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Neighbourhood arts spaces in place: cultural infrastructure and participation on the outskirts of the creative city

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Abstract

Set in the context of tensions between "community development" and "creative cities" policy agendas, which often implicitly privilege large-scale city centre cultural assets, this paper discusses cultural policy and arts provision in three neighbourhoods in the city of Leeds, UK. It uses findings from a pilot research project centred on three small cultural organisations based in neighbourhoods in Leeds' "outer inner city". Each venue works in and with its neighbourhood in distinct ways, and has a different vision of the contribution that they can and should make to their locales and to the city as a whole. The paper works with research on these organisations to explore the tensions around the ambition and reach of small venues in the light of this policy context, and the scale of the neighbourhood in cultural policy. We argue that city-scale policy making risks missing local particularities and erasing the role and contribution of small and geographically peripheral initiatives.

Introduction

In this article, we intervene into a number of current questions in cultural policy research and practice. Our focus builds on academic interest in spatial scale and geography in relation to cultural policy, and in particular on calls to "relocalise" policy and to turn attention to neglected geographies arguably eclipsed by the push to "globalise" cultural policy research and practice (Bell & Oakley, 2015; Gilmore et al, 2019). To achieve this, we explore the role of small-scale arts venues within cities, focusing on the relationships between arts spaces and their immediate locales, in the context of debates about the impact of cultural assets on their communities (Grodach, 2009, 2011). At the same time, we investigate relationships between venues and audiences, again at the neighbourhood scale.

The empirical material comes from a pilot research project undertaken in 2018 by a team of researchers from the University of Leeds, funded by the University and by Leeds City Council as part of its preparatory work for bidding to be European Capital of Culture. The Donut Pilot Project was conducted in partnership with the Donut Group, a network currently comprising 14 small arts venues working outside of Leeds city centre.[1] The Donut Group has been active since May 2015 and works as a networking and knowledge and experience sharing forum for its members, as well as being a platform to engage with the broader cultural policy environment in the city, and as a place to explore joint initiatives. The Pilot Project was conceived as a way to bring to light the role that the Donut venues play in the city as a whole and in their individual neighbourhoods, and three venues in different parts of the city were selected for study: Chapel FM in Seacroft, East Leeds, the HUB (Holbeck Underground Ballroom) in Holbeck, South Leeds, and Left Bank Leeds, in Headingley, North Leeds (see Figure 1 below). These three venues were selected because they inhabit neighbourhoods with very different characteristics, and have particular histories of engaging with their locality. Yet at the same time they can be thought of as "typical" Donut venues, in

terms of their location and mission. All three venues have been active members of the Donut Group since its inception, though beyond the Group they have not worked together in any sustained way. The Donut Pilot Project team undertook interviews with key workers in each venue, which were later edited into a film about the Project and the Group, and conducted interviews and observational research in the three venues and their surrounding neighbourhoods (see https://www.chapelfm.co.uk/news/2018/08/donut/).

[fig 1 about here]

In the next section of the article, we provide contextual information about the city of Leeds, as well as about the Donut Group. We review some of the relevant literature that frames our discussion, before outlining the research methods utilised. Selected findings from the project are then discussed in the context of the foregoing framing, under three headings: venues, neighbourhoods, and audiences. Finally, we broaden out our discussion by considering the particular "ecology" that the Donut Group occupies, on the margins or edgelands of the city, and consider the academic and policy implications of drawing our attention to small-scale, neighbourhood arts organisations and venues that sit outside of the *grands projets* of city-centre cultural policy and the overarching narrative of the creative city. In this way, the article contributes to a growing critique of the urban bias of cultural policy, asking us to think again about where, how and why arts participation and creativity takes place.

Leeds, the Donut and 2023

The city of Leeds, in West Yorkshire, UK, is a major post-industrial urban centre that has reinvented itself from its manufacturing past to its current incarnation as a centre for the service industries, leisure and consumption, and the arts and culture (Bramham & Wagg, 2009; Unsworth & Stillwell, 2004). Like many similar cities, Leeds has undertaken many regeneration and "re-visioning" initiatives as it attempts to redefine and reposition itself, and this has included centring culture and creativity as part of its contemporary brand. In 2014, the city council and other stakeholders decided to enter the bidding process to become the UK's candidate city in the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) competition for 2023. The city has also invested heavily in its arts infrastructure, and is considered to be a regional and even national cultural "hot spot", not least because it has significant large-scale venues and organisations in its centre, such as Northern Ballet, Leeds Playhouse and Opera North. In 2018 the city launched a new Culture Strategy informed by extensive consultation and a co-creation ethos (see https://leedsculturestrategy.co.uk/).

In many ways, the ECoC 2023 bidding process can be seen as a high water mark in the city council's commitment to culture, which had previously been critiqued as pragmatic and instrumental (Long & Strange 2009). Of course, this story does not have a happy ending: in light of the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the European Union decreed that the UK had rendered itself ineligible to participate in ECoC, voiding the bid process on the eve of submission. After a period of initial shock, the city council reconfirmed its commitment to culture and declared that it didn't need the EU or ECoC, and would organise its own international festival of culture, named Leeds 2023 (see http://leeds2023.co.uk/about/). At the time of writing, the organising of this festival is well underway, underwritten by a £35m investment programme.

