V&A Dundee and Cultural Institutions in Dundee: The Role of Museums in Culture-Led Regeneration

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V&A Dundee is a design museum by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma and is the first Victoria and Albert Museum outside of London. When V&A Dundee opened its doors to the public in September 2018, it was celebrated as the cornerstone of the regeneration of Dundee’s waterfront. The aim of this one-billion pounds, thirty-year regeneration project is:

to transform the City of Dundee into a world-leading waterfront destination for visitors and businesses through the enhancement of its physical, economic and cultural assets. (Overview Waterfront 2022)

That the museum is cited as prominent in this transformation is indicative of the role of cultural institutions in the regeneration of the city.

This paper will focus on the link between museums and cultural regeneration in Dundee as well as illustrate the impact that culture-led regeneration has had in the city over the past four decades. Through providing a context to Dundee, it will be shown what makes the city unique in setting and situation. Cultural regeneration is not unique to the development of V&A Dundee. Other major factors such as the importance of other institutions in Dundee, issues and limitations with cultural regeneration within the city and what the next steps might be for Dundee in its journey towards transformation will be outlined in this paper. It will be demonstrated that museums, specifically V&A Dundee, play a major role of what is driving cultural regeneration in Dundee currently. The museum is not isolated in this and is part of a long history of cultural venues and culture itself in the form of public art programmes regenerating areas around the city throughout its history.
4 Dundee’s history is closely interlinked with its location on the north shore of the Firth of Tay. The city gained its royal Charter in 1191 from King David to encourage trade. The site was strategically positioned, controlling the entry into the heart of Scotland and was the victim of numerous sieges and sackings. Dundee’s historical prominence came through its waterside location, the main site of its regeneration in the modern day. During the medieval period, Dundee was second only to Edinburgh in terms of commercial prosperity. The city was ideally located on shipping routes to and from the Baltic and North European ports since it was closer than Edinburgh by two days sailing (Watson 2006: 22).

5 Changing from a trading port to the world centre for jute processing (which had replaced the flax and linen industry by the 1830s), Dundee shifted identity in the nineteenth century (Whatley 2011). As Indian competition became fierce, the city began a process of slow decline and rising unemployment from the early twentieth century; the jute industry had reached its peak of employment before 1914 and shrank, unevenly, thereafter and until the last jute mill closed in 1998. As Jim Tomlinson, Jim Phillips and Valerie Wright note, the story of this decline might seem a straightforward one of an industry squeezed and eventually eliminated by low-wage competition (2022: 28). This was a narrative which was correct up until 1939, as the industry had shrunk to a fraction by its pre-1914 size. However, many other factors, such as globalisation, came into play after they had been responsible for Dundee’s prominence in the nineteenth century. Despite investment by multinational companies, by the 1970s, significant employers in the city such as Timex Corporation, which produced watches, and NCR, a major producing company, faced corporate restructuring (Tomlinson et al. 2022: 28). As a result, unemployment rose significantly in the 1970s, hitting its peak in the 1990s. The transition to a service sector economy changed Dundee from a manufacturing centre to a post-industrial city (Doherty 1992).

6 The 1960s also marked a key moment in the city’s separation from its waterfront connection through major construction projects. The waterfront was integral to many of the city’s industries, including ship building and whaling which were in decline by 1914 (Watson 2006: 22). Dundee’s historic central dock was infilled to make way for the construction of the Tay Road Bridge, and the choice of locating the bridge much closer to the heart of the city required the former central dock to be converted into dry land. This area was used for further developments and constructions such as the building of the Olympia Leisure Centre (the site on which V&A Dundee is located) and Tayside House, a multi-storey tower used as Dundee City Council’s executive headquarters (Di Domenico 2007: 329). As Catherine and Marialaura Di Domenico note, both these structures were originally planned as part of a much larger modernist development that was intended to create a multilevel civic and commercial centre. These plans were never realised in full, and the resultant developments not only deviated from original intentions but can also be seen as comprising ad hoc erections of individual commercial and residential structures rather than the implementation of a larger cohesive plan for integrated area development (Di Domenico 2007: 330). These three projects resulted in the loss of Dundee’s harbour and cemented the city’s severance from the waterfront. In contrast to the piecemeal approach adopted in the 1960s, the (Labour) City Council began planning regeneration within this area in 2001, with a focus on highlighting its maritime heritage and making it an attractive space for leisure activities. The programme included the realignment of main roads to create wide boulevards, the
creation of a new civic space, a new railway station, hotels, and a range of development sites. However, there was creative and cultural activity elsewhere in the city which allowed progress while also pre-empting the waterfront development work (History Dundee Art 2019).

