

# Arts & Culture and Regeneration Business Improvement Districts: Where the cultural can drive the economic

Caroline Davis

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## Introduction

It is almost universally accepted that the cities we love most, the ones we wish to visit, spend time and money in, are those cities that seem to be a thriving hive of activity. They are those cities that successfully manage to harness the twin powers of both economic and cultural force. This essay will examine how recent findings from a study I conducted in 2012 of city centre Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), show how BIDs and cities are using arts and culture activity to try to power their business areas and as a regenerative and profiling tool.

This essay will outline the broad thoughts on culture-led strategies for regeneration and development more generally, including the theories of Charles Landry and Richard Florida, before summarising strategies and activity used by BIDs in the UK found out through this survey. The findings from 14 UK BIDs identified that festival and outdoor arts activity was an important component of these BID organisations' programmes and distinguishes some early thinking in this area. The article, however, is not a critical response to the activities of BIDs but an initial understanding of how BIDs are using arts and culture activity and what that activity broadly looks like.

## Background

At a national level, we want our city centres and high streets to be hubs of activity for the benefit of business and society. On a policy level, the government is working to determine how to make this happen as towns and cities are affected by the twin impacts of the global recession and a loss of business due to the increase in online shopping. Visitor numbers are down, vacancy rates are up, and BIDs, who are acting on behalf of these affected member businesses, need to find ways to counteract this; to promote their areas and their offer.

Policy considerations and possible interventions at both a national and a local level include: physical improvements to the public realm; bringing life to vacant units with the use of 'pop-up shops'; and the increased use of arts and culture activity, such as outdoor theatre, to give consumers a reason to visit. It also includes other structural issues, such as barriers to development like parking; planning law; and, from a finance perspective, alterations to business rates (*Retail Week*, 2013). City problems are complex and span a number of areas. BIDs, as organisations that respond to local business need, will no doubt be pursuing a range of activities to best suit their own area needs – one strand of which is arts and culture activity.

Using the arts and culture interventions as a basis for regeneration can be a difficult case to argue as outputs can be hard to measure. However, Griffiths, Bassett & Smith (2003) describe *"the heightened strategic significance attached to the field of culture"* in the UK as *"one of the most striking features of urban policy and urban governance over the last two decades... arts and culture have come to be seen as a key resource for urban regeneration"* (p154). They continue to note that culture-led strategy drives the economic with *"[t]he ability of firms, regions and nations to capture economic added value from culture and creativity"* and this becoming *"an important ingredient of economic success"*. This article will highlight, specifically,

how increased significance attached to arts and culture has also been reflected recently in the activity of some UK BIDs.

## Theory

First, it is important to outline some of the broad opinions covered in 'culture-led' strategy. Charles Landry, a key commenter on flourishing and creative cities, outlines that, to be successful, cities need to create a buzz. He believes that the most successful global cities are those cities that build on their cultural assets. Landry (2000) contributes an ideal of how cities should come together to prosper; cities need to create this "buzz" and to ensure their *"images are not frozen in the past"* (p118). Festivals, the arts and celebration give citizens a reason to connect with their city: *"Beyond a certain level once basic services, shops and facilities have been provided, these differences are ways of adding value to what a city is about"* (p118).

Landry's theories are about places being more than just their physical embodiment: *"The style and design of a place, how people socialise or dress can itself be turned in to value added whether as a means of attracting outsiders to visit or to invest. Indeed every facet of a culture from history to contemporary events, a quirky circumstance... can be seen as a resource to be turned into opportunity"* (p175). Evans (2001) builds on this thinking: *"Cities that have used culture, whether architecture, design (including public art / realm schemes), event/animation or cultural production-based... [are seen] as successful proponents not only of culture-led regeneration, but also of urban regeneration more generally"* (p213). My survey study of BID wanted to examine whether BID were looking at capitalising on these opportunities too, as a way to bring success to their city and BID members<sup>1</sup>.

As a result of making the most of the opportunity that these cultural assets afford, Bovaird (1997, p5) notes: *"It is conventional wisdom to suggest that the cultural assets of an area will be an important factor in attracting inward investment"*. This is an argument for the economic following the cultural, how arts and culture can breed development. However, it's not all about the physical and the economic - people too have a huge part to play in creative cities. Whether those people are the decision makers, organisers or consumers – the latter with the money to spend to make activity viable. Richard Florida's *'Rise of the Creative Class'* (2002) looks at these elements and his theories are also considered within the study and later in the article.

