

# Northampton's Cultural Quarter

.....● JOHN BEST, CHAIR, ARTS GATEWAY MK

As an arts organisation based in Milton Keynes we want the best for our city, with its ambitious plans for the decades ahead. As an organisation reaching out across the sub-region we want to share best practice across our partners and neighbours. Culture lies at the heart of successful urban places so what better example could I choose for this month's piece than Northampton, and its Cultural Quarter. Folk in Northampton know it well; folk in Milton Keynes know it less well but should maybe try a few visits and get to know it. Here's a personal take on what it offers and why it is going from strength to strength.

## Making good places

Northampton has a long history of industrial and cultural development, which brings advantages and disadvantages. It's harder to gear a place up to the 21st century if the streets are small, the parking limited, the buildings getting tired and the mix of shops belongs to the 20th century. On the other hand it has history, it holds a cultural tradition that brings people in, has a range of buildings looking for new uses and can easily feel busy and purposeful. The greatest advantages that Northampton holds over its younger cousin are that it offers a mix of new buildings and new uses for old, and it has the built-in creative dynamo that is a university student body. The two come together forcefully in the centre of the town, which is why Northampton has so much potential as a thriving cultural place.

## The Cultural Quarter

The area around Derngate and Guildhall Road forms a unique creative cluster. Supported by vision of city leaders and planners, there is now an ambitious programme for regenerating the town. Northampton recognises that its prosperous future relies on a successful family of creative industries, now grouped as the Cultural Quarter. This is overseen by a forum which comprises the Borough and County councils, NN (Northampton Arts Collective), Royal & Derngate Theatres, 78 Derngate, Creative Northants, the University of Northampton

and Arts Council England. And, together with the Waterside Enterprise Zone, it seems to be working wonders.

## NN Contemporary

Let's start with the Visual Arts. NN is an independent contemporary art space based at Number Nine Guildhall Road, a four storey C19th building that was originally Franklin's hotel. Run by a dedicated team of curatorial and operational staff, Northampton Arts Collective works with artists at all stages of their careers to present an international programme of contemporary art and multi-disciplinary events. Three years ago they moved from the Old Fishmarket, and now operate a gallery for temporary exhibitions, a café and performance venue, four studios for artists to occupy and several other spaces. In 2014 they became a charity and are now led by director Catherine Hemelryck. Currently they have two artists in studios, Jude Lynn and Cordell Garfield, and actively help artists develop the business side of their practice, not least through their 'From Art to Commerce' workshops by development director Tracey Clarke. The next two of those are on 6th February and 5th March, 11-1pm.

## The Cultural flagship

The best-known part of the cultural offer, the Royal & Derngate is more than just two theatres running complementary programmes. With Wicked Way café, the Errol Flynn arthouse cinema and an active

youth, community and corporate programme in The Underground, they are a force for local cultural development.

The 500 capacity Royal Theatre, designed by Victorian theatre architect C J Phipps who also designed theatres in Bath, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Wolverhampton, is a Grade II listed building. In 1927 it became home to the Northampton Repertory Players and has run as a producing house ever since. Made in Northampton stages at least six 'in-house' productions each year. February sees 'The Herbal Bed, the secret life of Shakespeare's Daughter', a co-production with English Touring Theatre and Rose Theatre Kingston. The emotional thriller is based upon real events from Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1613, when the said daughter was publicly accused of adultery with her neighbour, and her husband chose to stand by her. Go see this beautiful evocation of life in Shakespearian England.

The Derngate Theatre, a 1,200-seat multi-purpose performance space, was opened by Northampton Borough Council in 1983. The venue can be configured to stage classical concerts, musicals, opera, dance and even 'in the round' events such as snooker tournaments. The February programme includes at least six music and four comedy events. The two theatres emerged in 2006 as one organisation following a £14.5m redevelopment, and in 2010 The Stage recognised it as Regional Theatre of the

continued overleaf



Guildhall Street, ctsy wikipedia



Royal and Derngate, ctsy R&D



Errol Flynn Filmhouse, ctsy R&D



## THE ARTS

Year for 'its artistic quality and connections it has with local audiences'.

### Errol Flynn arthouse cinema

The 90-seat Errol Flynn Filmhouse in Albion Place, named after the actor whose early career was spent at the Royal, opened in June 2013 as part of the Northampton Alive regeneration project. It screens a very successful mix of art-house, world films and documentaries. No cultural quarter could be complete without an active alternative to the mainstream diet of multiplex blockbusters.

