

# A Creative Alternative?

When I was a child, I was taken by my school to see a submarine launched at the Cammell Laird shipyard, a place that had been the *raison d'être* of my hometown, Birkenhead, for the last 200 years. I was given a flag to wave at the vast, metal object as it went down the slipway. My principle memory is of the scale of the place, as we stood dwarfed by the yard's huge construction sheds and yellow cranes. What I didn't quite understand at the time was that *this was the end*. This was the last ship that was to be built at the yard.

I would to come to realise this, though, and also that it was almost to mean the end of the town, reduced largely to decline and dependency on low-paid service-industry work, benefits and a small number of public-sector jobs. What happened to Birkenhead as a phenomenon has, if anything, increased elsewhere in my lifetime. The sort of decline that could once safely – for others – be said to be located in certain specific areas, has engulfed more and more places over the last twenty years in a rapidly shifting global world. What do you do with a place when its reason to exist has gone? Can it have a future? How can people suffering from the poverty generated by such situations have better lives and opportunities? These were the questions that plagued me as I grew up in a postindustrial area.

Economic decline is inextricably linked to population decline, both of which create surplus land and buildings. In the later part of the twentieth century, in certain urban areas such as New York, London and Berlin, this 'free space' was often occupied by artists and those seeking alternative lifestyles. Economically, this ultimately worked out for these cities, since while certain industries and the communities that had relied on them had been hollowed out, they had other industries to sustain them. In New York and London this was principally high-finance and in Berlin, principally government. So this occupation by 'creatives' actually helped re-animate what was, in the eyes of local authorities, 'problem spaces', bringing them back to economic use as they became fashionable and subsequently attracted new, wealthier residents. Such gentrification has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Writers like Richard Florida suggested that other postindustrial areas should adopt this model, becoming 'creative cities'<sup>2</sup> that attract the highly educated, highly mobile people who set up the likes of Google. This was seen by some civic leaders as a catch-all answer to stemming population decline, creating those lucrative 'good jobs' and so increasing the tax- and power-base of postindustrial areas. Based on these theories, many such localities spent big on arts venues, festivals etc aimed at regenerating disused space, attracting culture-seeking tourists and more importantly, those new 'creative' business-starting residents.

However, in many other cities, while empty buildings, declining populations and tax bases were also the problem, this solution was not so easy as in New York and London. In a place as large as a city, a 'creative class' generally needs a 'real' economy to feed off in order to enjoy a supporting infrastructure and audience. Shoreditch may emphasise its mental distance from The City of London, but without the latter's finance industry paying for the likes of London's advanced public transportation system via demand and taxation, along with everything from sponsoring theatres to buying artworks and commissioning designers, its 'creative class' would struggle. As any artist who has lived in a postindustrial city for any length of time will tell you, cheap rents and easily available space are important, but to lack easy access to a major market or audience (even in these internet days) is ultimately limiting.

While we may love them for their diversity, vibrancy and creativity, cities have since ancient times largely existed for strategic or economic reasons, formed out of convergences of power and money. This is why so many artists and creative people still move to New York and London despite the harsh costs and lifestyle. These cities offer potential for advancement that other localities do not, whether in terms of creative stimulation or more pragmatic personal opportunities. This is why economically successful cities are always centres of inward migration, people seeking their own piece of the growing pie, whether money or culture, which in turn helps gives birth to that diversity, vibrancy and creativity.

Throughout history, art and culture have generally emerged from economic centres that can afford them, rather than being expected to *be* the economy, or at least not solely. Some unique places such as Venice can, via tourism, achieve an economy based on their cultural histories. Yet even Venice has a

shrinking population, which is causing it problems now that it is no longer a centre of manufacture, commerce and slavery. Indeed, despite all the new creative industries being talked about in postindustrial places like Detroit, such as the start-ups at the A. Alfred Taubman Centre,<sup>3</sup> making cars is still actually the biggest part of the Detroit economy.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, even as cultural-focused tourism does grow in Liverpool, its maritime and manufacturing trades are still bigger economic assets.<sup>5</sup> Over in Birkenhead, even the old Cammell Laird shipyard has re-opened and is now booming.<sup>6</sup> These most traditional of industries, which had declined for years, are still the main points of growth for such places as trade patterns shift, to a degree, back in their favour. Such growth remains vulnerable, but at least these localities are still playing a significant role in the global economic system, in fields, despite their reduction in staff numbers, that employ far more people than the arts are ever likely to.

In London and New York, the fight for space against the overwhelming power of capital is key, hence the constant shifting of 'creative zones' to the latest deprived area. In cities such as Liverpool, though, the fight is *for* capital or rather any way for the city (including its artists) to sustain itself without having to rely on cross-subsidy from elsewhere to pay for its services. The latter is a dangerous situation, leaving postindustrial areas vulnerable to the whims of the policies of often faraway governments.

