

# Making Space for Culture(s) in Boomtown. Some Alternative Futures for Development, Ownership and Participation in Leeds City Centre

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**ABSTRACT** This paper looks at what kinds of spaces are emerging for cultures in Leeds, a city dubbed 'boomtown', due to an strong external appearance of a prosperous city on the move. What we suggest is that, while there is commitment to broad definitions of 'culture' as a way of life, on the ground, culture often equates to promoting property development and attracting mobile investment. We ask what are the barriers to doing cultures differently, and offer practical alternatives, in terms of development, ownership and participation, that could make space for different ideas and practices of cultures in boomtown Leeds.

**KEY WORDS:** Culture, Leeds, regeneration, alternatives, participation

## **Introduction**

In attempting to find its feet in the post-industrial world, over the last ten years Leeds has mobilised an extremely positive and upward image for itself, which we summarise through the idea of 'boomtown'. It now styles itself as 'Leeds: the UK's favourite city' (see [www.leeds.gov.uk](http://www.leeds.gov.uk)).

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However, amongst this hubbub of self-congratulation, what we explore here are the less sanguine aspects of attempts to make spaces for cultures in the city's centre (see Hannigan, 1998; Zukin, 1995; Chatterton & Hollands 2003). The context for this discussion, as highlighted in the introduction to this volume, is the two contradictory uses of culture within urban regeneration (Evans & Ford, 2003). The first, which forms the basis of much cultural planning rhetoric is, as Williams (1976) suggested, that 'culture' encompasses intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development as well as works and practices of intellectual and artistic endeavour. Hence, culture is an essential part in everyday life, be it in the home, at work or in the street. The second, which often describes the reality of cultural policy in action, sees culture as an asset or resource that can be harnessed to generate property, income and jobs and promote places. Making spaces for cultures means managing activities that fall into these two definitions. It is for this reason that we focus on the need for *cultures* in the plural, to stress how – left to market forces – mono-dimensional definitions, based upon revenue-generating activity, usually predominate.

In this paper, we outline the cultural strategies and activities that have emerged in the urban core of boomtown Leeds.<sup>1</sup> Rather than simply reciting what happened and why, and highlighting problems and pitfalls, here we ask what the barriers are to doing cultures differently. We conclude by asking how harnessing cultures could make a genuine difference to social equality while fostering creative and dissenting interpretations of the ways we live our urban lives. Here, we offer some practical alternatives that could be rolled out to make more spaces for different ideas and practices of cultures in boomtown Leeds.

### **The Growth of Culture in Boomtown Leeds**

Leeds' growth is premised on a desire to move up a league in the national and European urban hierarchy: 'Going up a league as a city making Leeds an internationally competitive city, the best place in the country to live, work and learn, with a high quality of life for everyone' (Leeds Initiative, 2004).

At face value, Leeds has been relatively successful in this. It has been able to weather economic recession and move away from its industrial legacy relatively painlessly. Between 1981 and 1998 over 52,000 jobs were created and the workforce grew by 17% – higher than almost anywhere else in the UK (Leeds City Council, 2002). A boom in high-value residential,

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<sup>1</sup> Due to space constraints, our focus is on urban core, as it represents the most intensively used and valued part of the city. This is not to deny the importance of cultural activity beyond the urban core, or the relationship between the two.

office and retail property in the centre continues and investment opportunities have soared. While the number of commercial investment properties in the central area has remained relatively stable, their capital value increased from £17 billion in 1981 to over £102 billion in 2002 (IPD, 2003). Leeds has become Britain's third financial centre after London and Edinburgh and has emerged as one of Britain's 'core cities', which are claimed to be economic drivers behind UK competitiveness (ODPM, 2004; Charles *et al.*, 1999). Clearly, this does not mean that the city has done away with unemployment, social polarisation or physical dereliction. The obvious inner-city deprivation, ringing the prosperous core, is one of the most pressing problems.

Leeds' policy approach, like that of most other big cities, has been to mobilise a new partnership approach to urban governance, create active relationships between the public, private and voluntary sectors, 24 hour activity, vigorous place marketing and a move to more entrepreneurial rather than mere managerial functions (Harvey, 1989; Haughton & Williams, 1996; Heath & Stickland, 1997). The main partnership is the Leeds Initiative, established in 1990 and now acting as the Local Strategic Partnership which all local areas are required to have. This partnership, coupled with a 'moderate' (read business-friendly) political approach, has helped to capture new investments and give Leeds a new look to the outside world.

