion and Relations with Local Governments. A first support program was announced by the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion and was launched in 2019 under the title "Nouveaux lieux, nouveau liens", which could be translated as "New spaces, new relationships". The aim of this support scheme was to help structures embedded locally to concretize and enhance the growth of their projects. As announced by the Minister of Territorial Cohesion and Relations with Local Governments,

> our society has changed, a great number of people want to 'do things together', want to work differently. What we want to encourage through this program, is the development of new services for all French people, regardless of where they live, and this capacity of putting initiatives into practice in all regional and local territories (GOURAULT, 2021, our translation)[1].

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[1]   In the original: « *Notre société change, de nombreuses personnes veulent « faire ensemble », veulent travailler différemment. Ce que nous voulons encourager au travers de ce programme, c'est le développement de nouveaux services pour tous les Français, où qu'ils vivent, et cette capacité d'initiative à l'œuvre dans tous les territoires* ».

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This program took the form of support for the conception and implementation of a project, the use of specific spaces (old justice houses, brownfields, offices…) or support mechanisms for the operation of such spaces. In its evolution, a specific call for "Fabriques du territoire" (that could be translated as territorial factories) was launched to consolidate the existing third places that were already rooted in their neighborhoods and the city policies. The project devoted 45 million euros to 300 projects selected until 2022. Half of them have to be rooted into priority neighborhoods defined by city policies and the other half in rural contexts. A specific label, "Fabrique numérique du territoire", was also created for those spaces and structures that have as principal activity the access to culture, to cultural rights, to digital public services, education and training, citizen participation, and entrepreneurship.

The next phase of this institutionalization process was the creation of France Tiers-lieu[2], an association that aims to support the development, emergence, and promotion of the third places sector in France. The association supports the initiatives of local agents by participating with the professionalization of those spaces, through training, job finding, real estate, impact evaluation, common tools. Supported and financed by the Ministry of Territorial Cohesion and the Ministry of Employment, it is supported by a network of experts, the National Council of Third Places, which brings together sixty-three representatives from different cultural third places in France. This Council plays the role of a representative body that allows dialogue with those working in the sector.

Cultural third places in the PACA region and the health crisis: research questions, fieldwork, and methodology

Overall presentation of the research project

As explained in the first section of this article, the heterogeneity of relations and the social conditions that can be observed in these intermediary cultural spaces, have converted them into a stimulating research topic. At the beginning of 2020, a research project aiming to shed light on the creative and innovative dynamics of "Cultural Third Spaces" ("Tiers-Lieux Culturels/ TLC") and the reconfigurations they generate on the cultural ecosystem of the PACA region was initiated. The research project is part of a multidisciplinary process that brings together a group of researchers in the fields of communication and information sciences, management sciences, and sociology who have collaborate for a number of years in the framework of a thematic research group: the CREAMED network in Provence, Alpes, and Cote d'Azur and Corsica regions[3]. The research project relies on field studies carried out in four territories of the region in focus: Avignon,

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2 Available from: https://francetierslieux.fr/. Accessed on: 5 ago. 2021.

3 For more information, see: https://creamed. hypotheses.org/472.

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Marseille, Toulon and Nice. On these territories we have identified cultural spaces in which each one of them represents – in its own way – spaces that encourage social ties and empowerment, facilitate the creation of new urban utopias, and stimulate collective initiatives in the artistic and cultural field.

Four main axis of inquiry had been identified at the origins of the project: 1. the genesis, identity and institutionalization of cultural third places; 2. the uniqueness of the cultural and artistic project; 3. the dynamics of social and territorial innovation with the audiences; and 4. the territory and democratization towards cultural participation. The underlying research question was to determine if, and how, cultural third places re-configure a new way of thinking culture as common (GUILLIER, 2018; PÉLISSIER, 2018a). The originality of the research project lies on the empirical work envisaged that could be described as participative, since it is undertaken in close collaboration with cultural third spaces that have accepted to be partners in the project, thus participating in a dynamic process of knowledge co-construction that the research team wishes to initiate.

At this point, we consider important to give a short overview of these spaces to better understand the results of the study but also their origins and diversity. The Friche Belle de Mai is operating since 1992 at an old tobacco factory in Marseille as a center for alternative artistic creation. It includes working spaces for artistic and cultural work, as well as events and exposition halls. Its mission lies in the support of artistic and cultural entrepreneurship, in the context of social and solidarity economy through incubators and coworking

spaces, while giving the floor to citizen-led initiatives and aspirations. Established in 2010, La Fabulerie is focusing its work on innovative projects that open doors to knowledge and digital competences. La Fabulerie develops projects and digital creations for professionals and the general public around the valorization of heritage collections, the mediation of scientific knowledge, through participatory design processes, and through the use of educational tools, deploying a playful and experiential approach. It also hosts a coworking space and a cafe. The Hublot is a center for digital creation and innovation that has operated for a number of years in the St. Roch neighborhood in Nice. Since 2016, the organization has been operating from the 109, the newly established center for contemporary cultures of the Municipality of Nice. It has a long history, starting off as a citizens and artistic squat of the Diables Bleus. The Port de Créateurs is an association based in Toulon which addresses local, national, and international artists, associations, and entrepreneurs. Its mission is to accompany projects in relation to emerging artistic practices, from their conception to their implementation. It operates from the historic center of Toulon and collaborates closely with different cultural structures of the city, as well as the University.