Is there an alternative for cities other than to fight each other for a slice of global capital? To take part in a pact with the very ideology that brought down industrial cities? We should not forget that it was also this same ideology that gave birth to these cities and subsequently the culture that rose from them: be it Motown or The Beatles, Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals or the sculpture by Arthur Dooley, himself a former Cammell Laird welder.

Despite the continued economic reliance on transport and manufacture in Liverpool, cultural activity has played a big part in shifting both the perception and actuality of the city in the last fifteen years in a way that few residents would disagree has been an improvement, even if most would also agree there is still a long way to go. If, with the right cultural attractions and activities, a town can create a tourist business and transform external views of the place, creating a few jobs in the process, why would any poor locality not do so?

Are these cultural initiatives in postindustrial locations just window-dressing: a bit of art to cover over the economic cracks, encouraging higher-end tourism and providing something to do between inward investment meetings? A chance for globetrotting arty-types to 'reanimate' decayed spaces and help pave the way for developers? Or can they offer more?

I would argue that they can. Art's real strength in this situation is how it can exist in a space between those at different ends of the scale of power and money. In this deeply imbalanced situation, real sway can be had, as Charles Bukowski once said, when 'an artist says a hard thing in a simple way'. Art has the potential to cut through things, creating a channel through dysfunctional systems. Creative activism in the public arena can, by highlighting errors, showcasing alternatives and probing new solutions, make the prevailing forces of power, at best take a step back, or at least demonstrate to others the holes that exist within their plans and systems.

Such action in postindustrial areas can break the deadlock that can emerge from vested interests. Governments, local authorities, businesses, property developers, investors, even entrenched community groups, while often having plans that may be valid on one level, can, in the inevitable vastness of such organisations, end up letting neighbourhoods, even whole cities, fall down the cracks. As an example, we can look to Liverpool and how the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder initiative affected it and other areas with mass housing demolition.<sup>7</sup> This plan emerged, no doubt with good intentions, from a think-tank at Birmingham University and was adopted by the then government as a way of regenerating postindustrial communities. Dozens of journals, petitions and surveys eventually began to critique this extreme approach. While these achieved a cumulative effect, ultimately they held less power and sway in general public and political opinion than two actions in Liverpool. In Anfield, the *2up2down/Homebaked* project,<sup>8</sup> re-opening a bakery that many thought had gone for good, and in Liverpool, eight community groups

painting bright images, planting flowers and hosting a local market outside abandoned homes. All the secret meetings, investment strategies and ten-year-plans rightly turned to dust in the face of such an obviously more positive use of empty property reduced to ruin by socio-economic policies. Such initiatives may have impacts that are more emotional than practical, but therein lies the ability of such creative action to compete against, or at least square up to, those who control the money and power. Those with their hands on the levers inevitably struggle to respond when they are faced with a public demonstration of obvious failure and positive alternatives.

The question from critics though, and it is a valid one, is what next? When folly or injustice has been demonstrated, what alternative is there? Can such initiatives represent long-term solutions? Creative perforations can open avenues to new situations, but for real change they have to then grow into something bigger. In becoming more established and practical, such projects may lose some of their initial outsider power, but this is essential if such action is to instigate actual change and shift the balance of ideas, power and control.

For an example of this we can shift from Liverpool to Bradford, where creative grassroots action helped not only to save a grand Art Deco cinema from demolition, but began a total re-imagining of the potential future of the building. After being closed for several years, the Odeon was facing destruction, to be replaced with a new office and retail development,<sup>9</sup> the need for which was questionable. Slowly, local opposition built into a 'Save the Odeon' campaign, with activists often utilising artistic impulses such as covering the building with 'Get Well Soon' cards, decorating it at Christmas while a brass band played, and even turning up as a group to clean its exterior to demonstrate that, beneath a bit of dirt, a fine building was languishing. These actions slowly won over more local people and even gained celebrity support from the likes of Imelda Staunton, Terry Gilliam and David Hockney. After much pressure, the demolition was eventually cancelled, with the local authority agreeing that the building should be retained in future plans for the area. The campaigners have subsequently formed into an Industrial and Provident society named 'Bradford One' and are now bidding to be allowed to take over the building themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, over in Detroit, the apparently sensible policy of reducing the city's size in relation to its shrunken population came up against The Heidelberg Project, begun in 1986 by artist Tyree Guyton on the city's east side. Initially, he painted a series of houses in Heidelberg Street with bright dots in many colours and attached salvaged items to the houses. He went on to develop the project into a constantly evolving work that transformed a semi-abandoned neighbourhood into a creative art centre.<sup>11</sup> Twice it was faced with demolition by the Detroit authorities, and indeed some of it was destroyed. Yet, despite these setbacks, it is now a global tourist attraction with its own arts education programme for local schoolchildren, not to mention being one of fifteen projects that represented the US at the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale.<sup>12</sup>

