

Meshworking Cultural Well-Being

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Preface

*"...It is so hard to imagine
A world where the many would have their chance without
A fall in the standard of intellectual living
And nothing left that the highbrow cared about.
Which fears must be suppressed. There is no reason for thinking
That, if you give a chance to people to think or live,
The arts of thought or life will suffer and become rougher
And not return more than you could ever give."
– Louis MacNeice: 'Autumn Journal', 1939*

This is the first of two Meshwork Worcester 'Opinion Pieces' reflecting on the inclusion of 'cultural well-being' in the 2012 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The second text will be published in early 2014.

Some History

The inclusion of 'cultural well-being' in the NPPF, March 2012, returns public art to the much overlooked 'democratisation of culture' versus 'cultural democracy'¹ debate of the early 1980s. At the time, this debate was ignored by the arts funding system as it pump-primed Public Art Agencies² and set out to secure a mandatory Percent for Art in the Planning System.³

The separation of public art from the bigger debate on cultural relevance has its beginnings in the work of the Arts Council's 'New Activities Committee' (1969 to 1970) and its subsequent 'Experimental Projects Committee' (1970 and 1973). By overlooking the social change agendas

¹ Owen Kelly's 'In Search of Cultural Democracy' challenged the 'Arts for All' ambitions then being advanced by Roy Shaw, at the time Secretary General of the Arts Council of Great Britain. "When Roy Shaw says that I dismiss 'the Great Tradition of European Art' as 'an ideological construction of the imperialist climax', he misses the point. It is not the art that I am dismissing, it is the 'Great Tradition' which claims the right to say what is and what isn't art."

The notion of cultural democracy finds early expression in the work of the European Ministers responsible for Cultural Affairs at the Oslo Conference in June 1976, and, before that, in the 9th Session of the Standing Committee of European Ministers of Education in Stockholm, June 1975.

Owen Kelly: 'In Search of Cultural Democracy', Arts Express, October 1985.

Roy Shaw: 'Arts for All', Arts Express, August/September 1985.

² "...they pump-primed specialist public art officer posts...[and] also supported the growth of the public art agencies. As hybrids of the public and private sectors the majority [of agencies] describe their primary function as being to promote art and create opportunities for artists. The needs of community, education, the environment and the provision of an advisory or management service are secondary."

Sara Selwood: 'The Benefits of Public Art', PSI, 1995.

³ For a useful overview of Percent for Art and the Arts Funding System, see Henry Lydiate: 'Government Policies and the Arts, Dire Straits – outside the gallery', Artlaw 1986 and Arts Council: 'Percent for Art - Report of a Steering Group', 1990.

shared across a wide range of emerging arts practices of the time, and concentrating only on new funding categories and regimes that could be managed or devolved conveniently from the centre, the opportunity for a bigger possibility was shattered by false division.⁴ The consequent employment of divide and rule tactics failed to act on the founding purpose of the Arts Council of Great Britain [which was] “to create an environment to breed a spirit, to cultivate an opinion, to offer a stimulus to such purpose that the artist and the public can each sustain...”⁵ As it was, public art’s adjacency with cultural development became detached from the findings of the 1974 ‘Baldry Report’, and later isolated from the 1986 Shelton Trust/‘Another Standard’ checklist used to define radical arts practice.

We now live in different times. The Coalition government’s new NPPF corrects past failures by inviting public art to again find adjacency with the requirement for ‘cultural well-being’ established under the Framework’s ‘Social’ pillar definition of sustainable development.⁶ This is a clear invitation to frame, or re-frame, public art in terms of cultural well-being. This invitation should not be ignored. It is a unique opportunity to rectify the failures of history.

Cultural Well-Being

In December 2011, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee concluded that there was “a compelling case” for including “a cultural dimension as part of the social pillar of the definition of sustainable development” within the emerging NPPF.⁷

As Raymond Williams notes,⁸ the term ‘culture’ is now stretched across “several distinct and incompatible systems of thought”, and, as such, is unlikely to find easy fit with today’s Planning processes. Even so, the NPPF could have used the plural and relative term ‘culture’ to cover what it gives priority to (cultural venues and facilities). As it is, the NPPF uses the phrase “cultural well-being” and this complicates things considerably because it locates any understanding in the idea of the “cultural dimension of development” first outlined by UNESCO in the early 1990s.⁹

⁴ Arts Council of Great Britain: ‘Report of the Community Arts Working Party (The Baldry Report)’, 1974.

⁵ BBC: John Maynard Keynes radio talk about the founding of the Arts Council, July 1945.

⁶ The NPPF defines ‘sustainable development’ as: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is central to the economic, environmental and social success of the country and is the core principle underpinning planning. Simply stated, the principle recognises the importance of ensuring that all people should be able to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, both now and in the future.”

Communities and Local Government: ‘National Planning Policy Framework’, March 2012.