Methodology and field research

The health crisis outbreak happened very close to the beginning of the research project. This put into question our initial planning and brought the research team together to question the effects of COVID-19 on the reactions and practices of the cultural third places to this unique period. Questions related to the artistic and cultural projects,

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the re-invention of the concept of live performance, the relation with their users and their publics, the changing relations with the territory in which they are embedded, and their level of financial and organizational resilience came to the surface. A common questionnaire grid was designed and the researchers engaged into interviews with different representatives of the cultural third places under study. Interviews took place between May and July 2020. We decided to work in close relationship with the cultural third places operating in the three major cities of the region: the Friche Belle de Mai and the Fabulerie in Marseille, the Hublot la Diva in Nice, and Port des Créateurs in Toulon. The first three spaces had already received the label "Fabrique du territoire", while the last one submitted its candidature at the last call published by the Ministry, in 2021.

The main objective of this particular research project was to capture how cultural third places reacted during the first months of the sanitary crisis. For this reason, four interrelated dimensions were identified as our fields of this inquiry:

Firstly, the artistic dimension. Our main exploration regarding this dimension was related to the transformation and/or redefinition of the relationship between artistic objects and outputs and their audiences when conditions don't allow a physical contact, or a mere existence, in a specific space. Can we still use the term "live performance"? Digital communication tools and how they were used during this period to facilitate this exchange were also part of our inquiry.

Secondly, the audience and users' dimension. As we've mentioned above, the communities around cultural third places

are their main reason for existence. During a period in which those places were forced to close, what has been their relationship with their audiences, the users of their services? We questioned if concrete measures were taken (e.g. limit of number of attendees) for the specific period studied and if different cultural and artistic missions were adjusted depending on the type of public addressed.

Thirdly, in regard to the economic and managerial dimension, we were interested in exploring the resilience of such fragile spaces as they were hit by this crisis, and their capacity to reinvent themselves and redefine their identity.

Finally, our last level of exploration was the policy dimension at local, regional, national, and European level. We were particularly interested to find out the opinions of representatives of these places on the support measures taken by agents at different policy levels and their relevance to the specific sector. Furthermore, we wished to explore whether new forms of cooperation and solidarity within the sector have evolved, also in regard to cooperation with other cultural spaces or networks at the local, national or European/international level. Joint efforts for advocacy purposes were also a topic we wanted to explore.

Findings and discussion

The four cultural third places studied were forced to close their doors to the public from the beginning of the lockdown in March

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2020, until the summer of 2020. From the very beginning, some of them reacted immediately in solidarity to those in need, facing the effects of the health crisis. For example, the team of the Fabulerie produced protection material through their fablab and distributed it in the region. At the same time, the Friche Belle de Mai opened spaces, which were previously used as residency spaces homeless people and immigrants who no longer had place at the accommodation centers. This reaction – besides their adaptation capacity – underlines the social cohesion role that these cultural third places can play on the local level.

When it comes to the artistic dimension, the main observation that stands out is the solidarity and how the crisis brought the communities closer together, albeit physically distant. The team at Friche Belle the Mai encouraged the resident artists and creators, as well as others, to create artistic content that was shared by regular newsletters and through social media. This helped the internal communication within the Friche's communities. As the person interviewed mentioned, "it allowed maintaining the contact and the community in action". At the moment that the interviews took place, there was a big anticipation regarding the re-opening of those spaces. Exhibition spaces were slowly opening with the necessary social distancing measures. For live performances this took a bit longer, but at the moment of the interviews rehearsals had started again at La Belle.

The condition of lockdown affected, to a large extent, the way of communicating and engaging with the different audiences. All physical activities were cancelled, postponed or moved to the digital sphere.

The challenge was dual: maintain the programming they had already planned and, at the same time, develop content for the specific moment and the particular needs of their audiences. The youth are very comfortable with the use of digital media, and the team of La Fabulerie focused on establishing strong contact with their online audience. Most importantly, they focused on developing pedagogical and creative "survival kits" addressed to parents and educators working with kids, in order to propose different activities – with and without screen- that they could do with younger audiences. At the same time they re-imagined an exhibition they had planned and made it available online, engaging even more with women amateur artists that were part of this and sharing aspects of the intimacy of their own personal space. With both projects, they kept a strong contact with their audiences, attracted new audiences, and continued collaborating with the artists they were already working with. The team of Hublot focused at transferring the organization of their Social Lab online. The Lab was a training center for youngsters between 16 and 25 that are facing challenging conditions and have abandoned school. For the team, it was a project that they had very much at their heart and were very satisfied that they managed to bring this group together, even under these circumstances. It slowly became a part of the cultural third places' way of working, to produce events and activities in the hybrid or digital mode. The major question that arose from this period, though, was: how can the digital divide be solved, and how can we guarantee equal access to digital content? Moreover, there was also a great anticipation on how the audiences would react to the re-opening. "The public will

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come back again more or less easily. But as time goes by, audiences regain their confidence. More and more people use their mask as a bib", said the representative of Belle de Mai.

