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Embeddedness and locational choices: A study of creative workers in a dance organisation

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Abstract

Locational choices of creative workers have been a matter of heated debate over the last decade. This study proposes a micro perspective aimed at disentangling how the individual decision-making process behind locational choices is activated and develops over time. To this aim, we combine previous geographic research on the issue with research on the role of organisational factors in workers’ attraction and retention. Empirically, we carried out an exploratory case study of dancers in a renowned contemporary ballet company based in Reggio Emilia, Italy. With this study, we highlight how matching professional quests and organisation-specific job opportunities activates locational choices, and we extend geographical approaches to embeddedness by considering the role of organisations as crucial mediating entities between the city context and creative workers.

Introduction

In line with the recent surge of interest on the role played by creativity in fostering urban and regional development (e.g., Markusen and Schrock, 2006; Scott, 2000), the issue of what kind of factors affect the locational choices of creative workers has received close attention over the last decade, both in research and policy circles. Indeed, creative workers have been depicted as highly skilled and educated individuals who play a crucial role in contributing to local development (e.g., Delisle and Shearmur 2010; Florida, 2004). As a result, cities compete to attract and retain such workers in order to stimulate economic growth (e.g., Currid, 2009; Wojan et al., 2007).

The existing literature seems to agree that a city's size matters (Markusen and Schrock, 2006, p. 1664) as creative workers tend to concentrate in large, metropolitan areas, where they could find a large pool of employment opportunities (e.g., Scott, 2010), a diverse offer of urban amenities (e.g., Asheim and Hansen, 2009), and a high concentration of other creative individuals to meet and interact with (e.g., Florida, 2004). However, several studies recently turned to the investigation of how small and medium sized cities, which "comprise the bulk of the urban landscape where people live and work" (Sands and Reese, 2008, p. 9), can attract and retain creative talent. Such studies highlighted other factors, such as liveability and sustainability, which could be at play thus providing a more nuanced understanding of the locational choices of creative workers (e.g., Denis-Jacob, 2012; Hracs et al., 2011; Waite and Gibson, 2009).

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With few notable exceptions (e.g., Brown, 2014; Musterd and Gritsai, 2012), however, most studies adopted a ‘macro’ approach investigating the relative importance of certain factors over others (e.g. job opportunities vs. amenities, liveability vs. large human scale interaction). As a result, to date very limited research has focused on the ‘micro’ side of the story – i.e. how the individual decision-making process is activated and develops over time.

Our first aim therefore is to provide a fine-grained understanding of how specific motivational patterns could trigger the locational choices of creative workers, to the point of ‘pushing’ them to small and medium cities that do not exhibit “thick and robust labour markets” (Hracs and Stolarick, 2014, p. 109). Second, we aim to delve into the rather nuanced ways the experience that creative workers develop after moving to a place affects their future intentions to leave or stay there. We will do so by presenting an in-depth study of the locational choices of dancers working for Aterballetto, a renowned contemporary ballet company based in Reggio Emilia, a city of 160,000 inhabitants located in northern Italy. Through a longitudinal qualitative analysis, we were able to delve into the reasons that triggered their decision to locate in Reggio Emilia (i.e. motives of attraction), as well as how they have evolved over time, affecting their decision to stay in the city (i.e. motives of retention).

Based on our results, we claim that, first, creative workers face complex issues in deciding where to move in order to balance career and life goals. In particular, rather

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9 than by the idea of moving to a place where they could serendipitously find some
10 interesting job opportunities because of the presence of a thick labour market, the
11 decision-making process behind locational choices is activated by the match (or
12 mismatch) between individual professional quests and the actual (or prospective) job
13 she has (or is considering). In our case, the job opportunity provided by Aterballetto
14 satisfied the dancers' professional quests, thus triggering their decisions to move to
15 Reggio Emilia – a place that they knew little about. Second, the decision to stay
16 depends on a complex set of factors that blend personal and professional considerations,
17 and in which a relevant role is played by the embeddedness a creative worker develops
18 with both the organisation and the city where she lives. Drawing on the organisational
19 literature (e.g., Zhang, Fried and Griffeth, 2012), we propose to consider *organisational*
20 *embeddedness* as a crucial element in explaining the locational choices of creative
21 workers.
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37 We believe this study provides two main contributions. First, we contribute to nuancing
38 the understanding of the locational choices of creative workers by highlighting how the
39 match (or mismatch) between individual professional quests and organisation-specific
40 job opportunities activates locational choices, attracting and retaining creative workers
41 in a place beyond thick labour markets. Second, we extend the approaches to
42 embeddedness developed in economic geography literature (e.g. Hess, 2004) by
43 entering the relationship between a specific organisation and creative workers into the
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picture, and highlighting the role of organisations as crucial mediating entities between the city context and creative workers.

The paper is organised as follows: first, we illustrate the theoretical background and motivation behind the study, then we present the setting and the methodology, moving to sum up the results from our case next. In the last section, we discuss the results, delineate the contributions, and conclude with limitations and suggestions for future research.

