

Re-Branding ‘Cultural Quarters’: Evidence-Based Policy?

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ABSTRACT

So-called ‘cultural quarters’ have been created in many cities as a means of bringing about economic diversification, job creation and income generation, as well as image enhancement. In Scotland, for instance, this approach has been followed to some extent by all cities. Spatial planning is often used as a policy mechanism in this context by means of the formal designation of ‘cultural quarters’ in statutory land use plans, with supporting policies aimed at encouraging further clustering of culture-related uses. Cultural quarters are therefore areas that contain a relatively high concentration of cultural uses and that are considered appropriate for further concentration of such uses. They may be aligned to cultural production (for instance in terms of art and design, digital media, music or film production), or cultural consumption (for instance in terms of arts and entertainment facilities) or both – indeed, it may be suggested that successful cultural quarters will of necessity contain a cross-fertilisation between production and consumption uses. In all cases, concentration is commonly accepted to lead to synergy, agglomeration economies, complementarity of uses and minimisation of amenity loss. However, it may be argued that such approaches primarily represent a ‘re-branding’ of areas in order to align them to city marketing and tourism strategies. Evidence of this may be provided by cities where ‘quartering’ (often involving cultural quarters) has been more comprehensive, with evident links to tourism and city marketing. Moreover, there is frequently resistance to such ‘re-branding’ activities on the part of residents and workers actively involved in cultural production in such areas, since such branding activity is seen to lead to cultural commodification and gentrification rather than regeneration, with the potential erosion of the very distinctiveness that prompted designation in the first case. Furthermore, the evidence of broadly-based regeneration outcomes arising from designation of such quarters is sparse, with much evidence and argument suggesting that such designation may be counter-productive.

This paper discusses such issues with reference to case studies in the UK, and presents conclusions of relevance for cities in other contexts.

Key Words: branding, cultural, quarters