From an economic point of view, all the structures have a hybrid economic model that rely on both public and private funding. Private funding is mainly induced by activities produced in their premises (cultural and artistic activities or parallel activities, such as restaurants, bars etc.). Given the new context, all these spaces were forced to lose this source of income. We observed that the more established cultural third places had fewer financial difficulties, compared to the emerging ones; considering that they had enough savings to allow their survival for the number of months that they were closed. To some extent, these losses were partially compensated. First of all, they could benefit from the governmental support in the form of partial unemployment schemes for their staff, which implied a 25% of their activity (either in the physical space or teleworking). Secondly, they could report the payment of the taxes on wages.

In regard to their positioning within the territory, it is important to note that their label as "fabriques du territoire" had facilitated the obtention of this governmental support, probably because their identity and territorial role was already (institutionally) recognized. In this respect, the representative of the Toulon based Port des Créateurs, which has not received yet this label, underlines that it is probably because "local territorial authorities have not understood our role". But, he also mentioned "the importance to enter into the

dynamics of networks outside the territory of Toulon to better understand the role of the cultural third places". In this direction, he underlined that their participation in the European initiative Smart Atmospheres of Social and Financial Innovation for Innovative Clustering of Creative Industries in Mediterranean Area (SMATH) – which aims to reinforce collaborative links between art, culture, innovation, and creative industries and the creation of creative clusters – is in this respect a necessary strategy for the development and the institutional recognition of those spaces. He also made the comparison between different cities in France that are more advanced into the networking aspect, such as Bordeaux and Lyon.

The project's timing poses a significant research challenge. Firstly, the disruption of the creative hubs' physical operations, and the subsequent adaptations following the COVID-19 outbreak, calls for a deeper understanding of the changes produced from the need to re-define the concept of space and look for interrelations between its physical and digital dimension. Secondly, this unexpected disruptive process revealed long-term issues concerning the volatility and sustainability of the cultural and creative sector as a whole (COMUNIAN; ENGLAND, 2020; SAEZ, 2020), resulting in a number of government-led short-term measures for their support and brought to the surface the resilience of those spaces. It is, however, yet to be explored how the COVID-19 will influence their work in the long run. Our research project had an exploratory character. It was just a first step to understand the immediate effects and the reactions of those running them.

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Final considerations

In this article we have presented some reflections on the evolution of cultural third places in France and preliminary findings of a research project that, based on a common interview grid, captured the first experiences of cultural third places in Southern France's PACA region, in relation to COVID-19. Nevertheless, our research only covered a specific period in time; and the knowledge produced provides an early reflection on the organisational transformation that these spaces will be called to deliver, under the binary of physical versus digital space and the on-going transformation imposed by COVID-19. Therefore, further research is needed to confirm the preliminary assumptions. Although some similarities can be traced, it is important to underline that each cultural third space has its own history and identity, its own governance and business models, as well as its own level of connection to the local territory and the specific communities around it. This cannot be ignored when studying such spaces. Our intention is to widen this ongoing research with a second field study towards the end of this year, using the same analysis grid to evaluate the evolutions and transformations undertaken by those spaces since the first reactions captured.

The research team also wishes to build on this experience and advance reflections raised within the project to a wider European and international level. Some of the researchers of the project already used the same interview grid to explore more spaces at the European level, namely ZWAP in Bilbao (Spain), Bios Romantso in Athens (Greece), the Artists Colony in Baia Mare (Romania) and Kulturfabrik in Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg). Further common projects with universities and research teams from different countries could shed light into the topic. Furthermore, a recently introduced research line in our work has to do with the role of universities and research in supporting cultural third places. The (still ongoing) creation of Villa Créative within the University of Avignon is part of these examples that would be interesting to explore in the future, and see the linkages than can be established between research, practice, and policy-making.

Finally, taking into consideration social and technological challenges affecting our societies following the COVID-19 outbreak and the varied interest that they have attracted in the policy sphere, future research should envisage producing new insights into the role of cultural third places in cities and urban contexts in times of digital transformation and contributing to general advancements in research and policy-making. The adaptive capacity of cultural organisations to digital transformation (MASSI; VECCO; LIN, 2020; PAQUIENSÉGUY; PÉLISSIER, 2021; PÉLISSIER; PÉLISSIER, 2017; PELISSIER, 2018b) will become even more a subject of interest, as well as how this capacity can be further enhanced. What this last year has showed us is that the dichotomy between the digital and the physical are being diluted, and cultural third places are evolving as pioneers in this transformation, while contributing to breaching the digital divide. The collaboration of research teams across borders can contribute to a better understanding

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of these transformations, that in return could help cultural operators and policy makers to develop better strategies and programs that respond to the context in which they operate.

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