

Keynote Address: Creating Sustainable Cultures

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Creating sustainable cultures seems on the face of it to be a public-sector debate around supporting a particular cultural establishment and how best to justify the funding required to maintain the status quo.

However, I wish to start from a position that individual people create and sustain cultures, not the bureaucratic infrastructures that we busily manufacture for the purposes of supporting an established cultural heritage. Much of this debate can be symbolised in the conceiving, construction and execution of the Millennium Dome in London, that is a project without roots, individuality, dominated by committees and a consensual view of the world. There was a complete lack of creative individuality and risk. It is then, time that there was a serious readjustment to the way we perceive and support cultural activity, otherwise there is a danger of continuing what we have always done without critical analysis or reflection and ignoring the basis of culture: that is people, risk, change and creativity.

Conceptual confusion: arts industry, heritage industry, creative industries or cultural industries?

So let's start with a conventional view of culture, which is succinctly encapsulated in the Raymond Williams's definition (culture, 1981):

"a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour".

He interprets culture in the widest definitional sense, an inclusive attitude consisting of structured and patterned ways of learning, and explains the artistic component of culture as:

"individuals in groups - characteristically respond to and make meaningful the circumstances in which they are placed by virtue of their positions in society and in history".

This definitional framework leads us into a wider understanding of our society, so for example Williams would recognise Britain's most popular tourist attraction, Blackpool Pleasure Beach (visited by over 7 million people in 1998), with more hotel beds than in all of Greece and its islands combined, as a cultural centre. However this cultural centre would not be welcomed into the approved cultural family of the Arts Council of England, or of Re:source, the national agency for museums and libraries and archives, although it would be seen as a significant component of the tourism industry. It would probably be hard pressed to fall within the accepted concept of cultural tourism.

Similarly, popular programmes on television such as East Enders and Coronation Street are instantly recognised by social scientists, media academics and others as a significant component of the cultural life of the United Kingdom. Noticeably, the Arts Council and the Film Council do not fund these activities or formally recognise them as a cultural component of equal status to the Royal Opera, as they are largely private sector activities and cannot be considered to be artistic.

Manchester United Football Club and its fan culture, which is not only a cultural phenomenon of United Kingdom but of the world, would also fall within the Williams definition. Manchester United is also a business quoted on the stock exchange, does not receive public subsidy and is able to attract capacity audiences.

Williams in addition refers to values as an integral component of culture and in this particular case he is referring to the values of society, such as equality, individual and religious freedom. However little is said about the role of religion as cultural life, except when policy makers and administrators give consideration to equal opportunities and ethnicity. The arts, religion and culture have been inextricably linked over centuries, with the Renaissance being an obvious example and similarly the Muslim art and design traditions. The arts and heritage form an important component of this cultural definition.

However, it seems that debates over the last decade, with regard to expenditure of public funds in support of cultural activity and development, have lacked coherence and ignored convergence, preferring departmentalisation with each discipline fighting for its particular corner and often based on a self defining view of the cultural world. For example, the Museums Association in the UK has defined a museum as:

"an institution that collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit".

(Museums Association 1996, page 352)

This definition includes galleries, however it excludes environmental heritage activity, botanical gardens and aquaria.

What is interesting about these debates is that they have focused attention on particular arts and heritage constituencies at the expense of others, with little demonstrable interest in responding to and encouraging emerging and different traditions. Furthermore, increasingly over this period of time these arguments have not been concerned with the intrinsic nature of the arts and whom they benefit so much as how they relate to the contemporary government policy of the time. So we find, for example, that in the UK during the 1940s and 1950s, arts development (Cultural Intervention in British Urban Regeneration since 1945, Proceedings, 997) was entirely devoted to the creation of arts centres in New Towns; every town should have one. It was also associated with the representing of Britain after the war and a celebration of the future

In my view, since 1970s there has been little or no debate by arts managers, administrators and policy makers about the purpose, value and nature of the arts, but rather a focus of attention on how the arts and heritage can meet government policy in the areas of the economy, urban regeneration, regionalism, social cohesion, community development, and so on. Whilst this is laudable, it does seem that we should be considering the importance of culture as a defining mechanism for society. In other words, arguing for coherence and convergence, the arts and heritage in culture and culture as a manifestation of society, a richness in diversity concept. By taking this stance, it is possible to incorporate the wider issues that concern society, such as the environment, urban regeneration, social cohesion and community development. The other issue, which complicates these debates and again is rarely discussed in a public forum, is how we decide what art is, including our view of aesthetics. In other words, many of the public agencies such as the Arts Councils are charged with promoting the arts as excellence, making excellent art accessible and educating society in the excellence of the arts. While this may be admirable, it poses problems such as what is excellence in the arts and heritage fields, determined by whom and using whose criteria? In other words, we have established a number of national agencies that have been given within their remit the task of determining our corporate sense of aesthetic. Is this right?

