

The art of regeneration: urban renewal through cultural activity

Cultural projects have played an increasingly important role in British urban regeneration since the mid-1980s, but recent developments have focused less on capital projects, and more on the capacity of arts activity to support community-led renewal. Charles Landry and François Matarasso from Comedia summarise recent experiences of arts programmes in British cities.

- **Arts and cultural activity have become an increasingly important part of urban regeneration in Britain, though the bulk of effort and resources to date has been on capital investment.**
- **Recently, increasing interest has been shown in participatory arts programmes which are low-cost, flexible and responsive to local needs.**
- **This use of the arts coincides with a shift in emphasis in regeneration strategies towards seeing local people as the principal asset through which renewal can be achieved.**
- **Arts programmes have been shown to contribute to enhancing social cohesion and local image; reducing offending behaviour; building private/public sector partnerships; promoting interest in the local environment; developing self-confidence; enhancing organisational capacity; supporting independence and exploring visions of the future.**
- **Regeneration agencies wishing to harness the arts experience problems because the models of success, and key factors in replication, are insufficiently known, but further research is being undertaken to address this issue.**
- **The National Lottery's restriction to capital projects in the arts severely limits the value of this new source of funding in supporting renewal through cultural activity in many of Britain's most disadvantaged communities.**

City problems

British cities have experienced a profound restructuring of their economic and social fabric since 1945. Some change—the decline in traditional manufacturing, for example—has been obviously economic. But apparently social changes, like the drift of populations from centre to suburb, have had an impact on the local community and economy alike. This erosion of individual commitment to the city has been accelerated recently by the trend towards private provision in all areas of daily life, from transport to leisure. Urban renewal initiatives have in the past tended to overlook the importance of social factors in their pursuit of economic growth. This situation is beginning to change.

Cultural responses

Artists and cultural organisations have always contributed to the vitality and character of cities. In the United States, since the late 1960s, they have shown how they can contribute to urban renewal, often through the creation of studios and ‘cultural quarters’ in run-down central districts. In the aftermath of recession in 1981, British cities began to look around for solutions to their economic problems, and some hit upon these American and parallel European experiences. The use of cultural activity to fuel urban regeneration was principally economic in conception and purpose. Its credibility was given a significant boost by a Policy Studies Institute survey, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (1988), which presented the arts as employer of 500,000 people and the fourth biggest invisible export earner. A series of contemporary conferences (such as those promoted by the British American Arts Association) also contributed to positive perceptions of the arts among local authorities and private developers.

The redevelopment of Liverpool docks, which included the ‘Tate of the North’, a maritime museum and TV studio, was a high-profile cultural regeneration initiative which set the tone for the 1980s. Major cities like Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham put in place cultural development strategies, and committed millions of pounds to them. The notion of the ‘cultural industries’ was launched.

Limitations of existing approaches

Although much important, worthwhile and lasting redevelopment ensued, some drawbacks also became apparent:

- Cultural regeneration based on capital projects could be very costly.
- It could take a long time, during which the

construction industry benefited much more than the arts sector.

- It often required substantial public sector revenue support on completion.
- It did not necessarily connect easily with local people and their needs.
- It was inappropriate for, and beyond the reach of, most smaller towns.

Growing awareness of these limitations has recently encouraged people to look more closely at the connection between urban regeneration and cultural activity, and begin to change the focus of their responses.

Renewing citizenship through cultural activity

At the same time, many of those working to renew our cities have come to see the human potential of a community as its most important asset. They accept that wealth creation, social cohesion and quality of life ultimately depend on confident, imaginative citizens who feel empowered and are able to fulfil their potential. And they have turned increasingly to the arts as a mechanism to trigger that individual and community development. They have prioritised cultural programmes above capital investment for several reasons:

- Cultural programmes are relatively cheap and very cost-effective.
- They can be developed quickly in response to local needs and ideas.
- They are flexible and can change as required.
- They offer a potentially high return for very low risk.
- They can have an impact out of all proportion to their cost.

Britain and Western Europe can now show many examples of the successful use of cultural initiatives in urban regeneration. They have shown a number of important benefits arising from cultural programmes:

Enhancing social cohesion

Festivals, community plays and other events have shown how cultural activities can bring people together. Carnivals in towns like Bradford, Nottingham and Leicester have attracted mixed audiences and celebrated different cultures. The community theatre movement in Belfast involves both Catholic and

Protestant communities, and plays dealing with key preoccupations of both traditions have been seen across the city.

Improving local image

'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign is only the best-known example of the recent trend to promote cities on the basis of their cultural character. From Edinburgh to Aldeburgh, the promotion of arts events has changed the way places are perceived—or caused them to be perceived in the first place. Shrewsbury benefited from a tourism windfall following the success of the Brother Cadfael detective stories. The novels brought many fans to the Shropshire town in which they are set, and in 1994 a £1 million visitor centre was built to capitalise on this interest.

Reducing offending behaviour

Arts programmes with young people in cities across the UK have shown positive alternatives to addressing criminal behaviour in the community. Bolton City Challenge is one among a number of agencies able to show change in the young people as a result of the work, and cost-effective results when set against the cost of car crime and burglary.

Promoting interest in the local environment

Arts organisations have taken a lead in developing people's interest in the local environment. Groups such as L4a have specialised in using the arts to create a forum for discussion between planners and residents. The planners of North Kesteven were influenced by the work of Common Ground and its emphasis on local distinctiveness and the creation of new traditions. The National Forest commissioned People Express, a local arts organisation, to develop a strategy for art in the forest.

