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The culture and economics of urban public space design: public and professional perceptions

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Abstract

Urban public space is once again a 'hot' topic and figures strongly in place quality discourse. City spaces are being recycled, reinterpreted and reinvented in a drive for a competitive quality of place. This paper illustrates the changing face of contemporary UK public space through a qualitative analysis of the perceptions held by public and professional-bureaucratic actors. Drawing on empirical case study research of five recent enhancement schemes at *prominent* nodes throughout the North East of England, the research explores the culture and economics of urban public space design. Some tentative observations are expressed in terms of the links between cultural activity and economic vitality, and some reflections on policy and practice are put forward.

Key words: urban public space, cultural vitality, economic activity, place quality

The importance of urban public space

While for centuries the quality of the urban environment has been an outcome of economic growth of cities, nowadays the quality of urban space has become a prerequisite for the economic development of cities; and urban design has undertaken an enhanced new role as a means of economic development

(Gospodini, 2002: 59).

The dynamic and heterogeneous nature of urban public space ensures that it presents many opportunities simultaneously, including channels for communication, a source of livelihood and trade, a setting for social interaction or an arena for political activism. As the backdrop to public life, urban public space is arguably the most visible and identifiable aspect of the economic health, cultural vibrancy and public life of an area (Pugalis, 2009b). Inscribed with a cultural mission, urban public space can be considered a social binder where individuals get a sense of taking part, of communality and of citizenship (Carr *et al.*, 1992: 345; Watson, 2009).

Critiquing Le Corbusier's *nouveaux ensembles* for overlooking the cultural dimensions of urban public space and reducing its vibrant complexity to a dormant, functional space; Henri Lefebvre argues that urban public space is an animated theatre facilitating interactions, encounters and movement of everyday urban life (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 18-19). According to Lefebvre, urban public space is where revolutionary events – moments of presence – generally take place, it 'is a place of play and learn', a space of 'disorder' where '[a]ll the elements of urban life, which are fixed and redundant elsewhere, are free to fill the streets and through the streets flow to the centers, where they meet and interact, torn from their fixed abode' (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 18-19). However, as Gospodini has recounted, once a product of capitalist accumulation and expression of power and prestige, the contemporary production of urban public space is often administered as a *means* to an (economic) *end*.

The morphological arrangement and design of urban space can be manipulated to stimulate economic growth through the precise make-up of 'qualities' of a place. The qualities of places, bound up with diverse social relations, political ideologies and economic forces, therefore emerge as an exploitable economic tool in the ongoing process of capital accumulation. Consequently, the design and reproduction of urban public space is once again a 'hot' topic and figures strongly in place quality discourse (see, for example, HM Government, 2009).

Capitalist production does not remain stationary and orderly; it has the dynamic capacity to switch locations at great speeds, ferocity and intensity (Harvey, 1989, , 2001). The relentless and restless process of capital accumulation has dramatically affected urban dynamics over recent years, as urban spatial structures have been reterritorialised, recycled, reinterpreted, reordered and reinvented (Spaans, 2004; Taşan-Kok & Weesep, 2007; Gospodini, 2009). These changes have incurred opportunities and threats depending on positionalities and situated vantages, where one of the effects is heightened ‘quality of place’ expectations (Florida, 2000b, 2000a; Florida, 2002; Pugalís, 2008). According to Florida (2002), as economies advance and people accumulate more wealth, ‘traditional’ values of ‘survival’ favouring social stability transform into those of ‘self-expression’ favouring the right to choose and to individuality. This has shifted attention away from the local state as a key site of ‘collective consumption’ (Castells, 1977) towards a narrower interest in entrepreneurial growth and competitive urbanism. Thus, quality of place – centred on distinctive character and identity – appears to be emerging as a central competition parameter, but paradoxically, such global dynamics often clash head on with distinctive cultural identities, the production of *meaningful environments* and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Gospodini, 2004; Harvey, 2008).

The so-called design-led approach to revitalise local economies, exemplified by the UK’s ‘urban renaissance’ agenda (Urban Task Force, 1999, , 2005), has prompted some commentators to assert that there has been a loss of significance for urban public spaces as they have become ‘empty’ mono-functional places, pre-occupied with trade or tourism (Madanipour, 2004; Minton, 2006; Lovering, 2009; Minton, 2009). Neoliberal economic restructuring has witnessed a blurring between public and private space (Madanipour, 2003; Voyce, 2003; Xu & Yang, 2008), as public functions progressively shift to the private realm. This process is often encouraged and supported through public-private partnership agreements and joint-venture structures to the point where the hegemonic private control over the production of urban environments is considerably reshaping the face of urban public spaces. Gated communities are just one noticeable manifestation of this trend (see Xu & Yang, 2008 for a theoretical discussion).

Urban areas across many parts of Britain and beyond, are attempting to recover from the global economic downturn, in addition to industrial decline, by placing increasing emphasis,

not to mention hope, on quality of place inducements, including the refashioning of urban public spaces (Pugalis, 2009a). Often public sector-initiated, but steered by (private) capitalist interests, these schemes are carefully targeted to act as a catalyst for the regeneration of depressed urban areas and degraded urban public spaces. Place quality enhancements are often 'sold' to various communities of interest, including the everyday user and politicians, on the back of the grand logic that the initial impetus from investments will resonate outwards to revitalise other areas and entice further inward investment. However, spatially discriminate with a tendency to target *prominent* urban spaces that present economic opportunities opposed to need, the rhetoric of quality of place enhancement schemes has been criticised by some for blurring the distance between 'renaissance' and 'revanchism' (Wynne & O'Connor, 1998; Holden & Iveson, 2003; Rogers & Coaffee, 2005; Atkinson, 2006; Mace *et al.*, 2007; Porter & Shaw, 2009).