However, Leeds remains a profoundly unequal, divided city, distinguished geographically by an affluent city centre surrounded by areas of severe deprivation, separated

spatially by transport infrastructure (such as the railway lines that bisect the city and the ring roads that form a barrier between the centre and what we might call the "outer-inner city"). Contemporary Leeds has become characterised as a "two-speed" city, with intense regeneration activity in the centre and areas of neglect and blight lying just beyond (Douglas, 2009).

Exploring this unequal geography, Unsworth et al (2011, p. 185-6) suggest that "despite the economic boom in Leeds and the various efforts to 'narrow the gap', the poverty gap between the city centre and the neighbourhoods situated closest to it [is] growing rather than shrinking". They map "a collar or disconnection, deprivation and neglect that surrounds the prosperous core, creating 'Margins within the City'". Nevertheless, they conclude that these margins "contain enormous potential that is under-utilized by the residents and under-appreciated by those who don't know them well" (p. 186). While Unsworth et al's emphasis was on community resources and social capital, this view extends to the arts and culture, and recent years have seen many attempts to address this inequality and under-utilisation via local-level initiatives. This was a recurring theme in discussions around the Culture Strategy, the ECoC bid process and the development of the Leeds 2023 programme, voiced in consultation forums and in the policy outputs (see, for example, the account of workshop discussions regarding the Strategy's Delivery Plan, the "Icing the Donut" strand in the ECoC bid book, and the Leeds 2023 commitment to being both international and local: https://leedsculturestrategy.co.uk/; https://leeds2023.co.uk/). At the same time, there is a shared perception among the arts community that large-scale city centre venues get more than their share of support, funding and profile, and that those on the "margins" have to struggle to be noticed and listened to. Again, this was voiced in forums and events around the Culture Strategy, ECoC and Leeds 2023, and strongly articulated in Donut Group meetings.

It was partly to respond to this situation that the Donut Group was founded. Its name was chosen reflect the geographical distribution of the member venues, as a loose donut-shaped ring around the city centre (though, over time, the donut shape of the group has been flexed to accommodate new members). The Group provides a network and forum for those who run and work in arts organisations outside the city centre to come together, share their concerns, build joint initiatives and lobby collectively. Along with regular meetings, in 2018 the Group initiated its first shared project: a series of workshops that toured eight of the Donut venues followed by an exhibition at Left Bank Leeds. This was also the first outing of the Donut Group as an external 'brand' – it was previously an internally-facing network with no public profile. Following the work carried out for the Donut Pilot Project, the Group also held an away day (which the authors facilitated) to ask key questions about the role, remit and vision of the Donut Group, and its desires for the future. At the time of writing, the Group continues to meet regularly and to explore joint initiatives, including further research.

As noted above, the Donut Pilot Project was partly a response to the ECoC bid process. The Pilot Project informed one strand of the proposed artistic programme – "Icing the Donut" -- and the launch event for the Project was attended by those centrally involved in the bid. The Donut Group thus ambivalently found itself in the 2023 spotlight, keen to capitalise on the interest in its work but wary of being incorporated into a narrative it was not authoring. Arguably of much greater importance for the Group were the findings of the Pilot Project which revealed distinct patterns of cultural participation in Leeds that offer a powerful counter to the focus on the city centre and on large organisations. In this sense, setting 2023 aside enables us to see the bigger questions that this Project has connected to, and in the next section we open out our perspective to review the research literature on cultural assets in cities.

Art spaces and city spaces

It is fair to say that the major focus of research at the intersection of the arts and urban space has been on creative cities, creative clusters and the role of arts interventions and cultural assets in urban regeneration (Andersson et al, 2011; Bianchini & Parkinson, 1989; Grodach & Silver, 2013; Hutton, 2016). In cultural policy terms, the city scale has also taken centre stage to the extent that critics complain of an urban bias in both policy and research. What this critique asks us as scholars and policy makers is a simple question; as Brennan-Horley and Gibson (2009, p. 2595) put it: "where is creativity in the city?" On the one hand, this has led to a reorientation, in research if not in practice, away from those once-dominant concerns and towards "other geographies" of creativity and culture: the rural, the suburban and the non-metropolitan in particular (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Gibson et al, 2012; Waitt & Gibson, 2009). On the other hand, this question prompts us to shift from "the city" as the unit of analysis towards looking at the "other geographies" *within* the city, by moving the focus closer in – as we do in this paper.

Similar questions have been raised in relation to cultural consumption: the literature on arts participation has also been critiqued for its "urban, big city bias, which brackets out and marginalises other – smaller scale, rural and semi-urban – places; failing to understand and therefore misrepresenting their creative dynamics in the process" (Miles & Ebrey, 2017, p. 67). A body of literature is addressing this critique, focusing on forms of everyday arts participation and 'vernacular creativity' away from the spectacular sites of cultural consumption (Gilmore, 2013; Stern & Seifert, 2010).

