

Building Tomorrow: Culture in Regeneration

The Lowry, Manchester, 25 February 2003

The key objective of the Conference was to begin the process of identifying the indicators and measures by which the regenerative impacts of large-scale cultural capital projects can be assessed. The Conference focused specifically on the experiences of capital projects in the three northern regions. The Conference sought to:

- Bring together experts in the field in order to isolate and discuss hard evidence for the special role of culture in regeneration;
- Consider whether capital cultural projects have long-term impacts on issues such as health, education and crime reduction; and
- To make recommendations for future policy and practice in this field.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, chaired the Conference which attracted 150 participants from a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including: local council representatives, funding bodies, academics, central government agencies, private sector developers, and cultural institution representatives contributed to the discussions.

In her keynote speech, the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP (Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) made the following key points:

- The past eight years has seen unprecedented investment in major cultural capital projects, largely due to the National Lottery;
- This investment in the social capital of individuals and communities has resulted in significant regeneration throughout the UK;
- One of the main challenges currently faced, is to improve commonality in the targets and indicators by which we can measure the social and economic impact of cultural projects; and
- One of the major proposals to come out of the Lottery review (which began last July), is to merge the Community Fund and the New Opportunities Fund, to create a single community distributor.

Tessa Jowell was followed by Tony McNulty MP (Housing, Planning and Regeneration Minister), who said:

- Promoting good design and community involvement are two important prerequisites for successful regeneration;
- Good urban design of buildings and spaces is integral to successful regeneration – well designed buildings build confidence, strengthen local identity and create civic pride; and
- Well designed regeneration is not enough if people do not feel a bond with what is built, and/or do not feel that it is relevant to them – the local community has to be engaged from day one to improve ownership of the project.

Hazel Blears MP (Minister for Public Health) followed Tony McNulty and outlined the case for the impact of capital cultural projects on health – she made the following points:

- The arts and culture have a significant role to play in improving the health and well-being of individuals & communities;

- Cultural investment in particular, can have a profound impact on health outcomes, when used as a catalyst for regeneration; and
- The linkages between culture and health are complex and not necessarily well understood – we need “to ensure we can systematically and routinely realise such wider benefits”.

Conference Themes

A number of common themes emerged from the presentations and discussions.

Joined-up thinking/action

A more holistic approach is needed (both within government and between government & other stakeholders) to better understand the complex relationships between culture and regeneration, and to provide more sustainable & effective outcomes.

Cultural investments have a number of obvious (and some non-obvious) outcomes. The government needs better to understand how communities function and the regenerative impact that culture can have on a wide range of outcomes. Furthermore, capital cultural projects must be conceived and evaluated within a framework that includes impacts on: health, education, transport, crime and community renewal opportunities.

A number of specific suggestions were made with respect to the issue, including:

- Better engagement/consultation with local communities (to improve ownership of the project and benefits to the local community);
- More explicit linkages across government between: DCMS, ODPM, health agencies, crime agencies etc; and
- Greater use of master plans to provide a wider development context to individual cultural projects.

Funding

A number of public sector funding issues were raised during the Conference, notably concerning the:

- Flexibility and sustainability of funding - constructing the project is not enough in itself; funding must be in place to maintain the building and ensure it can properly serve its intended function for at least a minimum period;
- Strings attached to such funding – specifically, the compliance costs involved in meeting the reporting and audit requirements of public sector funding; and
- Diversity of sources – the costs and logistics involved in dealing with a number of public sector funding bodies.

Some specific recommendations were made to improve public sector funding. Examples include developing a National Funding Programme, and providing more flexible funding arrangements. In addition, the breakout group looking at ‘Funding the Future’ recommended that DCMS should encourage more flexibility and co-operation between the funding bodies.

Private sector funding issues were also discussed. Non-departmental public bodies increasingly regard co-funding (or joint public-private sector funding) as a necessary requirement for arts and cultural projects.

Evidence

The government needs to acknowledge and better understand limitations associated with the existing evidence base and be wary of over-claiming benefits attributable to cultural projects.

Urgent work is now needed to map robust existing evidence, collect and co-ordinate evidence, identify and refine the measures used to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of cultural projects, and create a framework by which these can be applied in a consistent manner across our sectors.

Time horizon

Stakeholders need to take a longer-term focus, to better understand and capture the regeneration benefits of cultural projects. This issue has implications for each of the themes outlined above, namely: joined-up thinking/action, funding and evidence.

Design

Urban and architectural design was another key theme to emerge from of the day - it represents another cross-cutting issue. Design quality is regarded as a critical success factor for cultural projects, regardless of the scale of the project and a necessary element for ensuring the long-term success and viability of such projects.

Next Steps

The Conference represented the culmination of the first phase of the 'culture in regeneration' debate – it helped to inform the agenda for the second phase (outlined in broad detail above).

DCMS is now considering how best to progress the second phase of this project, which will start to identify the measures and indicators we need to assess capital projects by, if we are to effectively prove that cultural projects have wide-ranging social and economic regenerative impacts that effectively deliver key government objectives.