

ual:

Social Purpose Lab

From flagships to flotillas

The emerging practice of participative cultural placemaking

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Introduction

The idea that creative and cultural activity is a powerful driver of urban regeneration is not a new one. Property developers have long understood that cultural institutions and creative industries can have a transformative impact on the viability of their schemes, whether it's because the disruptors who so often work in these sectors are willing to move into parts of town that more conventional tenants would not consider; because the cultural programming and creative vibe they create attract other business elites; or because creative activity brings in the crowds of people—be they locals, tourists or shoppers—who bring a new place to life.

However, it is increasingly clear that a model which simply places a franchised art gallery or theatre in the middle of a new development is, at best, missing out on the opportunity to create wider forms of cultural value. At worst, confining creativity to new buildings or highly curated public spaces risks compounding a process of gentrification, alienating local people and potentially displacing grassroots creative and cultural practices.

University of the Arts London (UAL) has been at the heart of three of London's largest regeneration projects in the last twenty years: Granary Square at Kings Cross, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford, and now the Town Centre at Elephant and Castle. Our commitment to community placemaking and our academic expertise in design, spatial practice and public participation has enabled us to experiment with ways to foster creativity in and around our places, learning and adapting as we have done so. We are not without fault, ourselves, as an institution. Yet our experiences show us that when the community is brought into new places through collaborative and participatory projects, those projects and the communities in which they are located both benefit.

This paper therefore calls for participative creativity to be put at the heart of future regeneration and placemaking, and sets out some initial recommendations for property developers, creative institutions and policy makers—at local and national level—to enable it to happen more systematically. As the urban theorist Richard Florida says;

‘...how do you build a creative community? Certainly not all at once and from the top down – most of what makes creative communities emerges gradually over time. But that does not mean that strategy and public policy do not matter. Quite the opposite. Smart strategies that recognize and enhance bottom-up community-based efforts that are already working can help accelerate the development of creative communities.’¹

1 Florida, R. (2014), ‘The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited’, New York: Basic Books, p. 339.

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The paper comprises three sections. First, we set out the context in which we have developed our approach to cultural regeneration. Then, we share some brief case studies from recent participatory work led by our academics, and the barriers we have identified to working in this way. Finally, we set out our recommendations for how developers, cultural practitioners and policy makers can effectively create the conditions for flotillas of cultural activity in thriving communities.



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Culture-led development and our approach

Cultural presence in cities in the UK has seen a transition from the philanthropy driven high culture of the Victorian and early 20th century era, through to cinema, the expanding cuisine and live music in cities of the 1960s, and then on to the growth of the suburbanisation that eroded the cultural life of city centres.² Culture-led regeneration is used to refer to physical construction projects centred around a range of creative activity, including arts, media, libraries, museums, the built heritage, tourism and the creative industries in general. Development of this cultural infrastructure was devised to stimulate activity and became a prominent theme in Northern European experience.

Flagship cultural regeneration has a specific attraction in stimulating creativity, often repurposing former industrial land with a waterfront. Regeneration strategies centred around a flagship development predated the 1980s. Birmingham saw such developments with the National Exhibition Centre the 1970s and the Bullring Shopping Centre the 1960s.³ In the last decade of the 20th century, culture-led urban regeneration rapidly built momentum to become the prominent policy for economic development. Almost twenty years ago the academics Steven Miles and Ronan Paddison were able to assert, 'The idea that culture can be employed as a driver for urban economic growth has become part of the new orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position.'⁴

Nevertheless, cultural flagship regenerations are not without faults. These developments often bring increases in property prices that can be alienating to local communities. Such strategies can have an elitist view of inclusion seen through the prism of the market-place, which reduces engagement with communities to that of dealing with them only as consumers.⁵ The assumption that investment in urban revitalisation alone will also rejuvenate the public-sphere is indeed questionable.⁶ Action needs to be taken to mitigate these negative effects and this needs to be appreciated in making the case for culture-led regeneration.