The issue of the locational choices of creative workers

Starting from the ‘classical’ contraposition between the pool of employment opportunities available within localised production systems or clusters (e.g., Hansen and Niedomysl, 2009; Storper and Scott, 2009) and the amenities provided by a city in terms of vibrant cultural offer, climate of tolerance, or leisure activities (e.g., Clark et al., 2002; Florida, 2004), a number of studies has recently provided more nuance to the debate on the locational choices of creative workers. This is particularly the case of those studies that focused on the fates of small and medium cities, which have been traditionally overlooked because of their ‘low score’ in both amenities and jobs when compared to large metropolitan areas (Hansen and Winther, 2012). Such studies underlined how locational choices may be affected by a complex set of other contextual factors, such as liveability, housing affordability, and sustainability, which allow people to cultivate personal and societal goals (e.g., work-life balance, environmental

consciousness) in addition to career goals (e.g., Chapain and Comunian, 2010; Lewis and Donald, 2010).

However, what seems to have been less investigated is how the decision-making process behind locational choices is activated and develops over time. In particular, few studies have addressed the longitudinal aspect disentangling the reasons for moving from those for remaining in a place (e.g., Martin-Brelot et al., 2010; Musterd and Gritsai, 2012). Thus, in line with the “call for a more nuanced understanding of the factors associated with both the attraction and retention” of creative workers (Brown, 2014, p. 2352), we aim to shed light on the decision-making process behind locational choices by highlighting not only the subjective factors that trigger creative workers’ decision to move to a place, but also how the experience they develop after moving to a place affects their future intentions to leave or stay there.

The overlooked role of creative workers’ motivations

Since creative workers perceive their job as a calling, they show specific career patterns driven by intrinsic motivational factors such as achievement, personal growth, and the desire to avoid routine activities (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Menger, 1999). As a result, they usually move from one employer to the next initiating and terminating employment relationships in an attempt to satisfy their professional quests (Svejenova, 2005). Previous studies took into consideration these motivational issues insofar as they highlighted the role played by thick labour markets as magnets for creative workers, i.e.

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a large pool of employment opportunities could motivate creative workers to locate in a place, because it grants a continuous flow of work over time without relocating (e.g., Scott, 2005). In so doing, however, greater emphasis is placed to the case of ‘footloose’ individuals who work either autonomously or collaborating with others on a particular project and disaggregate when that project is over (Grabher, 2002). Whereas freelance and project-based employment is highly pronounced in creative industries (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, p. 500), relatively stable employment conditions within hierarchical organisations also exist (e.g. Maskell and Lorenzen, 2004; Menger, 1999). For example, Markusen (2006, p. 1927) noted how in the US only 18% of dancers and choreographers and 29% of fashion designers was self-employed, pointing to the important role that organisations may play in creative settings.

Therefore, we believe that a deeper understanding of the locational choices of creative workers would benefit from considering also the role played by the match between individual professional quests and the specific job offer(s) provided by an organisation, and how such a match changes over time affecting the decision-making process behind locational choices.

Creative workers and the ‘problem of embeddedness’: integrating geographic and organisational perspectives

Another important matter concerns how creative workers’ professional and personal networks shape their locational choices. Besides their important role in providing

professional opportunities, thus ‘pushing’ individuals into a place (e.g., Musterd and Gritsai, 2012), “networks [can also be] important for retention” (Brown, 2014, p. 2348). In this sense, the role of networks is twofold, since what matters is not only whether the networks in a given locale are permeable by newcomers (i.e. it is easy to build up relationships with other individuals operating in the local creative milieu), but also how they could embed the latter into a place. These considerations are in line with the recent “growing emphasis [...] on the social nature of economic processes and their manifestation in space”, which highlighted how individual and organisational action is embedded “into wider institutional and social frameworks” (Hess, 2004, p. 165-166). However, previous studies have mainly drawn either on a *territorial* or on a *network* view of embeddedness (Hess, 2004). While the former focused on the factors that could increase the anchoring to a given geographic space, and particularly on clusters offering thick labour markets, the latter looked more closely at relationships with family, friends and other professionals that are difficult to sever, and thus tie an individual to a given place. Thus, we intend to explore the intersection of the territorial and network views of embeddedness, particularly looking at how an organisation operating in a place can influence creative workers’ intention to stay. We do so by drawing on the organisational literature that investigated the reasons why individuals decide to join, remain or leave an organisation highlighting the crucial role played by *organisational* embeddedness –

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i.e. the forces that affect a person’s intention to stay in her present employment setting in terms of fit with the organisation, links developed with organisational members, and the sacrifice an individual would incur in if she leaves her present organisation (Lee et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2001; Ng and Feldman, 2009). Moreover, we will shed light on how locational choices, particularly decisions to stay, are affected by the interplay between the organisation and the wider context, thus favouring the development of creative workers’ embeddedness into the local community. In doing so, we will also take into account the evolutionary features implied in the *societal* view of embeddedness (Hess, 2004, p. 176), by considering how the organisation was able to develop a peculiar relationship with its cultural and political context over the years following its establishment (see also Leslie and Rantisi, 2011).

Setting and methodology

The present research is grounded in an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009) of the locational choices of a pool of dancers who moved to Reggio Emilia (henceforth, Reggio) to work for the Fondazione Nazionale della Danza Aterballetto (henceforth, Aterballetto), and the reasons why they remain in the city.

