



Conference 12 Delivering sustainable theatres

The challenge of
achieving the triple
bottom line

Conference Reporter, *Jo Caird*, considers
the theme of the Trust's annual conference.

When most of us think about sustainability, issues of environmental impact are probably the first thing to spring to mind. But although 'eco' may be synonymous with 'sustainable' in much mainstream debate, sustainability is about much more than simply greening our spaces and practices. If our theatre buildings are going to continue to meet the needs of artists and audiences today and in the future, all three pillars of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic – must be on the agenda, informing decision and policy-making at every level. This is the topic of The Theatre Trust's Conference 12, 'Delivering Sustainable Theatres – the challenge of achieving the triple bottom line', which takes place at Stratford Circus in London on 12 June.

Since 2008, when the Trust's annual conference explored issues around 'Building Sustainable Theatres', we've seen positive steps towards achieving environmental sustainability. The launch of 'Green Theatre: Taking Action on Climate Change', the Mayor of London's programme for greening London's theatres; and the Trust's own Ecovenue scheme, which is supporting 48 London venues in improving their environmental performance, are just two of the important advances that have taken place over the last four years.

But as the recession continues to bite and massive cuts to public spending begin to take effect, the industry's discussion around sustainability must become more wide-ranging than ever before. Looking back to the Arts Council's first Capital Lottery scheme in the nineties, with its focus on ambitious, large-

scale projects, we have to ask whether enough attention was paid in that period to issues of sustainability and longer-term viability. And if the answer is 'no', what is to be done to pick up the pieces now that sustainability is finally at the forefront of policy-makers' and funders' minds?

The venue for this year's conference could not be more apposite: this summer and in the years following the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games it is hoped that the arts will be a major factor in the socio-economic regeneration of Stratford and the other Olympic boroughs, some of the most deprived areas in the country. Stratford Rising, a consortium of which Stratford Circus and its near neighbour Theatre Royal Stratford East are both members, is dedicated to improving Stratford and the lives of its local people through culture. As the world's media prepares to focus its attention on this area, delegates from all over the UK will come together at Conference 12 to consider an issue entirely pertinent to their surroundings: how the three pillars of sustainability can be harnessed in pursuit of artistic excellence and the ongoing creation of a unique cultural offering.

'Sustainability' is a term with myriad definitions. We should not therefore be surprised to find that there exist myriad opinions on how best to achieve it. Part of the challenge is in balancing the different agendas involved to create a multi-faceted approach that takes in a number of different disciplines, from architecture, design and environmental engineering, to conservation, restoration and community engagement. Absolutely fundamental to all this is the consideration

of how the next generation of theatre-goers and theatre-makers will engage with our buildings. The voice of the young must be heard loud and clear.

The last few years offer us a number of examples of theatres engaging with environmental sustainability with truly impressive results. Daring early adopters such as Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff and the Dominion Theatre in London's West End (at the time owned by Live Nation) put energy-saving, recycling and other eco practices and technologies at the heart of their businesses from as far back as 2005. Adopting a holistic approach that included everyone from technicians to catering staff to administrators, these venues busted the myth that going green is unaffordable and showed that, in fact, prioritising environmental sustainability can save money and bring benefits to the local community too.

When it comes to the wider interrelationship between theatres and sustainable development, however, we're still finding our way. In recent years, our political leaders have become more willing to acknowledge culture's important role in economic development and social well-being. In 2010 United Cities and Local Governments, an international body which represents over 1,000 cities across 95 countries, encouragingly recognised culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. A landmark was achieved when the National Planning Policy Framework for England published in March 2012 recognised that if we are to achieve sustainable development, the planning system needs to reflect a community's needs and support its cultural well-being.

Under the coalition government we've seen a shift towards a localist agenda which offers a whole host of exciting opportunities in terms of the way our theatre buildings are owned and run. Without support at the level of national policy-making, making sure our cultural infrastructure continues to meet the changing needs of audiences, artists and communities may be an uphill struggle.

In some places in the UK, far-sighted individuals, communities and local councils are already taking advantage of the new freedoms offered by the Localism Act 2011 to put culture at the heart of sustainable development in their areas. The Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership, for example, on whose board Royal & Derngate chief executive Martin Sutherland sits, recognises culture as one of the new economic drivers in the county. When it

BE PART OF THE DEBATE



comes to planning, the Northamptonshire EP will ensure that due attention will be paid to protecting and promoting the cultural sector. The Northamptonshire EP is just one of 38 newly created Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), locally-owned partnerships between local authorities and businesses designed to promote economic development and the creation of local jobs. Regrettably however, not all the new LEPs share Northamptonshire's commitment to the role of culture in sustainable development.