Flagship culture-led developments have improved place identity and confidence, but there can be insufficient focus on the less tangible aspect of cultural development. In an economy decoupled from the industrial paradigm of the past, it is a place's creativity and diversity that are indicators of economic success.⁷ Hardware, in the form of the

2 Andy Pratt, 'Cities: The cultural dimension', Government Office for Science, August 2014.

3 Loftman, P. & Nevin, B. (1995), 'Prestige Projects and Urban Regeneration in the 1980s and 1990s: a review of benefits and limitations', *Planning Practice & Research*, 10:3-4, 299-316.

4 Miles, Steven, and Ronan Paddison. 'Introduction: The Rise and Rise of Culture-Led Urban Regeneration.' *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5/6, 2005, pp. 833-39, at, p.833

5 Deborah Stevenson (2004) 'CIVIC GOLD' RUSH, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 10:1, 119-131, at p. 122.

6 Miles, Steven, and Ronan Paddison. 'Introduction: The Rise and Rise of Culture-Led Urban Regeneration.' *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5/6, 2005, pp. 833-39.

7 Florida, R. (2014), 'The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited', New York: Basic Books.

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physical developments and facilities, must be accompanied by software in the form of activities and activation to maximise these indicators.⁸ Proactively reaching out to marginalised communities with creative participatory programmes helps to spread and diversify creativity in our society. In this manner flagships can become flotillas of culture and creativity.

As one of the world's leading Universities for Art and Design, we play a prominent role in cultural and creative initiatives in the UK and is a natural partner for culture-led regeneration. It has a presence in various communities in its London base, spanning several buildings over its 6 colleges. The university's various buildings in London cover a total area of some 210,050m². Our combination of size and creative energy means we have been a key partner in three of London's largest regeneration schemes in the North, East and South of the city. In the North, the world-renowned Central Saint Martins is an important member of the Granary Square development. In the East, the London College of Fashion is a partner in the vibrant East Bank development. In the South, the London College of Communication's new building is the showpiece of the Town Centre development.

Having a world leading creative educational institution at the heart of each of these regeneration projects has the potential to enhance the area's liveability and economy. In collaboration with the other partners in regenerations, creative institutions have the potential to take action to enhance inclusivity. In this way the endeavour to improve an area can include the local community rather than displacing them. Creativity, community engagement and a focus on participation are central to our academic activities, which lends us the capacity to have a positive social impact.

Building the community infrastructure to act as the cultural/creative hardware is essential. Through participatory approaches, our academics have been pioneering ways to challenge the elitist approach to creativity, presenting a model for democratising creativity. Although this action can come in a variety of forms, the use of temporarily available spaces to build enduring local community capacity has been a central method that has been used.

Design approaches, encompassing co-design and participatory design, are useful in capturing the value of creativity beyond the bounds of a culture-led flagship building. Participatory design is a particularly relevant focus for attempting to mitigate the negative effects of creative flagship developments by empowering a community to influence the shape of change. Spreading creativity makes the positive aspect of the development inclusive to the community in which, and around which, the development has landed. Spreading creativity to as many people as possible is essential in stimulating a creative economy, yet it is an often-overlooked aspect of culture-led regeneration.⁹

8 Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska (2016), 'Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project', Arts and Humanities Research Council, p. 74.

9 Florida, R. (2014), 'The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited', New York: Basic Books



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Placemaking in practice: case studies and barriers

The authors of this piece are engaged in the coordination of the placemaking work at UAL, helping to make connections and facilitate the realisation of our social purpose strategy. In doing so we are honoured to be working alongside such impressive teams of professional and academic staff at our Colleges who are leading many impactful projects. Our practice of placemaking has been developed by our academics and knowledge exchange teams over the course of many years: years in which our involvement in major regeneration projects has brought opportunity, challenges and no little controversy. So central has placemaking become to our approach to achieving social impact that it has set out four values to aspire to:

1 More Inclusive

To engage outside of the 'usual suspects', including widening participation and, through our spaces, increase our capacity to offer permeable spaces and open access to cultural and creative programming for a broad range of audiences.

2 More Collaborative

To leverage the diversity of our participatory practices and approaches for the interests of all relevant stakeholder, with a particular emphasis on marginalised and under-represented groups to create more collaborative decision making and enable cultural activation, enterprise and cultural production to be oriented towards more inclusive growth.

