

Embracing the Desire Lines – Opening Up Cultural Infrastructure

tom fleming / May 2009 /

We are witnessing a complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure. Those ‘bricks and mortar’ culture houses, citadels of experience, towers of inspiration, that for so long have stood steadfast as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort, while the streets around them have whizzed and clattered to multiple disruptive transformations, are being **turned inside out**.

This is not the extensive re-fit or capital re-build of the Lottery-funded bonanza seen in the early 21st Century, though that lay the foundations. Nor, except for a few pioneer cultural institutions and brands, is it led by a purposeful re-think of the structure and focus of cultural infrastructure, a response to profound questions that challenge the logic of institutional and organisational memory – *‘what is the role of a theatre in a ‘digital age’?; ‘how does a cinema identify and shape an audience amidst the hyper-fluidity of social networks and micro taste communities’?* For many theatres, cinemas, galleries and other types of culture house; and for pretty much all such venues with a strong dependence on public investment; this wholesale renovation is born out of an urgent requirement to change or die, and it is just beginning.

Until recently, our cultural infrastructure was changing more through a mix of just-in-time responses, an ongoing ‘paint job’ to lick together buildings and organisations and thus retain a grip of relevance and significance, however codified. We saw this through the refurbishment of theatre foyers to provide the café bar aesthetic of the late 1990s; the re-branding of museums and galleries toward aesthetic syncretism with perceived brands of integrity from our high streets; and the nervous, self-conscious shuffle, followed by standing jump, toward digitising everything - from programmes to ticketing.

Such piecemeal tinkering is no longer viable. For with every re-brand, re-fit and reappraisal, the public (call them the audience, users, participants, even customers), has moved in multiple different directions at varying speeds; while the paymasters (call them the government, the public sector, the corporate sponsors), have articulated a revised set of expectations, a realigned perspective of the 'value' they expect and require evidenced from their investment.

This short paper gazes from within this *landscape of shift* and explores the implications for cultural infrastructure that is built into the ground through bricks and mortar, yet increasingly and in some cases suddenly required to display an architecture that transcends the local and embraces the digital to offer multivalent senses of place, personality and position. Here digital technology and its cultural application is configured as the enabler and disruptor, opening-up, connecting and destabilising cultural venues and their organisations as they grapple with the vicissitudes of the shifting, multi-directional, constantly re-orientating *desire lines* of a public that never stands still.

This landscape of shift is overlaid and underpinned by a policy and funding system that more than ever requires its cultural infrastructure to be the agents of delivery for multiple strategic agendas – from social cohesion to the creative economy and innovation. In turn, this requires tangible evidence of instrumental impact at a time when the public refuses to take part as it once did. Thus the institutional pickle into which our cultural infrastructure is plunged seems at times inescapable.

The Landscape of Shift and Inertia

Our cultural infrastructure, built as it is with bricks and mortar, invested as it is with organisational and institutional memories pinned to the foundations of these structures, has been trammelled by these sunk costs and burdened by the need to keep the buildings fresh while developing content and identity that transcends the buildings and thus transforms their relationships with public and paymasters alike. This has not proved easy.

Crudely, there are three broad influences for change and the ways that change advances or is resisted: supply, demand and inertia.

1. Supply

Our culture houses raise funds from multiple sources, operating in what we term a competitive ecology¹, foraging alongside other cultural institutions as well as many other non-governmental-organisations (NGOs) for their nutrition. They must articulate and evidence multiple forms of public value², a mix of intrinsic cultural values, plus appeal to myriad corporate and commercial agendas (from corporate social responsibility to the bottom line), to prove their worth. The trouble is, the anticipated types and scales of public value that a cultural institution can provide are based on yesterday's evidence, yesterday's application, or on tomorrow's strategic agenda.

Indeed, the types and scales of public value required always seem to change – with every organisational review by Arts Council England or another NDPB³, after most elections, and at times of economic downturn, upturn and all places between. This means that under-prepared or insufficiently open cultural institutions can lurch painfully from agenda to agenda, struggling to articulate what and how they can deliver. It also means that many cultural institutions are not in a position to set or even co-shape agendas and the parameters of 'value' that emanate from them: they are responsive, too often the hod carriers of agendas that are not their own.

