

# Ambitious and Resourceful Cultural Planners

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## Introduction – The Case for Cultural Planning

In the UK and elsewhere, at neighbourhood, city, regional and national levels, there is a growing realisation that culture can deliver on many aspects of community engagement, empowerment and leadership. As the World Conference on Cultural Policies, held in Mexico City in 1982, put it: “Culture is a leading source of intellectual renewal and human growth, and can be understood as embracing all creative activity, not only the traditional, or ‘high’, arts but popular mass culture as well.”

Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz defines culture as: “The meanings which people create, and which create people as members of societies”. However, if culture is at the heart of how society works, it is above all in the urban context that the social aspects of culture have been negotiated over the past twenty years in the Western world.

This think piece will be mostly concerned with an exploration of new approaches to cultural policy and place-making such as Cultural Planning, and with the applicability of such frameworks to a society in which culture is becoming increasingly diverse, fragmented, and influenced by technology in the way it is produced, disseminated and consumed.

In economic terms, the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance have increasingly made culture and the broader creative economy the business of cities and the basis of their unique, competitive edge (see for example the importance assigned to gaining the title of EU Capital of Culture). In particular, in the UK, during the 1990s and 2000s, particular emphasis was put on the interplay between the economy and culture, with the latter playing an important role in image-enhancement, urban renewal and place-marketing.

However, although across the UK there are many examples of the positive effects of long-term culture-led regeneration plans, doubts have been raised in relation to the capacity, in some cases, of large cultural developments (i.e. iconic buildings ) to reflect the specificities of local life and to set in motion a virtuous cycle where local economic, social and cultural development go hand-in-hand in a sustainable way. Associated with that is the risk of a ‘banalisation’ of both cultural production and local space, whereby glossy town-centre redevelopments are mobilised and packaged for the benefit of consumers of (mainly) standardised cultural products.

The assumption here is that the arts and culture should not be viewed only as products to be consumed, but as processes and systems that are integral to the life and civic engagement of local communities. In other words, at a time when culture is becoming strategic in its connections with industry, communications and identity, *citizenship* is what cultural plans should be about.

This is also why, at governance level, there is a need for more inclusive, transparent and accountable policy tools and delivery mechanisms. These need to be holistic, joined up to the mainstream of public policy, rooted in the local context, and capable of embedding the cultural factor in planning, development, education regeneration, inward investment and heritage preservation.

This is the context from which new Cultural Planning applications have emerged over the past two decades in the UK, North America, Australia and the rest of Europe.

## What is Cultural Planning?

There is more to culture than the arts. So, when we talk about Cultural Planning we start from a perspective of a very broad, anthropological understanding of 'culture' as 'a way of life'. In this way, Cultural Planning is *not* simply the 'planning of cultural activity', but '*the strategic and integral planning and use of cultural resources (locally specific) in urban and community development*' (Colin Mercer).

Thus, while standard cultural policies have mainly a sectoral focus (e.g. the arts) Cultural Planning has a broader remit, including place-making and local development. This definition of cultural resources is a pragmatic one, and while it includes the arts, it also includes urban design, the leisure and entertainment infrastructure of a place, its history and heritage, and all the creative activity that feeds the contemporary cultural industries.

By linking the unique and distinctive cultural features of a place to other aspects of economic and social life, Cultural Planning can be instrumental in creating development opportunities while meeting local communities' needs and aspirations. In essence, Cultural Planning gives culture a high value, and uses it to influence all policy portfolios, cutting across traditional divisions between the public, private and voluntary sectors, government departments and different professional specialisations.

## Why and What – The Advantages

This way of thinking derives from a tradition of radical planning and the humanistic management of cities championed in the early 1960s chiefly by urbanist Jane Jacobs. Places (and cities) are our own artefacts, argued Jacobs, and the trouble with dealing with them is that planners and policy-makers can only contemplate uses one at a time, by categories. Jacobs saw the city as an ecosystem composed of physical-economic-ethical processes interacting with each other in a natural flow which connected to create the unique cultural ecology of a place.

Cultural Planning is creative and humanistic, ambitious and realistic, based on an understanding of a place and its community's (or -ies') needs and aspirations. It is a holistic approach, and looking at all of the services in a local area *together* results in a more effective use of those services which are specific to local needs, rather than being a blanket provision across a whole town or city, which may be appropriate in some communities but not in others.

As a creative process it requires a resilience to risk and an ability to be open to new ways of looking at problems that may have an open-ended solution – it needs a particular kind of flexible, confident mind-set.

## The Ingredients

The cultural identity of a community comprises who the people are, their backgrounds, tastes, rituals, experiences, diversity, talents and aspirations for the future. The cultural richness of a place is also governed by local heritage attributes and the natural and built qualities that have attracted residents to the area. Cultural Planning demands a recognition of the distinctive resources of a place in the first instance and then the development of policies rooted in those resources.

