

Culture that works? Creative industries development in a working-class city

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Creative industries development has been underway in the city of Stoke-on-Trent for the past fifteen years. Two urban quarters, a creative industries network, ‘design-led’ regeneration initiatives, and live-work spaces for craft businesses are some of the main projects undertaken in this period. In the past year, this raft of developments has been augmented by a creative industries mapping exercise, and a subsequent funding bid that seeks to draw on UK government and European structural funds in order to act on the research findings, and to put their recommendations into operation. This paper reviews this process both in terms of the political, economic, social, cultural and spatial context of the city, and in terms of broader urban agendas. It provides something of a corrective to the rather ‘rose-tinted’ picture often drawn of the role and significance of the creative industries for future economic and cultural well-being.

Stoke-on-Trent: ‘The most working-class city in England’

Located in the English Midlands between Birmingham and Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent is a city of around 250,000 people. Nicknames such as Ceramicopolis, Ceramic City and, more popularly, The Potteries, leave little doubt as to what goes on in Stoke-on-Trent. While the industrial revolution stimulated a broad local industrial economic base, including significant mining, steel and

engineering activity, it was the dominant ceramics industry that imposed a distinctive landscape and a seemingly indelible identity onto the region (Edensor, 2000). The name 'The Potteries' appears to suggest exactly what Stoke is about, signalling not only the region's industrial focus but, moreover, an obsessive—and perhaps even dictatorial—mono-industrial economy, and social and cultural life.

Furthermore, while 'The Potteries' gives Stoke-on-Trent a symbolic resonance (as a City of Pots) it is, nevertheless, the collective name for six towns (and the reluctant, and politically separate, Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme). 'The Potteries' tag thus remains a continuous distraction from, and symptom of, the failure of Stoke-on-Trent to develop the economy, infrastructure, social structures, atmospheres, and spaces and places associated with more successful post-industrial cities; that is, the failure to be anything more than a city in name only. In sum, it is possible to argue that, whilst the area is globally renowned for ceramics manufacture, the continued economic and cultural dominance of the pottery industry and its associated social structures, along with the distinct local spatial arrangement of the Potteries towns, has ensured that the 'city' itself remains of only local importance (Jayne, 2000).

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the lingering effects of these industrial identifications and socio-spatial structures have ensured not only the concentration of employment into just a few sectors, but also a dispersal of creative energies into inter-town competition. For example, the Potteries towns each have their own town hall and civic structures, and no town has a significant advantage or specialism in terms of business or financial expertise.

Any contemporary regeneration strategy, retail or entertainment development in Hanley, for instance, leads to Newcastle or Burslem desiring or, indeed, developing the same kind of business park, pedestrianisation scheme, multi-screen cinema complex, or type of restaurant or themed pub. There is a kind of obsessive internal focus which, until recently, has ensured that Stoke-on-Trent has failed to realise just how far its infrastructure and economy is lagging behind that of other cities.

While the area developed because of industrial expansion, its main activity—ceramic production—could never be considered a Fordist endeavour, but rather was dominated by a craft ethos that could not easily be updated by

production-line efficiency. This meant that there was a highly dichotomous relationship between bosses and workers ('them' and 'us'), with only a small sector of clerical and managerial intermediaries required. As these employment structures were matched by a lack of business, financial and support industries (marketing, advertising, suppliers), the local economy has an identifiable lack of middle-class representation—a feature that continues today—and the consumption spaces of the city are dominated by working-class interests.

Thus, while Stoke undoubtedly produced some of the finest ceramics in the world, the above factors have combined to ensure that the city (or its towns) has never developed a significant reputation as a consumption or service centre. In sum, its working-class, inward-looking perspective is a significant factor in its lowly and entrenched position in terms of urban culture and quality of life.

Indeed, the local paper *The Evening Sentinel*, in its 'The Way We Were: Millennium Special' (1999: 10), describes the area as 'engagingly parochial', suggesting that during the 1950s and 1960s, 'there was little Elvis, Little Richard and the rest could do about it ... the region has remained entrenched in pottery, railways, Bennett, football and boxing, and while politics, consumerism, and fashion elsewhere have all moved on, they've not in Stoke-on-Trent'.