Culture, the arts and, more broadly, entertainment and nightlife, were all recognised early on as playing key roles in Leeds' post-industrial makeover. Strange (1996) notes that this was done through a pragmatic, business-oriented approach based upon property initiatives, promotional activities and developing established events. Much of this approach was personality driven, through people like Councillor Bernard Atha and Jude Kelly from the West Yorkshire Playhouse. Jon Trickett, council leader between 1989 and 1996, also guided the Council into a proactive (some would say survivalist) approach to the future of the city centre. Hosting the first 24 Hour City Conference in 1993, a vision was articulated for the city around ideas of Europeaness (especially through allusions to being the 'Barcelona of the north'), 24 hour activity, café society and city centre living, many of which are shorthand for an ideal city based on creativity, inclusion and prosperity (Trickett, 1994). A French boules court, along with chess tables, for example, have been built in a new public square in the business district, while the Council has established an annual European Street Market and German/Belgian festival. Interestingly, it was one of the city's few small, independent, rather than corporate, bars who organised the beer festival. Over this period, then, an ambitious 'events strategy', '24 Hour City Initiative', and commitment to animating the city centre emerged. Emphasis was placed on street legibility, improving street furniture, lighting and public transport, although clearly much of this is geared towards consumer spending rather than cultural activity per se. Leeds also has a significant creative industries sector

comprising those employed in advertising, publishing, media, software, design and crafts.<sup>2</sup>

Compared with other British core cities, Leeds has a fairly small number of cultural and arts facilities and providers, although this stock does continue to grow.<sup>3</sup> Only the West Yorkshire Playhouse has developed a serious commitment to outreach and educational programmes. Throughout the 1990s, Leeds pursued several flagship projects geared to improving the city's external image, many of which resulted from London decentralisation. These included the relocation of part of the Royal Armouries, the attraction of retail giant Harvey Nichols, and the development of Quarry Hill based around the relocation of the NHS Executive. Lottery funding also helped to create a new public square for the Millennium. This £12 million project, funded by the Council and the Millennium Commission, complete with movable stage and underground logistics area, highlights many of the ambiguities regarding the city's approach to culture and public space. Originally, dubbed the 'people's square', the City Council sought to ensure that nobody should be excluded on the basis of price. However, many events are ticketed, and bylaws have been drawn up to restrict certain activities. Some now call it the Council's 'posh patio' (Figure 1). In its favour, it does host a variety of events aimed at a fairly broad section of social groups.<sup>4</sup>

An impressive programme of more populist festivals and street events has been established for several years (see Figures 2 and 3). However, such events often operate outside official policy and in spite of, often restrictive, legislation.

The most noticeable feature of Leeds' cultural coming of age has perhaps been the influx of thousands of high spending, city living

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<sup>2</sup> A recent study by Taylor (2003) showed that the creative industries employed just over 12,000 people in Leeds in 2001, the third highest amongst the UK's core cities. This accounts for about 3.2% of the city's workforce, with the biggest subcategories in advertising, architecture and the performing arts. The study also found that 87% of organisations employed less than 10 people but most of the employment was accounted for by a handful of large firms.

<sup>3</sup> These include: the performing arts (the West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Grand Theatre, Opera North, the Civic Theatre, the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Phoenix Dance, and City Varieties), art spaces (the City Art Gallery, Henry Moore Institute, Bruton Gallery), museums (the Royal Armouries which relocated from London was seen as a major coup for the city, and a new City Museum planned for 2007), an International Concert Series, free lunchtime recitals, and a media sector comprising regional headquarters of the BBC and ITV.

<sup>4</sup> Recently, these have included a Palm Sunday procession, St Patrick's Day March and events, a Breakthrough Breast Cancer charity roadshow, a Disability Festival Day, a Sikh Festival, community arts events, a Battle of Britain Memorial Day, a Children's beach football and volley ball competition sponsored by Nike, Athletes hospitality for the British Transplant Games, open-air film and video screenings as part of the Leeds International Film Festival, open-air theatre drama presentation, as well as several commercial concerts and trade events (Sandle, 2001).



