

Creating Places Conference, Tate Modern, 8th July 2003
Minister of State for the Arts, Estelle Morris MP

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Thank you very much and thank you for that warm welcome, I'm still very much in learning mode, and am still developing my thinking. I'll talk about where my thoughts are going and what I've learnt so far. At the end of the day I hope to get some feedback from the conference, and see what your ideas are.

This conference is very timely. Both in politics and in society in general we are beginning to value creativity in a way that wasn't the case even a few years ago.

I sense that this is the time for the creative industries. I think that there's a greater awareness in lots of fields about the importance of creativity and innovation. I think there are a lot of people and many sections of community that are not quite sure how to take it forward, but want to do something about it.

Those people who fly the flag for creative industries and for innovation have felt very much over recent years that they've not been valued, and that they've been squeezed out. I feel that their voice is being heard in Government at the moment. Government wants to do something about it, and capitalise on creativity and innovation. We need to develop a language to talk to practitioners and the public about the arts, culture and creativity.

But I sense that what I mean when I talk about creativity and spaces and the title of the conference today, Creating Places, I think of three things: creativity, valuing individuality and the impact of the arts in regeneration.

I think we know now that creativity is more important to economic success and prosperity than it's ever been, but I feel we've squeezed it out.

I think we should not forget that for individuals who want to spend their life as artists or do creative work, perhaps never growing to be a big company or being any more than themselves, have a right to achieve their potential.

They've a right to express themselves in the very same way as anybody who's got skills or aptitude in any other walk of life. And I think that we're doing both those things. In my mind we're actually talking about space for individuals who are artists to practice their profession, to exercise their potential and to achieve their potential. More and more, though, we're talking about the creative economy.

When I was in Education, I saw what was happening in our schools and I saw the finest quality art produced by youngsters. The quality of creativity in schools and universities is better than it ever has been. The standard of work is absolutely outstanding.

We talk about space. When we're designing new schools, when we're designing universities, we make sure that we give people space so they can develop their creative skills.

If you look at the other end of the continuum, we also treasure people who have become successful, people who have created brilliant pieces of art, or for whom their creativity has actually meant that industries can flourish. They are blue chip companies, competing world wide.

But we forget the gap in between, and it seems as though the gap, the area where we've not concentrated on providing facilities for, is after school, after university, before you're a world-wide success.

People who've left training and need to set up their own business find it very hard. For somebody leaving university, or leaving formal training in the arts, the most difficult period is the first 12 months.

One of the reasons why they find the first 12 months so hard is that they have no space to work.

I can't think of any other area of human activity, any other preparation for a job, where we would actually put all the money into educating a child compulsorily between 5-16, put money into further education and higher education, know that they can bring economic benefits to society, and at that very, very point where we're asking them to stand on their own feet, we deny them the space to do the job.

That's why I think this conference, Creating Places, is timely, and that's why I think it is important.

As soon as artists find a space, the minute they are successful, they actually help create the regeneration of an area, and then they get squeezed out. I think this is a serious issue.

In September, when I come back after the break and begin thinking about where policy areas need to develop, this is one of the key areas to look at in the Creative Industries. We need to make sure we capitalise on the talent and the expertise we're developing in universities, further education and higher education and consider how we make sure we don't lose out on that investment.

The second thing I think about is the value of creativity to the economic welfare of the nation. I think there's a need, in individuals and in communities, to actually value individuality in a way we've not for past decades.

One of the features of modern landscapes at the moment is sameness. Every city is the same. Every town is the same. We've got multinationals, we've got international businesses, international shops. Because of corporate identity, every shop that's in the same chain exhibits the same sign - whether it's in Scotland, Wales, Ireland or England.

That's a feature of multinational life. I don't knock it, and I don't knock that sameness, because I think it's actually brought economic prosperity to many areas of the country that would have missed out.

But I think that we have got the balance wrong in recent years, and sometimes in the globalisation of our society we have squeezed out individuality.

And when I was thinking about what I might say today, a truism hit me. The future belongs to creativity and the future belongs to the innovators.

But it's not global companies that innovate. It's individual men and women – young men and women, middle-aged men and women, elderly men and women, who innovate.

What companies do, what multinational companies do, is they take that innovation and make something of it. And I do wonder if we've forgotten that. I do wonder whether, at a time when we've got globalisation and all the benefits that that brings, we've forgotten that actually the root of every successful global company is probably an individual.

Somehow I sense that our language, and our society, has forgotten to cherish the individual, because it worships, rightly in some ways, globalisation.

This conference is about establishing again the importance of making sure that individual men and women have space to develop their creativity, have space to practice their arts, partly for it's own sake, but partly, because ironically, our global world actually needs them to do that.

That's why I think that this conference is so important – it's important for the immediate, but its actually important for the medium and long term as well.

Why doesn't it happen? When you're developing an urban or a town centre, there's many pressures on you, very many financial pressures. At the end of the day, you tend to take the decision that you think is in the best financial interest of the area you're developing.

