

Cultural animation and economic vitality: identifying the links and regeneration potential through the lens of the urban street scene

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Abstract

Culture, space and economy are intermeshed in complex ways. This paper reports on findings from a larger empirical research project commissioned to investigate the symbiotic relationship between culturally animated urban street scenes and economic vitality. Grounded in empirical qualitative research focussing on recent place quality enhancement schemes in the North East of England, the central aim of this paper is to make the case that everyday cultural activity and economically vibrant places can go hand-in-hand. The research did not seek to quantify economic benefits of investments in the cultural animation of urban space, but interpretive analysis suggests that place quality regeneration strategies can enhance the economic performance and vitality of places. Based on the argument that cultural production of space and economic development are not, and therefore should not be viewed as, competing objectives, the paper puts forward a range of good practice pointers for policymakers and practitioners embarking on place quality enhancement schemes.

Key words: street scene, cultural animation, economic vitality, place quality, public space and urban regeneration

Introduction and research focus

There's a quiet revolution taking place in our leading cities. Places that were once the engine room of the industrial revolution, employing millions in mills, factories, ports and shipyards, are learning new ways to create wealth in a global economy where brain has replaced brawn.¹

At a time when universalist values are hegemonic, distinct cultural identities are a way of holding – if not binding – communities and stimulating a sense of belonging. The social realm of public spaces, which I term ‘street scene’, is arguably the most visible and identifiable aspect of the economic health, cultural vibrancy and public life of an area.^{2,3} In recent times, the economic role of culture has taken on a more central position in the design and planning of cities. This is perhaps best demonstrated through the resurgence of Bilbao in Spain,⁴ but many other examples exist.

A common motivation for investing in the culture of the urban street scene is to enhance an area’s economic vitality and performance. The commercial motivation for urban quality and a culturally animated street scene essentially follows the principle that urban distinctiveness including the ‘good neighbour’ scenario produces economic benefits on a number of levels, including enhanced property values and improved image. Investing in a place quality improvements appears to be a lucrative option, not only for the government but for the business community as well.^{5,6} A UK trend reported almost two decades ago⁷, which is reflected by the proliferation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other private sector place quality investment activities. Yet, the surge in place quality enhancement schemes over recent years, linked to wider processes of economic globalisation, is having the unintended effect of producing what Marc Auge terms ‘non-places’.⁸

In light of these shifts in the urban street scene, research jointly commissioned by Culture North East (CNE) and One NorthEast Regional Development Agency (ONE) under the title; *The Public Space Vitality Project*, sought to identify the symbiotic relationship between culturally animated places and economic vitality: how they interact and feed off one another. Utilising this empirical work as a backdrop and supplemented with additional research conducted by the author, the central aim of this paper is to make the case that everyday cultural activity and economically vibrant places can go hand-in-hand. In the next section I discuss the commonalities and vagaries between the concepts of ‘public space’, ‘public realm’ and ‘street scene’ in so far as they have informed the research. This is followed by a brief discussion of the notion of ‘everyday culture’ before I go on to explicate the research approach and methods used. Some of the key findings are then presented and some good practice

pointers are suggested. I conclude by stitching together the main arguments put forward.

Public space, public realm and the street scene

While acknowledging the commonality of the term ‘public space’ within quotidian vernacular, defining it is no easy task especially in accounting for its lexical and semantic ambiguity. Pinning the term down is somewhat problematic, particularly when the idea of a single public itself is difficult to sustain.^{9,10} Indeed, it is a slippery concept that has the potential to pose complex epistemological problems when applied as a generic term, so it is necessary to outline some parameters in the first instance before the notion is explored in greater detail.

I differentiate between ‘public space’, ‘public realm’ and ‘street scene’ by drawing out the dynamic nuances of each. It is important to provide conceptual clarity to demonstrate how they are interpreted in this work and terms also need to be given some precision to allow for critical research and extensive thought about urban transformations. Yet producing a theoretical straightjacket for each of these terms is not the desired intention. I therefore seek to retain complexity but remove some of the ambiguity.¹¹ Conceptual definitions are not developed to seek consensus, but to provide the research with some clarity and direction.