Key to the Cultural Planning method are two characteristics: cultural-, community- and place-mapping on the one hand and strategy-building on the other.

**Mapping** is a pre-condition for identifying, harnessing and then exploiting local potential but it is also a technique that can be used to define a community's cultural activities, capacities and needs. Knowledge of a place's cultural profile can be useful for advocating change: it can inform policy development, attract funding and resources, and be instrumental in the adoption of new approaches to local development.

A fundamental aspect of mapping is to list resources as 'assets' rather than 'deficits'. This means focusing on what is present in an area (e.g. cultural institutions, or the local associational and institutional base) not on what is absent, or what is problematic. The adoption of such strong 'internal focus', however, must not be seen as a way of minimising the role of external forces but simply as an opportunity to stress local definition, investment, creativity, and control.

Cultural and place-mapping is more specific than a SWOT analysis in assessing the resources of an area or in tackling a problem. By allowing stakeholders to think afresh, cultural mapping can reveal resources (such as for example, place characteristics and distinctiveness, or informal community activities, networks of affiliation, different lifestyle patterns) that we did not know were there. In this way, it can be instrumental in developing policy interventions that are truly innovative and sustainable.

In fact, supporting and connecting resources with cross-departmental and cross-sector collaboration is key to the success of cultural plans, and this is where the second ingredient of Cultural Planning comes in: **Strategy Building**.

Places that successfully conducted cultural mappings must also have a clear vision of what they want to achieve, who is leading the process, and why and for whom this process has been set in motion. Such approaches to making the most of a place's unique cultural resources right across the spectrum depend on creativity.

A **Creative City** is home to creative businesses and organizations, and the individuals who direct and propel them, but creative cities do not arise spontaneously, they require creative *leadership*. Taking measured risks, feeling positive towards shared leadership, being determined but not rigidly deterministic, having the courage to go beyond the political cycle, having strategic principles while maintaining flexibility and adaptability to a changing environment are the key markers of creative leadership.

A successful Cultural Planning strategy must seek to challenge existing 'received' perceptions about what change means for a certain place and to be guided by a vision informed by a holistic, rather than a service or department viewpoint, and not be bounded by the responsibilities of a specific department or committee. It should make links with other existing plans and it should seek to create bridges between different local constituencies and groups of interest so that duplications of tasks are avoided, new energy is injected into the policy-making task and innovative ideas can be explored and implemented.

In essence, cultural plans are the result of a process and require active participation from different local actors, and the more backing there is from the 'top' the better.

## **Practical Applications**

The notion of Cultural Planning, widely applied in both the USA (since the 1970s) and Australia (since the mid-1980s), has recently gained ground also among European and UK policy-makers. **In the USA**, in particular, precedents of the concept can be traced back to

the civic programmes of the New Deal and to the strong tradition of neighbourhood-based community arts centres. Here, back in 1992, Robert McNulty, the director of the non-profit organisation Partners For Livable Communities, published *Culture and Communities: the Arts in the Life of American Cities*, a collection of case studies focusing on cities and towns representing a cross-section of life in the USA. The overall aim of this document was to place the arts and culture in the broader context of community development, build on their economic role, and expand it to include other social and community concerns.

By featuring inspiring examples of Cultural Planning strategies, the study considered the way in which more and more communities in the USA were using the arts as a means of fostering community pride and cultural identity.

**In Australia** applications of the concept can be related to the community cultural development agenda of the 1980s, and to the local autonomy lent by the federal systems of government to local agencies, which were able to run and fund independent cultural development programmes.

A key example emerging from this scenario is the 1990 *Brisbane Cultural Development Strategy*. In the document, the Brisbane stake-holders stated a set of principles on which to base an effective urban and cultural policy for the city. One of these principles is that, in order to assure cultural pluralism, it is essential that cultural planners understand what different segments comprise the community, conduct discussions and carry out research with each group, and include representations from each group on boards, committees and in the evaluation process.

**Across Europe**, a joined-up (or multi-agency) Cultural Planning approach has been adopted successfully by some of the cities that won the title of Capital of Culture over the past twenty years (e.g. Glasgow 1990, Antwerp 1993, Lille 2004, Cork 2005 and arguably Liverpool 2008). In such cases, Cultural Planning partnerships were created as a tool for delivering on the legacy, by stepping up their role and by widening their aims from the strictly 'cultural' to the broader development objectives (e.g. by developing initiatives linked to economic, urban and social development).

## The Challenges

As one of the first countries in Europe to experiment extensively during the 1980s with culture-led revitalisation, **the UK** is continuously developing local models of integrated approaches designed to tackle issues of quality of life, economic deprivation and health concerns and the local Cultural Strategies of the early 2000 (for example) provided a blueprint for embedding culture at the heart of local development.