It is within this context that the questions of sustainability, the environment and finance should be investigated. However, we need to commence by being clear what it is we are sustaining and why.

The position that I wish to adopt is one that avoids discussion of which corporate aesthetic is most appropriate for our respective societies and leave that for individuals to interpret in the way they see best, rather to support the concept of the inherent creativity of the individual. This leads to serious consideration of the emerging global interest in the creative industries as a particularly significant development because, for the first time, it enables us to view cultural activity from an alternative perspective without the constraints of traditional frameworks, notions of excellence, and long-standing (largely Victorian) ideas of aesthetics.

If consideration is given to activities, including the arts and heritage, as businesses, (the creative industries) with products, services and markets, then, for example access questions are immediately answered, the judgment of excellence is simple (fitness for purpose) and funding becomes conventional, ie based on business planning models.

From a perspective of the creative industries it becomes possible to re-evaluate public sector organisational roles and the nature of the engagement in developing this industrial sector just like any other industrial activity. In other words, there is no special pleading required and a wider range of funding agencies can then legitimately become involved in supporting and developing the businesses.

A question generated by this type of model is how the research and development is funded. This, in my view, becomes the domain of the education sector, and large businesses. It can of course be a role for government by insuring that risk and innovation is nurtured as part of the development of the industrial sector to maintain and expand the wider ambitions for the knowledge economy or other initiatives such as social cohesion.

It is then sensible to place this emerging pattern of activity, the creative industries, in an even broader and inclusive definitional framework, which is culture to encourage cohesion, access, participation and ownership. If we use culture as the all-embracing framework for our activities then we have a rational strategic mechanism for making sense of our activities at community, regional and national levels. An example of this is the recent development in a relatively small borough of Greater Manchester, Bolton. Bolton has no great pretensions in terms of its cultural ambition. Today however it is in the process of developing a cultural strategy and has defined this as:

"culture embraces a wide variety of meanings and values for people. The definition of culture used in this strategy falls into two dimensions:

- culture as an essential part of everyone's life, the cultural activities, the making, doing and enjoying
- the culture of the borough, the way of life in Bolton and what influences it".

This then enables the borough to represent its cultural activities as a spectrum comprising:

- “Visual, performing, broadcasting and media arts e.g. theatre (national, regional and local), dance, cinema, music and painting
- Sports e.g. watching and participating
- Museums
- Arts e.g. art galleries, art workshops, creative industries
- Play e.g. play facilities, parks and playgrounds, and informal play opportunities
- Parks and open spaces
- Libraries
- Heritage e.g. Bolton’s industrial background and cotton mills, the Mass Observation photography project of the thirties and nineties, Bolton’s multicultural dimension
- Built environment e.g. the town hall, Victoria Square, Le Mans Crescent, and Reebok stadium
- Countryside e.g. the West Pennine moors
- Identity and image e.g. Bolton as a mill town, Mass Observation photography project, Bolton Wanderers Football Club
- Shared memories e.g. local disasters and major events
- Relationships e.g. family, schools, clubs
- Beliefs e.g. religious, political.”

(Bolton’s Consultation Cultural Strategy 2001/2 Summary Document)

Interestingly another town, Rotherham, an old steel community in South Yorkshire, has also developed a cultural strategy and similarly describes culture as:

"Culture has a material dimension

- The performing arts, music, drama, dance
- The visual arts, craft, sculpture, fashion
- Media, film, television, video, language
- Museums, artefacts, archives, design
- Libraries, literature, writing, publishing
- Combined Arts and festivals
- the built heritage, architecture, landscape, urban parks

Culture has a value dimension

- Relationships, shared identity
- Shared memories and experiences
- Standards
- What we consider valuable to pass on to future generations”.

(Celebrating our past together, developing our distinctiveness together, creating our future together, A Cultural Strategy, for Rotherham Metropolitan Borough 2000)

There are great similarities between the two approaches. It might be said that both Rotherham and Bolton need to adopt such an approach in order to rekindle a shared community identity as a result of declining industry, unemployment and an uninspiring quality of life. These towns are not alone in the UK or elsewhere in the world where economic activity has declined or substantial population change has occurred, or social upheaval experienced. Just to reinforce this view, Toronto has produced a creative city work print which sets out to describe cultural activity in the City and a direction in terms of developing a cultural strategy to make the best of its existing assets and to realise the social, economic, and financial benefits by ensuring that Toronto is recognised as a world centre for cultural activity, including the creative industries. For example it describes relationships in a number of respects but particularly:

"The city needs to change its relationship with our major cultural institutions, from the donor forward/beneficiary to partners in creative city building."

