

"THE END": THE DECLINE OF –PRIVATE AND COMMUNITY-LED- CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE CITY

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Here is an anecdote that would lead us to a deeper analysis. As everything we try to consider in this blog, we seek that its significance as something that is happening in many cities at the same time would permit us to talk about 'trends' (urban trends).

So I would like to refer today to the disappearance of many private or community-led cinemas/theatres in the downtown of many cities around the world. I started looking at this phenomenon as I read this yesterday on the local news: "[City of Bilbao -Basque Country- loses Capitol Cinemas to make way for Decathlon](#)" (written in spanish), a large French sports retail chain which would refurbish the premises to make the way to a 10,000 square feet store in the heart of the city. But may we speaking about a trend? If we try a short search through Google we could find examples like that in many other cities in different countries. Cases like [Hindley St. Cinema or Wests Theatre in Adelaide](#) (Australia), [London's Hackney Empire Theatre](#) (the biggest in the East End) or the [Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City](#) have already closed or are in serious trouble. In Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan (near Cardiff in Wales) throughout 2008 were campaigning [to save a 100 year old cinema](#), arguing that: "*We have already lost most of the towns identity with the closure of Butlins and the decline of the Barry Island*".

Those events usually go unnoticed for the general public as they 'only affect' those who actually use those facilities or are sensible to the importance of culture for a given community or fear its economic and social decline. Personally I would say that the general public is divided between those who consider it a "loss" and those who see it as a simple anecdote, probably inevitable, the result of the times we live in and that in any case reflect the inability of this or that manager to adapt to changes, or the fact that, profit led approach would make much more reasonable to make the way to other of investments. As any economist would say: "free market is free market and imposes its law"

At this point I would like here to make a personal reflection from the perspective of public administration (especially local) on the consequences of this phenomenon in the city. Are they negative? Or are they just an example of modernity of the future to which we should resign ourselves and therefore refuse to act?

The first thing I did to try to answer those questions that were coming up, is to check the publications of what could be a reference organisation on those issues, and I went to the UNESCO website (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: www.unesco.org), where I found the following report: "[The Power of Culture for Development](#)". UNESCO argues here that "*Culture is precisely the medium through which individuals express their ability to fulfil themselves and is therefore an integral part of development*". Meanwhile, on culture a vehicle for economic development, points that "*Culture is a powerful global economic engine generating jobs and income with a value of US\$1.3 trillion in 2005. Global cultural industries account for more than 7% of global GDP*". Furthermore, and more precisely speaking about cultural infrastructure and institutions, says: "*Universities, museums, cultural centres, cinemas, theatres, craft centres, and other such institutions are significant generators of employment and revenues. A museum such as the Tate Modern*

is estimated to bring in revenues of over £100 million to London every year". So what we could deduce is that the closure of this type of infrastructure (theatres particularly) could be an economic setback for any city (whether or not the government that takes that role left by private developers). In the case of cinemas on the other hand, if it would be proved that the movement is more towards the suburbs (malls on the outskirts), it would seem to be that it is customer spending which goes out of town, providing increasing the revenues for large leisure and entertainment corporations who own those businesses removing from the city centre those actors that create life and make it vibrant.

But we could add even more. Firstly, the removal, relocation of the culture or the fact that this has necessarily to be accompanied by a very important public support, I think it's not a good sign and maybe we ought to take note of it. Education and culture are two of the ingredients (if not 'the ingredient') for development, something that everyone seems to recognize more so today with the importance it has acquired the knowledge economy, innovation or creativity. However, maybe not a matter of worry and we should just think that today there are other channels like the Internet or television, where that culture is broadcasted and therefore is not that the culture is dying. Things change after all. But we could even ask at this point whether these channels are effective in facilitating the dissemination of theatre, dance, or independent film. And what might be more: Whether this is good or bad for the city looking at the impact on the economy or on the difficulties that may increasingly be arising for city dwellers to socialise.

And last but not least: Assuming that those changes would mean "less space for culture or less chance for culture to be spread" especially the independent, local ... What impact it may have on our society? Would we become citizens without identity or values, sort of boring individuals not able to enjoy or create culture? Perhaps this sounds a bit alarmist and consequences would not be so dramatic for sure. However, I think that that argument could also add an interesting view to the discussion.

Finally, I would like to join those who think that the closing of a theatre or cinema is not good news. The enjoyment of culture as well as education or knowledge (to which I understand is crucial that they are accessible), is one of the pleasures of this life as well as one of the main tools to develop as a person and therefore one of the pillars of our society. It is worth therefore, and I would suggest understanding this as the objective of this article, raise the profile of this type of news from the anecdotal to the trend, in order to be able to open a thorough discussion about what is the future of culture in our cities and, if appropriate, check whether there is room to act or not.

There are no comments yet.