Such documents (and plans) constitute early attempts to encourage local authorities to formalise and promote the strategic development of their cultural and culture-related services, in the context of a broad definition of culture and the recognition of partnership working within localities, regions, and sub-regions in which local authorities take the lead. This was also reflective of the advocacy of the Cultural Planning approach by central government to local government and Cultural Services. In particular, DCMS policy has intended that cultural strategies be both a way of enhancing delivery effectiveness of local government services, as well as being a tool for raising the profile of culture.

However, a number of issues have emerged from cultural strategy implementations and these mostly focus on the obstacles encountered by the many different mechanisms set up to deliver on the broad cultural agenda at local level (see for example the question of what role the Local Strategic Partnerships should play).

In particular, the problem seems to be that local political culture is sometimes too weak to be able to offer a solid ground for strategic/joined-up thinking. Thus the partnership organisations designed to bridge the gaps between services, departments, layers of local government and community constituents lack the experience and the time to develop shared learning before being expected to deliver. In addition, the fact that Cultural Strategies were not 'statutory' has been interpreted by some Local Strategic Partnerships as a sign of the (yet again) 'peripheral' role of culture in community development and regeneration.

However, more recently (2005) these considerations have led to a radical reassessment by the DCMS of Cultural Strategies and to the issuing of a set of new guidelines linking Cultural and Community Strategies, and although it is too early to offer definitive conclusions, there is a feeling among seasoned cultural planners that this new round of strategies could throw-up the same old tension between a push to deliver against targets (set at national level) and the pull of local specificity and potential. In particular, the recent guidelines for merging Cultural and Community Strategies do not pay enough attention to the need to map community potential (cultural or otherwise) on the ground before setting priorities for actions.

There is a further challenge here for those wanting to embark on Cultural Planning. In particular, it is often Cultural Services (in some cases it is simply an ADO's initiative) setting in motion cultural mapping processes but – in the absence of locally dedicated strategic Cultural Planning mechanisms – implementation is often devolved to line managers or heads of services often burdened by other priorities and targets, inadequate understanding of the broader value of local cultural resources, as well as funding constraints.

In this scenario what is needed is a vision rooted in the establishment of links between local development and culture coupled to shared leadership on the ground. As mentioned earlier, from the point of view of practical Cultural Planning implementation mechanisms, there are examples of proactive partnerships out there, but there is no 'one size fits all' model. In the UK, there are interesting examples of places that either in the past, or, currently, are experimenting with integrated cultural and community developments aligned to place-making.

Based on the Australian experience, in 1993 **Bristol** set up an independent mechanism (the Cultural Development Partnership, or BCDP). In this case, Bristol City Council, the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, regional arts organisations such as South West Arts, the University and local entrepreneurs came together to create and implement a medium- to long-term strategy for the regeneration and improvement of the quality of life in the city centre.

Since then, the BCDP has been influential in brokering the development of a series of ground-breaking projects, such as the annual short-film festival Brief Encounters, the creation of the Watershed Media Centre, and the Arnolfini contemporary art gallery, both of which have played a major role in the development of the Harbour-side area (more recently, Bristol 2008 and the Legible City public art strategy).

Over the years, the BCDP has become an inspiration for ways of marrying local focus (and knowledge), to the freedom and flexibility to implement strategic actions with the right partners on the ground. The East Kent Cultural Consortium was an early attempt to build such a strategic and locally accountable mechanism, while the Creative Foundation in Folkestone is an example of a delivery mechanism which seems to have worked quite well at improving the profile of the local creative economy and at generating high-profile visitors' attractions. In the Thames Gateway North Kent area an interesting model of (cultural mapping) toolkit has been developed within the Living Places scheme, and in the past three years the city of Norwich has been training key stakeholders in the Local Strategic Partnership to use the Cultural Planning method to deal with community development. Elsewhere, although initially conceived as a small department within the council, Creative Lewisham (London) represents another variation on the BCDP model. A light footed organisation acting a bit like an impresario, generating ideas, assessing feasibility, triggering initiatives, seeking synergies and subcontracting projects wherever possible.

The examples presented earlier of places that have used Cultural Planning successfully have some common traits. Firstly, by using locally specific mapping techniques they have unveiled unique resources; secondly, they have analysed such resources and looked into synergies between them and other (tangible and intangible) assets; finally, they all have encouraged a process of creative thinking among local communities and civic leaders alike about how to maximise the newly discovered potential. Crucially, they have put in place new mechanisms of governance and delivery characterised by adaptability, an ability to move from project to project, and the capacity to maintain a strategic overview of what is needed in the short-, medium- and long-term to embed culture at the heart of local development.

