



Culture design-led regeneration as a tool used to regenerate deprived areas. Belgrade—The Savamala quarter; reflections on an unplanned cultural zone



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ABSTRACT

“Not enough clarified redevelopment and regeneration initiatives could compromise culture and cultural heritage. Avoiding the sustainability due to possible loss of cultural assets could be irreplaceable. Award-winning developers and architects from urban and tribal communities discuss today how to successfully strike a balance between economic redevelopment and the sustainable management of cultural assets; based upon culture.” (Jonathan, The emergence of culture-led regeneration: a policy concept and its discontents, Working Paper, University of Warwick, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, Coventry, 2007). We all recognise how important it is to respect local culture, heritage and tradition; with regeneration, we attempt to focus on quality, balanced with economic opportunity for the population, optimising the visitor's experience by applying a creative mix of cultural, environmental and historic resources linked with social and economical aspects. The new term ‘*placemaking*’ does not only measure a physical structure by its aesthetic design; it also defines the integrity of the experience had by the individual, which contributes to the economic viability of public spaces, the resources used and the health and wellbeing of the community. Culture design-led regeneration may be used as a tool to create cultural districts, cultural hubs, etc. and to utilise these zones in order to begin the gentrification process, with all its positive effects. Even unplanned cultural zones, such as Belgrade's Savamala quarter, show that the process can be unstoppable if initiated under the right circumstances.

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1. Introduction

Understanding and defining the exact and practical role of culture design-led regeneration under the frame of sustainable development has to be based on multidisciplinary principles and approaches. Culture can be, indeed, regarded as a fundamental issue, even as a pathway towards sustainable development necessary to receive a most welcome link to the general guidelines in accordance to EU standards. However, both theoretical and conceptual understanding of culture, within the general framework of sustainable development, remains vague: the role of culture is poorly operationalised within the environmental and social policies of the south-eastern/Balkan region, as is the case in most parts of Europe.

The evaluation of best practices, in order to bring culture into the domains of policy and therefore into practice, should be carried out by the State through the introduction of extremely well planned and wisely executed strategies. Furthermore, these strategies should be founded on the rigid investigation of indicators for the assessment of the impact of culture on regeneration processes in cities—within the framework of sustainable development.

In the ‘darker’ region of south-eastern Europe, the Balkans—where economic instability, political transition and many years of civil war have wreaked havoc, the effects of which are still felt today; it is particularly difficult to cope with the issues of regeneration based on cultural sustainability as a way of improving the situation. It seems that during trying times, culture remains beyond the boundaries of what are classified as essential human needs.

However, two and a half decades previously, during the prosperous 1980s a ‘cultural’ urban regeneration dimension emerged strongly within government policy in Europe, and it did so most visibly through two practices: urban design (including architecture) and public art. Positively, cultural concerns slowly gained currency through design matters which soon became well known

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as *design-led regeneration*. Often in use today, is the mixed term *culture design-led regeneration*.

This began with the ‘humanisation’ of artificial environments, often based on cultural heritage in city centres—where, by the end of the century, urban infrastructure made the people and public lifestyle as much of a priority as the actual physical structures, i.e. infrastructure and buildings. Within such a context, the reconstruction of community, a sense of local identity and the expression of collective aspirations are taken into consideration. Subsequently, creative interaction between culture and commerce, social and public life began, and for the first time, we were able to see the results of this kind of lifestyle. This is why the regeneration process, in terms of economy, consists of a necessary mix of diverse aspects.

The above mentioned is, in turn, the reason why culture design-led regeneration should identify the following assumptions:

- Attracting artists and creative entrepreneurs to a community infuses new energy and innovation, thus enhancing the economic and civic capital of the community;
- creating hubs of economic activity enhances the area’s appeal, making it an attractive place to live, visit and conduct business; additionally, it creates new economic activity;
- culture design-led regeneration attracts visitors and tourists;
- the process revitalises concerned communities;
- the aim of strengthening a community’s unique identity is essentially to achieve success;
- showcasing cultural and artistic organisations, events and amenities enhances a community’s vitality;
- nowadays, it is vital to contribute to the development of healthy communities, which means to improve the quality of life of the population by implementing various methods.

