

The Impact of Culture-led Regeneration on Regional Identity in North East England

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Introduction

From the 1980s onwards culture-led regeneration has been used as a strategy throughout Europe for regenerating and revitalising cities and regions which have suffered social and economic problems through de-industrialisation. While these strategies have undoubtedly been successful in a number of different cities throughout the UK and Europe, there remains much uncertainty and concern over the long-term benefits of culture led regeneration (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006; Tucker, 2008). Doucet (2007) points out that while there has been a plethora of research into issues around culture-led regeneration little research exists into the way in which inhabitants of cities experimenting with such programmes have been affected by these changes.

This research seeks to address this issue by exploring the way in which culture-led regeneration has been embraced as a means of regenerating the post-industrial North East of England and the impact this has had on the regional identity of inhabitants.

The North East of England

The exact boundaries of the North East have been the subject of much debate for many centuries (Colls and Lancaster, 1992; Green and Pollard, 2007). However, the contemporary North East is generally accepted to consist of the

counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, County Durham and Tees Valley (go-ne.gov.uk, 2008).

For most of the twentieth century the North East of England was famous for its coal, shipyards and heavy industry. At its peak just before the First World War around 20 million tons of coal were exported from the Port of Tyne each year. Although the inter-war years brought periods of harsh economic recession which sometimes resulted in public displays of discontent such as the 1936 Jarrow Crusade (Perry, 2003), the boom period of the 1950s saw unemployment levels as low as three per cent (Robinson, 1988: 17).

However, from the end of the 1950s onwards cheap imports of oil and competition from foreign industry meant that Tyneside's 'Golden Age' was coming to an end. Between 1950 and 1970 over one hundred coal mines were closed throughout the North East and the deindustrialisation of the region began. By the time Tyneside's last operational coal mine at Westoe closed in 1994, jobs in manufacturing had declined dramatically and the service sector was firmly established as the region's primary sector of employment.

The period of heavy industry on Tyneside was essential in creating a sense of identity for the North East of England. Nayak (2003) describes the way in which North East communities were based around work in heavy industries and leisure time spent in pubs, working men's clubs and at sporting events creating a strong sense of local solidarity, supporting the claims of Colls (1992) that the past heritage of hard manual labour and heavy drinking was a key element in creating a sense of North East identity.

Despite the economic decline which has taken place throughout the North East, the area is still associated with having a strong sense of regional identity. Inhabitants continue to adopt this traditional identity which echoes the industrial heritage, although this is now played out in the arena of *consumption* (through

social drinking, football and going out) rather than the arena of *production* (Nayak, 2003: 69; Fainstein and Judd, 1999). This can clearly be seen in the strategies of the 1990s and early 2000s whereby Newcastle embraced its emergence as a 'Party City' heavily promoting the leisure opportunities available in the city, most of which revolved around the nightlife and social consumption of alcohol (Newcastle City Council, 2008). Indeed this 'fame' reached international levels with US travel consultants Weissmann Travel rating Newcastle as the eighth best party city in the world (Nayak, 2003: 66).

Culture-led Regeneration, Regional Identity and the North East

Culture-led regeneration can be understood as the use of cultural projects to revitalise economically depressed cities and regions. This can involve the promotion of arts-based events and attractions along with encouraging the development of high quality housing and retail, and the attraction of professional businesses to the area.

Culture-led regeneration programmes are implemented in order to foster a new image for a city or region (Doucet, 2007: 5-6). The shift to a globalised economy has seen increasing competitiveness between cities, meaning that they must now vie for investment and status on a global scale. In the last twenty-five years post-industrial cities have increasingly adopted strategies of culture-led regeneration in order to revitalise stagnant economies and solve problems of unemployment and deprivation. As Keating and De Frantz (2004: 190) explain:

In a crowded international market, it can mark the city as distinct, giving it a brand image. This can indirectly promote its economic competitiveness by increasing its position in the quality-life indexes of international investment rankings. It may also have a psychological effect within the city, building self-confidence and civic pride among the population and even boosting optimism among investors.

Culture-led regeneration has been used extensively around Europe (Gomez 1998; Keating and De Frantz, 2004; Miles, 2005). The Bilbao region of Spain is often cited as one of the most successful examples. Beset with economic decline and social deprivation, the Bilbao region was revitalised with the 1997 opening of the Guggenheim Museum playing a central role in changing the fortunes of the region. Indeed, a number of European cities have attempted to achieve their own version of the 'Guggenheim Effect', often by placing flagship artistic or cultural projects at the centre of their regeneration schemes. These flagship projects are predominantly located in 'high-profile' areas such as city centres or waterfront locations (Healy *et al.*, 1992). Recent examples in the UK include the Tate Modern and Renzo Piano's 'Shard of Glass' on the London Docklands, the Millennium Galleries and Winter Garden in Sheffield and the redevelopment of Salford Quays. Elsewhere in Europe both Berlin and Barcelona have carried out extensive cultural regeneration schemes.

