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Planning the Cultural Quarter in Birmingham's Eastside

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Abstract

Cultural planning and the development of cultural quarters has become a new orthodoxy in the revitalization of inner city industrial districts, yet this orthodoxy is now widely questioned as to whether it delivers on its promises. In Birmingham UK, the aim to create a new cultural quarter in the industrial inner city area of Eastside represents a unique opportunity for the city to examine and learn from past lessons of the “cultural turn” in urban policy. The article examines these lessons and whether the Eastside scheme is set to repeat the mistakes of the past

Introduction

The development of cultural quarters has become a prominent part of urban regeneration and planning practice since the 1980s as city administrations seek to forge a response to the challenges of economic restructuring and related social and environmental decline. Such districts typically see the encouragement of a high-density mix of creative industry production and related consumption activities, often involving the renovation of historical commercial and manufacturing premises on the edge of city centres. While these quarters have been at the forefront of the apparent renaissance of many cities, and the associated manipulation of city images, the approach has raised some problematic issues ranging from gentrification pressures to the focus and extent of public intervention, the role of the built form, and concerns of how notions of culture are constructed in the planning process (Brown *et al.*, 2000; Scott, 1997; Bianchini, 1993). In this paper, we focus on three particular issues—planning governance, built form, and the public realm—to examine the development of a new cultural quarter in Birmingham.

The application of the cultural quarter concept in Birmingham is part of the City's bid to continue its high profile city centre regeneration of recent years. The Eastside district, a declining industrial area immediately east of the city centre, is the focus of a massive public and private regeneration initiative, launched in 1999. Birmingham City Council and its partners champion culture—including the arts and creative industries—as key ingredients for the physical, social and economic regeneration of Eastside. Yet Birmingham has adopted this approach somewhat later than other UK cities such as Manchester, Glasgow and Sheffield, thereby representing an ideal site to examine whether planning practice is evolving and adopting lessons from previous experience.

As the development of Eastside, and consequently our research into it, is in its early stages, this paper reports on early investigations into the conceptualization of culture in Eastside as a potentially regenerative force, and the mechanisms designed to deliver this. The paper begins by discussing the contemporary importance of culture in urban policy and regeneration programmes, and then goes on to outline the origins and emergence of the cultural quarter vision for Eastside specifically. We then evaluate such policy frameworks in the light of experiences of other cities that have

been down the “culture and regeneration” path, and also against the significant amount of academic research that has been conducted in this area in recent years. We ask, has Eastside learnt from the lessons of the past, and what might the contribution of culture be in Eastside's future?

Cultural Quarters and the Restructuring of Post-industrial Cities

That culture has become the business of cities, and the symbolic capital of cities is transforming their present and futures, is now well established in the academic literature (see Zukin, 1995; Harvey, 1989). Symbolic capital, the notion of culture and its connection with place has also become a key tenet of urban governance, spawning a set of activities now described as “cultural planning” (see Evans, 2001; Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Landry & Bianchini, 1995). The result is a “new orthodoxy” (Miles & Paddison, 2005, p. 833) of urban planning that positions culture and creativity as a defining success-factor in urban regeneration.

Culture is now positioned as central to most urban policies. It becomes related to social cohesion, sustainability, economic growth, civic pride, mental and physical wellbeing, social inclusion and a vast array of other worthy social, economic and environmental goals. As a recent report by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) states, “culture drives regeneration in many ways from inspiring landmark buildings through to reviving the decaying centres of market towns to bringing a community together around an arts event” (DCMS, 2004, p. 4). Culture is thus expected to deliver significant promises to urban citizens. The extent to which culture as an essential ingredient of urban regeneration can and actually does deliver on its promises, however, is now being questioned. Evans (2005), for example, concludes that “the expectation that [flagship and major city-centre and waterfront cultural schemes] will produce sustained social and distributive economic benefits alone is arguably an unreasonable one” particularly because short-term impacts have not shown to be sustainable and social benefits have patently not been achieved (Evans, 2005, p. 975).

This new orthodoxy links place and culture together and thus endows the cultural “sector” a powerful status to drive forward employment and wealth generation, in addition to denoting symbolic new identities for cities. Booth and Boyle (1993) show that policy-makers and city-leaders actively imagine and market the identity of a city through flagship developments, in order to attract footloose capital, and international tourism, thus reinforcing the residential choices of those upwardly mobile “knowledge economy” workers now championed (see Florida, 2002) as necessary to a city's future success. One potential result, as critical urban geographers have long been at pains to point out, is a significant displacement of former marginalized and poorer communities from areas newly targeted for flagship developments and city image-making (see critical work by Zukin, 1989, 1995; Smith, 1996; Lees, 2003; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2003).

Birmingham City Council, and its associated partners (notably the regional development agency, Advantage West Midlands (AWM)) working to re-brand the city, have bought into this new orthodoxy with vigour. Since the 1980s, Birmingham has been engaged in a rebuilding and marketing of the city centre to put it “on the map” of second-order global cities. Eastside has become a significant piece in this

rebuilding agenda, marketed as “developing the city's position as the regional capital and a major international city, and contributing to its renaissance by creating a vibrant, new city centre quarter” (Birmingham City Council, n.d.a, p. 2). In doing so, it follows in the footsteps of the many other European and British cities that have coupled culture with regeneration as a means of reviving ailing economies and revitalizing urban spaces. Dublin's Temple Bar, Manchester's Northern Quarter, Bristol's harbourside area, Sheffield's Creative Industries Quarter (CIQ), the Quayside developments in Newcastle/Gateshead, Covent Garden in London, and Glasgow's successful bid for European City of Culture in 1990—all, and more, are indicative of this trend. Similar trends are evident elsewhere in Europe including Bilbao, Barcelona, Rotterdam, and Lisbon. Their progress, and studies that monitor the impact of the changes such approaches bring to the city, offer a wealth of important lessons to Eastside. We review these lessons here, focusing on themes of planning governance, the public realm, and the built form as three key parameters in the cultural planning literature.

Planning Governance

The question of how to successfully deliver a cultural planning programme or “creative quarter” within a city is one of the paramount themes (often contested) in the literature. One debate centres on the choice between a “hands-off” or “hands-on” approach for local governance agencies. Should creative quarters simply be allowed to organically “emerge” and grow? Or do they require intervention at a range of levels to develop? Key case studies shed some light on this choice and the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.

Manchester's Northern Quarter emerged organically out of factors including cheap rents and a history of active music development in the city, rather than a specific policy of Manchester City Council (Brown *et al.*, 2000, p. 442). The “hands-off” approach in Manchester resonated with the views of the industry, who saw intervention as a threat to the scene's “Darwinian ethos” (Brown *et al.*, 2000, p. 443). The area is widely seen as a success, and a distinct cluster of activities that continue to associate Manchester with a strong music scene.

