Culture and Regeneration;
An ideal match?
Thursday 9th May, 12pm-4pm, V&A Dundee

Background

SURF links partners, policy, processes and learning across all sectors, geographies and levels of regeneration in Scotland. It does so in order to enhance shared understanding and practical cooperation, and thereby to improve outcomes to the benefit of all.

The breadth of SURF’s membership network reflects its broad view of regeneration, encompassing and connecting physical, social, economic, environmental and cultural dynamics. Over recent years, from Bilbao to Dundee, and across the communities, towns and cities of Scotland, heritage, culture and creativity based approaches to regeneration, have moved to centre stage.

Can places and people use their distinctive assets, creative processes and shared culture to drive authentic community, social and economic regeneration?
Or is that increasingly fashionable focus, just a distraction from the less glamorous regeneration challenges of upgrading infrastructure, attracting quality employment and tackling poverty and inequalities?

These were the central questions asked at this year’s SURF debate.

In following the SURF Chair Kate Wimpress who opened that debate, the leader of Dundee City Council, Councillor John Alexander welcomed SURF and its cross sector guests to the highly appropriate setting of the Dundee V&A Museum of Design.

Human Geography academic, Dr Oli Mould of Royal Holloway University of London, then set out the main arguments of his recent book, 'Against Creativity'.

Stewart Murdoch, Director of Leisure and Culture Dundee, responded by drawing on what the city has achieved in recent years, by capitalising on its creative and cultural assets.

Additional comments were provided by invited panel members with relevant perspectives and expertise, they were Maggie Broadley (CoCreate), Phil Deverell (Creative Scotland), Leonie Bell (Renfrewshire Council, Paisley Partnership) and Alisdair Clements (INCH Architecture). SURF Chief Executive, Andy Milne then opened the debate up, by chairing questions and comments drawn from the diverse experience and views of the audience, which included a wide range of regeneration practitioners, community activists, policy makers and academics.

**Summary of main points from opening presentations**

(l-r) Stewart Murdoch, Cllr John Alexander, Kate Wimpress and Oli Mould

Councillor John Alexander, Leader of Dundee City Council

In warmly welcoming SURF to the city once again, Councillor Alexander noted the substantial challenges that Dundee has faced, and continues to face, as a post-industrial city. In enthusing about how the city has successfully used is culture as mechanism for regeneration, he emphasised that the most important part of any cultural strategy, is connecting people into the process of planning and
delivery. A sincere and extensive consultation is therefore key and the V&A outreach programme spoke to 100,000 people before it opened. While there is pride that the resultant building is such an architectural success, he emphasised that the driving force was not the building; ‘buildings aren’t culture, people are culture’.

Councillor Alexander argued that culture based approaches can be used to address wider challenges such as; drugs, poverty unemployment. A key objective is fostering community spirit. He cited the Kirkton Art Project as an intergenerational project that broke down preconceptions and prejudices and brought the whole community together.

In addition to significant social benefits from local projects and the opening of the prestigious V&A, the city and its people also gain from related economic outcomes. These include increased attractiveness for business interests and investment, tourism, commerce, conferences and hospitality services.

In reviewing the success of Dundee’s culture and creativity approach, the City Council leader concluded that it is the intangibles that are ultimately most important; the rekindled fire in the belly of Dundee residents; a renewed pride in Dundee and more widely shared confidence in the city and its prospects. Such things can’t be easily measured but are nonetheless valuable as has become increasingly evident, especially over the last 5 years.

**Dr Oli Mould, Academic and Author of ‘Against Creativity’**

In drawing on the main arguments in his recent book ‘Against Creativity, Dr Mould reminded the audience that humanity’s creative collective imagination once powered the successful ‘race to the moon’. However, he suggested that what were once communal ‘Moon shot’ projects, have become privatised commercial ventures. He argued that the in the relentless pursuit of financial returns for the few, we have forfeited the wider gains of shared innovation.

He contended that shared creative ideas and enterprises are now conventionally commandeered by capitalism at the expense of democratic creativity.

Oli argued that ‘creativity’ is now largely a byword for gentrification, through which we promote and develop ‘creative cultural quarters’ to attract the affluent urban class. Such gentrified places are often not just private but also securitised, to the displacement of less affluent and more marginalised citizens, communities and entities.

However, in reality, as creative social beings we don’t want homogeneity or private citadels. We want diverse and vibrant cities for the many, as exampled in;

- Cheran in Mexico where the people acted collectively and creatively to throw out corrupt politicians. It’s now flourishing.
- The Preston Model – which is creatively capturing local spending, and encouraging local businesses to source locally.
- Transition Towns network – which is reimagining post-industrial towns.
Oli went on to highlight the example of a Skatepark at Southbank, where recreational sub-culture groups had defeated gentrification plans to sell off land they use creatively for retail space. They had done so with a lively and imaginative campaign that attracted 40,000 signatures to a petition supporting their resistance.

