

BUILT TO LAST?

The new generation of creative arts projects

Richard Tibbott, Chairman of Locum Destination Consulting and strategic advisor to many major cultural destinations in Europe, comments on the failure of the Centre for Visual Arts in Cardiff and the success of The Lighthouse in Glasgow, and highlights some of the key issues arising from their contrasting experiences.



The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Centre in The Lighthouse

During 2000, two creative arts centre projects faced major business challenges following the completion of their investment and their operational launches in late 1999. One project failed to make it through its crisis, the Centre for Visual Arts in Cardiff. The project closed on 5 November 2000, leaving private donors and a major Wales-based Trust with a total loss and the Wales Arts Council with a major failure of will and partnership. What went wrong? Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* provides an insight in the following article.

Concurrently, Glasgow's Lighthouse, when faced with similar scale revenue/cost challenges and business difficulties, managed to impress everyone with its will to succeed. At Locum we have had the privilege of helping The Lighthouse with its business strategy. After Jonathan's piece on Cardiff's CVA, Lighthouse Director Stuart MacDonald explains why his project in Glasgow continues to succeed.

Reality bites

These contrasting stories of success and failure serve to illustrate how the business model of the cultural project has changed over the last five years.

Both projects had unrealistic initial business forecasts, predicated on far too optimistic forecasts of visitor admissions. Interestingly, the Cardiff project was still basing its business thinking on a study done in 1993! The Lighthouse feasibility study was similarly out of date. More important than the age of the feasibility study was the fact that the underlying assumptions were based on a model of such a business that has become discredited. That is the notion that cultural projects are 'visitor attractions' that can be judged simply on the number of paying customers through the door. We have known for the past five years at least that this is not a sustainable model for a cultural project – even an attractive museum concept or a hands-on science centre – and certainly not for a creative arts centre.

Rethinking funding

Stuart MacDonald demonstrates in his analysis that the creative arts relate to the economic potential and image of a city and that ways need to be found to generate financial support from the city's wider market place, not just from the arts community paying admissions at the door. Cultural projects now have strong promotion of access policies, and crude price mechanisms are no longer the core financial strategy for the cultural project. New income streams from the wider destination role of the project need to be won by the cultural project manager. Additionally, over half of The Lighthouse's full-time staff are paid for by external bodies.

Strategy for sustainability

We also gain from Stuart's article an understanding of the other elements needed for the long-term sustainability of cultural destination projects:

- **Clear strategic vision:** The Lighthouse makes no claims to be just another visitor attraction – although it has attracted considerable interest from the general public, who have visited in great numbers. Rather, it has set its stall out to communicate with a specific range of audiences in order to achieve specific goals within each.
- **Rich cultural heritage:** The Lighthouse has been able to build on Glasgow's heritage in a way that reflects the interests of its various target audiences – architects, designers, and members of the public.
- **Effective partnership:** The Lighthouse has forged solid links with similar cultural centres world-wide, local authorities and educational bodies.

Lessons for the future

We are operating in a commercial environment that demands hard-nosed consideration of all salient factors when planning new destinations, no matter how exciting the idea may be. As Jonathan Jones points out, Sheffield ended up with a white elephant on its hands as the National Centre for Popular Music went the way of the Royal Armouries in Leeds and unceremoniously keeled over. The Lighthouse has avoided the trap of believing its own hype, allying a clear-headed, realistic level of visitor expectation with an innovative and equally realistic financial plan. Were it not for the continuous generosity of the Millennium Commission throughout the year, the Dome itself would have met an early end. Now is the time to learn from the many millennium mishaps to befall the cultural sector, to ensure that more projects are founded on the solid principles that have given The Lighthouse such an encouraging start and optimistic future.

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