

THE BILBAO EFFECT: BRITAIN PLAYS TO THE GALLERY

|
Words James Pallister

The last thirty years have seen a boom in the building of large-scale art galleries in English regional centres, unprecedented since Victorian days. For former industrial towns, stripped of a purpose and revenue stream by the collapse of heavy industry, art was touted as the new salvation. Have our prestigious new galleries realised the dream of local regeneration?



Sometime in the 1990s, the notion took hold that the arrival of a high-profile, new arts centre would be just the thing to turn round the fortunes of a struggling city or a run-down neighbourhood. Whether it came in the form of an opera house, an art gallery or a centre for interpretative dance, the prospect of a whizzy new arts venue was sufficient to bring a flush to the cheeks of councillors, curators and property developers up and down the country.

In the last 25 years many have been built; the dreams of the burghers of many of England’s post-industrial cities have become reality – they have gained their own new shiny centres, though the attendant economic miracle, the Bilbao effect, has not always been forthcoming.

Three factors helped fuel the resurgence: the need to emolliate what had been a brutal shift in the 1980s from an industrial to a services economy; the increased credence given to ‘the creative’ industries as drivers of economic growth; and the public sector and private sector investment in cities that accelerated in the late Nineties.

There were some high-profile failures along the way. Will Alsop’s The Public, in West Bromwich, was dogged by cost overruns, and arguments over programme; the Millennium Dome (Richard Rogers Partnership) was the great building which no one knew how to fill; and the National Centre for Popular Music in

Sheffield (Branson Coates), which cost £15m was only open for two years. It is now occupied by Sheffield Hallam Students’ Union.

For architecture, by and large, the period was a huge boon. There have been some genuinely fantastic galleries produced, which will be valued for years to come. The long-term effect on their host cities is more difficult to measure. Some critics of the strategy, such as the artist Nils Norman take issue with how ‘Cities are compelled to compete with each other, Liverpool with London, Manchester with Liverpool, Rotterdam with Amsterdam, Bexhill with Hastings, and so on. These cities are all incredibly diverse and yet the competition forces them to be the same.’ And geographer Jamie Peck of the University of British Columbia has made criticism of the notion espoused by Richard Florida in his 2002 book, The Rise of the Creative Class, that young, arty entrepreneurs can have a significant impact on the economic fortunes of a neighbourhood.

Psychologically, one could say that the proliferation of regional galleries has been an important corrective to the all-consuming maw of England’s capital. Even if artists may still have to go and work in London, at least there are globally important art centres that now exist outside Zone 2 and the precedent is there for England to shift away from its insistent centrism. Their power may be small, their presence perhaps a token gesture, but it’s an important shift nonetheless.

In recent years, however, Arts Council cuts have left many of these institutions struggling to fund themselves, making the prospect of a raft of new galleries unlikely, and few wanting to commit to venues with high running costs. That said, one of the earlier of the new galleries, the Milton Keynes Theatre and Gallery, built by Blonski Heard Architects, which opened in 1999, is celebrating its success by last year appointing 6a Architects to work on a refurbishment programme.

And what about the regeneration – did the regional gallery strategy, articulated by individual cities and national bodies, such as the National Museums Directors Conference help bring money to the regions? In many instances, it’s too early to tell, and the appropriate metrics to measure this are contested, but there are signs that it has had a positive effect. The Newcastle and Gateshead developments, with the BALTIC and the Fosters-designed Sage, make a strong case study of the economic value of building new cultural venues and developing existing ones.

In five years (2009–2014), the Newcastle Gateshead Cultural Venues (NGCV) made a total economic contribution to the North East of £85.8m, supporting 2068 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs, 1251 of which are people directly employed by the organisations. For every 10 direct full-time jobs created by NGCV, five additional ones were created in the region. For every £1 of public money invested in NGCV, there was a return on investment of

£4.43. The BALTIC itself attracts about 400,000 visits per year, including a dedicated audience of 80,000 who come to every exhibition.