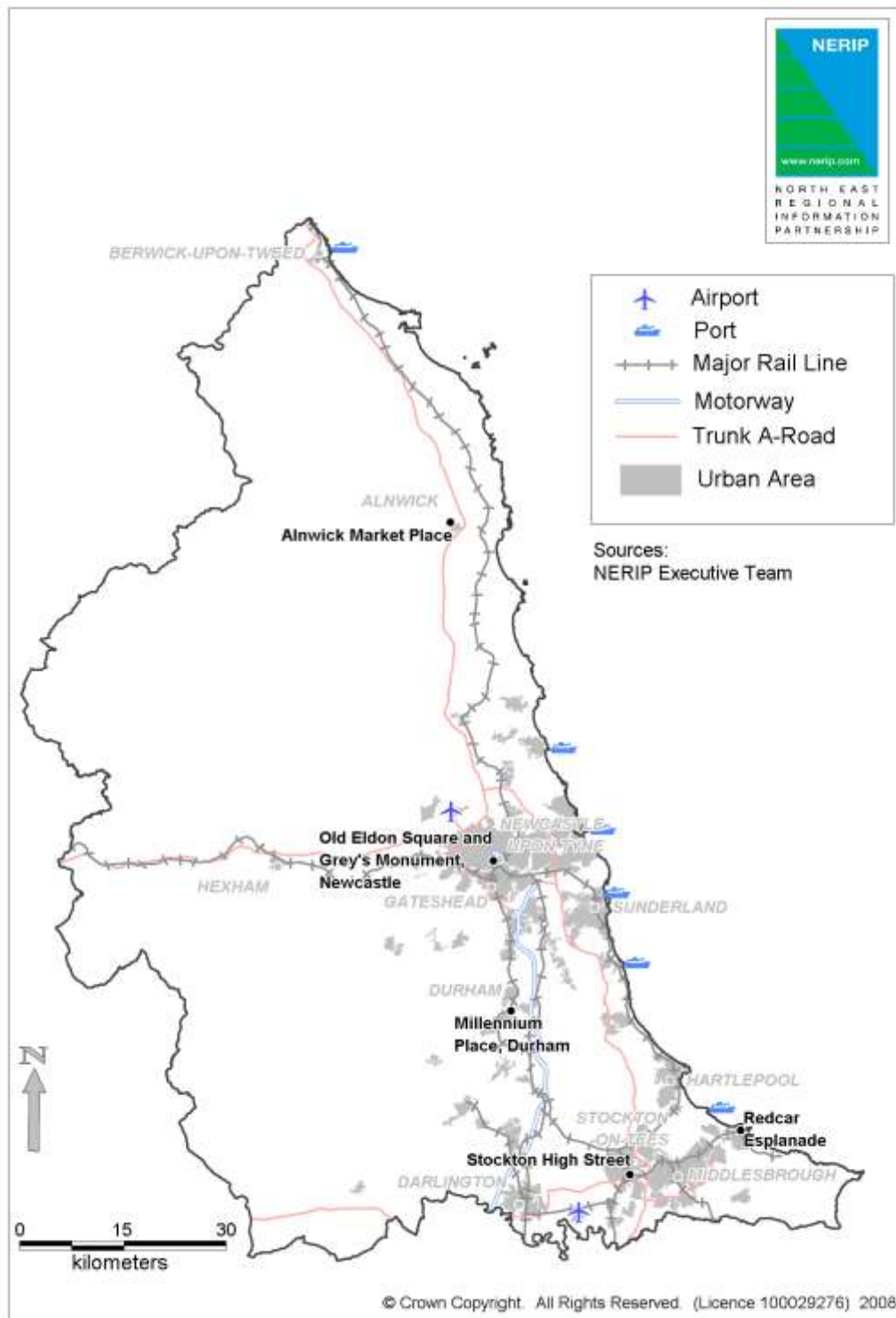
Whereas contemporary research on *peripheral* urban public spaces is relatively neglected (Paddison & Sharp, 2007), the focus of this study is on more *prominent* spaces as these tend to be where innovative design approaches have been concentrated (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008a). Grounded in empirical case study research of five recent enhancement schemes at prominent nodes throughout the North East of England, the paper explores through qualitative means the culture and economics of urban public space design. People respond differently to the qualities of places according to their personality, stage in life, gender, socio-economic status and cultural background. Jane Jacobs observes that the 'meanings associated with the built environment are not innate, but rather are authored by certain social groups and interests' (Jacobs, 1961: 229). By drawing on the perceptions of public and professional-bureaucratic actors engaged in the reproduction of urban public space, some tentative observations are expressed in terms of the links between cultural activity and economic vitality.

The next section discusses the methodological framework devised for the research investigation, which included an on-street survey of everyday users and interviews with relevant professional-bureaucrats. In the third section, each case study is epigrammatically described. Fourthly, the results of the on-street user survey are presented to elicit public perceptions and the views of professionals are analysed in section five. Section six examines some issues and opportunities emerging from the changing face of urban public space. Section seven makes some tentative conclusions and presents some reflections on policy and practice.

Fieldwork research

A mixed-method qualitative approach consisting of site analysis, on-street user surveys and interviews with appropriate professionals helped guide and structure the research. The approach attempted to understand each geographical site as a social space by exploring the perceptions, behaviours, motivations, values, needs and experiences of the everyday user and professional-bureaucratic actors. A scoping exercise of all *prominent* urban public places of settlements with a population of over 10,000 in the North East was initially conducted. This typological exercise provided an overview of the region's urban public spaces as a precursor to detailed follow-up case studies. Spaces were classified in terms of their function(s); size; character; location; investment strategy (where appropriate); and *success* or latent potential criteria. The urban public spaces selected for study were: Alnwick Market Place, Durham Millennium Square, Newcastle Monument-Old Eldon Square, Redcar Esplanade and Stockton High Street. All of which are geographically situated in the North East of England, as demonstrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: Sites of study



Street walking and hanging-around, including observation of a participatory and non-participatory nature, also constituted a central strand of empirical enquiry for each of the five

case study sites¹. This analysis of everyday practices examined policy-making from an implementation aspect: investigating the cultural life of urban public spaces ‘in the field’. It is in this sense that urban public space was perceived as the research laboratory, where one can experience and participate in spaces of sociality (Pugalis, 2009b). Each space was also subject to both direct and photographic observation methods to support an urban audit. Regrettably, the study did not comprehensively consider the temporal dimension of space that has been shown to have an important effect on the visual, cognitive, and functional value-based structures.