The continued dominance of The Potteries' industrial past is startlingly evident in the fact that there is little progressive championing of post-industrial activity, and little willingness to represent or support the cultural practices of alternative lifestyles such as lesbian and gay, ethnic, youth and other social groups. There is currently a no-go area of representation, in which the promotion of identities and lifestyles associated with post-industrial economy are considered pretentious, yuppyish or a threat to political, economic or social continuity (Wynne & O'Connor, 1998). Politically, the City Council is staunchly 'old' Labour, with working-class (constituents) and town-based allegiances. Despite the problems facing the city, it is not prepared to consider a post-industrial agenda, nor a convincing city-wide strategic vision.

The city's historical trajectory, and its continued inability to 'get it right', can be related to the dominance of working-class industrial lexicons in the city (Skeggs, 1997: 160). Skeggs suggests that class is structural—it involves the

institutionalisation of capital. In these terms, class is lived as a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961) and is about being and becoming 'classed' (Skeggs, 1997: 162). The working classes and working-class spaces and places are in a continuous process of trying to halt losses, rather than trading up and accruing added cultural value.

Thus, while working-class structures and practices are legitimated in Stoke-on-Trent, these barely influence supra-local arenas of capital exchange and the conferral of legitimacy. To date, the economic and cultural development strategies undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent have focused upon a plethora of out-of-town business, retail and entertainment parks, built on brown-field sites reclaimed from old industrial workings and as part of improvements to radial hubs and gateways.

Projects such as the National Garden Festival in 1986 (Parker, 1988) can be read as attempts to 'pass', but have simply reproduced the very distinctions they hoped to transcend. I am not suggesting that there is an axiomatic association between working-class culture and cultural inertia (Jayne, 2003). However I would suggest that, where such a relationship exists, it is constituted through a complex and specific dialectic of discourses that surround class and identity formation, and particular economic, political, social, cultural and spatial trajectories of spaces and places.

Creative industries development in Stoke-on-Trent

Creative industries development initiatives have been cited as having economic and social benefits in local contexts (Myerscough, 1988; Fleming, 1999); as a significant source of export earnings (Griffiths & Williams, 1992); as often being used in location-based marketing (Landry, 1995); and as a vital element of integrated urban and regional regeneration strategies (Evans, 2001; Florida, 2002; Parkinson & Bianchini, 1996; O'Connor & Wynne, 1996). Of central importance here is the last contention: that in cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff and Nottingham, and in smaller towns such as Bradford and Huddersfield, the creative industries have been integral to a broader regeneration that has focused on urban renaissance, attracting post-industrial jobs,

encouraging people back to living in city centres, and generally improving the urban quality of life.

However, as this special edition of *Capital & Class* shows, it is important that critical rigour is applied to the ways in which creative industries development has become aligned with regeneration initiatives in our cities (Moss, 2002; Bell & Jayne, 2004). There has been a large amount of ‘boosterism’ in discussions about the role that the creative industries can play in urban and economic regeneration over recent years (Florida, 2002).

To this end, I argue that the creative industries development initiatives underway in Stoke-on-Trent are a ‘shallow’ attempt to generate and support a potent and sustainable creative economy in the city. This mirrors the failings of other regeneration programmes in Stoke-on-Trent, which currently reproduce rather than transcend the historical failings of a city that has always under-performed (Jayne, 2001a). What follows is a review of the creative industries development initiatives in the city over the past fifteen years.

The Gladstone St James Design Quarter

The Gladstone St James Design Quarter is a project designed to revitalise a once-thriving area of Longton, one of the six confederated towns of Stoke-on-Trent. The Quarter was to include improvements to the Gladstone Working Pottery Museum, the development of craft studios and a ceramic design centre, and environmental improvements (Gladstone St James Design Quarter, 1992). Between 1989 and 1993, the European Commission helped to finance 32 Urban Pilot Projects through the Regional Development Fund: the Longton project was an urban regeneration initiative, based on the concepts of design and heritage. It sought to conserve the local industrial and cultural heritage, and to develop a new and innovative approach to the future of the area.