The work print document goes on to summarise the contemporary debate in the following way:

"All of these questions really boil down to one: how do we transform ourselves into a productive, creative, attractive global city with a sharply delineated, vital identity?"

(The Creative City, A Work print, April 2001. Toronto Culture)

It is evident that a cultural definitional framework encompasses far more than the traditional arts and heritage, facilitates engagement and interaction with many if not all of the components such as the built environment, beliefs, play, and shared memories. For example the museum becomes the focal point for reflection, and interpretation of past cultural activities as a means of informing the future, and providing a sense of place. It tells us about our past cultural history, and relationships through the nature of artistic practice of the past and

present. If we begin to consider placing our activities, including interpretation, in this broader spectrum of interrelationships there is a basis for sustainability, engagement with the environment and subsequently a justification for public funding interventions. However a combination of the arts and heritage as an integral component of the culture of a community, region or nation with that of culture as an industry provides the most effective and powerful future strategy for all those engaged in one or more of these activities.

Culture as an industry challenges the traditional role of the large national institutions, the cultural palaces, as symbols of society and how society wishes to present itself to others. It also questions the chosen mechanism for reflecting back to society its approved cultural traditions and practices to remind us corporately of our history and sense of place. This is associated with concepts such as nationhood. Whilst all of these functions are valuable, there is a tendency for such institutions to absorb the largest share of any public funding available for culture. This issue can be addressed by establishing these institutions as businesses, in the creative industries sense like any other and for public sector intervention to be targeted specifically at what is needed to “grow” the business. There is no reason why private sector operators cannot run national institutions.

Interestingly, there are indications that this approach is beginning to occur in the UK with the introduction of trusts and Public Private Partnerships. This encourages those operating businesses such as Blackpool Pleasure Beach to become involved in public sector activity. It also reinforces convergence of the public and private sectors in the interests of the customer, visitor and/or consumer.

Sheffield Art Gallery and Museum Trust and Royal Armouries, Leeds

Two examples that illustrate this are the Sheffield Art Gallery and Museum Trust and the Royal Armouries Leeds.

In the case of the Royal Armouries, there was a requirement by the trust (based in the Tower of London) to increase access to its collections as part of a response to government policy. However there was no additional space available within the Tower to achieve this and it was necessary to consider alternative locations. It was also the case that the trustees had no new resources available to them to realise this policy aim, with the exception of a small allocation from the Department of Culture Media and Sport. The approach adopted was to consider relocating part of the collection in other parts of the country, if a favourable regeneration grant regime existed. The trustees held a limited competition and ultimately Leeds in the North of England was chosen as the venue, not least because the Council promised a substantial grant towards the capital costs of building a new museum to house the collection. However, the problem of raising the outstanding resources for the new museum and, more significantly, the revenue costs of operating this new facility once opened, remained. The trustees entered into the first public private partnership in order to achieve this, in which a commercial company was prepared to provide the matched funding for the capital project and establish a facilities management company, the Royal Armouries International, to manage the new museum. Royal Armouries International was a private company with clear connections to the Royal Armouries trustees through the chairman. The capital cost of building the new museum in a run-down part of Leeds was £43 million, approximately 50 per cent of which was provided from commercial sources.

Royal Armouries International was expected to operate the Museum on behalf of its shareholders in order to recover the commercial investment and to meet the annual revenue costs of the museum. The Department of Culture Media and Sport provided a small additional grant to the Royal Armouries to contribute towards the running costs of the museum, however the key component for success was an entry charge as a means of generating income to service the debt. In addition car-parking charges were incorporated along with the letting of space in the Museum for commercial activities and the usual shop, restaurant and coffee bar. Much of the income from these activities was predicated on projected visitor numbers to the attraction, which ultimately did not materialise, largely one suspects because of an overestimate of the interest in arms and armour, as well as a prohibitively high entrance fee. Although this was a brave experiment it has ultimately failed to succeed, as visitor numbers did not reach the predicted targets and consequently income was insufficient to service the debt. Nevertheless this experience does not preclude careful consideration of the Public Private Partnership model. It needs much more realistic projections for visitor numbers and a careful analysis of what individuals are prepared to pay for.

In particular there is a requirement for accurate baseline study research to insure that this kind of over-estimate does not occur again. It also assists in determining the popularity of collections, over-supply of particular types of museums, galleries and arts organisation activities, and enables those planning to deliver new services and products to gain access to verifiable data.