However, cultural regeneration programmes should not be considered a guaranteed solution to long standing social and economic problems. There is ample evidence that many cultural regeneration schemes have failed to achieve their initial aims and in some cases the whole cultural revitalisation of cities has turned out to be unsuccessful. Glasgow is often cited as a prime example of this, with Laurier (1999), MacLeod (2002) and Jenkins (2005) all stating that the city used its status as European Capital of Culture 1990 to hide its working class heritage and socialist history causing resentment and hostility amongst many inhabitants. Doucet (2007) also suggests that cultural regeneration can encounter problems if it is not supported by residents, particularly those with a strong sense of local identity.

Despite the mixed success of culture-led regeneration throughout Europe many cities continue to enthusiastically pursue highly visible strategies of culture-led regeneration in their drive for economic revitalisation. These strategies continue despite the lack of empirical evidence into the long-term impacts that culture-led

regeneration has on a city, and continued claims that working-class inhabitants may be excluded from any benefits cultural regeneration may bring.

An important milestone in the regeneration of the North East was the establishment of the NewcastleGateshead Initiative in 2000. While the 1998 unveiling of the Angel of North sculpture provided a highly visible landmark for the North East of England, a coherent regeneration strategy had not existed until this point. The Initiative involved the councils of Newcastle on the north bank of the Tyne, and Gateshead on the south working together and promoting the conurbation as a single entity. Following the European model of high-profile city centre/waterfront regeneration, the river that divided the two urban areas became a key focal point providing the location for several flagship regeneration projects. Through cultural promotion and high-profile marketing the NewcastleGateshead Initiative aims to position NewcastleGateshead as a leading European destination for leisure, business and tourism, and in doing so create a new identity for Tyneside and the wider North-East region (NewcastleGateshead, 2008).

The major investment associated with the NewcastleGateshead Initiative has seen a number of iconic cultural projects materialize in recent years. The BALTIC which opened in 2002 was a £50 million project which saw the conversion of a disused 1950s flour mill into an international centre for contemporary art. This was followed in 2004 by the Sage Gateshead – a £70 million music and performance centre located on the Gateshead Quayside. The Gateshead Millennium Bridge, which opened in 2001 at a cost of £22 million, is a pedestrian and cycle bridge which gained international fame as the world's first tilting bridge.

In addition to flagship projects and other developments, the NewcastleGateshead Initiative seeks to promote a series of cultural programmes and events under the guise of its Culture¹⁰ programme. Formed in 2003 and funded by a combination of government, public and private bodies, Culture¹⁰ provides a continuous “programme of world-class events and festivals for North East England...[to]

build the region's national and international profile" (visitnewcastlegateshead.com, 2008). Further cultural strategies have seen increased funding directed towards existing arts and science based institutions such as Newcastle's Laing Art Gallery, the educational charity Centre for Life which promotes public engagement in science and The Gate leisure and retail complex. As well as this Newcastle has been designated one of the UK's six Science Cities, whilst the scientific achievements of the University of Newcastle have been widely celebrated (Jeffries, 2008).

During this period of culture-led regeneration the aspects of the night-time economy which promote the social consumption of alcohol have been marginalised. Indeed some local politicians have publicly condemned Newcastle's image as a 'Party City' stating problems with health, crime and alcohol related disorder. Writing in the Newcastle Evening Chronicle in February 2008 (p. 45), Coun. John Shipley stated that:

The image of Newcastle as having an evening economy based on alcohol consumption should be a thing of the past...it's very important we create a café-style culture...we are trying to change Newcastle's image to one that is inclusive for everyone.

The adoption of such strategies in Newcastle and Gateshead can be seen as a clear attempt to move away from the region's working-class industrial image and create a new cosmopolitan, international identity rich in culture, science and technology. Even the NewcastleGateshead's failed bid for European Capital of Culture 2008 has done little to slow the pace of change and level of investment in cultural projects throughout the region.

Methodology

The study adopted an intensive qualitative approach to enable deeper investigation into the topic. Fifty-two interviews were conducted with participants

sampled from the four Tyneside boroughs of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside and South Tyneside. The interviews were conducted in an informal, semi-structured format and were focused around three key research themes. Firstly, respondent's perceptions of the changing nature of Tyneside's socio-economic landscape were explored. Secondly, respondents were asked about their views on regional identity of the North East, and how this had changed over the years. Finally, respondent's opinions on recent cultural and scientific developments in the North East were sought.

