

Policy, Politics and Community Arts: The case of the Hilltown

Jane Picton Smith

Community Arts and Adult Education Tutor

My decision to explore community arts provision in the Hilltown area of Dundee comes from personal involvement in the area during my Community Education placement and also from previous volunteering experience in the Highwayman Youth and Community Centre, which was demolished in March last year. I am interested in the relatively high concentration of arts interventions in the area, compared with other parts of the city. I am also interested in the sense of transition which is evident within the community at this time, as the area is experiencing dramatic physical re-development as a result of regeneration. This article aims to explore the tensions which exist within the community, as policy agendas and political activity, through community arts interventions, bring different (even conflicting) outcomes.

The Hilltown area of Dundee is one of the oldest parts of Dundee and was known for its trade in weaving and bonnet-making up until the nineteenth-century. With the arrival of the jute industry, many of the weavers made the transition from their home handlooms to enter employment within the factories. Jute mills sprang up within the area and the Hilltown housed many of its workers, who lived in increasingly poor and overcrowded conditions. Improvements came during the mid 1900s when the slums were demolished to make way for new housing; tenements were replaced with flats and towards the end of the twentieth-century, multi-storey blocks were built.

There is clearly a rich sense of local culture in the Hilltown. From the conversations I had with older locals during my placement, many remember Hilltown 'worthies' they knew as children. Some of these stories and sayings have been immortalised on a plaque on the railings by the famous Hilltown Clock. It is a landmark that every Hilltown resident is familiar with and served as a meeting place. Indeed, one commentator notes that the railings were a popular place for 'loafing' and may have been the inspiration for a Hilltown song which is still known among locals today: 'we are the lads fae the tap o' the hull; we've never worked and never will' (quoted in Roberston 1991, p. 4). The legacy of unemployment is evident in the present day community, as it remains one of the area's ongoing social problems.

The connection between everyday life and culture is one which Raymond Williams (1989) recognises, as he writes about his home life and upbringing:

Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start. To grow up in that country was to see the shape of a culture, and its modes of change. I could stand on the mountains and look north to the farms and the cathedrals, or south to the smoke and the flare of the blast furnace [...] My grandfather, a big hard labourer wept while he spoke, finely and excitedly, at the parish meeting, of being turned out of his cottage. My father, not long before he died, spoke quietly

and happily of when he had started a trade union branch and a Labour Party group in the village [...] These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative. (p. 4)

Williams presents a culture which is inscribed with the realities and hardships of social life. In fact, he argues that the two should always be linked, as the culture of 'arts and learning' (p. 4) expresses and makes sense of the culture of everyday experience: 'some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction' (p. 4). Up until this year, the Hilltown exemplified this very idea through the much-loved and frequented Highwayman Youth and Community Centre, which was originally a pub of the same name. Its success arguably lay in the fact that it 'belonged' to the community and was not seen as a community 'intervention' from the outside, even though it was funded by the Scottish Executive's Social Inclusion Partnership.

The Hulltoon Writers

The Highwayman provided a range of different services and classes for children, youth and adults, with an emphasis on community building and learning new skills. It contributed to the creation of a community spirit which encompassed all ages, providing a social and cultural hub. In terms of community arts provision, there were a number of groups which provided an opportunity for locals to participate in crafts, photography and creative writing. Although the groups facilitated social connectedness and provided an opportunity for skill-development and creative expression, it is difficult to say if democratic interest was cultivated, or whether there was any real opportunity to use participatory arts for political gain. Most of the outputs were celebratory in nature, reflecting the desired sense of unity that characterises policies of social inclusion and social cohesion. Community arts groups were not used as a medium to campaign for better housing or for intervention to tackle drug-related issues.

The creative writing group, however, seems to have accomplished something quite different. The 'Hulltoon Writers', which formed in the Highwayman is now based in another community centre within the Hilltown and continues to draw new members while retaining its core regulars. While the arts and crafts groups have dispersed into different community centres towards the further limits of the area, losing a sense of the local community, the writing group retains a strong sense of its original local identity. Having volunteered with the group five years previously, it was interesting to return while on placement to see a few of the original members and hear about others who had left to pursue other things. The group gives a voice to local people who are given a space to express personal and collective issues relating to identity, home, family and neighbourhood. At times, their writing enables them to articulate more politically-emotive subjects which impact on their lives, as a result of poor

housing, unemployment or community deprivation. What is particularly significant is the use and celebration of local language and identity and the popularity of their dialect and subject matter. As a reaction against globalization, there seems to be an increasing value in what is local. Group members have gone on to publish to critical acclaim: Mark Thompson, now a poet, performer and creative-writing teacher, has published a collection of poetry, *Bard fae thi Buildin Site*, while Gary Robertson's non-fiction accounts of local gang culture, *Pure Dundee* and *Gangs of Dundee* are listed on Amazon.