In contrast, Sheffield's Creative Industries Quarter (CIQ) was a deliberate attempt by Sheffield City Council to prop up a local economy devastated by the decline of the local steel industry and create jobs (Brown *et al.*, 2000; Moss, 2002). It was, thus, a decidedly “hands-on” approach in Sheffield, where the Council provided key infrastructure and facilities and then marketed the Quarter to creative companies who would begin to catalyse the necessary “buzz” around them (Brown *et al.*, 2000, p. 443). Monitoring of the CIQ has found the initiative to have generally failed to achieve key objectives. Economically, the Quarter strategy has failed to produce any significant music or film niche in Sheffield (Brown *et al.*, 2000) and many businesses in the Quarter remain heavily publicly subsidised (Moss, 2002). Key projects funded with public monies have spectacularly failed, for example, the new National Centre for Popular Music closed within a year of opening (Moss, 2002, p. 218). Further, whilst the initiative has created jobs by providing space for small creative companies, the emphasis on culture as a means to an economic end has meant that the physical area is devoid of public space and life, because it is almost entirely production-based (Moss, 2002, p. 212; Brown *et al.*, 2000). This is contrasted with the Devonshire

Green area of Sheffield which has grown spontaneously as that city's hub for bars, cafes, music, and nightlife scenes (Moss, 2002, p. 217; Brown *et al.*, 2000, p. 444), providing the necessary 24-hour footfall required to give the area “buzz”. The CIQ is critiqued, then, on two grounds: for being heavy-handed from the top-down and for focusing too much on production and neglecting consumption activities.

An initial reading of the Manchester and Sheffield stories might suggest that a “hands-off” approach is preferred for the development of “successful” urban cultural quarters. Moss certainly concludes with an expression of hope that the Sheffield experiment is never tried again and instead “new stakeholders will be able to subscribe again to a common vision and clarity of purpose in a new climate of co-operation rather than reliance on public intervention, finance and leadership” (Moss, 2002, p. 218). Yet Brown *et al.* (2000) conclude that “non-intervention [may well be] no longer an option” (p. 449) particularly as London continues to assert its dominance, in the music scene at least.

More critically, both studies continually point to the myriad ways in which “intervention” (or the intricate urban policy framework) is continually present. Brown *et al.*'s study (2000) identifies a range of policy contexts which surely shape the music scene in Manchester and where it takes place. A key aspect was the high take-up of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme amongst the Manchester music scene, facilitating their location in the Northern Quarter where rents were cheap and properties small. A newly formed association in the Quarter pushed for a specific cultural remit in the City Council's 1993 Regeneration Study. And of course, Manchester's clubs and venues operate in the context of licensing laws and an array of other local regulations. Further, their interviews with key people in the Manchester music scene revealed a desire for the Council to be visionary and “inspirational” in the things it does do such as “commissioning buildings, public spaces, [and] festivals”, and thus, within this “iconoclastic anti-policy language, is in fact a cultural policy” (Brown *et al.*, 2000, pp. 447-448).

Similar silences about what actually constitutes a “hands-off” approach abound elsewhere in the literature on cultural planning and creative quarters. Montgomery's (1995) discussion, for example, of the Temple Bar initiative in Dublin champions the notion that “small is beautiful” (p. 165) (less policy intervention is better), but elsewhere points to the myriad ways that the local state was integral to the process. Crucially important was the large proportion of state-owned properties in Temple Bar rendering the process for redevelopment significantly less complex (McCarthy, 1998).

Commentators also highlight the very real threat of property-driven price rises that may occur in a supposedly “hands-off” approach where this can ultimately price out small scale cultural producers (Brown *et al.*, 2000, p. 448). Yet, this predictable outcome is also a distinct possibility in more obviously public-sector led approaches, because of the intricate connection between the announcement of a future “creative quarter” and the immediate raising of land values (whether real or latent) that results.

Perhaps, then, two other questions become more important than a straight debate between “hands-off” and “hands-on” approaches: first, what kind of “hands-on” approach; and second, whose hands? As Rodriguez *et al.* (2003) show, there has been a “fundamental shift from traditional government/governing structures to more

diffused, fragmented, and flexible modes of governance” (p. 38). In other words, governance is still an essential part of the process of city building, yet it looks very different from the kind of big government approach that is characterized by Sheffield's approach to its urban economic revival.

One approach characteristic of this new style of diffuse and fragmented governance in UK and European cities is the drive for “landmark”, “flagship” or “mega” projects. Rapid economic restructuring and changing socio-cultural forces (see Lash & Urry, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989) have pushed cities into competition with each other for footloose global capital (see Sassen, 1994). As a consequence, city governments looking to reposition “their” city in the new world order seek mechanisms and projects that can help achieve desired “global” status (Ward, 1998). Flagship projects are one significant part of that drive, and are too well documented for us to need reviewing here (see contributions to Rodriguez *et al.*, 2003).

Flagships can indeed re-brand a city and potentially change its fortunes—Bilbao is known for its Guggenheim, Newcastle for its Quayside, Glasgow as the successful City of Culture. Yet the extent to which this change is felt positively by everybody, and is sustained in a meaningful way, is now widely questioned. As Rodriguez *et al.* (2003) note, “social and spatial differentiation and exclusion are, however, often disguised under ready-made image reconstruction strategies that provide the basis for new models of collective identification that mirror the lifestyles and aims of urban elites, excluding less successful or less marketable social groups from the new projected urban identity” (p. 32).

The key lessons, then, are that:

- (1) The question of property values is crucial as rising values soon price out exactly those kinds of people and activities desired in “creative quarters”. “Hands-off” approaches run the risk of allowing property markets to determine which activities remain. Yet there are risks even in policy-led approaches where land values rise due to the announcement of a major development initiative. Careful attention is required, then, to the nature of local property markets, current activities and local conditions, to manage this critical issue (Brown *et al.*, 2002).
- (2) Policies that exclusively focus on production-side activities (such as the Sheffield CIQ) without paying attention to consumption activities and the public realm may result in areas that fail to generate a necessary momentum of activity and footfall on the streets both day and night (Moss, 2002; Montgomery, 1995; Brown *et al.*, 2002).
- (3) Flagship projects may have some impact but it is difficult to quantify, negative effects are distributed most heavily on the poor and marginalized, and any positive effects are fleeting (Miles, 2005a, 2005b; Evans, 2005; Loftman, 1990).

A final lesson returns us to the “who” question and it is to this we turn in the next section.

Public Realm

Exploring the nature of cultural planning inevitably raise the question “whose culture” is being represented and valued (Miles, 2005a). Zukin (1995) shows that the definition of culture in development (though usually not explicit) as Culture or the Arts acts to reproduce uncontested and dominant upper-class sensibilities. Lees (2003) argues a similar point in relation to urban renaissance policy “turns” in the UK, and Smith (1996) also shows how culture and the arts can be used as a deliberate strategy to displace those “less marketable” populations and activities from inner cities. Even whilst culture is championed as potentially generating community cohesion, a stronger civic realm and a sense of local identity and pride (Bianchini, 1993; Montgomery, 1995), more critical work highlights that culture relates to certain social groups, all of whom are “metropolitan types of some affluence” (Miles, 2005a, p. 892). Urban partnerships that form to deliver regeneration to a cultural “tune” often reflect cultural and political elites thereby simply reproducing the aesthetics and desires of a dominant middle-class (Evans, 2001, p. 222). Arts bureaucracies themselves reproduce old parochialisms and predetermine a view of culture that can be exclusionary and static (Miles, 2005a, p. 896).

Questions of the public realm have become paramount in cultural planning with the UK's DCMS recently recognizing that better engagement with local communities will improve ownership of projects and better distribute the benefits of culture-led regeneration (DCMS, 2003). A wealth of literature documents the ways by which culture can be highly exclusionary, and displace or unsettle existing communities and activities (Porter & Barber, 2006; Booth & Boyle, 1993; Bianchini, 1993; Evans, 2001, 2005; Miles, 2005b; McCarthy, 1998; Seo, 2002; Scott, 2000; Loftman, 1990).