Despite such strong support by some advocates, debate regarding the direction and success of regeneration strategies has continued, questioning the *specific* value of pursuing culture-led regeneration by cities across the world (Griffiths, Basset & Smith, 2003; Evans, 2001). Research suggests that some failures may be down to the unsuccessful adoption of strategy, e.g. a lack of investment in individual and structural capacity building (Balsas, 2004), a lack of participation from resident communities in these areas (Strom, 2003; Sharp, 2007), and broader issues of social exclusion (Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, 2005).

Middleton & Freestone (2008) argue: *"While these strategies have undoubtedly been successful in a number of different cities throughout the UK and Europe, there remains much uncertainty and concern over the long-term benefits of culture-led regeneration"*. Attempting to quantify hard outcomes and long-term benefits can be challenging. Bovaird (1997) notes that quantifying the *"economic role of public art in urban regeneration is a difficult issue, principally because it is both complex and nebulous"* (p2). Yet, despite these challenges, something keeps bringing cities back to the arts and culture to drive their cities forward. Some cities have overcome these measurement and strategy difficulties and are continuing to invest in the arts and culture as a means to provide entertainment, enjoyment and economic value in their city environment to great local and national success.

These arguments about the importance of arts and culture in our towns and cities are hard to ignore. With this in mind, the study I conducted last year was predicated on the notion that the arts can help in a variety of ways. Using Landry's view that: *"First, with their aesthetic focus, they draw attention to quality and beauty... Second, the arts challenge us to ask questions about ourselves as a place. Finally, arts projects*

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<sup>1</sup> BID are organisations formed by balloting members within a geographical area to pay an additional levy on business rates. This money funds the running of the BID company which is reinvested in a range of activities in that area, aiming to boost the economic base and profile of those member businesses. More detail on p3.

*can simply create enjoyment*” (2006, p252). This enjoyment, this vital city factor, is the component that city-makers hope may make residents stay and bring visitors back. Encourage us to dwell longer and maybe even spend more, whilst simultaneously allowing people a connection with that place. Promoting these opportunities is usually a key component of BID strategy with BIDs becoming increasingly important in shaping their city across the UK (Cook, 2008).

### Business Improvement Districts

There are now over 100 BIDs in existence (National BIDs Advisory Service, 2012) taking decisions about their city environment and able to play some part in the arts and cultural offer of a city. BIDs have become an important part of the UK policy and delivery landscape for city development across the country, with many local authorities finding them an effective mechanism to deliver real differences to the trading environment in an arrangement that sees the businesses themselves taking more control. In seeking additionality to statutory provided services BIDs invest money, generated through a self-imposed levy<sup>2</sup>, in schemes to enhance their trading environment and improve the member businesses’ bottom lines. Anecdotal evidence from BIDs both in the UK and abroad suggests there is scope for these organisations to make a valuable contribution to their cities through programmes of cleaning, greening, beautification and also events, marketing and business support. Sometimes these activities are wholly funded by BIDs, sometimes BIDs are a partner or a match funder. Crucially, these organisations have money to invest and their budget decisions are of interest to those who have a stake in those cities.

Previously, academic research of BIDs has primarily looked at the democratic value in these bodies operating in what some see as blurred governance areas (Justice & Skelcher, 2009; Justice & Goldsmith, 2006). This has caused some academic debate about the privatisation and governance of public space that comes with this increase in private sector power. However, there exists one study from 2006 when UK BIDs were in their infancy (Creative Cultures, Cultural Capital Ltd and Perfect Moment, 2006) regarding BIDs and arts and culture. That investigation pointed to a value in revisiting and expanding this line of enquiry of the role that arts and culture can play in our town and city high streets through the mechanism of BIDs.

### Arts & Culture and BIDs – The study



'Art in the City' is Truro's annual visual arts festival that draws together arts based businesses in Truro, making art accessible to the community.

With BIDs having the mechanism to raise income and spend this budget on their own tailored initiatives (Symes & Steel, 2003), last year I used an online questionnaire to identify whether city centre-based (UK) BIDs were looking at pursuing their own localised arts and cultural strategy, programmes or events, what those might look like and their reasons for doing so.

14<sup>3</sup> BIDs responded to the online questionnaire drawing from the population of BIDs located in city centres and Greater London. Although the study recognises that BIDs cannot be, and do not purport to be, complete agents of (culture-led) regeneration, the findings show that BIDs are playing their part with their investment decisions. The majority of BIDs agree that even if they are not committing to large amounts of arts and cultural activity due to budgetary constraints or other areas of policy focus, cultural regeneration is an important component in their regeneration strategy. Those BIDs that are

<sup>2</sup> BID Levy is generated through an additional percentage on business rates which is voted for through a ballot.

