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## **Down by the sea: visual arts, artists and coastal regeneration**

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## Abstract

This paper takes a critical approach to the arts-led regeneration of Margate, south east England. It argues that regeneration policy has effectively utilised local characteristics to recreate Margate as an artful space, and has stimulated a local milieu of artistic and cultural activity. However, though the work of local artists is vital in producing Margate as a creative place, local artists are marginalised by policy interventions focussed on attracting new consumers and investors. Thus, this paper argues that a misplaced policy emphasis is failing to support the labour and social relations on which the interpretation of places as ‘creative’ is built, and arguably undermines the sustainability of an arts-based regeneration. This has implications for culture-led policy, calling for greater attention to be paid to the specific locations in which it is deployed, and to the networks of producers whose labour is critical to its success.

**Keywords:** culture-led urban policy; arts-led regeneration; cultural work; coastal towns

## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a burgeoning research and policy field which posits a connection between the cultural industries and urban development. In this context, local and national governments have utilised cultural industries policies and ‘creative city’ strategies for the purpose of urban development and regeneration, their economic impacts being viewed as a possible ameliorative to the problems associated with the shift to a deindustrialised economy (Evans, 2009; Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000; Matthews, 2014; Mommaas, 2004). In many instances, culture-led regeneration has become synonymous with arts-led regeneration and artists have been constructed as at the vanguard of processes that symbolically embellishes and unlocks the potential of place; their presence understood as ‘a catalyst for neighbourhood transition’ (Bridge, 2006, 1965), converting ‘urban dilapidation into ultra chic’ (N. Smith, 1996, 18; see also Lloyd, 2010; Zukin, 1982).

The role of art and culture in urban regeneration strategies, and arguments as to its efficacy and socio-economic impacts, are well rehearsed in a range of academic literatures (e.g. Bailey et al., 2004; Evans, 2009; García, 2005; Ley, 2003; Markusen, 2006; Matthews, 2014; Pratt, 2008, 2011). They are

variously deployed as an ‘entrepreneurial asset’ in the discourses of city boosterism (Bridge, 2006, 1966; cf. Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000) while, in more critical accounts, are also viewed as providing a distraction from the contested nature of many urban interventions (Matthews, 2014; Peck, 2005; Zukin, 1982). Further criticism of culture-led urban policy includes questioning such an instrumental approach to culture, demonstrating issues of inefficacy, and a misplaced emphasis on consumption over production (Lees and Melhuish, 2013; Markusen, 2006; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008). Recent work has also highlighted a paucity of research interrogating the causal mechanisms assumed to link cultural developments to local cultural and creative practice (Comunian and Mould, 2014).

Despite these critiques, such policies have been rolled out to different contexts including coastal communities. M. Smith (2004) suggests that whereas environmental ‘sustainability’ was the buzzword during the 1990s for coastal resorts looking to boost tourism by diversifying their offer, the concept of cultural regeneration gained traction in its stead through the early 2000s. One such town is Margate, a seaside resort located on the east Kent coast that is being constructed as a cultural, creative or artistic place through arts-led urban policy. As a coastal resort, however, it is distinct from the ‘post-industrial’ spaces typically subject to culture-led interventions. This paper will highlight some of these specific properties of place, and note that they provide material and symbolic resources for a culture-led regeneration. It will note that the town’s flagship initiative – the Turner Contemporary art gallery – is a driver for changing perceptions and experiences of place that utilises, and trades upon, distinctive local characteristics. This paper will go on to demonstrate that the visual artists who live and work in Margate play a vital role in creating, augmenting and reproducing the cultural properties of place through their situated art practices, noting, however, that this work is obscured by dominant representations of space where urban creativity is ascribed in buildings and objects. Thus, even while the regeneration policy critically examined here advocates embedding and supporting local networks of practitioners, it appears that the needs of local artists, and the often-precarious conditions of their labour, are marginalised or overlooked by a consumption-oriented policy.

As such, the paper will conclude by noting that while cultural policy in Margate effectively leverages local characteristics to create a an artful brand for the town and has stimulated a local milieu of artistic and cultural activity, it fails to effectively consider how local networks of cultural and

creative practice can be maintained to provide a new, and sustainable, economic base for the town. This paper adds to nascent debates around the impact of arts-led regeneration on coastal communities, as well as broader debates on culture-led urban policy and tensions between the promotion of cultural production and consumption.

### **Contexts: culture-led urban development and coastal regeneration**

Under the UK's New Labour government (1997–2010), the cultural industries (branded 'creative industries') played a prominent part in a range of policy fields, including economic development, social inclusion and urban regeneration (Evans and Shaw, 2004; Hewison, 2011; Local Government Association, 2009). The Creative Britain report, from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), maintained that:

Now is the time to recognise the growing success story that is Britain's creative economy and build on that... The vision is of a Britain in *ten years'* time where the local economies in our biggest cities are driven by creativity... (DCMS, 2008, 6, emphasis in original)

The approach of subsequent administrations has been to focus attention elsewhere: the DCMS has turned to digital infrastructure and delivery of the 2012 Olympics (see DCMS, 2011), and Wilks-Heeg even suggests that the UK has entered a period of 'post-urban policy' (2016: 21) as, for the first time since the 1960s, there are no national urban policy initiatives targeted at areas of deprivation.