**Figure 1.** 'The posh patio', a.k.a. The Millennium Square.

- Rhythms of the City, which started 1993 runs for a month in the summer bringing a broad programme of street entertainment
- Hyde Park Unity Day, annually in August which showcases local artists and is focused upon community building
- The annual Chapeltown West Indian Carnival in August based around the city's afro Caribbean cultures.
- The St Valentine's Day Carnival established in 1992 in the city centre, but now moved out to the inner city.
- The International Film Festival in October.
- FuseLeeds in March 2004, a new biennial music festival based around the growing Quarry Hill cultural quarter, showcasing music from jazz and pop to classical while developing a community education and fringe programme.
- 'Shift: looking beneath the everyday city' event in May 2004, during which a group of artists transformed underused retail space on the fringe of the city centre, provided a programme of events including recipe tours of the city and an investigation into emotional responses to multi-storey car parks.

**Figure 2.** Cultural events in Leeds.



**Figure 3.** Vaisakhi, the annual Sikh festival in Leeds.

professionals who have fuelled a demand for high value added goods and services in the centre (see Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

This is perhaps most evident, not in the arts and cultural sector which represents a very small percentage of city centre ‘cultural’ and entertainment activity (Chatterton, 2003), but in ‘informal leisure’ in the city centre: the shops and café bars during the daytime,<sup>6</sup> and at night, the bars, nightclubs and restaurants (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003). As Table 1 shows, there has been a huge increase in entertainment facilities. Over the 1990s, Leeds was put on the cultural map, not through high culture but through popular culture, emerging as the UK’s Number One clubbing city. The Exchange Quarter acts as the city’s coolest entertainment district, and clubs like the Warehouse, Back to Basics and the Mint Club have given Leeds a national reputation for innovation in clubland.

<sup>5</sup> The growth of the city centre economy has far outstripped other parts of the urban area, and is home to 30% of all the jobs in the metropolitan area (Dutton, 2003). By 2003, only 1,805 residential units had been built in the centre, but over 8,000 more are planned, permitted or under construction, mostly along the waterfront. One third of households in the centre have incomes above £55,000 per year, with the modal price between £120,000–145,000 (Fox & Unsworth, 2003). Typically, up to 60% of developments are pre-sold at planning stage to investment consortia, often using bulk discounts, who are keen to maximise rental returns.

<sup>6</sup> Shopping is the top reason for people coming to the city centre (Leeds Initiative, 2003).



**Figure 4.** City Centre living Leeds style. Work hard, play hard, spend hard.

**Table 1.** Growth of entertainment in Leeds centre

Type of outlet	Number 1991	Number 2003
<i>Catering and entertainment in LS1 and LS2</i>		
Restaurants	50	80
Bars and Public Houses	55	110
Cafes	61	110
Hotels	11	17
Night Clubs and Casinos	13	21

Source: Leeds City Council, Environmental Health 2002.

Even with this range of activity in mind, compared with other policy sectors, culture is an area where the city drifted over the 1990s with policy pursued in an opportunistic and piecemeal fashion. Cultural success came more by luck than good judgement, with some notable institutional bickering between the Leeds Initiative and the City Council (Strange, 1996). It was only in December 2002 that a five year Cultural Strategy was published by Leeds Culture, a partnership within the Leeds Initiative (see Leeds Cultural Partnership, 2002). Its opening words, 'culture is what makes cities tick' sets the tone for this ambitious and wide-ranging document. Going on to state that 'no single organisation can develop and

implement a cultural strategy', it contends that the overall aim of the strategy is to promote the 'cultural wellbeing of the area'. It adopts a challenging and wide definition of 'culture':

Culture does not belong to large institutions. Culture exists through people – it is about people and how we choose to express ourselves, interact with each other and communicate with the world. (Leeds Cultural Partnership, 2002, p. 12)

Such an ambitious strategy is likely to receive close scrutiny in the coming years. A concern is that the city centre will remain a key area for the development of cultural activity as it is accessible to the maximum number of people, contains the greatest concentration of existing investment and is most appealing to visitors due to its critical mass. Further, one offshoot of the strategy is the 'Cultural Facilities Task Group', which remains embedded in property-based routes to culture. Acting as consultants to undertake a feasibility study into major new cultural facilities, in the words of its chairperson, its role is to 'ensure that we get the right facilities to 'go up a league' otherwise we shall fall behind other cities'.<sup>7</sup> Voicing concerns about such an approach, Peter Connolly, director of Yorkshire Design Group, highlighted that Leeds' renaissance is still about putting up buildings rather than the way the city functions, noting that neither the Council nor the Leeds Initiative is in charge of the processes going on in the city centre (Leeds Civic Trust, 2004).