⁷ Parliament: ‘All Select Committee Publications’, 21.12.2011. The inclusion of a “cultural dimension” in the NPPF was a direct consequence of a campaign by ixia, the Theatre Trust, and others during the NPPF’s consultation period.

⁸ “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.” Raymond Williams: ‘Keywords, A Vocabulary of Culture and Society’, Fontana, 1976.

⁹ In his 1992 Address, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, President of the World Commission on Culture and Development, noted “that development begins in human culture, both in humankind’s material culture and in its symbolic culture, and that it must lead to the cultural fulfilment of each and everyone.”

Meshwork Worcester

Meshwork Worcester¹⁰ is an artist-led initiative in partnership with the Design and Heritage Team at Worcester City Council. The project builds on a year long investigation into anthropologist Tim Ingold's notions of "taskscape" and "cultural improvisation"¹¹, and was timed to follow on immediately after the publication of Worcester's 2011 'City Centre Master Plan' (David Lock Associates).

Meshwork Worcester doesn't have a tidy definition of 'cultural well-being', but Worcester itself has an interesting history when it comes to thinking through the "cultural dimension of development". In the early 1940s, the sculptor Walter Ritchie joined a team from the University of Birmingham commissioned to undertake a 'civic survey' for the planning of post-War Worcester.¹² Although this survey was intended to "examine the economic and social structure" of the city on "a standard factual basis", Ritchie complicated things considerably by introducing Lewis Mumford's 'Culture of Cities' into the mix.¹³

Ritchie's passion for what he called the 'Geddsian-Mumford thesis' led to a falling out with his research colleagues, as well as to what amounts to a formal reprimand from Worcester City Council. Certainly, by the last chapter of 'County Town', Ritchie was a lone voice when he noted

Javier Pérez de Cuéllar: 'Address' to the 140th session of the UNESCO Executive Board, 21.10.1992. Whilst this led, in turn, to statements on cultural diversity/pluralism, in terms of the NPPF it may be worth recalling British sculptor Henry Moore's concluding remarks to the 1952 UNESCO International Conference of Artists: "One can feed culture to the masses, but that does not mean that they will absorb it. In the acquisition of culture there must always be an element of discovery, of self-help; otherwise culture remains...something outside the desires and necessities of everyday life." In this, Moore was raising the issue of cultural democracy and "the renewal of the sources of artistic inspiration among the people at large", whilst also recognising that the artist can't "rely on [the] courage and initiative in public bodies in a democratic society."

Henry Moore: 'Preliminary Address on Sculpture', *The Sculptor in Modern Society*, 1952.

For a more recent explanation of the relationship of culture to sustainable development and economics, see the United Nations: 'Creative Economy Report', 2008.

¹⁰ Meshwork Worcester is led by artists Rob Colbourne, Stuart Mugridge and David Patten, in partnership with the Design and Heritage Team at Worcester City Council led by Jim Blackwell (Senior Urban Design Planning Officer) and including Alison Vincent (Landscape Architect) and Sheena Payne-Lunn (Historic Environment Record Officer). Meshwork Worcester was supported by Arts Council England (2011 - 2012) and will be contributing to Professor Geoffrey Crossick's two-year Arts & Humanities Research Council 'Cultural Value' project which was launched in July 2012.

¹¹ Although the term 'taskscape' escapes easy definition, it references continuous activity that avoids discrete classification (as 'art', as 'planning', etc.) to find fuller meaning in Ingold's later plea for "...a convergence of lines of interest rather than a bounded field of study."

Tim Ingold & Elizabeth Hallam: 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation, An Introduction', 2007.

Tim Ingold: 'Resisting Culture, Embracing Life', 2010.

¹² P. Sargant et al: 'County Town A Civic Survey for the planning of Worcester', Faculty of Commerce and Social Science, University of Birmingham, 1946.

¹³ Lewis Mumford: 'The Culture of Cities', Harcourt Brace & Co, 1938, and first published in England in 1940 by Secker & Warburg. Commenting later ('Biographical Note', 1978) on his experience at Worcester, Walter Ritchie noted that: "Planning at this time was a form of national escapism. As long as they were not directly affected, people enjoyed seeing pictures of urban utopias. But there had been too much physical upheaval through the war. Society needed healing rather than the dramatic operations necessary to bring these utopias into reality – there was too much theory and too little experience and humanity. I returned to sculpture."

that: “After this stocktaking should come revaluation of current practices and conditions in the light of new...cultural standards.”

New Cultural Standards?

In avoiding any useful definition of ‘cultural well-being’, the NPPF defaults to referencing cultural buildings, facilities and infrastructure as examples of sustainable development. The possibilities are bigger than that. As are the associated difficulties. A recent study into the urban transformation of the renewed Bicocca district of Milan¹⁴ identifies clearly the loss of long-term sustainability when the provisioning of cultural ‘hardware’ (facilities) runs out of balance with cultural ‘software’ (“culturally mediated accumulation of knowledge, sociability and identity assets”).