**Cultural Regeneration in Dundee**

Despite being a time of economic difficulty in Dundee, the 1980s were also a time of change and the Labour led Dundee City Council placed emphasis on culture within the city. By the 1980s, and the decline of the jute industry, Blackness (north-west of the city) had become a myriad of empty, derelict buildings. The Blackness Public Art Programme was launched in 1981. The Programme attracted international attention for its pioneering approach; for the first time, artists, architects, planners, and engineers collaborated on such a project, and it was the beginning of the council’s £90,000 investment in culture-led regeneration (History Dundee Art 2019). It was also the moment when the Council recognised that art could be used as a tool for urban regeneration. Thirteen pieces of public art were built, and sixty new businesses moved to the Blackness area as part of this successful programme. This was extended to become the Dundee Public Art Programme, a programme which promoted and installed public art, and particularly sculpture.

The Dundee public art programme was the first city-wide public art programme in the country and remained the largest programme in Scotland throughout its existence from 1981 to 2003. Artists worked in collaboration with businesses, developers, council planners, and architects to bring the area to life in a pioneering, holistic project. Arguably, the long-time impacts of the Blackness Public Art Programme can still be seen in the city today. Contemporary and subsequent art and design developments in the city, such as the Seagate Gallery, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the redevelopment of the McManus Galleries and V&A Dundee, can all be viewed as part of its legacies.

Matthew Jarron, Curator of Museum Services at University of Dundee, states:

The V&A Dundee building is just the latest example of culture being used as an economic tool to regenerate the city. This is actually something that Dundee has led the way in for almost 40 years. Before the Blackness programme there were only a few pieces of public art in Dundee, with the most notable examples being Victorian sculptures. The three-year programme was part of a wider scheme to improve the Blackness area and became the catalyst for the cultural change that is still ongoing in Dundee today. (History Dundee Art 2019)

Culture-led regeneration can be defined as such:

[It] denotes the opportunities for the transformation and regeneration of places through cultural activity. It tends to be relevant for cities that have gone through big economic changes, places that may have lost their industrial base and have needed to reinvent themselves through cultural and art activity. (Garcia 2022)

Beatriz Garcia’s definition of culture-led regeneration is significant owing to her pioneering research on London, Sydney, and Glasgow. Dundee’s loss of its main industries and reinvention of itself through cultural and art activity underline its relevance as a case study for culture-led regeneration. Culture played a large part in Dundee re-examining and redefining its role in the twenty-first century working towards regeneration.
Taking a long term, strategic approach, with partners working together, the city has developed a vibrant creative and cultural sector, which has delivered economic and social benefits. Some key cultural organisations and venues that are at the heart of Dundee’s cultural development include, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the Rep Theatre, Discovery Point and Verdant Works as well as Dundee’s wider cultural heritage such as DC Thomson. Central to this focus on culture as a means for regeneration is that it must be inclusive. It must be city-wide and involve everybody, even those who are least likely to engage with culture and arts and it must deliver economic growth and social benefits. (Weaver 2022)

Dundee’s city council policy on regeneration is focused on culture, as shown in the “Dundee Cultural Strategy and Action Plan” until 2025. The council defines its policy as:

having a focus on culture-led regeneration, Dundee has adopted a planned and long-term approach to developing the cultural sector over the past twenty years. This has resulted in a strong and unique offer that has supported the diversification of the city’s economy. (Weaver 2018: 1)

The report references Dundee’s remarkable cultural offer for a city of 150,000 people; Dundee’s creative industries produce an annual turnover of £190 million and employ 3,000 people (Harris 2017). The McManus Art Gallery and Museum, the Cooper Gallery at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, the Dundee Contemporary Arts, and the Dundee Rep Theatre are four of these cultural venues which have long histories in the city. The waterfront in Dundee has also been a part of this cultural heritage; historic ships RRS Discovery and HMS Unicorn continue to play a key role in the area. Leisure and Culture Dundee, which operates the McManus Art Gallery and Museum, has a focus on cultural driven regeneration in the city’s ten-year cultural strategy for 2015-25, through demonstrating the impact of culture-led regeneration upon the city.