The key lesson, then, is that true cultural quarters only come about by attention to the local in two specific ways:

- (1) Being rooted in the local, by recognizing local talent, diversity, history and context (Booth & Boyle, 1993; Bianchini, 1993; Miles, 2005a; Brown *et al.*, 2000; Bailey *et al.*, 2004);
- (2) Being steeped in participative democracy with local communities. This requires genuine public debate and participation, ongoing mechanisms for the involvement of local people and institutions, and a genuine willingness by policy-makers to build on local distinctiveness and character (Evans, 2001, 2005; McCarthy, 1998).

This requires attention, then, to questions of what culture is and who is represented by it, and most importantly to the process that underpins any cultural or regeneration programme.

Built Form

Design and the character of the built form is considered a key element of a “successful” cultural quarter. Many such quarters are found in old industrial inner city districts—partly because that is where the rents are cheap (or at least used to be), and partly because “creatives” are drawn to gritty urban environments and the physical space afforded by old factories and warehouses can be ideal studio and exhibition space. Studies have shown the essential connection between place and creative activity, either because the place itself provides the raw material for creative activity

(Drake, 2003) or it sets the conditions for the necessary “buzz” and human networks (Montgomery, 1995; Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998; Harding & Shannon, n.d.). Of further importance is the provision of appropriate living, working and meeting places such as live/work studios, and exhibition and performance spaces (Montgomery, 1995; Evans, 2001).

Those who champion successful cultural quarters point to the key ingredients of “place”—public spaces, cafes and bars, uniqueness, emphasis on good design, and working with the local specificities of place (Miles, 2005b; Montgomery, 1995; Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998; Drake, 2003). Less successful are places that become “bland” by use of mainstream designers or activities, places that have too many “interstitial spaces which become unsafe or redundant” (Evans, 2005, p. 975) (mono-use complexes, office parks); or places that neglect one or more of either productive space, consumption space or public space (Moss, 2002; Montgomery, 1995). Design and the quality of place produced, then, are crucial.

Yet an overwhelming emphasis on design which overshadows other important aspects (such as the strength of public engagement or a focus on process) raises crucial concerns. Regeneration must begin with people, not the design of buildings, and approaches which market regeneration via glossy brochures showing a “blue sky backdrop to a person-free building, providing an optimum view of the finished product” (Evans, 2005, p. 974) are now widely questioned. When “star architects” (Evans, 2005, p. 970) are wheeled in to deliver landmark buildings, then that crucial aspect of attention and commitment to the local, as outlined earlier, is blurred.

The key lessons, then, are:

- (1) Creative quarters must work with the existing urban fabric and recognize the essential link between place and culture (Drake, 2003; Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998; Montgomery, 1995).
- (2) Planning frameworks must provide a breadth of place types—for production, consumption and public use, and those that blur the boundaries between these (Brown *et al.*, 2000; Montgomery, 1995; Evans, 2001; Harding & Shannon, n.d.).
- (3) Individual schemes should build authenticity by being steeped in the local. This should include a commitment to using local designers, architects and investment capital (Montgomery, 1995; Miles, 2005b).

The lessons for cultural planning emerging from the literature as distilled here through the parameters of planning governance, public realm and built form, provide an important framework for evaluating Birmingham's progress and approach in the Eastside area. In the following section, we set out the story of how Eastside has come to be thought of as a cultural quarter for the city and evaluate the policy approach against these lessons.

Birmingham's Eastside as a Cultural Quarter

The Digbeth area of Birmingham, re-labelled Eastside as part of the regeneration plans, reflects the severe de-industrialization and related environmental decline that affected the city in the 1970s and 1980s. The city lost 191,000 jobs between 1971 and 1987, representing nearly 30% of its employment base and nearly half of all manufacturing employment (Henry *et al.*, 2002, p. 117; Spencer *et al.*, 1986). Spatially, the impact was felt most directly in the inner ring of industrial districts such as Digbeth, where the metal working, automotive and related engineering activities were most heavily concentrated. The city council responded to the crisis with an ambitious programme of publicly funded city centre development based around a series of flagship projects including the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, the National Indoor Arena and a Hyatt Hotel, all accompanied by significant investment in the public realm including pedestrianization and upgrading of the canal network. These new projects and the surrounding city centre environment were vigorously promoted through place marketing campaigns to encourage the growth of business tourism and related service sector employment. While this and subsequent private investment have done much to transform the physical character of the central area, and to create significant new job opportunities, the city's economy remains structurally weak and substantial swathes of the city are characterized by high levels of multiple deprivation. At the same time, economic decline and associated social and environmental problems led to a sustained decline in Birmingham's population with out-migration most pronounced among economically active and more affluent households.

The Eastside regeneration quarter is a post-industrial urban area of 130 hectares (420 acres) located immediately to the east of the city centre core, but largely untouched by the nearby regeneration activity of the 1980s and 1990s. It is home to approximately 70 residents in two small pockets of housing, but immediately beyond its boundary lie several neighbourhoods characterized by high levels of multiple deprivation and substantial ethnic minority populations. In physical terms, Eastside can be seen in two distinct halves, divided from each other by the main railway line connecting Birmingham with London (see Figure 1).