Recent DCMS figures show just how popular the UK’s and galleries are: the 2013–14 figures saw an all-time record number of visits. However, domestic visitors to London-based galleries dropped, with half of all visitors to the Tate Gallery Group coming from overseas. A worrying trend, perhaps, for those galleries outside of central London, who pull in primarily UK-based visitors with, for example, just 16 per cent of visitors to the National Museums Liverpool being from overseas.

The V&A’s new gallery in Dundee (Kengo Kuma and Associates), currently on site, illustrates a profitable London-based gallery adapting a federal approach, despite significant cost rises – from £40m to £80m. A recent poll (source: YOURVIEWWK) showed that the majority of Dundonians were in favour of the gallery, with 67% saying it’s important for Dundee’s development. It seems that for many the prospect of a bright new gallery continues to have both economic – and emotional – appeal. That said, in the current economic landscape, it looks like smaller regional galleries without the clout of a major institution like the Tate or V&A will find it difficult to embark on the kind of ambitious capital spend projects that we have seen over the past 25 years.

Gallery Gallery

TATE LIVERPOOL

The current generation of galleries owe a debt to their forerunners in redeveloping former industrial space. Tate Liverpool (1988), designed by James Stirling took over former dock buildings to create a new outpost for the London-based Tate, a precursor of the further regionalism that would come with Tate St Ives. By the late 1980s and early 1990s the idea that revitalising city centres in decline, was important had begun to gain traction, helped by such disparate camps as Richard Rogers, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, and regeneration enthusiast Michael Heseltine, who drove forward the 1980s Garden Festival schemes that brought thousands of visitors to formerly derelict land in Liverpool, Glasgow, Stoke-on-Trent, Gateshead and Ebbw Vale. The building boom in other former industrial cities owes a lot to what was done in Liverpool in the Eighties.



PREVIOUS PAGE BENJAMIN BEKER THIS PAGE TATE LIVERPOOL



MIDDLESBROUGH INSTITUTE FOR MODERN ART

Once a titan of England’s industrial revolution, the fast-growing Victorian town was dubbed an ‘infant Hercules’, by William Gladstone and great wealth flowed through its iron and steel mills and its port. Middlesbrough, like many northern towns, declined in the 1970s and 1980s as trade went elsewhere and the heavy industries were wound down. mima was built in 2007, to bring together the three collections in the town’s existing Victorian galleries. As well as its permanent collection, mima has a focus on post-1900 work, and the relationship between art and craft. The gallery, designed by Erick van Egeraat Associated Architects along with landscape architects West 8, sits within its own large public

square. Despite attracting over one million visitors since its opening and attracting around £800,000 additional spend to Middlesbrough annually, mima’s existence and funding remains contentious in one of the most deprived parts of the country. As the recently appointed director Alasdair Hudson acknowledges, mima sits ‘in a context where the currency of modern or contemporary art is in doubt’ and that the world is very different to when the gallery first opened in 2007. The way forward, for Hudson, is to make a concerted effort to be relevant to its local population and to evolve a new kind of institution that ‘leads the field in testing new approaches to making art work in society’.



EVE PHOTOGRAPHY



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BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART GATESHEAD

Alongside the Tate Modern conversion of Bankside power station, the BALTIC was one of the more emblematic conversions in the crop of new galleries, taking a former flour mill and turning it into a space for exhibiting contemporary art. Ellis Williams Architects won the competition to convert the 1930s building, which had been vacated in 1981. The building is on the south side of the Tyne — so technically in Gateshead — but is synonymous with the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the North East of England, an area which was particularly badly struck by the effects of deindustrialisation in the 1980s. The gallery opened in 2002, with the bulk (£33m) of the £50m capital spend coming from the Arts Council Lottery fund. Together with the Norman Foster-designed Sage Gateshead and the Wilkinson Eyre Millennium Bridge, the BALTIC has helped transform the riverside that had long been a slightly scruffy, underused space, bringing Newcastle and Gateshead together. The trio of new buildings, together with enhanced public realm on the north side of the river are a good example of new cultural and physical infrastructure working in tandem to make a more pleasant, pedestrian-friendly city that appeals to both locals and tourists.



