

# create

Perspectives on the value  
of art and culture



## Assemble Building Culture

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## The Turner Prize-winning collective Assemble reflect on the relationship between our culture and our built environment.

‘Culture,’ the historian Raymond Williams wrote in *Resources of Hope*, ‘is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.’ Although we use the word culture to describe many extraordinary and complex things, like ballet, opera and abstract expressionism, we rarely think of the word itself as complex. But culture, in Williams’ definition, doesn’t mean only these kinds of activities – his idea of culture is far more expansive; a collective noun for all human practices that are learned, shared, used to understand the world and to communicate this understanding to other people. Culture is everywhere, and in everything, from language to everyday social interactions. For Williams, this ordinariness was the key:

*Culture is ordinary. That is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning ... [it] is also made and remade in every individual mind.*

Williams’ ideas have influenced many thinkers and writers, including John Berger and Stuart Hall, but have remained marginal to the mainstream. Every day, we use the word ‘culture’ in the way Williams contested – to mean ballet, theatre, opera or painting, all of which can be valuable, joyful and rewarding, but which make up only a small part of cultural life. For Williams, this was a problem. Culture is our common property; it does not exist in the abstract. Shared culture is sustained and developed by our individual engagement with it.



**‘A living, collective culture enables us to engage fully with the world, to communicate and make sense of our experience’**

A living, collective culture enables us to engage fully with the world, to communicate and make sense of our experience; it is ‘made and remade in every individual mind’.

In his book, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, Hal Foster argues that the tendency towards the spectacular in contemporary cultural buildings inhibits individuals from developing an active relationship with their shared culture. Such buildings create a distance between the everyday cultural life of the visitor and the cultural productions they contain:

*Some even tend to subdue us, for the more [they] opt in for special effects, the less it engages us as active viewers ... it takes our thoughts and sensations, processes them as images and effects, and delivers them back to us for our appreciative amazement.*

Underpinning Foster’s argument is the understanding that rather than only representing, or containing, culture, the built environment is itself a production that manifests cultural ideas.

Sometimes this is easy to see – for example, in the Gothic cathedrals of England and France, at Wells, Lincoln or Chartres. William Morris argued that these buildings articulated a cultural idea common to all involved in their production and use – they were ‘the result of the harmonious and intelligent co-operation of the whole body of people engaged in producing the work of the workman’.

In a cathedral, the physical form of the building both grows out of and represents cultural ideas – these are present in everything, from the details of the delicate tracery rising to heaven to the acoustic support for plainsong. Of course, the culture of cathedrals is complex, and their history has been one of suppression and fear as well as beauty and spiritual emancipation. In their apparent permanence and grandeur they argue for the ideas on which they are based. They are a powerful, physical expression of religious culture – not just a monument to it or a vessel for it.



The same is true of the wider built environment. Our built environment sustains and reinforces cultural ideas about the way individuals relate to each other and the rest of society; our right to access resources, and our right to be and to act in particular ways, in particular places. The built environment makes the ideas it contains seem like firm and inevitable facts.

In the 1970s, the architect Simon Nicholson argued that the city excludes the majority of its users, reinforcing a deeply hierarchical idea about creativity, culture and ownership:

*Creativity is for the gifted few: the rest of us must live in the environments constructed by the gifted few, listen to the gifted few's music [...] listen to the stories and plays by the gifted few. This is what our education and culture conditions us to believe, and it is a culturally induced and perpetuated lie.*

Nicholson argued instead for an approach to architecture that enabled the participation of its users in the ongoing creation of the places in which they live and work. His ideas, which came to be known as ‘the theory of loose parts’, suggested that ‘manipulability’ was the solution – that any designed environment should have a number of variables, usually objects that could be moved around, to enable its occupiers to test, change and express themselves, creating possibilities unimagined by the designer.



**‘Our built environment sustains and reinforces cultural ideas about the way individuals relate to each other’**

More recently, against the backdrop of increasing inequality within cities, David Harvey has reframed this as a political question, focusing on the power relations urban form perpetuates. In his article *The Right to the City*, he argued:

*The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city ... The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is ... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.*

It's difficult to imagine what a contemporary city might be like if this right were consistently enacted. It is so different to the way that we currently plan, build and live in our cities. In the United Kingdom, there are only a few isolated examples of individuals creating opportunities to influence their built environment, and, through this, the conditions for their day-to-day lives. These are often borne out of desperation, in an absence of support and encouragement by the authorities, and usually at the margins of the city.

One instance is the system developed by the architect Walter Segal, which supported self-builders to make their own homes in Lewisham with off-the-shelf materials. Another example is the Plotlands, the self-organised and informal settlements created by East Londoners across Essex. In both projects, the homes eloquently expressed a clear set of cultural ideas about the values of home and home-making shared by their owner-occupiers.



In Granby, Liverpool, we worked with residents who had created these conditions themselves, forming a Community Land Trust to refurbish the streets of terraces they live on. Our approach to refurbishing the houses learned from the residents' DIY and make-do-and-mend spirit. Together, we are now developing a series of other projects, including a winter garden and a workshop, with the objective of nurturing this culture and providing space and resources for it to grow in the future.

Assemble's work is based around the idea that a good city is one where people are able to have an active relationship with their built environment and shape and run it collectively. If we understand the built environment as the creation and expression of culture, we can find ways to use it to enable cultural expression, creating a city that can accommodate difference, allow for change and support the ongoing evolution of a living, collective culture.

*Assemble is a multi-disciplinary collective working across architecture, design and art. Founded in 2010 to undertake a single self-build project, Assemble has since delivered a diverse and award-winning body of work, while retaining a democratic and co-operative working method that enables built, social and research-based work at a variety of scales – both making things and making things happen.*



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