Like other creative workers, dancers use their creative skills to perform activities of symbol-making and produce valuable outputs (Hesmondshalgh and Baker, 2011; Scott, 2010). They also show high commitment to their job as a calling (Jeffri and Throsby, 2006) and a high degree of inter-organisational mobility, initiating and terminating

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9 employment relationships (usually temporary contracts of one or two years) in their
10 attempt to support their artistic endeavours and to seek non-routine work (Markusen,
11 2010; Menger, 1999). Finally, a dancer's career life cycle is very short (it starts around
12 age 20 and ends around 32), and may be further shortened due to a high risk of injury or
13 other work-related health issues.
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19 Aterballetto is Italy's foremost contemporary ballet company. Founded by the
20 Municipality of Reggio and the Region Emilia-Romagna in 1979, Aterballetto
21 established itself as very innovative by collaborating not only with the most famous
22 Italian choreographers, but also with internationally renowned ones, and contributing to
23 establishing contemporary ballet aesthetics in Italy (Pedroni, 2011). Aterballetto stages
24 about 100 performances per year in important theatres and festivals in Italy and
25 worldwide (see Table 1). Besides production and touring activities, over the last few
26 years Aterballetto has started to host other companies' performances in its
27 headquarters¹, and in 2015 received the formal title of 'Dance centre of national
28 interest' from the Italian Ministry of Culture. At the time of the research, Aterballetto
29 employed 18 dancers on a basis of one-year temporary contracts (renewable), 10
30 employees in the managerial and administrative area, and eight in the artistic area,
31 which makes it the largest organisation in the Italian contemporary dance field.
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Aterballetto attracts dancers from all over Europe: five out of the 18 dancers are not Italian (they all come from Europe), and all the Italians come from outside Reggio. Moreover, Aterballetto has demonstrated a remarkable capability to retain artistic talent. Notably, dancers have a higher tenure than the industry average² and, in some cases, they have been working for the organisation for more than 10 years.

As to the wider context, Aterballetto is located in a medium-sized city whose image is largely associated with manufacturing and agricultural activities: Reggio is home to one of the most important Italian mechanical districts, as well as well-known companies operating in the food industry. Placed in Emilia-Romagna – a region characterized by a vibrant cultural context (see Table 2) – Reggio exhibits remarkable specialisation in the music recording field, and has gained a reputation as a place where many interesting events in the visual and performing arts are organised (CCRE, 2013; ERVET, 2012). However, one cannot define Reggio as a well-developed cultural cluster, either in the dance or in other creative sectors. While there are a number of amateur dance associations, there are no professional contemporary dance companies other than Aterballetto.

Although the city has somewhat suffered the impact of the economic crisis, it still remains relatively wealthy, exhibiting positive socio-economic indicators (see Tables 3 and 4) and a good life quality ranking³. Furthermore, both municipal and regional

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9 governments have continued to support cultural activities despite bold reductions at the
10 national level. Specifically, the continuous commitment of Emilia-Romagna in
11 promoting artistic and cultural activities should be underlined. Since the Seventies, the
12 Region has tried to leverage on a long-standing, widespread cultural tradition by
13 subsidising projects and institutions that historically characterised each major city of the
14 region, with the aim of enhancing the specialisation at the provincial (sub-regional)
15 level. Reggio, in particular, became the regional centre for contemporary dance, with
16 Aterballetto being consistently supported by the Region as well as the Municipality
17 (MRE, 2008).
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31 Insert Tables 2, 3 and 4 about here
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35 *Data collection and analysis*

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37 We carried out the fieldwork between November 2009 and May 2015, gathering data
38 from multiple sources: direct observation, interviews and company documents.
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41 First, between November 2009 and April 2010, two of the authors observed
42 Aterballetto's rehearsals and shows and attended staff and manager meetings. This
43 helped us to understand the main features of Aterballetto, the work of dancers and some
44 initiatives adopted by the organisation aimed at strengthening its relationship with the
45 city. Furthermore, we conducted 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews with
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Aterballetto’s dancers including both ‘stayers’ and ‘leavers’. More specifically, between March 2010 and July 2011, we interviewed all the 18 dancers working for Aterballetto at the time. Afterwards we kept track of those dancers who left the company and of the newcomers joining it until May 2015. In particular, between July 2012 and May 2015 six dancers left the company. Four of them, who decided to stay or come back to Reggio after leaving Aterballetto, agreed to be interviewed and one, who decided to leave definitively both the organisation and Reggio, engaged in informal conversations with us⁴. Moreover, we interviewed all the six new entries who arrived within that period.

We asked dancers about their personal background, the reasons why they decided to move to Reggio and join Aterballetto and the factors that motivate them to stay in (or to leave) the city and/or the organisation. We also interviewed the General Director, the Artistic Director, the Resident Choreographer, the two *maîtres*, the general secretary, and the tour manager. These interviews addressed opinions about the factors that motivate dancers to join, to stay or to leave Aterballetto and the relationships that the dancers (and Aterballetto as an organisation) have with the city and the local community. Finally, we engaged in informal conversations with four industry experts and we interviewed three representatives of local institutions to have some external viewpoints about Aterballetto and its relationship with the local context.