In the case of the Sheffield Art Galleries and Museums Trust, a different approach was adopted. Sheffield City Council had over many years reduced expenditure on its museum, gallery and library services are in order to service debts it had accrued as a result of building substantial facilities for the World Student Games. The decline in funding for the Art Gallery and Museums Department became increasingly critical, to the point that staff were being made redundant, museums placed on reduced opening times and no resources were available for temporary exhibitions. However, the city had trust experience both in the past and relatively recently when its leisure facilities were transferred to a trust vehicle. Consequently it was no great surprise that the Council

considered placing the art gallery and museum department in trust. The approach adopted involved the Council retaining ownership of the buildings, collections, and other related assets, with the management of the service being given over to an independent trust, including the transfer of staff. The trust, which is an independent constitutional body, then entered into a contract with the Council to provide the management for the Art Gallery and Museums owned by the Council for at least a minimum of six years and in return would receive a guaranteed grant income.

This approach has several advantages, such as enabling the independent management to attract resources from a number of different sources; to be unfettered by committee structures and the general bureaucracy associated with Councils, and to act commercially working to a business plan with clearly defined targets and outputs. The trust accepts the risks involved in managing art galleries and museums whilst the Council for the first time can predict its commitment to insuring a service is maintained for the benefit of the community. It is in effect enabling the private sector, through the trust vehicle, to operate as a business with the assurance of public sector core funding support. There is no doubt that this approach is already attracting considerable attention across many local authorities in the United Kingdom. In a recent survey of the strategic ambitions of 26 local authorities with regard to their museum services on behalf of Re:source (English Regional Museums Study for Re:source, 2001) it was clear that virtually all of these Councils are in the process of considering transferring their museum and gallery services into trust. The latest Council to undertake this is York, and Leeds is actively pursuing a similar model. In my view this simply brings the museum and gallery sector much closer to other cultural private-sector attractions and re-positions them as businesses, with markets, customers, products and services.

Culture as a creative business

This obsession with trusts by Councils illustrates at the least a willingness to employ alternative means of delivering services the public want at a competitive cost, whether it is drawn from the public or private sector as a means of sustaining services over the long term. They are creative businesses engaging with customers, developing markets and providing services and products which in itself contributes to the development of local, regional and national culture.

The Councils and public funders, by focusing on what their funds are being used for; the mechanisms employed to insure accountability; and quality, have arrived at culture as a creative business. This may lead to a re-examination of the role of the staff in local authorities, Arts Councils and other funding bureaucracies in the sense that they might now have to consider operating as contract and risk managers, and business developers, developing explicit quality assurance mechanisms and establishing agreed bench marks for measurement. This requires different skills and knowledge as well as a genuine understanding of the sector, how creativity and business works.

Whilst this type of development might well be seen as an effective means of limiting public expenditure, which indeed it is, nevertheless it provides greater flexibility for the managers involved to genuinely develop the services they have taken over in the interests of different publics. The local authorities that were interviewed in the Re:source study also confirmed that they saw a long-term role for the services (whether in direct or indirect control) in contributing to regeneration, widening participation, lifelong learning, quality of life, social cohesion, and economic development. In other words, contributing to the culture of their particular communities in a direct and measurable way was recognised as a strategic goal. It was also seen by many Council members that their museums, galleries and arts organisations as the “family silver” needed to be retained, nurtured and developed for the benefit of the town, city, region and nation. There is no doubt that the arts and museums in the context of culture, as the creative industries, have a significant future. What it now requires is the development of alternative strategies, new skills or the rekindling of old ones, the recognition of the importance of people and their innate creativity, capturing and building it into the creative businesses of the future.

A creative and sustainable future

If museum managers, administrators and policy makers continue to behave as they always have, then the debate about the level of public subsidy dedicated to the arts and heritage will remain static, and never be won. The sector will continue to argue from the perspective of the arts as intrinsically valuable and museums as repositories of knowledge without making any substantial progress.

We now need to insure that activities encompassed in a cultural definitional framework are derived from the needs of communities, what they actually want, and are prepared to pay for. It is by pursuing this approach that a mechanism exists to genuinely change the basis of cultural activity and consequently once-and-for-all address sustainability. What is intended by this, is instead of thinking from within the museum or art organisation as to how a programme or exhibition can be funded, and from what particular source, and consequently adjusting the programme to reflect regeneration issues or social issues in order to trigger the appropriate source of funding, it is possible to start from the opposite direction and say that we are an integral part of the culture in which we live and therefore it should be an everyday part of our personal and professional lives that we are engaged in environmental, social and economic matters that reflect the cultural

life of our town or city. As a consequence there is no longer a question of how to source and attract funding, as it is obvious that there is engagement in the different aspects of the daily life of the communities in which we are located. This relies fundamentally on insuring that the relationship between organisations and individuals in communities is strong, and that the organisations reflect the needs, aspirations and creative potential of the individuals and groups of individuals in any of the towns, villages or regions we are concerned with. The most effective way of delivering this organisational and individual interaction is to consider cultural activity as creative businesses, which in order to survive have to identify and deliver products and services to markets, and customers.

I will leave you with these thoughts as a means of stimulating debate and encouraging creative thinking. ■

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