

A Platform for Creative Consultation: Relating Urban Design, Cultural Economics and UK Government Agendas

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Abstract

Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, England, faces a particular set of circumstances which are representative of those faced by many post-industrial settlements in current times. This paper traverses the socio-economic, political and cultural background to these circumstances: to broadly understand the interrelationship between urban design, the regional cultural offer and civic society through the lens of ‘cultural economics’. At a time when much of Europe is still feeling the effects of the global recession; and when the north of England has been particularly devastated by cuts to public sector funding, it explores heritage, culture and history in relation to place-making and place ‘branding’. It asks how a cultural offer within a locale might be understood in terms of economic infrastructure, and how culture as a social and economic resource might be strengthened by the support of local government and the community through ‘creative consultation’.

Key words: urban, art, cultural economics, community, creative consultation

1. INTRODUCTION

Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, England, faces a particular set of circumstances which are representative of those faced by many post-industrial settlements in current times. This paper traverses the socio-economic, political and cultural background to these circumstances: to broadly understand the interrelationship between urban design, the regional cultural offer and civic society, through the lens of 'cultural economics'. Central to this research is an exploration of the role of the town's Art Gallery and Library, seen as a cultural focus and barometer for the town. This paper concludes by proposing a series of events that are intended to facilitate diverse public participation through creative consultation.

1.1 The Town

With a population of approximately 146,000 and rising, Huddersfield is a large Pennine town originally built on a booming textile industry. It boasts a rich vista of historical architecture, including a much celebrated neo-classical railway station and a plethora of striking Victorian mills set in a distinctive rural landscape. A large amount of the town is listed for protection by Historic England. However, this architectural legacy is contrasted against areas of the town centre that exemplify the principles of 1960s/70s architecture, planning and urban design: for example a ring road which prioritises motorised transport over the pedestrian, physically and perceptively

segregating the town centre from surrounding communities. In addition, the town's socio-economic difficulties pose a far greater problem – relative to other UK towns of a similar size Huddersfield suffers from high levels of deprivation, including significant income deprivation, high levels of health and mental health problems, and is ranked lower than average for education and skills. [1]

In 2009, Kirklees Council produced an Area Action Plan (AAP) for Huddersfield. The purpose of the AAP is to guide development in the town centre to 2026. [2] The plan aims to build on the area's policies set out in the local authority's Core Strategy and provides the opportunity to consider how best to guide the town's growth and prosperity in a way which offers a decent standard of living, better jobs, pleasant open spaces, vibrant culture and all the quality services and facilities a major town should command.

Such plans are not isolated for the area. In March 2009, urban design consultancy URBED was commissioned by Kirklees Council to develop an Urban Design Strategy (UDS) for Huddersfield. [3] This work ran in parallel to, and complemented the development of the options stage of the Area Action Plan, and the two pieces of work formed part of a joint consultation. It is clear from the analysis that the heart of the town is considered a very high quality urban environment that is one of the finest examples of Victorian planning in the north. The priority for Huddersfield is to conserve and improve what exists, and to ensure that new development complements the historic buildings that give the area so much character, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of pastiche. Beyond the centre, the quality of the built environment is much poorer. The town has a ring road that has the sole benefit of facilitating traffic circulation but, equally, it has damaged the structure, permeability and legibility of the town. This, together with a number of unsympathetic modern buildings located on the ring road affects the impression of the town on people passing through by car. URBED's strategy suggests a way in which the centre could be reconnected to its hinterland by repairing the damaged shatter zone that surrounds it. This would involve reconfiguring the street network to create a 'horseshoe' ring road, redesigning the roads so that they are friendlier places for cyclists and pedestrians, and shaping new development over the coming years so that it addresses and animates public spaces.

3. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Geographically, Huddersfield is advantageously positioned in the middle of a network of northern cities – Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. But there is of course a political dimension to Huddersfield's regional context. Following the Scottish referendum on independence, recent rhetoric in the United Kingdom has responded to increased sensitivity to the perceived north/south divide and concentration of resources directed to London and the south-east. On the 23rd June 2014 the Chancellor George Osborne gave a keynote speech in Manchester proposing England's great northern cities to become a northern 'powerhouse' for the British economy. Speaking in the Power Hall of Manchester's Museum of Science and Industry, the Chancellor stated while the cities of the North are individually strong, they are not collectively strong enough. He asserted, "We need a Northern Powerhouse. Not one city, but a collection of cities – sufficiently close to each that combined they can take on the world". [4] This is echoed by, Tom Bloxham, Chairman and co-founder of award winning property developer Urban Splash who states, "One of the great things we have got are our universities [...]. Yet still the majority of research funding goes into the south-east – that's something that could be relatively easily addressed". [5] Despite being named the 2014 Times Higher University of the Year the Chancellor omitted the University of Huddersfield, stating,

Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York and more – the north is blessed with world class universities. These universities have been at the forefront of the urban renaissance here over the last three decades. Many of them were

founded by enlightened industrialists – today they are still leading the way in cooperation between academics and industry [6].

This correlates with the N8 group - a partnership of eight research-intensive universities in the north of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York. The N8 universities (predominantly members of the Russell Group) have a critical mass of research capability and represent a significant cluster of research power among the 130 universities in the UK. In receipt of a large Arts and Humanities Research Council award (AHRC), the N8 propose culture can refuel reinvention, helping people to adapt to change and generate new models for sustainable development. In March 2013, the N8 Research Partnership was awarded funding from the AHRC for a pilot study to explore how universities can work closer with the arts and humanities sector to generate growth and answer a diverse range of research questions on cultural infrastructure.

All of these themes are both credible and admirable as they relate to national and international priorities and challenges, including the need to promote economic growth, enhance knowledge exchange, develop effective public engagement and create employment opportunities. However, though the Russell Group represents twenty-four of what are deemed the UK's leading universities, traditionally they have not provided the vocational focus in their arts and cultural programmes – and arguably have a particular academic approach to employment and practice within the cultural industries. Vocational programmes in arts and cultural industries have a long-standing history with the previous polytechnic universities, now referred to as 'Post-92'. The AHRC N8 project is being coordinated by Professor Dinah Birch, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research & Knowledge Exchange at the University of Liverpool. She states,

This is the first time that the N8 Research Partnership has engaged with the arts and humanities research community. [...] The cities represented by the N8 university partners include several of the giants of the Industrial Age. These cities have a history of self-reinvention; and have dynamic economies and vibrant arts scenes. Culture can fuel the process of reinvention, helping people to adapt to change and generate ideas for sustainable and fair models of development – and these workshops will explore how this can be achieved. [7]

Professor Mark Llewellyn, Director of Research at the AHRC, commented that the N8 plans to:

[...] support activities that will stimulate new ways of bringing arts and humanities researchers together across the north of England to think about heritage, digital cultures and creativity [and ...] to challenge and debate their own role in regional cultures, communities, growth and regeneration. [8]

Critics to the 'Northern Powerhouse' concept question the idea that large cities are needed for innovation and economic growth; citing examples of small towns in the US, such as Cupertino, now home of the apple campus and Menlo Park, headquarters of Google. Wayne Hemingway designer and retail expert states,

London needs to have real competition in the UK – ideas, creativity, club culture, music and film aren't owned by the capital but infrastructure is so heavily focused on the south, it's created a lopsided economy. Look at Germany – it's so much stronger because it has a set of regional cities with strong industries that give people equal opportunities to live and work. [9]

With a similar perspective, Siemens CEO Juergen Maier argues that the issue is not "the North

versus London – it's the North versus the rest of the world". [10] He calls upon authorities from across the Pennines to collaborate, and give businesses the confidence to continue investment, stating, "If every devolved region does its own thing it would be the worst possible scenario. You need a national industrial strategy and then you agree which regions are going to take ownership of which areas to create world-class clusters." [11] George Osborne reiterates,

Global cities are also great places to go out [...] great cities are competing for the 'creative class' that powers economic growth. [...] [Economists show] how innovators and entrepreneurs are attracted to creative, cultural, beautiful places. Here we already have world-class arts and culture, from Opera North in Leeds to the Tate in Liverpool, to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and the new Hepworth over in Wakefield. And then there's the music of the Halle and the Liverpool Philharmonic and of course the best pop music on the planet. [12]

It is in this context that regional towns such as Huddersfield appear to be overlooked by both neighbouring universities and national government strategies, raising particular questions about the dynamic between culture and the arts, politics and economics in this area.

