## QUESTION

Critically analyse the use of new cultural institutions and iconic architecture as a tool for urban renewal, in particular linked to place branding, tourism and promotion. Consider both the positive impact of these interventions as well as the possible negative implications.

# Cultural Institutions & Iconic Architecture As Tools For Urban Renewal: A Critical Analysis Of The Trend

## INTRODUCTION

The United States has a rich history of employing the arts in urban revitalization, as many American cities have utilized iconic architecture and cultural institutions to attract further investment. In 1941, when President Roosevelt dedicated the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., he declared building the site 'the purpose of the people of America' (National Gallery of Art, 2015). Amidst the beginnings of World War II, the opening of this cultural institution was a physical representation of the values the country was at war for. While an early example of the trend, American cities have only increased their reliance on cultural institutions and iconic architecture to act as symbols of identity and a rich quality of life within a city since, utilizing the economic and social benefits of these institutions to revitalize urban areas. More recently, a survey found that 71 large-scale performing art centers and museums were built or expanded across 65 U.S. cities since 1985, with many linked to urban renewal strategies (Strom, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the factors involved in employing cultural institutions and iconic architecture in urban renewal strategies, with particular attention to these institutions' effects on place branding, tourism, and promotion. Firstly, the paper will explore the key concepts and theories surrounding this trend through a broad review of literature on the subject. The paper will then consider previous case studies in Los Angeles, California to compare the positive and negative implications of these strategies on an urban American city. In analyzing the cases within Los Angeles, it can be assessed that even in one city, cultural institutions and iconic architecture used as urban renewal strategies are subject to both positive and negative implications. This analysis suggests that when linking a cultural institution to place branding and tourism, specific attention must be placed on the current identity and cultural sensibilities of an individual place, rather than a general model, in order to be successful in influencing sustainable urban renewal.

## CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND ICONIC ARCHITECTURE: Their Implications in Urban Renewal Strategies

In the previous two decades, an abundance of research has determined that "culture is more and more the business of cities" (Zukin, 1995, p.2). In the mid 1980's, the role of culture in a city became that of a contributor to economic and physical regeneration (Bianchini, 1999). Investment in large cultural projects was one such tool of this period, as expressing a city's identity became less about politics and social classes, and more about 'the cultural power to

create an image, to frame a vision, of the city' (Zukin, 1995, p.3). One of the cataclysmic instances of a cultural landmark regenerating a city was the case of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which instantly attracted tourists, 'brought hope to citizens and city officials', and prompted an urban regeneration (Plaza, 2007, p.2). Paired with the widely accepted creative class theory put forward by Richard Florida and others in the early 2000's, city officials as far as the U.S. were influenced to strongly invest in cultural institutions to revitalize a city, both economically and socially (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007).

***Urban renewal through place branding, promotion, and cultural tourism***

Different from sports venues, entertainment complexes, and retail centers, cultural institutions come with a high-brow history, once used as a system to delineate class positions and indicate belonging to a socially elite culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Strom, 2002). This history still informs a wider perception of the arts, so that building a cultural institution in a city is to value 'selling an image of an urbane place of cultural sophistication, in which the museum or performance hall lends its panache to the city around it' (Strom, 2002, p.16). As symbols of taste and distinction, cultural institutions attract visitors or workers who value the arts and bring their own cultural capital to an area (Ibid.).

Theorist Richard Florida groups such people into a 'creative class,' attributing the presence of this class to the economic development of a city in their ability to generate more revenue from their own cultural capital (Florida, 2002). Attracting this 'class' of people willing to spend on culture will bring eventual economic returns to cities in their patronage of and attendance at cultural institutions (Ibid.; Strom, 1999). As 'these possessors of "cultural capital" have additional standing as opinion leaders and trendsetters' (Strom, 1999, p.425), they have the ability to influence more widespread cultural consumption. Urban developers thus use cultural institutions or iconic landmarks as physical symbols of a high quality of life within a city, effectively branding the urban space as 'associated with beauty, good taste and higher purpose' (Strom, 2002, p.7) to attract this class.

More recently, as funding for the arts has decreased, cultural institutions are forced to generate revenue through commercial avenues that appeal to more diverse communities and popular culture (Strom, 2002). Adding cafes, restaurants, and gift shops to performance halls, or even partnering with corporations for major exhibitions will draw a larger audience, generating more cultural consumption (Strom, 1999). By appealing to wider audiences, they contribute to urban renewal strategies' goals to 'increase consumption by residents and tourists, improve the city image, and enhance the local quality of life' (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007, p.350). Still, because of institutions' longstanding image of cultural sophistication, they have a unique way of making revenue off of 'profit generating activities, while bringing their nonprofit, noncommercial credentials with them' (Strom, 2002, p.16). The symbol of these institutions still attracts Florida's 'creative class' to increase status of a city, revenue, and audience numbers, while an institution shapes and caters to the identity of the communities they exist in through their programming.

