

Theatres and Placemaking

Rebecca Morland reports on the Theatres Trust annual conference, which was held at the Lyric Hammersmith in October

This was the first conference led by new Theatres Trust Director, Jon Morgan, and demonstrated a slight change of emphasis for the Trust – showing that it is as focused on what theatres can achieve and contribute as much about their bricks and mortar.

Near the end of the day, one speaker claimed that “placemaking” was an over-used term, and that the debate had very much moved on. This may be true in academic circles, but one of the strengths of the conference was that it demonstrated what placemaking could involve in reality and included many relevant case studies.

One of the most inspiring of these came near the start. Paul Callaghan, Trustee of Sunderland Music, Arts and Cultural Trust, provided a passionate explanation of the challenges facing Sunderland, contextualising them through an analysis of social and economic inequality in Britain. He then explained how culture was being seen as a major part of plans to regenerate Sunderland – not the icing on the cake, but a key ingredient – and detailed how this going to work, especially through the development of the Music, Arts and Cultural Quarter. A new theatre was being built in the Quarter, together with spaces for arts groups and two heritage pubs had been re-opened as pubs and food spaces. These would not only serve the theatre (which was therefore being built without bar/catering spaces, hence a reduction in cost) but would also provide an ongoing income stream. It

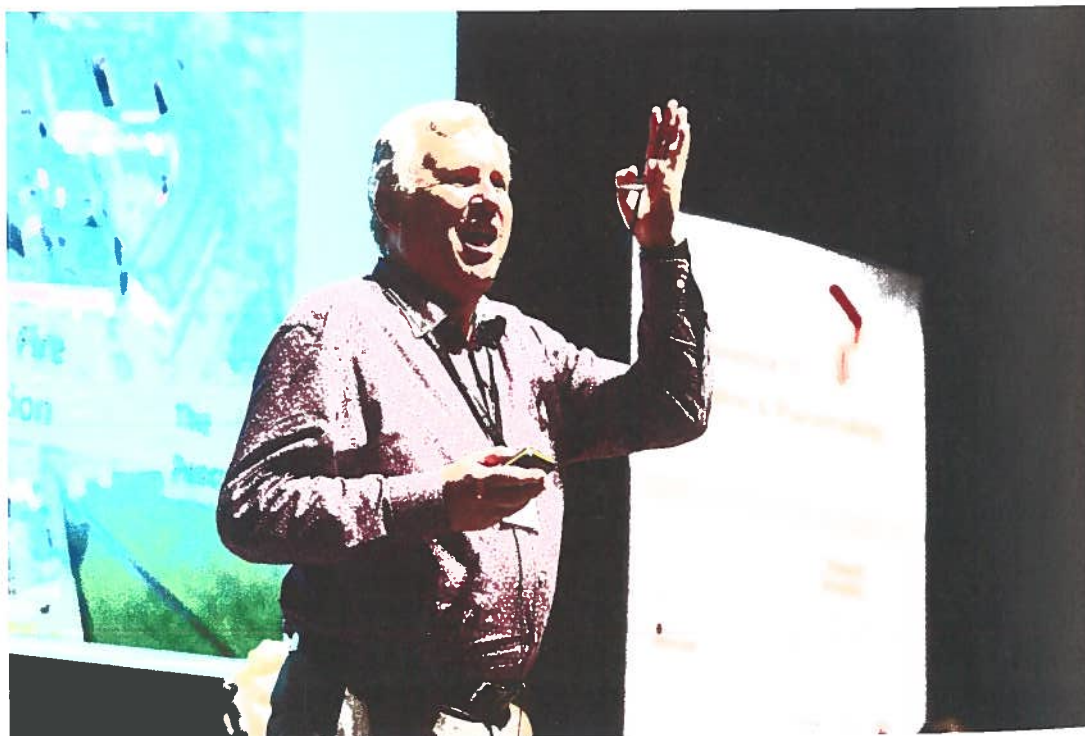
is hoped that he returns to a future Theatres Trust Conference to give an update.

Later in the same session, we heard from a double act of developer and theatre - Anna Devlet from British Land and David Byrne from the New Diorama – the theatre which sits in the heart of British Land’s Regent Place development. The partnership that had grown up between the two organisations over seven years was shown by both to be mutually beneficial, and – equally important – provided many benefits for the artists and communities that the New Diorama serves.