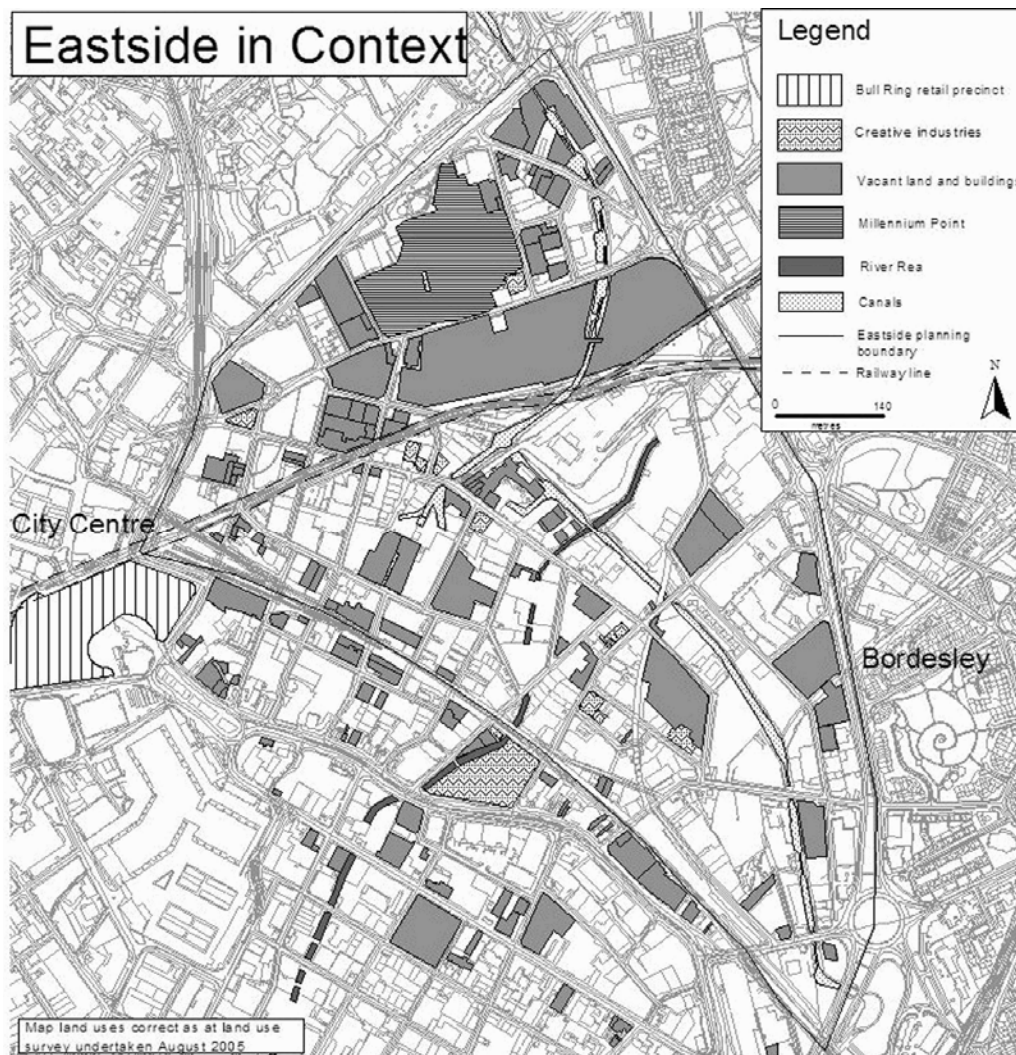


Figure 1. Eastside in context

North of the tracks, the area is dominated by light industrial uses, vacant land, and predominantly large-scale property ownership. This is where most of the Council and AWM's attention has been focused, particularly around Millennium Point, completed in 2001 as a catalyser of creative development in the region. A number of small-scale creative industries in printing and design operate in this area, but all will be moved elsewhere, or closed, to make way for the substantial redevelopment about to take place.

South of the tracks is dominated by small-scale industrial uses, some conversion to creative industries uses, and a fragmented property ownership. Known generally as the inner city district of Digbeth, this landscape is gritty in character, dominated by nineteenth century blue brick railway viaducts, listed industrial buildings, and a busy network of local streets. A canal system, and the River Rea are also key features of the area and its industrial heritage. The existing seeds of the “creative quarter” for Eastside are located in Digbeth, where clusters of creative industries are now working especially around the Custard Factory and the Bond.

Over 150 creative industries or professional firms closely related to the creative sector are currently located in Eastside (see Figure 2). They range from visual artists, to

studios and television producers, to screen printers, to architects and marketing consultants. Most are small firms perhaps only employing a handful of people, but there are some larger organizations, such as “Maverick TV” television production company, which itself grew out of a smaller company originally located within the Custard Factory complex. The most significant sectoral clusters of creative activity in Eastside are in visual arts, screen media, music, printing, and graphic design.

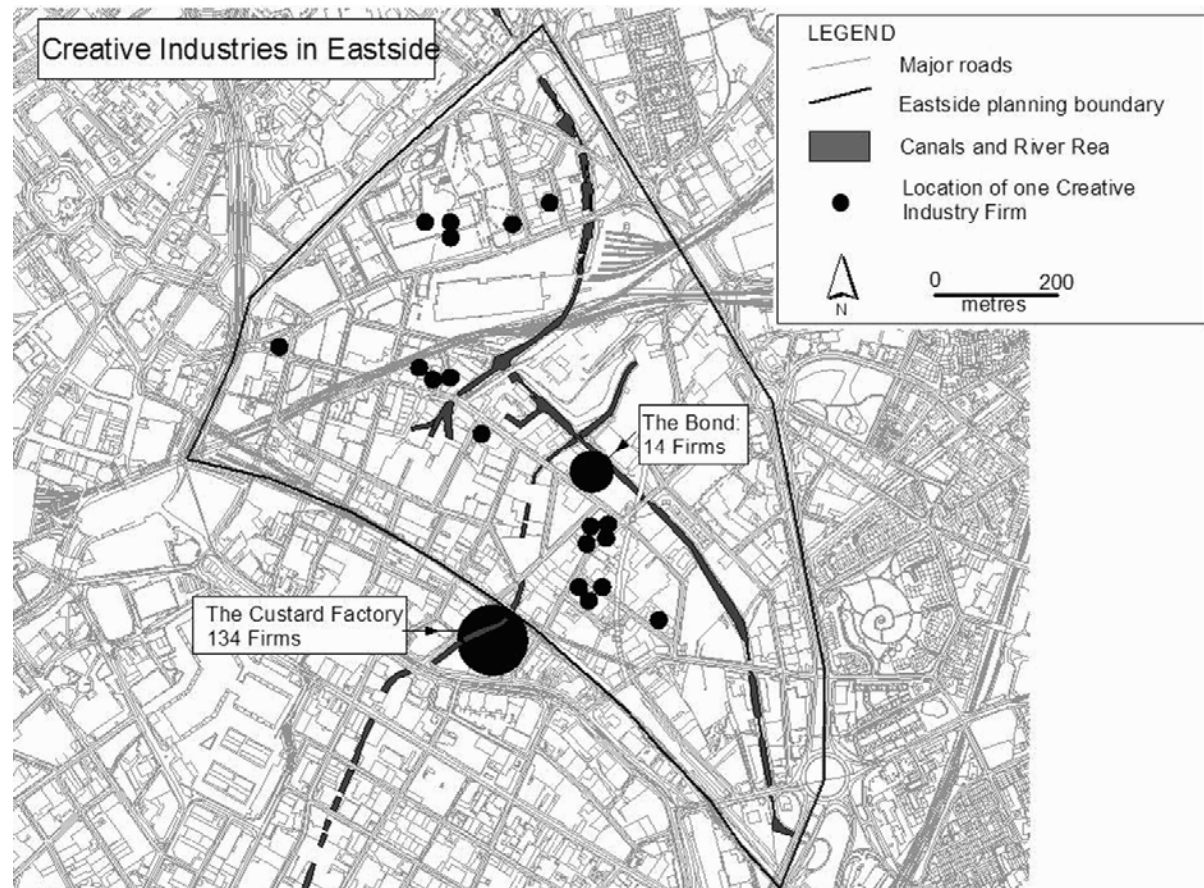


Figure 2. Creative industries in Eastside

It is these existing activities and clusters that have, in part, prompted the Council to rethink Eastside as a “cultural quarter”. How those activities and clusters came about, to which we turn in the following section, is central to the story of Eastside as a cultural quarter.

Origins of Eastside as a Cultural Quarter

In 1988, Bennie Gray—a London based developer of space for creative and artistic enterprises—attended the Highbury symposium in Birmingham. This symposium—which drew together local, national and international experts—framed a new vision for an expanded and pedestrian-friendly city centre, by knitting together the traditional commercial core and a series of distinctive quarters. Inspired by the “iconoclastic ideas” that emerged, Gray's Space organization acquired the 5-acre Custard Factory complex of vacant nineteenth century factories in the heart of Digbeth. Initially, the space was made available to theatrical groups and young artists, who had approached Gray about the possibility of temporary use (Space Ltd, n.d.).

Subsequent restoration and marketing of space to creative businesses and talent has been a substantial commercial success. The first phase led to further expansion, introducing retailing alongside more studios and offices, and the complex is now seen as a focal point for creative industries, cultural activities and small business growth in Birmingham, housing more than 130 enterprises. Its success alongside the Bond, a similar privately developed conversion of a canalside warehouse for small media and business services companies, helped to lay the seeds of the cultural quarter idea and to highlight the potential for Digbeth.