More than just attracting a creative class and revitalizing a city's local communities, cultural institutions are a draw for what has been termed cultural tourism. As studied by Pratt (2002), 'the built environment, or site specific heritage, has an ideological, social and economic effect' (p.34)

for cities. The specificity of a place, their images, and symbols, can promote tourism to a place and draw further consumption (Ibid.). Therefore, cultural industries and their institutions are the link in the economic process of consumption between production and cultural tourism (p.39). Understanding that 'individual tourists visit cities with distinctive attractions' (Strom, 2003, p.249), investment into iconic architecture has become a priority for cities seeking to harness the economic benefits of cultural tourism. While mega entertainment complexes or other commercial sites may offer a larger economic impact, cultural institutions' 'value as symbols of good taste and excellence may give them a more powerful indirect impact' (Ibid.). Architecture and cultural projects create a unique identity for the city that will attract tourists who value unique images and experiences, and contribute to spending in multiple sectors (Ibid.).

### *Negative implications of culture-led urban renewal strategies*

Utilizing cultural institutions and iconic architecture for urban renewal strategies has been met with much critique, the 'extent to which branded urban entertainment centres can develop and sustain an identity and image for a city' (Evans, 2003, p.421) sometimes resulting in decline over time. The case of the Bilbao Guggenheim, which ignited much of the positive talk around culture and development, is evidence of the negative implications of such strategies in the long term. With declining attendance and a lack of connection to regional identity, the Bilbao demonstrates how 'the single image and brand loses its impact and novelty, and a more pluralist range of representations is required' (Ibid.). While urban centers have attempted to replicate the original success of this museum, many have experienced what has become termed 'The Bilbao Effect' (Plaza, 2007), in failing to continue to attract cultural tourism steadily and subjecting themselves to a 'serial replication of architectural style, blockbuster exhibitions and shows' (Evans, 2003, p.437).

In producing architectural wonders and cultural institutions based on the same model, the identity of cities is generalized and unreflective of its distinct culture. The focus on attracting elites and tourists has sometimes led to 'a hierarchy of interests in which the concerns of visitors to cities... take precedence over those of the people who reside in the city' (Eisinger, 2000, p.322). Many institutions may find a lack of sustainability because of a strict vision of promotion, as 'such amenities may... have little appeal to those who actually live in the city' (Strom, 1999, p.433). Without specific attention to the city's inherent cultural and social sensitivities, such strategies can be unpopular with local communities and therefore become unsustainable for future growth.

## CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND ICONIC ARCHITECTURE: The Case Of Los Angeles

To explore how the factors involved in utilizing a cultural institution for urban renewal have fared in practice, this paper will now analyze two cultural institutions in downtown Los Angeles built for the aims of urban regeneration. As a city with a range of socio-economic levels and a large geographic area, efforts to renew the downtown area of Los Angeles through cultural intervention and iconic architecture has been employed consistently over the years, with both positive and negative results.

### *Walt Disney Concert Hall*

Downtown Los Angeles's Walt Disney Concert Hall is a major example of iconic architecture meant to aid in urban renewal. With eye-catching design by famed Bilbao Guggenheim architect Frank Gehry, the project housing the LA Philharmonic (LA Phil) 'spills out and mutates into various intriguing shapes onto Grand Avenue' (Ryan, 2004, p.62) on Bunker Hill downtown. Its location was strategic for planners who wanted to change 'the predominant image of Bunker Hill... as a zone of increasingly derelict, degraded buildings and entrenched poverty' (Reese, 2010). Connecting the Central Library and the Concert Hall was a desire of Los Angeles developers since the early 1900's, when Charles Robinson first suggested building a cultural center downtown so residents and visitors knew 'that the urban environment offered the best of modern amenities' (Ibid.). Still, throughout the century, the area saw 'failed or only partially successful attempts to create a strong image of the core' (Ibid.).

The Concert Hall, conceptualized in the 80's, finally gained financial backing following the success of Gehry's Guggenheim and was completed in 2003 (Russell, 1999). With an exterior of 'swirling panes of steel' (Webb, 2003, p.67) reflecting the buildings of the grid-like business district, the design 'deliberately eschews the formal, hierarchical ethos of most previous buildings of the type,' attempting to attract new, younger audiences (Ryan, 2004, p.62). The effects of the long-term project were felt almost immediately, as LA Phil concerts doubled in number the first year it opened, and attendance at performances has remained above 90 percent in the decade to follow (Chagollan, 2013, p.88). The building of this new cultural institution renewed interest in attending the symphony's performances, but it also gave the LA Phil 'the opportunity to totally reimagine who we could be' (Borda in Chagollan, 2013, p.88), showing a renewal of programming to be just as important to attracting audiences as rebuilding the institution.