Supplementing the fieldwork element of research, key professional-bureaucratic actors charged with varying responsibilities for the selected spaces participated in semi-structured interviews. A stakeholder mapping exercise was carried out to identify interview participants, which included town centre managers, planners-designers, management contractors and policy officers, and following this initial sift the ‘snowballing’ technique was applied to identify further stakeholders of interest. In sum, 18 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by team of researchers and a further 14 face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted by the author in order to elaborate on particular analytic themes.

The case studies: an overview

This section provides a brief overview of each case study to set the context for the qualitative analysis and discussion. Table 1 summarises each space to draw ease of comparison.

Table 1: Summary of study sites

Name of area	Location	Description
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¹ In contrast, ‘spectral’ analysis involves reading urban space from a more detached vantage than street walking (Lefebvre, 1996).

<i>Market Place</i>	Alnwick, Northumberland	Pedestrianised area surrounded by historic buildings with a strong sense of place, situated in the core of a market town setting.
<i>Millennium Place</i>	Durham city	Contemporary space conveying a sober aesthetic. High quality materials used but currently detached from surroundings.
<i>Old Eldon Square and Grey's Monument</i>	Newcastle-upon-Tyne	Forms the 'heart' of the regional capital, displaying huge symbolic and cultural meaning and creating a legible space.
<i>The Esplanade</i>	Redcar, Cleveland	Linear space in a coastal town, benefiting from views out to sea but displaying vehicular-pedestrian conflict.
<i>High Street</i>	Stockton-on-Tees	Widest High Street in England housing the town hall. Visually cluttered and under-used when market is inactive.

Alnwick Market Place is a legible space located within the town's historic core. The surrounding buildings are rich in architectural quality; particularly the Grade 1 listed Northumberland Hall constructed in 1826 with its arcaded ground floor. Major resurfacing of the Market Place and adjacent streets, together with removal of car parking began in the late 1990s courtesy of European Regional Development Fund and Heritage Lottery investment. Vehicle access is permitted, although pedestrians take priority and can freely move within and around the space. The space possesses a desirable human scale and sense of enclosure.

Café activities, such as alfresco dining, flow out into the Market Place, reinforcing its cultural animation. 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. This symbolic dimension is a key asset.

Figure 2: Alnwick Market Place



Millennium Place Durham was created with finance from the Millennium Commission and is an example of contemporary ‘design-led’ pedestrianised public spaces. The square is enclosed by a theatre, cinema and a number of chain bars and restaurants. It is minimalist, leaving one with a feeling of exposure and therefore less likely to provide opportunities for developing a strong place attachment. The street furniture is crafted to a high quality but seating is perhaps more aesthetically pleasing than user-friendly. The minimalist design is in stark contrast to the nearby historic quarter of Durham and connections to the town centre are problematic.

Figure 3: Millennium Place Durham



Old Eldon Square and Grey's Monument Newcastle both contain significant elements of historical and cultural significance, which is principally characterised in the form of their centrally located monuments. These spaces form the 'heart' of Newcastle combining commerce and social interaction. Each has undergone a careful makeover as part of the extension to Eldon Square shopping centre (2005-2009) and the work of the recent Grainger Town Partnership (1997-2003). The two spaces are connected by Blackett Street which is the primary east-west bus route through the city with around 6 million passengers per annum. The high degree of legibility is personified by Grey's Monument which links in with Grey Street, Grainger Street and Northumberland Street, and also serves as access to the underground Metro rail system. Expressly designed glass and stone street furniture contribute further to the distinctive local character.

Figure 4: Grey's Monument, Newcastle

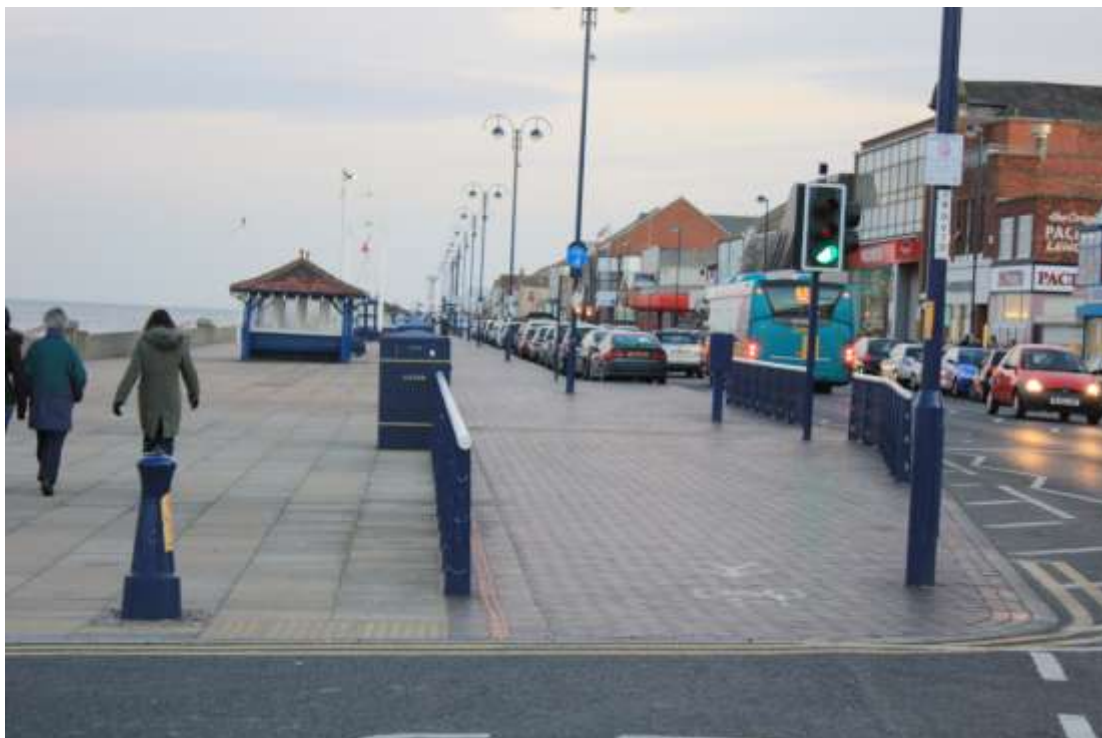


Figure 5: Old Eldon Square, Newcastle



The Esplanade at Redcar is a linear space running directly parallel to the retail High Street behind. The space incorporates artistic features and expansive views of the North Sea that make the Esplanade ideal for strolling along. An adjacent building houses the oldest lifeboat in the country; however, the history of the site is fractured by the existence of a pub and cinema which jut out onto the beach from the Esplanade. User conflicts are apparent, particularly for pedestrians who have to tackle a busy road with limited crossing points in order to reach the nearby retail provision.