Interview participants were invited to attend follow-up focus group sessions and were encouraged to invite friends, family and colleagues. In total seven focus group sessions took place throughout late 2007 and early 2008, with numbers attending ranging from three to eight people. These focus groups were primarily made up of people from Tyneside, although a number of respondents were drawn from the wider North East region. Such a forum enabled participants to debate and discuss a variety of ideas on the key issues in a flexible and open manner.

Results

All respondents felt that the North East of England had a strong sense of identity which distinguished this region from the rest of the country. Supporting the views of Colls (1992), respondents considered traditional Tyneside identity to be based around the region's industrial heritage of industry and manual labour:

Geordies [inhabitants of the North East] take a sense of pride where they are from, it's about heritage.

(Male, 46 - 55)

People are proud of their humble roots, the North East is built on tough times and it kind of gets ingrained.

(Male, 18 - 25)

Respondents explained that these industries, although long since disappeared from the region, were important in creating a sense of identity and community which persists to this day. Many respondents stated that they believed the North East was open and friendly, and that they did not think many other places in the country could claim this. However, participants also commented on the fact that Tyneside's industrial period was long since gone, and that contemporary Tyneside maintained a sense of identity through other means, namely supporting a football team and spending leisure time drinking and socialising. These viewpoints clearly support Nayak's (2003) claim that the basis of North East identity has shifted from production to consumption.

When asked for their opinions on the cultural developments which had taken place in the region responses were generally positive. Participants mentioned the major redevelopments which had taken place in Newcastle and Gateshead such as the Sage, BALTIC and the redevelopment of the quayside on both banks of the Tyne. Respondents felt that these cultural initiatives had brought a new energy to the North East; they had raised the profile of the region and, to a certain extent, proved that post-industrial Tyneside had something else to offer to both its inhabitants and the rest of the UK:

They are good; they will raise the profile of the region.

(Male, 18 - 25)

Things like the Sage and BALTIC, they are good to have in the region.

(Male, 26 - 35)

Twenty years ago no one would have come to the North East but they will now.

(Female, 56 - 65)

I think the North East is changing a lot...look at Newcastle on the Tyne and Sunderland...everything is changing, there's no dockyards or shipbuilding here now...I think its changing for the better.

(Female, 46 - 55)

While there was widespread agreement amongst respondents that culture-led regeneration may have been successful in raising the profile of the region, the belief that culture-led regeneration could provide a solution to deep-seated socio-economic problems was not present. The benefits of culture-led regeneration were confined to the status of 'attractions' – "places to go for a day out" (Male, 26 - 35) and would not have any more meaningful impact on the North East. In terms of the scientific developments which had taken place in the region, respondents were generally unaware of any developments which had taken place, and were not aware of Newcastle's status as a Science City. These findings run contrary to the claims of Minton who in 2003 saw the cultural developments taking place in the region as being successfully integrated into the character, identity and "soul" of the North East.

During further questioning participants began to outline some of the concerns they held about cultural developments throughout the North East. Firstly, respondents felt a sense of disconnection with the culture-led regeneration developments based on socio-economic factors. While they agreed that the profile of the region may have been raised, this was seen as irrelevant to the lives of many respondents:

Cultural stuff might draw a few extra people to the events, but it won't change the region. Cultural developments are just art and music, they are not wide ranging enough.

(Male, 18 - 25)

Only professional people will be attracted to museums and things, while it might reach out to some there is still too many who will remain totally

unaffected. Jobs may be created but its only professional people who will be attracted to them. Problem groups will still be out there any won't get anything from museums being in the North East.

(Male, 18 - 25)

Respondents clearly felt that culture-led regeneration developments had a narrow focus on a professional middle-income, middle-class demographic, therefore excluding a large proportion of lower-income people from the region. In this context they did not see culture-led regeneration as benefiting them in any way and that culture-led regeneration effectively existed for other people, a view similar to that proposed by Peter Eisinger's (2000) in his study of cities in the US. People may have developments taking place in their city under culture-led regeneration schemes, but do not necessarily feel that they benefit anything from this. Whilst Miles (2004) believes that Newcastle and Gateshead provides the environment for the cultural events and developments to sit happily alongside the traditional night time economy, this research suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Local inhabitants with a strong sense of local identity are becoming increasingly disenfranchised with cultural developments and, as experienced in Glasgow, may well become more vocal in their criticisms.