2. Demand:

Our culture houses no longer have audiences; they have participants, patrons and peers. Their public (and thus the value they create for this public) is not only more diverse and multiply stratified than ever; it is more critical, promiscuous, challenging, and even subversive. On the flip side, it is more open, willing, adventurous, engaging and collaborative. Put short, *demand is more demanding*. You can put it down to digital technology or the standards forged by pervasive consumerism; the emergence of global taste communities checked by the ongoing need for communities of propinquity; or the refusal of any of us to grow old, balanced by a set of complex

¹ Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy: 'Approaches to Public Service Investment and Competition in the Cultural Sector - Supporting Evidence for the Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting Review', 2008.

² The system of public support and investment across the cultural sector is driven both by the needs and interest of funders and by the range of cultural organisations both of which have their own aims and objectives. Like any market this system is governed by 'rules' or conditions. In the case of the cultural sector, the market is increasingly driven by frameworks that articulate public service or public value benefits. From a funder's perspective, these frameworks define what will be funded and what the expected outcome and outputs are. From the institution's perspective, it is increasingly the case that they need to demonstrate how 'fit for purpose' they are to deliver within these frameworks.

³ Non-departmental public body – e.g. UK Film Council.

and often entrenched comfort zones. Whatever the cause or effect, it is certainly more difficult for our providers of cultural infrastructure to develop challenging programmes and experiences fuelled by new cultural content that impacts upon audiences to satisfy 'demand' and in turn evidence sufficient value to 'supply' than it was yesterday, this morning or five minutes ago.

3. Inertia:

Our culture houses simply cannot cope. Even the major institutions – the brands that transcend singular interpretations of their role, audience and value – are contorted by organisational dizziness incurred by facing multiple directions to be multiple things for an increasingly multiple notion of 'public'. For many smaller institutions – cash and time poor, with small teams enervated by low staff churn caused by limited career path opportunities; as well as by buildings that look tired in comparison with the shops round the corner; band-width that is lower than at home; and funders who want more ill-defined value for less investment – then the situation is critical.

Perhaps then we have reached a critical moment for cultural policy and the way we manage cultural provision: such is the pace, din and divergence of demand, some of our bricks and mortar-based cultural institutions need to relinquish the inert frontage of their physical presence and find ways to overcome their inertia to develop more flexible business models and operational systems based upon logics of provision that are not always building-based or steeped in yesterday's paradigm, but are more digital, collaborative, enabling and *open*.

Indeed, there is hope for frowzy old theatres, dusty cinemas and conspicuously misguided art spaces across the land because some cultural venues have been so startlingly, disarmingly successful in shaking off old approaches to create new or freshly recombinant approaches to cultural provision. They have edged toward or in some cases sprung vigorously to a very new space, the space cultural infrastructure must inhabit if it is to resonate as it always must: at the **intersection of our desire lines**.

The Trajectory of Desire Lines

Desire Line (di.ZYR lyn) n. : is a path developed by erosion caused by animal or human footfall. The path usually represents the shortest or most easily navigated route between an origin and destination... **(T)he lines take on an organically grown appearance by being unbiased toward existing constructed routes**⁴.

Desire lines, a term in common usage in urban planning to “indicate yearning”⁵, is expressive of the routes we want to take as an alternative or at least in addition to the established footpaths that were planned for us. They are not necessarily the most direct routes or the ‘paths of least resistance’:

(T)hey are “never perfectly straight. Instead, like a river, they meander this way and that, as if to prove that desire itself isn’t linear and (literally, in this case) straightforward”⁶.

Our bricks and mortar cultural venues were in most cases developed to capture the desire lines of a different age; an age where the public hunger was for the comfort and conviviality of the live and visceral, the authentic and tangible. This hunger persists, but the means of delivery, the technology, and the level at which demand is satisfied, have all changed.

Here comes a simplistic view of the historical narrative:

The Age of the Crowd

In the 1920s and ‘30s, just as we gathered en masse at seaside resorts, football terraces, Lyons teahouses and for religious worship; we congregated in cinemas and theatres, seeking ways to connect our communities to an outside world, as well as to disconnect from our daily experiences through an embrace with fantasy and alternative reality.

⁴ www.wikipedia.org – the on-line user-generated encyclopaedia; itself an intersection of the desire lines of knowledge contributors internationally.

⁵ Patricia Leigh Brown, “Whose Sidewalk Is It, Anyway?,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2003.

⁶ Paul McFreedie, 2009 – Word Spy: The Word Lover’s Guide to New Words.