As Zukin¹ notes: “...Economy relies to a sentence: *cool jobs in hot industries*.” To achieve this unusual and demanding goal, we have to establish potential culture hubs, to cultivate cultural production and produce creative districts, mainly for the purpose of enhancing economic growth.

1.1. Defining the case study

In the City of Belgrade, there are many contradictions in urban development. For example, there are several areas that have developed over time completely differently from the expectations of urban planners. The ‘New Belgrade’ district, for example, has become one of the most resilient neighbourhoods in the region; lively and pedestrian-friendly, although its design was based on an area of Athens known as ‘Charter’ and Le Corbusier’s postulates. The area represents an exception among newly planned urban areas in Eastern Europe that were built after the 1950s. New Moscow, New Novi Sad, New Bratislava, New Prague, New Zagreb, as well as New Paris are all districts that have recently become areas where serious social issues have arisen. New Belgrade, on the contrary, has become a strong and powerful business centre, despite primarily being planned as a purely residential zone.

In Belgrade, neither creative districts nor hubs are strictly planned. They arise instinctively and spontaneously based on the rich cultural and industrial heritage found in the city’s centre. Unplanned cultural zones have sprung up out of nowhere, as a consequence of the unpredictable activities of individuals and enthusiasts, who have tried to redefine their lives by organising

various cultural activities. The result of which has been the development of ideas, without any prior planning on their part, nor on behalf of the local or federal government; a pure consequence of following the random movements of certain individuals with both vision and enthusiasm.

2. Guidelines

2.1. Promoting culture design-led regeneration

Let us reflect on the role of culture, used as a tool to regenerate society. Culture is often defined within the context of policy only in terms of a supplement to social or urban policy aspirations. Culture and creativity are included in order to generate the already existing process of social reconstruction, but this approach has resulted in an impoverished concept of culture.

The temptation to examine the true role of culture within the regeneration process leads us to reflect on the European model, more specifically, on Britain’s advanced regeneration model which took place throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Britain began the regeneration process mainly due to the fact that it was subject to a decades-long impact of deindustrialisation, insecurity stemming from a rising and random crime rate, unequal mobility, social polarisation, and the loss of public control over local land [1]. It was from within this context that a formative concept of urban regeneration emerged. At the time, the term *urban regeneration* meant a whole slew of problems centred on the main issue of inner city social and material degradation. In order to secure a profit on the costly process of urban regeneration as well as to demonstrate the more profitable characteristics of the process, those involved in the project, both the public and private sectors, attempted by use of various methods, to generate creative industries, art, ‘culture’, in the general sense of the word; they also attempted to involve professional artists, etc.

This model serves to support the role the arts play in regeneration and its first focus is purely financial—the arts are proven to provide amenities that attract tourism, increase the employment rate, and increase a sense of pride and identity within a community. In short, culture creates a climate of optimism—the “can do” attitude. During the 1970s, the Beaubourg museum, located in Paris, became one of the first huge cultural hubs—the unusually designed building attracted tourists from all over the world because of its shape and content. In fact, the building proved to be a success far beyond the expectations of the architects themselves. The “look at me” architecture of Rogers and Piano became the pioneer model used to construct mega projects, which led the regeneration process, especially in times of prosperity. Almost overnight, the whole quarter became one of the first and largest cultural hubs ever built.

In Germany, after the events of September 11th, the fresh and newly liberated European metropolis of Berlin succeeded in becoming one of the international cultural-led global centres. The city became a ‘Mecca’ for all sorts of culturally oriented globetrotters to settle in. The new inhabitants of Berlin—young musicians, artists, designers and architects had found a perfect haven; a place where the rent, as well as the cost of living was affordable, with an atmosphere that nurtured cultural open-mindedness.

The various results achieved in culture-led regeneration in Europe have shown that it is necessary to insert the role of artist into any re-building project, and that it is vital this be done at the design stage. (For example, the *Marais* quarter in Paris). The emphasis is on highlighting the cultural identity of a place, its environmental sustainability and absolute respect for its own heritage.

Next, at the turn of the 21st century, a new approach called *holistic regeneration* arrived on the scene, as a final assessment: “Good design may additionally upgrade and promote sustainable

¹ Zukin, S., Braslow, L.: The life cycle of New York’s creative districts: Reflections on the unanticipated consequences of unplanned cultural zones; 2011; Magazine: City, Culture and Society.

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