
Analysis: Can the show go on for theatres?

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Theatres and arts centres face a battle to survive amidst council cuts, but some new city schemes are demonstrating how culture can add value, writes Josephine Smit.



Storyhouse is Chester's largest public building to date, with 7,500 square metres of public space (PIC Peter Cook)

Last week the 900 seat Bridge Theatre opened for business on its prime site beside London's Tower Bridge. The new theatre, designed by architect Haworth Tompkins, is one of around 30 estimated to have opened around the capital over the past five years, largely thanks to Section 106 agreements. The Bridge was delivered by Berkeley Homes as part of its One Tower Bridge residential development.

But at the same time as new venues are opening to public acclaim, other arts venues around London and beyond are facing a struggle for survival that is resulting in, at worst, closure, and at best, local authorities handing existing cultural assets to community groups and charities. Sutton, in south London, has been left without a theatre after the Sutton Theatres Trust, which operated in two council owned venues, went into administration.

"The cuts mean local authorities are having to divest themselves of theatres and arts centres and so are often taking short term decisions, but those decisions will have long term consequences," warns Jon Morgan, director of the Theatres Trust, the national advisory body and statutory consultee for theatres in planning. "Local authorities should not underestimate the value of existing cultural buildings, and they shouldn't let go of these buildings lightly."

Vibrancy and value

There is conflicting evidence of culture's economic impact on cities. A report by research centre the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth assessed the impact of sport and culture and came to a gloomy conclusion. It noted, "Overall, the evidence suggests that the measurable economic effects on local economies tend not to have been large and are often zero. Facilities, however, can have a small positive impact on property prices nearby." At the same time authoritative sources, such as Arts Council England and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, point to economic and social value to investment in the arts.

Developers delivering theatres are finding that culture can add value to mixed use schemes in a market where consumers and businesses are placing an increasing emphasis on the experiences that places have to offer. Culture is bringing vibrancy to schemes like British Land's Regent's Place, in north London, which incorporates the Diorama Theatre. Regent's Place has the theatre at its heart, with commercial space and homes around it. "That means that people walk through the development at the weekend, and it brings in nearby communities," says Morgan. The venue, which featured in the Theatres Trust's conference on theatres and placemaking last month, has become a resource for new and existing residents, promoting community cohesion.

An upcoming scheme in Quarry Hill in Leeds puts mixed use development alongside existing cultural neighbours, including the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Northern Ballet, the BBC and Leeds College of Music, to create a cultural quarter, which has been collectively branded as SOYO. "The area has a dream team of uses that aren't recognised as having a coherent cultural location," says Andrew Gardner, partner at DLG Architects, the scheme's masterplanner. Developer Caddick Group's scheme will introduce a range of uses, with the first phase providing 490 apartments for private rent in two blocks, and will create a unified streetscape and public realm, with green spaces and car-free environments.

SOYO's very different players have all recognised the potential benefits of the collective branded approach, says Angus Armitage, director of DS.Emotion, the creative and placemaking agency working on the project. "The stakeholders have all been very supportive, and importantly there has been strong council buy-in on this." Unified branding allows the cultural players to co-ordinate and collaborate, and they will ultimately tap into the audience of new SOYO residents and workers, while Caddick, and its restaurant and café tenants, will ultimately benefit commercially from placemaking, although that is something that may only be realised over time. Armitage stresses that placemaking developers take on the role of stewardship: "Caddick will be custodians of the place. That means they take a longer term view."

Razi Riahi, strategy director for placemaking at DS.Emotion and an urban trends specialist, says this kind of thinking is by no means unique. "More enlightened

developers are becoming more focused on the opportunity of place and the values of branding. Every developer wants a vibrant place."

That has already been achieved at Chester's Storyhouse, a new arts centre combining a theatre, library, cinema and café bar, which opened its doors in May. In little over the first month of operation, the venue had nearly 80,000 visitors, putting it on track to receive 1 million visitors in its first year, ahead of forecasts. Its library has increased its membership by around 150 per cent. The scheme is already being celebrated as a success, and has captured the attention of placemakers and the arts world alike, with the latter also seeing interest in innovations such as the co-location of the library and theatre, and the theatre's adaptable configuration (interior shown below, photo by Peter Cook).



The centre combines a classic 1930s Odeon cinema with new build in a design by architect Bennetts Associates, and it was delivered in a bold move by Cheshire West and Chester Council. The city lacked a theatre, cinema and art gallery and the council was prompted to act when Chester started to lose visitors. "People were becoming impatient that Chester lacked facilities and something had to be done," explains Graham Lister, the project director working on behalf of the council.

An economic impact study was carried out to inform development decisionmaking. "It showed there would be £16-17 million of economic advantage from the operation of the new building. That helped to justify spending in excess of £30 million on the project," says Lister.

The new centre is attracting both city visitors and local residents, and the community's enthusiasm for the development may, in part, be due to the Odeon, and its role in local life. "The Odeon was the place for everyone – it was where people had met their loved ones," says Lister. "Using and reinventing that was crucial." DS.Emotion's Riahi also stresses the importance of resonating with community. "The community knows what's best," she says. "Our role is to provide the cultural glue, to provide a platform for cultural character."