An emergent response has been the process known as Artwashing, in which developers are increasingly using art and artists to give places/projects a veneer of ‘cool’. He cited how the run down Balfron Tower public housing construction, was artistically promoted to make it more amenable to the cultural sector and attract the ‘right type’ of people, with the right income and leisure time.

In such cases, we are all encouraged to believe that the ground targeted for commercial development is barren, and that there is no viable alternative.

Dr Mould urged the rejection of that propaganda and that if we are to successfully defend scarce shared space, we need to be more radical and to creatively ‘de-stabilize the ground’ to make it less attractive to capitalist short-term growth.

Oli concluded that the boundaries imposed on our imagination are artificial and that authentic culture can’t be put in a box. Finally, he urged everyone to release their inner revolutionary rather than their inner entrepreneur.

**Stewart Murdoch, Leisure and Culture Dundee**

From his long-term perspective of involvement in its regeneration process, Stewart Murdoch noted that Dundee has come a long way since Paul Thoraux said it was the ‘ugly duckling of Scotland’ and that it is now the poster child for community and culture led regeneration.

Stewart noted that, as de-industrialised cities, both Dundee and Glasgow had used Semtex and bulldozers to create sterile environments and communities with children who were labelled as “born to fail”. That conscious destruction marked a brutal end to a brutal working period and the breakup of the city’s cultural environment. What was called ‘regeneration’, very largely dealt with bricks and mortar but not humanity.

Stewart asserted that gentrification is not regeneration and culture is not responsible for inequality but a solution to it. Authentic culture rebuilds cities and communities. Dundee’s focus is on civic activism, with twin tracks of culture and regeneration, with investment in community led regeneration underpinning civic participation.

Dundee had strategically re-engaged with its history and its communities and culture. In doing so, it had spent a lot of time and resources finding out how communities could be regenerated, rather than replaced. It had found that civic investment in culture compliments more conventional regeneration efforts.
Stewart recalled that the challenges of change over recent decades have been huge and Dundee’s experience does not suggest that culture can replace a historical industrial base, but culture and creativity have provided hope and inspiration as part of a wider and long-term process of change.

Stewart summed up by reflecting on the current Dundee offer, a small city with an incredible portfolio of cultural investment. It is diverse and multi-cultured, with 150 different nationalities represented at Dundee University. Culture and community led approaches have enabled the regeneration process to be mutually beneficial and relatively harmonious. Crucially, he concluded, any critic would have to consider what would Dundee be like today if it hadn’t taken that path?

**Comments from the Panel**

Before opening the discussion up to the wider audience, SURF’s Andy Milne, asked the invited panel to offer some comments on what they had heard so far, from their varied perspectives.

- **Maggie Broadley** of CoCreate advocated more support to enable professional artists to work with communities, having witnessed the considerable impact their expertise can have.
- **Phil Deverell** of Creative Scotland spoke of the challenges in defining value from creative activity since everyone’s cultural conceptions are different.
- **Leonie Bell** of Renfrewshire Council suggested that we do a disservice to architects and buildings which have values and impacts that can be incredibly powerful. She emphasised the power of architecture and design in creating a democratic space.
- **Alisdair Clements** of Inch Architecture contended that a building is just a building unless we successfully factor in the intended purpose and outcomes, before we design and build them.

**Main Debate**

Andy Milne then invited comments and questions from the floor on the arguments and ideas that had been presented. What follows is a brief summary of the broad spectrum of responses, proposals and statements that were raised under a variety of themes.

**Power – who or what has control?**

- We need to give control and ownership to the people in the communities.
- Power has always appropriated culture. The danger is to assume that culture is a tool for regeneration, when it has an inherent value of its own.
- Should national agencies be driving community culture? We should be looking at taking things/decisions out of hidden rooms.
- This is exactly the conversation that Creative Scotland are just launching. What should they focus on?
- National agencies need to focus at local level, supporting communities to achieve their needs and wants.
• It’s hard to work nationally and locally. How can you represent local when you spend so much time on national strategy? We have to keep a historic perspective.
• Youth of today is showing us the way. Let young people speak.
• Culture is a contested concept, not homogenous. What creates the dilemma is that culture is seen to be something delivered by professionals obscuring existing culture.
• There’s an issue about buildings and where and why they originate.
• Instead of all this talk about empowering people maybe we could stop disempowering them.
• Power is central to what we should be talking about - we need an accountable and democratic structure
• SURF and others need to be more radical.