Despite Gray's investment and activity, cultural policy did not become a significant feature of urban place-making in Birmingham city centre and Digbeth in particular until much later. One senior officer in Birmingham City Council recalled that a dilemma in the early 1990s over a future use for the Birmingham Cold Stores building on Digbeth High Street (nearby to the Custard Factory) sparked thinking about a creative quarter in the district (personal communication, 22 June 2004). The most obvious use for the Council-owned, heritage-listed industrial warehouse was for creative activities (particularly given the precedent for such conversion provided by the Custard Factory and the Bond before it). However, through the 1990s the emphasis of public investment remained on driving forward the regeneration of the western side of the city centre, building upon the initial impact of the flagship developments. Where culture or the arts were involved, it concerned mainly the promotion of prestige cultural institutions, such as the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (in its new Symphony Hall home) and the Birmingham Royal Ballet, formerly Sadler Wells, whose relocation from London was seen as a coup for advocates of the “new Birmingham”.

From the late 1990s, however, the Council and AWM have been actively developing policies in the “cultural” turn, closely related to their economic development ambitions, such that the current drive for Birmingham is “to achieve the prize of becoming the UK's second city for creativity and innovation and a true European city of culture” (Birmingham City Council/AWM, 2002, p. 23). Council's recently released economic development strategy, “Developing Birmingham”, expresses a vision for Birmingham as “a premier international business location and a major centre for professional services, with new and innovative enterprises in thriving sectors and high-technology industries”, and also a “vibrant City with extensive cultural and creative opportunities and a world-class sport, leisure and tourism infrastructure” (Birmingham City Council, 2005, p. 3).

In planning terms, the clearest manifestation of this cultural turn was the launch of the Eastside regeneration proposals in 1999 and the subsequent development of a broad spatial framework for the district, intended to provide a foundation for its emergence as one of the city's future “national prestige cultural quarters” (Birmingham City Council/AWM, 2002, p. 9). The district offers potential due to the existing seeds of cultural activity most notably at the Custard Factory and the Bond, but also because its industrial character (and the proliferation of vacant industrial buildings) lends itself to “creatives”. Public policy-makers are now pursuing this agenda for Eastside through the city-wide economic development objectives noted earlier, as well as specific spatial planning frameworks intended to “deliver” a creative quarter in Eastside.

The area's statutory planning framework, the Eastside Development Framework (EDF), outlines the key proposals for the area, based on three themes of learning, technology and heritage (Birmingham City Council, 2001a). The main spatial emphasis is on the division of the area into a series of sub-districts with a designated set of uses, several of which relate, directly or indirectly, to creative industries or creativity in its most general sense. These include a learning and leisure quarter, a high technology park, a media village, the relocation of the Royal College of Organists from London, and the (now scuppered) proposals for a new public library (see Figure 3). It is important to note that whilst Eastside is generally thought about as a “cultural quarter” within these themes and sub-districts, the notion of what this actually means and how it will be “delivered” is entirely absent from the planning documents. The catalyst for the regeneration was the demolition of a major inner ring road, known as the “concrete collar”, which opened the city centre toward Eastside and created new development plots at Masshouse. As a result, the EDF sets out a vision for Eastside to become a “24 hour district”, an “urban village”, an “attractive visitor location”, and home to many culture and leisure activities. Eastside as a cultural quarter will thus become a “thriving and dynamic place in which to live, work and visit” (Birmingham City Council, 2001a, p. 11). Overall, amidst the numerous proposals in this framework it is possible to discern some overarching ambitions for Eastside: first, that it play a distinctive role within the city centre context through its broad mix of uses; second, that it be locally rooted through its education role and the emphasis on supporting the growth of small firms and creative enterprises; finally that it have an inclusive character by virtue of its anticipated range of users and activities, especially public facilities such as the city park and the library which the council envisaged as a “community resource”, “a centre for diversity” and “a destination of leisure and culture” among its prime roles (Birmingham City Council, n.d.b).

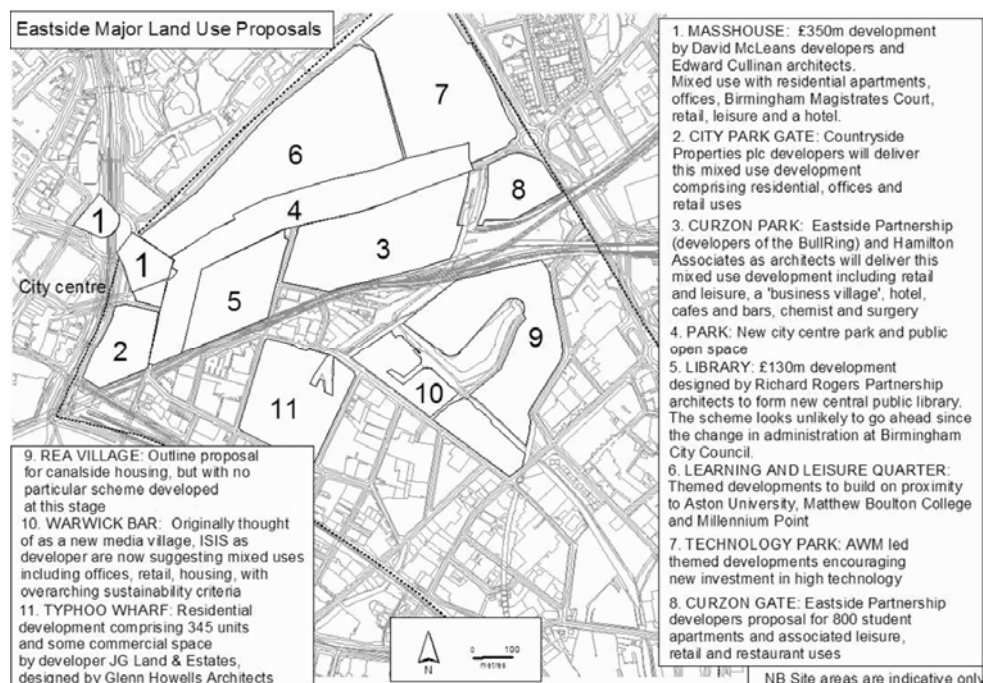


Figure 3. Eastside major land use proposals

In the next sections of the paper we explore those frameworks and their application to the two distinct spatial “halves” of Eastside (north and south of the tracks) in the light of the lessons raised in the literature reviewed earlier.

Planning for the Creative Quarter in Practice

North of the Tracks

The area of Eastside north of the tracks represents the focus of public sector intervention in support of the Eastside ambitions. The demolition of the elevated ring road and its replacement by a conventional road layout opened up new plots for redevelopment through disposal to the private sector. The two main components, Masshouse and City Park Gate (see Figure 3), are characterized by the extension of city core functions led by major corporate developers and internationally renowned architects. Other significant tranches have been acquired through site assembly by AWM for the learning and technology park quarters with a view to building upon the proximity of Aston University and its science park. But most importantly for this paper, the area is the site for several completed and planned flagship venues at the core of the cultural ambitions for Eastside more generally—Millennium Point, the anticipated new City Library, and the Royal College of Organists. These are intended not only to generate activity in their own right, but also to act as catalysts for similar cultural amenities and facilities in the vicinity. However the experience of these is very chequered thus far, and reflects many familiar failings of this model. The main issues are summarized in Figure 4.