We analysed the collected data following the iterative process recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). More specifically, we travelled back and forth between direct observation notes, interview notes and extant theory on the locational choices of creative workers. The use of multiple sources allowed us to triangulate the data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Moreover, we independently read the collected data in order to develop our personal impressions and, as we continued to collect new data, we discussed our interpretations until we reached agreement. We coded the emergent themes according to different categories: professional quests and organisational features (e.g., need for continuous learning, company reputation), personal or affective motives (e.g., closeness to family), evaluations on the context (e.g., amenities, ties with members of the local community), and the relationship between Aterballetto and the city. Once it was clear that reasons of relocation were substantially different from reasons affecting the decision to remain, and that, among these latter, themes associated with the organisation (e.g. learning opportunities, links with other organisational members) and its relationship with the city (e.g. collaboration with local artists, respect by the citizens) were dominant, we searched for more specific factors affecting the decision to stay in (or to leave) the organisation and/or the city. At this stage, we worked abductively going back also to the literature on embeddedness identifying, in the managerial stream of research (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2001; Ng and Feldman, 2009), *organisational embeddedness* as the main force that compel individuals to stay in their

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present employment setting. Thus, we drew on this concept to extend the theoretical explanation of the location decision-making process provided by the economic geography and urban studies literature. We ended the analytical process when we felt theoretical saturation had occurred (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Results

In this section, the main results from the qualitative analysis are presented. We begin by focusing on dancers’ initial decision to move, thus identifying the motives of attraction to Reggio; then, we show the reasons why they keep on staying in the city – i.e. motives of retention.

Why dancers moved to Reggio Emilia

For all the interviewees, working for Aterballetto was the primary motive to move to Reggio. The job offered by Aterballetto, in fact, triggered dancers’ decision because it represented a good match with a particular professional quest they were experiencing at that time. More specifically, all dancers reported that the company’s reputation and the possibility to work with the choreographers collaborating with it matched their need to put their talent to the test. To illustrate, one dancer, who had joined the company four years before, noted: “I wanted to join Aterballetto in order to dance with Mauro Bigonzetti [the resident choreographer]. I liked his style and his choreographies”. The General Director reiterated this sentiment:

Dancers join Aterballetto because it is the only Italian contemporary ballet company with an international reputation [...] when Bigonzetti was the Resident Choreographer, dancers came here to work with him; nowadays, they are attracted by the possibility to work with different choreographers.

All dancers also thought that working for Aterballetto was a great opportunity for their professional development and for enhancing their reputation within the industry. For example, one of them explained: “I wanted to join Aterballetto in order to enrich my professional experience, thus adding to the value of my professional profile”. Moreover, they were interested in the opportunity to work for Aterballetto even though Reggio did not offer any “thick and robust labour markets” (Hracs and Stolarick, 2014, p. 109): “I knew that Aterballetto was the only contemporary ballet company not only in Reggio, but in the whole Italy. Simply, I wanted to work here”.

However, all dancers clearly held the opinion that the offer by Aterballetto was not their “dream job” (Brown, 2014, p. 2343): for instance, the levels of job security and compensation provided were lower than those offered by other European dance companies⁵.

Our data reveal also that none of the dancers had decided to move to Reggio because of the amenities of the city. This supports prior studies questioning the role of urban amenities as primary attractors of creative workers (e.g., Martin-Brelot et al., 2010; Musterd and Gritsai, 2012). Indeed, most dancers reported that they knew very little, if anything, about the city before deciding to move there to join Aterballetto, as

exemplified by statements such as “when I applied, like almost all foreign dancers, I didn’t even know where Reggio was”.

Indeed, our findings suggest that the motives of attraction strongly associated with the satisfaction of professional quests are rooted in a complex set of considerations regarding partly personal reasons and partly general expectations relative to the wider context (e.g. quality of life, cost of living). As two dancers put it:

Two years ago [in 2011] I decided to come here. At the time, I was working in Great Britain and despite the ballet company made me an interesting offer to renew, I had the desire to come back to Italy in order to get closer to my family [...] and in Italy Aterballetto is the best company of contemporary dance.

In 2009 [four years before], I was working in a ballet company based in the Netherlands. I was not satisfied, and thus I quitted. I applied to several ballet companies and I was selected by Aterballetto and a Swedish company. I chose Aterballetto to work with the choreographers who usually collaborate with it. However, I also liked the idea of living in Italy. I remember when I arrived at the train station [...] I thought that this was what I was looking for.

Whereas these factors did have some influence on the decision to move to Reggio, they were basically ‘second-order’ reasons compared to the professional considerations: what really mattered in dancers’ choice was the perception that the aforementioned organisational features could match their professional needs.

Why dancers stay in Reggio Emilia

Following the initial choice to moving to Reggio, the intention to keep on staying in the city is influenced by a complex mix of subjective evaluations on the working experience in Aterballetto, the living experience in Reggio, and the embeddedness developed within both the organisation and the city. Crucially, the latter dimension is dependent on the interplay between the organisation and the city.

