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Cultural and economic vitality – the role of place quality

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Lee Pugalis looks at the lessons from a study of how planning for public space can promote public value and economic competitiveness through culture, focusing on the everyday street scene of town squares, high streets, market places and promenades in the North East

With a focus on the cultural life of public spaces, the research examines how public and private actors can collectively support a broader range of public experiences, interactions and social values. In addition, the study investigates how planning for public space can promote public value through culture. The culture of public space, or what one could refer to as the everyday street scene, is arguably the most visible manifestation of public life: a social barometer for cultural vibrancy and economic health. Once an outcome of economic progress and a symbol of power, the design of cities, including the recomposition of urban space, is now increasingly perceived as an aesthetic means to an economic end. But perversely, the homogenisation of urban landscapes and public space is an issue of contemporary concern for planners, architects, politicians and the everyday person strolling down the street.

At a time when UK urban policy continues to champion economic competitiveness, it appears that the vibrancy of public life is rescinding. Is everywhere becoming alike, as the 'clone town' thesis suggests? Are places in danger of erasing their competitive edge as they enter the 'buzz to bland cycle'? Can cultural activity and economic competitiveness thrive in harmony?

Critiques of culture-led regeneration, for instance, often point to the importation of an internationalised style: a culture primed for consumption and economic growth, which tends to displace the unique localised culture, and can marginalise everyday users and inhabitants. Consequently, once the 'tipping point' is reached, the distinctive buzz of a place can quickly evolve into a bland 'anyplace'. Reacting to these trends, the regional cultural consortium Culture North East and the Regional Development Agency One North East commissioned a piece of research investigating *Public Space Vitality*.¹

Research focus

With a focus on the cultural life of public spaces, the research examines how public and private actors can collectively support a broader range of public experiences, interactions and social values. In addition, the study investigates how planning for public space can promote public value through culture. Taking a case study approach, the research looks at a range

of public space typologies geographically distributed across the North East of England, but examines all deemed to be of *prominence* in commercial and cultural terms. The research focuses on the everyday street scene of town squares, high streets, market places and promenades.

A scoping exercise of all the prominent public places in 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 public spaces and enabled each identified space to be classified in terms of location, size, function(s), character, investment strategy (where appropriate), and *success* or latent potential. Subsequently, five places were selected for detailed analysis: Alnwick Market Place, Durham Millennium Square, Newcastle upon Tyne’s Grey’s Monument and Old Eldon Square, Redcar Esplanade, and Stockton High Street (see the map below and Table 1).

Table 1. North East sites of study

Name and location of area	Description
Market Place, Alnwick	Alnwick’s 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 the 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. In addition, the market cross (shown in the photo) strengthens the sense of identity, and the distinctive seating, designed by local schoolchildren, pays reference to the history of the site. This symbolic dimension is a key asset.
Millennium Place, Durham	Millennium Place, Durham was created with finance from the Millennium Commission and is an example of contemporary ‘design-led’ pedestrianised public spaces. 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 was not necessarily designed with the elderly in mind. The minimalist design is in stark contrast to the nearby historic quarter of Durham, and connections to the town centre are problematic.

**Old Eldon Square
and Grey's
Monument,
Newcastle upon
Tyne**

Old Eldon Square and Grey's Monument, Newcastle both contain significant elements of historical and cultural significance, principally characterised in the form of their centrally located monuments. These spaces are largely considered to constitute the commercial and cultural heart of Newcastle and have undergone a careful make-over as part of the work of the Grainger Town Partnership (1997-2003) and ongoing extension of Eldon Square shopping mall. 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 Metro system below it. Expressly designed glass and stone street furniture contribute further to the already strong sense of place.

**The Esplanade,
Redcar**

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.

**High Street,
Stockton-on-Tees**

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 hub, and there are roads and passageways leading from it. This forms a semi-legible network, although visual clutter does detract from this. The space is the context for a hive of activity on market days, but for the remainder of the time the space conveys an unwelcome feeling and is socially barren. This is in spite of the area being redeveloped in 1995 with City Challenge funding.

Investigating the cultural life of public spaces was approached by viewing the everyday 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 city. Street walking and 'deep hanging around' offered a sound appreciation of 'surface' transformations, including changing aesthetics, activities, functions and users. The study is also grounded in stories-so-far and reciprocal interactions with those who have an interest or responsibility in the planning, design, funding, management and/or governance in one or more of the sites of study. Engagement with everyday users and inhabitants supplements research findings in order to provide multi-dimensional perspectives on the cultural life of contemporary public spaces.