However, much contemporary policy activity, including that under discussion in this paper, remains a product of an earlier period during which national frameworks encouraged culture-led urban strategies. Oakley (2010, 19) notes that it was at the 'regional and local level that the fusion of economic development, regeneration and social inclusion goals was largely enacted', and this backed-up with central government funding and support through, for example, the Local Government Association (2009, 2013), and the various regional development agencies which, from 1999 until being disbanded in 2011, were involved in many culture-led strategies and initiatives (DCMS, 2008; Oakley 2010). The economic rationale for such policies is rooted in post-industrial theory that posits 'theoretical knowledge' as the key driver of growth and value (Bell, 1973), the Local Government

Association (2009, 5) arguing that ‘local areas with higher levels of employment in knowledge intensive organisations and with more highly skilled workers are more productive’. Thus, culture-led urban intervention are often focussed on areas that have been subject to deindustrialisation, examples include ‘cultural quarters’ established in Cardiff, Leicester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Stoke, the installation of iconic public art in Gateshead (Anthony Gormley’s Angel of the North), and the construction of ‘flagship’ cultural sites on former industrial sites as in Salford (the Lowry) and Tate Modern in a former power station on London’s South Bank (Evans and Shaw, 2004; Evans, 2009; Mommaas, 2004).

Publicly-funded flagship cultural developments, in particular, play a prominent part in many arts-led urban interventions as policy-makers attempt to emulate the perceived success of projects like the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain (Comunian and Mould, 2014; Plaza, 2000). These high-profile and large-scale developments – often designed by a famous ‘global’ architect – aim to capture the economic, and wealth generating, returns of the ‘Guggenheim effect’, wherein a flagship development promotes private-sector investment and tourism in the surrounding area (Miles, 2005, 893). For proponents, the causal relations that underpin this are that investment in a flagship building improves a location’s image, fosters career and supply chains, and establishes knowledge and learning networks (Comunian and Mould, 2014, 68). This suggests that flagship projects can have a long-lasting, positive effect as they build capacity and demand for further cultural and economic activity. This is important as it may sustain the milieu of artists and other creative workers who are co-constitutive in achieving a key aim of cultural regeneration, ‘culturally “recharg[ing]” the surrounding urban space, reintroducing that space back into a wider market of urban- dwellers, tourists and investors’ (Mommaas, 2004, 518).

As such, flagship cultural urban policy interventions may be understood as part of a competitive strategy based on the ‘upgrading’ of the city’s image and through the development of the unique selling points of the city-cum-product, configuring signs and symbols to produce a particular ‘representation of space’ (Lefebvre, 1991, 38), that is, space as conceptualised by urban and cultural planners and politicians. Lefebvre suggests that this can be problematic as the creation of an ‘urban product’ can serve to conceal the labour, and ‘the exploitation and domination’ (80–1) on which it is

founded. The implications that follow from this are that research on culture-led urban policy must consider the labour through which they originate. It must also question the practices changing material and immaterial ‘spatio-temporal configurations’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 77) promote: dominant representations of a space as, for example, ‘cultural’ and ‘creative’ does not necessarily mean they are lived or experienced as such. Thus flagship cultural developments have been criticised for tending to only deliver short-term effects while lacking attention to longer-term initiatives that might support and create value for the local cultural economy (Comunian and Mould, 2014; García, 2005). Furthermore, while flagship arts projects might attract large amounts of funding, it has been argued that very few, if any, of the surrounding artists will have a stake in them (Markusen, 2006, 1936). As such, Lloyd (2010: xii-xiii) argues that ‘far from being liberated by the heightened attention to local culture’ artists are ‘co-opted into new forms of postindustrial exploitation’ as the success of flagship developments can kick start gentrification processes which displace extant populations, and undermine local cultural and creative activity (Zukin, 1982). Flagship cultural developments thus exemplify some of the critiques of broader arts- and culture-led regeneration scripts: that they emphasise a ‘speculative construction of place’ (Harvey, 1989, 7–8) aimed at a specific class of elite consumers (Peck, 2005).

Notwithstanding such criticism, local and regional policy for many British coastal communities has included arts-led economic and social regeneration strategies, backed by initiatives such as the DCMS Sea Change programme (2008–2010) which provided £37 million to projects that used culture to contribute to social and economic regeneration of seaside resorts (BOP Consulting, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Research by Beatty et al. (2008), looking specifically at English cases, has shown that coastal towns tend to share certain characteristics, namely that when compared to rates for England as a whole, they have:

- higher unemployment
- lower skill levels and achievement
- higher levels of individuals claiming unemployment benefits
- substantially lower earnings

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<sup>2</sup> Supported projects include galleries and public art installations in Bexhill-on-Sea, Ilfracombe and Hastings.