### Northampton Museum

One of Northampton's strengths as a place is its heritage – buildings, artefacts, collections and industrial history. The Borough's collection of objects charting the history of shoes is the largest in the world and helps highlight the town's uniqueness. The Museum's collection of 12,000 shoes and 50,000 archival records is of national and international significance and includes current as well as classic designers and manufacturers. A £14m expansion into the former gaol is underway to double the size of the exhibition space, showing more of the town's significant art collection, which includes work by Burne Jones and Hockney. Ground floor space for retail, food and drink will further support the day and night time economy in the evolving Cultural Quarter.

### Charles Rennie Mackintosh lives!

Another bit of cultural heritage I want to highlight in the Cultural Quarter is a gem of 20th century design. 78 Derngate is a Grade II\* Listed Georgian house, noted for its interior, which was extensively redeveloped in 1916-7 by Charles Rennie Mackintosh for local businessman and modelmaker, Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke. It has been open to the public since 2003 and is a feast, even if interior design and architecture may not normally be your bag.

### The cultural industries mix

Any cultural quarter worth the name will offer a range of experience, including restaurants, live music, hair, beauty and fashion... and places to take coffee. All the town's main cultural institutions have interesting settings for a good cup of coffee, and that's surely a healthy challenge to the national chains. Assess them all for the art they show as well as the coffee they serve.



*Cloud and Rainbow*  
Photograph reproduced with the kind permission  
of Northampton Museums and Art Gallery

Also in the mix are the new 104-bed £7m Premier Inn in Albion Place, from Whitbread's, and the boutique hotel at 13-15 Guildhall Road, where interior design students at the University of Northampton have collaborated to add their extra creative flair to what might otherwise have been a standard product. Newspaper House, the former home of Northampton Herald and Post production (now moved to Bedford) and of Glass House theatre company (now moved to Hazelrigg House in Marefair), is due to be replaced by luxury apartments – hardly a cultural industry but if occupied by lovers of urban culture unlikely to harm the cultural quarter. With several eateries in the picture (Mailcoach, Hygge, Pizza Express, Vineyard, Haycock and Tailbar, Wine connection), not to mention fashion and beauty (Berties, Chaps, The Guild, Montague Jeffery, Outcast, Salon Forty-Six, Wedding Wardrobe), the rich mix is encouraging.

### Vulcan works, flagging the cultural and economic future

Possibly the most ambitious project of the town's creative industries programme is the £10.8m Vulcan Works project between Guildhall Street, Fetter Street and Angel Street. The plan is to create 400 jobs in 100 new businesses in the historic setting of engineering and leather working. The listed building citation has them as 'one of the best surviving engineering works for the production of boot and shoe industry machinery'. Investment in creative industries is being placed at the centre of local and regional economic policy, right where it should be and a great lesson for nearby towns wanting to establish their cultural credentials.

### The cultural dynamism of a university town

Northampton's cultural clout is greatly helped by having a University in the town, surely not

just desirable but a necessity in any place wanting to make a cultural mark. The sheer numbers in their age group, the cultural programmes they generate and support, the investment and spending they bring, and the businesses they stay on to create, all lay the foundation. In Northampton's case the University is not just there – it's even moving to an ambitious new waterside campus just down the road from the cultural quarter, and student housing is already on its way. That surely is inspired place-making by the Northampton policy-makers.

### Where will it be in ten years time?

Cultural blogger therealchrisparkle has it right, when commending last summer's Love Northampton Fair, that the key to the town's success was the combination of independent commercial sector, the focus on a rich cultural programme and a commitment to being distinctive. He particularly singles out the Royal and Derngate programme for being both diverse and ambitious when compared to more corporate fare elsewhere. And that ambition is reflected in the city's leaders who, at a time when the rest of the world is cutting, are managing to direct significant investment into the cultural and creative sector. The real test will be in a decade, when we'll see the effects of the university's second decade, and the first decade of the Cultural Quarter, and the fruits of 2016's investment programme. I believe there will be a pay back, as more people visit Northampton expressly for its cultural offer.

And how will Northampton's relationship with Milton Keynes evolve? The centre of MK lacks the conventional assets of cultural history, redundant old buildings both on the main road and in back-streets, and a dynamic and thriving student body. But Central MK also needs to recognise it has its own underused assets, maybe not as historic as Northampton's, but which nonetheless must be brought into use to keep up. The key to shared success for both will be to develop complementary offers and programmes, when culture-lovers alternate their visits to both, while practitioners and cultural organisations build the local network of exchanges and collaborations. We will live in a richer world when places find ways to collaborate. ■



Big Plans for the Museum extension, ctsy NBC



Magnificent Mackintosh, ctsy 78 Derngate



Premier Inn now open, ctsy Premier Inns



Regeneration by culture, ctsy NBC