### **What are the Barriers to a More Creative Cultural Policy?**

Within local authorities there is no shortage of good ideas, good will and genuine commitment to using culture creatively to tackle issues such as social exclusion, accessibility, and meeting what are perceived as local needs. A whole raft of more inclusive rhetoric has filtered into policy documents covering sustainable development, culture, social inclusion and participation. Local authority corporate plans, planning policy guidelines and regional strategies are replete with good intentions and attractive-sounding visions and mission statements. The key question here, then, is not why there is a lack of innovative and creative ideas in the cultural sphere (clearly there is), but why so little of it is translated into practice. Below we examine some of these barriers to putting the creative rhetoric of cultural policy into practice, and from this suggest how localities can proceed to do things differently. Clearly, policy changes are constrained at different levels – by local circumstances and wider political-economic contexts (Chatterton & Bradley, 2000), hence some barriers are more surmountable than others.

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Morton is chair of Cultural Facilities Task Group & President of Leeds Chamber of Commerce, quoted in Leeds Financial Services Initiative Newsletter (Spring 2004, p. 3).

First, local authorities work within frameworks of best practice, best value and statutory responsibilities, and even with the best intentions degrees of freedom are severely limited. Local authority restructuring under the Local Government Act 2000 has shifted decision-making away from committee to cabinet-style structures emphasising the role of a few super councillors. Moreover, the emergence of a quango culture and public-private partnerships has made it less clear where executive power really lies. Restructuring of the planning system in the manner proposed by the Government in its 2001 Green Paper 'Planning: delivering a fundamental change' may result in legislation that will further constrain local authorities in addressing traditional notions such as the 'public good'. Urban authorities are also constrained by ongoing funding shortfalls and the struggle to find sufficient funds for public services. Increasingly, funding for specific projects has to be won in competition against bidders from other cities. In such a context, policies will only rise to the surface and be implemented if they are economically viable.

The 'bottom line' profit motives of the development and property market is a second substantial barrier. Only activities that are financially viable and offer stable returns are selected. Within a property market where publicly-quoted companies are limited by fiduciary duty to shareholders, there is little scope for smaller, riskier cultural projects. Competition for scarce centrally located sites usually means that the successful bid will be the one which has the greatest completed value. Developments that emerge are a function of the amount and quality of floorspace in 'use categories' that are perceived to be most in demand, rather than creating a balanced public infrastructure.<sup>8</sup>

Third, the lack of public ownership of physical space in central areas is a major barrier to developing a range of cultural activities. City Councils are under pressure to maximise the income from land disposals and this inevitably means attracting development proposals that will add the most value. With a restricted city centre property portfolio of their own, the Council cannot move beyond issuing 'development briefs' that specify what will be acceptable on each site.

The dominant discourse of the city-region model also throws up particular challenges for doing things differently locally. This model is predicated on an inter-regional hierarchy of functions between specialised tasks. The eight core cities at the top of the urban hierarchy take on high value-added functions, with smaller centres taking on lower level functions

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<sup>8</sup> A current example in Leeds is illustrative of such tensions over private/public uses of space. Warehouse Hill, on the north bank of the River Aire, is one of the last remaining open sites on the waterfront. When a development company acquired the land, at a high cost, the development proposals consisted of high-density buildings for private occupation. However, the Civic Trust has pointed out repeatedly that granting permission for the scheme precludes the possibility of this space being used by the public. Nevertheless, the development is to go ahead according to the private developer's brief.

(ODPM, 2004). Within this model, Leeds undertakes high value-added, core functions of a national and regional importance in finance, banking, culture, retail and housing. Undertaking these core functions means that less attention is paid to lower value activities and employment that may cater for lower income groups. It is for localities lower down the city-region hierarchy, or certainly areas beyond the centre, to do these.