- generally lower Gross Value Added per head, and;
- higher levels of deprivation

Thus many these towns appear to fit within the narratives of decline that apply to deindustrialised manufacturing areas, and are therefore viewed as prime candidates for the same kinds of responses based on culture and creativity as the means of securing a 'post-industrial' future. However, such comparisons should be approached with caution. Coastal towns developed, prospered and declined in particular ways that may be linked with national economic fortunes but also are distinct from them (Beatty and Fothergill, 2003; New Economics Foundation, 2005). For example, coastal resorts stand in contrast to deindustrialising towns; whereas a factory or mine may have closed quite rapidly, quickly undermining the economic base of a manufacturing or mining town, the weakening of the tourist trade at seaside resorts has happened much more slowly (New Economics Foundation, 2005). Though this could have given resorts time to adapt, the reality has been that decline, though arguably beginning in the 1960s, was not recognised as a key policy issue until around 2000, stifling access to regeneration funds and further entrenching problems (14). Similar policy neglect has been noted in other coastal towns where, perhaps due to their physical isolation and perceptions as to the quality of life afforded by the seaside, warning signs as to decline and increasing deprivation have been overlooked or ignored by local and central government (Ward, 2015).

Further research has highlighted other distinctive features: while higher skilled people tend to move away from the coastal towns where suitable employment is lacking, these towns have not seen the net out-migration that affects some deindustrialising areas. In-migration, however, has come from those who are economically inactive or 'winding down' – such as retirees (Beatty et al., 2014). The in-migration of economically disadvantaged groups has been augmented in many coastal towns as buildings previously used for tourist accommodation and small businesses have been converted into extremely cheap houses of multiple occupation (HMOs), turning some seaside towns into perceived 'dumping grounds' for disadvantaged groups (Beatty and Fothergill, 2003; Ward, 2015).

For those coastal towns that have prospered in recent years, Shah (2011) suggests there has been a kind of 'coastification': this mirrors gentrification in certain causes and effects – such as a rent-gap, and through in-migration of groups with higher social, cultural and, ultimately, economic capital,



alongside changes to residential and consumption patterns (Ley, 2003; N. Smith, 1996). Coastification, however, emphasises the specific development of coastal towns: the steep decline in property prices alongside the persistence of a ‘coastal idyll’ – the seaside as ‘as a place of escape, pleasure, peace, and refuge’ (Shah, 2011, 234) – can help to make these towns particularly attractive as places to relocate to or invest in. Shah also notes some specific effects of coastification, notably that, at least initially, pioneer gentrifiers displace transient populations who have few ties to the area. Elsewhere Gray (2006, 66) notes that coastal resorts, in particular, may be appropriate sites for cultural re-imagining as they have long engaged in place-promotion and undertaken strategies for reinvention whereby ‘particular social relationships, images and ideas of social class were managed and manipulated’ to meet changing tastes. Moreover, the sea and coast have a long association with art and artists, the work of Romantic painters may be viewed as formative in conditioning the public to derive pleasure from the coast and its aesthetic and affective qualities (Corbin, 1995; Feigel and Harris, 2009).

Overall, then, while the causes and effects of the culture-led urban policy in coastal towns can be linked to paradigmatic examples of regeneration, and possible gentrification, in deindustrialised spaces, attention should be paid to the specificity of these places as having distinct material and symbolic characteristics.

### **Case study: Margate**

This paper draws upon data collected in Margate between 2010 and 2013. Research included nine interviews with artists, a review of relevant policy materials, and participant observation. As this research focused on visual artists within the context of culture-led regeneration schemes it was important to engage with the spaces that artists help create, enact and operate within, looking for ways in which art and artists were visible in the landscape, and the spatial implications of this. Thus, research included spending time in the town as an observer of day-to-day life, and through attending and participating in cultural events, such as exhibitions and private views in galleries, volunteering to invigilate exhibitions, assisting an artist creating an installation for a festival, and events targeting creative and cultural professionals. This activity was also vital in recruiting artists as research

participants. Though this approach limited my research to those artists, events and activities associated with Margate's Creative Quarter, it was pursued as it is these spaces and activities that were inscribed by policy documents as (becoming) the locus of an 'artful' and 'creative' activity (e.g. KCC, 2010; MRP, 2007; 2008). Moreover, it allowed for a way to access Margate's disparate, uncentred and shifting art 'scenes': one respondent described them as 'splintered', going to note that 'it's like shifting sand, really... There isn't a cohesive Margate art scene' (Pat).

Interviews were conducted with 'local' artists – that is, they each had a strong connections with the town, either living/practicing in Margate (five) or, through maintaining a separate studio there (four). Only three participants were originally from Margate, and of these two had returned to the town after living elsewhere. Others came to Margate from elsewhere in Kent and London, the most recent arrival had been living and working in Margate since 2009, i.e. for 2 years at time of interview. Artists' practices included a range of media, including painting, photography and printmaking. The research focus on visual arts again follows the focus of policy which explicitly highlights visual art as a priority area 'so that artists, artists' studio providers and visual arts audiences will come to Kent confident that they will be welcomed and rewarded' (KCC, 2010: viii). Data from 2008 also show that visual arts is the largest single sector of the cultural/creative industries across Thanet, including 50 business and 135 individual practitioners (Fleming, 2008a: 45). Where possible, interviews were undertaken in artists' studios or own homes and lasted between one and three hours. Given the difficulty of trying to wholly anonymise data where identifying details of individual's biographies and art practices are vital to its integrity, permission was sought, and granted, to use real names.