Figure 6: Redcar Esplanade



Stockton High Street is famous for being the widest street in England. It is split into two sections by the presence of the centrally located town hall. The High Street has conservation area status and is surrounded by a mixture of building styles. The space is an important district service hub and there are roads and passageways leading from it. This forms a semi-legible network although visual clutter is a detractor. The space provides the setting for a hive of activity on market days, but the remainder of the time it conveys an unwelcome feeling and is socially barren.

Figure 7: Stockton High Street



Over recent years, each of the five case studies has benefited from publicly-funded place quality enhancements with the intent that this would leverage additional private sector investment and stimulate economic growth. Each space is deemed to be relatively accessible and legible, albeit to various degrees. With the exception of Millennium Square Durham, all are linked to a permeable network of streets². The distinctive qualities of some spaces, such as the artwork along Redcar’s Esplanade and the distinctive seating provided at Alnwick and Grey’s Monument, throw into sharp contrast places that do not work so well. Unfortunately this applies to much of Stockton High Street. The next section explores public perceptions.

Public perceptions about the spaces they frequent

Drawing on the on-street-survey, this section examines the changing face of contemporary urban public space in terms of design, culture and economics. The primary concern is with public perceptions: how people perceive place quality enhancements and the redesign of

² As part of the Durham City Vision project, strategic connections to Millennium Square are planned to be improved.

urban public space in relation to cultural activity and economic vitality. The section concludes by summarising some issues and opportunities.

Design awareness

Engagement with the everyday user revealed that people do not necessarily fixate on architectural or urban design quality when they try and relate positively to why they enjoy places:

“I frequent this place pretty regular ... I can’t put my finger on it ... It’s just a nice space to enjoy and soak-up the atmosphere” (Alnwick)

“The people make this place special” (Newcastle)

“The view is priceless ... it contrasts sharply with the [amusement arcades on the] other side of the street” (Redcar)

One explanation for this, is provided by Jan Gehl who draws attention to the pedestrian field of vision: ‘A person walking down a street sees practically nothing but the ground floor of buildings, the pavement, and what is going on in the street space itself’ (Gehl, 1996: 65; Gehl *et al.*, 2006). It is perhaps only when a person purposely stops to pause and consider spatial arrangements that they reflect on more intricate design qualities. Conversely, everyday users were quick to note when design qualities were absent. For example, one conversation with a disgruntled user captured this feeling, stating that: *“I don’t like the brick front, the facade should be changed”*. Other respondents, across each of the five spaces, commented on unsympathetic buildings that *“jut out”* or *“dominate the street”*. In terms of Stockton High Street, user comments and negative perceptions were directed towards the car-pedestrian relationship and street furniture:

“It’s a shame that the road system breaks-up what would be a wonderful area”

“The railings and street furniture don’t do this space justice”

The High Street’s road configuration tends to undermine the place quality improvements, which has resulted in little more than an urban facelift and consequently the space remains inhospitable with the frequent presence of double-decker buses providing an overbearing effect on street-level activity. Public perceptions are strong in their indictment of the High

Street as an inhospitable social space. Whereas, Alnwick Market Place and Newcastle's Monument/Old Eldon Square have successfully adopted 'shared space' for pedestrians and motor vehicles, Stockton's place quality enhancements introduced a sharp separation. Promoting the conventional segregation of traffic from urban public space, Stockton's approach is based on an ill-conceived view of risk that is contributing to the growing public dissatisfaction with street clutter and pedestrian impediments, such as railings and physical barriers (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008b).

Newcastle's Monument is extremely popular with users and yet users seemed almost unconscious of the care that has gone into designing this space: "*Works good as a social area*" and "*Nice to sit down and see everyone passing around you*" were phrases commonly expressed and much more prevalent than comments relating to architectural styles and quality of materials. A truly successful public space displaying a high integrity of design quality could therefore be expressed as permeating the unconsciousness of its everyday users. In his seminal text, *Townscape* (1961) Gordon Cullen refers to the concept of a 'sense of place' and explains how the aesthetic element can provide a unique feeling of a place that draws people to it. Relph alludes to this also, asserting that it involves 'being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it' (Relph, 1976: 65). 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. It is perhaps only when this key quality of place component is underprovided that the everyday user explicitly recognise the value of design features and architectural detailing.

Cultural life

Findings suggest that people value culturally animated spaces. Animation of space helps to create meaningful environments and experiential landscapes, increasingly favoured by contemporary society according to some analysts (Florida, 2002; Worpole & Knox, 2007; Lorentzen & Hansen, 2009). A culturally vibrant space can help transcend a chore or quotidian task into a leisure and cultural experience. When people choose, for example, to sit outside a chic café, it is not necessarily the culinary delicacies that entice them, but the overall experience. Whilst Millennium Place in Durham is less frequently used and at times deserted, analysis suggests that it was the social and cultural activities that people valued the most:

“You won’t often find me here, the bars are all for the young’uns but now and again [Millennium Place] fills up with people. It was lovely in the summer; there was street jugglers and entertainment. It made a difference ... the volume of people was great”

This perspective supports the work of Jan Gehl, who contends that people activities comprise one of the most important qualities of public spaces. A central aspect of Gehl’s work that guides his design philosophies is that people attract other people: ‘If given the choice between walking on a deserted or a lively street, most people in most situations will choose the lively street. If the choice is between sitting in a private backyard or in a semiprivate front yard with a view of the street, people will often choose the front of the house where there is more to see’ (Gehl, 1996: 27). It is the ‘optional’ or ‘incidental’ activities that are particularly conducive to the quality of spaces; thriving when conditions are good. Old Eldon Square and Grey’s Monument Newcastle and Alnwick Market Place were favoured by users partaking in optional activities, including eating and drinker, listening to music, participating in playful activities and even dancing on some occasions.

