

## **CULTURE AND REGENERATION – 2019 SURF ANNUAL DEBATE**

**Thursday, 9 May 2019 at V&A Dundee**

**What happened here over the last forty years to turn a city described by Paul Theroux as “the ugly duckling” of Scotland into the poster child of culture led regeneration?**

We are all of us a complex combination of our experiences in life, the values that inform our beliefs, our training, and what we hold to be true.

None of these things are givens.

Like urban regeneration and creative practice – we are a complex mix of different influences ... and what we put into practice is the expression of our values ....

I think Olly and I would agree that humans are innately creative – it’s within our DNA, it’s why we’ve become the dominant species on this planet – being human can be both a force for good and a force for ill.

So when Olly talks about being “against creativity”, what he is actually against is the way that creativity has been, to quote his own words – “harnessed by capitalism to further a neo-conservative agenda”.

I do not recognise that argument in this city. We have lost none of our left wing radical views, we have been buffeted by the same economic forces, but we can point to many examples of where culture and regeneration have been mutually reinforcing and where outcomes have been a force for good.

So, I am going to set out the counter-narrative ... and the images (behind me) will, I hope, illustrate this story.

In 1973, both Dundee and Glasgow were cities going through seismic post-industrial shock and confronting big housing and social problems. I worked there as a community development worker for 15 years.

Glasgow and Dundee followed similar policies of Comprehensive Development Area renewal – slum clearance – and rebuilding. A brutal end, to a brutal industrial era.

The new neighbourhoods created on the periphery of our cities were equally brutal, devoid of a quality of life that anyone would defend. They were sterile ... and, for many, they were hostile.

In 1972, the report “Born to Fail” set out in stark terms the evidence that, in Glasgow, where you were born would affect your health, your educational outcomes, your

economic prospects, the length of your life, and the opportunities you would, or would not have access to. The situation that many people were facing was described as hope-less.

Twenty years later, the Black Report repeated this analysis. The underlying socio-economic factors which created inequality remained unchanged and they are still with us today. But Glasgow had changed dramatically – it has become hope-full.

So, I am not arguing that investment in culture can, of itself, solve societal inequalities, but it can change the aspirations and the outlook of a city.

Creativity was not responsible for:

- market failure
- social inequality
- income inequality
- health inequality
- the environmental crisis we face

The transformation of cities like Glasgow and Dundee has been very much down to the quality of cultural life that has been developed and to community led regeneration.

Community engagement has given people a form of dignity and self-respect that was missing in the early '70s. It has kept us grounded and explored new ways of living, it keeps public officials accountable and challenges our values. It provides a purpose in the lives of many people who have lost their economic foothold in the world as our manufacturing and industrial base collapsed. Blame capitalism for creating the problem by all means, but don't blame creativity.

It is too convenient to link regeneration to gentrification ... of course, this can happen, but few would describe Maryhill, Easterhouse, Ardler or Stobswell as gentrified. Today, these are stronger communities, regenerated in part through strategic investment in culture and in part through investment in the physical environment with strong community influence.

We have learned from the mistakes of the '60s and '70s. We recognise that successful regeneration has to engage people and is not just about bricks and mortar.

The reason that, 30 years on, I still live and work here, has everything to do with both civic activism and a political commitment in this city. Dundee has been a city which values cultural engagement and invests in culture. Creativity has been an integral part of Dundee's regeneration story.

Just over 30 years ago, Dundee Rep produced a remarkable theatrical event – “Witch’s Blood” – the story of the demise of the last woman accused of being a witch in this city, Grissel Jaffray. The play had a huge community cast, anchored by the professional actors of Dundee Rep. Its director, Alan Lyddiard, integrated community voices, local dialect, community song and created site-specific locations around the city. A fleet of buses enabled the audience to move from location to location as the story was told. It was mind-blowing in terms of its scale of ambition, and it still resonates today. A number of those who work in the creative and cultural sector in the city were first engaged through this event. It was their relatives enacting the story of their town, in their own words. It brought social history, people and place together. It did not need a theatre, only creative, socially engaged artists working in and with communities.

Throughout the ‘90s, Dundee Rep continued to produce plays using the words and music of Michael Marra and the creative talent of the permanent ensemble, working alongside the community cast in re-telling the story of the city’s industrial, social, cultural life: Blood Red Berries, The Mill Lavies, She Town, etc. This was political activism through theatre and it was catalytic.

Dundee has placed community at the centre of its regeneration initiatives. It has used creative processes such as Planning for Real to involve those living in areas of poor housing in determining the future of their communities.