At the wider level, local authorities work in a context of inter-urban competition, market-led economics and representative democracy, which present a multitude of limitations to change at the local level. For example, the ability of local authorities to deviate from national guidelines and policy agendas, opt out of competing with other similar urban centres, hand over entire budgets to neighbourhood assemblies, decentralise or renationalise service provision, or pursue non-market forms of growth is restricted, and probably economically suicidal. The reality of contemporary urban governance is that in a highly inter-connected, networked society and economy, there is very little real scope for independent and creative action and policy formation.<sup>9</sup>

### **From ‘Dreaming the Impossible’, to ‘The Art of the Possible’**

Here, taking the current culture offer in Leeds as the starting point, we seriously ask what alternatives can be tabled and achieved? Visioning events and futurology have become common practice for policy-making. Questions are asked such as: where do we want to be in, say, five years time, and what do we need to do to get there? Such processes have gained legitimacy through public consultation and participation. However, such events rarely cast the net wide enough to include the full range of possibilities and scenarios and they draw some potentially specious conclusions (Clarke, 2003). Seldom – despite the efforts of those running consultation exercises – do they include the voices of the most marginal or questioning. Many people-centred ideas or traditions of popular architecture and planning are rarely heard. Moreover, many sacred cows such as profit maximisation, raising production and consumer spending, and wage labour are not up for negotiation. The current practicalities of competitive-oriented, market-led democracies are a sober reminder of what can be achieved.

The questions, then, depend on the balance between radicalism and reformism. Instituting a social and economic climate based upon public ownership of space and resources, active redistribution of wealth, environmental sustainability and promoting use-value rather than profit-based activities would pave the way for many changes, most of which are outside our vision and policy frameworks. Such ideals aside, below are some pointers at what could be achieved within current frameworks.

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<sup>9</sup> However, one locality, Hastings, has taken the bold step of prioritising growth based a strong local offer.

Like all urban centres, there is a vast array of activity going on in Leeds, which changes across the rhythms of the day and night. Hundreds of groups meet in pubs, churches, schools and halls discussing topics from boat building to ecological direct action. Sub-cultural groups (the goths, the skaters, the kids from the estates, the homeless) use city streets to meet, chat, pose and play out their identities. Bars, restaurants and clubs provide a backdrop for creative encounters for the wealthy and the poor. That said, it is important to note the real narrowing of choice and activity in city centres. This is particularly evident in terms of nightlife. While the first round of developments in new style and café bars and nightclubs was led by individual entrepreneurs, this has since been overtaken by a surge in growth from larger corporate operators. One key issue here is how to stop the corporate carpet-bombing of the night-time economy and maintain mixed-use, small-scale entrepreneurial activity. Hence, a concern is that the 'cultural offer' of Leeds is heavily biased towards higher value-added activities that tend towards a more passive, mass cultural experience, which despite efforts to the contrary, remains dominated by alcohol consumption and commercial music in corporate-owned branded bars, highly regulated by price and dress codes (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003). Moreover, the focus on the city centre, geared increasingly towards business and tourist users, has diminished the sense of community involvement in cultural events (Strange, 1996).

It is disingenuous to say that development in Leeds is accessible and successful just because thousands go to multiplexes, theme bars and fast food restaurants. Stimulating demand for more creative activities depends upon creating policy that will develop options outside the mainstream. Moreover, there are many people who are priced out, policed out or feel out of place, so do not enter the city centre. Certain demographic groups (children, the elderly, poorer people, women, minority ethnic groups) are effectively excluded, or at least, not provided for specifically (Chatterton & Hollands 2003). 'Sub-cultures' – alternatives to the mainstream – are not catered for and are even discouraged. Overall, the Cultural Strategy may talk of a wish to see these groups included, but in reality there is a tension between what is desirable in theory and what emerges through a process of market-led development in practice. It is vital to ask non-participants why they do not come, and if not, what types of culture and entertainment they would like to see. Even asking this type of question to people who live on council estates would be a major step forward for local authorities, the police or developers. While the 'dual city' phenomenon is perhaps too simple to describe a large, complex, multi-speed, urban area like Leeds, it does remain useful to highlight the huge disparities between those who can easily gain access to the city centre – as operators and consumers – and those who are excluded.

Many future plans for redevelopment do little to hide their commercial focus. Current plans to develop a large site to the north and south of Eastgate do include some public open space and links to adjacent inner city areas, but the main elements of the site will be aimed at mainstream

commercial occupiers and their customers. To date, development briefs have been formulated with a large anchor tenant in mind. Moreover, the cultural quarter on the northern side of the city centre, faced on all sides by corporate bars and restaurants, is committed to externally-focused and high value-added development. On the old Electric Press building, for example, an advertising hoarding proclaiming a 'superb new theatre and conference venue with associated high quality restaurants and offices' sets the tenor for the development, and the drift away from the inclusive rhetoric of the Cultural Strategy (Figure 5).