These critiques notwithstanding, it is important to hold on to key insights from the creative cities/clusters literature, and to explore the resonance of these insights for "other geographies" of culture and creativity. Key to our analysis here is the simple observation that

place matters to arts infrastructure. Work on the creative industries has shown clearly how choices about where to locate are determined at least in part by the characteristics of particular places, often at the neighbourhood level. While there is a pragmatic dimension to this, in terms of locating where rents are cheap and suitable premises abundant, as well as agglomeration/clustering effects, there is also an aesthetic and reputational dimension (Wood and Dovey, 20152). Studies of areas such as Manchester's Northern Quarter have shown that the neighbourhood is attractive to creative businesses for many reasons, such as "the aesthetic appeal and utility of the built environment, proximity to the city centre and key transport nodes, a history of creative production and a 'cool' image associated with sites of countercultural consumption" (Champion, 2010, p. 24). This insight informs our own research here, in drawing attention to the question of locational choice – the three venues in the Donut Pilot Project each have distinct stories to tell about why they are where they are, and these locational choices are also felt in terms of how the venues "sit" within their neighbourhoods, and how audiences feel about visiting them.

A second important strand of research centres on the so-called "artistic dividend": how the presence of artists in a neighbourhood can lead to forms of revitalisation, or conversely to gentrification (Grodach et al, 2014; Markusen & Schrock, 2006). Work by Grodach and various colleagues has tested the revitalisation versus gentrification question in a number of US cities (eg Grodach et al, 2018; Murdoch et al, 2016). A mixed picture has emerged, suggesting that "the arts have multiple, even conflicting relationships with gentrification and displacement that depend on context and type of art" – and that neighbourhood context is a vital part of this equation (Grodach et al, 2018, p. 807). In short, it is concluded that the presence of arts infrastructure neither leads inevitably to gentrification, nor can it be relied upon to generate neighbourhood revitalisation.

This research base is important for our own analysis for two reasons: first, it retains a focus on the neighbourhood scale and on local distinctiveness, asking us to pay close attention to the character of both arts organisations and the places they are based; second, in so doing it resists easy conclusions and demands detailed empirical study, again at the local level, and at the level of individual arts venues and organisations (see especially work on Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas reported in Grodach 2009 and 2011). Only by detailed empirical study can we say with any certainty what possible effects cultural infrastructure has on its locale – and this is a vital policy question, too, given the push to fund arts venues as a route to revitalisation (Grodach et al, 2014).

Before concluding this literature review, we want to signal some other important work that has influenced our thinking: materialist analysis of arts venues and place, which draws our attention to the relationships between the material conditions of the venues and those of the city surrounding it: "which opportunities are most geographically, financially and otherwise accessible, for whom, in the city; how the city organises us as groups or individuals and reinforces or challenges social hierarchies and how economic ideologies such as capitalism are embedded in everyday urban lives" (Harvie, 2009, p. 8). This sensitivity to the imbrication of the artistic and the urban is key to our analysis, as we view the presence of particular arts venues in particular neighbourhoods as indicative of the outworking of these much broader questions: who gets to live in particular ways in parts of the city, who has access to resources, who is included and who is excluded, how is the uneven geography of the economic and social life of city dwellers addressed – or amplified – by the arts? Arts infrastructure segments the city, most notably in the formation of arts or entertainment districts (Rogers, 2012), but we might extend this "segmenting" view by thinking – as Grodach does in Dallas-Fort Worth – about the neighbourhood scale and the interaction between the material and reputational conditions of a particular locale and its ability (even its

desire) to draw in and capitalise on the artistic dividend. This takes us full circle, in a sense, back to debates currently centred on the creative industries and their locational preferences. What leads to a particular arts venue being located in a particular neighbourhood? And what effects does this location have? These are core questions for our discussion, and we turn to them below, after we have outlined the research process and methods at the heart of the Donut Pilot Project, whose findings we then use to reflect on the issues raised here.

Mapping venues, audiences and neighbourhoods

The research on which this article is based was undertaken in a particular context, for a particular client and with particular funding enabling it. The Donut Pilot Project was commissioned by the Donut Group, who gave the research team a fairly open remit to design the Project; it was funded from the 2023 bid writing budget of the city council, but again with a minimal remit in terms of methods and focus; this funding was matched by a University scheme that helps fund collaborative work with external partners in the cultural sector, and in our case funded "research interns" (PhD students) to undertake paid research placements. The research design was therefore perhaps more open than much "applied research", and the core members of the team settled on a mix of methods that centred on "mapping" combined with qualitative interviews and observational research in the venues and neighbourhoods. The research tools evolved over the course of the Project, based on the on-the-ground research experiences of the team.