### *Margate*

The local government district of Thanet is located on the north-east tip of Kent. It has a population of just over 119,000, of which 58,465 live in Margate on the district's northern coastline. The town's gently curved sandy beach stretches for 700m between the train station and the Turner Contemporary gallery, located at the base of the town's pier (the 'Harbour Arm'). Set on the seafront by the station is the 1960s brutalist Arlington House development, which overlooks the 1920s deco Dreamland building and amusement park, which reopened in 2015. Following the curve of the beach

beyond this are rows of Georgian and Victorian terraces in various states of repair. These comprise Margate's main 'strip' with amusement arcades and shops selling traditional seaside paraphernalia, though more recent refurbishments include a boutique hotel and artisanal pizza restaurant. Further east along the coast, Cliftonville sits on top of chalk cliffs, the areas' streets and crescents of former guest houses set back behind a wide promenade that includes the Winter Garden's theatre, a (derelict) lido, gardens, bowling green and a 'Crazy Golf' course.

Much of the built environment is the legacy of the town's development as a tourist destination. This can be dated back to the introduction of bathing machines in the first part of the 18th century at a time when Margate's fishing industry was in decline (Barker et al., 2007). Investment in tourism infrastructure would keep pace with increasing demand and technological change through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – including railway stations, bathing pools, cinemas and theatres. As a resort Margate achieved such prominence in the English popular consciousness that it assumed significance in the World War II propaganda of the poet John Betjemen and broadcaster JB Priestly (Gray, 2006: 73), Priestly writing that the contemporary hardships of war “should be thought of as a bridge leading us to a better Margate in a better England, in a nobler world” (quoted in Gray, 2006: 74).

The town was badly damaged in World War II, and again by severe storms in 1953 and 1978 (Barker et al., 2007: 51), factors that exacerbated its vulnerability to the increasing number of British holidaymakers preferring foreign travel, a trend that resulted in many seaside towns losing their economic rationale (Shared Intelligence, 2008b). Thus, though popular as a holiday resort until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the town now faces serious economic and social issues and today has some of most deprived areas in England and Wales (ONS, 2011). Though the town is now served by High Speed 1 rail services with London, Margate developed as, and still is a relatively isolated, 'edge' space that is 'stigmatised' and 'adrift' from the larger south east region (Fleming, 2008b, 18). In the UK, Margate has come to be viewed as byword for undesirable destinations, domestic coach tour operators reporting their (often elderly) clients felt vulnerable around the town due to its poor condition and inadequate facilities (Barker et al., 2007: 57), while a budget airline even ran an advertising campaign prompting people to head to 'Malaga not Margate' (Brown, 2013). A respondent who grew up in Margate – and now has a house and studio in the east of the town – went so far as to note that as a

youth she was 'repelled by Margate and find it disgusting, dirty, a filthy place' (Jill). As noted in the previous section, the deteriorating condition of the built environment and increases in the measure of deprivation may have been exacerbated by slow response decline of its traditional tourist industry: in Margate, local government identified the need, and developed plans, for comprehensive redevelopment in the 1960s but subsequently failed to effect substantial change (Barker et al., 2007: 52-54).

The possibility of Margate adopting an arts-led approach to regeneration was identified as early as 2004 (Tibbalds, 2004), and art and culture feature prominently in several pieces of research between 2007 and 2009. This includes work undertaken on behalf of the Margate Renewal Partnership (MRP), a collaboration that includes the local Thanet District Council (TDC), Kent County Council and the South East Economic Development Agency (SEEDA) (MRP, 2007, 2008, 2009; see also: Fleming, 2008a, 2008b; Shared Intelligence, 2008; SQW and BBP Regeneration, 2007). Funding for Margate's flagship Turner Contemporary gallery was secured in 2008 and it opened in 2011. It was envisaged that this gallery would 'anchor' Margate's 'Creative Quarter', the Margate Renewal Study (Shared Intelligence, 2008, 14) noting that:

Building on the development of the Turner Contemporary, the aim of the Margate Destination Strategy is to turn Margate into a hub for cultural events, artistic goods and creative production.

Margate's culture-led regeneration policy, and development of the flagship Turner Contemporary gallery, can be understood in relation to these contemporary discourses around culture, the creative industries, the knowledge economy and creative cities. Such 'official' representation of space 'intervene in and modify spatial textures' (Lefebvre, 1991, 42), and have a 'substantial role and specific influence in the production of space', establishing a logic for social and political practices. The Creative Quarter is now the location of several smaller galleries, studios and a range of other cultural and leisure amenities: the Greedy Cow cafés, the Lifeboat pub at the southern end and the Pie Factory Gallery and Studios just to the north. It also includes the Lombard Street (previously Margate) Gallery, and vintage clothing and homeware stores. Outside the Old Town, the Harbour

Arm extends into the North Sea from the Turner Contemporary, and is home to several artists' studios and the Harbour Arm Gallery, alongside two bars and a café.