How does the organisation matter? With few exceptions⁶, all dancers reported that they keep on living in Reggio because of the positive experience in Aterballetto, which has continued to match their professional quests. In particular, dancers feel that the ballet company utilizes their skills and talent well, and provides them with several opportunities for skill development, thus satisfying their strong need for continuous learning. For example, one young dancer who has been in Aterballetto for two years argued:

I am completely focused on my professional development, because I know that in order to keep on dancing, which is my life, I have always to improve myself, learn new techniques and styles [...] achieving perfection! I want to stay in Aterballetto because here I can achieve these goals.

Moreover, all the dancers appreciate the supportive and collaborative work environment characterised by the presence of strong interpersonal relationships among the artistic staff. To illustrate, one experienced dancer who had worked for several dance companies in the past argued:

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I like working with my all my colleagues: the dancers, the choreographers, the artistic director, and the maîtres de ballet. In Aterballetto, there is a positive climate that sustains the exchange of ideas.

Similarly, the most tenured dancers reported that they appreciate the frequent opportunities to meet other artists, both within the dance and other creative fields (e.g., painters, sculptors, musicians), who collaborate occasionally with Aterballetto. As stated by one of them, through these encounters “We [dancers] could experience different styles and artistic languages, thus challenging ourselves. With them [the artists they have the chance to meet in Aterballetto], we can discuss also our own artistic projects”, thus satisfying the need for non-routine work and for developing a network of personal contacts, which may increase their employability in the industry. As of the interviewed journalists put it: “Dance is a very small field in Italy and knowing the right people is fundamental to find interesting job opportunities”.

Findings confirm that none of the dancers thinks that working in Aterballetto is the ‘dream job’ since there are also some negative aspects (particularly, the comparatively low pay level), which however are compensated by the positive ones. A dancer who had joined Aterballetto five years before commented: “I know that we [dancers] should get higher pay because we work very hard [...] however, changing company would not be worth it”.

To sum up, dancers keep on staying in Aterballetto, and thus in the city, because they experience a good fit with the organisation and have developed organisational links,

which contribute to making them embedded in the organisation (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Thus, the primary dancers' motives of retention in the city are related to Aterballetto's capacity of embedding dancers into the organisation (i.e. dancers' *organisational embeddedness*).

How does the city matter? Findings reveal that the city's amenities do not play a univocal role as motives of retention in Reggio. Whereas all dancers agree that Reggio does not offer a particularly vibrant urban life (restaurants, music venues, art galleries, etc.), only some of them (specifically, the youngest ones) perceive it as a factor that "might be a relevant constraint in the long run". Interviews with Aterballetto's managers confirm that such a reduced fit between the dancers and the city has always been one of the most frequent reasons of voluntary turnover, especially for young foreign dancers.

However, most of the dancers (15 out of 18) seem not to suffer from the city's reduced vitality. Instead, consistently with their focus on the work experience in Aterballetto, they appreciate the quietness and liveability of Reggio because they are functional to their professional life. Some of the younger dancers also share this feeling, as exemplified by an interviewee who stated: "I like Reggio [doing this work, we are travelling a lot, so] when you come back here you have quietness and rest". In these cases, they declare to appreciate Reggio's convenient geographical position, which makes it easy to reach larger centres. To illustrate, one young dancer said:

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The cultural offer is not so stimulating... maybe in summer you have more. However, if you want to have more fun or to attend cultural activities, the city is well connected to other bigger cities... Bologna and Parma, for example, are close.

Findings reveal that other evaluations on the context regarding, for instance, the low cost of living, safety from crime, or the high quality of public health services (e.g., childcare centres⁷) affect positively the evaluation of the city, independently from a dancer's career stage or the time she spent in the organisation. To illustrate, the oldest and youngest dancers of the company noted, respectively:

I like here. Public health services for children are amazing [...] I have a big house in the countryside where my child [who had two months at the time of the interview] will play all day long as soon as he will be old enough.

In Reggio, apartment rents are convenient. I can afford a really big house.

To sum up, the aforementioned amenities have some influence on dancers' decision to stay in Reggio, but our analysis suggests that they are some kind of 'maintenance' factors – i.e. they are necessary to avoid dancers' dissatisfaction with the city (which in turn may lead to relocation), but by themselves they are not *sufficient* motives of retention. Consider the following statement by a dancer who has been in Aterballetto and in Reggio for six years:

A dancer's locational choice is mainly affected by what a ballet company provides her with [...] the local context is also somewhat relevant. I think it is important in the sense that if you work in a city that you don't like, your work is affected negatively by such dissatisfaction.

