www.museumsassociation.org

Museums Journal

In the mix

Scott Billings

Issue 108/10, p40-43, October 2008

Venues that combine cultural activities with commercial units and residential properties are on the increase, but what are the benefits for local communities and the arts? Scott Billings reports

As people get busier, or perhaps lazier, they increasingly want places where they can do a variety of different things, be that listening to live music, shopping or going to the cinema, in one easily accessible space.

One method of delivering these amenities in a fairly high-impact manner - maximising space, facilities and branding - is the mixed-use development.

Across the country, a range of mixed-use sites have combined different aspects of cultural activity, often (but not always) as a component of commercial and residential complexes, or as part of a larger urban redevelopment.

There is the Barbican and the South Bank Centre in London and the Lowry in Salford Quays. But how do these venues work and what is the rationale for developers in placing cultural amenities in their schemes?

One of the latest mixed-use developments in the UK is Kings Place, an arts, leisure, office and events space located at London's King's Cross, an area undergoing one of the highest-profile urban redevelopments in Europe.

The purpose-built Dixon Jones-designed building opens on 1 October, and is already headquarters to two orchestras - the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the London Sinfonietta. It boasts a 420-seat main recital space and a second space for smaller performances, rehearsals and education.

There are two main galleries - Pangolin London, the first London base for Gloucestershire sculpture foundry Pangolin Editions, and Kings Place Gallery. Both will run temporary art shows, while the building's main public spaces will also be used to showcase visual art.

The developer Parabola Land has leased the seven storeys of office space in Kings Place to companies such as the Guardian News & Media, Network Rail, and US footwear company Wolverine. All food and drink in the centre is run under commercial contract by Green & Fortune.

But arguably the most interesting aspect of Kings Place is its musical ambitions. Both orchestras have been given tenancy at a peppercorn rent, which is effectively for free. As Parabola Land director and the venue's mastermind Peter Millican says, "you don't make any money out of doing music".

Sadly, the same could be said of most theatre and exhibitions. So why is the inclusion of performance spaces, studios and galleries so attractive to commercial developers?

The reason is partly because local councils can use commercial developments to improve cultural amenities in an area, which, without commercial money, are unlikely to happen.

Gail Dexter Lord, president of destination consultancy Lord Cultural Resources (LCR), explains: "Councils want to improve humanities services because they improve the quality of life. They're a form of tourism; they benefit local merchants and residents and provide education and well-being.

But councils lack the money and resources to do this on their own."
In cities where space is at a premium, adding a few cultural jewels to a commercial or residential proposition can ease the process for developers trying to get planning permission from local councils for their schemes.

"Developers usually use cultural elements to get planning gains - quicker planning permission, higher densities and so on. For councils, planning permission is one of the most important tools at their disposal," says Lord.

Mark Sullivan, director of destination planning group Locum Consulting, says sometimes developers are simply looking for a more "unique and differentiated" design. "Cultural amenities can be more effective in generating a sense of place, helping to get people and tenants in," he explains.

Alternatively, councils, developers and investors may all have an interest in the long-term regeneration of urban districts, many of which are now located in brownfield sites, "contaminated" with the remnants of industrial activity, which don't immediately appeal to residents and businesses.

Cultural venues can be a catalyst in regenerating these areas, attracting people and investment and allowing other developments to grow around them.

The Barbican, the Lowry, and West Bromwich's Public Gallery were all developed as part of urban regeneration programmes. The Barbican Estate, although contentious at the time, was planned in the 1950s to provide housing and a world-class arts centre in an attempt to rebuild the East End of London following heavy bombing during the second world war.

Salford Quays was previously a run-down dockland area of Greater Manchester that was developed into a zone of waterside housing and cultural activity using private money. It is now home to the Lowry arts centre and the Imperial War Museum North.

LCR advised on the development of the mixed-use Lowry centre, but Lord says that it wasn't until the other elements of the district were developed that the whole thing came together.

"The plan was to put the culture in first, then you get the BBC in the north and the condominiums. With nothing there, it's risky for developers to raise capital. Salford council had the foresight to do this and to see that it could happen. The council, not a property developer, directed this," she says.

In the case of Kings Place, it was Millican, the director of Parabola Land,

who wanted a non-publicly funded arts venue as part of a mixed-use space that led to the inclusion of arts facilities that he says "go way beyond" what Islington council would have stipulated for cultural elements.

And Parabola's formation of the Kings Place Music Foundation to manage the music space and run a community outreach programme also goes further than what might be expected from a property developer.

According to Lord, cultural organisations are a valuable component in this type of mixed-use building. "Museums and galleries should recognise the great value they bring to these developments and show more leadership," says Lord.

"They're stable; they don't come and go like retailers; and they bring a lot of economic and cultural benefits. The cultural partner should be a lead partner, not just an element that gets moved around."

Communal benefits

Millican acknowledges that councils always require something that benefits the community to be planned into a scheme, although not necessarily on the scale of the music foundation.

"If we'd only proposed offices, the council would have asked for something else, like social housing perhaps. We both wanted to bring something to the community. Buildings should be made to work for society, but it wouldn't be possible to do the arts stuff without the commercial tenants," he says.

Thinking along similar lines, in 1935 the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill on Sea was opened, which the socialist ninth Earl De La Warr had proposed as "a building of world renown that will [create] a new model of cultural provision which is going to lead to the growth, prosperity and the greater culture of our town".

The centre's current deputy director, Emma Morris, confirms that the commercial elements - the shop and cafe/bar, which are owned and run by the venue - are a critical part of the business plan if they are to earn enough revenue to fund the music, exhibition and performance programme. Unlike Kings Place, the pavilion is entirely self-sufficient.

Maximising revenue and resources

This mix of facilities at the De La Warr Pavilion means commercial revenues are maximised and can subsidise arts programmes, while cultural events can attract people and further investment to the area, which in turn increases visitors. There are also programming benefits, especially if different department heads work together as part of a venue-wide team.

"Although we have individual directors, we try to present an integrated programme where there is a connection between different areas. If there's not an obvious link, we don't push it," explains Morris.

The De La Warr Pavilion's forthcoming Michael Nyman exhibition, which opens in January 2009, illustrates how a multi-space venue can be leveraged. Nyman's audiovisual work will be shown in the gallery spaces and a related piano season in the auditorium will feature some acts suggested by Nyman, including live performances by the composer himself.

At Liverpool's Bluecoat contemporary arts centre, the focus is on artist, rather than audience development, says chief executive Alastair Upton. All Bluecoat's facilities - studios, artists' shops, offices and exhibition spaces - are given to various stages of artistic output.

"It's the creative process from one end to the other, including retail. We take an economic position and so can see the connections between the creative process and the economic results very clearly. I don't know of anywhere else that does it from top to bottom like this. Here, the whole thing is integral," he says.

A seemingly clear benefit of housing different cultural organisations under one roof is that visitors will "cross-pollinate" the different areas, although, in reality, this is hard to achieve.

Upton says that cross-promoting the Bluecoat's different activities - dance, music, painting, or whatever - remains difficult, even though they present interconnected programmes where possible, such as this summer's Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival.

"The contemporary arts audience tends to have minority interests and it's very hard to move them into other areas," he explains.

According to Lord, this is a near-universal difficulty, but it's also one of the key objectives of a multifarious arts centre. "There is cross-pollination, but there are very few examples of it working really well because it's complex and hard to get right," she says. "But that certainly doesn't mean it's not worth trying."

Scott Billings is a freelance journalist