The social here was interdependent with the technical and physiological. For example, cinema preceded television, so moving image content was unavailable at home; analogue provision rendered image content immobile other than through manual transit, and directed for rather than with an audience; and these venues were often better heated, cosier, and enabling of a disenthraling anonymity unavailable in domestic environments. Also, and a classic paradox of 'the crowd', cultural venues of this age were supercharged with a participatory spirit, suffused with chatter, banter and retort; although this was necessarily responsive to rather than shaping of the culture on offer.

The Age of the Clone

Cut to the 1980s and early '90s, and we reach a period of disciplined cultural provision based upon decades of practiced, formalised cultural norms. The distance between audience and performer is deeply delineated; the boundaries between art forms are respected and largely adhered to; notions of quality have broad consensus; and culture houses have in many cases taken on a generic ambiance, with the multiplexes mopping up the picture houses, and commercial operators releasing local authorities of the burden of theatre provision. The desire lines over this period were shaped by a public coughing and wheezing toward a cultural impasse, with built cultural infrastructure required to replicate the cheerless banality of the retail park.

Of course, there was also a supply-side reason for this parched and dreary cultural landscape: our cultural institutions were largely skint. Pre-lottery, only the cinema multiplexes and major institutions were able to consort with this culture, rubbing shoulders with the garden and DIY centres while the rest of the cultural infrastructure landscape was left fallow and fallow, earnestly seeking new ways to connect with the desire lines of a public largely happy to stick to the main paths. With governments over that period following their own desire lines of low taxes, low public expenditure, and an ideological distaste for cultural innovation, and our cultural infrastructure was not for turning.

The Age of the Independent

Cut to this Century and the renovation is in full swing. This can be linked-back to the 1980s and early 1990s, where, as a response to the etiolation of our mainstream

cultural infrastructure, a number of small, independently-spirited cultural organisations and institutions began to establish a foothold.

They were born out of funding adversity and lustreless cultural provision, and positioned to convene the desire lines of critical consumers, creatives and technologists⁷. For example, independent theatre blossomed amidst the brownfield of late Thatcherism, and it was here that cinema societies rallied around emergent art house cinemas, and small media centres grew as pioneer communities offering alternative post-industrial realities. Most footfall passed by these nascent spaces, but slowly they gathered together a larger public, appealing through their granularity in the face of vapidty; intimacy in contrast to the innominate; and independence as an alternative to the corporate. They also offered a freshness of content, with a curatorial vision to experiment, reveal the otherwise unavailable, and respond to trust the demands of their audiences.

Then *the desire lines began to change*. These small, keenly creative organisations undertook a role (which also means they were designated a role by their expanding public) to aggregate and commission content from across the world that, through its staging in idiosyncratic spaces which lent themselves to credibility and style, became attractive to the opinion-forming classes of our major cities: the film buffs, artists, writers, independent thinkers, and micro creative enterprises - what Pierre Bourdieu might call 'cultural intermediaries'.

At the same time, cultural infrastructure across the range was boosted in capacity and profile through investment from the national lottery, and supported through a reinvigorated policy approach to art and culture spearheaded by the New Labour Government's policy splash with the Creative Industries and the opening-up of cultural infrastructure through free entry to many institutions. Add to this the establishment of NDPBs and other organisations with a sector development remit (such as the UK Film Council and then Regional Screen Agencies; or Museums, Libraries and Archives Council) and the renaissance of culture and creativity as mainstream policy concerns at a regional level (such as through sector-based policies

⁷ Of course, the 1990s wasn't the first 'wave' of independent arts and cultural centres across the UK – for example, the first Regional Film Theatre was established in Nottingham in 1967, followed by Tyneside Film Theatre in 1968. However, the 1980s was a period of intense organisation creation – for example, Watershed in Bristol and Cornerhouse in Manchester both opened in the 1980s, and Liverpool's FACT Centre, although it opened in 2003, had been active as a commissioning and exhibition agency since 1988.

by Regional Development Agencies); and the desire lines of the policy machine started to divert toward cultural institutions of all sizes and types, albeit often for very different instrumental purposes.