Dundee has built resources, partnerships, and cultural understanding that make it one of the most effective examples of culture-led regeneration anywhere in the UK (Dundee Cultural Strategy 2014: 5). From this, cultural regeneration can be seen to be part of Dundee’s physical structure as well as its identity. In the lead up to the opening of V&A Dundee, Clive Gillman, a former director of Dundee Contemporary Arts, commented:

Across Europe there are hundreds, thousands of small, post-industrial cities trying to understand what their future is. What Dundee has done is shape its future – partly by accident, partly by design, building on what was already here. It is a living experiment of what culture-led regeneration could look like. (Quoted in Geoghegan 2015)

However, he expressed concern about the so-called ‘irritable Bilbao syndrome’, and the way large-scale institutions like the Guggenheim or V&A Dundee may work or not work in their local context. The syndrome indicates an emphasis on one institution transforming a city, which Dundee is keen to avoid.

Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, is often referenced by politicians and city officers as the prime example of a museum transforming a post-industrial city, demonstrating that socio-economic transformation through a programme of regeneration is attainable, termed as the ‘Bilbao effect’. Its shortcomings have been identified, with the museum criticised for failing both as public space, and not supporting community and cultural life within the city (Kent 2005). Dundee’s example of the placement of the V&A follows this pattern, using cultural investment and a star architect to promote economic uplift for a post-industrial city. However, as with other comparative examples, including Dundee, the city was already undergoing a period of radical change, and rethinking public spaces. The Guggenheim was highly visible but
not the main aspect of the city’s culture-led regeneration (Heathcote 2017). Bilbao and similar examples including Glasgow, Liverpool, and Dundee show that there is a need for policy to be sensitive to local context, including social and economic structure, political culture, organisation of elite networks and governance structures (Williams 1997: 10). A study by John McCarthy suggests that Dundee’s example showed that there is a need for more inclusive and holistic approaches to culture-led regeneration (2000: 22). He emphasises the importance of cultural policies to be linked closely with policies on education, training, research, and development, which is reflected in the policy of V&A Dundee.

The location of Dundee’s major cultural venues is also indicative of the limits of cultural regeneration in the city. Most of Dundee’s cultural institutions are located in the city centre or in the west end, while many of the city’s most deprived areas are located outside of this area. Outreach activities and programmes have been key to helping provide access to physical cultural venues. Dundee Contemporary Arts buses helped thousands of children attend screenings at the two-week Children’s Film Festival and Dundee Rep tours venues across the city in an attempt to decentralise culture. Leisure and Culture Dundee also state that the “aim is to ensure that culture and creativity are contributors to, and key aspects of, Dundee’s affluence and aspirations, and that as many people as possible can take advantage of an equality of opportunity to access cultural experiences.” (Dundee Cultural Strategy 2014: 1) Other organisations including Creative Dundee (Dundee’s Creative Hubs 2020) and UNESCO City of Design Dundee have also been integral to outreach activities around the city. Dundee Design Festival, a UNESCO City of Design project hosted by V&A Dundee, chose sites predominantly outside of the city centre for its 2021 iteration, Everywhere Design (About 2021).

The museum’s announcement in April 2021 that V&A Dundee would develop Scotland’s centre for design as a major three-year project also had outreach as one of its major aims; the focus was on working with schools and developing external skills (University of Dundee). Community outreach is central to any project funded by the Heritage Lottery, the museum received £14 million in 2018. From the earliest days of V&A Dundee, prior to its physical existence as a building, outreach through events, programming, and activities was key to its message of cultural regeneration. This was driven by a consciousness that the waterfront location was far from the communities the museum was trying to engage with. Preopening projects such as Bonnet Makers, funded by one of the historic Nine Trades of Dundee, centred on design, history, and outreach. The museum’s learning team engaged with local primary schools from the Hilltown area, an economically deprived area, which was historically referred to as ‘bonnet hill’ because it was the main site for producing and selling bonnets within the city. The museum worked with milliners for the children to design their own hats. Joanna Mawdsley, Head of Learning at V&A Dundee, cites this project as being crucial to the museum’s preopening outreach programme: “It did trickle down in such a precious way. We were working with the pupils, but it involved friends and family members who didn’t realise what [the V&A] was going to be, or what it was about.” (2018) Mawdsley cites the concentrated involvement in the community, from working with local schools, to staging the final event in the Wellgate Centre, the local shopping centre, as central to its success. She felt that a real understanding of the museum’s aims
was gained through this project, and an encouragement that the museum was for local people.