For a visitor to Margate, the Turner Contemporary gallery may be understood as occupying a key physical position within the town – it is visible from the train station, and from along the length of the beach and promenade. The modern and iconic building, designed by David Chipperfield, stands in contrast to popular conceptions of Margate as a faded resort where underinvestment (particularly in the built environment) and economic decline have severely undermined the tourist offer (MRP, 2008). In spite of Margate's negative associations, on 29 August 2013 BBC News reported the gallery had reached the milestone of one million visits, well in excess of initial estimates of 300,000 visitors over its first two years. Moreover, the Turner Contemporary has come to occupy an increasingly key position in media representation of the town; for example, the building was reviewed in a national newspaper by prominent critic Brian Sewell (2011), and was cited as a reason why Margate is a 'must-see' destination for 2013 (Jones, 2012), while a New York Times article on Kent led with reference to the gallery (Barton, 2013). These help to create and sustain representations of Margate as a creative and increasingly vibrant place, drawing in, as Ian Aitch (2013, n.p.) – a writer and journalist who grew up in Margate – suggests, 'visibly new demographics... in terms of visitors, residents and businesses'. One respondent, who has worked and exhibited around Margate, concurs, pointing out that the Turner Contemporary means that 'people are coming from London to Margate, they weren't doing that before [...] It's bringing a whole new audience in' (Claire). The Turner Contemporary, then, may be viewed as changing how Margate is perceived and experienced, and attracting a new set of cultural consumers to the town.

The gallery may also be viewed as conforming to one of the expectations of the Margate Renewal Partnership (2009, 3) for who the Turner Contemporary operates as an anchor, attracting visitors to Margate and, hence, into the Old Town's Creative Quarter. Thus, the Turner Contemporary has also stimulated independent cultural, and other entrepreneurial activity. Alongside being a locus of cultural consumption it can be viewed as creating or promoting a new economic base for Margate as a site of cultural production, fostering dynamic networks and relationships between clusters of producers and consumers, where ideas and markets can be tested and developed (Pratt, 2004, 123).

This strategy is in keeping with policy for seaside towns that has emphasised the role of culture in helping disadvantaged coastal communities to regenerate (BOP Consulting, 2011; Kennell, 2011; Shared Intelligence, 2008; M. Smith, 2004). It is also possible to point to ways in which the Turner Contemporary exemplifies institutionalised urban branding techniques (e.g. Evans, 2009; Peck, 2005) that codify and project a particular representation of space. The gallery is striking in its design and location. Situated at the base of the Harbour Arm pier, the gallery is visible as soon as one leaves the train station and from the length of Margate's beach. The building stands slightly isolated from, and in contrast to, the Georgian, Regency and Victorian architecture around it, the gallery's grey/blue and faintly mirrored façade reflecting the sea and sky. The gallery, then, offers a spectacle that is attractive for visitors, and affords the capturing of photographs to feature in press and PR that project an image of the town as a cultural destination. The gallery creates a new cultural urban space as a means by which the town can accumulate cultural capital. This is augmented by the galleries' choice of artists to exhibit: since opening, it has had exhibitions by major artists including Alex Katz, Tracey Emin and Carl Andre. Moreover, the work of the gallery's namesake – the renowned landscape painter JMW Turner – was subject to a second exhibit in the gallery during 2014. This is notable as Turner lived in Margate both in his youth and later in his life, occupying a house where Turner Contemporary now stands (Darwent, 2012). Indeed, Margate's connection with the Romantic painter is part of the founding narrative of the gallery, placing itself in the tradition of:

one of the most celebrated artists in history... Now, our gallery is testament to Turner's lasting influence as a visionary. His passion to create something new and original continues to inspire artists today. (Turner Contemporary, 2015)

The deployment of JMW Turner's association with the town, and the historical framing of the town's adopted slogan 'the original seaside' – visible on signs and hoardings across the town – are a means by which Margate can also make claims, and trade upon, notions authenticity, heritage and uniqueness. These are familiar tropes of culture-led regeneration (Zukin, 2010) that assume additional significance in the context of Margate's position in British popular consciousness, and the established

links between the coast, and art and artists (Corbin, 1995). This is in contrast to flagship interventions such as Bilbao's Guggenheim where 'hard-branding' has negated 'any notion of regional identity' (Evans, 2003: 433).

Thus, for Margate, the representations of space afforded by this flagship project can be understood as in dialogue with a representational – that is lived and affectively experienced – space that overlays the existing material and symbolic properties of the town with new socio-spatial configurations (Lefebvre, 1991, 41–2). It deploys a specific ideology of culture and creativity to imagine the town as creative, facilitating the development of representational spaces, and fostering particular spatial practices. It seeks to reject negative images inherited from the past – as a faded seaside resort, past its touristic heyday (MRP, 2008, 7) – upgrading the image of the urban 'product' (Bailey et al., 2004, 48) through the utilisation of 'the field of historically constituted cultural artefacts and practices and special environmental characteristics' (Harvey, 2001, 404). In Margate this is expressly based on claims to authenticity and uniqueness, positioning the town through its association with JMW Turner and through references to its history as the 'original seaside'. The overarching aim remains the creation and exploitation of synergies between culture, leisure and tourism for economic development (Mommaas, 2004, 518) attracting tourists and cultural producers in schemes where there is a virtuous synergy between the two. The effect is the layering of socially constituted discourses of culture, creativity and art over extant understandings and lived experiences of these places.