In the course of the Donut Pilot Project, we conducted sixteen semi-structured videoed interviews with staff members in the three organisations – these interviews form the basis of the Donut Pilot Project film which we presented at the launch event for the Project Report and made available to project partners and published on YouTube. The team also

carried out 139 semi-structured interviews with audience members. These interviews took place on location at events in the three venues, and were spread across different types of event at each venue to reflect the diversity of programming and audience. We gathered qualitative responses from audiences about the venues, as well as producing maps of the home locations of attendees for each event at each venue, to give a sense of the geographical catchment or "reach" of the venues, and the extent of their "localness". We also asked audience members about other cultural venues they attend, to begin to build a picture of the overall "ecology" of participation (Miles & Ebrey, 2017). We combined these data in a compound "cultural activity" map for the three venues, revealing a dense and intense network of audience engagement across Leeds (see Figure 2, below).

To understand how the venues "sit" in their neighbourhoods, the team conducted street interviews with members of the public in proximity to the venues. These interviews used a short survey as an initial prompt for a more open conversation about the venues, the area and cultural participation. In total, we completed 120 interviews, with a 32 per cent response rate. We asked interviewees if they knew about the venue in their neighbourhood, if they had attended any events there, and what they thought about the venue and the area. These methods were supplemented by attendance at Donut Group meetings and events at the three venues, analysis of venue websites and other materials, field notes on the venues and neighbourhoods, and a workshop at the launch event in July 2018.

As noted, the overall research design was oriented towards a "mapping" of cultural assets in context in order to uncover the "spatial ecology of the arts" at the neighbourhood level (Lee & Gilmore, 2012, p. 8). "Mapping" here extends beyond the cartographic or morphological – though actual maps were produced as part of the research – and our approach is informed by calls for gathering "more textured qualitative information about how [arts] assets are valued or used by local communities and visitors" (Ibid.). Our focus on the

neighbourhood was inspired by work that shifts attention towards this scale of analysis in order to better understand arts participation in its spatial setting. As Chapple and Jackson argue persuasively:

> When the neighborhood is our unit of analysis, rather than the audience, we have a way of understanding what art means in daily lived experience, rather than as a special event occurring in a designated place. … This approach unsettles our current methods of calculating and mapping impact from the venue out, rather than the audience in (Chapple & Jackson, 2010: 483).

Mapping was powerfully used in the Donut Pilot Project, as a way of visualising the density and intensity of cultural activity of which the three venues are nodes. In this sense, mapping provides accessible and impactful knowledge which is useful for stakeholders and researchers who share a desire to "critique the distribution of governmental resources, and more deeply challenge problematic assumptions about 'more or less creative' places, industries, and people" (Brennan-Horley & Gibson, 2009, p. 2596). This last statement became particularly important in the context of the ECoC bid process: a parallel research project using box office data to map audience engagement with large cultural assets in Leeds revealed what became known, non-innocently, as a "donut of low engagement" – the data from our Project was able to counter this view, revealing the "donut" as an area with *different, not lesser* engagement in culture. Where we go to look for participation, and how we ask about it, has profound implications for what we find – and these implications matter, not least for the allocation of resources and for our ideas about which places are "creative". The focus of the Donut Pilot Project was on providing insights useful for the participating venues and the Group as a whole, and to build a model for a wider project. In the discussion that follows, we shift our analytical emphasis in order to draw out themes from the project findings that connect to the

research literature, based around the notion of the site-specificity of the venues in their relationships with their neighbourhoods and their audiences.

Site-specific art spaces

Rogers (2012) discusses site-specific performance as a key coming-together of the concerns of performance research and geography. She wants to shift our understanding of what being site-specific means, noting that such work is "created in relation to the living communities of [the] places" in which it is staged (p. 65). In performance research, she adds, there is analysis of how site-specific work also emphasises "an embodied sense of *being in* and *experiencing* the uniqueness of place" (Ibid. emphases in original). We want to expand the understanding of site-specificity still further, by exploring how neighbourhood arts venues carry a different sense of engagement with the uniqueness of place and asking a different question about what Rogers calls "the politics of performing in place" (p. 66). Thinking of each of our case study venues as site-specific but also as nodes in the broader arts ecology of the city enables us to attend to the particularities of each venue in place while also not losing sight of the relational geography of arts infrastructure (see also Grodach, 2009). In the discussion below, we think through this analysis by turning our attention first to the venues themselves, then to their neighbourhoods and their audiences, before zooming out to consider this broader ecology in the concluding section of the paper.

Venues

Chapel FM Arts Centre and East Leeds FM Community Radio Station are both projects of community arts organisation Heads Together, who have been working in Seacroft since 1998. In 2014, they refurbished a derelict chapel to be their new home. Chapel FM offers a varied

programme of activities including spoken word, theatre and live music events (chapelfm.org.uk). It is also home to community radio station East Leeds FM. Chapel FM is located around four miles from the retail core of city centre Leeds, to the east (see Figure 1).

At first, according to our interview with centre director Adrian Sinclair, Heads Together had been attracted by the acoustics of the chapel space, which they opened as a community radio venue, before "realising it was also an arts centre". Previously, Heads Together's work had been on a project-by-project basis, moving around the city and beyond, but around 2000 they began to think about what it would mean to put down roots in one place. This was also in part a response to the needs of the young people who were a main focus of their work. These participants wanted a place to go, somewhere they "owned", and this spurred the move from projects to a space. Thus began a lengthy development process with the trustees of the disused Methodist chapel, and three years later the venue opened. Despite living and working in East Leeds for some years, Sinclair confessed that he had never noticed the chapel until it was suggested as a possible home for East Leeds FM.