3 More Innovative

To engage diverse partners to create an environment that nurtures and tests new ideas, products, services, policy and processes that contribute towards net zero goals.

4 More Prosperous

To support the business growth and innovation of the creative industries with a combination of workspace, facilities, business support and industry networks, underpinned by long term skills development and lifelong learning programmes.

These values help focus the varied placemaking activities across UAL to achieve maximum value for society. The ways in which this has been done varies by the college and place.

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Central Saint Martins

In Camden, UAL's [Central Saint Martins](#) (CSM) has been active working with the community across a number of initiatives. Beyond the college playing a part in making the culture-led regeneration at King's Cross viable, staff in the college see it as essential that they spread creativity to the communities that otherwise could be marginalised. As is discussed below, the college has taken the lead in a major project, T-Factor, that has been fostering community engagement, preserving local heritage and promoting sustainable economic practices. A very pertinent example of CSM's work has been their involvement in a community maker space, [MAKE @ Story Garden](#).

The MAKE @ Story Garden project began 2019 and was originally a cross-sector collaboration between Central Saint Martins, Somers Town Community Association (STCA), Camden Council and the real estate company Lendlease. Inclusivity for creative activities as a goal in itself and to address wider social issues and local challenges is the purpose behind MAKE @ Story Garden. Outputs from the space range from making clothes to coming up with ways to tackle the climate emergency. Fundamentally the project builds a sense of community and a confidence in those that participated. Over 2 years, 1,694 people participated in the project, with 1,339 of those participants being local residents.

Importantly, MAKE @ Story Garden embraces the skills and talents of the people who live and work in the neighbourhood of Somers Town, as well as the wider Camden area. By mixing the local talents of the community with those of the CSM staff and students the project contributes to the widening of participation in arts and cultural experiences. In a 2021 evaluation of the project, its objective of widening access to arts and culture through an inclusive programme of collaborative creative activities seemed to be achieved, with 84% of participants responding that participation in the projects activities had made them more interested in participating in forms of arts or cultural activity that they hadn't tried before.

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In the East of London, the relocation of the London College of Fashion (LCF) was conducted with care to ensure that the college could connect with the community hosting it rather than being an alienating new presence. LCF achieved this aim in multiple ways. For example, LCF's outreach programme, Insights, worked with colleges and schools in their local boroughs to deliver career fairs, workshops and spring/summer schools. As well as attracting millions of pounds in research and investment funding to the area through fashion and textiles clusters LCF is developing a broad array of initiatives under the banner of the Fashion District.¹⁰ Nurturing the local business ecosystem, the Business of Fashion, Textiles and Technology based at LCF has awarded £3.4m of R&D funding to 36 medium, small or microbusinesses, leveraging over £15m.

Creative engagement projects by LCF include ReGo, which addressed the high levels of serious violence between young people in London by transforming reclaimed weapons into items such as jewellery or bags. Bespoke fashion pieces made using reclaimed knives were co-created by young people from four east London boroughs: Waltham Forest, Newham, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, who worked with local fashion brands. Working in partnership with the charity catalyst in the community, the project put young people at the heart of the creative project.

Possibly the most visible part of the Fashion District presence is Poplar Works. Stemming from our award-winning work in prison industries, Making for Change originated as a programme to support inmates to develop new skills, build pride through the creative process and build confidence through teamwork. Since 2019, Making for Change at Poplar Works has not only delivered training for prisoners and ex-prisoners, but also for members of the local community who are recruited from community centres and schools, with the assistance of Poplar HARCA. The activities at Making for Change at Poplar Works include the development of technology to help the wider ecosystem, such as an AI production analysis system. The excellent placemaking work at Poplar Works, which carries on a heritage craft of the area, has been recognised with an OBE for Claire Swift, who leads it.

¹⁰ <https://www.fashion-district.co.uk/>

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At the London School of Communication (LCC) site of Elephant and Castle, the college has engaged in multiple ways of working with the community to enhance creativity. LCC's efforts to make the developments in the area more inclusive involve initiatives working with the community and with Southwark Borough Council. An example was the Elephant Recovery Project that ran till 2022, in which LCC delivered creative skills to their local community. LCC provides ongoing creative skills dissemination in the local community through the Talent Works initiative, where students are provided with paid creative work with Southwark-based charities, social enterprises and community groups.