A few years ago, some of the Hulltoon Writers were invited to perform their work at the Byre Theatre in St Andrews, the home of Scotland's first university. Their writings had entered a particular cultural discourse and been 'accepted' by those who name and own culture. The Hulltoon Writers had developed a counter-culture, writing subversively against the very institutions which were now acknowledging them. As an act of rebellion against their formal education, they wrote in their own dialect, both celebrating and reclaiming the language that had been "drummed out of them". They proved that poetry did not have to appear in Standard English – but now, their work was being reified, as part of the 'real' culture they had subverted. This highlights the disparity between intended and unintended outcomes. Despite the policy-inspired origins of the creative writing programme which sought to promote Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion, the poets managed to see political change in their own circumstances. This supports the idea that the capacity to act differently is always embedded in wider structures of power (Layder, 1994). Above everything, I believe that for the poets it was a matter of recognition, as their culture was being acknowledged and valued for what it was: a true reflection of Williams' definition. On his website, Mark Thompson sums up his motivations rather succinctly:

"Thi say that Dundee's no got any culture? We've nae vision an' we dinna hae a dream? Well, that's a load o' shite. Dundee's a class act an' em here to pit Dundee back on the map. Thir's plenty talent ah about, it's just kenning whar to look".

Regeneration by demolition

Despite the obvious success of the Highwayman's provision, it was demolished last year. Graeme Strachan, writing for Dundee's *Evening Telegraph* on March 10th 2010 (two days after the community centre was demolished) states that the Highwayman was demolished as part of the Hilltown regeneration plan: '[it] was earmarked for demolition regardless of any funding being obtained from other sources'. In the same article, Phil Welsh, secretary for the Coldside Community Forum, spoke up against the re-distribution of programmes and services following the Highwayman's demolition: "Services scattered throughout various locations do not encompass the idea of community, whereas a single centre which is eclectic in its activities allows for a sense of choice, belonging, togetherness and diversity". His hope is that a purpose-built centre will be incorporated into the Council's regeneration plans, to

retain a central community hub. With the local policy emphasis on social inclusion apparently giving way to regeneration, has one policy replaced and undermined another? According to Strachan, funding was, for once, not part of the equation; instead, it was redirected from the Executive's Social Inclusion Partnership and re-allocated from the Fairer Scotland Fund at the request of the City Council's Policy and Resources Committee and at the recommendation of the Dundee Partnership. In the long-term, perhaps, a regeneration strategy is ultimately more lucrative for the area, since it may attract re-investment – even if such 'gentrification' has been slated by Social Geography researcher, Sarah Glynn (2006). Re-investment comes with a price, however, as the Hilltown's regeneration strategies have incurred the cost of displacement. Local people are being re-housed against their wishes in a way that seems no less than underhand.

The regeneration plans also included the demolition of the multis, which happened in July this year – and it seems the community were bulldozed into this decision. In her paper, *Home Truths: The Myth and Reality of Regeneration in Dundee*, Glynn discusses the events which led to the decision to demolish. Tenants were asked to vote with little background information and offered £1,500 for moving. The report used words such as 'surplus' and 'at risk', which led to assumptions about the safety of the multis, even if no evidence was provided to substantiate this claim. The process produced majority votes in favour of demolition and the councillors were able to deliver a unanimous decision.

In an article by Graham Huband, under the heading 'Councillor: Hilltown shedding bad image', one local councillor states that 'the demolition of the Maxwelltown multi-storey blocks in Alexander Street will banish some of the negative perceptions of the area and provide land for redevelopment'. The councillor goes on to talk about his hopes for the community:

"In the longer term we are trying to avoid letting flats to people who will make their neighbours' lives a misery and use our council houses for drug-dealing. We are stepping up the level of vetting and looking at new ways of managing multis [...] but I want to stress the majority if the Hilltown does not suffer from these problems. There are some hot-spots, but actually most of the Hilltown could be characterised as a quiet residential area which is attractive, well served by public transport and offering a good quality of life".

It is interesting that the councillor can present such extremes within a relatively small community, as he justifies the need for demolition while talking up the area's assets. In the push for regeneration, it would seem that social inclusion has become redefined as 'anywhere but here'.

Arts and Community Culture

There is much artistic interest in the Hilltown. Local arts-related agencies include The Little Theatre (which houses Dundee's Dramatic Society), Pure Media, 'social art

innovators' who form 'a bridge between the arts and the social care sector' for youth and young adults, as well as arts programmes that have been re-housed from the Highwayman and now take place in Grey Lodge and the Mark Henderson Centre. A self-sustaining artists' collective called Tin Roof has recently been established in the area, involving resident artists who live and produce artwork within the community, seeking to work alongside local people. There is a social element to their work and the project leader told me their projects are concerned with issues surrounding the re-development that does not seem to match the needs or wants of the community.

As a response to what is happening in the Hilltown, a working group of community partners formed last summer to collaborate on a project called Documenting Hilltown. This project has been working creatively with local people to support them through this time of transition. At an early meeting, one of the artists asked if these plans would allow enough involvement for local people. This is a good and relevant question. It is important to document and record local Hilltown culture in such a time of transition within the life of the community; however, there is a sense that this is a commemoration of the inevitable. As part of Documenting Hilltown, an exhibition, *We Reign Invisible*, is running until 27th November at The Little Theatre, 58 Victoria Road, Dundee. Using materials from the Alexander Street demolition site, the exhibition is a poignant comment on community regeneration. As regeneration policy transforms the Hilltown landscape, community arts interventions are, perhaps for now, more reactive than active.

References:

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