Public space needs to be conceptualised as more than just the space between buildings. Too often the term, especially when appropriated by architects or landscape designers, is simply understood as empty space. I prefer to apply the term in a way that recognises its social (as well as spatial) qualities; as a behavioural setting of activity connecting places and people. Just as Kevin Lynch has described the city as a shifting organisation raised by many hands,¹² the same notion applies to public space. These spaces of socio-cultural-economic life can be conceptualised as microcosms of the wider urban area: visible nodes of public life and channels to focus citizens’ visions and actions.¹³⁻¹⁶ It is therefore a broad concept that is not easily defined: there is no single ‘public space’, place is socially produced (people shape places, and places shape people) through conceived, perceived and lived spatial practices.¹⁷ It could also be argued that no space is truly public; there are always subtle restrictions, codes of

conduct and expected forms of behaviour where multiple constructions, interpretations and dimensions abound. The polysemic nature of the term ‘public space’ thus acts as both a blessing and a curse. Put simply, the degree of access is possibly the most fundamental component of public space, which in turn is related to the ownership of space and who *controls* the space. As a starting point, the expression ‘public space’, underpinning this research should be understood as relating to all those parts of the built and natural environment where the public has *free* (physical) access. This paper represents the ‘publicness’ of space along a *continuum of exclusivity* in recognition that there are always subtle restrictions and motivating factors of control at work. Public space conceived through a geographic lens can therefore be defined as a freely accessible site open to the public.

Closely related to the concept of public space is the notion of ‘public realm’. A kaleidoscope of definitions can, and indeed has been, used to encapsulate this term. Whereas I have chosen to locate public space as a geographically-rooted concept, public realms are social constructs: publicness is not pre-given and can always be open to different interpretations and activities. As such, it is not always the case that a public space will have a public realm. Alternatively, the public realm can often be perceived as a private space for some groups such as young people for example.¹⁸ The notion of public realm rather than public space helps convey that ‘publicness’ is not pre-given and can always be open to different interpretations and activities. Realms are socially produced, adaptive to the ebbs and flows of the practices and actions of groups and individuals. It is here where one is exposed to the inquisitive gaze of others as well as exposing and observing others.¹⁹ Public realm conceived through a social lens can therefore be defined as a place facilitating social encounters and interactions. However, critical questions can be posed about the broad ranging application of the term, and so, I apply the term ‘street scene’ as a corrective.

‘Street scene’ is applied here as a bridging mechanism between the concepts of public space and public realm. Building on the socio-spatial qualities of these concepts, street scene relates to the atmosphere of a place, and its symbolic and cultural roles. Whether outside or inside, public or private, the street scene helps determine general perceptions of an area and representations of space. My reading of street scene conceptualises it as a fluid social space of multiple publics; a social realm as much as

physical infrastructure for getting from A to B, and an imagined space as much as *real place*. It is perpetually *in process*; open and constitutive of relational processes. Activities, behaviours and perceptions are the quintessential elements that make the street scene become alive. Street scene conceived through a socio-spatial lens can therefore be defined as a space of social practice and symbolic experience.

Everyday culture(s)

Culture is about shared meanings between a *community* which are used to make interpretive sense of the world, providing a frame of reference. Nevertheless, cultural values remain open, fluid and negotiated; inseparable from everyday practices, representations and imaginations. Culture may encompass a broad array of activities including festivals, celebrations and artistic performances, spatial practices, built heritage and urban fabric, and local traditions, customs, dialects and foods. Culture is defined as a resource which reminds us of our past, reveals the present, and challenges us to consider the future. It reveals what we value by way of the meanings we attached to things. It is spatially constituted: cultural values are shared and determined by groups of people located in particular places. There is an increased acknowledgement that there is good in popular and ‘everyday’ culture as well as in ‘high’ culture, and that the latter is not necessarily by definition of the highest *quality*.

For the purposes of the research it was the everyday culture(s) – in a reiterative dialogue with one another that are expressed in and expressive of an active street scene – which were of focus. The research argues that cultural vitality and economic competitiveness are not, and therefore should not be viewed as, competing objectives. Rather they can reinforce one another.