<sup>3</sup> Responses received from Southside (Birmingham), Lincoln Business Improvement Group, Bristol, Broad Street (Birmingham), Brighton, Colmore Business District (Birmingham), Angel, Kingston First, Plymouth, Winchester, Truro, Hull, Retail Birmingham and Bath. Unfortunately no responses from other core cities, other than Birmingham, were received.

using arts and culture are doing so for a variety of reasons, agreeing that: footfall; improving the environment; increasing dwell times; acting as a promotional tool; and public participation are all valid to their objectives.

The survey discovered that festivals are being used in a diverse range of forms including community, faith and arts (books, music, food, comedy, and dance), to bring extra activity into their city centres and BID areas. The celebration of the city and its assets is important to BIDs. It is possibly an area that could be developed more, especially when looking at the more sustained work of some of the US BIDs where there are direct examples of using local industry, such as fashion and wine culture assets, to make more of their BID offer. Some of the BID activities discovered in my research appear consistent with those outlined by Landry; building on quirk and circumstance to provide a connection. However, undoubtedly others, such as BID fashion shows, are perhaps more commercially driven than community conscious. Winchester's website provides further elaboration on the use of festivals: *"Culture, the arts, events and festivals brings footfall into the city centre. Every year over 400,000 visitors come into the city to visit a festival"* (Winchester BID, 2012) - proving the power of this type of programming. The responses received in the survey may lead to some disagreement or ambiguity over the definition of 'arts and culture' but, within the main study, BID managers themselves outlined some of their feelings about this and the cultural assets that they may or may not have to build on in the first instance (for example: shopping, night time economy, existing arts and cultural venues in their districts).

From the survey findings, the main examples of other BID organised or BID supported arts and culture activity fell into four categories: photography (outdoor exhibitions), public space improvements (changes to and investment in the public realm), installations (including sculpture and lighting) and art competitions (with various levels of public engagement). What was clear was that despite commissioning some of the more commercial event activities, arts and culture activities were valued for more than just their aesthetic value. In some instances, these events were being used by the BIDs as a platform for debate and community engagement – as seen in Truro with their art walks and talks. Further analysis of how BIDs are working in terms of community participation could also be interesting – especially as an example of how to bring business closer to the community, which can be challenging in larger cities.



Colmore Business District, Birmingham, invested money into a public realm scheme including newly commissioned public art.

Interestingly, of those BIDs that responded to the survey, no BIDs that were using arts and culture activity at the time were planning to cease this and, to date and nationally, all BIDs have been successful in their re-balloting of members to ensure a second BID term<sup>4</sup>. The survey noted that some BIDs are even looking at more initiatives in future, including: working with specialist artist-led lighting schemes; increased festival-based activity; and art in vacant units. This is a positive reflection on the success of these initiatives to date, or at least a willingness to explore further arts and cultural activity in the future.

The role of BIDs in reaching the aspiration for a regenerated city may be increasingly important as *"BIDs involve businesses as never before in the day-to-day operation of cities"* (Cook, 2008, p2). They are also potentially important in the future roll out of government policy, following the allocation of pilots for Mary

<sup>4</sup> BID legislation in the UK allows for BIDs to run for a maximum of a five year term before having to re-ballot member businesses on whether they wish to progress to a second term. To date, all BIDs have been re-voted in for a second phase.



Portas' scheme of Town Teams<sup>5</sup> who are also piloting a range of interventions including arts and culture activity. BIDs already have the ability to raise money to finance these initiatives.

Secondary to their programmes of activity, it is also important to look at the management of BIDs. BIDs provide an opportunity for businesses (and their leaders) to become more involved in the running of the city (Cook, 2008). Involvement by business managers in the running of the BID company can allow for an increased involvement in the direction the BID takes with its investment. BID boards are typically made up of a representative selection of the types of businesses they represent, with working groups also allowing for specific focus.

Southside BID, one of four BIDs based in Birmingham city centre, has an eclectic board membership including directors from a wide range of cultural organisations (theatre, cinema, Chinese restaurant, Gay



Southside BID, Birmingham, have provided funds for an outdoor theatre programme.

Pride) and other areas of the city's business community (insurance, property development and third sector). The organisation is chaired by the Chief Executive of a theatre, and the BID's programme includes an outdoor theatre programme, a festival of visual arts and commissioning independent films, representing the cultural offer of the area amongst some other strands of cleaning, greening and marketing. Three of the Truro BID's board members represent cultural organisations, which is a large proportion by comparative standards and shows another opportunity that creative/arts/cultural organisations can have in terms of extending the role they can play in shaping the city they operate in. This area could prove interesting for further study.