However, there are spaces that are intended, at least partly, to be used by a range of people. The new Millennium Square is a useful example here. It exists in a difficult intersection between controlled/secure and open/spontaneous. It does not have a fixed meaning, as it is used by various social groups and interests, ranging from commercial to community. There is no defined policy stating what kinds of uses are acceptable or unacceptable, and anyone can use the square for an arts performance or event, within the parameters of Council policy (Sandle, 2001). Of course, there is unlikely to be agreement about the threshold beyond which certain activities become unacceptable, so at the margins, there will be conflict. A key aim for the success of the square is to go beyond officially organised events to give a sense that the space is not just civic controlled but has broad public ownership.



**Figure 5.** The Electric Press. Excite your senses... if you can afford it.

There is an ongoing dispute, for example, between skateboarders, other users and the Council's management. There are those who see the freedom to skateboard as a legitimate and important use of the square and others who view it as a hazard, nuisance, damaging to the environment and an intimidation. As Sandle (2001, p. 12) notes:

The council itself is uncompromising and has gained a legal injunction to try and stop the skateboarders. The resolution or containment of such conflicts will be an important influence on how the square develops democratically and some issues may require imaginative compromise.

Various mechanisms could be developed here – citizens' panels and user forums that bring together skaters, young people, the council, developers and the police is one example. Finding ways of encouraging and showcasing art forms such as skating and graffiti are other possible solutions. This is part of accepting and understanding various sub-cultural groups and how they could be encouraged alongside accepted ones.

An important caveat is how to support cultural activity on the creative, sub-cultural fringe without restricting it. The key is to create genuinely independent spaces where creativity, dissent and critique can flourish, while letting go of fears associated with the growth of subversive cultures. A wider problem is that of commodification and hence sanitisation of cultural forms into the commercial mainstream (Hannigan, 1998). At some point, we also need to face the difficult issue that whoever is making or influencing policy imposes moral and aesthetic judgements on what should happen in city centres.

An 'art of the possible' generates many new ideas. Pragmatically, revitalising culture in the short-term means working with what there is in terms of spaces, ideas and funding, but aiming to create 'win-win situations'. Here, a series of connections need to be made – between different social groups and ages and between the prosperous centre and poorer outer areas. One of the most important points is that briefs and plans from developers need to take on board seriously the idea of culture as critical engagement and encounter rather than passive consumerism. Through this, priority would be given to spaces for creative engagement, spaces where people can become active participants in the creation of cultures – be it art, music, food, dancing, singing, or debating. Urban space can be used more flexibly, especially throughout the day to maximise activity. For example, bars and nightclubs are not used during the day, while public buildings are not used at night. Local authorities could also play a stronger role. Rather than permitting the assembly of large sites for large developers, smaller-sized property units should be maintained through planning guidelines, to encourage a greater diversity of products and opportunities for small-scale, local entrepreneurs and riskier start-ups. Such property patterns underpin the vitality of European cities, and should be a key focus if Leeds is serious about its 'Europeanness'. However, due to its industrial urban form based upon an urban core, arterial routes and

detached residential suburbs, there are serious limits to Europeanising life in Leeds.

One of the sticking points has been generational divides and associated moral panics. Cohorts of young people have always congregated in city centres, but increasingly encounter restrictive policing, surveillance and moral disapproval (Lees, 2003). New legislation such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders have been used to restrict the movement and activities of certain young people, along with homeless people and beggars, who are seen to be deviant, or simply not consuming.<sup>10</sup> In Leeds, for example, goths and skaters are regularly moved on from the Calls and Corn Exchange areas due to perceived negative impacts on consumers, while in April 2004 the Council gave the *Big Issue* Magazine one month to stop its sellers begging and aggressively selling, or it would ban them from the city centre.

Much can be done to bring social groups and generations together. Child-friendly areas in bars and night-clubs for teenagers are a start but policy could go much further. Central spaces where the city's young people could represent their own lives, through music or theatre for example, would create bridges between generations and classes. Competitions or festivals that attract and involve local children in creating drama, art, music, sculpture and new media could be developed along with opportunities for showcasing the winners in central public spaces such as Millennium Square. Such activity can increase pride and self-esteem and give young people a greater sense of ownership of, and possibly respect for, of city space.