As it was for the Victorians, it is again suggested that culture is the pillar of an urban civilization. But there is a difference. Whereas nineteenth-century middle-class civic culture was more often than not the indigenous product of a Nonconformist conscience, the culture of today’s cities appears more of a branding and marketing tool than a reflection of civic identity. It is frequently the work of quangos and urban regeneration consultants rather than the organic outcome of any home-grown civic sentiment.²⁰

Culture is being promoted and encouraged by many layers of governance as an economic development policy tool and pathway for regeneration. However, the actual role of culture as a motor for urban regeneration in a time of intensive social change remains uncertain.²¹ Culture has become the new arena in which commodity production plays itself out.²² Following this theme, Sharon Zukin observes ‘that the word culture has become an abstraction for any economic activity that does not create material products’.²³ A critical interpretation of culture-led investment is provided by Dicks who asserts that it produces placeless forms of cultural representation,²⁴ with other analysts arguing that such regeneration activity is inherently biased in favour of economic imperatives.²⁵ The term ‘cultural film’ can be applied to describe the same thin coating of consumerism which is spread everywhere. It is in this sense that culture is being appropriated to make places *work*, and in many instances producing what Marc Auge calls ‘non-places’, rather than culture emerging instinctively from the everydayness of places.

The approach and empirically produced material

This paper is based on empirically produced material conducted by Global Urban Research Unit (GURU) based at the University of Newcastle, as part of the *Public Space Vitality Project* commissioned by CNE and ONE. The author directed the project on behalf of ONE, setting the scope of the project and formulating the key research questions. The project explored the perceptions, behaviours, motivations, values, needs and experience of users and non-users of prominent public spaces, in the North East of England. Following a scoping exercise to provide a ‘sketch’ of the region’s prominent public spaces, five places were selected for detailed analysis. The spaces studied reflect a cross section of street scenes: Alnwick Market Place, Durham Millennium Square, Newcastle Monument-Old Eldon Square, Redcar Esplanade and Stockton High Street (see table 1 for a synopsis of each case study). Selection criteria were predicated on whether the space had been renovated since 2000 and that public sector funding was secured to finance it. In this respect, each case is open to examination of the links between cultural animation and economic vitality, and the regeneration potential of public space enhancement schemes through the lens of the urban street scene.

Table 1: Summary of case studies

| Study site | Description |
|---|--|
| <i>Market Place, Alnwick, Northumberland</i> | Pedestrianised area with a strong sense of place, situated in the core of a market town setting. The surrounding buildings are rich in architectural quality; particularly the Grade 1 listed Northumberland Hall constructed in 1826 with its arcaded ground floor. Vehicle access is permitted, although pedestrians take priority and can freely move within and around the space. In addition, the market cross strengthens the sense of identity and the distinctive seating, designed by local schoolchildren, pay reference to the history of the site. |
| <i>Millennium Place, Durham City, County Durham</i> | Contemporary space enclosed by consumption uses including a theatre, bars and restaurants. High quality materials used but currently detached from surroundings and conveys a sober aesthetic. Located a couple of hundred metres from Durham's historic heart and marketplace. Funded by the Millennium Commission, hence the name, this space is a prime example of contemporary 'design-led' regeneration schemes. |
| <i>Old Eldon Square and Grey's Monument, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne & Wear</i> | These two distinct but proximate spaces are situated in the centre of Newcastle's bustling shopping district. Old Eldon Square has recently been revamped as part of an extension to Eldon Square shopping centre. Originally designed in the 1830s as an enclosed private gardens, this green space is enclosed on two sides by Eldon Square shopping centre and a third side by the original Georgian terrace. Grey Street, Grainger Street and Northumberland Street radiate out from Grey's Monument, which provides a fitting city centre focal point for people to meet, sit and meander through. The two spaces are connected by Blakett Street which is the primary east-west bus route through the city with around 6 million passengers per annum. |
| <i>The Esplanade, Redcar, Cleveland</i> | Linear space in a coastal town, benefiting from views out to sea but displaying vehicular-pedestrian conflict. It runs parallel to the retail High Street, with a beach to one side and 'seaside stores' including amusement arcades and fish and chip shops, to the other. The space incorporates artistic features and expansive views of the North Sea. |
| <i>High Street, Stockton-on-Tees, Tees Valley</i> | Widest High Street in England housing Stockton's town hall. It has conservation area status and is surrounded by a mixture of building styles and heights. The space is an important hub of commercial activity and there are roads and passageways leading from it. Visually cluttered and under-used when market is inactive. |

