



# Opinion Piece

## Placemaking – cultural branding

### Wayne Hemingway

is a fashion designer and co-founder of Red or Dead, a globally acclaimed label that won the prestigious British Fashion Council's Streetstyle Designer of the Year Award for an unprecedented three consecutive years in 1996, 1997 and 1998. After selling Red or Dead in 1999, he set up HemingwayDesign, which specialises in affordable and social design. The highest profile project is The Staiths South Bank, a 800-property mass market housing project in Gateshead for George Wimpey Homes. He is the Chairman of Building for Life, a CABE (Commission for Architecture and The Built Environment)-funded organisation that promotes excellence in the quality of design of new housing. He is a Professor in the Built Environment department of Northumbria University, a Doctor of Design at Wolverhampton, a writer for architectural and housing publications and a judge of international design competitions. He has just received an MBE.

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The past 20 years have witnessed an exponential growth in cultural tourism and to many, placemaking and the branding of place has become synonymous with its cultural offerings. From historical architectural tourism to Prague and Vienna, to hedonistic cultural tourism to Ibiza, Rimini, and Amsterdam, low-cost carriers have and are benefiting. The Hemingway family, like many of our generation, no longer choose our holiday breaks based on beaches and Sun. Whereas visiting a town or city based on the culture of a place was once the preserve of a narrow set of what were thought of by many as 'cultural bores', the concept of 'culture' has widened to the extent that even Benidorm and Playa de las Americas are attempting to play the 'Cultural Place' card. I love spending part of my week on my three green acres in splendid cultural isolation, but like many, I need my 'fix' of culture. In the main, the towns and cities I have affinity with are the ones that have given me my 'fix' (Figure 1).

I was born in Morecambe, on the north-west Lancashire coast, and while you wouldn't recognize the town as being an overly cultural hub now, throughout the 1960s it was a cultural hotspot, a

seaside town that didn't just attract retirees, but that also attracted a creative young crowd. My mum and her cool bunch of friends would hang out at Brubeck's coffee bar on the prom. There was the iconic Oliver Hill's art deco, Eric Gill interior designed Midland Hotel (where in Room 16, yours truly was conceived!), and there were a couple of wonderful structures that, at the time, filled me with dread as I was coerced into talent contests and amateur dramatics: Harry Graham's art deco bandstand and The Victorian Winter Gardens concert hall (Figures 2 and 3).

Approaching secondary education, my family moved to a Lancashire mill town, Blackburn. It was Blackburn and a clutch of other Lancashire towns that were formative in building my cultural DNA and influencing my career in the creative industries. Apart from my beloved Blackburn Rovers (which I don't think counts as culture does it?), my memories are all built around a stimulating local youth culture. At the time, it wasn't the brooding architecture of King George's Hall that made it so attractive and, at the time, I couldn't see that this impressive building built in the Blackburn's textile heyday could one day form a

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**Figure 1:** Early images of Phase 1, The Staiths, Gateshead, 2003



**Figure 2:** Wayne's Mum, Maureen fourth from left in Brubecks, Morecambe, 1959

'placemaking' icon in the town's regeneration. It was being an 11 year old and starting to find my musical and fashion feet by going to see The Sweet and Slade, it was David Bowie on his Ziggy Stardust tour in 1972, and the furore surrounding the fact that he sang 'Life on Mars' wearing just some white Y fronts and make-up, and it was Blondie and Stiff Little Fingers up

on King George's Hall stage that give me my home town's cultural resonance.

There was Ribchester, a little village outside Blackburn. As a teenager, I would walk six miles to Roxy and Bowie Nights and to see early performances of The Sex Pistols, Boomtown Rats, and the Rezillos. When I visit family, Ribchester has become a place to walk



**Figure 3:** Wayne is a little actor at Winter Gardens Morecambe. *The King and I*, 1965

by The Ribble, or visit a new-fangled Gastro Pub, or The Roman Museum, but it is its musical cultural legacy that has cemented Ribchester in my conscience and that draws me back.