In looking at how best to frame new public art policy in the context of the NPPF, Meshwork Worcester has turned for guidance to a little known 1997 UNESCO/UNRISD paper on ‘Cultural Indicators of Well-Being’.¹⁵ Ignoring the author’s constructed formulae intended to explain how ‘well-being’ can be measured (because we don’t understand them), we suspect the paper’s use of Amartya Sen’s notion of ‘functionings’ could be useful. Particularly in terms of public art as an activity that connects “social and political functionings” with “intellectual and aesthetic functionings”.

The importance of this becomes apparent when, as the paper says, “economic, social, political, intellectual and aesthetic factors are of interest...only to the extent that they constitute different dimensions of the same basic notion of well-being.” As we enter an extended period of promised austerity – during which we will see further local authority contraction, wider economic slowdown, cruder growth measures linked to forced impetus, and deregulation of previous assumptions – we would be wise to remember that public art’s relevance to well-being is more than what ornithology is to the birds.¹⁶

In pursuing a strategy based on “...a convergence of lines of interest rather than a bounded field of study”, Meshwork Worcester has been engaging in “a kind of ‘mass exploration’...as a means of understanding what might fruitfully be the practices of ‘public art’ in the processes of a city’s becoming”.¹⁷ This has involved (by example and not limitation) writing new policy guidance and shaping new Planning procedures, proposing the re-use of redundant buildings (and in doing this, challenging assumptions about Worcester’s flood red-zone), re-drawing the city and co-authoring

¹⁴ Pierluigi Sacco & Girogio Tavano Blessi: ‘The Social Viability of Culture-led Transformation Processes’, *Urban Studies* 46 (5-6), 2009. In terms of the NPPF, it is also worth reflecting on Sacco’s notion of ‘Culture 3.0’ approaches to sustainable development.

¹⁵ Prasanta K. Pattanaik: ‘Cultural Indicators of Well-Being’, UNESCO/UNRISD, 1997.

¹⁶ Barnett Newman: “Aesthetics is for the artist what ornithology is for the birds.”

¹⁷ Professor Antonia Payne: ‘Flood Alert, Be Prepared’, 2012.

city navigation strategies that employ social media, advocating the planting of sunflowers and artichokes at every opportunity, and generally making bold claims about big possibilities.

Cultural Well-Being and Public Art

In its 2011 Public Art Survey, ixia found that the “most important role for public art is believed to be shaping national and regional identity. This is followed by improving the design of the environment, and then by performing an important social function”.¹⁸

As a sub-set of the ‘social’ pillar in the NPPF, public art’s roles in identity building and design improvement will hopefully become less important. As Jonathan Vickery noted recently¹⁹:

“The role of artists in urban regeneration was always as a junior partner, and the art always submerged in a complex of symbolic meanings articulating global economic forces always beyond view. National cultural policy as it stands is fixated on international contemporary ‘artworld art’ – of effectively evangelizing on behalf of this artworld and attempting to convert the public into art spectators. It rather needs to consider how to turn art spectators into cultural citizens, whose life in real cities can be creative and generative of the non-capital social investment that is the only way to develop an urban ‘way of life’. It needs to consider the real meaning of the term ‘public culture’, and how a genuine public culture can exist as an integral part of city governance.”

This is well put, although it has been said before and invites a rereading of history from, say, Gustave Courbet’s plans for the Vendôme Column during the 1871 Paris Commune²⁰ to Gustav Metzger’s demand for an art of social relevance and activism a hundred years later. It also returns us to Louis MacNeice’s ‘Autumn Journal’ and the writings of Mumford and Herbert Read, as well as to the reports of numerous later assemblies and committees, as starting points for building any understanding of public art’s relationship to cultural well-being.

Perhaps our starting point should be Lewis Mumford’s observation in ‘The Culture of Cities’ that “Nothing is unthinkable, nothing impossible, provided it comes out of the needs of life and is dedicated to life’s further development.” Or maybe the starting point is Eric Gill’s caution about “culture as a thing added like a sauce to otherwise unpalatable stale fish!”.²¹

¹⁸ ixia: ‘Summary and Key Findings’, Public Art Survey 2011, January 2012.

¹⁹ Jonathan Vickery: ‘Beyond the Creative City – Cultural Policy in an age of scarcity’, MADE, 2011.

²⁰ Gustave Courbet: “Inasmuch as the Vendôme column is a monument devoid of all artistic value, tending to perpetuate by its expression the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty, which are reproved by a republican nation’s sentiment, citizen Courbet expresses the wish that the National Defense government will authorise him to disassemble this column.”

²¹ Quoted in Herbert Read: ‘To Hell with Culture’, Routledge, 1963.