I approach the investigation by viewing the street scene as the research laboratory, where one could get a feel for the *place*. It is from 'street walking' that one gets a sense of the social practices, symbolic experiences and everyday cultures. A multi-layered approach was deployed to help take account of different elements and details

simultaneously. Sensory cues, including the visual sensations of colour, shape, polarisation of light, smell, sound, touch, kinaesthesia, sense of gravity, and motion were all used to get a 'feel' for each street scene. Such a user-based street-level approach has been championed by Kevin Lynch ¹² and Jan Gehl, ²⁶ amongst others. This involved spending time within and around each site of study; exploring surroundings and observing the workings at different times of the day. A key strength of urbanising philosophy, literally taking 'to the streets', is the re-emphasis on spatial practices and how people actually interact.

18 semi-structured conversational interviews were conducted with a range of different communities of interest with a stake in the street scene. Typically, this involved town centre managers, planners and designers, business representatives, maintenance contractors and key decision-makers. Interviews were looked upon as providing hints and clues to the 'interiors' of research participants and the 'exteriors' of organisational practices: as situated interactional statements in a particular social situation (i.e. the interview setting of a meeting room in an organisational environment). Conceptualising interviews as a 'close encounter' ²⁷, I treat them as a collaborative generator of knowledge and a 'sharing of space'. Interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Supplementing this evidence-base, the author has drawn on over 120 'on-street' conversational interviews with users and non-users of public spaces and conducted 21 un-structured conversational interviews with key policy-makers and decision-takers at local, sub-regional, regional and national level.

In a recursive interaction between 'field' and 'theory', my interpretive style of analysis applied a 'layered circularity' wherein provisional interpretations are revised, reformed and reformed. The empirical material is central to and generative for the theorising process. I located 'sense-making elements' reflective and constitutive of local knowledge, such as metaphors, categories and markings ²⁸, as a means to access underlying meanings.

Regeneration supported by the everyday culture(s) of places

The research did not seek to explicitly calculate the precise economic benefits of investments in the cultural animation of the street scene, but what is clearly evidenced

by the study is that investment in public space renovations and place quality enhancements can encourage private investment in economic uses abutting and within spaces: “you should have seen this place a few years ago before the whole Grainger Town thing [a regeneration initiative including the Monument] kicked-off” noted one respondent as he was sat outside a café overlooking the Monument in Newcastle, “buildings were empty and falling down ... now look at it [referring to the throng of people and vibrant commercial scene]”. Ultimately this can help encourage and sustain a variety of businesses, shops and services, and improve general market confidence as evidenced in Alnwick and Newcastle. For example, one local stakeholder in Alnwick summed up the views expressed by several research participants when relaying that,

“in terms of the town centre itself, we have always taken the view that the market place and the area around the market place is the retail core and in this part of Northumberland it has potential and what we needed to do for that space to fulfil its potential and for its benefits to spread to other parts of the town was to make it more economically vibrant and to do that we felt one was to create a high quality physical environment there which would be attractive to retailers and attractive to shoppers and the whole thing which would hopefully come together”.

A colleague of this Alnwick District Council officer reaffirmed this viewpoint and developed the perception that commercial activity had been improved since the market place had been enhanced by discriminating between the types of business that had benefited most: “I think its more of a lifestyle business, I think perhaps that’s where the difference is, you know you are talking about small local retailers with a lifestyle issue”. However, as was revealed through the cases of Redcar and Stockton, private investment and economic uplift is not necessarily an automatic process; multiple factors affect the size of economic impact including timing and ‘fit’ with other policies and regeneration schemes. Remarking on Stockton’s ongoing revitalisation efforts, a representative of the Chamber of Commerce commented that the High Street remained economically fragile and lacked the critical mass of retailers and consumers to “compete” with the neighbouring town centre of Middlesbrough.