The competitiveness of culture

The study presents a general, but complex, perception that a symbiotic relationship exists between cultural vitality and economic competitiveness. This was not something one could 'accurately measure', noted one research participant, and impacts were difficult to isolate; but such difficulties should not detract from the potential that place quality can unlock.

The refurbishment of Alnwick Market Place was believed by some to have increased investor confidence, improved business performance for those dependent on passing trade, and raised the area's profile. Here, a recurrent theme was that place quality enhancements have helped to provide a focal point for the town and a sense of purpose. It is a meeting place, a rest point, a space to relax in, and even an occasional makeshift football pitch for young children, all rolled into one place – multiple social spaces interpenetrating a singular urban site.

In Alnwick, the cultural life of the everyday street scene appears to be contributing to the local economy as people consume local products and services. And conversely, enhanced commercial competitiveness generates and may even strengthen the public life of the market place. The most visible example of the positive flows between economic competitiveness and cultural vitality is alfresco dining. As cafés and restaurants spill out onto public space, the buzz and animation intensifies, reinforcing the symbiotic relationship as people attract more people – which would support the research of scholars such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl. According to divergent communities of interest and supported by street walking observations, Alnwick Market Place is now a place that is *used* – culturally, socially and economically.

In a number of the study spaces, examples are provided of businesses improving their shop fronts in the aftermath of place quality enhancements. In Newcastle, as part of the Grainger Town Initiative, streetscape improvements have been supported by shop front grant schemes. By demonstrating strategic leadership, public sector led intervention has helped to (re-)establish a high-quality threshold in central Newcastle to complement its fine Georgian architecture. Private investors have since followed suit, most notably with the £180 million redevelopment of Eldon Square shopping mall and £5 million revamping of the 3000 square metre Old Eldon Square, but also in quality improvements to building facades and more sensitive shop front designs. To some extent, quality improvements are helping the Old Eldon Square and Grey's Monument quarter of Newcastle to weather the current economic storm.

In Redcar, place quality improvements to the esplanade, including public art and new street furniture, were instigated to improve the visitor experience. Responses suggest that enhancements have been administered to add the 'quality touch' so that visitors stay longer and return. Artists were involved from inception and played a proactive role throughout the design stage, which has helped to produce more culturally responsive works and to integrate art into the wider regeneration programme. Consequently, the product has been deliverable but also manageable, in the sense of reducing maintenance bills and also managing public expectations.

The remodelling of Stockton High Street was initiated to improve accessibility, legibility and attractiveness so as to prevent economic leakage to nearby towns, including Middlesbrough and Darlington. Attempts have been made to physically and culturally link the High Street with the North Shore mixed-use development scheme on the banks of the River Tees, which includes the Stockton campus of Durham University. The High Street comes alive on markets days, when the place is bustling with activity – not too dissimilar to Alnwick. Unlike Alnwick Market Place, however, Stockton High Street degenerates into a 'dead space' on non-market days, projecting a bleak and desolate impression.

The case of Stockton demonstrates that the role of place quality in planning for cultural vitality and economic competitiveness is by no means straightforward. Indeed, 'hard' improvements to the physical fabric of public spaces need to be accompanied by 'softer' activities to support the cultural life of spaces.

By introducing a theatre and cinema adjacent to Millennium Place in Durham, this contemporary development scheme has sought to use culture as a vehicle for economic competitiveness. Millennium Place is now enveloped by a number of bars and restaurants as it develops into a popular city leisure quarter. While the design has been successful in terms of 'leveraging' in private investment, it does appear to be following a standard 'cultural toolbox' strategy. This can leave one feeling that one has seen and experienced this space before, albeit in another place. For these reasons, Millennium Place's everyday street scene and public life is found to be lacking in comparison with the other spaces surveyed. There is a real danger that a single-minded commercialisation of culture to foster economic competitiveness may actually be counterproductive if it constrains the cultural life of public space.

Research pointers

A number of pointers emerge from the research specific to the planning of public spaces. First, planning for place quality enhancements, such as a pedestrianisation scheme, or cultural activities, such as street performers, are not necessarily guarantees of cultural and economic success. The generation of cultural vibrancy and economic activity is by no means an automatic process. A range of factors affect the nature of impacts, including, but not limited to, the following:

- o the support of different stakeholders and 'buy in' of the local community(ies);
- o spatial integration with other local plans and city strategies; and
- o building on what the place has, rather than piloting in what has apparently worked in another place.

