



CULTURE AND THE GREEN AGENDA

Can cultural organisations provide the skills needed to shift public behaviour and deliver meaningful environmental change?

A paper following Culture Northwest's November think tank entitled 'Has Culture Gone Green?'

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Green is the new black

Climate change. Carbon emissions. Carbon off-setting. The 'to fly or not to fly' debate: the environment is in the news, on the lips of global politicians, taught in schools and in our homes. In Whitehall, Government policy is increasingly reflecting growing public concern over the environment, with the 2006 pre-budget speech attempting to balance economic growth with environmental care.

But mixed reactions to Gordon Brown's proposals indicated just how difficult this balancing act was going to be. While Labour trumpeted plans for every new house to be built as a 'zero carbon home', the media reported scepticism. The scheme was damned as 'wildly unrealistic' by environmentalists who also argued that other proposals - to raise taxes on petrol and air passenger duty - didn't go far enough.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Labour's pre-budget plans, what's striking is the fact that the environment is now no longer considered as separate to, say, economic development. As Sara Parkin said at Culture Northwest's think tank in November 2006, 'Change is on the way. Gordon Brown gets it. The goal of the economy used to be about creating new jobs and economic growth, but now it's also about social justice and environmental care – and we won't get success in one without success in another.'

This new holistic approach is key. Despite once claiming that there is 'no such thing as society', even the Conservative Party have got in on the act. Financial gain is being put aside in favour of what Parkin calls 'the economics of happiness, the notion that the purpose of life is the pursuit of happiness and *not* financial gain.' The success of the nation, according to the Conservative's David Cameron, shouldn't be considered in economic terms alone. GDP should be balanced by a 'happiness index'. 'When politicians are looking at issues they should be saying to themselves "how are we going to try and make sure that we don't just make people better off but make people happier, make communities more stable, make society more cohesive"', argued Cameron.

This isn't as far-fetched as it sounds. The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan measures output based not on GDP but on 'gross national happiness'. Here, street advertising is banned as it makes people yearn for what they don't have and can ill afford. Back in Britain, Government-backed research supports the Bhutan approach by revealing that advertising does indeed make people unhappy. Meanwhile, the BBC reports that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is working to produce its own happiness index and has adopted a policy of pursuing what it calls 'one planet living' – the notion that we must assess the entire planet's production and waste outputs, not just our own¹.

But for those who viewed Cameron's calls for a 'happiness index' as a little, well, 'fluffy', the 2006 Stern Review provided a more substantiated view of the consequences of relentless economic growth minus environmental and social concern. The Stern Review set out the (financial) cost of not taking action now to prevent further environmental damage, and made it clear that climate change won't simply effect the 'other'; climate change will happen on our doorsteps, with dire and far-reaching economic results.

Sustainability is thus no longer an issue that's being treated as separate from education, the economy, business, travel, leisure and our communities. Getting the balance right is vital to

¹ According to this thinking, we are so out of touch with our levels of consumption that if everyone in the world consumed at the rate we do in the UK, we'd need the resources of three planets.

secure a stable future. 'We are now seeing the impact of our behaviour on the environment, the economy and public health,' says Parkin. 'And that's forcing us to change.'

But are we changing fast enough? There may be an unprecedented level of awareness around environmental issues but it hasn't yet translated into the kind of action the Stern Review advocated. A massive cultural shift is still required – in every community, in every school, every workplace and every home. It's no longer enough to talk the talk. So, is this where the cultural sector can step in – does it have the tools and skill sets to help Britain change the way we work, rest and play?

Winning hearts and minds isn't easy

A recent DEFRA report argued that 'far from being the outcome of rational deliberation, behavioural choices are often subconscious and inconsistencies between beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are common.'² Or, to put it another way, getting people to change isn't easy. It means adopting a multitude of different approaches and applying them at different times, in highly targeted ways. Tackling the consumer in one way when they're eating breakfast; in another when they're at work; yet another when they pop into the supermarket on the way home; and then another when they've put their feet up in front of the TV.