There then followed three parallel sessions, all of which were repeated throughout the day – ensuring that all delegates were able to see two out of the three:

In People Places and Spaces – Designing Democratic Theatres, Chair Paddy Dillon introduced three groups of clients and architects, talking about their completed projects, and in particular, the relationship with their communities that the schemes had grown out of and/or influenced.

At Theatre Royal York, Artistic Director Damien Cruden and architect Angus Morrogh-Ryan had developed their scheme only after Damien had been at the theatre for some time. His work with community groups (as performers/creators of work) and for family audiences was very much around the democratisation of culture, and the theatre building had not been helpful in this. Through



Paul Callaghan,
Sunderland Music, Arts and
Cultural Trust
Photo: Alex Brenner

changing the seating rake in the auditorium the relationship between audience and stage changed, and this had also provided more space in the foyer, further increased by glazing over the colonnade – which made for a more welcoming space.

Sian Alexander, Executive Director at the Lyric Hammersmith, had arrived after the theatre's capital project (outlined by architect David Watson) but described what it had enabled the theatre to deliver. The new Reuben Wing was now the centre of an incredible amount of arts activity, with 10 arts organisations based there and 33,000 young people involved every year.

Tara Arts' new theatre in Earlsfield was discussed by artistic director Jatinder Verma and architect Julian Middleton. The theatre arose out of the dialogue between communities which Tara has been engendering since its foundation in the 1970s, but also looked back to the building's roots in the local community. The theatre itself includes within it artefacts from India, but also reflects the original high street building.

In Civic Pride: Local Authorities and Cultural Placemaking, one existing and one planned project were highlighted, where local authorities have a strong commitment to cultural investment.

Councillor Louise Gittens, from Cheshire West and Chester Council, explained the Council's commitment to Storyhouse, the new arts venue which recently opened in Chester

to great acclaim and which is already starting to have an impact. The Council are very proud of what has been achieved. Graham Lister, Project Director, explained how the initial knock-back from Arts Council England had actually been useful in that it meant the project had been reviewed with everything having to earn its place. A partnership Board had been put in place with an external chair, and an existing group (Chester Performs) had been identified to operate the venue.

In contrast, Taunton was at the start of its journey. As Ian Timms, Assistant Director for Business Development at the Council, outlined, the town was facing substantial growth. Part of their plan was to provide an infrastructure to accommodate this growth and they saw Leisure Arts & Culture as an important part of this, with a cultural quarter, with the Brewhouse Theatre at the centre. Vanessa Lefrancois, Chief Executive and Tim Foster, architect, outlined their plans for the redevelopment of the Brewhouse to respond to this, in particular through re-aligning the theatre so it was open to the river, and upgrading its facilities.

Cultural Citizens – Communities Putting Culture on the map

This session highlighted the role of communities in cultural placemaking, both through case-studies and through a concise explanation of the role of the planning system, provided by Brian Whiteley, Planning Adviser, Planning Aid. His presentation explained the different layers that sit within the planning



Julian Middleton and
Jatinder Verma
Photo by Alex Brenner



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system and highlighted the ways in which communities could get involved. Daniel Rose, Executive Director of the Mechanics Institution Trust, Swindon, outlined the role of his organisation. It has already renovated and operates buildings within the New Swindon area of the town, and runs a range of projects there, but its ambitions to bring back the Grade II* listed community-run theatre at the heart of this are proving harder to achieve.

Hannah Garrow, from Leith Theatres Trust, talked about the re-opening of that theatre, and its role as a community hub in the area it serves. Both emphasised the role of communities as campaigners, and the need for persistence, especially with local authorities.

The final session of the day looked forward to the future and drew on the findings of the earlier sessions.

Deborah Aydon, Executive Director of the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, provided the most inspiring quote of the day - from Joan Littlewood. "Good theatre draws the energy out of communities and gives it back as *joi de vivre*". She pointed out that real place-making happens outside institutions, and that there will always be a tension for arts institutions between leading and responding to communities.

In this final discussion, several themes emerged.

There was definitely some concern about the role of some local authorities – not all of

these were as proactive as the case studies quoted earlier in the day.

The relationship between developers and cultural organisations was going to be increasingly important as other funding sources for capital developments reduced. Section 106 agreements [which sometimes require developers to provide cultural facilities] need to be policed by the local authorities, but if they (or their planners) are not aware of the importance of culture, then that can be a problem.

Overall, the day left me with a far better understanding of what place making could mean in reality rather than as an abstract concept. And a belief that a combination of commercial developers, enlightened local authorities and theatres with a strong understanding of the communities that they serve, could make a real difference to the development of theatres in future.