

Creating Sustainable Cultures

On the face of it, sustainable culture may appear to be a public sector debate over a particular cultural establishment and how best to justify the funding required to maintain it. However, I wish to start from the position that for individuals who create and sustain cultures, not the bureaucratic infrastructures that we manufacture to support our established cultural heritage. A prime example is the Millennium Dome. Here we see a project without roots or individuality, dominated by committees with a consensual view of the world, and lacking any creative individuality or risk.

It is time for a serious readjustment of the way we perceive and support cultural activity, otherwise there is a danger that without critical analysis or reflection, we will continue to ignore the true nature of culture: that is people, risk, change and creativity.

Conceptual confusion; arts industry, heritage industry, creative industries or cultural industries?

I will start with a conventional definition of culture, succinctly encapsulated by Raymond Williams:

"a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour."

He interprets culture in the widest sense, an inclusive attitude consisting of structured and patterned ways of learning. He explains the artistic component of culture as:

"Individuals in groups characteristically respond to and make meaningful the circumstances in which they are placed by virtue of their positions in society and in history."

This definition framework leads us to a wider understanding of our society. Williams would no doubt recognise Blackpool Pleasure Beach, with over 7 million visitors in 1998, as a cultural centre. But it would no doubt be unwelcome in the approved cultural family of the Arts Council of England or Resource, the national agency for museums, libraries and archives, and would even be hard pressed to fall within the concept of cultural tourism. Similarly, the enormously successful TV soaps *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* or Manchester United and the cultural phenomenon of soccer fans are both recognised by social scientists as part of the cultural life of the UK but are seen as private sector activities and hence deemed to be inartistic. All are successful as businesses and attract large audiences without the benefit of subsidies.

Current debate also makes little of the role of values and religion in society, an integral part of culture. Such narrow definitions do not help us when it is clear the arts, religion and culture have been inextricably linked over centuries, with the renaissance being the most obvious example.

Over the course of the last decade, the debate over the expenditure of funds in support of cultural activity and development has suffered from departmentalisation and a lack of coherence. Definitions of what constitutes cultural heritage are confused and are sometimes exclusive of more modern forms of culture.

Instead of the usual focus of attention on how the arts and heritage can meet government policy in the areas of urban regeneration and community development, we need to consider the importance of culture as a defining mechanism for society and as a richness-in-diversity concept. Public agencies, such as the Arts Council, are charged with educating society in, and promoting the accessibility of, the excellence of the arts. Whilst this may be admirable, is it right that a national agency should be given the task of defining our corporate sense of aesthetic? The position I wish to adopt is one that avoids a very Victorian discussion of which corporate aesthetic is most appropriate for our respective society but leaves it to the individual to interpret in the way they see best, supporting their inherent creativity.

Such an alternative perspective allows us to consider a more sustainable future for the arts and heritage as creative businesses, with products, services and markets. Judgement of excellence is simple, and funding becomes based on a business model. The nature of public sector organisational roles can be re-evaluated in developing this industrial sector just like any other industrial activity. Large businesses and the education sector take over the role of research and development. Government should ensure that risk and innovation is nurtured. No special pleading should be required though, and a wider range of funding agencies can become involved in supporting and developing the businesses.

We can then place our understanding of the creative industries in a wider definition of culture to encourage cohesion, access, participation and ownership. Culture as an all-embracing framework gives us a mechanism for making sense of our activities at a community, regional and national level. A good example of this is the development of a cultural strategy in Rotherham, an old steel community in South Yorkshire, defined as:

Culture has a material dimension:

- The performing arts - music, drama, dance
- The visual arts - craft, sculpture, fashion
- Media, film, television, video, language
- Museums, artefacts, archives, design
- Libraries, literature, publishing, writing
- Combined Arts and festivals
- The Built heritage - architecture, landscape, urban parks

And a value dimension;

- Relationships and shared identity
- Shared memories and experiences
- Standards
- What we consider valuable to pass on to future generations.

It is obvious that a cultural definitional framework encompassing far more than the traditional arts and heritages facilitates engagement and interaction with many of the components such as the built environment, beliefs, play and shared memories. A museum, as a focal point for reflection and interpretation of past cultural activities, becomes a sustainable project where public funding is clearly justified. However, this should not prevent us from seeing that the combination of the arts and heritage as an integral component of the culture of a community, region or nation, with the notion of culture as an industry, provides the most effective and powerful future strategy for all those engaged in such activities.

Culture as a creative industry

Culture as an industry challenges the traditional large institutions, which absorb the largest share of public funds. Whilst they have an important role to play, such funding issues can be resolved by establishing these institutions as businesses, with public sector money targeted at what is needed to "grow" the business. This approach, becoming more popular with the introduction of trusts and PPPs, can encourage the private sector, such as Blackpool Leisure Beach, to become involved in public sector activity. In Sheffield for example, the council was having difficulty meeting the required expenditure on its museums, galleries and libraries, leading to redundancies and reduced opening hours. The city placed the department in trust, retaining ownership of the estate, collections and other assets, but with an independent management contracted to run the services for six years in return for a guaranteed grant income. Acting commercially to a business plan, the trust allowed the private sector flexibility to operate the institutions as a business with the assurance of public sector support.

Institutions such as these can be seen as creative businesses engaging with customers, developing markets, and providing services and products which contribute to the development of local, national and regional culture. This may require a re-examination of the role of local authorities or Arts Councils towards acting as contract and risk managers with a wider understanding of business development. However, such developments will not only limit public expenditure but also provide more flexibility to the managers. Many local authorities see a long-term future for the cultural services and arts in contributing to regeneration, quality of life, social cohesion and economic development. What is now required is the freedom to develop alternative strategies and the recognition of people's innate creativity, capturing and building it into the creative businesses of the future.

If administrators and policy makers continue the static debate on public subsidies dedicated to the arts, the condition of our institutions will never improve. We now need to insure that activities encompassed in a cultural framework are derived from the needs of communities and what they are prepared to pay for. Only through this approach can we once and for all address the issue of sustainability. Instead of asking how a particular institution or exhibition can be supported and seeking funding as required, it is possible to start in the opposite direction; we are an integral part of the culture in which we live and therefore it should be an everyday part of our personal or professional or professional lives that we are engaged in environmental, social or economic matters that reflect the cultural life of our town or city. Attracting funding therefore becomes less of an issue. This approach relies fundamentally on insuring that the relationship between organisations and individuals in communities is strong and that the organisations reflect the needs, aspirations and creative potential of the people of the town or region. The most effective way of delivering this organisational and individual interaction is to consider cultural activity as creative businesses, which in order to survive have to identify and deliver products and services to markets and customers.