

# The regeneration game

**The Centre for Visual Arts should have launched Cardiff into a new, culturally exciting era. But after just a year, it has flopped. Jonathan Jones outlines what went wrong.**

The city of Cardiff is effortlessly dominated by the new rugby stadium, the one they decided to build instead of an opera house by Zaha Hadid. Built like a cross between a ship, a space station and a branch of Sainsbury's, it is a permanent reminder that in this city sport and populism count for more than culture.

With hindsight, the Centre for Visual Arts was never going to make it here. The only major contemporary art space in Wales opened to a great fanfare in the Hayes shopping centre last summer. It was a converted Victorian library, but unlike the original institution it charged admission, and had a touchy-feely introduction to contemporary art for children on the top floor. It wanted to be the Millennium Dome and Tate Modern simultaneously, but had no chance of being either because its funding bodies – the Arts Council of Wales and the City Council provided the bulk of the £9 million cost – expected the Centre to make up a serious financial shortfall from admissions in its first year. The financial crisis at the end of 12 months was not merely predictable, it is almost as if it were planned in advance. The CVA closed on 5 November 2000.

Cardiff's political establishment went about the business of establishing the Centre so half-heartedly that it's hard to believe they wanted a modern art gallery at all. Instead of nurturing an audience for new art, the CVA acted as a proof to cultural conservatives that Welsh people don't want this modern art rubbish, see.

Instead, Cardiff has a world-class rugby stadium. It also has the £2 billion Cardiff Bay Development – eventually to include a new cultural hub, the much-delayed Wales Millennium Centre – where the despised docklands have been turned into a genteel setting for businesses and fish restaurants. The aesthetics of the new Cardiff Bay, as with other waterfront reclamations from Sunderland to Liverpool to New York's Pier 17, are cosily retrograde. This kind of reclamation can create a pleasant setting for eating an ice cream. It cannot make a city feel like a city.

Cities are cultural entities. The texture of social and economic life in them is defined by their cultural energy or lack of it, and cities all over the world – Glasgow, Barcelona, Seattle – have demonstrated that, by changing the way their cultural life is perceived, you can change everything about them. The problem is that culture is not something that can be neatly delivered from above. It cannot, as the Welsh critic Raymond Williams argued, because it is complex and living. When city authorities – and in the case of Cardiff, national governments – try to regenerate a city by mixing up architectural, artistic and leisure projects, the results can be catastrophic. Sheffield ends up with a National Centre for Popular Music (aka the Unpopular Centre for National Music) whose shiny Nigel Coates design cannot conceal the



*Not enough interest or visitors: the Cardiff Centre for Visual Arts*  
Photograph courtesy of Huw Evans

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poverty of its displays; Newcastle gets a vast, pointless, life-science centre; Greenwich gets the Dome.

What these follies have in common is a patronising conception of popular culture. The question, as city after city tries to turn itself into a hip, swinging cultural metropolis, is what kind of culture do you want and why? To a city like Cardiff, the answer appears to be popular, mainstream culture. So opera was out, and contemporary art is out. Rugby is in. But what Cardiff's Taffia have done is to impose a boring cultural stereotype on the city, and on Wales, and then to build monuments to this stereotype. As a strategy for urban cultural regeneration this is a disaster. Cardiff feels small – it is, with a population of 320,000 – and parochial. It has the commercial and leisure venues you see all over Britain. But this does not add up to any sense of metropolitan energy.

Architecture in Wales means, for many people, medieval castles perched on rocky crags over slate-built towns. The castles built by the English in the fourteenth century are architectural masterpieces – dense, raw structures that still speak of power. The problem for Wales is that there is no metropolitan tradition to compare with these rustic ruins. The urbanisation of south Wales only happened in the nineteenth century, and a country that had always had a tiny population scattered across small towns and hamlets never really got used to the idea of the big city. Swansea, with its mid-twentieth-century cultural scene, was perhaps the closest to a Glasgow or Dublin – but Dylan Thomas spent his final days in faraway New York. The Welsh have built towns that seem



*The Millennium Stadium, built instead of an opera house by Zaha Hadid*  
 Photograph courtesy of Graham Davies

## Across the country, enterprises that respect their public succeed

makeshift and frightened compared to the looming mountains. The interior world of the home has been valued more than public space; the national imagination is rooted in the village. For all these reasons, Cardiff's culture has shied away from the metropolitan and expressed itself until recently in a flight to the suburbs. That's why 'cultural regeneration' has become necessary, with the Cardiff Bay scheme – including the construction of a £200 million barrage to control tidal levels and the opening up of waterfront spaces for development – and the Millennium Stadium attempting to lure money into the city centre.

In too many cities in Britain the bright, shiny dream of 'cultural regeneration' has been pursued without the courage to believe in culture at all. What is most wrong is the assumption that a cultural project in a city has to fit in with what is already there. Sheffield thought it was a pop city (The Human League! Jarvis!); Cardiff thinks it is Rugby Central. But where cities have exploded into cultural life it has been a surprise. Glasgow's 1980s literary scene and current art scene had nothing in common with the way the city had always been imagined.

Good art is serious and difficult. It does not confirm what you already know. This is why so many of the new cultural spaces and projects in cities across Britain just turn into samey exercises of less interest than the opening of a new multiplex. At least multiplexes and music and book megastores give people access to contemporary culture. The lessons of success and failure in the cultural renewal of Britain's cities can be stated simply. Tate Modern or Millennium Dome? Across the country, enterprises that respect their public succeed. Glasgow succeeds, public art commissions such as Alison Wilding's *Ambit* in Sunderland succeed, Norman Foster's glasshouse in the Welsh countryside succeeds. Intelligent avant-garde culture excites people. In a city it creates drama and possibility – the essence of the metropolitan. By contrast, local authorities who have assumed that everyone is an idiot have ended up with embarrassing follies.

If Cardiff wants to be a cultural mecca why not create something really wild? A John Cale Gallery of the 1960s Fluxus avant-garde, a Frank Lloyd Wright museum designed by Frank Gehry, a Gorky's Zygotic Mynci centre for bilingual culture – with a café called *Bwyd Time*. But then what's the point if the city can't even keep a modern art centre for more than 12 months?



*Aerial view of Cardiff waterfront*  
 Photograph courtesy of Huw Evans