The research advocates a policy approach grounded in the everyday actualities of places: the flows of people and capital, the relations between uses and functions, temporal fluctuations, cultural distinctions, and so on. Such an approach requires a detailed understanding of the needs and motivations of different actors and everyday users. It requires the active involvement of a wide range of interests and communities of practice throughout the cultural reproduction of public spaces – which is itself an ongoing process beyond the one-off ‘flagship’ scheme or ‘hallmark’ event.

This does not diminish the role of professionals, such as planners and urban designers, but challenges them to mould diverse community aspirations, political ambitions and cultural values into a creative solution specific to the place in question. It requires the professional ‘expert’ to leave their conceptual plans on the drawing board and ‘walk the streets’. An active engagement with the social life of public spaces is a requisite grounding for those charged with the planning, design, funding, management or governance of public spaces.

Secondly, quality is crucial for all public space interventions. Investing in an area’s quality of place profile, whether through new lighting or a street carnival, should not be considered an ‘add-on’. This means emphasising quality in the design, implementation and ongoing maintenance of places. Users were quick to point out flaws in quality; consistently referring to broken pavements, inappropriate seating, and rubbish-strewn spaces. Visitors to the Esplanade in Redcar bemoaned the latter, and even Newcastle’s acclaimed Grey’s Monument received some critical comments from pedestrians when the rubbish bins overflowed.

Across each of the studied spaces, conversations with users revealed that people do not necessarily fixate on aesthetic touchstones when they try to relate positively to why they enjoy places. Unlike professionals, who frequently commented in detail about the designs of these spaces and the architectural details of surrounding buildings, the everyday user viewed design quality as a backcloth, only recognising or commenting on quality aspects when they were underprovided.

Another common thread was the widespread appreciation of animated space. However, users were highly perceptible to temporal and seasonal fluctuations in cultural activity. In the case of Stockton High Street, it was often remarked that the space was ‘dead’ on non-market days, whereas Newcastle’s Grey’s Monument and Old Eldon Square tended to be frequently animated and used as a place to meet and congregate.

The research contends that a clear management strategy and cultural activity programme needs to be put in place, whereby investments, activities and interventions are linked with wider programmes and social objectives, so as not to be viewed as stand-alone ‘showpieces’. It was clear that hallmark events raised the bar in terms of user expectations. The research identifies that a dichotomy between sporadic energised space, such as an annual festival, and the quotidian mundanity of spaces the remainder of the time can distort perceptions. In order to maximise economic competitiveness, the study argues that cultural programming is required so that when the ‘buzz’ dissipates, everyday public life can fill the void.

Based on these perceptions, the research suggests that culturally vibrant and economically sustainable spaces require a sensitive combination of activities and aesthetics. It is unfortunate that many newly configured public spaces, such as Millennium Place in Durham, tend to be preoccupied with surface appearance to the detriment of cultural animation and public life. While the contemporary design of Millennium Place uses high-quality materials and is well maintained, the space feels exposed and is yet to be actively appropriated by local people during the day. However, on an evening the space comes alive, as alfresco eating provides animation and drinkers spill over into the space from the surrounding chain bars. This provides hope that even 'anyplace' environs can be socially and culturally distinctive, opening space for alternative experiences, uses and practices.

Reflections

The culture of public space as a medium for economic competitiveness remains uncertain, as does the actual role of place quality. The meaning of culture and the impact of cultural provision on place is highly intangible and has led to a 'clouded picture'. Consequently, calculating the value of place quality improvements with any precision is fraught with difficulties.² The *Public Space Vitality* study identifies the qualitative links between cultural activity and economic vitality, making the case that their relationship can be mutually reinforcing if viewed through a holistic frame and it takes a long-term perspective. Yet it should be recognised that culture matters for its own sake, and not merely as a means to an economic end. A lack of quantifiable evidence should not detract from the overall importance of the everyday culture of urban public spaces: the infrastructure of public life.

As we venture deeper into a global economic recession, reinvigorating the cultural vitality of public spaces could be a useful mechanism in planning for economic recovery. However, in doing so we should restructure the power relations underpinning the production of space – re-ordering the relationship between exchange values and use values to favour the latter. By so doing, we may be pleasantly surprised by what the competitiveness of culture has to offer.

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Notes

- 1 For a detailed investigation, see L. Pugalis: 'Cultural animation and economic vitality: identifying the links and regeneration potential through the lens of the urban street scene'. *Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal*, 2009, Vol. 3 (forthcoming)
- 2 L. Pugalis: 'Achieving place quality'. *Urban Design*, 2009, Winter (109), 14-5