Still, creating landmark buildings around Bunker Hill throughout the years razed housing and displaced over 10,000 people. When construction started on the Concert Hall, critics lauded developers for opening amidst a recession, public debt, and so soon after riots plagued downtown streets months earlier (Kaplan, 1992). Rather than focusing regeneration downtown, many believed it should 'begin in our scattered neighborhoods in need' because 'the centrist trickle-down theory doesn't work' (Ibid.). Still, as time has passed the history surrounding it's opening has been forgotten. In his case study of the Concert Hall's impact on urban renewal, Reese determines that Los Angeles is 'not only in need of landmarks but also of sustained planning and building that will make it a place where the city's diverse population can live, work, and take their leisure' (2010). He believes that the Concert Hall is succeeding as a part of the goal to bring a more cohesive image to the immense landscape of Los Angeles, with architecture that encourages social interaction (Ibid.).

### *Museum of Contemporary Art*

An earlier cultural institution intended to revitalize and attract visitors to the area around Bunker Hill was the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in 1986. While the artist advisory council involved in planning the building 'envisioned the museum as a central forum for the city's dispersed arts community' (Berelowitz qtd. in Grodach, 2008, p.502), MOCA 'has done little to attract and sustain a concentration of commercial galleries, non-profit arts venues, and artists

within the larger one-mile study area' (Grodach, 2008, p.502). In fact, many artists left downtown by the time the museum opened, and a recession, rising homeless population, and crime further pushed the arts community out of the area around the museum (Szanto, 2003, in Grodach, 2008, p.503). This artistic migration out of downtown, coupled with MOCA's focus on large exhibitions and a permanent collection, drew 'attention away from its focus on programs that nurtured the local arts scene' (Grodach, 2008, p.504), effectively inhibiting its ability to attract visitors from the local community. With lack of patronage, major financial difficulties hit the museum in 2008, and politics amidst its board and director plagued management in the late 2000's, contributing to MOCA's lesser social and economic impact compared to other art galleries in the city (Colacello, 2013).

In his case study on MOCA's impact on urban renewal, Grodach (2008) concluded that the failure of MOCA to attract more arts-based development around Bunker Hill and the amount of visitors intended to the area is due to a cultural strategy that 'called upon a single building to catalyze development without full consideration of the role that programming and community relations play in this process' (p.511). In the museum's focus on transforming the image of Bunker Hill and attracting cultural tourism, its financial priorities became the building it was maintaining, rather than the arts community it was supposed to engage (p.510). Grodach puts forward that cultural strategy considering both consumption and production would lead to 'a wider arts and economic development role than the focus on tourism and image alone' (p.512).

## ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

In the case of Los Angeles, urban revitalization downtown has continued to be culture-led despite setbacks, but its branding Bunker Hill as a cultural center has little to do with the identity of the area itself. In its current state, it can be said to be a city experiencing 'The Bilbao Effect' by failing to *sustainably* lure tourists through statement architecture. Concentrating on producing an image through these innovative buildings that don't reflect the communities around them has inevitably led to 'brand decay', as Los Angeles' 'reimaging and reinvestment in 'new' cultural facilities and experiences, in order to maintain visitor appeal and city marketing distinction' (Evans, 2005, p.966) is seen in their continued building of cultural institutions around Bunker Hill over many years. It wasn't until nearly 20 years after MOCA that the Walt Disney Concert Hall finally arrived on Grand Ave., and just recently that the Broad Museum opened next door, yet the 'dream of culture-craving throngs persist' in the slowly evolving area (Schjeldahl, 2015).

The effects of adding to the institutions along Grand, complete with more eye-catching architecture in the new Broad Museum, still remain to be seen, but it can be concluded that in MOCA's case, failure to initiate further immediate cultural growth reveals place-specific issues. LA's culture of residents resistant to traveling outside of their neighborhood due to traffic, and the fact that other museums like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Hammer Museum show contemporary art as well, does not help the case for visiting a contemporary art museum downtown, for instance (Ibid.). Within this local context, it becomes clear that culture-led development strategies need to be much more place-specific, as creative cities are not created by new institutions, rather they involve the growth of cultural capital over time from a variety of consumers (Evans, 2005). As seen in the case of MOCA, simply constructing an architecturally iconic museum in downtown will not attract a sustainable audience or lead to economic and

social growth in the area. Even with Disney Concert Hall next door, the area is still hardly seen as a cultural center (Schjeldahl, 2015). In branding the Bunker Hill arts district as such, strategies should focus on engaging the surrounding cultural communities, in this case Latino and Asian neighborhoods, as well as local artistic communities, to effectively grow within the local economy.

The case studies of cultural institutions and iconic architecture in Los Angeles analyzed in this paper indicate both positive and negative effects associated with culture-led urban renewal strategies. While this paper only explored such strategies in one urban city, many other American cities have shows similar dualities of successes and failures in utilizing cultural institutions and iconic architecture to spur regeneration (Strom, 1999; 2003). This continuous pattern suggests that with attention to local economies already present in a city, and engagement with artists within the area, urban renewal strategies can find sustainable success. Iconic architecture, while attractive to outsiders in the outset, is not a free ticket to increasing visitors and revenue; ignoring local communities and place-specific issues can lead to failed sustainability and growth in a city. For such strategies to initiate sustainable regeneration in a city, a balance of local cultural sensitivity and attention to globally attractive cultural products is needed.

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