A strong impression was conveyed that people prefer animated space and it was something that they would like to see more of: *“The market is the best thing about it”*, exclaimed one respondent in Stockton. Street markets of all types were a focus for comments:

“I like it as an open space, on Saturday there are stands, I liked the French market recently” (Newcastle)

“Alnwick [Market Place] is a great place anyway, but the market, the market is what sets the place apart” (Alnwick)

Markets are perhaps the prime example of the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of urban public space: integrating communication, commerce and social exchange by way of an animated theatre of public life. Exploring ‘The Magic of the Marketplace’ as a site of multiple forms of social interaction, Watson (2009) reveals that such urban public space offers significant opportunities for vibrant social encounters, the co-mingling of differences and everyday cultural activity. Market days animate urban public space, performing as a theatre for the meeting of strangers (Young, 1990; Watson, 2006), where different cultural and socio-economic groups can interact. Observation, interaction and conversations with

users of urban public space on market days signals that markets are perhaps an example of cultural life that may help erode social divides. Acting as animated theatres, it was noticeable that different social groups would co-mingle, whereas on non-market days they would be found huddling in their own 'private' social spaces.

In terms of cultural animation, people do not necessarily separate out the everyday life of spaces from more specific attractions, whether it is a regular market or a one-off 'hallmark' event:

"The Monument always has a buzz about the place ... I can't really recall any specific events but its always brimming with people and energy" (Newcastle)

"Of course events are held [in the Market Place] but what I like is its daily character"
(Alnwick)

One could therefore reason that developing culturally vibrant and economically sustainable spaces is as much about the activity programming of spaces as it is about other aspects relating to the physical appearance of space itself (see also Holland *et al.*, 2007). A perceived negative related to the dichotomy of sporadic energised space and when the "buzz" dissipated in those spaces (i.e. Millennium Place and Stockton High Street) that displayed less 'optional' social and cultural activities. One everyday user commented how *"the Festival was a great experience ... the only trouble was it made the place seem dull the rest of the time"* (Stockton). A similar charge was levelled at street markets where users conveyed a strong message that non-market days were "dead" and "boring". Perhaps the experiential occasion generated by an exuberant event, such as a market, reinforces the more *ordinary* features of a space during tranquil times. Therefore, one could deduce that by improving urban public space, perhaps through the programming of more frequent events, aspirations and expectations are subconsciously raised, elucidating their latent potential.

Economic vitality

User opinions tended to be directed towards social and cultural aspects, including how a space is used and experienced, rather economic considerations. However, some interesting insights were forthcoming from the everyday user. Firstly, several users remarked that quality of place enhancements had helped changed their perceptions of the space and also the

perceptions of “*others*”. Due to the prominence of these spaces, there was a strong feeling that a “*place that works puts the rest of the town in a positive light*”, in the words of one person visiting Alnwick. There was a strong impression that culturally vibrant and attractive public space has a positive effect on shopkeepers and retailers in terms of improving shopfronts and attracting more business, tourists and visitors in terms of frequency/length of stay, and marketing in terms of image. One respondent speculated that a high quality environment “*shames*” property owners and businesses into “*making improvements*”. Such a perception suggests that place quality enhancements can set a design benchmark: effectively raising expectations and prompting property upgrades. The next section compares and contrasts professional-bureaucratic views with public perceptions that have been examined.

Professional views

Grounded in semi-structured interviews with professional-bureaucratic actors engaged in the production of urban public spaces, this section examines its changing face from a professional vantage. Subtleties between user perspectives and ‘expert’ opinions are teased out.

Design considerations

The design of urban public spaces was at the forefront of professional-bureaucratic actors, perhaps to the detriment of cultural aspects. In contrast to the everyday user, the professional ‘expert’ was predominantly concerned with the aesthetics of urban space and particularly the visual dimension. A regeneration practitioner in Alnwick, for example, commented that the strength of the Market Place is its urban fabric and “*the quality of the materials*”. In Newcastle, an engineer referred to this particular strength as “*architectural location*”, describing the Monument as situated “*right in the heart of Grainger Town*” conservation area. Evoking a similar policy story, a practitioner in Stockton contended that the High Street’s “*weaknesses are really just the absence of any very strong architecture, the whole town is uninspiring ... architecture is the trigger*”, but is absent in Stockton, “*I think we suffer in Stockton from having very few [architectural] pieces left that are of real note*”. The preponderance of the visual has led some commentators to assert that the space of bureaucratic politics is ‘conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of

human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms' (Soja, 1996: 10). Conceived space constructs life through scripted representations of spatiality that produce, impose and reinforce social homogeneity and control, relying 'on the repetitive – on exchange and interchangeability, on reproducibility, on homogeneity' (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 396). Lefebvre contends that under capitalism conceived space is the dominating force.

Drawing on the example of the urbanist as 'producer of space', Lefebvre demonstrates how *projection* and *project* are situated in a confused ideality perceived to be 'real'. Following the 'logic of visualization', the urbanist believes that the blank medium is neutral space which 'corresponds to the neutral space outside ... As for the 'plan', it does not remain innocently on paper. On the ground, the bulldozer realizes 'plans''. This is why and how this act 'is a mode of representation, a stipulated and codified know-how', eliminating part of the 'real' (Lefebvre, 1996: 191). Conceived space is therefore a semiotic abstraction that informs both how people negotiate space in their everyday life and the space of corporations, governments and institutions. A double reduction is often apparent when social space is reduced to two-dimensional representations (Euclidean space). This procedure reduces the *life* of space, from something to be experienced and lived (as well as perceived and conceived) to a passive space of detachment. Whilst most face-to-face interviews with professional-bureaucratic actors took place within walking distance of the urban public spaces under discussion, it was rare that the respondent would suggest a guided street walk. Conversely, respondents would frequently draw on conceptual tools of representation, such as maps, plans and diagrams, to support discussion.