The research suggests that people do value public spaces, if in slightly different ways to the stakeholders charged with their design, development, governance and maintenance. Engagement with users of the studied spaces revealed that people do not necessarily fixate on architectural or urban design quality when they try and relate positively to why they enjoy places. Many users tended to be more concerned with the public realm, as interview extracts below demonstrate:

“People come here to have a fun time ... the kid’s like the beach and the arcades, I just like to stroll along the front and chat with people” (Redcar)

“It’s buzzing with us [young people] at weekends” (Old Eldon Square, Newcastle)

“I come here to meet friends and go shopping” (Monument, Newcastle)

“The market place is a safe place ... it’s great for all groups” (Alnwick)

“taken over at night by young people” (Stockton)

Conversely, the public are quick to note when these qualities are absent. A few everyday users in Newcastle pointed out a solitary broken Caithness stone and many of those interviewed on Stockton High Street bemoaned the “litter”, “lack of decent street furniture” and “low grad shop fronts” that contributed to a general perception of “grotty-ness”, removing “the shine” from the “good bits”. This implies that good design is an essential aspect in the success of public spaces, yet may not be explicitly identified in a positive sense. If for no other reason, this makes a good case of giving priority to investment in local public spaces.

Culturally animated street scenes have the potential to promote economic growth by attracting more human capital to the area, and findings suggest that these scenes are stronger when they include greater quantity, quality and concentration of amenities. In Newcastle, both Old Eldon Square and the Monument are well-designed public spaces and surrounding by high quality architectural features, however, many users and stakeholders interviewed stressed the “drawing power” of Newcastle city centre with a “wealth of top line shops”, “plenty of designer outlets”, “great restaurants” and “leisure activities like the cinema” just behind Old Eldon Square. Animation of space generates activity and helps to create experiential landscapes which are increasingly favoured by contemporary society. One urban planner described this as “a virtuous

cycle where people keep on attracting more people”. Findings suggest that people value animated spaces; street markets of all types were a focus for comments: “the market [in Stockton] makes a huge difference. If I come here any other time the place is deserted”. Several of those interviewed in Alnwick referred to the market along the line of “bringing the place to life” and “injecting some buzz”. However, people do not necessarily separate out the everyday life of spaces from more specific attractions, whether that be a regular market or the showpiece ‘hallmark’ event. This suggests that developing culturally vibrant and economically sustainable spaces is therefore as much about the active programming of spaces as it is about other aspects relating to the physical appearance of space itself.

Cultural programming in public spaces, through special events and activities, can help attract and retain people.¹⁸ From which there are economic spin-offs: “we always do well [in terms of increased trade] when the [Stockton Riverside] festival is on” claimed one retailer based at the south end of Stockton High Street. The Christmas markets and other attractions such as a mobile library and street performers in and around the Monument area of Newcastle were perceived by stakeholders to increase trade: “by investing in a stream of cultural activities and events” noted a town centre manager responsible for the Grainger Town sector of the city centre, “the streets are busy [with consumers] all year round. We have really worked hard at this”. Observations support this claim and many frequent visitors to Newcastle, and the Monument in particular, augment the symbiotic relationships between intensified economic activity and cultural vibrancy by stating that they “liked the [street] performances” and “additional activities beyond shopping” that had persuaded them to return and make more regular visits, thus spending more on consumption activities and other local services such as parking.

The study provides substantial evidence of the value of public space in supporting public life. However, there was also a perception that most of the spaces were not being used as much as they might be; latent potential exists within all the spaces that can be further exploited in both a cultural and economic sense. Reflecting on the High Street’s temporally fluctuating street scene, Stockton’s town centre manager affirmed that:

“I think if you come to Stockton during the day perhaps on a Saturday its heaving, if you come on a Sunday it’s a quiet stroll around, if you came on a Friday or Saturday night you probably would be going quite quickly because at the moment we don’t have the sort of evening economy which attracts enough of a mix to control what can be something of a job culture, everybody is aware that this is an issue”.

Other interviewees in Stockton corroborated this perspective by stressing the mono-functional evening activity (binge drinking) and choice client base (young people). Many respondents supplemented this opinion with the belief that the High Street embodies lots of latent potential, stressing the “huge size of the High Street” with a “large catchment area” with “good transport links” as important “ingredients” that can underpin a renaissance whereby it serves the cultural needs of multiple publics and capitalist interests. Whilst Alnwick Market Place is generally considered to be “a buzzing little place” as one research participant put it, many perceived that there remains more to be done. The Grade I Listed Building; Northumberland Hall which overlooks the Market Place was frequently cited as being underutilised and the potential to improve pedestrian links with Alnwick Garden was seen as “massive”; helping to “increase the dwell time” in the town.