Other projects, such as the Living Room for the City, used the idea of Kengo Kuma, the museum’s Japanese architect, to create a preopening programme that was meant to bring design to the local community (Living Room 2014; V&A Dundee 2014). Scottish Design Relay was a further attempt to connect the museum to its target audiences in both cities and rural areas. The project showed the research, sketches, and prototypes made by teams across Scotland and involved young people, designers, and cultural partners (Seith 2018). Design in Motion, a national touring exhibition, displayed objects in a custom-built bus gallery which was taken to community centres and schools across the city, and then further afield (Design in Motion 2015; V&A Dundee 2015). Outreach has also been part of the museum’s learning programme since its opening to the public in 2018. The museum sets working with schools and communities across Dundee as a priority, providing funding for schools to travel to the site (Steel 2018). Three members of staff within the learning department have been working with schools and communities. Community outreach and skills development also forms part of the project piloted by Front Lounge, a local charity which trains young parents towards a Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) qualification in textiles (V&A Dundee 2022). The museum’s outreach policy and its aim of improving lives through design are V&A Dundee’s top priorities (V&A Dundee 2021).

The Urban Form of V&A Dundee

The vision behind V&A Dundee originated from within the city and was that the museum would be a driver of cultural regeneration in the city. The concept of the museum was sparked by a conversation at the University of Dundee in the early 2000s, between the University Secretary, David Duncan, and the then V&A South Kensington director, Mark Jones. This led to a pitch, which was centred on four points: (1) The V&A had a multitude of material in their museum stores which they were unable to display because of space restraints. (2) The V&A’s research outputs matched those of the university. (3) There was no museum dedicated to the applied or digital arts in Scotland, and digital was an area which the V&A had begun to expand into, and that university had expertise in. (4) The final point centred on regeneration, which was emphasised as being a major point:

Finally, that the V&A could anchor any expansion plans around a really exciting urban regeneration project that would demonstrate the ability of a major arts capital project to transform a post-industrial city. (V&A University 2018)

The project grew to comprise five major founding partners (V&A, University of Dundee, Abertay University, Dundee City Council and Scottish Enterprise), and became a cornerstone of the reimagining of Dundee’s waterfront as a new cultural neighbourhood that reconnects the city to the river. The development of the architectural design of the building was to be rooted in the local community. That a major international architect was appointed following an international architectural competition in 2010 is indicative of the city’s global ambition, and its openness to foreign creative talent. This choice invites a comparison with Edinburgh which chose Catalan architect Enric Miralles to build the new Scottish Parliament. Kuma’s vision for V&A Dundee was to evoke Scotland’s cliffs and natural environment through
architecture, which parallels Miralles’s vision for the parliament building, as a building growing out of the land (Figure 1). The architectural competition for the museum was underpinned by involvement in the local community. There were public talks at Abertay University, and models of the proposed six architectural plans were displayed for the public to view at the Abertay University Library (Turner 2010).

Figure 1. Exterior of V&A Dundee

![Exterior of V&A Dundee](Hufton + Crow Photography. Exterior of V&A Dundee. Sept. 2018.)

V&A Dundee was intended to be a place “for people from Dundee to use as an everyday part of their city, as well to welcome visitors to the waterfront, and city” (McKinlay 2018: 3). The architect also saw the future museum building as a site for inclusion which would bring the wider community of Dundee together. Kuma proclaimed his building as “the living room for the city” (McKinlay 2018: 1). His metaphor was inspired by Scotland’s cold climate and a need for the museum to recreate the environment of a living room, for the household to gather (McKinlay 2018: 1). Dundee lacked an indoor community hub that could be used as a cultural place to socialise, and the architecture of V&A Dundee was responded to this need (Figure 2).
Conclusion

