

ARCHES DEBATE
The City as a Cultural Site

Saturday 21st April 2012, Glasgow

I have a dreadful habit when asked questions like this to unpick the questions and interrogate what are meant by them and then to embark on a rant about capitalism....so in that spirit and in ten minutes flat.

A. What is the **value** of **art** in enlivening/challenging the use of urban space and the recent rise of reclaimed buildings as arts spaces?

..a pedantic point to start with but the use of disused/reclaimed/leftover spaces for art is not recent - the appropriation of spaces for whatever purposes warehouse raves, performance events, film screenings... is as old as the notion of squatting and the idea of a counter culture, that can be traced back past Dada and the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s all the way to the sacrilegious and anti-clerical carnivals that took place during the French revolution

more generally I find the question problematic without defining what we mean by;

art – what is it? whose is it? and what is it for e.g are we talking about so called ‘public’ art sponsored by politicians and corporations? Community arts programmes? Good fun entertainment? Or an assault on bourgeois culture...?

value – of value to who? Spiritual and non-quantifiable value, that is the non-commodified *use value* of art, or **exchange value**, that is art as commerce... and

challenging – challenging WHAT? the organization of the culture industry? The transformation of art into business? the privatisation of urban space? Institutionalised forms of inequality? ... are we talking about the old avant-garde idea of art as hammer as a tool in the critique of capitalism?

B. What are the problems with the framing of art as an **economic driver** in the urban context **over and above** other values?

The problems with *framing arts as a driver* is that it is largely nonsense in terms of serious economic regeneration.

Unless we are talking about applied art – ceramics, textiles, graphics, animation, which can indeed have an economic impact but only really when it is tied to manufacturing.

Thirty years of de-industrialisation has led to an economy almost entirely dependent on services and retail, the idea that the visual and performing arts can somehow rescue us from the crisis of neoliberalism is daft and more importantly a thoroughly degraded notion of the role of art.

Art should ideally be decoupled from the pursuit of profit. Art should be about the critique of the world not about propping up a bankrupt economic and political system

A vibrant city ‘fit to live-in’ needs a healthy art and music scene. It is of course just about possible to produce art and stay alive without prostitution, but it is very difficult.

One might argue that in a sophisticated democracy artists should receive proper subsidies to unshackle the production of art from business, lotteries and the prejudices of grant givers. Unfortunately, in the midst of a global crisis of capitalism, the arts and the humanities are very low down on the list of institutional and government priorities, including I might add in Higher Education

Politicians of course insist that ‘art’ is good for tourist footfall, increasing sales in bars and shops, helping brand a city. But this is to reduce the role of art to that of advertising in which what kind of art is of no real importance beyond whether it will help sell the city to investors.

As for “*Over and above other values*” - ? Ask most people what to them is more important the funding of a day care center or an arts programme, which are the sort of awful choices being thrust upon people they are likely to say the former. This is what neo-liberal ideology and economics forces people into accepting the deterioration in the quality of everyday life

C. Consider the changing shape of Glasgow since 1990, what is the **actual** or **perceived** role of culture within that?

This is impossible to judge. Again politicians, desperate to rid the city of its reputation as a rebellious working-class city would have you believe that Glasgow now has an enviable reputation as a lively culture art friendly city in which every other person is engaged in creative activity.

This would also seem to be the perception abroad. At a conference in the Ruhr valley that recently received this dubious accolade at which I was asked to speak, many thought the Year of Culture had revolutionized the city. I tried to point out that this was largely mythological. Individuals might have done well out of it but the majority of the population?

People can form their own opinions on this. But ask ordinary working people who are unemployed, in casual employment, facing home repossession, eviction, what they thought of it all and whether they benefitted, who often couldn't afford the bus fair into town?....was it a celebration of the spontaneous working class culture that is feature of everyday life in this city? Or was it a neat well-packaged idea of culture to be consumed without too much indigestion?

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