

# Theatres Trust Conference 17: Theatres and Placemaking

Claire Beeson reports from the Lyric, Hammersmith . . .

**UK** - Attracting over 250 delegates and record numbers of sponsors and contributors, the 11th annual Theatres Trust Conference took place this October at the Lyric, Hammersmith, with an overriding theme of *Theatres and Placemaking* guiding the day's activities. This year's event welcomed a new format that saw three parallel, break-out sessions make use of the venue's various rehearsal rooms and studio theatres to encourage increased debate and discussion amongst contributors and delegates.

The Trust's new chairman, Jon Morgan, presented a welcome address in the Lyric's extravagant Frank Matcham-designed main house. Posing the question 'What is placemaking and how do theatres contribute?', he revealed: "I believe theatres are so much more than just bricks and mortar; they're about people, communities and places. At the heart of the Theatres Trust's mission, we want every community in the UK to be able to see a live performance in their local theatre, wherever they live."

Stephen Cowan, leader of Hammersmith and Fulham council - who, despite budget cuts, have helped fund the redevelopment of the region's Lyric and Bush theatres - concluded the welcome address by expressing his delight at such a key event for the arts being held in his constituency.

Following this, the first session of the day saw strategist Dr Cara Courage of Futurecity explore the term 'placemaking' in relation to theatre and the arts. "What happens in public spaces, why and by whom forms the basis of placemaking," she said. "The heart of placemaking is storytelling, and what else is storytelling but theatre?"

Courage was followed by Paul Callaghan, chair of Live Theatre and trustee of



Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture (MAC) Trust. In a rallying presentation, he highlighted the disparity of wealth of various regions in the UK, pointing out that nine out of the 10 poorest places in Northern Europe sit within the UK. These he named "the left-behind towns" such as his birth town Sunderland where people are "poor and getting poorer". These conditions, he claimed, pose a danger of drawing disenchanted people to the far right. To avoid that, the MAC Trust has a goal of placing culture at the heart of the community.

"Culture is often seen as 'the icing on the cake' - we've got to empty the bins first, sweep the streets," he said. "But in my city, culture is one of the key ingredients. We believe there are three elements to building a successful city: economy, an education system for all and a cultural system."

He continued: "We've pulled together the main players - the local authority, the university and the MAC trust - and in 2014 developed a cultural strategy."

As part of the regeneration programme, the MAC Trust is now developing a cultural quarter for the city, utilising

a cluster of disused Edwardian civic buildings. Although securing funding has been unsurprisingly challenging, Callaghan revealed he and his team are making solid progress with their placemaking mission. In 2018, Sunderland will welcome some three million visitors as it hosts the Tall Ships Race, and in 2021 the city will be the UK's City of Culture. Callaghan said: "Five years ago, they'd have laughed us off the stage. But now they actually share our belief that we are going to achieve a positive change."

Next to present were Anna Devlet, head of community at British Land and David Byrne of the New Diorama Theatre, who spoke of their long-term partnership building and running the 80-seat theatre as part of the Regent's Place cultural development in Kings Cross.

After a brief refreshment break, the morning continued with the first round of break-out sessions. *People, Places and Spaces: Designing Democratic Theatres* was chaired by the Theatres Trust architectural trustee, Paddy Dillon, director of Allies and Morrison. The session

explored themes such as how theatre buildings relate to their local community, and how the architecture and ethos of a theatre combine to create a sense of community ownership and belonging.

Angus Morrogh-Ryan of De Matos Ryan Architects and Damian Cruden, artistic director of York Theatre Royal discussed their recent award-winning transformation of the theatre. This has included relocating the foyer to the centre of the building and re-purposing the old foyer as a restaurant. Other changes have included glazing the theatre's colonnade to utilise the space year-round and make it a 'shop front' for the venue. "We believe we've created a space full of possibilities," they said of the project.

David Watson of Rick Mather Architects and Sian Alexander, executive director of the Lyric, followed. They detailed the recent redevelopment of the Lyric into a thriving community hub by incorporating vibrant bars and eateries, a roof terrace and break-out spaces with the original auditorium. "We have a 19th century theatre attached to a 20th century shopping centre, with a 21st century



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Photo: Alex Brenner

exterior and facilities around it," said Alexander before revealing that, this year alone, the Lyric has welcomed an increase of 33,000 young people through its doors.

Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts and Julian Middleton of Aedas Arts Team concluded the session with an enthusiastic presentation on the regeneration of the Tara Theatre in Earlsfield. Based in a former Mission Hall, care was taken to preserve the building's modest Victorian façade, whilst expanding and upgrading the rest of the venue to better reflect the multi-culturalism of the community that has built up around it.

Today, Tara Theatre offers a fusion of the east and west - with antique Indian doors installed throughout, an earth floor in the main theatre space and the venue's new exterior inspired by a twisting tree, rooted in the community. New studio space and a courtyard garden have also been incorporated to encourage further engagement with the local community.

In one of the Lyric's rehearsal spaces, Ann Skippers chaired *Cultural Citizens: Communities Putting Culture on the Map*. Brian Whiteley of Planning Aid England encouraged the theatre industry to engage with planning authorities to ensure the arts are fairly represented in local and national planning policies. Whiteley revealed theatres currently get just one mention in the National Policy framework - in the glossary...

Daniel Rose of the Mechanics' Institution Trust then introduced the work of his organisation in bringing Swindon's historic Mechanics' Institution back to life as a community-run theatre and events space. Rose was proceeded by Hannah Garrow of the Leith Theatres Trust who detailed the challenges of re-opening Edinburgh's Leith Theatre. "These have included managing a public asset, achieving a collective vision and raising funds and awareness," said Garrow. Despite these difficulties, in May 2017 the venue successfully hosted the Hidden Door festival; it also boasts local hero Irvine Welsh as a patron, his novel *Trainspotting* having been set in the area.

Taking place in the Lyric's main auditorium, *Civic Pride: Local Authorities & Cultural Placemaking* was chaired by Ruth Eastwood of the Grand Theatre, Blackpool. Ed Bayes, policy officer in City Hall's Culture at Risk, Culture and Creative Industries department informed attendees of how "policy, direction and structure can actually help cultural centres to flourish." Attendees then heard from project director Graham Lister and Councillor Louise Gittins who explained how and why they went about building support for and investment in the recently opened Storyhouse in Chester (see *LSi July 2017* for more on this project).

Ian Timms of Taunton Deane and West Somerset Council, Vanessa Lefrancois of the Brewhouse Theatre and Tim Foster of Foster Wilson Architects concluded the session with details of their plans for a new cultural quarter based around the redevelopment of Taunton's Brewhouse arts centre.

At the end of the day delegates reunited in the main auditorium for short provocations from Anna Strongman of Argent and Deborah Aydon of the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse theatres. This was followed by a panel discussion chaired by Tim Jones of Furturecity and featuring a number of the day's speakers, who discussed the future of theatre and placemaking. Jon Morgan then provided closing thoughts before welcoming delegates and contributors to a post-conference reception.

Well-attended by a broad cross-section of key players from the theatre and planning sectors, the day succeeded in exploring theatre's relationship with 'placemaking': making a place - be that a city, town or venue - attractive and beneficial to communities. Though it's clear that securing consistent funding support can be challenging, the capacity for the arts to regenerate areas and provide a much-needed boost to communities should not be overlooked, and engagement with local and national planning authorities is vital. ☀

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