This is a huge challenge to policymakers used to working within governmental boundaries. It's joining the dots on a massive scale. And it's not enough to perform the task once. The same DEFRA report highlighted that effecting social change required constant communication or what it called 'a model of ceaseless innovation.' And at the same time, the message has to be consistent. Conflicting messages – about climate change itself, or what practical measures we can take to resolve it – mean that the public are confused. 'We need to use all the tools at our disposal if we're to get people to alter their behaviour,' says Parkin. 'If we do that, we'll create a kind of environmental literacy that will make second nature sense to Britain's communities and give them the confidence to both advocate and act on change.'

But is consistent, targeted communication enough? Some would argue that the British public is all too aware of what it should be doing, and yet very few are actually making changes. How many of us, for example, are willing to give up holidays abroad? A recent research study revealed that 'information and awareness are not enough – people seem to have quite a lot of information and awareness already.'³ Four out of the five adults questioned knew *what* they needed to do to be environmentally responsible. They just didn't do it.

Why is that? Well, one reason could be cultural. For those raised during the austerity of post-war Britain, for example, the concept of re-use, repair, doing-it-yourself and saving up before spending up is common sense. For those raised during Britain's headlong rush into consumer culture, these are alien ideas. Why repair when you can buy a newer, shinier one? Why hang on to your mobile phone when there's an upgrade in the offing? For this generation, new is not only desirable, it's a status symbol. The latest, newest, *best* is part of who you are. 'Today's young people,' says environmental consultant Brook Lyndhurst, 'are completely steeped in the contemporary capitalist culture of consumerism.'

What we need is some strong leadership...

'There's been a failure in leadership and there's a crisis in implementation,' says Parkin. 'The findings from the first earth summit in 1972 were the same as in 2002.' It seems that

² *Behaviour Change: A Series of Practical Guides for Policy Makers & Practitioners, No 4., Triggering Widespread Adoption of Sustainable Behaviour*, DEFRA, Summer 2006.

³ *Bad Habits and Hard Choices: In Search of Sustainable Lifestyles*, Brook Lyndhurst.

policymakers are as aware as the public of what needs to be done and yet leadership remains patchy. It's not enough to load responsibility onto the consumer. 'The public realise that they have some bad habits; and they know that someone, somewhere, has to make some hard choices,' agrees Brook Lyndhurst. 'They seem to be looking to government to act, and to make it much more straightforward for them – us – to make environment-friendly, sustainable choices.'⁴

Much has been made of 'consumer power' but in reality real change needs to come from communities *and* government. Strong leadership can tackle the fact that, for many, there is no alternative but to adopt unsustainable lifestyles. The emergence of eco-products on supermarket shelves has given consumers the choice of buying a 'green' washing powder, for example, but at many levels there just isn't such a choice. This is where policymakers are essential. They can tackle the supply chain further up and take more drastic steps (such as public transport investment or introducing 'eco taxes') that are out of the consumer's reach.

...and some new ways to measure worth.

Britain's models of development, education, business and economic growth are 150 years old. They arose during the Industrial Revolution and, so far, we haven't seen the need to re-assess them. It's these models that dominate our every decision, set our priorities and have allowed us, according to Parkin, to 'unknowingly take wrong decisions and choices.'

But it might be time to turn this value system on its head. Instead of viewing the environment, education or culture as necessary evils, for example, how about we make them integral to the way we lead our lives and conduct our business? 'We see culture as a cost rather than as an investment and therefore we always have to justify its importance rather than focusing on the evidence,' says Parkin. 'We do not invest in culture because we're thinking "where is the pay off going to be?"' and the problems we're now having with the environment is as a result of that same way of thinking.'

And perhaps it's time to re-think the way we treat nature. Everything we produce comes from nature, and yet it is not an infinite resource. A recent report by Green Engage Communications pointed out that we should treat the environment 'like a life support system in a hospital; the whole system is complex but fragile and vulnerable. It could break down if we don't keep the machinery in good running order. In other words, if we don't start looking after the environment, it might stop providing what we need.'⁵

To do this, we need to develop a 'triple bottom line' where environmental and social outputs are as valid (and valuable) as economic ones.⁶ 'We need to redefine what we value and what equals success – and therefore the cultural sector has a huge role to play. We need to start creating value-added goods and services that have benefit to society,' says Parkin. The Stern Review was one step in this direction: for perhaps the first time it translated the cost to Britain of not making change. 'This is the same argument used to get Britain into the Common Market,' agrees Parkin, 'what the cost would be for us if we *didn't* do something.'