The flagship project of the Design Quarter is The Hothouse Centre for Ceramic Design, housed in a Victorian school building. The Hothouse provides high-tech workspaces for designers, with 20 studio spaces for new and developing small, design-related businesses. It provides access to high-specification computer-aided design and

modelling tools (for shape and surface pattern), as well as providing services ranging from rapid prototyping to production. The second element to the Design Quarter is the Roslyn Works—the conversion of a redundant pottery works into a studio centre with 16 workshops for craftspeople and designer-makers. The final ‘attraction’ of the Quarter is the Gladstone Working Pottery Museum. Opened in 1974, the Gladstone Working Pottery Museum was near to closure due to poor visitor numbers. However, the museum introduced new, hands-on attractions, and has since improved its performance.

Launched in January 1992 with a budget of £2.8 million, the Gladstone St James Design Quarter was completed at the end of June that year. With cobbled streets, bottle kilns, signage, hard and soft landscaping, new street nameplates and improved street lighting and footpaths, the intention was to boost the image of the area and create a recognisable ‘quarter’ which was safe, attractive and sustainable.

However, the initial brief of the project was not just that it should address the problems of poor image and low environmental quality. Nor did the project simply seek to show that a modest investment could be a catalyst for the rejuvenation of an historic industrial area. The principal aim of the Design Quarter was to demonstrate that the creation of a specialised ‘quarter’ could act as a mechanism for both the regeneration of a particular area, and the modernisation of a traditional manufacturing industry, by means of a progressive design ethos; a process that could then be replicated in many other European towns and cities. Central to the success of The Gladstone St James Design Quarter was that it was to be a creative industries initiative. This initiative sought to increase design skills, introduce new technology and facilitate product diversification in order to meet the challenges of world markets. The Design Quarter sought to promote small-batch product design, business start-ups, and a creative industries network.

While the Design Quarter documents spell out a particular vision of regeneration for Longton, there has been little dispersal of economic or cultural activity beyond the project. Although the Hothouse and Roslyn Works were initially fairly successful in attracting occupants, such production cultures have not been matched by local consumption, and there have been no projects to create a critical infrastructure or a variety of cultural producers, cultural intermediaries or the

associated, supporting cast of bars, restaurants, galleries and shops.

In sum, the Design Quarter does little to address (let alone alter) the political, economic, socio-spatial and cultural practices and processes that have dogged North Staffordshire. There has been a wider failure, in fact, to even begin to attract the kind of business, financial and professional jobs needed to address the structural inequalities of employment in the region (Jayne, 2000). Moreover, in the past year the Roslyn Works has jettisoned its craft focus due to a diminishing number of tenants, and has become a general business incubator space; and despite a further building being refurbished as part of a Hothouse II development, both 'Hothouses' have opened their doors to increasing numbers of businesses beyond the creative industries sector.

The cultural quarter

The formulation of the concept of a cultural quarter can be seen to emerge from the 1990 report, *A Cultural Strategy for Stoke-on-Trent*, commissioned by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and completed by Comedia Consultancies. The central aim of the report was to identify the ways in which Stoke-on-Trent could begin to stimulate the presence of, and support, creative people who could facilitate a post-industrial critical infrastructure.

Arguably, however, the only major recommendation assimilated by the Council was the need to address the city's lack of a major touring venue. Three years later, this led to a report entitled *Major Touring Venues for Stoke-on-Trent* (1993), completed by Arts Business Ltd., which rather obviously concluded that for a city of over 250,000, and a catchment area of around one million people, there had been under-investment and a lack of 'arts and media'-orientated infrastructure, which many similar towns take for granted. Stoke-on-Trent suffered from the market's failure to satisfy the needs of its population and the report recommended the establishment of a distinctive quarter in the city. In sum, the overall vision for the cultural quarter was based on the redevelopment of two derelict and under-used theatres; support for existing facilities such as a cinema, youth theatre, museum and art gallery and the city library; and the

augmentation of the area through enhanced retail services. However, support for such infrastructural development is not matched by vibrant local creative production. For instance, unlike many other cities' cultural quarters, Stoke-on-Trent's relies solely on a touring theatre, rather than on indigenous creative production, to enliven this urban space (Jayne, 2001b).

Other creative industries-related projects

There has also been a raft of other creative industries-related projects pursued in the city. These include the refurbishment of the Burslem School of Art—a Grade II listed building, which was once renowned for a profusion of artistic talent in ceramics. The building has been restored and provides a mix of uses, including arts-based training, design and business studios, meeting rooms, exhibition space, a recording studio and the local incubator facility for the Staffordshire and Black Country Business Innovation Centre.