The HUB (Holbeck Underground Ballroom) was theatre company Slung Low's base from 2011 to January 2019, in five railway arches on a patch of largely industrial land in Holbeck. It is described on Slung Low's website as "a makeshift theatre and rehearsal space for all who had need of it" (slunglow.org). The HUB is less than a mile and a half from the city centre, but its neighbourhood is physically separated from the centre by the main railway lines into Leeds station.

Now archived following its move to new premises, online the ethos of the HUB is described like this: "We understand that in these times committing to see a piece of theatre isn't the easiest of choices, so we will always welcome you as warmly as we can, the kettle will always be on, and because everyone has different circumstances as many of our shows as

possible will be 'pay what you decide' -- you give the amount of money you think is right after you see the show. We look forward to welcoming you". There is a clear origin story for the HUB, recounted by Alan Lane, artistic director of Slung Low, in an interview for the Project: that the HUB came about as a consequence of the requirements by the Arts Council that Slung Low should have an office base. Rather than take a city centre office that would be underused, they took on the arches and made the HUB, with a strong ethos of sharing of space and resources. So the HUB evolved into a resource base, a rehearsal space and then a venue with a diverse programme including performance, workshops, a choir and community events. Sharing and welcoming are the key words for the HUB, manifest in its aesthetic of homely retro furnishings that also advertise its "anti-capitalist" politics. This is spelled out in the interview with Lane, who talks of Slung Low working in "the cracks" of the market as a way to respond critically to the idea of flagship cultural regeneration embodied by an imagined "big shiny, gleamy chrome and glass arts centre" which the HUB is not.

Left Bank Leeds proclaims itself as a "multidisciplinary arts venue" and is housed in a Grade II* listed former Church in the Headingley neighbourhood of Leeds, a little over two miles from the city centre (leftbankleeds.org.uk). In our interview, one of the two co-directors at that time, Courtney Spencer, explained that the mission for Left Bank Leeds is to "reinstate the building, open it up for the public benefit" – the reuse project was originally funded by money raised by the local community. Left Bank Leeds aims to promote "creativity, connection and wellbeing" and "inspire and empower the local community through our programming of arts and events". The interview and Left Bank Leeds' own marketing materials stress the architectural splendour of the space, but also that it is poorly known locally. Spencer says that "visitors walk in and say 'Wow, what an amazing space – I live just round the corner and I didn't realise it existed'" – she herself did not know about the space, despite living in the neighbourhood, until she was scouting for a wedding venue. The Left

Bank Leeds website states that "amazing" is a word often used about the space, but adds "get to know us and you'll find that it's much more than an impressive building, Left Bank Leeds is an organisation with a heart and a down-to-earth approach, connecting people to each other, to arts and culture, and to new experiences and opportunities". The venue has a clear split between commercial activities – principally weddings – and artistic activities; "it's a balancing act", Spencer says, with the commercial side ensuring the space is sustainable. Weddings bring in a lot of income but Left Bank Leeds is keen not to over-state this role and to maintain the emphasis on being a multidisciplinary arts venue.

In common with many small neighbourhood arts spaces, the three case studies are examples of the creative reuse of derelict or underused buildings – a chapel, a church and some railway arches. As Grodach (2009) writes in the context of Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, old buildings such as these are highly adaptable for new uses while also being (at least in the cases of Chapel FM and Left Bank Leeds) valued assets in the local community whose reuse is generally welcomed as a way of preserving them. Yet, at the same time, new uses in old buildings can perplex locals, and the compromises of having to take on an existing building (rather than a purpose-built venue) can cause problems of visibility and accessibility. As both Sinclair and Spencer noted in their interviews, neither knew about the venues they would later come to run, and our research in the neighbourhoods confirmed that there was a lack of awareness among locals about the venues and their function. In the case of both Chapel FM and Left Bank Leeds, the reuse has been completely missed by many people we spoke with in the neighbourhoods, who assumed that these still housed religious organisations. As Grodach adds, small arts organisations can find themselves in venues that are not fit for purpose and that are costly to maintain. Moreover, their former use might also have shaped how they are accommodated in their locale, meaning sometimes "there is no public streetlife in the traditional sense, no immediately adjacent commercial activity, and virtually no arts-related

activity has appeared nearby" (Grodach, 2009, p.483). This limits footfall and prevents potential users from simply happening upon the venues – a recurring theme in our Project. The lack of visibility and legibility means that extra work needs to be undertaken to draw attention to the venue and its uses.

We can read much of the preceding discussion through the lens of "asset attractiveness" (Delrieu & Gibson, 2017) to think about the "pull factors" that might draw audiences in to the three venues, while also being aware of the challenges posed by the aesthetics of the space, the reputation of its location, the lack of clarity over its use, together with concerns such as transport access and the programming on offer. As Grodach (2009) summarises, these features dictate the extent to which an arts venue functions and feels like a public space and a community resource, especially for those who are its immediate neighbours.