Other Lancashire towns have a special attraction to me; Wigan is one. As a 13 year old, it provided a venue, the youth culture holy grail, that was the home of Northern Soul, Wigan Casino, where I would stand on my tip toes wearing platforms (which I would put into my badge-covered check shopping bag and replace with flat leather-soled dancing brogues once safely past the bouncers). One of the aims of my company Hemingway Design is to get involved in the regeneration of Blackpool and this stems from the fact that it housed my favourite disco of all time, the legendary



**Figure 4:** Wayne the punk behind the bar, aged 16, 1977

Highland Room at the Blackpool Mecca, where disco and modern dance music developed in the UK. Actually maybe the Mecca wasn't my favourite disco, maybe I should say it was Wednesdays at Angels in Burnley, where I met my wife, Gerardine, 26 years ago!! (Figure 4).

With some 10 O levels and four A levels (mostly at A grade may I add), I left school to study in London. I had no vocational desire to pursue a career in my chosen field of study, Geography and Town Planning, but rather a burning desire to immerse myself in a youth culture that hitherto I had watched from 250 miles up the M6. Today, I still navigate my way around central London by the location of the clubs where Gerardine and I developed our style and culture knowledge that would serve us so well in the development of Red or Dead and latterly HemingwayDesign. It was The Beat Route on Greek Street, and we navigated and were drawn to Covent Garden via The Blitz Club rather than The Opera House (Figure 5).

It was the vibrant and fast-moving late 1970s and the early 1980s youth culture scene that enabled Gerardine and I to establish Red or Dead on Camden Market and Affleck's Palace in Manchester. After Punk, Joy Division, and



**Figure 5:** Wayne (third from right) in band Diversen at Camden Lock, 1980



**Figure 6:** Wayne and Gerardine outside their stall at Camden Market, 1980

the New Romantic movement, the important and lucrative world's youth culture was looking to England. A new form of cultural tourism was starting to rival those coming to view Britain's Cathedrals and historic buildings. We were able to capitalise on this by selling sack loads of Dr Martens to French, Spanish, German, Italian and American tourists. Buyers from Macy's New York were seduced by London's youthful cultural vibrancy and visiting our little stall in Kensington market, where Gerardine would sit sewing individual items on her little machine,



**Figure 7:** The Staiths, Gateshead, 2004

they placed Red or Dead's first big export order, and a business that would ultimately employ hundreds of young people, have shops around the world, and that we would eventually sell for a substantial sum, was born (Figure 6).



**Figure 8:** The Staiths, Gateshead, 2004

In the sphere of design that HemingwayDesign now spends most of its time, placemaking, the places that we have been inspired by — the regeneration schemes of Malmo in Sweden, Frieberg, and Kronsberg in Germany, Ijberg, Almere and Leidsche Rijn in The Netherlands — have become design and cultural tourism brands in their own right (Figures 7 and 8).

There are successes in the UK, the transformation of the Gateshead Quayside from a nondescript grotty piece of neglected urban waterfront into an internationally significant cultural hub featuring the Baltic Arts Gallery, The Sage National Music Centre, and the Millennium Bridge has led to a some distinctly un-Geordie accents strolling about at weekends

as well as forcing a once overpowering neighbour, Newcastle, to acknowledge its erstwhile poor relation across the Tyne and to allow it to share top billing as the re-branded conurbation Newcastle — Gateshead. We have first-hand experience through our Gateshead housing development, The Staiths South Bank. Early in the decade, the cultural renaissance of Gateshead was already entering the regional psyche and this gave us and George Wimpey the confidence to develop a very large forward-thinking development on a site that had been empty for 12 years.

‘49% of those who bought homes at Straiths did so because of design as well as location and affordability.’ The Power of the Barbeque, Arts Council, England, 2006.

Research has shown that we have attracted buyers who, because of the cultural happenings on the Quayside, no longer perceived Gateshead as a ‘no no’. The Staiths itself has become a brand mainly through our commitment to placemaking. Arts Council research on the development ‘The Power of The Barbeque’ backs up our firm belief that if you inject individuality of place, rather than play the ‘anytown’ card that most house builders love to play, you can kick start a vibrant community and generate higher land values.

A decade ago, we moved out of London and built a home near the sea on the south coast. It’s been a wonderful place to bring up our four children, but now that the elder three are well into their clubbing and gigging years, the cultural magnets are becoming stronger. They have chosen universities according to the cultural reputations of locale and are willing to travel substantial distances to hear certain music or see bands.

‘Plus ca Change’.

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