Another aspect of the decentralist agenda with potentially positive implications for our theatres is the increasing empowerment of communities when it comes to taking over the ownership or running of buildings or amenities from local authorities. The Marina Theatre in Lowestoft was only taken over by the Marina Theatre Trust in December 2011, so it's still early days for the venue, but this is a cheering example of how the involvement of a committed local community can turn around the fate of a building not reaching its full potential under local authority management.

But of course a community does not need to run or own its local theatre to feel it has a stake in its future. If privately-run buildings – commercial ventures and those in receipt of public subsidy – are to survive and thrive in these challenging times, community engagement must be at the heart of what they do. Encouragingly, we're already seeing a number of theatres rising to meet the new and varied expectations about the role that our cultural infrastructure should play in regeneration, both social and economic.

The National Theatre, for example, is putting £70 million into NT Future, its scheme to open up the theatre to more people over the next 50 years. It involves an overhaul of the building's entrances and exits; the development of new education and participation spaces; and a commitment to the pursuit of new technologies and practices that will keep the NT financially and environmentally sustainable going forwards.

It might sound obvious but a crucial stage in the future-proofing of any theatre – before plans can be made or sustainability policies implemented – is assessment of the situation as it stands. The Theatres Trust's Ecoveneue project, running since 2009 and wrapping up in time for case studies from the scheme to be presented as part of Conference 12, uses SMEasure software to chart the energy use of 48 London venues. Each participating venue undergoes an environmental audit and receives a Display Energy Certificate (DEC)

and advisory report, with information from further performing arts venues in possession of DEC's but not involved in the scheme going into a 'DEC Pool' to help establish benchmarks for the industry. These benchmarks, alongside international standards on sustainable management such as the ISO 14001 (which Wales Millennium Centre was the first independent theatre in the UK to achieve) are a valuable way of measuring performing arts venues' progress towards sustainability.

Other factors affecting venues' sustainability are also relatively straightforward to measure. A capital asset audit enables an organisation to identify how it might make more of its existing infrastructure, whether by improving access and thereby facilitating increased community engagement, or creating spaces that could be hired out to the public to raise additional revenue.

Arts Council England's new £180 million capital investment programme was launched last year with just this in mind. Venues can apply for grants of £500,000-plus towards the cost of building work or equipment to help them "become more sustainable and resilient businesses". ACE has been clearer than ever before when it comes to the sustainability agenda, stating in the advisory material available to organisations applying for the capital funding that "sustainable development is a dynamic process through which organisations can begin to achieve a balance of environmental, social and economic activities. Sustainable development must recognise the impacts of a project on these three areas".

Another route to achieving that balance might involve sharing resources with another organisation, as Manchester institutions, the Cornerhouse and the Library Theatre Company are soon to do. Having been recognised as a National Portfolio Organisation, following a joint bid to ACE, the two merged to form the Cornerhouse and Library Theatre Company on 1 April and will move into a new purpose-built multi-arts venue within Manchester's First Street regeneration area in 2014. Marriages such as this one are bound to present challenges as merged organisations seek to satisfy previously distinct sets of audiences and artists, as well as the local community in which new premises are based. But there is much to be gained too, from economies of scale to the creative chemistry that can come of artists sharing a space.

Looking forwards, those designing and running our theatres are going to need to be fearlessly innovative when it comes to the adaptation and adoption of new technologies. But it's not just about architectural and engineering choices, and decisions on energy use. Also crucial to delivering sustainable theatres will be meeting and exceeding the expectations of modern audiences made up of tech-savvy individuals who place a high value on convenience and social media engagement. Whether that means embracing fully mobile ticketing, saying goodbye to the physical box-office, installing digital signage featuring live feedback on shows or creating value-added, 'red carpet' experiences, those in charge of our buildings would be wise to stay alert to consumer trends.

David Cameron's 2010 battle cry, "We're all in this together", has been much derided by those who feel that the actions of his Government again and again belie the spirit of those words. When it comes to addressing the challenges of future-proofing our theatres, however, and achieving the triple bottom line of sustainable development, the industry could do worse than take inspiration from the Prime Minister's call to arms. On 12 June, delegates from UK theatres big and small will come together at Stratford Circus. Through the conversations they will have with architects, designers, policy-makers, technicians, artists and who knows who else over the course of the day, innovative and surprising solutions to these challenges will be found. Make sure you are there to be part of the debate.

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