Neighbourhoods

The three venues in the pilot study are located in very different parts of the "outer inner city" of Leeds. Chapel FM is in Seacroft, East Leeds, around four miles from the city centre. Seacroft is dominated by local authority housing and is reputed to have one of the largest council estates in the UK. The HUB was based in Holbeck, South Leeds, very close to the city centre, but cut off by the railway line and station (and Slung Low remains based in this area). Holbeck is a former industrial area struggling to redefine itself, a centre of the city's sex industry (home to the UK's first managed red light district), but also a site of regeneration (even gentrification) activity, localised in the Holbeck Urban Village development (Aiello, 2013). Left Bank Leeds is located in Headingley, two miles north of the city centre, in a mixed neighbourhood with student housing alongside longstanding resident populations.

To get a sense of these three neighbourhoods, the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and Experian's Mosaic classification of households have been drawn on. The IMD ranks small areas (LSOAs) in terms of measure of deprivation derived from ONS data, with the 'most deprived' areas given the highest rank (so the lowest number). Eight of the 16 LSOAs making up Holbeck are ranked in the most deprived 20 percent in England, with the highest rank being 37th (out of a total of 32844 LSOAs in England). Seacroft has 13 of its 17 LSOAs in the most deprived 20 percent, with its highest rank being 123rd. Headingley has no LSOAs in the most deprived 20 per cent, and its highest ranked area is 9356th. The Mosaic classification groups households based on shared consumer characteristics, and is used by Leeds Observatory to classify households by ward. Seacroft is shown to be a mix of municipal challenge (31%), family basics (29%) and vintage value (18%), Headingley 93% rental hubs (reflecting the student population) and 2% urban cohesion, and Holbeck 43% transient renters, 27% rental hubs and 9% municipal challenge.[2]

A key interest of the Donut Pilot Project was the level of engagement between the venues and their immediate neighbourhoods, both in terms of participation and in terms of visibility and legibility: does location matter to the venues, and do the venues matter to their locales? Alan Lane talked about a shift in Slung Low's view of this relationship, that over time the HUB "became a space that was really aware of being in Holbeck, and really proud of being in Holbeck" and that "could be of use to a community that has less than other communities". Adrian Sinclair also viewed location as important – that being in Seacroft was part of the mission of Chapel FM, to engage with a community largely "off the map" of arts participation and one also unlikely to travel far for arts activities. Both Sinclair and Lane voiced locational choice as more than a matter of chance, even if only in hindsight. Being where they are is an important expression of the underlying ethos of these venues and their practice (Orozco, 2015).

The strategy of our researchers here was to simply approach people in the street in the vicinity of each venue, and ask a series of questions about their knowledge and use of the venue, and their overall impressions of the neighbourhood. This was a challenging method for the research team in practice, and we improvised with ways to improve response rates. We did not attempt any segmenting or stratifying of participants, and we spoke with anyone and everyone who took time to respond. The analysis presented here developed directly from the transcripts of the interview data, using emergent coding frames to categorise responses and then identify representative (and outlying) statements.

These surveys and interviews around the venues painted a picture of this relationship from the view "outside" the venues: almost half the people we spoke to in Seacroft had neither heard of nor attended Chapel FM, with the same being true of half of those we interviewed in Headingley when asked about Left Bank Leeds, and over 80 per cent of respondents in Holbeck about the HUB. Those who had heard of the venue said this was mainly either by passing by or by word of mouth, while those who hadn't attended events there voiced confusion over its function and lack of marketing. Nevertheless, some interviewees could see the potential role of the venues in changing the perceptions and fortunes of their neighbourhoods: "The HUB could have an impact on the local community by bringing a lot more people down to this sort of area, and that would expand the city, people's perceptions of the city – it would make the city bigger". That "could" is important here: respondents often signalled the potentially transformative effect of the venues on their neighbourhoods, while sometimes also questioning whether such change will actually happen or who it might benefit. In the case of Slung Low's move from the HUB to The Holbeck, relocation signals a shift in ethos from bringing people into the area to bringing the cultural activity to people who live in the neighbourhood.

For some interviewees that there was a mismatch between the place and the activity: "You'd expect [Chapel FM] to be more of a city centre thing" – reflecting the uneven landscape of arts provision. In addition, the reputational geographies of neighbourhoods have to be countered: Lane and Sinclair talked about negative stereotypes around Holbeck and Seacroft respectively, and the challenges of drawing audiences to the area, though both saw that transforming the image of the area was something their organisation could contribute positively to; Sinclair said that there's "a general feeling across the city that 'something good is happening in Seacroft – isn't that weird?'", with the hope that in time it wouldn't seem weird at all, that Seacroft could lose its poor reputation and be seen instead as a place where "something good is happening" in the arts.