It is interesting that professional-bureaucratic actors, including town centre managers and cultural development officers, as well as planners and urban designers, placed great importance on the design of urban public space, and tended to be preoccupied with a visual logic. On the contrary, user perceptions predominantly stressed the value of social encounters and cultural experiences. Perhaps because of the visual logic of professional-bureaucratic actors, urban public space tended to be conceived as an empty container. Consequently there was a need to 'fill it' with objects. In Alnwick, there were some professional concerns that because the space seemed quite empty when not in use there was an ongoing need to "...*fight the attempt to fill it up with bits of clutter*", which would render the space inflexible.

Since the publication of the Buchanan report; *Traffic in Towns* (Buchanan, 1963), the ordering and control of the UK street has intensified, prompting some researchers and practitioners to assert that ‘The accumulation of ‘street clutter’ – the signs, markings, signals, bollards and barriers associated with traffic engineering – is the most evident visual manifestation of measures aimed to regulate and control movement, and remains a source of growing concern about the decline in visual and spatial quality in the public realm’ (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008a: 164). Such a modernist conception of urban public space, exemplified by rationalist planning approaches, is preoccupied with safety and stasis, neglecting that space is eventful. The result is single purpose space, fixed and nonflexible; a space, for instance, that serves pedestrians or motor vehicles, tourist or inhabitant, user or consumer, but struggles to provide for the social and cultural needs of multiple publics.

Cultural activities

A view emanating from professional-bureaucratic actors was that cultural activities provide people with a greater sense of purpose for using public spaces and frequenting the wider area. A producer of space in Alnwick, for example, remarked that:

“there has been a strengthening in the role of the market place as a focal point for people” and “... the space has been used to a greater degree than perhaps people may have first envisaged ... the development of the markets... give people a sense of purpose coming into the town...” providing “space which can now be used”

Popular public spaces can be used to host events and programmes that in turn act as a catalyst for greater engagement with the surrounding locality and add to the unique character of the space and wider area. Intensity of appropriate activities was found to improve the likelihood of stronger bonds with spaces and encourage a positive sense of place. Farmers markets are an obvious expression of this, encouraging creative industries is another possibility. Facilitating the cultural animation of space requires the consideration and understanding of the needs and motivations of diverse interests (particularly permanent local businesses and residents) that may be in direct competition or conflict with proposed interventions. A good example comes from Alnwick, where some owners were, *“...not interested in the potential of those properties and its very frustrating. All we can do is create conditions for things to happen, but if the entrepreneurs, shop owners, don’t take these opportunities then you can’t*

make them” (Alnwick). This professional-bureaucratic insight into the complexity of place quality initiatives provides an interesting counter-perspective to that put forward by some users referring to the “*shaming*” of businesses/property owners to upgrade to a desirable quality standard.

The professional-bureaucratic perspective would suggest that place quality enhancements are not an inevitable guarantee that other private actors will follow with coherent investment and activities. Specific forums related to local urban public spaces could help here. To be truly effective, these forums need to be representative of the business and local community and have a prominent decision-making role otherwise they may suffer from ‘talking-shop’ syndrome. Forums can provide the arena for different interests to express their thoughts, concerns and reassurances. They can tackle divergent public, resident, business and visitor requirements head-on, pre-empting tension once implemented.

Urban democracy, according to Lefebvre through his concept of ‘the right to the city’, implies an equality of place virtues and equal participation: ‘The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 174). The most fundamental of all rights, the right to the city involves the rights of being, becoming and participating. A literal reading of the concept misses the radical arguments that Lefebvre was making. Capron (2002) for one, translates the right to the city as one of use and access to urban resources. In a similar vein, Mitchell (2003) narrowly equates such a right with the right to access public space. Instead, it can be articulated in a way that goes well beyond the rights of ownership and access to embrace the progressive politics of “use value”. Use in respect of active presence and appropriation, a “right to *claim presence in the city, to wrest the use of the city from privileged new masters and democratize its spaces*” (Isin, 2000: 14, original emphasis). It is the right of citizens to occupy, access, and *produce* urban space: a socio-political right to participate in urban society in concrete, abstract and symbolic ways of representation. Regrettably professional-bureaucratic actors tended to view the role of non-professionals in the production of urban public space in a rather narrow and restrictive sense: limiting community engagement to ‘official’ openings in the statutory planning process. However, the case studies provided a few notable exceptions, including the active design input of local children in terms of the street furniture in Alnwick Market Place.

Working with creative artists is one way of adding vitality and interest to schemes, but this needs to be carefully managed from the very earliest planning stages. In the case of Redcar, interviewees suggested that initial artistic involvement in the design stage, assists in accomplishing the desired outcome of the integration of art into schemes providing a considered and artistic response to the locality. This is much more proactive than artists “having a plinth to work off” after the implementation of a scheme. This allowed for more subtle responses which have been found to hold interest over time. Moreover, it facilitates the early identification of over-ambitious or unworkable pieces, before too much progress has been made or public expectations unnecessarily stimulated.

A clear management strategy and cultural programming was perceived to be a prerequisite for successful spaces. Good practice emanating from Newcastle is the appointment by the City Council of a cultural estates manager who is a chartered surveyor seconded from the property department to culture and environment. The primary role is to assist small independent, and in particular creative, businesses in the city to find affordable space, often on council-owned land. Whilst the direct economic advantages of business start-ups is clear, the cultural offer that creative ventures confer and ripple effects should not be underestimated.

Economic benefits

The intangible benefits of improved confidence for private sector investment should not be underestimated. For instance, the £10 million invested by the public sector in Buchanan Street, Glasgow was complemented by private sector investment of £100 million in Buchanan Galleries (Scottish Executive, 2002). Improvements in the urban public spaces studied were generally seen to increase business confidence in these areas and lever in private sector finance:

“...what it has done is actually improve business confidence for those who have been able to see an opportunity...” (Alnwick)

“there is a discernable, measurable economic benefit” (Stockton, but specifically referring to the Riverside Festival)

“I think the economic activity in the area will benefit from the quality of the public area we are creating...” (Newcastle, Old Eldon Square)

In contrast to Williams & Green (2001), the findings suggest that the benefits of well-designed schemes may outweigh the (capital and revenue) costs: *“...when you are using very robust good quality, natural materials, I think you know you are lessening your maintenance bill...”* (Newcastle). This can occur through producing local competitive advantages, decreasing crime and vandalism, increasing property values, reducing management, maintenance, energy and security costs, and providing productivity gains to local workers (CABE & DETR, 2001; Swanwick *et al.*, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2002; Carmona, 2004; CABE, 2007; Pugalys, 2007; Worpole & Knox, 2007). Further, public spaces with a sense of place can attract inward investment and retain existing businesses, increasing the value and marketability of nearby residential and commercial property. Public spaces were perceived to enhance place identity:

“Its part of that visitor experience... the quality of that probably dictates whether people want to actually come back...” and *“...in terms of attracting visitors its performed very well”* (Redcar)

“...people tell you they have heard some interesting things going on in Newcastle... people in Europe are interested in it...” (Newcastle)

Conversely, there was stakeholder recognition that poor quality urban public space could jeopardise the image of a local . This ‘broken-windows’ theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) was considered an issue in Stockton where the High Street suffers from litter, clutter and bus traffic limiting public usage, which further compounds problems.

