

BECOMING AWESOMESTOW

11–26 April

A research project by Julie Ramage and Dr Lorna Hards

CONTEXT

Speaking in the third of his Reith Lectures in 2013, the artist Grayson Perry characterised creative place-making:

“This idea, you know the currency of bohemian-ness...especially in the urban ecology...artists move into the cheap housing and the cheap spaces and they make them...”¹

Perry’s reference was to a phenomenon in urban regeneration, made popular in the 1990s and 2000s [and accounted for by Florida, Leadbeater, Markusen and others in the academic literature], whereby run-down, post-industrial areas become inhabited for work and living by artists and creatives and which subsequently take on a bohemian charm or cool and grow in popularity and value and hence becoming ‘Awesomestow’ (a reference to Walthamstow, where Perry had a studio).

During the late 1990s and 2000s many UK cities and towns attempted some form of creative industries or cultural quarter initiatives. These often aimed to regenerate town centres, address issues of urban decline, redress some town planning decisions undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s and tackle socio-economic problems (worklessness and participation, skills etc). Cultural assets (theatres, concert halls, galleries etc) were sometimes regarded as catalysts within such initiatives, attracting further investment and creative talent. With relatively predictable budgets and organisational structures, such cultural assets they were also seen as supporting less structured parts of the sector (predominantly small and micro-businesses) at policy level and in the development of sector skills and audiences.

In 2004, DCMS published ‘Culture at the Heart of Regeneration’². In its introduction, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell stated that ‘there are many fantastic examples of culture acting as a catalyst to turn round whole communities’. In this project we wanted to see if we can see evidence of this kind of change outside of the main cities and in some small, lesser celebrated towns.

Our aim was to use a combination of visual and oral narrative accounts sourced from stakeholders in each town to assemble evidence of ‘Strategic Added Value’ that the formal economic impact assessments often refer to, but do not always fully capture. Our investigations show that while the original visions and masterplans for creating cultural quarters and creative districts in these towns were often idealistic, the new venues have stimulated practical and varied activities and benefits, in keeping with local needs.

METHODOLOGY

We took a standard Impact Evaluation Framework (IEF)³ as a reference point. The IEF recognises ‘Strategic Added Value’ (SAV) as consisting of strategic leadership and catalyst; strategic influence; leverage; synergy and engagement.

White (2009)⁴ proposes possible SAV outputs, including ‘Information, knowledge and advice’, ‘Information sharing and relation-

ship building networks’ and ‘awareness, understanding and shared priorities and delivery mechanisms’. These possibilities already appeared to us to offer arguably as much relevance to the true value of case study investments than a standard economic impact assessment that essentially focuses on the net benefits of additional ticket sales⁵ or visitor spend. So, we kept these in mind during our consultations with stakeholders to understand what the broader intended impacts of the investments were.

One of the essential features of our research was that we involved stakeholders from the case study towns. Where possible, we wanted to engage them in the development of the revisited ‘theories of change’, which we could then use to illustrate ‘before’ and ‘after’ the interventions from a range of perspectives.

From there we aimed to compile a selection of photography through which we would attempt to demonstrate something like the economists’ term ‘SAV’, using a visual medium.

CASE STUDIES

We looked at three case studies of towns that undertook investments in cultural assets in the past 10 – 15 years. These were Lerwick, Dunfermline and Walsall. The examples were chosen to cover different investment types in terms of varying socio-economic profiles, metropolitan and remote settings, cultural and social variation, Scotland and England.

OUR FINDINGS

Although the ‘theories of change’ are useful, in practice the effects cannot be distilled to simple ‘before’ and ‘after’ analyses. The emerging ‘stories of change’ are complex and the impacts, subtle. As with any evaluation, there is a challenge in considering the true ‘additionality’ of the intervention: what would have happened otherwise – and this is always difficult to ascertain. Some of the effects that we observed were almost certainly due to the new or refurbished cultural asset. Others are difficult to attribute directly.

A number of important external factors featured too, not least the global recession, era of austerity and changing political frameworks and imperatives (in the UK, from Europe and globally). So, sometimes where the observed benefits appear to be much more modest than those expected or intended, it is not just due to over-enthusiasm on the part of the master-planners and visionaries.

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Thank you to Dr Nicky Bird

Design by Christine Jones

1 Perry, G. *Nice Rebellion – Welcome In, Playing to the Gallery 3*, Reith Lecture 2013, BBC, Broadcast 29th October 2013

2 *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration* DCMS, 2004

3 *RDA evaluation: Practical Guidance on Implementing the Impact Evaluation Framework*, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009

4 White, G. *Pushing the boundaries of impact evaluation: Report on knowledge development possibilities*, SQW, 2009

5 Myerscough, J. *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain*, Policy Studies Institute, 1988