This creation of an 'urban product' through the reconstruction of Margate as a cultural and creative place, can, however, be problematic. As galleries and exhibitions attract much attention from visitors, the media and in policy, they can obscure the labour and social relations on which the interpretation of places as 'creative' is built. This can extend to include a range of people, in both 'creative' and non-'creative' roles and institutions: from curators to invigilators, café staff and cleaners, all of whose labour can play a constitutive role in creating creative places. The following sections will first highlight the importance of the labour of visual artists in creating and sustaining Margate as a creative place, before going on to argue that despite playing a vital role in arts-led regeneration, they are overlooked by consumption-oriented policy that remains inattentive to their needs and their often precarious conditions of labour.

### *Artists creating space*

Of the artists interviewed during this research six of the nine had moved to Margate to live or work. Included among their reasons for selecting Margate are those related to its position as a coastal town. These include quality of life factors, Roy saying that the sea is ‘a lovely boundary to have’, and the sea and the seaside acts as inspiration in several respondents work. Margate was also understood by respondents to be a ‘raw’, ‘edgy’ place, in part because it is outside established artworld circuits but also thanks to the material ‘legacy’ of tourist heyday visible in the built environment. Respondents valued these properties, as they were attracted by sites of unrealised potential where there is ‘possibility’: Duncan suggested that Margate offers artists like him ‘a chance to do what they want pretty much’ as it is ‘just at a stage now where it’s not polished but there’s things happening, [so] you can try stuff out’. Related to the possibility and potential of Margate becoming a creative town is the role of the Turner Contemporary which was valued excitement and sense of optimism that it fomented in the cultural sector, and for the other activities it had spawned. Nick noted that the gallery had attracted artists to the area and meant that ‘there’s just a lot of positive energy going around and lots of projects being set up and stuff’. Consequently, while the Turner Contemporary may be understood as a site of cultural consumption, for local artists it has also stimulated the development of a productive milieu.

At a glance, therefore, Margate’s culture-led urban policy may be viewed as being successful in projecting the town as a space for artists: as a place that is (or will become) ‘creative’. Policies have helped to create a social milieu in which there is excitement at ‘being there’ (Currid and Williams, 2010, 428), where artists respond to social and cultural cues of the ‘buzz’, excitement and energy of a ‘creative’ town. However, the following section will question the sustainability of visual arts production in Margate as policy attracts but fails to engage with artists’ needs. This is an important question as this section will demonstrate that, more than just responding to policy interventions, the labour of visual artists in Margate is producing the image of a creative town: artists are an important part of the (re-)production of cultural, ‘artful’ spatial and social configurations, implicated in the changing material and symbolic properties of place through their work, galleries, events and participation in aspects of the various communities within the town.



This is exemplified through artist's studios. These are spaces that are both a product, and site, of cultural labour, where the embodied labour of the artist is visibly manifest (Housley, 2007, 7). Importantly, the studio can also play a role in creation of particular kinds of aestheticized spaces (Ley, 2003, 2533), providing a persistent cultural consecration that can be traded upon long after the artists' departure. The studio, then, is not a passive site, but is implicated in active material and immaterial processes, including those related to how spaces are understood and valorised. This is perhaps most obvious where the studio is located so that resident artists can be seen producing work. For example, the Harbour Arm Studios have windows to allow the curious to peer in. They also share a central space that is often open to visitors, displaying work and inviting the public to visit the artist at work. Of course, studios are not always apparent to uninitiated observers: even within cultural districts they are often located behind anonymous doors without indication as to what happens beyond. These studios are distributed across a variety of spaces: above galleries, in old industrial buildings, spare rooms, sheds and the backrooms of shops. Yet, despite often being 'hidden' from street level observation, studio spaces can be important sites in establishing and maintaining an arts scene and cultural milieu, and the material and symbolic changes the towns are subject. For the general public they are most visible when studios are the site of special events: the opening of Resort Studios attracted around 400 people to its opening day celebrations, and open studio events provide opportunities for visitors to access these normally private spaces, meet the artists and for the artists to be seen and expose, and hopefully sell, their work to a broader audience. More than this, however, studios can allow for quotidian social interactions that lead to expanding networks, new work and events. For Nick, a printmaker who has relocated from east London to Margate, the studio was the 'impetus' to make the move. He went on to note that the studio also plays an important part, alongside other institutions, in developing a cultural community.

It's people who work at the Turner, people from the other studios, people who run galleries and stuff and they all kind of interact, you know? (Nick)

Such social activity can have important implications for the production of cultural and creative spaces, as artists expand the circuits of cultural and creative activity. Alongside other local creative

practitioners, Nick has gone on to play an important role in establishing Resort Studios – which includes studios and events space for artists and other creative and cultural practitioners – in a disused industrial building, a few minutes’ walk from the Turner Contemporary.