Richard Florida's theories of the 'Creative Class' look at soft factors (including availability of arts and culture activity) as increasingly important in investment decisions in globalised cities. He asks: *"Why do creative people cluster in certain places? In a world where people are highly mobile, why do they choose to live and concentrate in some cities over others and for what reasons?"* (Florida, 2002, p223). As an extension of this theory, I was interested to discover whether BIDs were actively looking to attract businesses to their districts. This would, in turn, create the environment to attract the 'Creative Class' - high earners, mobile individuals with capital, who like to cluster in areas with a range of activity.

There were only some examples of BIDs undertaking initiatives to help attract particular businesses into the BID area, but this did include temporary space (incubation spaces/pop-up shops), engagement with wider business community (encouragement to take space rather than pro-active engagement) and support (working with existing organisations who carry this function out). This is an important example of BIDs recognising the increased role they can play in developing their city and an alternative way to view the cultural driving the economic. It is also possible, within Florida's view that *"[m]any members of the creative class also want to have a hand in actively shaping the quality of place of their communities"* (Florida, 2002, p232), that in the long-term the 'Creative Class' could become more involved in the running of BID boards and in shaping the city.

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<sup>5</sup> Some arts and culture activity of the Portas Pilots are in line with the BID findings. Bedminster, one of the 12 pilot towns, aims to *"exploit and eventually explode the gap between art, advertising and entertainment, high street retailing and real estate development"* (Bedminster, 2013), proposing: theatre in the shops; an arts festival; a street art installation; and an Arts Council street lighting project. Stockport aims to open a digital and visual arts centre for the creative population and population at large. Pilots are currently awaiting evaluation.

## Thoughts and Conclusion

Having summarised some of the broad thinking and findings about BID programmes, in the context of culture-led strategies, I feel it has been important to highlight the arts and cultural work that UK BIDs are involved in. This article does not argue that BIDs should be using arts and culture as a key part of their strategy. It does, however, identify that city centre BIDs are involved in organising, supporting and commissioning arts and culture work - and plan to continue to. This raises interest in the possibilities of that relationship going forward. Some BIDs believe that arts and culture programmes and activity are important to drive the profile and growth of their BID areas and to continue to add value to the businesses that are funding them and it will be interesting to see how this area of work develops, especially around the programming of outdoor festival activity, installations and public art commissions/competitions.

The limitations of the research must be noted. The survey conducted last year was more of an information gathering exercise than an in-depth case study of particular initiatives. Nowhere within the research was there an assessment about the success (or otherwise) of these reported arts and culture programmes: Were they well attended? Were those residents or visitors who attended them positive about their experience and engagement? Were the businesses involved satisfied with the activity? How much of the BID's resources were used in comparison with the resources of other partners? This one voice (the respondent to the questionnaire, the BID manager) is therefore limited in scope.

It is possible, for future research, that some of the key schemes could be used as case studies and that a more rigorous investigation of their success could be used to help shape BID investment decisions in the future. The BID's representatives are likely to hold their own work in positive regard and may not have considered some of the limitations of culture-led regeneration schemes. These are outlined in the background review and include lack of: participation, gentrification, and capacity building. They may have failed or succeeded in their own ambitions to increase dwell time, spend or profile – or certainly other BIDs who did not respond to the survey may have had those experiences.

Landry and Florida provide a useful academic backdrop against which to analyse BIDs, with their views on making physical connections to a city and giving businesses a chance to shape their city in a creative city and 'Cultural Class' context. Moving forward from a practical point of view, the research conducted in 2012 pulls into focus the possibilities for BIDs in becoming important commissioners of, and key partners in, arts and culture activity in the years to come but more in-depth study around BIDs playing an active role in attracting businesses or high capital individuals would be of interest.

The focus of this research was only on cities. However, towns and high streets are also key areas that should be considered should the research ever be re-done for a more complete picture of BID activity. In the meantime, as the difficult economic conditions continue and BIDs continue to find ways to boost footfall and profile, it will be interesting to see whether they (and also the initial Portas Pilots) will continue to be, or perhaps increasingly become, involved in this area of work to drive the economic through the cultural in our towns and cities.

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**Caroline Davis**

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For further information on this area of work please contact [carolinedavis@birminghamhippodrome.com](mailto:carolinedavis@birminghamhippodrome.com) / 07980995580

The report summarises the findings from research submitted as part of the requirements for MA Regeneration, Staffordshire University, Creative Communities Department; *Cultural Regeneration and Business Improvement Districts: An Investigation of Arts and Culture Projects of City Centre Business Improvement Districts in the UK (2012)*.

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