<p><i>Millennium Point</i>: this £110 million complex, completed in 2001, comprises the Think Tank science and technology visitor centre (replacing the previously free science museum), an Imax theatre and a large forecourt that is used for some large-scale public events. Think Tank visitor numbers have been well below expectations, and the venue has been afflicted by poor feedback (Naqvi, 2004). The Imax venue closed after 2 years, due to poor trading performance before re-opening under new management, and the public open space (serving mainly as a surface car park), has been sporadically used and with limited success, most notably in the hosting of a New Years Eve event which failed to attract expected audience. In addition to this poor performance of its core functions, the facility has thus far failed to catalyse development in the vicinity and it is acknowledged by policy-makers that it needs much improved supporting fabric and amenities in the immediate area (Birmingham City Council, 2004). The question then, is why such a weak performance, particularly in view of the city's more successful flagship project development on the west side? Two main reasons have been cited: a lack of connectivity with the city core, and weak relationship to the wider urban or community fabric in the adjacent areas. This is compounded by the building design—a monolithic box-like structure that does not engage with the surrounding streets and fails to encourage interaction despite its claimed role as a public, cultural facility.</p>	 <p>Source: www.birmingham.gov.uk</p>
<p><i>City Library</i>: perhaps more alarming from the standpoint of the cultural quarter ambitions is the unravelling of high-profile proposals for a new city library, replacing the existing facility that is the busiest public building in the city. This was envisaged as the lynchpin of the entire Eastside scheme and certainly of the area north of the tracks. In the Council's vision, and the outline proposals prepared by internationally-renowned architects the Richard Rogers Partnership, this was to be a dynamic people-generator with an inclusive, wide-ranging role as a hub of learning, arts and culture, all contained in an iconic structure of striking modern design. The city's prospectus claimed "The Library of Birmingham will be a centre for learning and culture. It will play a major part in the Eastside development bringing up to 10,000 visitors a day to the area, and will contribute to the City's economy by supporting its creative industries" (Birmingham City Council, n.d.b, p. 3). The plans clearly emulated recent projects in other major cities that have used library schemes as a focus of culture-led regeneration (p. 1). This next generation of libraries can be seen very much as a new-style flagship project, delivering important symbolic impacts alongside community benefits.</p>	 <p>Source: Birmingham City Council, n.d.b.</p>
<p>However, the 3 years following the project launch have seen the process stutter due to the scale of funding required and the complexities of any possible financial package. A change of Council administration in May 2004 threw the library into doubt as the new leadership, concerned about the funding implications, investigated alternative options. In July 2005, the Council announced its preference for a split-site approach that would see only an archive facility established in Eastside next to Millennium Point, while the main public uses would be located elsewhere in the city centre. The decision was taken against the advice of the Council's own consultants, who cited the original proposal as best value for money, and there remain considerable doubts about the achievability of the new scheme. At the same time, the decision not only removes one of Eastside's most significant elements, but it seriously impacts upon proposals in the immediate areas, not least the adjacent city park with which the library was to have a close, almost symbiotic relationship.</p>	
<p><i>Royal College of Organists (RCO)</i>: the re-location of the RCO from London to the Grade I-listed former Curzon Street railway station building was seen as an important achievement for Eastside because it involved a high-profile, prestigious cultural investment similar to the impact of the re-location of the Sadler Wells Ballet almost 20 years earlier. The striking re-use of the district's most historic building for a new headquarters and recital hall would lend credibility to the aspirations of developing a critical mass of cultural assets in the area and raise the area's profile. But the move was thrown into doubt in summer 2005 because of the organization's difficulties in securing funding for the move. The RCO move was portrayed as an "early win" for Eastside regeneration but these hopes now look scuppered, even if the organization eventually secures a move to an alternative, less costly, site in the city.</p>	 <p>Source: www.lookingatbuildings.org.uk</p>

Figure 4. Key flagship projects north of the tracks in Eastside

Overall, then, the Eastside regeneration north of the tracks includes three flagship developments that are all falling foul of familiar risks associated with such major schemes: a lack of cohesive medium-term planning on the part of public agencies and politicians; and the uncertainty surrounding funding packages for large capital projects. The nature of the planning approach north of the tracks, including these facilities, has required extensive property acquisitions to assemble sites of critical mass for the anticipated new uses. This has led, directly and indirectly, to the closure of several businesses and a number of existing cultural venues. Most notably, it has meant the closure of the Old Railway, a scruffy but important venue for the city's rock and alternative music scenes. This pub was exactly the kind of cultural seed that might be expected to form the basis of a cultural quarter (see Porter & Barber, 2006). Site assembly for the library also led to the closure and demolition of the Chuck Works, an empty factory that had been used for art exhibits and other events—again, precisely the kind of use that could help to animate the cultural life of the district.

Overall, this “hands-on” approach to development of cultural amenities and activity through major physical development with the necessary planning processes is being undermined by the scale of the initiatives, the prolonged timescales, and the reliance on extensive external funding packages. It is a classic tale of flagship project perils that suggests Birmingham is repeating many of the mistakes of the past. The loss of confidence and increased uncertainty resulting from the problems afflicting these schemes are likely to have knock-on effects for cultural aspirations and potential elsewhere in the quarter. In the medium-term this large scale property development process may be suitable for enabling the expansion of the city core and extension of university/science park activities through private investment, but it has been ill-suited in this case to the provision of significant cultural facilities, let alone a coherent cultural or creative district. The significant issues north of the tracks suggest that many of the lessons have not been learnt for Eastside (see Table 1).

Table 1. Is Eastside learning the lessons?

Theme	Lesson	North of the tracks	South of the tracks
Planning governance	Urban policy vacuum results in property markets excluding “creatives”	“Hands-on” approach, with no attention to property market implications, has automatically generated latent and immediate property price rises	“Hands-off” approach allows property market to drive up prices
	Narrow models of cultural quarters are likely to fail	Park development represents major opportunity for new public space, but other schemes dominated by production uses	Consumption spaces recognized in planning framework as important, but with no mechanism to deliver them
	Flagship projects have unevenly distributed negative	Activity rests almost solely on flagship projects, now suffering	Less emphasis on flagships and more attention to working with

Table 1. Is Eastside learning the lessons?

Theme	Lesson	North of the tracks	South of the tracks
Public realm	effects and any positive effects are fleeting	predictable perils	fine grain existing fabric
	Must be rooted in the local by recognizing local talent, context, history	Lack of attention to local history, context or existing seeds of activity	More attention to existing fabric and activity, but disconnection from adjacent neighbourhoods
	Must be steeped in participative democracy	Very little public consultation, information dominated by glossy brochures	Recognized inability to connect with fragmented communities and businesses
Built form	Must work with existing urban fabric	Demolition or displacement of existing seeds of cultural activity	Good attention to existing physical environment and its attractiveness
	Must make space for a breadth of place types	Park is key to delivering new public realm, but loss of the library will be keenly felt	Little attention to accommodating range of activities beyond the production or consumption realms
	Steeped in local	All players are major multinational developers and investment capital, and “star” architects	Lack of any commitment to this aspect, approach to leave it to the market

South of the Tracks

The area south of the tracks presents a very different urban fabric—a fine grain layout, with historic building and infrastructure, reflected in conservation area status for the majority of this area. It is the site of much new cultural and creative activity in recent years, particularly through the growth of creative industries led by the Custard Factory and the Bond developments.

