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Achieving place quality through cultural vitality and economic competitiveness

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A whole raft of studies have recently promulgated that pervasive commercial forces are eroding the publicness and cultural plurality of urban public spaces. Town Centre Management Companies, Public-Private Partnerships, Joint Ventures, City Development Companies and Business Improvement Districts, to name just a clutch of mechanisms, are being utilised throughout the UK to improve neglected urban landscapes. As their names suggest, they provide the platform for the private sector to take a greater responsibility for the design, management, ownership and governance of urban public space.

The paradox, however, is how in a business world, dominated by global flows of capital, can place quality improvements best cater for the needs of local people and diverse communities of interest? This article identifies the links between cultural activity and economic vitality, making the case that the relationship between each of these objectives is not necessarily dichotomous but can be mutually reinforcing. The arguments contained here are based on a larger research project; Public Space Vitality, jointly commissioned by Culture North East and One NorthEast Regional Development Agency.

The research, recently undertaken by the Global Urban Research Unit at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, sought to identify the links between cultural activity and economic vitality through an analysis of five case studies in the North East of England. The spaces studied, reflecting a cross section of prominent urban public spaces, were Alnwick Market Place, Durham Millennium Square, Newcastle Monument-Old Eldon Square, Redcar Esplanade and Stockton High Street.

The empirical investigation is largely based on information gathered from face-to-face interviews with different actors and agencies with a 'stake' in the selected urban spaces, including town centre managers, management contractors, planners-designers, policy officers, and business representatives. In addition, findings are based on engagement with everyday users and 'walking the streets'.

Opinions were strong and varied about 'what makes a place work' and what is the role of culture in this process. The research revealed many contradictions and different ideological positions, but a recurrent strand emerging from users and those with a stake in the case study spaces was that actions detrimental to cultural vitality would have negative impacts on the economic performance at a variety of spatial scales. Put another way, respondent views considered a thriving public life in urban spaces to be crucial to the economic competitiveness of locales. However, the way to go about designing, delivering and managing this was less unanimous and straightforward.

Investment in aesthetic improvements or cultural activities is not a guarantee for success and automatic process. Multiple factors affect the nature of impacts and so it is important that policy responses are tailored to places. This would suggest a detailed understanding of the needs and motivations of key stakeholders such as property owners, residents and businesses, everyday users, tourists and non-users so that problems being represented in policy spaces are commensurate with the spatial practices of lived space 'on the ground'.

The research argues that "Quality is the watchword for all public space intervention", drawing attention to the fact that public spaces are long-term investments and recommending that investing in place quality should not be considered an 'add-on' or 'bonus'. This means emphasising quality in the design, implementation and on-going maintenance of places. An implication of this may be more focussed public sector intervention, what One NorthEast refers to as "fewer, bigger, better" projects.

This obviously has considerable benefits for the spatially demarcated areas that are considered 'strategic sites or 'prominent' locations surrounded by leisure, retail and business uses such as the five case studies. But such trade-offs may unintentionally

marginalise peripheral public spaces, those not deemed 'economically competitive'. Therefore the everyday cultural value (public life) should not be derailed by opportunist economic strategies. The danger of a purely market driven philosophy needs to be scrutinised through a holistic lens which considers the long-term economic, social and environmental impacts in a balanced fashion before decisions are taken. Short-term 'wins' can often result in long-term costs.

Although conclusions remain tentative, time-space specific and by no means comprehensive, key findings to date suggest that:

- Urban public spaces that promote everyday cultural activity are undoubtedly economically vibrant also
- Place quality enhancements to urban public space increase business confidence and 'lever in' private sector finance
- Public space improvements rarely happen in isolation, however, and therefore calculating economic benefits with certainty is extremely difficult which poses difficulties in securing resources
- Investments, activities and interventions should be part of wider programmes, not standalone 'showpieces'
- A clear management strategy and cultural programming was perceived to be a prerequisite for successful spaces
- The role of professionals such as urban designers should harness and reflect diverse community aspirations and cultural values
- Increasing usage and popularity of places and events is a key cultural benefit from place quality improvements
- Benefits radiate out from beyond the immediate focus of any intervention works and can lead to a general raising of standards across an administrative or functional urban area
- Improved public spaces can be used to host events and programmes that in turn act as a catalyst for greater engagement with the surrounding locality and add to the areas unique character
- Quality public spaces can enhance the image of cities, sub-regions and even regions

The potential of public spaces is huge: the glue that will bind the 'sustainable communities' championed by all levels of government. Yet, much of this potential remains unrealised as I argue that much of this public infrastructure remains presently under-valued by policy-makers and some business interests. This research which forms part of the North East's Quality of Place Agenda, has dispelled some of the myths broadcast by the doom mongers, that large-scale corporate interests are undermining the fabric of communities and will derail the cultural renaissance of our towns and cities. Private interests are beginning to recognise that a homogenised public landscape is not a valuable asset. This is particularly so in the retail sector, where consumers value urban space that facilitates meaningful experiences that they can identify with and perhaps forge a sense of attachment.

A plethora of intangible factors are inextricably bound within the social production of space that tends to undervalue the role of culture in the successful functioning of places and spaces. Whilst the impacts of cultural vitality on economic activity and vice versa are not easily quantifiable, research findings suggest that cultural vitality and economic competitiveness are not and therefore should not be viewed as competing objectives. Rather they can reinforce one another. This however, requires collaborative action supported by an inclusive spatial vision that different communities of interest are 'brought into'.

It is the challenge of contemporary development practice to embrace local specificities and simultaneously project a transnational vision. Through such action, cultural vitality can remain resonant in urban public space. A considered approach is the mantra put forward that accommodates progressive change based on the heterogeneous spatial representations, narratives and repertoires of a diverse community of interests from school children to pensioners and from market traders to multinational retailers.

This still leaves the issue of securing capital and revenue resources which remains vital to the successful functioning of urban public spaces culturally and economically. It is not as simple as securing a public sector grant to upgrade the streetscene environment and then automatically assume that more people will use the space with the knock-on effect of improved business performance and other economic benefits.

The latent potential of high quality and aesthetically pleasing public spaces can be realised through an events and activities programme. By animating these places the cultural and economic potential of urban public space may be realised.