Addressing the challenges around physical regeneration, in 2019 a co-design initiative was conducted around the Elephant and Castle Park development. This initiative sought to identify social infrastructure that would meet the needs of the community.¹¹ Students were guided to develop service design solutions utilising interviews with co-creation and ideation processes to include different views of the local community. The process included important sections of the local community who may have been harder to reach, such as residents over 60 and the Latino Community. After refining the concepts, three pilot projects were designed and tested with the target users.

Skills related activity goes alongside the more general support offered to the local community by LCC staff through placemaking initiatives. An example of this is PNK Garden, a project that created an independent community garden in central London by transforming an abandoned piece of land. Based in Rotherhithe, the garden is in LCC's borough of Southwark. Founded by Dr Lara Salinas of the Service Futures Lab, the garden reframed relationships with community groups. Every participant starts as a volunteer, contributing to the garden, before being able to join as a member at no cost. The lab assumed responsibility for managing the garden in 2020 on a rolling five-year basis. The previously vacant land was hazardous, and the lab leveraged £180,000 of mixed resources, including some funds from Southwark Council, to realise the participatory vision.

11 Grimaldi, S., Bielak-Dworska, A., Bielak, M., Javiera, G., Lundsgaard, A., Nowak, A. & Nowak, P. (2021), 'Co-Design Your Place: How to use service design in regeneration?', University of the Arts London. Accessed at; <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/17564/>.

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Constraints to this way of working

As desirable as inclusively spreading creativity alongside culture-led regeneration may be, there are various constraints to the approach being scaled up. Creative participation is messy and can be difficult to measure.¹² The much-criticised market approach to cultural regeneration is tourist friendly, so engaging a community with participatory approaches requires being able to manage both at the same time. One of the benefits of these initiatives is that they can surface problems to help find solutions, yet this very process exposes cultural differences and cracks in community structures that can be uncomfortable.

Councils can be unprepared for working with partners in participatory schemes. Camden Council, for instance, is a developed council who have embraced design and participatory thinking, but this represents the culmination of significant time working on such projects with partners. Other boroughs in London are at different stages of development in their relationships with participatory thinking. To address this, long-term relationships should be developed between partners to advance understanding together.

Developers can have challenges with their image. Although developers can improve the perception of their practices through engagement with participatory initiatives, there can be crossed wires and problems with expectation management from both sides. As collaborative efforts, there can be tension over the optics of who partners with who. For example, some developers may have a bad reputation with local communities and can seem to be toxic to potential partners. In these cases, all parties need to work to overcome issues and find a way forward in order to make developments beneficial to society. In general, parties to culture-led developments should embrace the challenges and potential offered by cross-sector collaboration in its true sense.¹³

Beyond attitudinal constraints, local government has a lack of capacity in many respects. Cuts to local government budgets have created substantial pressures that have been partly met by reductions in investment in the cultural and community life of places. Investment in the arts through local governments in England saw a 30% real terms drop in capital and revenue expenditure in the arts in the ten year period up to 2019/20, which the Creative Policy and Evidence Centre has claims has eroded the core ambitions of making areas more attractive and fostering local communities.¹⁴ Analysis by the Guardian reported a 43% real terms cut of net spending per person on cultural services by local councils over the period between 2010-11 and 2022-23, with spending on parks and open spaces being reduced by a third.¹⁵

12 Lees, L., & Melhuish, C. (2015) 'Arts-led regeneration in the UK: The rhetoric and the evidence on urban social inclusion' *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 22(3), 242-260.

13 Taylor, J. & Ball, N. (2023) 'Collaboration Playbook: A leader's guide to cross-sector collaboration', WIG & Blavatnik School of Government. Accessed at: <https://www.wig.co.uk/campaigns/collaboration-playbook/download-the-collaboration-playbook>

14 https://pec.ac.uk/blog_entries/a-new-deal-for-arts-funding-in-england/

15 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/jan/29/how-a-decade-of-austerity-has-squeezed-council-budgets-in-england>

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If broader creative economy benefits can be envisioned through effective culture led-regeneration with participatory approached, then spending in this area could be seen more as an vital investment than a non-essential.