Dundee has managed to maintain a long-term commitment to both:

- community lead regeneration, and
- culture led regeneration

DCA would probably not have happened had it not been for the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design and the Art School Movement. So, the multiple influences on the cultural regeneration of the city are hard to pin down but they are all about people, place and a response to the shifts and values in society. There has been a strong, shared ambition to re-invent the city using cultural investment:

- The RRS Discovery was brought “home” to the city as a powerful metaphor for our place in the world – “City of Discovery”.
- The Rep formed the Scottish Contemporary Dance Company.
- Verdant Works – the jute textile museum – was created.
- Dundee secured funding to create the Scottish School of Contemporary Dance – a millennium capital project.
- A major five year project refurbished the city’s Art Gallery and Museum.
- The Science Centre was built.
- The High Mill was restored.
- Creative Dundee came into existence.

- The Dundee Schools Music Service launched the ASPIRE programme (a cultural boost for children from the most deprived areas).
- And, plans for an international competition to design Scotland's Museum of Design were developed in partnership with the V&A and 14,000 people voted on which building should be selected.

The Cultural Pathfinder project spent 18 months exploring “cultural choices” and looking with people at how they defined their culture. This process recognised that Dundee's traditional industrial base had gone and its future employment growth lay in creative industries, education, biomedical sciences, computer games, art and design. The city's cultural offer had to reflect these changes. Cultural investment has responded to the expectations of a creative, flexible and increasingly international workforce.

The opening of Dundee Contemporary Arts was controversial. Overnight, it doubled the price of a pint of beer in the west end of the city. It also signalled a change of aspiration. DCA has gone on to become one of the most successful arts venues in Scotland been – beer is still expensive, but it is certainly not exclusive.

These initiatives combined to create the conditions for “citizen led campaigns” which allowed Dundee to present itself as a candidate city for UK City of Culture, European Capital of Culture, and to secure its status as the only UNESCO Creative City of Design in the UK.

Investment in the cultural sector and the development of creative industries will not substitute for the loss of manufacturing or industrial jobs. It has, however, provided opportunities for people to find employment and to enjoy a quality of life which is based on those things which make us human and allow creativity to flourish.

Our Universities have become international institutions, helping bring the world to Dundee, and taking Dundee to the world. Over 150 countries (that's three-quarters of the countries of the world) are now represented among the students and staff. And they get one of the best student experiences in the UK, as reported consistently across the major student surveys.

So Dundee isn't just the best place to live in Scotland and the UK, as the Sunday Times recently told us, it is also one of the best places to study and to work, and this is directly related to the quality of cultural life on offer and its emergence as a creative hub.

Had Dundee not embraced culture led regeneration, where would it be today?

It would not have created the impressive list of cultural assets. It would not have retained its unique network of neighbourhood libraries. It would not have developed

the world's first degree programme in computer games. It would certainly not have the V&A Museum of Design. And, it would not only be a poorer place economically but, socially. Those who live here would have an infinitely poorer quality of life ....

Creativity and cultural engagement have provided a sense of hope and possibility. They have become economic drivers. They have created a real energy and the social capital that can both ameliorate and help to address the many challenges that we face today.

We need creativity and we need to stand up to argue for it, not against it.

## SUMMARY

Being against creativity and talking down the impact of culture led regeneration risks playing directly into the very forces of capitalism and post-austerity politics that Olly seeks to challenge.

It's too easy to blame creativity for the socio-economic challenges we face and for the way in which the world of work has changed. There are injustices, but these exist despite, not because of changes in working practice.

In Dundee's case, culture led regeneration has shaped collective social action. Our cultural strategy has, at its heart, social purpose. The values that underpin it have sustained change in the political composition of the local authority over a number of decades.

These are the same values that have promoted Dundee as a city of recycling; as a city which has embraced the Scottish Living Wage; as a city which has argued for and sustained fair pay for artists and designers; it is a city which has promoted electric vehicles, car sharing and now cycling. There is a set of social values in Dundee which sit comfortably with a commitment to community engagement and culture led regeneration.

My starting point has always been to engage with communities, to trust people, to build creative partnerships, and to give communities a greater say in the allocation of public resources. If local authority expenditure was liberated from its current ring-fencing, I suspect the general population would vote to see at least the same or more invested in arts, heritage and culture. As it stands, these are areas of investment which are under pressure precisely because of the extent of ring-fencing and the general challenge of underfunding of public services.

It is easier to be against something than it is to be for it. I am against pumping out carbon and consuming resources at an unsustainable rate; I am against zero hour contracts; I am against the way in which global economic forces have impacted on vulnerable communities; I am against injustice and inequality.

We have to be for something, and I am certainly for public investment in the arts to enable a high quality of cultural life to be accessible to everyone. I accept that this might involve paying more tax. I am concerned that, at this point in history, unless we stand for creativity and for investment in culture, we may see it fall victim to the post-austerity, neo-liberal narrative which counts the price of everything but knows the value of nothing.