This process is continuing, with the role of cultural infrastructure being scrutinised for its public value benefits and potential like never before. Indeed, the very role of public investment in the arts is being scrutinised for its value and impact. This is not just a response to recession, with public borrowing at a high and the prioritisation of public resources more politicised than in recent years. It is also a response to a wider set of debates underway that traverse the public value of the arts, the extent to which arts and culture can be recognised as public goods, and thus the contestation of the extent, focus and required/desired outcomes of what some continue to term 'subsidy'. Here arts funding (or what others term 'investment'), is couched relative to a notional arts market, with challenges in balancing responses to popular demand against nurturing new types of demand through experimental, boundary-crossing work.

The Age of the Network

Cut to 2007. Tasked with developing an evidence base for the Infrastructure Working Group of the Government's review of cultural and creative policy – the UK Creative Economy Programme; we set about exploring how different cultural institutions and organisations were responding to shifts in demand for culture, or – more bluntly – shifts in the behaviour of demand. This majored on the impact of digitalisation on how we produce, consume (with production and consumption increasingly squashed into the same process), distribute and thus provide culture. Spinning out from this, we focused on how the new centres of cultural practice (production and consumption) were at yesterday's margins: they are more collaborative, cross-art-form, and embedded in and curated across social networks that are global in their reach yet often intensely local in their deconstruction and performance.

This places different pressures on and requirements for cultural infrastructure. It also introduces an expansive new landscape in which they can operate, with the potential for them to be positioned as the facilitators, brokers and enablers of cultural experimentation, cross-art-form and pan-sectoral collaboration, and thus at the intersection of desire lines across a networked 'knowledge economy'.

Indeed, wrestle with terms and concepts splattered across global knowledge communities – convergence, disruptive innovation, gift economy, open source, open innovation, user-generated, cloud sourcing, long tail theory, mass innovation, ‘we think’; then consider the processes of absolute technological, social and cultural change that they try to describe; and you get an idea of the maelstrom in which our cultural infrastructure was and is struggling to operate. You also get an impression of the opportunity landscape in which they now inhabit.

Throw into the mix an appreciation of the socially aware consumer, trading speed for slowness - in food, fashion and community, while trading slowness for speed in the ways it expresses choice, shops, performs; the proliferation of multiple interpenetrating digitally enabled social networks that subvert notions of friendship and build all-encompassing professional architectures; and new practices of sharing, bricolage and mash-up that decentralise production and disassociate notions of ownership; and the desire lines of contemporary culture appear as striations that are at once parallel, diverting and intersecting.

Indeed, the desire lines of contemporary culture appear, concomitantly, flattened into the turf by the dizzying depthlessness of digitisation; and at times utterly atomised (such as through the often solitary pursuit of blogging). Yet they can also be as sharp and crunchy as ever before, as we gather round and heavily invest in multiple communities of interest - whether this be the brand social networking and performed (user-generated) community spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Myspace and a multiplicity of idiosyncratic bolt-holes for connected expression; or through the revival of the ‘live music experience’ as an embrace with the raw, sweaty, unbridled spectacle of the crowd.

These are the trajectories of the desire lines. Thus to retain an influential role in cultural and economic life, our research for the UK Government made it pretty clear that cultural infrastructure needs to find a way of clumping the desire lines together, albeit fleetingly, to become those spikes in a digital world, or what Geoffrey Crossick calls “those spaces where the interactions take place”. It became plainly obvious that culture houses which obsess about the role of their bricks and mortar (their physical footprint), need to develop digital footprints that stretch instantly across multiple

spatialities as a means of effectively connecting with the a public that is becoming more complexly collaborative and progressively critical.

However, at the same time, they needed to hold on to their intimacy, the tactile qualities of their offer which were so informed by the organisational memories of their buildings and previous programmes. And hence the language developed: if the desire lines are not to pass by, cultural infrastructure needs to be far more interdisciplinary, multi-platform, flexible, proactive and responsive, user-generated, open and porous. Lace this with a dutiful nod to their historic core qualities and values – those factors that defined success for a previous age – and an ‘ideal type’ model for cultural infrastructure began to emerge.

Yet cultural institutions cannot simply dig new digital foundations and slide in the type of organisational reform and re-visioning required without substantial collateral damage. There is no simple digital switch-on for a cultural sector bound-up in the sunk investments of buildings, boundaries and basic instincts. The inertia of organisational memory counts for a lot in the cultural sector, not least for institutions that pride themselves in ‘knowing their audience’ and having an according brand integrity. The inertia of underdeveloped leadership, weak knowledge exchange, and reform recalcitrance counts for even more, especially because in a ‘network age’, knowing your audience should mean continual re-invention and innovation. Thus in many cases, we found that cultural infrastructure is in most cases not equipped with the capacity, craft or even commitment to embrace the shifting desire lines of a public hell-bent on demanding new cartographies of cultural experience and opportunity.