While we did not hear any clear critique of the potential gentrification effects of these venues, some people we spoke with did comment on neighbourhood change, especially in Holbeck – though this was associated more with other developments in the neighbourhood, such as Holbeck Urban Village, rather than the HUB. As one participant put it: "I think this area's going to be booming, it's going to be a really cool area to live and socialise". So, while Alan Lane himself expressed concern about potential gentrification effects he associated with a certain (stereotyped) type of arts venue – the "big shiny, gleamy chrome and glass arts centre" -- he did not extend this view to the HUB itself, and neither Courtney Spencer nor Adrian Sinclair saw their venues as potentially gentrifying their neighbourhoods. In this way, our findings support the analyses in US cities by Grodach and colleagues, that neighbourhood revitalisation stimulated in part by small local arts organisations need not inevitably lead to gentrification, though this is still a moving picture, and the long-term impact remains uncertain.

This focus on the neighbourhood context rescales our attention to the micro-geographies of the arts ecology, requiring us to think at the scale of the individual venues.

That is not to say that we cannot draw broader conclusions; it is a case of balancing the specificity of each site against general patterns without losing the detail. Such "close reading" of context, we argue, is essential if we are to fully understand arts spaces in place, and this matters for cultural policy as well as for the lives of those who live around these venues, whether they use them or not. Attention to non-users is particularly beneficial, given the claims made about arts venues as hubs of community development and neighbourhood revitalisation. If at least half of those surveyed in the immediate proximity of a venue haven't even heard of it, there are countless missed opportunities for this broader "social work" of arts venues (Grodach, 2009).

Audiences

The third strand of the research for the Donut Pilot Project focused on the audiences of the three venues. In particular, we were interested in where audiences came from, and what drew them to the particular event and venue. Of course, not all audiences are "local", and a key aim for the research was to map the catchments of the venues with a view to understanding their reach across the city, and to open up space for a conversation about audience mix. Attracting an audience is in part about "asset attractiveness" and in part about programming: the type of event is an important variable in drawing people in (Kawashima, 1999). All three venues offered mixed programmes, and thought carefully about programming and audience development. We reflected this in our audience research by choosing events at each venue that targeted different audiences – film screenings, comedy shows, food and drink events, music and performance. This revealed different audiences drawn from different parts of the city (and beyond) for different types of event.

Our approach to recruiting audience members to participate in the Pilot research was, given the size of the venues and their audiences, opportunistic rather than systematic: as with the neighbourhood research, researchers in the venues talked with whoever would talk with us. As noted above, we attempted to guarantee some diversity in participants by targeting different types of event, but beyond that the research team simply approached people in the venues, and took up every positive response to participate. In this way, the interviewees are "typical" audience members from the three venues, and we did not stratify our sample by any shared characteristics. The analysis followed the approach described above for the neighbourhood interviews.

On the issue of programming in relation to audiences, Adrian Sinclair reflected that Chapel FM being a non-city centre venue is "a challenge" and that "there are some things that I won't put on because they don't get an audience". Engaging some prospective audiences, especially local young people, is a slow process of "encouraging, and hand-holding". At the same time, bringing young people into Chapel FM from the immediate area is possible because it is local: these participants can't or won't travel far; as Sinclair concludes, "Being local is good in terms of participation". For the HUB, a key concern had been moving from "audience as customer" to a more active form of participation in arts activities. Due in part to Slung Low's national and international reputation as a theatre company and former producer at the HUB Porl Cooper's programming of small scale experimental and new theatre, the venue mostly attracted a knowing theatre-going audience visiting predominantly from outside the immediate neighbourhood. Slung Low's ambition to embed itself and its resources further into Holbeck and act as an asset for that particular neighbourhood is now being realised in their new venue, The Holbeck, through initiatives such as the Cultural Community College and the People's Theatre (slunglow.org) and a community facing artistic programme.

Our empirical work showed that audience profiles for the three venues were distinct, with Chapel FM having the most "local" audience (70 per cent of audience from Seacroft or neighbouring Crossgates), and the largest number of participants for whom this is their only arts activity. Nevertheless, audience members listed a range of venues they also attended, clustered to the west, in and around the city centre, with a bias towards other small-scale venues. The HUB by contrast had a wholly "non-local" audience base, with its attendees drawn instead from across the city and beyond it. These people also attended events at both large-scale city centre venues and smaller neighbourhood arts spaces. Left Bank Leeds audiences also favoured generally smaller venues, and were drawn mainly from north Leeds. We found some evidence of audience sharing between the three venues, but more could be done here in terms of cross-marketing of events and shared promotion under the Donut Group banner.

The segmentation of audiences was matched by a strong sense of engagement and identification with a particular venue coming from many of those we spoke with: Chapel FM was called by one interviewee "a second home. Everyone is basically my family" and by another as "a good thing for this part of Leeds, which is pretty barren"; the HUB was described as "like being in your dining room" and as like "nowhere else in Leeds" in terms of its programme; Left Bank Leeds users emphasised its aesthetic and architectural appeal, calling it "a great transformation from architectural beauty to social hub" and praising "the mixture of a traditional and modern venue, bringing all ages together". Clearly, as research on arts-house cinema has also shown, intense attachment to a particular venue means more than liking the programming: it is about a sense of being at home, part of a community of like-minds, engaging in a social experience as well as a cultural one (Evans, 2011; Hollinshead, 2011). Of course, this means exclusions as well as inclusions, and for everyone who feels at home in a venue there is someone else who doesn't, who feels that what's on

offer "isn't for me". In some cases, there is a tension between audiences and neighbourhoods: if audiences by and large are not drawn from the local area, as in the case of the HUB, this potentially reinforces this tension. The flipside is true for venues that are strongly local in their catchment, and which might not feel so welcoming to "outsiders" who don't know everyone else at the event. Getting this balance right is also about finding a place in the overall arts ecology of which each venue is a part.