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Changing the system: recommendations

Since the 1980s, there has been an emphasis on the development of flagship culture-led construction projects as the catalyst for private-sector property development and economic regeneration. However, we cannot rely on the trickledown economic or social effect of these flagships alone. We must empower inclusivity and the creativity of the communities around the flagship to realise the economic and social benefits of regeneration. The resultant 'flotillas' of creative and participative activity will serve as a sustainable model for culture-led developments across the country, which could have a transformative economic and social impact.

Strenuous and focused contributions from the cross-sector organisations involved in culture-led regeneration will be required to scale-up the creative inclusivity that is needed. In particular, we recommend:

What property developers should do

Developers need to be clear what they want in an upfront manner. Explicit negotiations need to take place between the developers and the other parties to ensure that misaligned expectations do not create new problems or exacerbate existing ones.

Many developers do not even have a budget for meanwhile use projects to realise social value from their underutilised spaces. This is an obvious area where change should be expected.

The over regulation of quasi-public spaces is a risk that developers should be conscious of. If the outsourcing of the regeneration of public spaces to the private sector by cash strapped local authorities is to be sustainable then all developers must be aware that this represents a de facto social license that must be handled responsibly.

What creative and cultural institutions should do

Being a partner in an inclusive culture-led regeneration has costs. Cultural Institutions need to contribute their resources and attention to the endeavour of participatory creativity. This involves taking time to work with partners and internally forging a purpose for the organisation that leverages its strengths. Externally it also involves opening their doors and experimenting with how to engage the communities that are in need. Creative institutions will need to let go of their power to instead empower the community organisations that will be capable and eager to take responsibility for programmes and their own development.

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Being proactive in this area is especially important for universities to ensure that they deliver social value through their activities and avoid their inherent risk of reinforcing inequality.

What policy makers should do

National and local government need to take action to enable the transformation of cultural flagships into ‘flotillas’ of creative action. National governments should guide partners of culture-led regeneration so inclusive developments can proliferate across the country. By doing so a strategy can be devised to reach the ideal of a creative economy where the value of the latent creative potential in as many people as possible is realised.¹⁶

Funding is a key issue when it comes to the place of local government in making culture led regeneration inclusive. Defunding of arts and culture by local governments is a clear area for improvement. Local governments need to see the value that arts and culture can bring in spreading or activating, creativity in communities. Prioritising such spending must, of course, be seen in the context of ever shrinking budgets from central government. There is a close link, therefore, to the policies at the local and national level. National governments must understand the potential in cultural spending and appreciate the dilemmas faced by local government cuts.

Collaboration

It is recommended that local governments engage the support of educational institutions in collaborating broadly to make developments inclusive. Local government can convene important stakeholders on developments and inject capital funding. The Mayor of London has been a vital benefactor of the culture-led developments in London. Devolution, which is an enabler for strategic investment, has clearly been a factor in London and could be in other regions. Local government can also be vital for enhancing community participation. Methods of bringing together businesses, universities, local government and communities are varied and include the concept like Urban Rooms, which were popular in the 1970s. These constitute a physical space where broad stakeholders can understand the evolution of their city and debate the vision for what the future could be. Educational institutions have knowledge that can assist in such communications. For example, we supported Croydon’s Urban Room¹⁷, where CSM students worked with the council to help connect the planning for the future with the community. Engaging in collaborative planning costs resources and local authorities require the support of other actors in society, not just

16 Florida, R. (2007), ‘Flight of the Creative Class: the new global competition for talent’, New York: Collins, p. 34.

17 <https://www.croydon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/urban-room-overview.pdf>

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universities, to be able to increase public participation in shaping the future of creative cities.

The result could be an increase in initiatives as culture-led development multiplies across the cities of the UK. Seen as helping to attract talent and activate latent creativity in the population, as prescribed by urban theorists like Richard Florida, these culture-led developments could be seen as strategic investments in the new economy. Creative institutions, like us, will be a key facilitating partner in this endeavour, but other partners need to play their part fully to realise the social value that is possible when creativity is spread to marginalised communities.

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