Within local galleries, cafés, libraries and a range of other venues local artists play an important role in establishing creative, ‘artful’ spaces, as they host, organise and participate in exhibitions and events. All respondents had previously exhibited in the town, many having also organised group shows. These exhibitions ranged from having work displayed in a small café, weekend hires of the tiny Parade Gallery in Margate, to larger exhibitions in the Pie Factory or at the prominent Harbour Arm Gallery. Having shows around the various galleries in Margate adds to the town’s production as a cultural place, and while galleries do not rely solely on local artists they do constitute an important part of who hires these spaces. Furthermore, respondents took on broader roles than just producing work for exhibition. Pat, while in her studio on the Harbour Arm in Margate, undertook a key (and unpaid) role in running the Harbour Arm Gallery; a space that, thanks to its location on the pier next to the Turner Contemporary, can be viewed a key part of the town’s cultural offer. She was enthusiastic about the role of the gallery in helping artists find an audience and establish themselves, while also making a different offer for visitors than that of the adjacent Turner Contemporary.

This concentration of artistic activity presents ways in which Margate can be reimagined as a ‘creative’ town that is, importantly, reliant on the labour of individual artists outside of the flagship cultural project. Local artists play a vital role in establishing a dynamic milieu of cultural producers and consumers around Margate. Importantly, culture-led development strategies seek to exploit the ways in which cultural goods are produced, consumed and valorised within social milieu. The success of the material and immaterial construction and branding of Margate as a re-aestheticized, ‘creative’ and ‘cultural’ space depends on (re-)producing these social milieu to generate buzz and, hence, aesthetic and market value (Currid and Williams, 2010, 424).

### *A new cultural landscape?*

This paper has thus far demonstrated that, in keeping with strategies to secure a ‘post-industrial’ future, informed by the rhetoric of culture-led regeneration in coastal towns (Kennell, 2011; M. Smith, 2004) and ‘creative cities’ (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2000), Margate is being materially and symbolically recreated. As the centrepiece of Margate’s regeneration strategy, the Turner Contemporary has attracted visitors and national media attention (e.g. Emms, 2011; Graham-Dixon, 2012; Phillips, 2011). But it is artists’ labour that plays the key role in producing Margate as a more ‘creative’ place. However, critiques of arts-led urban strategies suggest that the instrumental uses of culture operate as a veneer, obscuring rationales that privilege consumption over production, failing to properly interrogate the impact of flagship developments on local cultural and creative practitioners (Comunian and Mould, 2014; García, 2005; Pratt, 2004). This includes a failure to adequately support artists who face precarious working conditions, but also how culture-led policy can erode local distinctiveness in ways that have negative effects on the ability of towns and cities to attract and retain these workers. As such, this section explores how policies have privileged economic and consumption oriented rationales, and overlooked the specific needs of local artists despite their important contribution to the production of creative spaces.

While the Turner Contemporary may have worked to attract artists to Margate, it appears to rely on the assumption that raw numbers will incubate and sustain networks of producers without regard for the organisation and infrastructure they might require. Little attention seems to have been given to how to support local artists beyond designating the Old Town a Cultural Quarter. There is not much studio provision, and the district council and Turner Contemporary have not taken an active role in developing artists’ networks. As noted above, Margate has splintered arts communities and this lack of cohesion means that possible emergent beneficial effects of agglomeration – in establishing supply chains and knowledge and learning networks (Comunian and Mould, 2014, 68) – are lost. Duncan, a photographer with a studio in Margate, highlights the lack of action on the part of policy makers in providing any sort of overarching organisation to promote local artists, suggesting that the council could do more to help, for example, by establishing ‘a good quality website for the town or something that kind of unified everything’. Pat notes that in-migrants, lacking networks and the ability to

establish those connections, rely on their existing connections elsewhere: 'if they've come down from London and they're doing something they'd rather pick up a phone and contact a designer back in London'. She argues that the council has a responsibility to change these habits but that they 'don't have that kind of grasp [...] on the art thing'.

In its external focus, the Turner Contemporary's curatorial and commissioning programmes have caused consternation among the artists who live and work within the local area as they are overlooked in favour of those artists with national and international reputations who can attract visitors and their disposable income. While respondents acknowledge the rationale for having 'big name' artists as drivers for tourism, they have felt excluded from reaping the possible benefits of working with or alongside this flagship institution. Jill suggests that local artists do not 'necessarily feel that there's a protective arm of the Turner that's looking out for them'. While she was exhibiting as part of the Pushing Print festival in the Old Town's Pie Factory gallery she resorted to clandestine tactics to get flyers for the event into Turner Contemporary:

I put them in the toilet [Laughs]. They won't allow you put them on the desk, and they haven't got a notice board [...] and we thought [the Turner Contemporary staff] won't see [the flyers] in there until the end of the day, so we'll stick them in the loo. So yeah, sometimes it feels like you're [...] I don't know, you just do what you can. (Jill)

Pat sums up some of the dissatisfaction felt as to how policy is failing cultural practitioners, that the Turner Contemporary is there and 'it's making money and they're getting the kudos from it [...] But, I don't see local artists still getting much of a look in'. While Markusen (2006, 1932) notes that the increased visibility of artistic activity can have an 'import-substituting' effect, encouraging expenditure on local goods and services so that wealth remains within a region, this is undermined by curatorial and commissioning activity (and concomitant spending) focussed on bringing in 'big name' artists. As such, though there is an acceptance on that part of local artists that they will not be able to drive visitor numbers, it remains that as part of a broader policy to encourage cultural activity there is

a desire for the ‘protective arm’ for key policy interventions to engage with the needs of local artists so that they might accrue some ‘trickle down’ benefit.