Conclusion: the arts ecology of the outskirts

Describing a visit to the HUB, Massie-Blomfield writes:

> To reach it I walk through a stretch of bumpy overgrown wasteland full of fly-tipped junk, the remnants of bonfires. It is one of those neglected spots that is, in fact, when you look closely, verdant with life; clusters of wild flowers and brambles grow here, feather-headed dandelions that bob in the breeze. The wind skims over the grass, making it shimmer like an ocean (Massie-Blomfield, 2018, p. 250).

The description of a neglected spot verdant with life sounds like a description of the Donut Group's ecosystem as a whole. It resonates with the concept of the edgelands, those neglected parcels of the urban fringe on which life has retaken hold in the cracks (Symmons Roberts & Farley, 2012). Viewing the arts scene in a city like Leeds as an ecology lets us think about the particular niches available away from the well-tended city centre with its large venues and its ready streams of funding and audiences. In the margins, on the outskirts, things look and feel very different. The geography of arts spaces and the geography of audiences are overlays that add up to a picture of this ecosystem – one of the visualisations we produced for the Donut Pilot Project (reproduced here as Figure 2) shows the composite cultural activity (in terms of

home locations and other venues visited) for our audience sample, revealing a dense pattern of cultural engagement drawing people in from across the city and taking them out to venues across its breadth (though still with a marked city centre dominance).

[Fig.2. about here]

This vibrancy must ask us to reconsider the scaling of cultural policy interventions, requiring a focus that is "hyper-local" and attuned to nuances in this micro-geography (Grodach, 2009) rather than making policies at the city level. While we do not have comparator research on the impact of large city centre venues in Leeds on their locales, we can speculatively conclude that, at the least, small "edgeland" venues can make a significant positive contribution to neighbourhood revitalisation, though this should not simply be assumed as an outcome: the stories of the HUB, Left Bank Leeds and Chapel FM show how variegated the venue-neighbourhood relationship can be. Locality matters, and simply opening a neighbourhood venue does not guarantee revitalisation; the venue has to "fit" its surroundings, even as it changes them.

At the same time, viewing the Donut Group as an ecosystem means focusing on networks and connections as well as individual nodes. As its members recognise, there is something distinctive about the Donut Group *as a group*, not just as separate entities. Nurturing the entire ecology requires different inputs than either whole-city or individual-venue interventions. There is competition as well as cooperation at work here, just as there is in any ecosystem. But that is not a problem if it is understood that both processes are vital to the overall health of the system. While our aim in the Donut Pilot Project was not to undertake an overall evaluation of the Group, the research began to identify the benefits of

members working together. Certainly, in terms of visibility – as we saw around the ECoC/Leeds 2023 process – the Group occupies a more prominent position than individual venues arguably could.

It is important to remember that, while our focus has been on the local scale, the local is never only local: it is embedded in other spatial scales as well as being connected to other "locals" (Gonzalez et al, 2010) and of course to the "global" – hence some researchers preferring to talk of the "translocal" in order to emphasise connections across scales (Smith, 2001). The local is, moreover, never static, but is shaped and reshaped as global, national and local flows come in and out of it. Responding to the changing character of the local requires neighbourhood venues to be attuned to these changes – and to understand how they are in turn shaped by but also shape such flows. While this has mainly been considered to date in terms of gentrification, we should broaden our analysis to think about other ways in which local arts organisations help reconfigure their locales, while also having to respond to other forms of reconfiguration. For Left Bank Leeds, for example, there is a perennial issue of trying to reach a transient student population while also meeting the needs of longer term residents, while the HUB was caught between the changes brought about by regeneration schemes such as Holbeck Urban Village – arguably gentrifying the area – and the deprived, ungentrified "Holbeck proper".

Finally, in terms of methodology, this shift in focus to the arts ecosystem means close attention to individual arts spaces but always viewed relationally: the parts and the whole carrying equal weight (Delriue & Gibson, 2017). If we are to ask and to answer the question (paraphrasing Moulaert et al, 2010) *'Can neighbourhood arts spaces save the city?'*, we need research and policy that can work in this way.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Organisations that belonged to the Donut Group in June 2019 were: Chapel FM, The Holbeck, Left Bank Leeds, The Constitutional, Sunny Bank Mills, Hyde Park Book Club, Leeds West Indian Centre, Union 105, Interplay, Garforth Arts Academy, HEART, Otley Courthouse, The Carriageworks and Love Pudsey.

[2] For definitions of the Mosaic groups and more details, see https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/customer-insight/ward-segmentation/