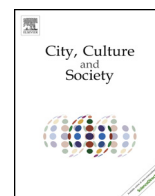




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

City, Culture and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ccs

Unsettling the role of culture as panacea: The politics of culture-led urban regeneration in Buenos Aires

Cecilia Dinardi *

Department of Culture and Creative Industries, City University London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 June 2014

Received in revised form 11 November 2014

Accepted 4 March 2015

Available online 11 May 2015

Keywords:

Culture-led urban regeneration

Cultural policies

Buenos Aires

Public architecture

Post office

Heritage

ABSTRACT

In recent years the rise of culture as a universal cure to a myriad of urban, social and economic 'diseases' has been celebrated without precedent, both in policy and academic accounts. Unlike these celebratory discourses, this paper provides a critique of the politics underpinning culture-led urban regeneration in order to unsettle the role of culture as panacea. Drawing on a case study – the on-going redevelopment of the post office palace into a commemorative cultural centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina – the analysis offers an in-depth account of the policy process by which industrial heritage is redeveloped through a cultural rhetoric. The analysis reveals how the recycling of the post office building enabled multiple meanings of culture to emerge and circulate within a range of policy, architectural, urban regeneration, real estate and media discourses. These, in turn, express existing disputes over the making of cultural policies, the uses of heritage, the image of the capital city and the value of the post office. In the redevelopment of the postal building, the paper argues, policy invocations of culture were aimed at de-politicising cultural activities in post-2001/2002 crisis Argentina, when politics had become a synonym of corruption and mismanagement. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the urgent need to adopt a critical perspective to the study of culture-led urban regeneration in Latin America, one which situates the analysis in historical and political terms and acknowledges the contending circumstances out of which these urban strategies often emerge.

© 2015 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Introduction

When the former Argentinean Economy Minister, Roberto Lavagna, suggested during a business meeting in 2004 that the national post office headquarters could be transformed into a spectacular cultural centre, he was keenly aware of the remedial capacities of culture in the renewal of cities. He knew places like Bilbao, Barcelona, London and Sydney and was familiar with the financial and aesthetic benefits brought about by culture-led urban regeneration – when urban and economic development become inextricably bound up with cultural projects. Clearly, Lavagna is not alone in his enchantment with cultural regeneration. Policy-makers, architects and marketing consultants increasingly invoke culture as a magical solution to the

city's myriad of social, economic and urban problems (Pratt, 2009). From renovating inner-city areas and recreating the city's image, to constructing artistic quarters and sustaining nationalist claims (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Landry, Greene, & Matarasso, 1996), culture constitutes a crucial component of today's urban policy agendas, not only in the city of tango but elsewhere in the Western world.

This paper aims to examine the politics of culture-led urban regeneration in order to unsettle the role of culture as a panacea, that is, as one of those traditional plants meant to heal *all* diseases. Despite – or precisely because of – its much celebrated rise in recent decades, culture's function as a panacea poses a number of problems, which this paper is rather concerned with, in terms of the history, materiality and uses of the places to be regenerated. While there is sufficient evidence that culture has become 'a new orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position' (Miles & Paddison, 2005, p. 833), the reasons *why* culture is

* Department of Culture and Creative Industries, City University London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK.

E-mail address: Cecilia.Dinardi.1@city.ac.uk.

invoked in particular local contexts and by specific social actors are less clear, and tend to be subsumed under a policy rationale purely preoccupied by economic development and the aesthetisation of the city's landscape. Three main questions are explored: Why is culture invoked as a solution to the city's various problems? How are official meanings of culture contested by alternative claims? What is at stake in redeveloping an industrial site through cultural use?

To answer these questions, the paper analyses a case study in depth: the transformation of the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones – the national post office headquarters – into a commemorative cultural centre (the Bicentenary Cultural Centre, CCB, recently renamed Centro Cultural Kirchner), and the planned regeneration of its surroundings. The building is located in one of the most expensive lots in downtown Buenos Aires, between the renovated docks, the city's financial district and the Government House. It underwent metamorphosis: from representing a symbol of progress and civilisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to becoming neglected as a site of state bureaucracy in the 1990s, and more recently it has been projected as the emblem of spectacular modern culture, only to be lately re-appropriated as a symbol of the national-popular in the context of the country's bicentenary celebrations in 2010.

This case study represents an example of global trends of post-industrial urbanism and a unique case characterised by local features. As part of widely adopted urban regeneration strategies, post office buildings in countries as different as the United States, Costa Rica, Germany, Malawi, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Guatemala, to mention just a few, have been renovated and transformed into offices, retail spaces, hotels or cultural facilities. These initiatives are aimed at the revitalisation of historical centres, revalorisation of cultural heritage and creation of new resources for tourism and business investment. In Argentina, this global phenomenon acquires a peculiar form, one that underscores the political function of culture, as we will later see.

This paper contributes to urban cultural policy debates about the instrumental uses of culture and its role in urban regeneration, taking the discussion to an important but less explored area – the politics sustaining the policy decision to convert industrial infrastructure for cultural use, embedded in historically situated local configurations and the subsequent contestations over the meaning and uses of material culture. Studies on culture-led urban regeneration have largely focused on its effectiveness to improve the physical features of decayed areas, boost the local economy and enhance the branding of places, mostly in European and American cities. Research has broadly oscillated between celebration and critique. On the one hand, a policy-oriented body of work has focused on

measuring the evidence of the power of culture to renew, reinvent and regenerate cities and on providing best practice guidelines (Evans, 2009; García, 2004; Ghilardi, 2003; Montgomery, 2003, 2004). On the other, another strand of research has stressed the tensions surrounding the transformation of space through a cultural rhetoric, questioning the claimed universality of such processes and revealing their social and political implications (Bailey, Miles, & Stark, 2004; Keith, 2009; Pratt, 2009; Shin & Stevens, 2013; Yúdice, 2003; Zukin, 1995).

Specifically this paper will add a critical perspective to projects for urban regeneration through culture in Buenos Aires, a city largely overlooked in the international academic debates, with some exceptions (Arrese, 2003; Carman, 2006; Dinardi, 2012; Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009; Lacarrieu and Alvarez, 2008; Welch, 2005; Zunino Singh, 2007). In Latin America, the rhetorical importance given to cultural policy discourses for urban development has not been accompanied by systematic academic approaches that analyse these policies (Rubim & Bayardo, 2008). In this sense, the analysis demonstrates how the different redevelopment alternatives aimed at repairing the fissures in the body of the emblematic building express existing disputes over the making of cultural policies, the uses of heritage, the image of the capital city, the value of the post office, and the meaning of culture. The paper has three main sections. The first analyses the decision to convert the post office palace for cultural use; the second explores contention over multiple meanings of culture related to the meaning and new function of the building; and the third examines the complex relationship between culture and politics in light of the problem of hegemony. In emphasising the contending political dimension through an innovative methodological approach, this paper shifts the predominant focus on economic development and urban impact of studies of culture-led urban regeneration.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger investigation conducted over a five-year period between 2007 and 2012, involving several fieldtrips to Buenos Aires. Adopting a qualitative approach and an exploratory research strategy, I drew on a range of methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, visual analysis, archival research and critical discourse analysis. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with policy-makers at the municipal and national levels, architects, postal workers, postal museum staff, journalists, real estate developers, cleaners, and vendors. The selection criteria responded to participants' involvement in the redevelopment project. I also looked at the building from outside by making on-site observations, undertook a guided visit to the building, and attended seven relevant events that enabled me to contact new

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5048220>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5048220>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)