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9 What really seems to ‘trigger’ dancers’ motivation to stay in Reggio is their perceived
10 embeddedness in the city. This is the case of those dancers who, independent of their
11 age and tenure in Aterballetto, appreciate the city to such an extent that they perceive it
12 as “a positive environment where [we] feel at home”, and have several links with the
13 members of the local community (in particular with other artists operating in the local
14 creative milieu).
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21 Findings suggest that the organisation plays an important role in enhancing dancers’
22 embeddedness in the city. Indeed, dancers who like the most to live in Reggio are those
23 who feel respected by Reggio’s citizens, because these latter recognise them as
24 members of a prestigious organisation within the city. To illustrate, one of the most
25 tenured dancers argued: “When I go to buy ice cream in this shop downtown, the owner
26 always pays me a lot of compliments for our shows. I like to be recognised by people
27 and be appreciated for my job”. Similarly, dancers acknowledge that working for
28 Aterballetto created opportunities to meet members of the local creative milieu, who
29 happened to collaborate with the ballet company for specific projects. A dancer, who
30 also had about five years of experience in other companies abroad, stated: “It’s been
31 three years now [...] It was such an enriching experience [...] here I met great dancers
32 and choreographers, but also local artists, who are good friends of mine now”. Thus,
33 being a member of the organisation provided dancers the first opportunities to access
34 the local artistic circles (both within and outside the dance milieu), which has been
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crucial in enhancing dancers’ embeddedness in the city, as the former could explore their personal artistic projects by relying on the newly formed relationships. To illustrate, one 22-years-old dancer, employed in Aterballetto since 2011, argued:

We [other two artists based in Reggio and the dancer] set up a performance at a shop in downtown Reggio, together with an Aterballetto fellow who had [also] realised a photography project. I think that Reggio is a city where there are the [right] people with whom to do such things.

The development of the embeddedness in the city is evident also in the case of the dancers who left the company during the study because they wanted to change their profession or because they were concluding their career as professional dancers due to age reasons. In these cases, they decided to stay in Reggio to explore new professional opportunities with the people they have met there over the years. For example, one dancer around her thirties, in Aterballetto for six years, said:

I feel too old to continue dancing: my physical and emotional resources, my energy is not enough anymore [...] In these years, I have developed several links with people working for some fashion companies operating here. Let’s see if they’ll lead to some job opportunities: I really would like to work in the fashion industry.

Similarly, another dancer in her twenties, who had worked for Aterballetto just for one year, argued:

I want to stop dancing dance for some time [...] I do not know what to do, I have several ideas and I’m open [to change] [...] I will leave the company and go back to my homeland, Portugal, but in September I’ll be back to Reggio because I have a photography exhibition.

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9 It's a project I have developed with two artists I met here. Even though Reggio is small,
10 there are many interesting people.
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12 *The interplay between Aterballetto and the city of Reggio Emilia.* Since its foundation,
13 Aterballetto has had a strong relationship with the local context. In fact, as the General
14 Director noted, "Aterballetto is located in Reggio not by chance, but because this is a
15 city that has always loved ballet". Interviews with both the representatives of municipal
16 and regional governments reiterated this sentiment:
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23 The decision to create a touring [dance] company was the natural outcome of a cultural
24 policy aimed at creating a network-based performing art system. The outcome of this
25 policy was the creation of three cultural institutions, each specialized in one performing art
26 and tied to their local community. In 1975 the 'Arturo Toscanini' Music Association was
27 established in Parma and in 1977 the Emilia-Romagna Teatro (ERT) theatre production
28 company was created in Modena. In the same years, Aterballetto was established in Reggio
29 because of the blend of a strong tradition in dance and an attention to contemporary
30 languages that the city was experiencing in those times. (Regional Council)
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38 It is not accidental that Reggio Emilia is home to a ballet company like Aterballetto. Local
39 audiences and public authorities have always devoted much attention to dance and other
40 innovative and contemporary forms of art. (Municipal Councillor)
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44 Moreover, as the General Director said, "we are always open to collaborating with the
45 cultural institutions and artists from Reggio, and also from other nearby cities. We
46 believe this is an important side of our mission". Consistently, Aterballetto organises
47 every year several activities that involve the local community and favour opportunities
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for dancers to interact with local cultural institutions and artists, such as performances in the public spaces of the city, educational activities with the local schools and so on (see Table 5).

Insert Table 5 about here

Both the city and the company have nurtured such a symbiotic relationship between each other over the years. For example, in 2009 the Municipality approved a strategic city plan, which placed a great emphasis on creativity and the arts as key elements for local development (MRE, 2008). In line with the objectives of the plan, Aterballetto was further encouraged to increase the collaboration with local institutions and organisations such as dance schools, the Music Conservatory and the theatres of the region. Moreover, “Aterballetto has always been invited to celebrate with site-specific performances the inaugurations of all the cultural events hosted in Reggio in the last five years” (General Director). Such performances were held mostly in the city’s public places and squares, or in the premises of recently restored spaces, and they “have attracted a lot of audiences, representing important situations in which we can speak to a broader audience than we are used to [...] Dancers really liked them. They have been great opportunities to be proud of being a dancer with this organisation” (Artistic Director). These activities are important since they satisfy dancers’ “needs for variation

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9 and change; besides, they contribute to making them more attached to the city [...] they
10 understand what this organisation means for the city” (General Director).