Furthermore, the role of artists in policy and for policymakers may be viewed as tending to place an emphasis on their economic, rather than cultural, value. Chair of the Turner Contemporary, John Kampfner (2011), describes ‘the scale of the success’ of the gallery by highlighting its role in creating a ‘new spirit of entrepreneurship... flair and business savvy’. This may be viewed as a product of instrumentalising cultural policy and funding regimes focussed on quantifiable impacts (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007). Thus, there is a tension in policy aims between those that state Kent will become a place where artists will feel ‘welcomed and rewarded’ (Kent County Council, 2010, viii), and overarching aims to encourage entrepreneurship, small businesses and economic growth. While these are not mutually exclusive, it suggests an emphasis on welcoming artists only insofar as they are active in an economic regeneration, only paying lip service to their cultural/creative activity.

Moreover, while artists were, at least in part, attracted to Margate because of its ‘rawness’ or potential, from an artists’ perspective many desirable spatial properties are threatened as urban space is reconfigured to the needs – and economic means – of affluent, more conservative, middle-class consumers (Matthews, 2010). Respondents understood local peculiarity in Margate as in danger of being ‘invaded and taken over’ (Jill) through culture-led developments, expressing concern that the features of the ‘traditional’ seaside were threatened by regeneration, and that the town may become a highly gentrified locale like, for example, parts of Brighton or Whitstable<sup>3</sup>. Roy was clear that part of the draw of Margate was its heritage as a seaside resort, including its gaudy and ‘tacky’ elements: ‘we want more of that: neon light and silly noises from one-armed bandits’. Yet Roy suggests this is threatened by the ‘distraction of good taste’ as people ‘quite sincerely think we need to get rid of the arcades and turn them into posh B&Bs and stuff’. Further issues are highlighted by the changing use of 3 Marine Drive on Margate’s seafront. In 2012, the building was empty and boarded up. From late 2012, through 2013, the premises had become Parade, ‘a “not for profit”, artist led space’, hosting exhibitions and events in the small ground floor space or down precarious stairs into the basement. By

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<sup>3</sup> A fishing town west along the Kent coast from Margate that has developed one of the strongest English seaside economies (Beatty et al., 2008, 65)

2014, 3 Marine Drive had become Crafted Naturally, a shop selling ‘carefully sourced gifts including fine china mugs, novelty egg cups, money boxes, silk screened bags, traditional toys, seaside gifts, hand made soaps, gifts in a tin, tea-light holders...’ (Crafted Naturally, 2015). Via arts-led processes, the space has become an example of consumption-led gentrification. Jill further highlights the changing use of property elsewhere in the Creative Quarter, discussing the disused properties that were used by local artists as exhibition spaces:

I think the Midland Bank was one but then that was taken over by Creative Partnerships, and the Lloyds Bank, which is now the Media Centre. So, ironically, the places that were there for artists to display their work in cheaply have gradually been taken up by [...] government organisations for art.

For Jill, the effect has been that ‘the smaller individual, local [exhibitions], ones that were mushrooming have died down a little bit. So it’s got a bit more official and business like I would say’. Policy activity has thus brought property into use with the effect reducing the potential for cultural or creative use outside the remit of official policy actors.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that, in keeping with strategies to secure a ‘post-industrial’ future, Margate is being materially and symbolically recreated as part of a cultural ‘re-branding’ that follows established scripts of culture-led regeneration (Comunian and Mould, 2014; Lloyd, 2010; Matthews, 2010; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008; Zukin, 1982). However, Margate differs from the post-industrial spaces usually subject to such art-led policies. As a seaside town, Margate can trade on the strong relationship between art and the coast, this is further strengthened by the association with Turner. An arts-based aestheticization of place, then, continues in a tradition rather than presenting a disruptive intervention. Moreover, should an arts-led regeneration, even gentrification, take hold in Margate it will be the latest stage in the development of a town that has sought to physically and symbolically reconfigure itself to the changing demands of consumers since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Barker et al., 2007).

As such, Thanet District Council and the Turner Contemporary have distinct advantages through which to catalyse regeneration and the development of Margate as a site of artistic production.

Yet, despite the rich material and symbolic resource through which Margate may pursue an arts-led approach to regeneration, there is a failure to properly engage with, and support, the requirements of artists. Key institutions and policy actors are failing to help develop the social networks and physical infrastructure necessary for artists, therefore, while Margate is being imagined by some local governors as sites of cultural production, artists felt the programme undermined this, as it focussed on promoting economic activity and creating the image of places of cultural consumption in which they did not figure. This is not just an issue of social or economic justice – though these are important. Rather, the economic, social and cultural outcomes sought in Margate depends upon artists and artists' labour; thus, there is a practical imperative for policy-makers and stakeholders to ensure that local artists can thrive.

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