The second major criticism outlined by respondents was that they were disconnected from culture-led regeneration developments in the North East on a spatial level. Respondents who were drawn from areas of the North East other than Tyneside highlighted concerns that the majority of cultural developments had taken place only within the Newcastle/Gateshead area:

I can't think of any which have taken place outside of Newcastle to be honest

(Female, 26 - 35)

Newcastle has become more cultural, the City of Culture bid shows that, but I'm not sure about other places in the North East

(Male, 26 - 35)

Despite that many respondents lived within relatively easy travelling distance of Newcastle and Gateshead and the cultural developments which had taken place there, several felt detached from any benefit that culture-led regeneration programmes may have brought. Such findings support Healey *et al.*'s (1992: 281) argument that culture-led strategies which often concentrate development and investment activity in a select few places such as a city centre or waterfront location can leave other areas blighted. Furthermore, many respondents said that they had visited the cultural attractions in Newcastle and Gateshead when they first opened, but had subsequently lost interest:

I don't go to them often, I went quite a lot early on when they first opened
(Male, 18 - 25)

Very occasionally, only really went when they first opened
(Male, 26 - 35)

I don't really go, even if they are free!
(Female, 18 - 25)

Such disillusionment with culture-led regeneration programmes can therefore be understood as being based around the fact that people feel disconnected on both a social and spatial level. Respondents from the Newcastle and Gateshead area felt that the cultural developments were not meant for them. Respondents from other areas of the North East also agreed with this, whilst adding further criticism in that as the culture-led regeneration has been concentrated in a different city to which they live, they would gain no benefit from it taking place. Both criticisms follow the findings of Evans (2003: 432-435) who noted that after an initial opening period, attendance by locals to the Guggenheim in Bilbao declined whilst attendance from tourists continued to increase. A significant reason for this was

its insistence on exhibitions which were more appealing to the tourist audience than that of the locals.

When asked about the interplay between the culture-led regeneration and their perceptions of North East regional identity, a number of respondents put forward more telling criticisms of the culture-led regeneration project. Many of the responses given in interviews and focus groups implied that the regional identity of the North East was too strong (or too ingrained) to be replaced with a new cultural image. This was played out from both within the region - in the sense that the majority of people in the North East identified too strongly with the 'old identity' of work, industry and social drinking to give this up - and from outside the region in the sense that the perception of the North East from the rest of Britain (particularly the South) would not be changed by the cultural developments. Such attitudes and perceptions from inhabitants of the North East can potentially have a profound impact upon the long-term viability on the cultural redevelopment of the region.

Conclusion

Despite the questionable results of culture-led regeneration programmes in other cities of the UK and NewcastleGateshead's failure to be awarded European Capital of Culture 2008, strategies of culture-led regeneration in the North East have continued at a rapid pace. This research suggests that while culture-led regeneration has been successful in raising the profile of the region and providing successful attractions for people to visit, the more ambitious aims of the culture-led regeneration project may be unachievable and potentially damaging to economic competitiveness and social cohesion of North East England.

This research found that many people in North East England are already becoming disconnected from the culture-led regeneration project on the basis of whom cultural development strategies are targeted towards and the limited geographical locations in which they take place. The findings of this study

suggest that the criticisms put forward by respondents go beyond mere complaints about cultural events and activities and suggest that many people are becoming hostile to the idea of an unwanted new cultural identity being imposed on their city, region and way of life.

In investigating the impacts of culture-led regeneration on regional identity in the North East this paper has found that there are a multitude of concerns over the ways in which 'top down' cultural strategies are being used to regenerate the region. While at present this has manifested itself in terms of a general disillusionment and disconnection with the culture-led regeneration project, this research suggests that the North East's ongoing strategy of cultural regeneration could cause further, more serious problems in the future. Although culture-led regeneration strategies are currently being rapidly pursued throughout the North East, little attention is being paid to the 'bottom-up' consciousness of inhabitants which has been formulated over many decades. A clear example of this is provided by Newcastle City Council's attempt to distance itself from the notion of Newcastle as a 'Party City' – something which the respondents enjoyed and saw as important to their regional identity – and replace this with a new cosmopolitan café culture.

Whilst culture-led regeneration has had its successes in the North East of England, this paper has found that in the quest to re-imagine the region and provide a new identity, the long-term impacts are as yet unknown. Many of the aims of culture-led regeneration can only be achieved with the acceptance and involvement of local inhabitants – something which current strategies have failed to take into account. Acknowledgement of the traditions and history of the region and a continual active involvement of local people is essential if socio-economic rejuvenation through cultural regeneration is to be a success. Currently the cultural development of the North East is failing to adequately incorporate this leading to considerable questions over the long-term sustainability of such strategies.

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