Unfortunately, the workspace has a low occupancy rate, and the building is only partially and infrequently used. Four nearby vacant retail units have been refurbished to create craft and design SME (small to medium-size enterprise) live/work units, along with a business advice and support service, despite the failure of the similarly-orientated Roslyn Works nearby.

There is also the proposal to develop further live/work units, and the possibility of creative industry-related uses for other unused buildings. A proposed creative industries network, to encourage active cultural and economic interaction, is also a fledgling initiative that has failed to make any significant impact to date.

Creative industries mapping and forward strategy

In the past year, the Cultural Trends Unit at Staffordshire University has undertaken a Single Regeneration Budget-funded mapping exercise, to assess the scale and scope of the creative industries sector in the city and, further, to review current provision and creative industries strategy (Jayne &

Bell, 2003). Some of the salient findings of this research are listed here:

- There are 1,030 creative industry-sector businesses in Stoke-on-Trent.
- The total turnover of 99 creative industry-sector businesses that provided information (10 per cent of the total number identified) is £20,853,400.
- The total profit of 99 creative industry-sector businesses that provided information is £3,988,300.
- The 157 creative industry-sector businesses that completed the questionnaire employ 817 people. These employees comprise 664 full-time staff and 153 part-time staff.
- 84 percent of businesses surveyed wished to see the establishment of a creative industries development service in Stoke-on-Trent.
- 80 percent of businesses surveyed wanted to see a flagship creative industries building in the city. The majority of these thought that this building, and all future creative industries development initiatives, should be located in the city centre.

Following the mapping research, £300,000 has been ring-fenced by local regeneration agencies for creative industries development (and is also to be used to lever further funding).

However, despite the findings of the empirical research and the failure to generate a convincing and sustainable creative industries strategy in Longton, Burslem or in the city centre cultural quarter (not to mention other failing urban regeneration initiatives in the city—again, see Jayne, 2001a and b), proposals for how this money should be spent remain focused on the current infrastructure.

For example, a consortium led by the Research and Enterprise Unit at Staffordshire University, and Business Link Staffordshire, has suggested the development of a *Creative Beacon* project for the city.

While this proposed project includes progressive initiatives such as the creation of a creative industries development service, it ultimately ties itself into the current failing initiatives and projects in Burslem and Longton, and is *contra* to successful creative industries developments elsewhere in the UK. It does not commit to generating and supporting a creative milieu in the city centre.

Indeed, such a strategy is not only in conflict with successful creative industries development in cities throughout the Western world, it also ignores the evidential basis for sound policy provided by both the empirical findings and recommendations of the mapping research, as well as ignoring the city's updated *Local Cultural Strategy (2002-2007)*—*Stoke-on-Trent: Culture that Works*. Both of these documents recognise the inadequacies of the city's current spatial structure, cultural provision and infrastructure. However, they advocate attempts, both by creative industries development and by broader regeneration projects, to stimulate a critical mass of post-industrial economic and cultural productive activity in the city centre. This represents a strategic agenda that seeks to overcome the city's historic spatial and economic structural failings.

Conclusion

Substantial funding has supported creative industries development initiatives in Stoke-on-Trent for the past fifteen years. However, the impact of this development on the regeneration of the city has been minimal. This is the result of both a flawed creative industries strategy, and associated failings of the city to overcome its spatial and economic structural conditions so as to compete in an urban hierarchy dominated by post-industrial and middle-class consumption cultures.

Unlike many other Western cities, Stoke-on-Trent remains overly dominated by working-class production and consumption cultures. The city is thus, in a sense, rendered illegible to post-industrial businesses, tourists, and to the many young people who leave the city in search of the more dynamic economic and cultural opportunities offered in other cities. I argue that, unless such inadequacies are addressed, the city will continue to fail to generate a thriving cultural economy. Despite a strong empirical evidential base, and the strategic grounding provided by the city's cultural strategy, the current forward strategy for creative industries in Stoke-on-Trent is aligned more with past failings than with the kind of progressive agenda that has contributed to the renaissance of many other former industrial cities in the UK, the rest of Europe and North America.

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