Spaces that celebrate rather than police and restrict the creativity of young people, and which offer activities away from both consumerism and an alcohol mono-culture, are a real priority. In essence, it is about making time and space for sub-culture, critique and dissent. None of these concern maximising returns on investment, increasing consumer spending or creating an appealing external city image for tourists and business elites, but they are the life-blood of cities and cannot be ignored. The case also has to be made that broadening cultural activity does bring social and economic benefits, albeit tangentially and thus are difficult to measure. In areas such as policing, safety and health there could be lower costs and positive spin-offs from Leeds as a place where there is genuine diversity and tolerance rather than crime and fear.

Much creativity occurs in what Ray Oldenburg (1999) calls 'third places' – the first being the home and the second being work. There is no set format

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<sup>10</sup> A recent campaign led by Leeds Community Safety Partnership called 'Change for the better' encourages shoppers not to give money to beggars, but instead put money into boxes which is donated to 'legitimate' charities. While this may placate many fears, such as their donations to beggars being spent on drugs, policies should be more creative than simply reducing contact between groups and making beggars less visible.

- Do developments retain a range of small, cheap units to allow a range of small-scale entrepreneurs and more experimental activity?
- Is there a real commitment to social housing quotas on new developments?
- Is equal weight given to small-scale investors in terms of land acquisitions, legislation, licensing etc?
- Is there equal commitment to the economic and social elements of development briefs?
- Are non-alcohol-related uses been sought for ground floors of residential buildings?
- Is there provision of quality open spaces within new developments to maximise opportunities for meeting, appreciation of public art, open air events etc?
- Are opening hours of cultural venues being maximised to show commitment to 24 hour activity that is not alcohol related?
- Are informal spaces for art exhibitions and installations being encouraged?
- Is there a commitment to participation rather than policing?
- Are event strategies focused on local as well as national/international performers?
- Are public spaces offered on flexible and cheap terms for non-traditional users?
- Are developments sensitive to human scale? Here 'minor planning' might be as appropriate as 'master planning'.

**Figure 6.** A checklist for city centre cultural developments and activities.

for such places but they often provide space for small-scale, live acts, sell locally produced food and drinks, and offer space for information. Such places should be inexpensive, welcoming, a place of encounter. They are crucial to community life for a number of reasons: they are distinctive informal gathering places, they make the citizen feel at home, they nourish human contact, they help create a sense of place and civic pride, they provide numerous opportunities for serendipity, they allow people to relax and unwind, they encourage sociability instead of isolation, and they enrich public life and democracy. Considering the breadth of these roles, the disappearance of third places like the corner shop and neighbourhood café is unhealthy for our cities. The pub is perhaps the UK's quintessential third place. But many of these are being rationalised, corporatised and sanitised (Chatterton & Hollands 2003) and have really been more about alcohol than community. In Leeds, the development of the city centre has been so much led by a pro-active private sector, that third- and public-spaces have been squeezed out of proposals (Unsworth & Smales, 2004).

In light of the above discussion, a cultural checklist emerges that can be used to gauge the likely effects of developments:

### **Signs of Change?**

There are several signs of change in Leeds in terms of cultural policy making. Whatever the outcome, there is now a cultural strategy in place. The City Centre Management Team is also no longer in charge of events and Leisure Services now has responsibility for events across the city. The councillor responsible for Leisure Services also has education and youth services within her portfolio. This should make it easier to link communities

from the whole city into city centre activities, and already there are plans, for instance, to showcase local groups in central spaces. Further, the new city museum, which is to open in 2007, will be as much for the people of Leeds as for visitors to the city. The layout and content aims to involve as many kinds of people as possible and draw them into further active exploration of their cultural heritage.

As mentioned earlier, the Council, concerned about the negative aspects of the city centre at night, commissioned consultants to suggest ways of achieving a night-time economy that is 'accessible, attractive and safe to use by all' (Chesterton, 2003, p. 3).<sup>11</sup> This amounts to a series of 'containment' policies that should, over time, lead to a city centre less dominated by alcohol-related evening activity. Other recommendations did include giving consideration to independent operators and businesses within the city centre (Chesterton, 2003, p. 77). While there are a few concrete ways of doing this, one tool to achieve this could be stipulations on plot ratios, which would limit the density of development, prevent high rises and keep the overall scale of buildings smaller.