Developing self-confidence

The Collard report on the Manpower Services Commission's drama training projects was one of the first demonstrations that arts training provided an effective means of developing self confidence and helping people into work. The video training offered to people in the North West by First Take is one example among hundreds of such initiatives. The Nerve Centre in Derry was established by local artists and is now a vital training and education resource for North West Ireland, as well as contributing to the vitality of the city.

Building private and public sector partnerships

The arts are unusual in spanning the range of public and private sector activity. There is scope for the entrepreneur, the small business and the grant-aided to work together. Alan Ayckbourn's long-standing commitment to Scarborough has won the town a £1.5 million theatre development, while David Hockney's association with Salt's Mill in Saltaire has been essential to its success. Richard Booth brought about the regeneration of Hay-on-Wye by transforming it into the world's largest centre for secondhand books.

Exploring identities

The arts have been used by communities of all sorts to explore and affirm their identities. In the Fish Quay Festival, it was the identity of a run-down part of Sunderland. In the case of New Breed theatre, it is the identity of disabled people. In Belfast, as mentioned above, community theatre has opened new dialogue, with a play about Protestant men on the Somme being performed to full houses in an Irish language arts centre in the Falls Road.

Enhancing organisational capacity

Arts programmes have helped individuals and communities to develop the organisational skills to help themselves. The Craigmillar Festival Society, founded in 1964 on an Edinburgh housing estate, has become a model of community empowerment for many other initiatives like Easterhouse and Cranhill Arts Projects or the Pilton Video Project in Glasgow.

Supporting independence

Arts programmes with people with mental health problems have helped people develop the confidence, interests and support networks to make a success of living in the community. Work with former hospital patients by East Midlands Shape in Derby has proved a cost effective form of support, and empowerment for people with mental health problems who have been able to articulate their views.

Exploring visions of the future

The artist's ability to see problems from a different perspective and offer previously unheard-of solutions is vital to urban regeneration. Artists like Angie Hiesl in Köln, or Christo in Berlin, have created work which has challenged residents' ideas of their cities. In Bradford's Little Germany and elsewhere arts festivals have been organised as a way of drawing attention to the possibility of change and helping people imagine what the future might be. Small changes to bye-laws can have a great impact on urban life, as authorities in Manchester, Bradford and elsewhere have found.

Helsinki's Night of the Arts is an annual event that has been running for five years. The city allowed cafés and restaurants to put tables and chairs on the streets and extended licensing hours. This has been so popular that it has become the norm, changing the way residents enjoy and perceive their city.

What is special about the arts?

Looking at the dozens of instances where arts programmes have made a positive contribution to local vitality and urban renewal, one must ask whether other types of social programme could not have been equally productive. In some cases the answer is certainly yes, but the arts have a special character to offer because:

- They engage people's creativity, and so lead to problem solving.
- They are about meanings, and enable dialogue between people and social groups.
- They encourage questioning, and the imagination of possible futures.
- They offer self-expression, which is an essential characteristic of the active citizen.
- They are unpredictable, exciting and fun.

Arts programmes are not an alternative to regeneration initiatives like environmental improvements, training schemes or youth development projects. But they are a vital component which, like yeast in dough, can transform a situation.

Regeneration, culture and the National Lottery

It is unfortunate that the important new resources of the National Lottery are restricted to capital investment in the arts. Britain's most disadvantaged communities—who provide so much of the Lottery's cash—rarely place new arts buildings at the head of their list of priorities. Nor can they easily secure the matching funds and revenue commitments required. But the resources to develop cultural activities which can bring new vitality and other social benefits would be very valuable to neighbourhoods across the

country. It is time to revise Lottery guidelines so that the money can help people help themselves through creative programmes.

Developing strategies for success

The difficulty encountered by many local authorities and regeneration agencies when faced with the potential of the arts is often a practical one: where to begin. Successful initiatives are often known only locally or among specialists. Where they have been reported, it is anecdotally. Attempts have rarely been made to quantify their achievements, or compare their cost-effectiveness with other forms of intervention. The key factors in their success—which are central to the question of replicability—are not analysed. The problem is not made easier by the relatively unpredictable nature of arts activity. The outcomes of an initiative cannot be foreseen with the reliable detail of a capital investment. Further research and dissemination of good practice are needed if the arts are to contribute fully to urban regeneration.

About the study

The preceding paragraphs summarise the findings of *The Art of Regeneration*, which was written by Charles Landry, Lesley Greene, François Matarasso and Franco Bianchini and is published by Comedia in March 1996. It is based on over 10 years' experience of art and urban regeneration policy in the UK, Western Europe, Australia and the United States.

Further Information

The new Comedia publication, *The Art of Regeneration: Urban renewal through cultural activity*, explores the underlying issues and gives over 100 examples including 15 detailed case studies. It is available from Comedia, The Round, Bournes Green, Stroud, Gloucester GL6 7NL (ISBN 1 873667 96 5, Price £20, post free). New research is also being undertaken by Comedia on the social impact of participatory arts activity. This involves case studies across the UK and abroad, and is intended to produce evidence of the impact, and a methodology for its assessment, and will be completed in Spring 1997.



Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 1356-3408

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which funds programmes of research and innovative development in the fields of housing, social care and social policy. It supports projects of potential value to policy-makers, decision-takers and practitioners. It publishes the findings rapidly and widely so that they can inform current debate and practice.