

# Innovation through cooperation

KREATI>LAND  
TRANSFER

**Insights and impulses of  
successful cooperations  
between cultural and  
creative industries with  
small and medium-sized  
enterprises in rural areas  
of Europe**

# ① Preface

The *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives* project was realised in collaboration with the Saxon State Ministry for Regional Development as part of the *simul+* future initiative. Following the nationwide [pilot phase of the project](#) from 2020 to 2023, which focused on knowledge transfer between creative industry players in rural areas, a [compilation](#) of cross-industry collaborations was published from 2023. This also aims to strengthen rural regions in Europe beyond the duration of the project.

For this reason, an extensive research was carried out to find successful economic collaborations between small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and players in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) and to make their projects and experiences visible. Initially the project's center of interest was Saxony but the focus then was extended to Germany and other EU countries.

This paper shows how CCIs and SMEs promote regional value chains in rural regions and how these value chains drive economic and social innovation. In order to make the collaboration's patterns and similarities visible, an evaluation of all entries was carried out.

In addition, the following sections also describe the research procedure and the status quo of the cross-sector collaborations presented. Building on this, suggestions and tips will be prepared that can be understood and used as a guide for politicians and municipalities in order to provide SMEs and CCIs with good guidance and support for cross-sector cooperation.

**»We firmly believe that looking at these positive examples and their success factors can be a source of inspiration and help for other rural regions.«**

Katrin Kappenberger, Project manager *KreativLandTransfer*

## ② Potential of the cultural and creative industries for other sectors

The pilot phase of *KreativLandTransfer* (2020 to 2023) has already shown that the cultural and creative industries provide diverse and sustainable impetus in rural areas. Cross-industry exchange is worthwhile for the development of innovative products and services. An exchange that connects the most diverse actors, promotes knowledge transfer and enables a more comprehensive value chain, which can play a key role in meeting the challenges of the future, especially in rural areas. There are virtually no limits to cross-industry cooperation: Almost every sector of the economy can operate profitably through cooperation with the cultural and creative industries and find new solutions together in new ways.

### Rural areas

Rural areas are subject to numerous comprehensive and challenging transformation processes, whether of an economic, structural or demographic nature. Nevertheless, they also offer many locational advantages. Small and medium-sized municipalities and rural districts are characterised by a comprehensive range of social infrastructure and a lively social environment (associations, initiatives). These characteristics contribute not least to increasing the quality of life of residents in the regions. In contrast, there is a shortage of affordable residential and commercial space and a lack of social infrastructure in many large cities.

The collaborations identified are best-practice examples of how to utilise the locational advantages of rural areas and thus counteract the previously mentioned challenges.

»The countryside has a major role in my work, as I draw my inspiration from nature. [...] And I think we share this connection to nature and that's where we find our common ground.«

Carolin Tennstädt (MACARONIE Design Studio) on her collaboration with the Ellidus Resort in the Ore Mountains, Saxony<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> see: Video portrait:  
*Design Studio meets hotel* [↗](#)

Photo: Carolin Tennstädt in her  
design studio © Steven Busch

## ③ Criteria

In order to increase the informative value of the research, qualitative criteria were defined which the collaborations had to meet and which are outlined in the following sections.

All collaborations had to have an economic background and at least one small or medium-sized enterprise (SME with a maximum of 250 employees) involved. The respective sector of the SMEs was kept open and did not play a role in the selection process. The associated cooperation partners, on the other hand, had to belong to one of the twelve subsectors of the cultural and creative industries.

By definition, rural areas are characterised by rural districts with a higher or lower population density. In the course of the research, only rural areas or municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants were specifically included in the focus. This definition was intended to ensure that the research actually focused on rural areas and that no areas from urban peripheries influenced the results.

Another decisive factor for listing in the *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives* database was the fact that every cooperation is actually one at eye level and not a commissioned external service, although the boundaries are fluid in practice.

In order not to completely disregard the cooperation of SMEs and CCI partners between urban and rural areas, it was allowed in the course of the research that one of the partners involved may also come from an urban region as long as concrete added value for the rural region involved could be recognised.