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13 Importantly, such activities provide the occasion to develop relationships with members
14 of the local community, particularly artists and other creative workers with whom they
15 also created side artistic projects. Aterballetto allows dancers to carry out these projects:
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17 “As long as they do not interfere with their dance activities, we are happy for dancers to
18 pursue personal projects with people they know from here” (General Director). Such an
19 open and proactive approach to the context where the company operates seems to
20 favour dancers’ embeddedness not only in the organisation but also in the city,
21 providing benefits both for the organisation (people are happy to work for it) and the
22 city (people want to remain in the city even when they leave the organisation).
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35 **Conclusion**

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37 This paper shows that creative workers were attracted to the city by a specific job
38 opportunity provided by a prestigious organisation operating in that place. In this sense,
39 rather than the presence of thick labour markets or a wide supply of amenities, it was
40 precisely the fact that such an organisation-specific job opportunity matched their
41 professional quests to trigger individual decisions to move to the city. Once they have
42 been attracted, the ability of the organisation to continue to fulfil their professional
43 quests plays an important role in sustaining their intention to stay in the city –
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specifically, in so far as workers perceive a strong fit with the organisation, have several positive relationships with their colleagues, and recognise they would face a big sacrifice in leaving the organisation (i.e. workers have a strong organisational embeddedness). Moreover, their decision to stay is triggered by the perceived embeddedness in the city, which is influenced (though not entirely determined) by their organisational embeddedness. This happens not only because being a member of a prestigious local organisation brings recognition within the local community, but also because it provides several opportunities to develop professional and personal ties with members of the local creative milieu. In other terms, findings suggest the organisation’s intense interplay with the local context (intended as the local community, institutions, other organisations, etc.) supports workers’ embeddedness, providing benefits both to the organisation and the city (e.g. people want to stay in the organisation and like the city).

Results seem to confirm the idea that creative workers’ locational choices follow on from a complex decision-making process comprising professional quests, personal reasons (e.g., links to family or friends), and expectations relative to the wider context (e.g., amenities, liveability). More specifically, such a decision-making process is activated by the match (or mismatch) between a specific job opportunity and the professional quests that creative workers are experiencing in a given moment. In line with the model proposed by Hracs and Stolarick’s (2014), once they have taken their

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9 decision (for instance relocating to a place or staying in the same city), individuals
10 constantly compare the experience of living there with their expectations. As a result,
11 not only could they change their mind if their expectations are not met, but they
12 continue to compare their ever-changing professional quests and their actual experience
13 of both the location and the job (in our case, the organisation).
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19 This study, thus, confirms the idea that motives of attraction could differ from those of
20 retention (for similar considerations, see Grant, 2014), and questions an easy sketching
21 of the locational decision-making process based (only) on creative workers' age and
22 career stage. For example, while the time spent in the organisation and in the city may
23 generally contribute to sustaining a dancer's embeddedness in the organisation and in
24 the city, other factors not necessarily time-related (the perceived fit with the
25 organisation, the number of links developed with colleagues and other artists of the
26 local creative milieu, etc.) come into play. This result could help in understanding why
27 creative workers – even those who are in the early stages of their professional careers –
28 could decide to move to (and remain in) small and medium sized cities that do not
29 exhibit thick labour markets.
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44 This study provides two main contributions. First, by providing a fine-grained
45 understanding of how the decision-making process behind locational choices is
46 activated and develops over time, it lends support to previous studies that contributed to
47 moving the debate beyond the binary contraposition between job opportunities and
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amenities (e.g., Hansen and Niedomysl, 2009; Hracs and Stolarick, 2014). To this regard, we enrich such a debate by highlighting the role that a single prestigious organisation operating in a small-medium sized context could play in triggering the locational choices of creative workers. Whereas previous studies mostly focused on creative workers such as writers, painters or architects, who could practise their job in relative isolation and/or as freelancers (e.g., Markusen, 2006), our results cover the cases in which individuals are to some extent dependent on an organisation for getting access to critical resources and coordinating their efforts with other creative workers. Highlighting the relevance of certain particular organizations echoes studies that looked at universities as “an important determinant of the geography of highly skilled individuals” (Gertler et al., 2014, p. 7). However, whereas universities’ ability to attract creative workers (mainly in the early stages of their lives) does not guarantee their retention over the long term (Comunian et al., 2016; Florida et al. 2006), our case shows that the embeddedness in the organisation and its interplay with the local context could play a crucial role in retaining creative workers even in the absence of thick labour markets.

Our second contribution is an extension of the approaches to embeddedness. In particular, we posit that *organisational* embeddedness, by locating at the intersection of other kinds of embeddedness (societal, network and territorial) (Hess, 2004), helps in understanding the role that certain organisations – and their interactions with local

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9 institutions and community – play in eventually building ‘institutional thickness’ (Amin
10 and Thrift, 1994; Coulson and Ferrario, 2007). Indeed, organisations could be seen as
11 crucial mediating entities between the city and the individuals insofar as they develop
12 (at least) two of the four features ascribed to institutional thickness, namely “high levels
13 of interaction” between its members and the local context, and “a mutual awareness of
14 being involved in a common (regional) enterprise” (Hess, 2004, p. 174; on the issue of
15 mediation and embeddedness of creative workers see also Hracs, 2015).