Public space improvements rarely happen in isolation and impacts can be so intangible that to calculate economic benefits with certainty is very difficult, if not impractical: *“it is quite a difficult one to actually measure because other things have been developing over the same period”* noted a stakeholder in Alnwick. In particular, the respondent felt the Market Towns Initiative and works to Alnwick Garden from 2000 onwards had led to a *“clouded picture”*. Such benefits may not necessarily be easily quantified, since a host of intangible factors are inextricably bound within the social production of space, but professional-bureaucratic views tended to correlate with user perspectives in so far as places promoting everyday cultural

activities tend to be economically vibrant too. Take for example, the increased economic sustainability of the Grainger Town area of central Newcastle, encompassing Grey's Monument and Old Eldon Square. This quarter, rich in architectural heritage, recently underwent a sustained place quality improvement initiative over several years that has contributed to the economic, environmental and cultural renaissance of Newcastle city centre (Akkar, 2005). Yet it would be extremely difficult to state in quantifiable terms with any degree of accuracy, the precise role of place quality enhancements (Pugalis, 2008).

Place quality investments can encourage private investment in economic uses abutting and within spaces. Ultimately this can help encourage and sustain a variety of businesses, shops and services, and improve general market as has occurred in Alnwick and Newcastle. However, professionals in Redcar and Stockton allude that this is not necessarily an automatic process; multiple factors affect the size of economic impact. By way of example: transport, location, local labour supply, economic trends, cultural activity, historic significance, and environmental features may all be of relevance to various degrees. It is therefore essential that quality of place strategies are embedded in wider economic regeneration programmes and strategically fit within a network of public spaces serving divergent cultural needs. This is particularly relevant to isolated area-based interventions that often displace problems, despite the rhetoric of 'spill-over effects' propagated. Birkenhead Park, Merseyside and Central Park, New York are well known examples of coordinated strategies where public space improvements have been catalysts for nearby commercial investment.

The changing face of urban public space: issues and opportunities

During conversations with users across all five spaces, there was little mention of the privatisation of urban public space, neither was there a strong recognition of a public-private divide. Whilst changing 'publicness' is a core aspect of the wider changing face of contemporary UK public space (Akkar, 2005), from a user perspective at least, it appears that the insidious privatisation of urban public space is of less import and direct significance so long as the social and cultural life is thriving. Alternatively the privatisation of space was of greater concern to professional-bureaucratic actors, but in a markedly different manner to the theoretical literature reviewed earlier. Those professionals interviewed were primarily

concerned with a lack of private investment in place quality and thus did not express fears of the private sector controlling and commodifying urban public space, or indeed, disintegrating its public life. Perhaps this is due to the contextual specificity of the cases, located in a region heavily reliant on public sector financial support, particularly in terms of place quality interventions. In other circumstances where private sector provision and redesign of urban space is more common through mechanisms, such as Business Improvement Districts, findings are likely to be substantially different.

The overall picture to emerge from the both the public and professional-bureaucratic perception exercise was that the everyday user is positively responsive to the changing face of prominent urban public spaces but some recurrent issues and opportunities were identified (see table 2). Issues associated with the spaces investigated can be summarised into three clusters: under-utilisation, lack of facilities and maintenance issues. Low usage of space was strongly associated with feelings bemoaning a social “emptiness”. Closely linked to this theme, the everyday user frequently cited a “*lack of shops and facilities*”, suggesting that design aesthetics alone are insufficient. Chewing gum, litter and poor quality paving were persistent problems identified by the public, which appear crucial to perceptions of place. Simple maintenance and street cleaning might often make the difference between the use or non-use/abuse of urban public space.

Table 2: Issues and opportunities

Issues	Opportunities
Low usage can deter others	Space and potential to attract more users
Lack of attractors and facilities	Activate space and culturally animate it
Road layouts and vehicular traffic impedes pedestrian enjoyment	Whilst not always appropriate, shared space for people and vehicles should be explored
Street clutter, such as signage, detracts from visual enjoyment and can inhibit pedestrian flow	Less clutter would make spaces more flexible and adaptable to different uses

Street furniture, such as seating, needs to be designed with usage in mind and not be preoccupied with aesthetics or inappropriate usage	People friendly street furniture can also be aesthetically pleasing
Low-grade buildings can impede place quality	The socio-cultural use of space can potentially negate aesthetics
Poor maintenance can deter usage	Well-designed spaces and high-quality materials can be easier to maintain
Isolated or ‘showpiece’ cultural events are inappropriate	Everyday cultural activities and events can be programmed to maximise the potential of showpiece events
Different stakeholder needs and expectations	Actively engaging different interests in the production of space can help reconcile conflict

It is clear that issues concerning UK contemporary urban public spaces are not insurmountable. The most pertinent issues relevant to each of the five case studies, as summarised in table 2, require only minor interventions and small shifts in present policy-practice. The exception is road layouts where vehicular traffic dominates the pedestrian cultural experience. It is here where interventions are likely to be financially costly; however, a growing body of international best practice suggests that the benefits associated with shared space, liveable streets and pedestrian-friendly environments are worth it (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008b, 2008a; Sauter & Huettenmoser, 2008). The next section concludes with some policy and practice relevant reflections as to how public and private sector stakeholders can create and maintain inclusive, culturally vibrant and economically sustainable public spaces.