A vibrant street scene also provides an important platform to market a place and promote its quality of place ‘offer’. Analysis suggests that some place quality enhancement schemes are ‘missing a trick’ by not effectively marketing vibrant street scenes in promotional campaigns. A Stockton business representative revealed that “the image issue” is:

“certainly one of the [key] economic development [factors] ... I think that once you get an environment that brings in, an environment that has enough about it to bring in people from outside then you get inward investment as you have in Newcastle, then you get visitors to the area as you have in Newcastle. So I think it is as much a knock on effect that you need to get something ... Passionate Stockton, Passionate Place [is the slogan] but we’ve got to have the infrastructure to do that ... We are working with the town centre manager to manage and develop a number of events and certainly there is potential for

sponsorship with various other organisations but I think the difficulty we have is that the retailers are not a calibre which could offer major sponsorship, you know we need bigger, higher quality retailers to be able to do that”.

Yet, this is by no means always the case as the example of Newcastle demonstrates. Grey’s Monument, the ‘heart’ of Newcastle, is regularly used as a backdrop to market the city to residents, visitors and investors (see figure 1). As Ali Madanipour reminds us, ‘[i]f a place finds a symbolic meaning shared by a large number of people, it has the potential to become a focus of local identity’,²⁹ which Newcastle has successfully achieved in the form of Grey’s Monument.

Figure 1: Marketing a city – Grey’s Monument, Newcastle



Source: ONE

Bailey and colleagues suggest that where the commercialised identities we might associate with globalisation can be reconciled with more localised expressions of identity, culture-led regeneration may be especially effective.³⁰ I should like to point out that culture-led investment programmes do not inevitably produce placeless forms of cultural representation. The five cases analysed above, although partial and selective, do help dispel some of the myths broadcast by the doom mongers that large-scale corporate interests are undermining the cultural fabric of places and will derail the renaissance of our towns and cities. The everyday street scene cultures appear to be thriving as people search for *meaningful* experiences that they can identify with and perhaps forge a sense of attachment. The research was able to suggest a number

of good practice pointers to realise the twin goals of cultural activity and economic vitality that I summarise in table 2 below.

Table 2: Policy and practice considerations when embarking on place quality enhancement schemes

| Themes | Pointers |
|---------------------------|---|
| Vision | Agree a <i>shared</i> vision that should aim to be inclusive. This is distinct from an authoritarian that seeks to impose consensus. A shared vision could be multilayered and multidimensional |
| | The <i>shared</i> vision should be ambitious but grounded in reality |
| ‘Design’ process | Actively engage widely from the outset that may assist with collaborative action. Utilising the creative input and contextual knowledge of disparate actors and alternative lifestyle communities is one method that can assist the development of a sense of ownership; bolstering the cultural identity of a place |
| | Appoint an officer who has responsibility for integrating public space and cultural objectives |
| | Explore options for establishing a suitable forum for private, public and voluntary sector interests to debate issues |
| Strategies | A strategy setting the framework for place quality enhancement schemes is desirable. It is beneficial to integrate both public space and public realm considerations into a singular statement which may help policy co-ordination |
| | It is desirable for site-based strategies to be contextualised within a broader framework that may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A network of public spaces across a town/city/authority-wide • A spatialised programme of cultural events This can help embed strategies in wider economic and cultural programmes |
| | The formulation of strategies should be grounded in a localities socio-cultural economic context and should not ‘cut and paste’ ideas, concepts and <i>solutions</i> that ‘float’ from place to place. During the ‘visioning’ and ‘evidence’ gathering phases it is important to seek the views of different communities of interest and those with local knowledge |
| | Strategies that consider the life-cycle of schemes from planning and design through to maintenance and cultural programming can help embed a project |
| Cultural animation | Position the cultural animation of spaces as a central strand of place quality enhancement schemes designed to enhance economic vitality |
| | Programming of spaces is vital to ensuring on-going appeal. A hallmark cultural event can be used to ‘kick start’ cultural vibrancy in a public space. This should be followed by a period of intensive event programming, which can be gradually reduced as a sense of shared ownership of place takes root. An events calendar aligned with the management of public space would be desirable |