4. CULTURAL ECONOMY

Recent reports that have focused on the cultural offer, such as the Warwick Commission, highlight that publicly funded arts, culture and heritage projects, supported by tax and lottery revenues, remain predominantly accessed by a narrow social, economic, ethnic and educational demographic: those from a privileged socio-economic background with university-level educational attainment and a professional occupation. [13] It is noteworthy that this demographic is particularly drawn to those activities that attract significant public funding, while other demographic groups are not. It suggests that nationally, this type of cultural offer remains exclusive, failing to attract or engage the broader spectrum of the population. There are, of course, many possible sociological and economic reasons for this, but it is suspected that a contributing factor is the cultural and creative industries' failure to express, represent or develop the voices, experiences and talents of the United Kingdom's population as a whole.

Writing for DEMOS in 2006 John Holden's paper, 'Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: Why culture needs a democratic mandate', highlights the challenges facing a political understanding of cultural value. He states,

The 'cultural system' faces a crisis of legitimacy. At local government level culture is suffering extreme funding cuts, the recent Arts Council England (ACE) Peer Review uncovers a rift between ACE and its Whitehall department, and individual organisations continue to stagger from one damning headline to the next. These are the current symptoms of a deeper problem that has dogged culture for the last 30 years. Politics has struggled to understand culture and failed to engage with it effectively. Cultural professionals have focused on satisfying the policy demands of their funders in an attempt to gain the same unquestioning support for culture that exists for health or education; but the truth is that politicians will never be able to give that support until there exists a more broadly based and better articulated democratic consensus. [14]

In his studies of governmentality, Michel Foucault identifies the transformation of the pre-modern administrative state into modern forms of government. Foucault's analysis utilises the old definition of 'police' to include policy, authority and polis in relation to articulating 'power'. Rejecting the conventional theory of power, defined as a central point from which struggle is waged, as in hegemony theory, Foucault proposes real power exists in a micro-politics of habits, language and

the vernacular; a micro-politics that is able to circuit the couplet of culture and governmentality. [15] In other words, power exists at the level of the particular and what is deemed 'normal'. In response to historical debates on cultural policy, Theodor Adorno proposes that a cultural policy must be based on a self-conscious recognition of the contradictions inherent in applying planning to a field of cultural practices which stand opposed to planning in their innermost processes; hence planning in government must involve a critical awareness of its own limits. [16]

Holden, Foucault and Adorno reiterate the difficult but intrinsic relationship that exists between politics, economics and culture. However, in the 1990s Bennett argued that Adorno's model of maintaining an autonomous cultural policy for the arts was outdated. [17] In contrast, he saw culture as an industry; recognising that any aesthetic and critical disposition forms merely a particular market segment within that industry. According to Bennett, different competing patterns within the 'cultural industry' will determine public expenditure, forms of administration to be debated and assessed in relation to different publics, and their relationships to competing political values and government policy objectives. What Bennett advocates is instrumentalisation that teeters on the reification of culture; an accusation frequently levelled at current UK government policies. However, he also proposes that communities are funded and formed from the policies within government – cultural policies for Bennett, are thus seen as national political instruments that construct communities – rather than perceiving communities as emerging external to government initiatives.

These different theoretical perspectives on cultural economy further provoke consideration of the cultural offer in Huddersfield and how it might be possible to sustain and develop this within existing political and economic constraints. Through tracing the history of the thinking around these challenges, the complexity of the issue becomes apparent – as does its prevalence in discussions spanning several decades. What is more, the challenges of articulating and understanding such concepts as 'power' in this context, and the difficulties in drawing together the different strands of thinking in relation to what might be termed 'cultural economics' become evident. Bennett's ideas, for example, might be seen to correspond with those underlying the N8 consortium and with Osborne's comments, that cultural progress for the north of England might be made by providing structure, steering funding and allowing for a 'vernacular' direction. Whereas Adorno completely opposed any sense of instrumentalising communities towards central government objectives, and Holden proposes there should be greater consultation and democracy in the constitution of cultural, how it is formed and accessed.

It is anticipated that the process of facilitating creative consultation will help to tease out some further responses to these issues. It will respond to the challenges faced by the fact that funding is so often steered in such a way as to make it either inaccessible or at least alien to those who need it. The creative consultation further aims to empower local understanding about some of the discussions happening at a national level, facilitating a 'bottom-up' as opposed to a 'top down' consultation process.