So where does the Culture Sector fit in?

> Effective communication

Changing behaviour requires constant, consistent messages. It relies on highly targeted communication. It needs to tackle the consumer at every stage of their daily life. And cultural organisations are perhaps in a unique position to help achieve precisely this. How is that? Well, artists and cultural organisations are used to communicating to diverse audiences – it's a core

⁴ *Bad Habits and Hard Choices: In Search of Sustainable Lifestyles*, Brook Lyndhurst.

⁵ *Painting the town green – Green Engage Communications/Transport 2000*

⁶ Such as *State of the Northwest – Vital Signs*, a comprehensive picture of the region's performance produced by the Regional Performance Indicators Group and available at www.culturenorthwest.co.uk

part of their business. They have ready-made audience development strategies; they've developed two-way communication between public and organisation, and they have the skills and the physical spaces to communicate with. These so-called 'soft skills' are essential in creating cultural change, and in making the environmental message an integral part of life.

Cultural organisations can also help engender a sense of empathy with other communities, nationalities and countries – including those in the 'firing line' of climate change. 'We suffer from a kind of cultural autism,' argues Parkin. 'We are not very good at socialising between different cultures. We are absorbed in our own way of doing things, despite what other people are doing. We don't have any cultural curiosity beyond our own culture.'

> Networks work

Social networks are becoming increasingly important. As traditional media crumbles – newspaper sales, for example, continue to decline – social technologies and personal networks will become the most effective way of reinforcing the environmental message. We need only to look at the recent US mid-term elections for evidence. Here, the Democrats got to grips with new media. They filmed Republican gaffes and posted them on YouTube. They used 'Google-bombing' to ensure that searches about Republican rivals turned up negative press reports. But most interesting of all, the Democrats accessed 'living room networks', using community groups and local advocates to spread their message via word of mouth. The technique was so successful that the Labour Party is reported to be considering using it.

For the environmental sector it's an important lesson. 'People are willing to change, but they need to see others acting around them to feel their efforts are worthwhile,' said a recent report by the National Consumer Council.⁷ Many cultural organisations, particularly community-based ones, already work with networks such as community groups, religious organisations, schools and parents' groups. They can also share their understanding of the motivations of groups from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds – because what encourages one person to go green may not work for another.

> Show, not tell

But perhaps most important of all, cultural organisations, particularly those working within the visual and performing arts, can *show* rather than *tell*. They are in a position to demonstrate to both the public and policymakers the values and ease of sustainable living. They are in a position to help 'people to understand a problem in their own way, decide for themselves to do something about it, make a real difference that's noticeable to them, and receive recognition for having done the right thing.'⁸

> Walk first, then run

The time is right, and the opportunities for the cultural sector to support environmental change greater than ever. As a first step, cultural organisations and their funders must make environmental responsibility a priority. Funders and policymakers must also ensure that cultural organisations know their role in creating a sustainable, viable society and are able to make informed, proactive choices. The cultural sector undoubtedly has the skills necessary to generate behavioural change – but, if we're to believe the Stern Review, those skills are needed now. Delay is not an option.

⁷ *I Will If You Will: Towards Sustainable Consumption*, National Consumer Council and Sustainable Development Commission, May 2006.

⁸ *Painting the town green – Green Engage Communications/Transport 2000*

Some recommendations

The challenge is to engage the cultural sector fully in their role and responsibilities in creating environmental change, and to provide them with clear messages and practical steps that make it easy to become involved in new cultural-environmental projects. To this end, funders, policymakers, agencies, key 'influencers' and larger cultural organisations could:

1. Work with cultural organisations across the region to **raise awareness** of their role in creating the kind of behavioural change necessary to bring about environmental change. Circulating this paper could be one step.
2. Provide cultural organisations with **practical first steps** – or a simple checklist – to ensure that they comply with current legislation and thinking on issues such as recycling and energy conservation. Such checklists already exist and can be supplied from companies such as Sustainability Northwest and EMERGE. In addition to this ensure that sustainability is a key criterion for funding applications. In this way sustainability and environmental protection will remain at the top of the agenda.
3. Supply cultural organisations with a list of environmental companies, agencies, training, latest news and report summaries, plus other **sources of information**, to help them become informed and involved in the environmental debate.
4. Pull together **examples of projects** that combine culture and the environment – a new, central resource – that can be accessed by those working across the cultural, public sector and sustainable sectors, eg. touring exhibitions or plays that could be performed in schools or businesses; photographic/visual resources that could be used to inform the public; downloadable staff training packs; examples of best practice and so on.
5. Create a **flagship project** that combines culture and the green agenda and can be used as an inspiring example of just what can be achieved if these two sectors begin to work together. One such project could be the Whitworth Art Gallery's proposal to turn it into a carbon-neutral, sustainable 'gallery in a park' that uses its natural setting to communicate both environmental and artistic values and that fully involves local communities.

Case Study

Creating greener homes within sustainable communities

Housing in Britain faces a challenge. Houses are responsible for a third of the UK's carbon dioxide emissions and, with 60% of Britain's housing stock Victorian or older, it would seem that our creaking, inefficient homes are responsible for some of the UK's worst energy crimes. A housing study in 2005 called for 14% of such homes to be demolished, replaced instead with 220,000 new ones every year.⁹

But we need to be mindful of not falling into the same 'new for old' trap as in previous generations. Pre-1919 homes aren't necessarily 'bad', just as new homes can be inefficient and energy-guzzling. According to English Heritage, we lose 400,000 old homes every year and, quite often, wholesale demolition can be hugely detrimental to communities, quality of life and the environment. In Manchester, we need only look at former new-build developments such as the Cardroom Estate to see that new isn't necessarily better. And, to be fair, the *40% House* report quoted above called only for low carbon homes to be built, alongside the introduction of tougher building regulations.

Homeowners' priorities should also be factored in. For marginalised communities the environment may not be a primary concern. 'We need to work towards legitimising and broadening the appeal of green behaviours by wrapping up the environment with... prosperous, comfortable lives; safe communities; social justice; and physical, mental and spiritual well being,' argued a recent report.¹⁰

Taking a holistic, balanced approach to building and renovating homes is the key to reducing emissions and creating the kinds of sustainable, long-lasting communities Britain needs in the 21st Century. The Chimney Pot Park development in Salford is one example. Instead of demolishing the 385 Victorian terraces that Salford City Council had placed under a Compulsory Purchase Order, developers Urban Splash suggested an innovative renovation – keeping the façade intact but radically altering the interior to create more space and homes more in keeping with modern lifestyles. These hugely desirable homes sold within two and a half hours of going on the market, but - more importantly - reinvigorated the local community.

The New Islington Millennium Community in East Manchester – once one of the UK's poorest and most disadvantaged areas - has been remodelled along more expansive lines. Here, new build sits alongside renovated historic buildings, and care has been taken to restore the canals and ensure they become an integral feature of the new community. A new primary school, integrated transport links (which reduce reliance on cars), a clinic and open spaces are major parts of the scheme, as is developing social housing for returning residents. Care has been taken to involve local communities. Residents chose their architects and worked closely with them throughout development. Manchester Methodist Housing Association even took residents to Amsterdam so that they could see different examples of waterside housing and make more informed choices.

According to Renew's *Egan Wheel*, New Islington has all the ingredients of a sustainable community: it takes into account culture, housing, the built environment, the local economy, the environment, public services, transport and governance. 'In simple terms,' said Tom Russell, Chief Executive of New East Manchester Ltd., 'the approach is a holistic one. The regeneration is not just about refurbishment and the construction of new homes ... but it is also about investing in the people who live in the area and ... achieving significant improvements in the housing, health and education of the local community.'

Knocking down and starting again, it would seem, should be the last possible route we take if we are to create not just low carbon homes but long-term, sustainable and successful communities.

Written by Susie Stubbs on behalf of Culture Northwest 2006

⁹ *40% House*, The Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University Centre for the Environment, March 2005

¹⁰ *Painting the town green – Green Engage Communications/Transport 2000*