**»[The collaboration] works on equal terms. It's also usually the case that we come out [of joint appointments] and take five more ideas with us. So there's a lot of creativity present at Schicktanz itself that comes across our creativity and then together develops even further.«**

Laura-Marie Schulte (*MealGood*) on her collaboration with Schicktanz GmbH<sup>4</sup>

### Summary of the criteria for entries in *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives*:

- Economical background
- Cooperation on equal terms
- SMEs (open to all sectors, 250 employees, max.)
- CCI partner from one of the twelve subsectors of the cultural and creative industries
- Located in a rural area (one partner from an urban area, max.)
- Visible effects for the rural region

<sup>2</sup> see: [lvkkwsachsen.de/the-industry](http://lvkkwsachsen.de/the-industry) ↗

<sup>3</sup> Due to the different total populations of the European countries and their different land areas, the numerical specifications were scaled accordingly as part of the research. This ensured that the data from other European countries corresponded to the same criteria that were used as a benchmark for the research in Germany.

<sup>4</sup> see: Podcast: *KreativLandTransfer* in conversation with Laura-Marie Schulte ↗

# ④ Evaluation and results

The following graphics illustrate the basic results of all the collaborations presented in the *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives* database.<sup>5</sup>

The following information on cross-industry cooperation were decisive for the evaluation:

## Category 1: Type of contact between CCIs and SMEs

- 16 of 23 (69.6 %): Through targeted contact
- 7 of 23 (30.4 %): Through previous collaborations/projects
- 3 of 23 (13 %): Through jointly attended events

## Category 2: Added value for the region in which the cooperation is located

- 18 of 23 (78.3 %): Increasing the attractiveness of the location
- 15 of 23 (65.2 %): Improving the regional infrastructure
- 10 of 23 (43.5 %): Creation of an attractive (cultural) touristic offer
- 6 of 23 (26.1 %): Recruitment, retention and management of skilled workers

## Category 3: Added value for the cooperation partners involved

- 19 of 23 (82.6 %): Innovation and development
- 13 of 23 (56.5 %): Quality improvement
- 12 of 23 (52.2 %): Interlinking of skills

## Category 4: Duration of the cooperation

- 18 of 23 (78,3 %): Longer than 2 years
- 9 of 23 (39,1 %): Longer than 5 years
- 12 of 23 (52,2 %): Continuous from the start

### Type of contact



**69,6 %**  
Through targeted contact



**30,4 %**  
Through previous collaborations/projects



**13 %**  
Through jointly attended events

### Duration of the cooperation

**78,3 %**  
Longer than 2 years

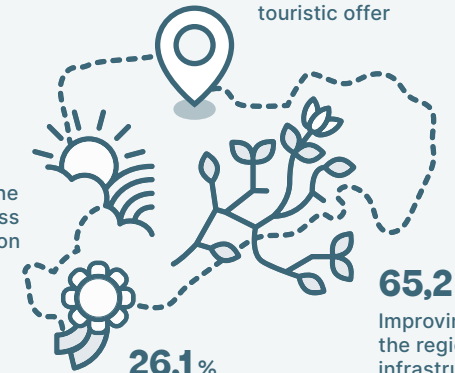
**39,1 %**  
Longer than 5 years

**52,2 %**  
Continuous from the start

### Added value for the region

**43,5 %**  
Creation of an attractive (cultural) touristic offer

**78,3 %**  
Increasing the attractiveness of the location



**26,1 %**  
Recruitment, retention and management of skilled workers

**65,2 %**  
Improving the regional infrastructure

### Added value for the cooperation partners involved



**82,6 %**  
Innovation and development



**56,5 %**  
Quality improvement



**52,2 %**  
Interlinking of skills

<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the information from 23 entries; multiple choices possible for categories 1 to 3

In addition to this information, the stakeholders were also asked for their individual advice on cross-industry cooperation. Some commonalities emerged, which can be summarised by the following four points:

- 1 The majority of all cooperation partners advise courage and openness towards creative processes. **Municipalities** should provide support and guidance and offer events/ workshops where stakeholders from CCIs and SMEs can meet and exchange ideas. It was also recommended several times to use tailored **financing concepts** for cross-sector cooperation between CCIs and SMEs in order to facilitate the start-up phase of cooperation. From the point of view of CCI representatives, **companies** should also make time for personal exchange within the framework of cross-industry work and creation processes.
- 2 Another very frequently mentioned piece of advice is to find **local partners** and establish **networks** and integrate both into ongoing collaborations in order to be able to locate not only the development of ideas but also their implementation in local context. According to the stakeholders, this conserves and saves resources. It also promotes knowledge transfer and **local or regional value chains**<sup>6</sup> and increases public acceptance of innovations. Ongoing maintenance of these contacts and networks is also necessary.
- 3 The association between practitioners and creatives is generally perceived as a good basis for innovation. Municipalities, business development institutions and industry associations can provide targeted **support, guidance and advice**.
- 4 The research conducted by *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives* also shows that SMEs from the agricultural and forestry sectors tend to cooperate with the software and games industry<sup>8</sup> in order to better position their products and services on the market or open up **new markets**<sup>9</sup>. Small and medium-sized enterprises from the manufacturing and construction sectors, on the other hand, are more likely to enter into collaborations with representatives from the arts and crafts or design and architecture sectors<sup>10</sup>. In both cases, the focus is on the targeted **interlinking of skills** in order to jointly develop a product or service innovation.



»I would recommend to look around in your own city, in your own living environment, and look for partners who are equally capable of implementing projects together.«

Anne Hasselbach (*Die Badebox*)<sup>7</sup>

6 see: listing *RUDIS* [↗](#)

7 see: video portrait: *The Bathing Box (Die Badebox)* [↗](#)

8 see: listing *4D Land cinema (4D Landkino)* [↗](#) and listing *The Animal From Here (Das Tier von hier)* [↗](#)

9 see: listing *Timberstore (Timberstore)* [↗](#)

10 see: listing *BUTZE!* [↗](#)

## ⑤ Learnings

Based on the evaluation of the listings, the following learnings with regard to cross-industry cooperation between CCIs and SMEs in rural regions can be put forward:

**Location:** Rural regions are not perceived as an obstacle by stakeholders, but often even as an advantage (lower location costs, less competition, deceleration, etc.). Any infrastructural disadvantages in rural areas are often fully compensated by the strategically useful linking of competencies within the framework of cross-sector cooperation.

**Establishing contact:** Cross-industry collaboration between CCIs and SMEs primarily begins through direct contact or through jointly attended workshops or events. It can therefore be concluded that the partners involved make very conscious and targeted contact with each other.

**Network:** Successful collaborations require active and early networking that extends beyond the cooperation partners involved. This increases success and acceptance in the region and ensures long-term cooperations.

**Joint goals:** Cross-industry collaborations are mainly initiated in order to jointly drive innovation and development, to combine expertise and to improve the quality of products and services through cooperation. The longevity of the collaborations also shows that these joint goals are sustainable.

»We have a uniqueness with these products and you can recognise that everywhere – that's us. If we hadn't had this cooperation, it would look pretty empty and sad at Eildus.«

Melanie Ellinger (Eildus Resort GmbH) on the collaboration with Carolin Tennstädt (MACARONIE Design Studio)



◆ **Regional added value:** None of the collaborations pursue purely sales-oriented goals. They are always driven by an idealistic background, which most often focuses on **increasing the attractiveness of the location**<sup>11</sup>. Many collaborations also pursue the goals of improving the **regional infrastructure**<sup>12</sup>, creating an **attractive (cultural) touristic offer**<sup>13</sup> or attracting and retaining **skilled workers for the region**<sup>14</sup>. This results in positive influences of cross-industry cooperation for the respective regions.

▲ **Challenges:** A lack of experience and time, challenging day-to-day business, fear of contact and a lack of networking, workshop, consulting and financing offers in the area of cross-sector cooperation primarily prevent SME actors from working together with the CCI across sectors.

In addition, it was often mentioned that patience, openness and time are needed in the start-up phase for the cooperation to be profitable. However, if the partners involved show this willingness, the collaborations are quickly perceived as essential and enriching.

◆ **Financial aspects:** Due to the lack of or unknown funding opportunities for cooperation between SMEs and CCIs, the start of cooperation often involves additional investment in the form of money, time and personnel for the partners involved. Although these investments pay off in the long run, they represent a hurdle for the start of a joint project.