Dundee's move towards culture-led regeneration continues. The city along with its neighbours in the wider Tayside Region, connected by the River Tay (Dundee, Perth and Kinross, Angus and Fife), was longlisted for UK City of Culture, 2025. John Alexander, the SNP Leader of Dundee City Council, cited cultural regeneration as being key to the bid stating “We’ve seen here in Dundee how powerful culture can be in leading regeneration. Our collective bid is about harnessing that transformative power.” (Expression of Interest 2021) The Eden Project, an eco-visitor attraction and educational charity also plans to open a site in Dundee in 2025, in a former gas works, another post-industrial area of the city, which points to the ongoing development in the city and continuing investment in transforming post-industrial areas through culture-led urban regeneration. The project is, in this case, to focus on the history of the city and to connect Dundee to the natural world (Eden Project 2022). Like V&A Dundee, this project maintains a strong focus on the waterfront while ignoring other economically and socially deprived areas.

The impact that the museum has had upon regeneration in the city is significant, but its limits must be recognised. Key to regeneration would be engagement with local audiences, and a sense that the museum was something which belonged to them. A sample audience survey by the independent market research company scotinform from January 2022 showed that a large proportion of the museum’s audience is from within Scotland, but local audiences are the minority, with 31% coming from Dundee, compared to 42% elsewhere in Scotland (Case Study 2022). Audience research carried out in 2018, the opening year of the museum, showed that 46% of repeat visitors in the first three months of opening came from Dundee (Weaver et al. 2020). However, this is
counteracted by the experience of Myles McCallum, a community campaigner from Lochee, around two miles from the museum, who commented that the museum seemed distant from the communities he had been working with, and that more time was needed for it to benefit the more deprived areas of the city (Ogston 2019). One of the main criticisms of the museum is that it continues to be disconnected from many of the most economically deprived communities in the city. The location of the museum is also problematic to these communities, as more than one form of public transport need to be taken to reach it. It must also be recognised within the context of this paper that the museum is not a silver bullet to the myriad of urban issues which came out of deindustrialisation and unemployment. This criticism may be made about other culture-led regenerations, such as Glasgow and Liverpool.

This prompts the questions: What are the limitations of cultural regeneration? And, at which point does cultural regeneration shift? A critical moment happens when people living in regeneration areas become agents of change in their own lives and communities (Bell 2021). These are questions which are beyond the remit of this paper and remain open for future discussion in the museum and other cultural institutions within the city. The impact that culture-led regeneration has had in Dundee has been substantial, transforming areas of the city by increasing employment and introducing new places for leisure. However, there are limits to culture-led regeneration. Mainly, that it is currently limited to specific areas of the city. It is important to recognise that culture-led regeneration is a multifaceted story which requires the involvement of many different institutions. The ongoing regeneration in Dundee is a testament to the development and growing impact of the cultural sector in the city as a whole over the past forty years and since the Blackness Public Art Programme.

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This paper will examine V&A Dundee and the role of the museum in culture-led regeneration of a post-industrial city. It will set the museum in the context of existing cultural institutions in Dundee and the significance of the previous work undertaken by institutions in moving towards culture-led regeneration, showing that this has been in progress for over forty years. V&A Dundee is promoted as the centrepiece of the city’s one-billion-pound waterfront regeneration, prompting comparisons to the ‘Bilbao effect’, and subsequent examples. This paper will analyse the main objectives of the museum alongside its perception as a driver of culture-led regeneration, but also illustrating the limitations of culture-led regeneration.

Cet article porte sur le V&A Dundee et le rôle du musée dans le processus de régénération culturelle d’une ville post-industrielle. En étudiant la place du musée parmi les institutions culturelles déjà existantes à Dundee, et l’importance des travaux antérieurs menés par ces institutions pour proposer une régénération urbaine axée sur la culture, cet article montre que ce processus est en cours depuis plus de quarante ans. Présenté comme la pièce maîtresse d’un programme de régénération du front de mer s’élevant à un milliard de livres sterling, le V&A Dundee peut être comparé à « l’effet Bilbao », et à d’autres exemples. Cet article analyse les objectifs principaux du musée ainsi que sa conception comme moteur d’une régénération axée sur la culture, et illustre également les limites d’une régénération urbaine axée sur la culture.

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