The Age of Instrumentalism

Of course, cultural infrastructure is not only influenced by shifts in the desire lines of demand; it is burdened with the desire lines of supply. In addition to a relationship with their public and the self-allocated boundaries of institutional role and remit, which together continue to ask new questions of the role of cultural infrastructure, the last few years has seen a shift in the behaviour and expectations of ‘supply’ – i.e. of those policy-makers and investors. Indeed, our research for the UK Government and subsequent work for different public sector bodies, focuses on how cultural infrastructure can be fitter-for-purpose in delivering across different strategic

agendas. Thus before reading the following, please accept this as an acceptance of guilt for our contribution to the age of instrumentalism that pictures cultural infrastructure as a resource from which maximum value must be extracted.

Investment decisions across the cultural sector are saturated by multiple strains of public value and gratified by even more grains of declared and to an extent evidenced public value worth. Arts Council England, as a leading funder and development partner, has sought to refine and articulate notions of public value⁸. Key here was its 'Arts Debate', a conversation with the country to identify what people value as a basis to hone the metrics for public value. As part of this process, it developed a more nuanced approach to understanding and measuring audience and participation through the Taking Part Programme. This in turn led to the Arts Council's Plan for 2008-11 - Great Art for Everyone - which presents four priorities to:

"(M)ake sure children and young people grow up with a strong sense of the possibilities the arts give them....use digital technology to connect with audiences in new and exciting ways...improve the reach and effectiveness of visual arts provision...(and embrace the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games) to celebrate imagination and creativity, inspiring individuals and communities to take part in the arts, and raising the aspirations of young people for years to come".

At the same time, the DCMS commissioned the McMaster Review on Supporting Excellence in the Arts, which placed a premium on the arts' ability to connect with audiences and argues that their primary aim is in delivering excellence which *"occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual"*. Here, McMaster coupled excellence with a set of other attributes essential to the delivery of culture of the highest standard. These include innovation and risk, diversity, internationalism, governance, professional development and public subsidy.

Also on the increasingly cluttered policy table was the Government's Creative Economy Programme and subsequent Creative Britain report, which emphasised the role of culture as a driver of a competitive creative economy. It positioned culture as an entitlement for personal and ultimately economic development; and thus culture

⁸ Indeed, it is currently undertaking a 'Public Value Review'.

as having a critical role in the development of creative individuals, improving education and in ensuring the ongoing strength of the creative industries. It also placed emphasis on the role of public investment in securing a fit for purpose cultural offer:

“The bedrock on which the strategy is built is the Government’s fundamental belief in the role of public funding to simulate creativity”.

Add to this strategic and organisational reviews across each of the NDPBs, placing sector-specific emphasises and thus different notions of value on the role of cultural infrastructure; a mix of RDAs and local authorities that recognise the role of culture for creative industries growth, inward investment, and civic boosterism; a set of sector skills and research councils that see cultural infrastructure as a resource base for building aspiration and decreasing worklessness; and the responsibility being placed on cultural infrastructure increases further, as does the opportunity to raise investment from different parts of the public sector.

A further agenda has been the increased attention across the public sector of the role of culture and creativity in knowledge development and nurturing innovation. David Throsby, speaking at a NESTA event in January 2008, calls for:

“(A) broadening of the concept of innovation from one which is concerned only with science and technology onto a more wide-reaching appreciation of the role of creativity in the economy”.

Thus the broad sweep of the instrumental burden and opportunity facing our cultural sector *inescapably invades the ways cultural institutions are configured, invested-in, managed and run.*

The Age of Openness and Porosity

So we face a situation where the desire lines of demand and supply require the complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure: its physical and digital architecture; its management and organisational profile; and the ways it opens up to live, work and play with its collaborators, the public. It must be at once the provider of excellence, a broker of knowledge, an enabler of innovation; as well as a key tool

for such loose terms and flabby concepts as 'learning and skills', 'place-shaping', and 'regeneration'.

To retain relevance to the public, cultural venues need to find new ways of engaging this 'public' as participants and collaborators. This means co-commissioning and co-curating, connecting the knowledge, content and tastes of different communities through the different spaces of the institution – the physical and the digital.