Reflections on policy and practice

Reacting to the present recomposition of capitalist urban development, political ideologies of all stripes and colours are being refashioned in their vigour to pursue a neoliberal dogma (Pugalis, 2009c). The pursuit to maximise exchange value has produced an abundance of pessimistic accounts of the commercialisation, commodification and privatisation of urban public space. Much work seeks to dichotomise between public space characteristics, be it public versus private, sense of place or non-place, diversity or mono-expressive. This work demonstrates that distinctions are never that clear cut; spaces and places are dynamic. The level of dynamism reflects how they respond to the demands of the capitalist production of space where changes can often be rapid and unexpected. This presents huge opportunities for creativity and improved quality.

Public and professional perceptions of place qualities, including the design, culture and economics of urban public space, are highly variable. This paper has demonstrated that everyday user values are not necessarily congruent with those held by professional-bureaucrats, which reinforces the argument for a multiplicity of knowledges and perceptions to be debated (or co-produced) alongside the hegemonic interests of the politico-bureaucratic-economic actors. The knowledge, wisdom, expertise and creativeness of the everyday user appear crucial to the development of culturally vibrant and economically active urban space. Energised community participation is vital; the involvement of specific groups, particularly children and young people is seen as particularly beneficial. All of this requires substantial investment and in turn should be based on a robust framework for guiding investment decisions. This does not diminish the role of the designer, indeed the opposite could be argued. It poses a significant challenge on professionals and particularly designers to deliver a community responsive vision.

Utilising the creative input and contextual knowledge of the everyday user is one method that can potentially assist the development of a sense of ownership; bolstering the cultural identity of a place. However if quality of place investment is exclusively considered for its economic value, excluding social, cultural and environmental impacts, there is a danger that the economic objectives will not be met. Where the economic viability of new public spaces is divorced from a more holistic set of objectives, there is a danger design-led enhancement schemes can create unconnected, socially exclusive and 'stage-set' public spaces.

Through an exploration of the changing face of contemporary UK urban public space, the case is made that cultural activity (use value) and economic vitality (exchange value) are mutually constitutive. Despite a ‘statistical vacuum’, stakeholder perceptions suggest that place quality improvements to urban public space can stimulate cultural activity and this in turn can induce private economic engagement. Nevertheless, a note of caution that a preoccupation with capitalist production and profit can result in the creation of urban facelifts, divorced from the social needs and cultural values of the everyday user. In response to concerns expressing the commoditisation and privatisation of urban public space, rather than restricting values to a single metric, such as exchange value, it seems more appropriate to adopt a model that incorporates use value, thereby capturing and providing for multidimensional perceptions and qualities. For latent potential to be maximised, interventions should be part of wider programmes of activity, informed by community aspirations, and wide stakeholder buy-in.

The under-utilisation of the spaces studied, suggests that urban public spaces are not fulfilling all possibilities open to them. The case put forward is that a significant proportion of investment is a *wasted* opportunity: wasted in an economic, political, environmental and socio-cultural sense. The potential of public spaces is huge and presently under-valued by policy-makers and investors. Assessment procedures designed to guide planning and investment decisions have often ignored perceptual, affective, and cognitive responses to the environment, inherent in concepts, such as sense of place, in favour of techniques addressing quantifiable considerations, where the judgement of ‘experts’ presides. This paper has demonstrated that perceptions of space are idiosyncratic. Therefore, if for no other reason, the widespread values (held on a multitude of levels), makes a good case of giving priority to investment in public spaces. The dearth of numerical ‘evidence’ should not depreciate the significance and value of urban public spaces: the infrastructure of public life (Pugalis, 2009b).

Responsive spaces are called for that positively adapt to changing needs and requirements. This type of space, with un-restricted pedestrian movement, is supported by much central government policy but the rhetoric often fails to be applied in practice. This study advocates for quality to take precedence over quantity; making the case that public spaces are long-term investments. This may result in a lower rate of public space enhancement programmes,

calling for a targeted intervention approach holistically considering public space as part of the urban network. Good design must take centre-stage in such an approach. A proliferation of ‘good practice guides’ have been produced over the past decade or so, that aim to educate both professionals and the public about what constitutes good urban design. Guidance tools should certainly be consulted as they can be particularly useful, but they do not need to be slavishly adhered to and the key challenge is to embed agreed principles in the design, management and delivery of specific spaces in creative ways.

Capitalising on the renewed emphasis on place, urban public space should be promoted as a significant (public-private) cultural and economic asset: a central public good. This approach would begin to reverse negative perceptions of space and create a situation where the private sector is more willingly prepared to contribute to its design and upkeep. As public purse-strings begin to tighten as a consequence of the ‘credit crunch’ and subsequent economic downturn, it is apparent that future investment in urban public space will require increasing private sector involvement, particularly focusing on capital funding and management. This investment model will require a sophisticated understanding of users and surrounding businesses to help facilitate inclusive environs which maintain a cultural integrity without displaying overt control. The potential of investment vehicles, such as Business Improvement Districts, is therefore enormous. However, the ‘business’ element must not be seen as an autocratic entity. Privately owned/managed urban public space does not necessarily confer better quality. Appropriate intersects are required where top-down conceptual *strategies* amalgamate with bottom-up lived *tactics* (de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). The sheer diversity of spaces and individual characteristics needs much more promotion and attention to detail. In particular, further research is needed to investigate innovative urban public space design-delivery-management partnership models.

The cases studied in this paper suggest that public life, social interaction and cultural exchange are thriving, contradicting accounts of the death of public life and cultural disintegration. Such prominent spaces providing a platform for everyday cultural animation act as an important counter-balance to over-inscribed, highly regulated and commodified urban public spaces often associated with the private production of space. Even when the planning and design of space is dominated by abstract conceptions compartmentalising dynamic social life, there exists potential for the lived space of everyday society to transgress and produce urban public spaces expressing vibrant cultural characteristics. The challenge for

producers of space is to make the most of existing urban public spaces: to fulfil their latent potential and make the most of their distinctive characteristics. Such a practice would need to draw on the expertise of the everyday user and consider socio-symbolic-cultural functions as well as politico-economic-aesthetic roles.

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