## »Innovation before profitability – because profitability comes naturally«

Lucas Bitschnau (*Die Køje*) on the cooperation *KaraKøje – The flamed stone pine bed*<sup>15</sup>



<sup>11</sup> see: listing *Gölles world of experience (Erlebnisswelt)* [↗](#)

<sup>12</sup> see: listing *School In A Shed (Schule im Schuppen)* [↗](#)

<sup>13</sup> see: listing *BOYS FROM THE WOOD – PopUp-Event* [↗](#)

<sup>14</sup> see: listing educational game *WissERZ* [↗](#)

<sup>15</sup> see: listing *KaraKøje – The flamed stone pine bed (Das geflämte Zirbenbett)* [↗](#)

**Photo:** *KaraKøje – Das geflämte Zirbenbett* © Buero Magma



## ⑥ Conclusion

Based on the research carried out as part of *KreativLand-Transfer – European Perspectives* the current status of cross-industry cooperation between SMEs and CCIs can be summarised as follows:

Cross-sector collaborations between small and medium-sized enterprises and players from the cultural and creative industries offer enormous potential and synergy effects for innovations and locally anchored value chains for and in rural regions. However, this form of collaboration is still a flagship project and it is important to make it visible in order to inspire more people to engage in this pioneering form of collaboration. It is precisely this visualisation that was promoted as part of the *KreativLandTransfer – European Perspectives* project.

For the cultural and creative industries, it can be stated that there is a willingness, patience and openness for cross-sector cooperation with small and medium-sized enterprises. Fear of contact is evident among SME stakeholders due to the challenges mentioned above (see section: Learnings). These must be overcome with suitable methods and funding instruments in order to unleash the potential of cooperation for rural regions. In this form of cooperation, the cultural and creative industries demonstrate their ability and competence to find creative solutions to the economic and social problems of these regions.

Once both sides have actively taken the decisive step towards each other, there is usually nothing standing in the way of successful cross-industry cooperation between CCIs and SMEs.

Ongoing cross-industry collaborations between CCIs and SMEs are characterised by flexibility, longevity and repetition. Moreover, in many existing collaborations, additional joint projects are started in order to transfer the positive synergies and experience gained to other products or services.



**»Our business model is actually innovation, so always questioning, always finding new approaches, always taking a slightly different method – innovation on both a small and large scale. SMEs, their business model is actually the tried and tested [...] and combining these two approaches [...] leads to insights. What was surprising about the collaboration with KUBIO was that the sides were suddenly reversed. [...] They went to extremes in the construction.«**

Robert Ilgen on the development process of *BUTZE!*

16 see: listing *Werkzeugkiste* [↗](#)

Photo: *BUTZE!* © TAKTAK  
Robert Ilgen

## ⑦ Advice for SMEs

According to the stakeholders surveyed, cross-industry cooperation with the CCI should be characterised by openness, perseverance and the courage to think outside the box. Collaboration with stakeholders from the CCI should also always be considered a long-term cooperation. This is the only way to achieve strategic goals and tangible synergies.

Cooperation partners from the CCI should always be trusted and given all the necessary insights into their own company, including its processes and goals. Conclusion: A project will only be a success if both sides meet as equal partners.

It is also important to have a regular, possibly moderated exchange during the collaboration. In this way, expectations and the respective work status can be realistically compared and strategically important partners can be integrated into the joint cooperation at an early stage.



**»We had weekly meet-ups and exchanged and acknowledged our respective points of view. [...] I don't really get anything out of it if I outsource it now and it's then worked through according to a pattern. [...] It only really works if you work hand in hand. So we were definitely in contact a lot [...] we repeatedly changed and optimised things until we both liked it.«**

Justin Kollautz (Timberstore) on the cooperation with SILENTGATE GbR<sup>18</sup>

**»Creatives are most successful when they are involved in a long-term cooperation. This is the only way to achieve strategic goals. Results are all the more predictable if you consistently put your trust in the creative service.«**

Gregor Fink (Roger G. Knif) as part of the cooperation on Wachmann Mühle's growth strategy<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> see: listing *Creative growth strategy instead of logo for the bakery* [↗](#)

<sup>18</sup> see: Podcast: *KreativLandTransfer* in conversation with Justin Kollautz [↗](#)

Foto: *Creative growth strategy instead of logo for the bakery*  
© Roger G. Knif

## ⑧ Advice for politicians and local authorities

Support and advisory services for cross-industry cooperation as well as corresponding events are perceived by the stakeholders surveyed as useful for bringing together and informing representatives from CCIs and SMEs. Advice on possible financing concepts for joint cooperation is also in high demand.

Municipal administrations, but also business development agencies and employees of the LEADER program could provide closely interlinked support here. However, the prerequisite for this is that these institutions really know the SMEs and stakeholders in the respective region and are able to establish specific networks.