To retain relevance to the public funders, cultural venues need to find ways of articulating and codifying the outcomes of their creative exchange with the public – whether this be their contribution to artistic excellence or role in catalysing and connecting the innovation ecosystem. They also, if they are to attract meaningful investment from across the public sector, need to find ways of combining their artistic and creative endeavour to have a wider impact that is better aligned to agendas in innovation, knowledge exchange and the wider creative economy.

Some cultural organisations are developing a role that brings together both sets of desire lines; those of the public and those of the public funders. Indeed, these desire lines should converge anyway if the public sector is doing its job in recognising shifts in need and demand. After all, how else would it arrive at notions of 'public value'?

On our travels and guided by the social networks that energise and refresh the cultural sector, we began to recognise that some cultural institutions were not the followers of demand or the just-in-time deliverers of public value: they were the enablers of new types of demand, the brokers of collaboration, the curators of public value that could be abstracted to satisfy even the most one-dimensional instrumental reading. What we found was that, despite and in many cases because of the 'inertia' of bricks and mortar, given breadth through the hyperdrive of digitalisation, and integrity and intelligence through a commitment to openness, our cultural infrastructure is undergoing and in some cases embracing a wholesale renovation far more profound than its Changing Rooms refit of the previous decade.

We see this through the high profile digital renovation of the National Theatre, with its on-line Discover space that provides virtual tours of the building, introduces the

fine grain of the production and rehearsal spaces, and thus de-mystifies the institution to a wider audience:

“There is no limit to what we can show on-line...the number of doors we can open, the number of alls we can bring down” (Nick Hytner, Director of the National Theatre, *Intelligent Life*, 2009).

This opening-up is also spreading across the physical footprint of the National:

“We can be porous in all sorts of ways...in ticket prices, Sunday openings, Watch This Space...it's about adapting and adjusting” (Nick Starr, Executive Director of the National Theatre, *Intelligent Life*, 2009).

For other cultural organisations and venues, we see The Royal Opera House purchasing Music and Dance DVD production company, Opus Arte, as one response for the need to move the relationships with audiences on to a different level. The ICA's link up with Sony Playstation portable and the production of ten minute arts bulletin for its predominantly youthful users is another.

But we see this most pervasively and compellingly with smaller cultural institutions that have adopted the title 'cross-art-form venues' or CAVs⁹. In different and developing ways, venues such as Cornerhouse in Manchester, Watershed in Bristol, Dundee Contemporary Arts and Liverpool FACT, are committed to offering those porous, connected and flexible spaces which are vital to a rich creative ecology and dynamic creative economy. They operate as critical brokers, commissioners and connectors, generously linking activity, both physically and digitally, in a way that gives them a role akin to that of a curator: making experiences, using facilities, mixing collaborators and content.

The venues go some of the way to ensuring that in each of their host cities there is an organisation which consistently seeks to build new and strong relationships across the cultural sector and into a wider environment, to cross boundaries, introduce new

⁹ For example, a project is underway (funded by the UK Film Council and Arts Council England) to establish a network programme for six leading CAVs, with further options to connect the network across the wider cultural sector so that the CAVs have a progressive role in knowledge exchange and cultural leadership.

ideas, and ensure that those with the ideas have the platform upon which they can be expressed.

In our ongoing role to support the successful and sustainable transition of CAVs – from arts centres and cinemas to critical enablers of creativity and innovation – we explore how the venues need to operate for, by and with their public. Historically, the venues operated on the principle of **‘Infrastructure for you’**. This is a way of defining the traditional role of the venues as providers of experience for an audience, through cinema, art or their other facilities and programmes such as through the ambiance of their bars or their incredible range of festivals. It also describes the way the venues, utilising digital technology and new work practices, must work harder to become places that blur traditional boundaries between consumption and production, broadening their base and reach with an emphasis on connectivity and engagement. But ‘Infrastructure for you’ covers just a few of the public’s desire lines.

‘Infrastructure by You’ refers to the ways the venues can and indeed must build on this role and embrace new types of relationships with audiences, businesses, and a wider set of stakeholders: the ‘we think’ approach to cultural infrastructure. This is to embrace the intersection of new and emergent desire lines that are growing and diversifying with the internet and its recombinant transformation. This is where audiences play a more proactive and influential role in programming, in defining meaning, and in co-designing the infrastructure of the physical and digital footprints offered by the venues. This is where ‘openness’ is adopted as a culture and ethic, with the venues actively encouraging the public to influence the digital and physical footprints, whether this be through new content or shaping the overall experience landscape. This is also where digital technology becomes a key enabling force, a means of connecting the desire lines and aligning cultural organisations to the swing and sway of different taste communities.