The Council's planning approach here is very much “hands off” in nature. The main Eastside planning frameworks provide a general encouragement of creative uses and investment by private interests, or arts organization backed with external funding sources. The key documents identify some potential sites and use possibilities for new activities, particularly at Warwick Bar (see Figure 3) (Birmingham City Council, 2001a). Yet there is no tangible policy intervention in the form of land acquisition, site assembly or designation of specific uses beyond the highlighting of prominent sites. The intention here is to allow creative and cultural growth to occur organically, either through the actions of individual firms and organizations, or on the initiative of key landowners and developers. One such initiative currently in the early stages is the Warwick Bar development. The developers of this scheme are ISIS (the private developer component of a public-private partnership with British Waterways), who have run a design competition for the scheme, which will have a strong focus on

sustainability and innovation. The vision of key developers is thus essential to the process, when a vacuum in a wider vision is apparent.

As noted earlier, the area has seen a steady but significant rise in creative industry investment since the launch of the Eastside plans since 1999. But there is little evidence that this is directly attributable to the regeneration programme. Rather, it is driven mainly by classic business location factors—cheap premises, central location, links to collaborators and clients in and around the Custard Factory (Burfitt *et al.*, 2005). There are elements of an organic clustering process developing in the area. Yet some creative industry actors express a sense that the area lacks spirit as a creative or cultural district, particularly with regard to those elements—amenities, private and public services, some residential population—that would animate Digbeth as a thriving creative community (personal communication, 21 and 30 June 2004).

Thus, while the “hands off” approach is not stifling recent creative industry growth, limited though that may be, there exist some problematic issues and risks associated with this approach that relate to previous experience in other cities. The first is the risk that the area evolves as a rather mono-functional district led predominantly by weekday business uses and little else. In this respect the area potentially risks repeating some of the experience of Sheffield CIQ, even though the approach in Sheffield was very different. Of particular concern is the lack of consideration in the planning framework of how non-commercial uses and aspects of a community fabric might be encouraged, where they might be located, and how they might relate to the changing business function in the area (see Porter & Barber, 2006). This conceptualization of Eastside as a creative quarter continues to equate the “public realm” with a relationship between individuals and the consumer market (Miles & Paddison, 2005, p. 836). Implicit in the current approach is an assumption that the growth of creative industries will inevitably lead to the “thriving and dynamic place in which to live, work and visit” envisioned (Birmingham City Council, 2001a, p. 11). However, given recent experience in Digbeth, and the previous lessons from other cities (see Table 1), it is debatable whether this will be the case.

At the same time, a “hands off” approach risks allowing processes of land value inflation, property speculation, and ultimately forms of gentrification to take place. In part, this is central to the ambitions of the wider Eastside initiative. But the danger exists that if it does gain momentum, then the flourishing of a range of creative and cultural uses or activities will never reach a critical mass. By virtue of its central location, Digbeth is already subject to pressure from corporate uses and interests. The demolition of the ring road barrier alongside the 2003 opening and subsequent commercial success of the Bull Ring shopping centre, means that the area is seen as an opportunity for the expansion of the commercial office core and for high value housing. These pressures are most acute north of the tracks, and are already tangible at the Masshouse development, but there is evidence of the pressure building in the south area too. As the marketing agent for the Masshouse development, Knight Frank, state in their brochures, “there is huge demand for further city living opportunities in central Birmingham, so the first residential developer to launch a scheme at Eastside will be in a very strong position to command the premium prices seen in the city core” (Knight Frank, 2004). And while the industrial, fine grain nature of the district may temper the intensity of price inflation and comprehensive redevelopment, recent experience nearby sounds a warning. At the first private housing scheme in the

adjacent Irish Quarter, a similar industrial area, the apartments have been pitched at prices well above the city average and a substantial proportion were purchased by investors (Country and Metropolitan Homes, 2005). Similar trends are evident throughout recent city centre residential development (see Barber & Blackaby, 2003).

South of the tracks thus reflects the common tension about striking the balance between a “hands off-hands on” approach in managing change in such zones of transition. Experience from other cities suggests that where policy-makers adopt a subtle form of hands-on intervention focusing mainly on innovative, small scale initiatives, it is possible to encourage the sustainable growth of cultural districts (Brown *et al.*, 2000). This is a view reflected by some leading cultural actors in Eastside, where the industry will most benefit from a form of local authority action that is “visionary”, “brave” and “imaginative”, rather than the current approach which they see is dominated by a “cost per square metre” attitude (personal communication, 30 June 2004). But the Council's approach to this part of Eastside reflect a lack of means and/or willingness to mobilize the kind of policy initiative or tools that might address the main risk. There thus looms a prospect of Eastside evolving in a similar manner to Dublin's Temple Bar, whose proximity to a booming commercial district led to gentrification and a shift in character away from the initial, distinctive vision (McCarthy, 1998).

At the same time, Eastside actors would like to see some subtle, yet bold initiatives on the City Council's part to facilitate the growth of a more diverse cultural quarter. For example, a senior economic development officer with Birmingham Council expressed disappointment that Eastside was being approached as a regeneration project to be “delivered”, when a more daring and unconventional dimension is needed (personal communication, 22 June 2004). A prominent member of the creative industry sector in Eastside expressed concern that the current approach lacks imagination and freedom to think differently about the place, and allow a unique city quarter to emerge. In this view, the current process lacks engagement with the district's creative actors, especially younger individuals, whose energies and talents could be unleashed in exciting ways (personal communication, 30 June 2004).

However with the current lack of critical consideration of how key amenities and place may be provided and market forces at least tempered, there is limited prospect of such a diverse character emerging. The impact of the one planning framework that does exist, the conservation area status, is uncertain. But again this is an essentially reactive policy, and experience from Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, another central district with conservation area status, is that this can limit innovative development of more diverse uses where it is not accompanied by more proactive initiatives (Pollard, 2004). In summary, then, while the planning approach pursued south of the tracks is different from that adopted to the north, notably with a greater attention to the existing urban fabric and range of activities taking place there, many of the lessons available from other cities' experience have not been learnt (see Table 1).

A Case of Blurred Vision?

The evidence from the two halves of Eastside thus highlights the emergence of numerous problematic issues. They are of a different nature in the two halves but both in their own ways constitute the repetition of many mistakes made elsewhere. It seems

striking, then, that despite ample opportunity to learn from other cities, Birmingham is repeating such shortcomings. Why is this?

Most fundamentally, it becomes apparent that the cultural quarter planning approach in Eastside is not anchored by any deeper thinking about what such a district might mean. The general aspirations outlined earlier in this paper are based partly around the perceived opportunity to build upon existing assets, mainly small clusters of creative industries, and partly on a desire to generate the kind of facilities and amenities seen as important to the successful restructuring of city economies, image and quality of life, as pursued by city leaders in Britain, Europe and North America since the late 1980s. Since the first announcement of the Eastside vision in 1999, there remains a lack of documents, studies, policy papers, events and planning processes that display a critical, imaginative thinking about what a cultural quarter might be, and what planning or other spatial policy initiatives and tools might be necessary to facilitate this.

