

# Thinking Through Design-led Urban Regeneration

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From global cities to rural villages, design has become levered into regeneration and place-making processes in the last 10 years. Within its 'Creative Cities' programme, Buenos Aires, Berlin and Montreal figure as UNESCO 'Design Cities'. Montreal itself has built up its own network of 'New Design Cities' that includes Antwerp, Glasgow, Lisbon, Saint-Etienne and Stockholm to compare their respective strategies for positioning and growth through design. During the summer of 2007, Scotland celebrated its 'Six Cities' design festival, a £3m initiative aimed at celebrating and raising awareness of the value of design. Equally, the rise of neighbourhood or village design statements have frequently become the focus for community capacity building.

The rise of design as object, aspiration and process in the transformation of locations has produced a new specialism of 'design-led regeneration' that has found its way into planning and policy parlance. 'Design-led regeneration', however, is a fuzzy, uncontested term. Reviewing North Staffordshire, geographers David Bell and Mark Jayne argue that the application of this policy can be broadly divided into three spheres: consumption, design industries and production.

In terms of consumption, the hardware of the city (streetscapes and buildings but also promotional devices such as graphics and media) is given spectacular, added-value in order to stimulate civic pride and inward tourism and investment. This may involve investment in interventions to reduce vandalism or crime which has an economic pay-off. Another option is through support and celebration of the human and symbolic capital of a vibrant design industry. This may be within the wider remit of viewing the creative industries as both a source and evidence of innovation networks. It supports conceptions of labour as flexible and relatively 'weightless' in terms of capital and material intensity. Finally, a production-focused approach would seek closer links between the business of design and its nearby manufacturing base. This would ensure technology transfer and a longer-term commitment to innovation in local industries.

A mature and sustainable aim would be for all three options to exist in unison and in mutual support and dependence. Barcelona is the most oft-cited example where this has been achieved. However, the 'Barcelona paradigm' was far from programmatic in its creation. It was the product of a long trajectory of design activism built since the 1960s. In the 1980s, this aligned itself with the recovery of Catalan aspirations of cultural recovery alongside regional economic transformation. Ironically, it was this intensely localised and inward-looking design culture that provided the roots of its international renown. The emergence of its dense designerly urban fabric was more evolutionary than institutionally led.

Is a 'design-led urban regeneration' policy feasible, therefore? At the level of consumption, the design developments of Barcelona have not gone without their detractors. From the steady embourgeoisement of its gothic quarter to the displacement of working class households to build the coastal installations for its Cultural Forum 2004, the designer/Disney-fication of Barcelona has stirred up successive civic crises. And once the process of design



Barcelona waterfront

spectacle has been instigated, it has to be renewed with ever increasing frequency.

Design is traditionally understood as the process of putting value into objects. Products are made more attractive or ergonomically successful, logos are made more visible, clothes more fashionable. In the case of design-led urban regeneration, it may be also identified as a *source* of value to be unlocked. It is value *in potentia*, something that exists as a signifier of future value. The presence of a design industry in a city or town may certainly help to stimulate inward investment. As a result, design and property development are becoming easier bedfellows.

Meanwhile, the design profession itself exists on increasingly tight margins. According to industry researchers British Design Innovation, overall turnover of the UK design industry has dropped by 32% since 2002. A decade of hyperbole about the triumphs 'DesignUK' and its international standing thinly disguises its steady overheating. The energy and enthusiasm which designers combine to promote their industry – through the foundation of local forums, exhibitions, festivals and competitions – may have more to do with a genuine need to garner more business than confident celebrations of success. The 'fast policy' of harnessing design industries as a promotional feature for municipalities is cheap and cheerful. It downloads responsibility and cost onto an already hard-pressed sector.

An alternative approach to engaging design in urban regeneration is to embed it within all planning and development. Here, design is not an apparatus for municipal marketing, a consumeristic laxative to

help move things through the system or an 'expert' resource to deliver commercial or symbolic advantage. Instead, it is a device to engage the imagination, aspirations and creativity of officials and citizens alike.

By thinking *through* design, there is an opportunity to review and experiment with the relationships of people to systems, spaces and objects. This is where design moves beyond aesthetics and becomes a tool to help conceptualise and materialise solutions.

If this all sounds a bit heady, then real examples exist. Of particular note are the many projects run within the Designs of the Time project in the North East of England ([www.dott07.com](http://www.dott07.com)). Here the focus was on grass-roots community projects to investigate new ways of configuring aspects such as schools, health, new business, food and movement. Solutions may be simple, such as developing a register of meeting-friendly cafés for micro-businesses. Or they may engage student populations and teachers, through co-creation, in integrating the redesign of school layouts and curriculum delivery.

If design smacks of frippery and excess in the face of social fragmentation, economic hardship or cultural malaise, then a design-led policy for urban regeneration might sound even more far fetched. However, policies have still to be experimented, debated and evaluated. In new product development the design phase is generally understood to absorb 15% of the production budget, but it commits 80% of overall costs. The measurement of 'cost' might be different, but it would be interesting to speculate whether a similar ratio is applicable in regeneration terms.

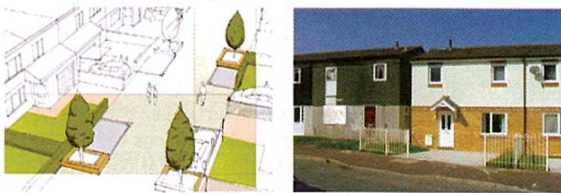


Local communities coming together in Designs of the times project in the NE



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# The British

Powell Dobson Urbanists have been appointed by Spring UR to prepare a masterplan for the site of the former British Ironworks in Abersychan, Pontypool.

The scheme is an ambitious reclamation and redevelopment of the site, scarred by generations of industrial activity, but set into a stunning landscape.

Powell Dobson Urbanists are developing a masterplan to include housing, employment, community uses and outdoor leisure opportunities.

Chris Gentle, associate at Powell Dobson Urbanists, said, 'The challenge for our team will be to exploit, in a positive way, the site's natural and historical assets, make the best of its natural constraints, and connect it back into its landscape and social setting in a way which it never has before.'

It is intended that the masterplan and eventual development will set a new benchmark for sustainable and innovative reclamation of spoiled sites nationally.

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