An example here is the forthcoming ‘Abandon Normal Devices’ (AND) Festival in the North West¹⁰. Driven by CAVs Cornerhouse and FACT, and embracing multiple partnerships (such as with digital arts organisation Folly); the AND Festival converges different art forms by clasping, trialling, joyfully experimenting with emergent technologies as enablers for what are termed ‘trailblazing platforms’ for creative

¹⁰ www.andfestival.org.uk

expression. Persistent here is the active role of the 'audience', centrality of the creative practitioner, and unabashed enthusiasm for the visual arts as having equivalence with other art forms as a provider of digital opportunities. *'Rules and Regs'*, a part of the AND programme led by the Bluecoat in Liverpool, animates these dynamics. It targets artists working *"in, between and at the edges of their disciplines"*. They are encouraged to come forward with new types of content and practice that have performative qualities. These will be showcased through the festival – which means on-line, at the Bluecoat, and staged through the interaction of the audience.

Thus AND Festival utilises the facilities and brand values of the CAVs, provides different spaces for the projection of new deliberately boundary-crossing content, and pushes the role of practitioners and audiences to play an active role in review and engagement with the creative processes at play. Cute here is the way the audience or 'public' is re-imagined as an active provider of content and review, and as the constituency of significance when it comes to shaping the role, use and adaptation of emergent technologies.

Indeed, the CAVs and their partners have recognised the need to open-up to the ongoing shift in the way that audiences consume media: the shift from passive consumption to active participation and control. What this shift means in practice is summed up well by Anthony Lilley in Ofcom's 2007 discussion paper on Public Service Content:

"(w)hilst traditional media technologies primarily concentrate on the distribution of ideas, the interactive media technologies are concerned with handing active control and the ability to communicate to citizens".

Dick Penny, Managing Director of Bristol Watershed, sums up their approach to opening-up the institution for it to become predicated absolutely on dialogue, healthy contestation, and openness:

"We are most interested in collisions of experience and cultures, to create something new. A laboratory for experiment, risk and disruption. We are a router and amplifier

of cultural ideas, creativity and technology” (Dick Penny, Managing Director, Watershed).

We see this through e-Shed, Watershed’s digital space for young people, which encourages ideas-generation for cinema and on-line programming; and d-Shed, Watershed’s on-line globally-facing digital community where the organisation commissions new work and encourages the public to upstream content that reflects the quality and creativity of Bristol and the South West. We see this through Cornerhouse, with its commitment to public-sector publishing, and its Artradio project is a groundbreaking example of using convergent technology. Liverpool’s FACT is continually pioneering new ways of reaching audiences, as is seen in the Video Jukebox work produced in collaboration with Sandpit/Lancaster University. Broadway in Nottingham houses a range of projects that explore new boundaries in digital media, brokered by the Arts Council England, East Midlands -supported Digital Broadway Programme. Tyneside Cinema commissioned and published its first open source films, the Light Surgeon’s Chimera Project, as far back as 2001, and had them broadcast on regional BBC in 2003. Its recent projects – driven by the Pixel Palace – have embraced this approach.

For the CAV venues, leading the way for the wider cultural infrastructure landscape, we are seeing genuine commitment to change based on an acceptance that the desire lines have moved on and will soon be out of reach. They are adopting a reinvigorated and redefined producer role; operating as leaders in converged media experiences; and providing connecting space(s) for constituencies as varied as individual artists, technologists, intellectuals, and simple old-fashioned consumers.

They do this through a commitment to openness – in programming, partnership, and access (to the buildings and digital spaces); and they are allowed to do this because they have built up a role over their time as providers of culture to be trusted as the honest brokers of quality that challenge as well as delight. They have become the spaces where the interactions (are allowed to) take place:

“What is needed is not new or adapted instruments for knowledge transfer, but something quite different: the spaces in which interactions can take place. Why spaces? Because what is needed is not a system to transfer from one party to

another some knowledge that has already been produced, to transfer something that has already happened. But, rather, the need is for a system to create spaces in which something can happen. In the Creative Industries, much of the time, once it has happened it has already been transferred"

(Professor Geoffrey Crossick, Warden, Goldsmiths, University College of London: A Lecture to the Royal Society of Arts).

