Culture-led Revitalisation and Gentrification: A look into the Ouseburn Valley

Divyali Mehrotra

School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape

Having just moved to Newcastle from India, the idea I had of the city was one that was painted by the tourist blogs and the picturesque photographs of the sun setting over the Millenium Bridge and River Tyne. One is easily charmed by lazy flow of River Tyne, the quaint pubs, the friendly spirit, and rich culture of the people of Newcastle. The culture-centric picture of Newcastle's urban fabric almost reads like a tourism advertisement and I too, was enamoured by the culturally characterised charms of Newcastle. However, romanticising the city does not cover up the glaring fractures in the city's social and economic structures and the cracks become visible as we a deeper look.

A push for revitalisation of the identity of the Ouseburn Valley in Newcastle upon Tyne, is part of the larger global trend of building creative cities. The paradigm shift towards the "creative city" of Newcastle is reflective of the industrial decline from shipbuilding, coal mining and

manufacturing to a service-based economy. [The shift](#) was originally focused on the city centre and Quayside area, which is adjacent to the Ouseburn Valley, as a spot for thriving nightlife. This image of Newcastle as a "party city" was later followed by a tilt towards developing cultural centres and the specific interest towards the Ouseburn Valley picked up in the early 2000s with several art galleries and creative industries expanding.

Artists and creative, culture led policies have played an important role in the early stages of gentrification. Artists are seen settling into areas that have been previously labelled as dilapidated and dangerous by the broader middle class. Eventually, their presence encourages larger scale investments in the area as the district then becomes an attractive "neo-bohemia", as the encouragement for [culture-led revitalisation](#) grows, since the "creative class" theory places artists at the centre of post-industrial urban growth agendas. With the growth of the Ouseburn Valley as a tourist and leisure area, the pitfalls of consumerism become more apparent as hordes of visitors continue to flock to the Valley and do not share the cultural identity of the Valley. Moreover, with the increasing popularity of the Valley, the "creative hub" has inevitably evolved into a space for more business-oriented art spaces to develop, thus, creating a process of gentrification within the artists' community where areas become "less creative" as more artists taken on work on commission and newer middle-class residents with higher income but "lower creativity" move into the Ouseburn Valley.

The policy to push a cultural-led regeneration and revitalisation of the identity of the city is adopted under the impression that culture-led regeneration can boost the quality of life of its people as it permeates through all the layers of social life. There seems to be a dominant belief that culture can provide an alternative to the ["post-industrial world."](#) The general trend has been one where the production and [consumption of culture](#) is part of the effort to sustain a new industry. However, one of the main concerns of pushing a certain kind of culture is that community ties are not at the core of these creative cultural experiences, which while having a language of inclusion in it, does not necessarily unify the community but in many cases leads to a cultural-led gentrification instead.

With the change in the ward boundary of Ouseburn Valley in 2009, the area was officially separated by an administrative boundary from Byker. This placed the Valley in a middle-class constituency, making it more central for the wider ward. These changes to administrative boundaries come in as an effort to rebrand the Valley as a creative centre. It has been estimated that since 2003, the Lower Ouseburn Valley has seen [£67 million of investment](#), with 50

physical regeneration projects being undertaken in this period. This begs the question then, whose culture is being reflected in the regeneration of the city, and more specifically, whose heritage is the city actively trying to protect?

The gentrification of the Ouseburn Valley is one that has emerged from a process of commercialisation and regulation of a so-called "dangerous and dilapidated" space. While creative strategies have been designed with the intention of preserving and promoting an "authentic" creative space, these strategies may promote a form of unintended gentrification. The instrumentality that is attached with the work of artists renders the creative quarters less attractive to the creative class which was intended to be protected and nurtured in the first place, and the homogenisation from the consumerist tendencies silence and erase the heritage that exists and prevents the growth of "authentic art"; a phenomenon which seems antithetical to a Just City.

References

Bailey, C., Miles, S., & Stark, P. (2004). Culture-Led Urban Regeneration And The Revitalisation Of Identities In Newcastle, Gateshead And The North East Of England. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *10*(1), 47–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/1028663042000212328

Evans, G. (2001). *Cultural Planning: An Urban Renaissance?* (1st ed.).

Newcastle City Council (2012) Ouseburn Regeneration and Action Plan. *Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle City Council.*

Whiting, J., & Hannam, K. (2017). 'The secret garden': Artists, bohemia and gentrification in the Ouseburn Valley, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, *24*(3), 318–334. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776416643750

Wilkinson, S. (1992). Towards a new city? A case study of image-improvement initiatives in Newcastle upon Tyne. In *Rebuilding the city: property-led urban regeneration*