A newly constituted Property Forum is also bringing together a range of people who are charged with the task of thinking innovatively about (amongst other issues) cultural and additional city centre facilities, and quality spaces and places. Membership of the special working groups of the forum is open to any interested people who consider that they have ideas to contribute.

## **Conclusions**

So what kind of space is boomtown Leeds making for cultures? Leeds, like all cities, is walking a difficult path, attempting to mobilise culture to the ends of both economic growth and social inclusion. Clearly it is not going to please everyone. In many areas, Leeds has developed a fairly broad package of events, in which barriers between performer and spectator, producer and consumer have occasionally broken down. However, many gaps remain, especially considering its status at the centre of a major city region. There is no city-centre art house cinema, only one small-scale commercial gallery, little flexible space for artists, the number of independent bars is diminishing, and public and green spaces are few and far between. Gaps in creative and fringe cultural activity are important. As one of Britain's eight core cities, Leeds needs a spread of functions ranging from high value-added to more small-scale, experimental and creative activities. This range of activities makes sense, especially considering it is the transport hub of a large sub-region. But the city has followed a route

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<sup>11</sup> The recommendations include limiting and spatially concentrating licensed premises, and balancing market forces with public need; balancing the interests of the growing number of residents and revellers; limiting binge drinking; and new policing methods to minimise the disorder caused by bar and club customers.

of encouraging high value-added investment in its ambitions to enter a European super league. In not providing spaces and opportunities for smaller, riskier activity, it has also overlooked the fact that this kind of activity is the lifeblood of today's large vibrant metropolitan areas, especially in continental Europe.

The outcomes of cultural activity, in terms of meeting government social and economic targets, but also in terms of improving people's daily lives, are often contradictory and unpredictable. The yearly Leeds Valentine's fair is a good example. Here, Harcup (2000) asks to what extent can such cultural events actually transform participants' relations with each other and their city? While the city may be alive with activity, to what extent are unscripted spectacles, unlicensed demonstrations or critical interventions permitted in the corporate city and tolerated by new urban residents? Moreover, to what extent has Leeds used culture to harness creativity from the bottom-up, to allow us to step outside our normal lives, turn perceptions on their head and inside out, take a critical look at the city, subvert and transgress our normal social roles, glimpse alternative visions of community life, or encounter people we might not normally meet? Here, many initiatives are unlikely to welcome many youth and subcultures to take a full role within the city centre. They are likely to remain on the social and geographical margins unless those involved with economic and social development of the city are prepared to take some unusual risks.

The answers are probably that much cultural activity continues to create safe spectacles to increase the saleability of the city, rather than critically engaging with people and their problems, helping us to gain a better understanding of our daily lives and the constraints we face. Most culture is also too tied up with the act of consuming and spending, which brings with it a host of problems such as easy debt, but also the lack of environmental sustainability, corporate control of manufacturing, distribution and consumer chains, production outsourcing and sweat shop labour, and long distance transport. Without real commitment, culture usually drifts into the service of place marketing and attracting tourists. Strange (1996) warns us of the dangers here: 'corporate hospitality is not the same as culture'. Moreover, Leeds is likely to embrace the Business Improvement District (BID) model from the USA, which in practice orients public space even more closely to the needs of business users.

The recipes for great cities are widely known, by public officials as much as artists. The problem is that, as we have outlined, there remain certain blocks from property markets, statutory regulations, and law and order agendas that mean they are rarely put into practice. The bottom line is which city authority is prepared to genuinely embrace the real diversity of city life (including poverty, crime, drugs, social anxieties, dissatisfaction, pollution and alienation) within city centre cultural activities? The short answer is none. It is easier and more profitable to ignore it and concentrate culture towards a more sanitised and profitable version of city life. Moreover, a problem is ambiguity in policy-making, or rather only half-hearted commitment to certain sacred principles. For example, diversity is

seen as both an obstacle to, and objective of, public policy (Lees, 2003). This is a particular issue in terms of how young people are perceived. But in the spaces which boomtown has not colonised, outlines of very different cultures can be seen; not based on profit, consumerism or maximising investment, but on people, creativity and solidarity. Ambivalence, spontaneity and dissent, on the part of the many different groups who use urban space, are not easily transferred into a cultural or events strategy, nor should they be. But they are the essence of urban cultures. This is why it remains so important that city spaces can be used in multiple ways, and not completely restricted by both regulation and the operation of the free market.

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