They have though retained their role as the spaces where the best in new work from the heartlands of recognised 'arts sectors' takes place. For example, while FACT majors on groundbreaking work in digital media and interdisciplinary work, its feet remain firmly on the ground through its role as a lead partner in 'Visual Arts in Liverpool' (VAIL), a collaboration of large and small visual arts organizations that works to jointly promote, support and connect with the aim of establishing Liverpool as the leading centre for visual arts outside London. Likewise, Cornerhouse remains absolutely committed to quality programming of visual arts content, and this is reinforced by its gallery and publishing role, as well as by its strengthening education programme.

To digitise and open-up does not mean to indulge in the extremities of interdisciplinary experimentation. Rather, it means to intersect quality, recognisable programming for which there are established desire lines and taste communities, with emergent ways of seeing and doing for which new desire lines are being scratched and etched. It also means to find new ways of connecting with audiences – widening the reach of the content 'on display', and making malleable its meaning by enabling those outside of the usual audience segments to contribute.

This is why Cornerhouse merged its programming and education departments, interweaving the commissioning and projection of content with direct and enabling interaction with multiple audiences. Thus the current programme – *POI – Moving, Mapping Memory* – presents multimedia works by eight visual artists to *"investigate our shifting existences, both physical and digital, and the ways we perceive, shape and interweave the environments we inhabit"*; underpinned by a visual arts course that examines how artists explore our surroundings using historical and technological perspectives; and surrounded by a broader education programme that connects with schools and colleges.

This overall package sits within *Edition* – Cornerhouse's new project that operates as a “testing-ground for innovation with a strong emphasis on supporting new risk-taking ideas and cross-disciplinary collaborations, providing a platform for contemporary practitioners”. To simply programme high quality work would be an insubstantial offer in an age when the artists and audiences alike require more from their cultural infrastructure: they demand to be provoked and tested; impressed and pressed; talked to and talked with.

The desire lines converge where the noise is most intense, and where the noise comes from multiple directions. Yet, the desire lines of the public are accelerating in multiple different directions, with convergence fleeting. This is because, for the most part, our cultural infrastructure has failed to keep pace, very rarely sets the pace, and has been ill-equipped to build on those moments of success, those instances of collaboration and quality that have been so critical in defining infrastructure such as the CAVs as ‘leading edge’. Indeed, the public sector in turn redefines what it values, putting additional pressure on venues to productise and reform, it is clear that the CAV venues lack the capacity, reach and deftness to consistently create spaces that enable the desire lines to converge. This doesn't bode well for the rest of the cultural sector.

The Culture of 'But'...

We face a situation where our cultural venues are able to talk digital but have narrower band width than we have at home. How then are they supposed to develop effective partnerships with universities and corporations and upstream content generated by their digitally enabled audiences?

We can all embrace the principle of interdisciplinary work, where the electronic arts and the plastic arts are positively transformed through their hybridity. How then can we explore this opportunity if the funders and so many cultural managers so relish falsehoods such as ‘authenticity’ and continue to recognise venues for their disciplined adherence to art form-specific work? Or to flip this dilemma around, how can we support cultural venues to retain a commitment to high quality work in ‘pre-digital’ sectors such as the visual arts and cinema, while at the same time enabling them to go digital at every turn?

We can all celebrate the vision, positive risk and openness of cultural managers that embrace the shifting desire lines. But what of the other cultural managers and their colleagues, many of whom struggle to build the competencies or appetite for change? Indeed, what of the deficit of skills in cultural management, low levels of digital literacy, and consequent labour market inertia in our cultural sector? We see a real talent shortage in even our most progressive cultural venues; with low pay and weak career path opportunities obvious push factors; and jobs in industry providing the pull.

And no one can contest the merits of openness, but how to balance this with a clear curatorial vision, a commitment to excellence, and the retention of existing brand values? To open the doors a little wider is to encourage vulnerability as much as innovation and opportunity.

Thus there is no space for celebrating achievement here: the desire lines are moving far faster than our cultural venues are able. Without extensive organisational reform, the abandonment or at least realignment of comfort zones, and a willingness by funders to re-appraise the indicators of public value and the silos in which they are stored, then the renovation we require of our cultural infrastructure will be licked together as clumsily, half-heartedly and shoddily as before.