5. HUDDERSFIELD'S CULTURAL OFFER

Huddersfield Art Gallery and Library, as Huddersfield's primary cultural site, might be regarded as the main civic facility which embodies the town's cultural offer. As such, it functions as a useful case study for examining the broader social, political and financial challenges of the 'top-down' approach endorsed by Bennet and Osborne, in contrast to the democratisation of culture proposed by Holden and Adorno. The building and its contents might be read as a 'cultural barometer' from which to gauge how the population views the status and value of culture *per se* in a town such as this. The local authority perceives the Art Gallery and Library building as a cultural focus for the town, and, as such, is interested in its role within current and future urban design planning for

Huddersfield: the building is composed of two library floors and the third floor forms the five room gallery space. Originally set within the traditional Victorian fabric of the town, this public building has since been subsumed into a pedestrianised retail development known as the Piazza area. It has recently been listed by Historic England as a significant example of 1930s architecture. [18] Despite its architectural elegance, the building, and the local authority itself, face a number of challenges. Set against a backdrop of severe public funding cuts, they include the issue of how the building can be revitalised or re-conceptualised to become a vital cultural hub, capable of stimulating the cultural offer within Kirklees by being both accessible and culturally dynamic.

Across the UK there is currently a series of government led initiatives concerned with measuring and documenting the value of culture in relation to social, economic and health infrastructures. [19] The drive to measure cultural value is nothing new. Back in 2002 Michelle Reeves, Research Officer for the Arts Council England, drafted a report on ‘Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: a review’. She proposed that one of the most important reasons for monitoring, measuring, assessing and evaluating creative work is the genuine desire “to help to make the complex and intriguing web of creative exchange more visible, to articulate actual and potential achievement, to help us all move forward”. [20] This is a common goal. These challenges might be regarded as fundamental to much of the cultural sector both within and outside of academia; relevant not only in relation to the current funding climate, but constituting a more deep-seated profundity; being fundamental to our understanding of how arts and culture ‘works’ in the UK.

This proposal builds on an established relationship between the Gallery and the University. In 2011 the University of Huddersfield commenced a formal partnership with Huddersfield Art Gallery to offer a public engagement programme entitled ‘ROTOЯ’. ROTOЯ can be seen as a response to Michelle Reeves’ point that a locale’s cultural offer can be improved or sustained by partnership working. Acting as a metaphorical ‘bridge’ to link town and gown; connecting the University with the Art Gallery and its users, ROTOЯ exemplifies Reeves’ idea of sharing responsibility through collaboration. Featuring the art and design work of University staff, this on-going series of exhibitions, public events and talks creates a platform for showcasing a community of artists, designers and curators whose ideas and connective practices migrate and span art and design production. Central to ROTOЯ’s ethos is an enquiry into art and design’s impact upon, and value to its locale, with respect to contributing to the cultural offer. ROTOЯ aims to locate interpretation at the pivot between academic research and public engagement, where points of intersection are considered and debated from multiple perspectives; including the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people’s lives.

ROTOЯ, then, provides a useful case study for the University and Art Gallery’s partnership working, which we plan to draw upon and further develop in relation to our creative consultation research project. Not only has ROTOЯ provided insights into Huddersfield’s cultural context and identified areas where challenges exist – for example in enabling engagement and understanding in hard to reach audiences – it has also highlighted some of the benefits of collaborative working, and of ‘bottom-up’ approaches to public engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

Having considered Huddersfield’s position, its regional context, the current political setting and theoretical perspectives on cultural economy, we propose a pilot programme of creative consultation events. This paper has attempted to set out the existing rhetoric on the topics relating to the facilitation of creative consultation, providing contemporary context as well as historical background on some of the key issues at stake. The next phase of the research aims to respond to this rhetoric; to facilitate the development of a stronger cultural economy for Huddersfield by creating situations in which the public’s voice(s) can be enabled and heard. While an accessible outcome will take place (in the form the exhibition/installation), it is the consultation process itself

which will be the focus for the research, and which we plan to critique in a self-reflexive manner in order to provide insights into ways of successfully communicating this multidimensional ‘voice’. We are interested in the process of enabling this voice through new and perhaps unconventional ways of engaging a broader cross-section of the town’s population.