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| | Cultural programming should consider the impacts, both positive and negative, on local businesses and communities. |
| Flexible public spaces | Promote rather than preclude vibrancy by designing <i>open</i> spaces that are flexible. Open in the sense that they are physically, socially, economically and symbolically accessible |
| | Allow activities such as cafes to flow into public spaces, subject to legislative requirements |
| | Give priority to the pedestrian and explore the diversion of motor vehicles and removal of traffic where possible ¹ |
| Funding | When visioning and developing place quality strategies, consideration should be given to getting the funding in place for ‘hard’ infrastructure such as paving materials, ‘soft’ infrastructure such as performers to culturally animate space and revenue streams for the ongoing maintenance of street scenes ² |

Source: extracted and adapted from the Public Space Vitality Project.

Stitching the threads together: cultural animation and economic vitality

Two polemics about the street scene in the popular media and policy discourse – centring on the economic imperative of place *quality* and the social and security merits of reversing *decline* – have heightened its prominence in the contemporary production of public space. What is now beginning to filter into mainstream urban development activity is the ‘value’ associated with high quality public space and a vibrant street scene. It was not so long ago that urban researchers were documenting the diminishing importance of public spaces to cities,³¹ whereas now they appear to be regaining their significance.^{3,32}

The central goal of this paper was to make the case that a symbiotic relationship exists between culturally animated urban street scenes and economic vitality, by shining some light on the everyday cultural activity and economically vibrancy of a selection

¹ The author is presently involved in a research project that is investigating the perceptions and effects of pedestrianisation schemes and removal of parking spaces. Indicative findings suggest that perceptions tend to be less than favourable at the proposal stage and views are extremely negative during on-site works, but as time passes post development perceptions begin to get more positive as effects such as increased trade for local shops becomes more discernable.

² The author has been leading a study over the past 18-months exploring innovative practice in financing the management and maintenance of public space. The findings are due to be published in late 2009.

of public spaces in the North East of England. In addition, I argue that quality is the watchword for urban enhancement strategies, drawing attention to the fact that public spaces are long-term investments and recommending that investing in place quality is therefore vital.⁶ This means emphasising quality in the design, implementation and on-going maintenance and cultural programming of space. Analysis suggests that increasing usage, diverse user activities, street scenes shared by multiple publics and overall popularity of places is the key cultural benefit from place quality enhancements. Such a view emphasises that the everyday cultures of urban spaces need to be given greater attention by policymakers and practitioners when considering the economic role of quality of place initiatives.

Public space improvements and cultural programming rarely happen in isolation, however, and therefore calculating economic benefits with certainty is extremely difficult. Culturally vibrant street scenes have the potential to promote economic vitality by attracting more people and businesses, and these scenes are stronger when they include greater quantity, quality and concentration of complimentary amenities. A catalytic role of place quality projects is also apparent where benefits can radiate out from beyond the immediate focus of any intervention works and can lead to a general raising of standards across a larger spatial scale.

Market building is a primary objective of regeneration strategies and it would appear that cultural activity and animated street scenes can act as the *glue* required for the revitalisation of distinct urban spaces. Although conclusions remain tentative and by no means comprehensive, key findings indicated that street scene improvements were seen to increase business confidence and lever in additional private sector finance. Such benefits may not necessarily be easily quantified, since a host of intangible factors are inextricably related and difficult to isolate, but places that promote everyday cultural activity are undoubtedly economically vibrant too. Numerous studies have tried to express the economic value of culture, using a variety of techniques; none of which have produced easily quantifiable outputs. Even so, a lack of 'hard' evidence should certainly not detract from the overall importance of culture. This is because culture matters for its own sake¹ and just because something is difficult to capture in a quantitative sense should not necessarily derail its *value* in

research, policy and practice: often those phenomena difficult to measure are those most valued.

Culture, space and the economy have an important role to play in defining, preserving and remaking identities. It is the challenge of contemporary development practice to embrace local heritage and simultaneously project a transnational vision. Through such action, cultural vitality can remain resonant in public spaces. A considered and outward-looking approach is the mantra put forward that accommodates progressive incremental change. With national policy in England, and in particular the Government's recent *framework for regeneration*,³³ appearing to be focussing attention on places of *opportunity* rather than areas of *need*,^{34,35} it remains paramount that cultural concerns are considered alongside economic factors when diverting public funds into place quality enhancement schemes.

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