There were many conversations with local representatives throughout this research. Although representatives showed great interest in the regional CCI their knowledge about it seemed rather limited. Addressing this imbalance would be an important prerequisite for providing better advice.

It would also be worthwhile to create general incentives for cross-industry cooperation between SMEs and CCIs in order to support the creation of regional value chains and attractive (cultural) tourism offers as well as the improvement of regional infrastructure and to promote the recruitment and retention of skilled workers.

The appropriate remuneration of creative work with corresponding minimum level and the appreciation of creative work processes should also be topics that are actively addressed by politicians and the administration and incorporated into corresponding funding offers.

**»We are the bridge between creative companies and commercial enterprises – we see this as our task in business development. It should go without saying that companies can get support from the creative industries if they want to innovate and rethink things.«**

Dr. Peggy Kreller (Business Development Ore Mountains)<sup>19</sup>

**»The offer is out there. And so are agencies that take care of such things, they can help. It's just that people often don't even know that all this exists.«**

Justin Kollautz (Timberstore)

<sup>19</sup> see: Podcast: *KreativLand-Transfer* in conversation with Peggy Kreller [↗](#)

# ⑨ Methodology

## Research

The offices for economic development and the regional management of the [LEADER program](#) or their local action groups (LAG) as well as individual municipal administrations were very helpful for the research. This was due to the fact that these institutions knew their own economic region very well and were therefore often able to provide information on where to find companies, stakeholders and multipliers that were relevant for the research.

At the same time, extensive research was carried out in online portals and databases that map similar collaborations. Free research, an ongoing exchange within the team and the level of knowledge from the pilot phase of the project also supplemented the search for suitable collaborations.

In conclusion, it should be noted that personal exchange, recommendations and mediated or existing contacts are preferable to completely free research or cold calling.



## Challenges of the research

The challenges in the research initially consisted of finding and reaching the relevant contact persons and making the background of the request clear. The need for explanation was generally high. For these reasons, approaching the contacts via telephone was much more successful in this phase in order to make the added value of the database entry clear to the cooperation partners. On the one hand, this consisted of making the respective cooperations themselves visible, as the collection is permanently accessible to the public. In addition, it was attractive for the cooperation partners that the entries were presented via the *KreativLandTransfer* channels. The offer to create a podcast or a video portrait of individual collaborations was also often accepted with interest.

In addition it was often convincing, that the database entry publicises the general nature and synergy effects of cross-industry cooperation between SMEs and CCIs and can motivate other entrepreneurs – especially from the SME sector – to engage in this type of cooperation. Against this backdrop, the communication also constantly pushed for the input fields for *advice* to be filled in for the respective entries, as this is where there is a high added value for interested parties.

## Summary of the research challenges:

- ambitious high-quality research
- high need for personal contact and recommendations
- high need to communicate the nature and added value of the search request
- high need for communication until the final implementation of the entries
- sometimes high language barriers in EU-wide acquisition

# 10 Closing remarks

Cross-industry cooperation between CCIs and SMEs offers enormous potential for synergies, networking and value creation – for rural areas and beyond. These special forms of cooperation lay the foundations for innovation through constant and dynamic teamwork and often combine **traditions with modern approaches**<sup>20</sup>. In this way, not only products and services are created but so are jobs and regions get shaped for the future.

Nevertheless, cross-industry collaborations between CCIs and SMEs are still lighthouse projects and pioneer work. It is worth investing in these, even if this form of cooperation requires more **courage, openness, trust, time and patience** than solutions that are sought purely within the company in the traditional way.

**Support, advice, promotion and appreciation** are therefore the elements that cross-industry collaborations between CCIs and SMEs will need more than ever in the future in order to develop, establish themselves and be accepted both internally and externally. Innovation is created through cooperation in which all participants **learn from each other**. In conclusion, cross-industry cooperation between the cultural and creative industries and small and medium-sized enterprises has the potential to open up **positive and creative spaces in rural regions** for years to come.





<sup>20</sup> see:  
[listing Blue print armchair](#) ,  
[listing ORE One 82](#)   
and [listing City Kids](#) 

Foto: Blue print armchair  
© Antonia Schwarzmeier

# Imprint

## Contact:

Landesverband der  
Kultur- und Kreativ-  
wirtschaft Sachsen e.V.  
Kraftwerk Mitte 7  
D-01067 Dresden

[kontakt@lvkksachsen.de](mailto:kontakt@lvkksachsen.de)

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Landesverband der  
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