The recent 2014 Research Excellence Framework conducted across all UK Universities adopted a strict peer review process in measuring the ‘impact’ of academic research across society with reference to determining artistic excellence. However, as Francois Matarasso states when commenting upon the Brian McMaster report, “perhaps, in the end, what really needs to be excellent is the conversation we have about culture”, and that “conversation cannot be excellent if it excludes the voices of the public.” [21] Indeed, in re-imagining the cultural offer of Huddersfield and the role of its civic embodiment – the Art Gallery and Library building - we see meaningful and democratic public engagement as a fundamental and essential process rather than a luxury.

The intended outcome is a ‘people’s installation’ that reflects, and is born of, the ways in which local people value and relate to culture. This opens up a wider discussion and contestations about the ways in which cultural value can be measured, and the ways in which cultural infrastructure itself is played out in political, economic, urban design sectors. It is our intention for the ‘people’s installation’ to be a mechanism through which to understand the views of ‘the public’ more deeply and inclusively. Understanding public attitudes through various engagement processes will no doubt reveal a variety of conflicting positions, which we wish to encourage. It is thus important for the research to recognise that ‘the public’ is a collective term for what is in fact a multitude of different and sometimes opposing viewpoints: hence, the proposal to adopt different engagement strategies and outcomes via a rich and complex art installation is just one way such plurality may be captured. One of the challenges is to overcome the convention of homogenising and limiting the status of the public, something which is particularly prevalent in public funded culture where there remains a tendency to aggregate individuals and perceive them as ‘audiences’, ‘attenders’ or ‘non-attenders’, rather than as contributors or cultural advocates.

This endeavour could be interpreted as an act of collective self-creation. If active ‘self-creation’ becomes a marker towards a political ideal of self-government, then the main civic cultural building (HAG/Library) provides a good starting point in which to assess the public opinion of Huddersfield’s cultural life. In this respect we are interested in political democracy, and the people’s installation displaying the characteristics, and challenges, of pluralism, equality and transparency under the guises of artistic expression.

One intention of the research is to assess, from a public perspective, the ways in which Huddersfield’s identity might be discovered and marketed, in relation to providing it with a stronger sense of ‘place’; useful in relation to tourism, but also as an instrument for attracting the attention of decision makers at regional and national levels of government. The subject of ‘place branding’ is something we plan to address here, with the aim of helping to further define and position the town from the perspective of its inhabitants and visitors. Successful branding not only helps to develop positive associations with a place, but also provides a point of reference with respect to the competition. [22] Acting as a tool for rapid communication, place branding has been associated with long-term sustainable economic developments; something which we wish to explore further. [23] We are also interested in the problems of place branding, for example the fact that, when faced with limited budgets, strategies have often focused on creating differentiation and raising awareness through the propagation of logos, symbols, and strap lines rather than articulating what the town and people have to offer. [24] Too often, it seems, place brands have failed because they do not wholly represent an area in a way that can be understood by local inhabitants, and thus fail to gain acceptance from local communities. [25] In response to this, our proposed creative consultation aims to work with local stakeholders to provide insights into the local perspectives that are often

overlooked by more rhetorical marketing. Creative thinking and research might be one way of developing ideas around place branding beyond that basic response of logo-development, to really take on board dissonance and maximise what might be considered ‘brand impact’ in this context.

We wish to intertwine this with discussion and contestations of the ways in which cultural infrastructure is valued, judged, measured and resourced. Under a notional umbrella term of ‘creative consultation’, we wish to provide a people’s perspective on these issues; enabled by a series of events including, workshops facilitated by creative practitioners, to include artist-led activities, café events, psychogeographic approaches such as mapping exercises and creative play-based activities.

Alongside these events the public will be openly invited to occupy the building to provide a critical evaluation of its role and function; the phenomenon of the recent occupy movement equally is a source of inspiration. As an alternative to the conventional output of public consultation – a predominantly textual report – the final outcome of the events and occupation will be a visual, interactive and immersive installation. The primary intention of this is to explore how to create a more accessible, inclusive and expressive culmination of the consultation process. It is hoped that this will be able to capture a breadth of ideas, feelings and positions from local citizens through an integrated, on-site exhibition of drawings, sculptures, videos, text and sound pieces that can be experienced in a holistic way.

This pilot scheme will provide an arena for experimentation with the ideas and mechanisms described in this paper, with the aim of reflecting upon and evaluating the benefits and limitations of adopting a ‘bottom-up’ approach to public consultation, relative to more conventional methods of consultation; and build a model for further community-led input into the cultural offer of regional towns such as Huddersfield.

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