COLIN DAVISON 2014 BALTIC



JAMES TOLLEY

**NEW ART GALLERY
WALSALL**

This project, opened in 2000, helped consolidate the reputation of Caruso St John, then a fairly young practice, building a large gallery in the canal-side centre of Walsall, in the West Midlands. The work went on in parallel with a master plan by Hopkins Architects on how to rejuvenate the former industrial area. The gallery hosts a large permanent collection of art as well as touring shows. In 2005, the gallery's assets were boosted by the addition of a public-access art library — since its opening, 50,000 visitors have used the facilities, to look through archives, books and journals. The last two years have seen the gallery attract a healthy crop of visitors (202,7875 in 2013–14), helped by strong attendance at 2012–13's Damien Hirst, part of the nationwide Artists' Rooms tour. The gallery has fared relatively well in the 2015 local council budget cuts, meaning no full-time jobs will be lost. The gallery received an extra fillip in 2014 with the allocation of a £2.64m funding boost from Arts Council England's (ACE) National Portfolio 2015–18. The money will help pay for the completion of refurbishment and upgrading work to the gallery. In the same round of funding, ACE commended the gallery for its 'track record of excellent programming'.



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MANU PALONEUOE

**TURNER
CONTEMPORARY
MARGATE**

Margate's story — seaside resort fallen on hard times, beset with crime, drugs and sluggish economic activity — is unfortunately an altogether familiar one. David Chipperfield's sober new gallery, opened in 2011, has helped shift perception from the town being associated less with brawling mods and rockers and more with the painter JMW Turner, who declared its skies 'the loveliest in Europe'. Its location on a high-speed rail link to London has helped pull in a few Zone 2 émigrés, keen to leave the expense of London's overheated rental market behind, but still needing a quick connection to the capital. With a large number of vacant shops, it's hoped by many that the town can benefit as a whole from the halo effect of the new gallery. In Margate, as elsewhere, the perennial tensions between new 'middle-class ghettos' emerging and economic development that benefits existing inhabitants, rumbles on.



BENJAMIN BEKER

**THE JERWOOD GALLERY
HASTINGS**

Another seaside special, this one conceived and led by the private charitable organisation, the Jerwood Foundation was completed by a relatively young practice, HAT Projects, in 2012. The duo twinned mundane materials — cladding normally found on out-of-town drive-thrus — with some imaginative glazing and detailing, to create a sumptuous, but cheap black box that riffs on the traditional structures of the nearby fishermen’s net houses. Its large picture windows are a reference — intended or otherwise — to the New Art Gallery at Walsall. The gallery’s focus is on early-twentieth-century art, including pieces by Sir Stanley Spencer, LS Lowry and Walter Sickert. HAT Projects’ gallery works in tandem with the new public realm cafe and restaurant by Tim Ronalds Architects, making sure the gallery is not marooned by itself. The Jerwood complements the existing string of galleries on the south-east coast comprising Eastbourne’s Towner, Bexhill’s De La Warr Pavilion and Chichester’s Pallant House.



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FIRSTSITE COLCHESTER

Rafael Viñoly's crescent-shaped building opened in 2011, costing £28m on a budget of £18m, and completing several years late. Tucked behind a row of respectable Georgian, and some Tudor shops, firstsite, with its croissant shape and sloping walls, brings an unexpected shock of bling to the journey through one of England's oldest towns. Drawing some adverse publicity for its impractical sloped and curved walls, the gallery attracted 178,000 visitors in its first year, surpassing its 150,000 visitor target. Visitor numbers dropped by 30,000 to 148,000 in its second year. However, a survey conducted in early 2014, by local critics of the building, showed that 54 per cent of visitors over a 20-hour period, were leaving within two minutes of arriving, prompting the charge that many of its punters were attracted by the availability of a free public toilet rather than the prospect of the art on show, and that all visits should not be counted equally. Since then, the proposed funding from Arts Council England has been pulled, with the gallery being put into special measures. Director Matthew Rowe said the gallery, which has 15 full-time equivalent employees, was 'chronically understaffed' and needed around 25 staff members and that he regretted not engaging a forensic financial controller when he joined in January 2013. ■



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