Beyond this general gap, there are two particular lacunae in critical thinking, which relate closely to the “public realm” dimension of lessons emerging from other cities' experience as outlined earlier in this paper. First, is a gap in respect to how cultural/creative activity might draw upon Digbeth's specific history, recent creative growth and the area's role within the city, beyond more general planning statements about its “distinctive urban fabric” and the possibilities for some innovative building conversions. This much is acknowledged by the Council's Eastside team itself, charged with responsibility for the area's regeneration. Six years after the launch of the Eastside plans, the team director highlighted their considerable problems engaging with somewhat disparate business and community interests in the area, and forging an inclusive or dynamic dialogue about the future (personal communication, 8 September 2005). The second, and more glaring, gap is the lack of creative thinking and discussion about how development of the area might draw upon the increasingly multicultural character of Birmingham's population, especially those districts immediately adjacent to Eastside. In this respect, the city is missing a crucial opportunity to draw upon its most distinguishing social characteristic (in a British and European context), ironically in an age when city distinctiveness is claimed to be a key factor driving broader urban fortunes.

In the absence of such a critical underpinning, the creative quarter aspirations for Eastside remain tethered, almost by default, to the agendas of economic diversification, developing a “knowledge city” and generating a more modern city image. The most coherent policy initiative relating to the creative dimension of Eastside is the “Creative City” programme. This is a broader city-wide initiative operating from Council's economic development department, and is focused on business support with only the most tangential spatial or social concerns. Its activities and funds focus to a significant extent on Eastside and the Jewellery Quarter because of the number of creative industry firms and organizations based in these areas, but it is devoid of any emphasis on social conditions or the kind of place-making that might create an environment in which they can flourish. The irony here is that the Council's approach misses the opportunity not only to create conducive conditions for business growth, but also for the emergence of the kind of locally rooted, distinctive districts that are hailed as truly successful cultural quarters. Most importantly, it raises broader

questions about the inclusivity of a cultural quarter that does not reflect its wider socio-cultural citizenry.

The narrow approach focusing primarily on economic concerns reflects (and is reflected in) a lack of consistent engagement with the arts and cultural communities in the area or an ability to generate the kind of dynamism or buzz that might engender a stronger organic process of change. The City Council has made one notable initiative in this regard through the appointment of an Eastside Arts Ambassador. He joined the Eastside team in December 2004 in an attempt to raise the profile of the arts and cultural activity in the Eastside regeneration process. The 2-year position, backed in part by the Arts Council, was filled by a secondee from the Council's urban design team. His remit extends to three main responsibilities:

- (1) to arrange for the temporary use of buildings scheduled for redevelopment by arts based organizations;
- (2) to work with developers to promote cultural activity and involvement of artists in the early stages of design and masterplanning work on specific schemes;
- (3) to establish a programme of cultural activities to “create a buzz” and a sense of constant artistic happening. (Personal communication, 10 October 2005)

In some respects, then, the ambassador's brief addresses some of the weaknesses outlined in this paper. For example, his work contributed to the holding of the February 2006 Urban Fusion Eastside Light Festival that featured innovative lighting displays by international artists utilizing Digbeth's historic industrial architecture. However, his overall experience thus far reveals many of the deeper problems besetting the creative ambitions for Eastside. The re-use of empty buildings is hindered by onerous health and safety regulations applying to publicly-owned buildings, and his specific role conflicts with Council's property department's ambitions to achieve the quick sale of premises. Perhaps most frustrating, in his view, is the difficulty in generating a significant programme of events in large part because his post does not carry any dedicated funding streams that could generate confidence and some certainty amongst potential partners. Further, in his view, the lack of a significant residential population and community infrastructure makes it difficult to generate an audience and a creative impact (personal communication, 10 October 2005). The Arts Ambassador's candid acknowledgement of the limitations and frustrations of his role in practice raises questions about the real priority accorded to these dimensions of Eastside's future. His role carries few means to achieve his objectives, in terms of funding or other resources, and in practice his effectiveness is entirely dependent on the outcomes of extensive negotiations with public and private partners who wield resources or possess the lead initiative in development processes.

The role of the Arts Ambassador and its overall lack of powers highlights the link between the mix of actors and institutions and the somewhat limited vision of a creative future for Eastside. Mainstream institutions become locked into set procedures, particular funding constraints, timescales, outputs and targets to be achieved. Many of these rigidities prove to be real barriers to accessing unique and more locally-grounded knowledge and meanings about Eastside, a weakness recognized by those with an interest in Eastside's future. Without the anchor of critical

thinking, associated policy tools and tangible funding, all underpinned by political commitment, policy-makers are left with aspirations that can easily be blown off course by practical difficulties (as seen north of the tracks), or that are vulnerable to dominance by powerful commercial and property market pressures that increase in significance as the regeneration process unfolds (this can be seen in both parts of Eastside).

The current situation thus lends itself to the prospect of a further expansion of the city commercial core, high value housing, associated consumption uses and some further growth of a creative industries base. The city council may thus realize the high profile redevelopment of another city centre quarter, providing similar mix of activities found elsewhere in the centre, but the unique opportunity to fulfil the early ambitions for an area that is distinctive, locally rooted, culturally inclusive and providing a vision of Birmingham's future, is likely to be lost.

Conclusion

Our analysis in this paper has highlighted some concerns about the current approach to planning the cultural quarter in Birmingham's Eastside. In particular, crucial lessons from previous experience have not been considered in Eastside, and many mistakes are being repeated (see Table 1). There are some positives, however, and these contain the seeds of a different way of thinking for Eastside, if momentum can be gathered around them. The new city centre park is one such example, which if well planned (with a focus on wide and genuine public engagement) could provide a unique and inclusive public space in the centre of Birmingham. Attention to the detail of Digbeth's unique urban fabric and industrial heritage is also welcome, and the approach to work with that fabric on small-scale developments (rather than flagships) is to be encouraged.

Yet a lack of a cohesive vision for the area as a “cultural quarter”—in particular what that actually means, and who is to be included in its envisioning—remain fundamental problems. Eastside represents a unique opportunity in Birmingham, and indeed the UK, to regenerate an area based on principles different from the standard property-market led approach. The evidence thus far suggests that this opportunity may be lost, unless some new thinking can be injected into the process. An alternative approach might include a range of aspects. First, would be a requirement to ensure wide and genuine public debate and engagement regarding the new city centre park, and allowing that public debate to generate new ideas and concepts to replace the library scheme. Second, greater attention must be paid to property market pressures and the development of creative mechanisms to alleviate those pressures where appropriate. Third, the notion of the public realm must be expanded beyond that of consumption space to specifically make place for non-commercial, community-based uses and activities. These might include such facilities as community halls, community arts-based facilities and spaces, community gardens or allotments and so on. Fourth, it is crucial to redirect emphasis away from flagship projects toward finer grain, organic and locally-driven initiatives. Fifth, Eastside must be reconceptualized as a place that can include the socio-cultural diversity of Birmingham's citizens, and embark on a substantial programme of genuine public engagement. Finally, the local state must look to create mechanisms to specifically encourage (even require) the

involvement of local designers, architects, creative workers and investment capital in new schemes.

Without a decidedly different approach to Eastside, the mistakes of the past are likely to be continually repeated, and the distinct opportunity that Eastside represents may well be lost. The regeneration of Eastside is still in its early stages, however, and it is not too late for policy-makers to take some risks.

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