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24 This study offers also some policy implications. For instance, it suggests how local
25 authorities of small and medium cities should support the prestigious cultural
26 organisations they host as a means to attract and retain creative workers. However, it
27 also warns that it is not sufficient to support these organisations through capital
28 endowments and funding; instead, local institutions should also push them to take an
29 open and proactive approach to the local context, for example through cooperating with
30 other local constituents or providing their members with opportunities to collaborate
31 with local artists. In this sense, public investments should be inspired more to a
32 ‘movement’ than to a ‘monument’ logic (Mizzau and Montanari, 2008, p. 667), aiming
33 to stimulate the development of a local creative milieu with which prestigious
34 organisations could interplay. Further, such a support should be consistently developed
35 in the long term: particularly in the case of medium-small cities, benefits are unlikely to
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be reaped fast, implying that ‘fast-policy’ intervention is not well suited (Comunian and Mould, 2014).

Although we believe the results of our study may be suitable for creative workers operating in other fields (e.g., designers, engineers), it would be interesting to investigate other creative (and non-creative) sectors and contexts. For example, it would be intriguing to study cities with similar size but different organisational and cultural endowments or comparing cases such as ours (a single prestigious, highly-embedding organisation) with creative cities characterised by thick labour markets with many, but less embedding organisations. This could shed further light on differences and subtleties on how the decision-making process behind locational choices is activated and develops over time.

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¹ It is called the Fonderia and is a reconverted foundry from the 1930s. It has two small spaces for live performances with 180 and 70 seats, respectively.

² Aterballetto's dancers display an average tenure of about 5.6 years, which is longer than the industry average: according to our managerial informants and expert interviewees, in fact, dancers in Europe decide to switch company every three years on average.

³ For instance, in 2014 Reggio ranked 5th in the annual quality of life ranking of the renowned Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

⁴ One of the six dancers who left the company did not agree to be interviewed not even informally.

⁵ As noted by a managerial informant: "A dancer who joins our company at the beginning of her career gets a starting salary of about €12,000 per year. In similar European companies, they would get at least €15,000".

⁶ The six dancers who left the company during the study represent the exceptions. In particular, four dancers wanted to change their profession, one returned to her home country due to unexpected familiar problems, and one decided to change ballet company.

⁷ Only two of the interviewed dancers had children at the time of the study.

Table 1. Number of Aterballetto performances

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
In Italy	42	33	55	96	81	82	88	79
Abroad	22	17	23	3	27	12	16	14

Source: authors' elaboration of primary data

Table 2. Ranking of the Italian regions by number of cultural events and tickets sold in 2014, and index of territorial diffusion of theatrical events (TDTE)

Region	Cultural events	Tickets	Region	TDTE Index
Lombardia	705,541	44,892,083	Toscana	61.32
Lazio	561,313	29,033,519	Emilia-Romagna	53.74
Emilia-Romagna	381,548	28,856,832	Veneto	53.70
Veneto	317,417	21,956,980	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	50.46
Piemonte	323,769	18,336,849	Marche	48.54
Toscana	339,143	17,579,120	Umbria	45.65
Campania	278,786	13,565,710	Puglia	43.41
Sicilia	242,527	11,282,167	Trentino-Alto Adige	38.74
Puglia	216,710	10,183,549	Sardegna	34.75
Marche	152,283	6,273,743	Sicilia	33.59
Liguria	133,962	6,130,315	Basilicata	30.53
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	128,185	4,724,489	Lombardia	30.38
Abruzzo	109,598	3,668,362	Liguria	23.40
Sardegna	93,225	4,111,702	Piemonte	22.14
Umbria	90,217	4,000,399	Lazio	21.69
Trentino-Alto Adige	52,718	3,013,849	Campania	20.87
Calabria	46,555	1,900,474	Abruzzo	19.34
Basilicata	18,283	662,693	Valle d'Aosta	10.81
Valle d'Aosta	12,151	493,901	Molise	10.29
Molise	9,929	255,425	Calabria	10.02
ITALY	4,213,860	1,412,019	ITALY	32.08

Source: SIAE,

Note: The TDTE Index measures the portion of the regional territory (in terms of number of municipalities on the total in the region) where a supply of theatrical events was offered. Thus, it is a sort of index of geographic coverage of the cultural offer in a given region.

Table 3. Unemployment rate before and after the economic crisis in Reggio Emilia, Emilia Romagna, and Italy (in %)

Unemployment rate	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Reggio Emilia	2.5	2.0	2.3	4.9	5.4	4.9	4.7	5.9	6.6
Emilia Romagna	3.4	2.8	3.2	4.7	5.6	5.2	7.0	8.4	8.3
Italy	6.8	6.1	6.7	7.7	8.4	8.4	10.7	12.1	12.7

Source: ISTAT

Table 4. Households' disposable income in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Reggio Emilia Emilia Romagna, and Italy (in €)

Households' disposable income	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Reggio Emilia	20,026.69	19,845.39	20,358.74	19,668.66	n.a.
Emilia Romagna	20,940.95	20,889.27	21,391.74	20,834.42	n.a.
Italy	n.a.	17,870	18,279	17,758	17,598

Source: CCRE, 2013

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Table 5. Number of outreach activities organized by Aterballetto

Activities	2011	2012	2013	2014
Hosted performances of local dance schools	9	10	14	16
Shows of local artists (music, theatre, photography, etc.)	3	4	3	5
Educational activities with local schools	19	22	27	31
Public events open to local community	2	3	6	7
Other events	6	11	13	16
Attendance (estimates)	4,500	5,500	6,000	7,000

Source: authors' elaboration of primary data