Too often, the criteria that we use for judging what's in the financial interest of the area squeezes out small spaces and small areas where artists can practice their trade. If the criteria we use for urban development means that we squeeze out spaces for arts to develop, there must be something wrong with those criteria. It can't be right that we squeeze out those spaces.

Artists face many problems – costs of rents, pressures from other companies' wishing to expand, local authorities and others not making provision for studios, and the ability to make enough money to continue to pay for their studios.

I don't know the answer to all those problems, because it's not just about the allocation of space. It's about urban planning and regeneration. It's about finance. It's about politics. And it's about big business.

It's not as though we've have to pit one of those against the other. But we've got it wrong if, when we actually develop an area, there isn't a safe place for people to practice art. There's got to be. If that means that the criteria or the guidelines are wrong, then that's something that we need to look at.

I think the third reason why this is a timely conference, is that there's enough evidence now to show that creativity and arts in regeneration works.

If you look at many of the small towns that have got economic success, a lot of them have been built on the backs of having a strength in the arts and in cultural diversity. I look at my own city, Birmingham, and the Custard Factory, a building that stood by itself in a very, very run-down area, my side of the city. It is now a base for artists to practice their work, and was the first bit of the regeneration in the east of the City.

What's happening as a result is the rest of the area around about it is being regenerated. One of the great levers for bringing money in, and one of the great levers for people planning round that area in Digbeth and the east side of Birmingham, was the fact that the Custard Factory was there, with innovators, with risk-takers, with artists in their midst.

We've got evidence now, that making space for arts and artists isn't an optional extra. It's not something you do with a bit of lousy land or an old derelict building when you're not ready to do anything else with it. It actually is something you do to bring other industry and other economic activity into the area.

We have to shout about that, we have to shout very loud, because what happens just naturally over time? When my bit of east Birmingham is redeveloped, people will forget that the pathfinder, the Custard Factory was there before anything else. It was the one that showed that people would invest in the east side of the city - a building dedicated to small arts and to people who had small businesses and wanted to practice art.

As we go forward and try to find a way through the economics and the planning regulations, the grant giving, people making a profit to plough back into buildings and shared space, and linking universities with space and into new partnerships, we must collect our evidence.

I come from an area Ministerially and an area where I've spent all my life which over-measures - education. It's quite easy to measure childrens' performance in a way that gains national acceptance, but education is often criticised for over-measuring. Maybe because of that, the comparison with the world of the arts and the resistance to measurement is something that has absolutely struck me in the last three weeks.

I knew it was there, but I didn't know the difference between the two was as stark as it is. Heaven forbid anybody should think that I've just said that we ought to measure the arts like we've measured education. [laughter] I've been in politics long enough to know that you have to say what you've not just said as well as repeat what you have just said.

What I did learn in education was that measuring gave you the evidence you needed to argue with people who want evidence for financial investment and all the other changes that you want.

We've got to have a language where we can best describe to others what the arts, cultural activities and the cultural industries are and all the benefits that they bring to communities.

I don't feel that we've got that language, I don't feel it's in pounds, shillings and pence.

As each town, as each city, begins to regenerate itself, there will be lots of people going to the local planners with their indices, with their language, with their measurements, with their pounds shillings and pence, saying 'this is my evidence as to why you ought to allocate some space for me'.

I wonder if one of the things that might come out of today's conference, is the beginning of a language and the beginning of a discussion as to how we create the evidence base to arm us, so when we go to people and argue for space in regeneration, we're not actually saying 'do it because we're nice people' or 'creativity is a nice thing to have in your city' - we're actually saying 'if you don't make space for the creative industries, one thing we can promise you is you will not be a successful town or city in years to come.'

And that is a very, very, very powerful message.

I believe that is true in a way I didn't know it was true six weeks ago. And I can't think of another more powerful message to be able to put to the city planners, or whoever it is that makes decisions.

And that's why Creating Places is a timely conference. That's why now's the time to shout loud and clear, not just be cosy or soft, not some sort of balance to the hardness, the hard-edged-ness of the society in which we live.

Creativity has earned it's right to have a place in the economic life of this country, in a way that it's always had a place in the cultural life of this country and the way that we've always wanted to give it a place in order to let people achieve their talents.

It is a powerful, powerful argument if we can actually get that evidence base together. I think we can do that, between us, with help from the Arts Council, which has been really trying to find innovative ways of doing this. I want to return in September to this issue.

If we can get this right, we will actually do something that, in politics, you always want to do - you always want to make irreversible change. Your biggest worry is you spend your life doing something and the minute someone else comes in, they take it away. Politicians always want to make irreversible change.

Now there are some things you get wrong and you shouldn't be making irreversible change in.

But I feel confident enough to say if what you're discussing today, and what comes out of it, means that in planning our future townscapes and cityscapes, we irreversibly change it so that at the development stage, cities and towns always make space for the creative industries, and for artists to practice their trade, I think that will be irreversible change that everybody will welcome.

If we can do that, I know that it can prove it's worth and in that sense, there will be no going back on it.

Thank you, thank you for listening, and I hope the day goes well.