**The importance of clear communication**

• There should be differentiation between high and low culture.
• There is too much loose language. What’s needed is precise language to enhance learning.
• Social capital is the word ... why don’t we use that. Everyone knows what that means.
• Culture can’t be defined. If it’s defined, you have to put a value on it.
• Culture is not creativity. They’re two big circles that overlap. The draft culture strategy is such a disaster, partly because you could substitute the word ‘creativity’ for ‘culture’ throughout and the meaning would hardly change.

**Culture and art are not luxuries**

• Arts is not a frippery. Creativity is not a luxury. Arts and culture are a basic need.
• Culture is important as a basic human need.
• Art is embedded in everything. Boundaries are artificial
• Art used to be about community, about collective endeavour. It belonged to everyone

**Health and wellbeing**

• ‘Culture and regeneration’ should be about health and wellbeing, something the draft culture strategy barely touched on. And that means recognising that not all ‘culture’ is beneficial, e.g. the cultures of Orange marches, football violence, gangs and knife crime, drugs, xenophobia.
• There is a need for de-growth as a driver to address mental health and wellbeing issues.

**Economic, Funding and Policy Impact**

• Gentrification v regeneration outcomes can be predicted according to ‘strength of local market’ and whether that market driven by hedge funds or insurrection. Edinburgh and London have strong local market. Glasgow and Dundee have weak local market.
• What would funding look like for working class culture?
• Loss of facilities such as libraries, museums, cinemas, community halls and even local pubs. The spaces that are left, are now costing three times as much as they used to, or more, excluding the very people they were built to benefit.
How do we protect public spaces, like libraries, which are under threat?
We need to change measurements from economic data to other data.
Purely economic equations can’t be used to judge a quality of place. Other measurements like SROI are needed.
We need to set new parameters. Creativity is best unshackled from economics.
There are serious budget challenges - Dundee only spends 1.5% on arts, cultural heritage area. Creative Scotland only gets 0.2% of the Scottish Government Budget.
The implication is that the role of regeneration is economic. If you put culture with regeneration it becomes linked with economics. Culture should not be in the service of regeneration. Regeneration should be in the service of culture.
Growth is essential for fragile communities to enable repopulation and amenities
We need to discuss how we want our tax invested
Investment in culture is driving tourism and visitor numbers to Dundee for conferences etc.
Corporate creativity is about the opposite of place, it’s about a global phenomenon which cities have tried to buy their way into, from Guggenheim look-alikes to ‘creative quartiers’.
’Culture-proofing’— major policy developments need to go through a filter which examines their potential cultural impacts, good and bad.
Should we be looking at bio-regional regeneration rather than city and rural places?

What is working?
Examples of Artists in Residence programme in Glasgow as good use of resource.
Culture/creativity as regeneration tool began in Craigmillar with culture and arts festival as an act of resistance.
What matters is the story. Some of Glasgow and Dundee’s success is because they started telling different narratives about themselves.
Culture and creativity are very similar. They’re about place and stories.
There is a need to embrace the haphazard and accidental. The V&A is not the result of careful planning. Creativity successes come from trying and failing.
We always had culture in Dundee; always had a global perspective. History is what this was built on. What happens now is just an extension of that.
Use art to challenge ideas of what art should and shouldn’t be. Art can’t be expected to solve all of society’s ills.

Summary Remarks
Having drawn the open discussion session to a close, Andy Milne, asked the two guest speakers to provide some final observations considering the varied points raised in the course of the debate.
In doing so, Dr Oli Mould suggested that we should all accept and embrace the complexity in attempting to define culture and build it into existing systems. In terms of practice he acknowledged
that participatory budgeting is a means of forcing present power holders to begin relinquishing some degrees of control. For a more ambitious outlook, he encouraged everyone to consider what a state committed to the dissolution of power would look like.

Stewart Murdoch agreed that ‘power’ is central to what we should be talking about. He suggested that to effectively address imbalances, we need to continuously work to ensure the accountability of our democratic structures. Stewart stressed the importance of partnerships and community engagement to help rebalance power. He concluded on the optimistic note that emerging high level and local Place Principle support, has potential to help us improve and protect quality of life for all.

Conclusion

SURF would like to thank everyone who participated in this interesting, stimulating and constructive event, which was the latest in SURF’s series of topical annual debates.

Contributions from both speakers and from the floor reflect SURF’s broader findings that there is enthusiasm for ways in which considered use of authentic heritage and culture can enhance wider regeneration efforts, providing additional resources and increasing community participation.

Learning from the debate will inform SURF’s ongoing work in exploring and supporting the role and capacity of Creative Culture in Community Regeneration.

Further information about SURF can be found on the SURF website www.surf.scot