The question raised by those who wanted to see the demolition and removal of all these places was, 'Well, what would you do with it?' In answer, creativity was used against the overwhelming machines of business, media, government and prevailing orthodoxy, to open up alternative possibilities for these spaces. Such projects may not in themselves solve all the problems of a postindustrial city, but their operation in a more open-ended space outside of dominant ideologies can raise awareness, generate new solutions and galvanise people to action. After all, successful local regeneration is based on local enthusiasm for it, which, when people are already facing the multiple challenges of living in a deprived area, can be slow to start and quick to wane. Key to ongoing positive change stemming from such initiatives is the genuine involvement of local people in an in-depth way. The Bradford One and Heidelberg actions were both begun by people who already had a stake in the local area, while *2up2down/Homebaked* in Anfield began as an external provocation from Liverpool Biennial. However, all of these projects ultimately took the time to win understandably sceptical people over from outside of their own circles and become rooted in local desires, rather than just agendas imposed from outside. Also vital though, is that such projects moved on from their initial creative perforations and formed organisations, sought funding,

liaised with regulators, engaged wider publics and communicated with media and academia. Thus they created a momentum that became sustainable, even through inevitable setbacks and ups and downs.

So, having begun to develop initial provocations into projects with positive outcomes for communities, the question becomes, what next? How does the spark of an alternative become something sustainable or even a new way of doing things in postindustrial areas? The rights of the urban resident of the twentieth century were gained through practical action, engaging, even if aggressively, with the prevailing system and demanding a share, as well as through the development of solid alternatives that functioned effectively, even if these existed within a wider capitalist framework. Bodies from the Cooperative movement founded in Rochdale in 1844 to the early housing associations formed in 1960s Liverpool, determined that inner-city housing had a future, and so it remains today.

Having successfully fundraised via Kickstarter to open its bakery, *2up2down/Homebaked* now seeks to establish a co-operative housing scheme<sup>13</sup> as part of the wider redevelopment of Anfield, which is centred on a new stadium for Liverpool Football Club. In Bradford, the Save the Odeon campaign has formed into the constituted Bradford One organisation, which is developing proposals that, if successful, will see the historic structure transformed into a multi-purpose cultural venue and centre for creative enterprise. This will include an 'asset lock' ensuring that the Odeon's future use will always benefit the people of Bradford.<sup>14</sup> In Detroit meanwhile, the Heidelberg Project is planning to expand into neighbouring properties as part of a broader 'cultural village' concept for the area once the site has been secured from recent damage.<sup>15</sup> The project's development committee now includes senior staff from Detroit and Michigan local authorities, demonstrating quite a change from when Guyton spent much of his time fighting officials who wanted to shut down the project. His case was no doubt aided by the Heidelberg's increasing popularity and global visibility.<sup>16</sup>

While global big business is probably here to stay, it seems that local control, whether it is of new business start-ups, arts centres, housing co-ops or bakeries, offers the best long-term sustainability for communities. Yet for this to happen, local people must be able to take control. The will must be there in the community for such initiatives, but provocations such as the above, by highlighting alternatives and breaking open new ideas, can have transformative effects, bringing people on board who never imagined they could ever have a voice or play a part in the future of their area.

However, controlling authorities also need to have the desire, or at least the will, to hand such power to communities. So will states grant such power to localities and will local authorities in turn divest power to their citizens? Even if this happens, will it descend into counter-productive factionalism? Perhaps in some cases, but as the examples above show, plenty of projects can exceed even the wildest hopes of their founders, if they are given the opportunity. It may be the case though, as projects such as these have demonstrated, that the only way to gain power is for such organisations to be formed, take the initiative and demand it, creating legitimacy through raising awareness and encouraging action. Equally vital is that the authorities provide the required financial support for such projects at the relevant time. David Cameron's 'Big Society' idea of community solutions quickly fell on its face because of a lack of money, something even acknowledged by the academic who came up with the phrase.<sup>17</sup> If you hand the levers of power over to people, but with no capital to be able to use them, positive effects will always be limited.

Creative perforations, such as those listed above, are in themselves valid, as a way to speak the truth to power, show an alternative and imagine new possibilities. However, if they are to have lasting effects, they need to change, morph and engage with the prevailing systems of power and money in order to achieve wider goals. This may require compromise, but such compromise will have much stronger social benefits in deprived areas than any academic treatise denouncing failures in the system from a faraway university.

Finally, can these projects be more than interesting perforations, a few gems standing out in otherwise troubled cities? Can they actually become new ways of organising postindustrial urban environments? If this is possible, such initiatives cannot exist in a vacuum. Power brokers need to be

engaged and convinced that the system needs to shift and absorb these new ideas. In undertaking such engagement, projects like these may risk losing their outsider power, but they gain the potential to change many more lives and even of becoming new orthodoxies. That is, of course, until the need arises for the next perforation from outside of the prevailing order.

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