

Publica

CHAMPIONING THE CIVIC

LUCY MUSGRAVE, PUBLICA, MARCH 2015

Civic spaces in our villages, towns, and cities are 'public' in the widest sense of the word; they are for all people but are also born out of our shared cultural and social systems of meaning. The 'civic' refers to both the grand buildings and spaces and the smaller, in-between, everyday spaces within towns and cities; from iconic national libraries and museums to playgrounds, street corners and parks.

Regardless of scale, or whether they are inside or out, these spaces perform a critical function – they are sites for social interaction and exchange, where public life is played out. When designed to a high quality and with pride, they celebrate our shared values, contributing to a positive sense of identity and belonging.

Today, our civic spaces are reflections of earlier societal values and design decisions, including quality, generosity and longevity. We are fortunate that the early civic champions - local politicians and public figures, philanthropists, architects and planners - together commissioned and created public spaces that were built to last, and intended for the use and benefit of future generations.

In recent years, across both the public and private sectors, there has been increasing recognition of the public realm's vital role in shaping civic life. But, as demonstrated by the widespread closure of libraries and the curtailing of the Building Schools for the Future programme, there has also been a crisis of confidence in the public sector's role as custodian and champion of the building stock of our social infrastructure.

Across the many groups currently involved in creating places, we have the expertise (including the necessary legal and policy frameworks) to deliver high-quality civic buildings and spaces that can help define and secure our neighbourhoods, in villages, towns and cities. Given the collective significance of civic spaces for our shared societal identity, values and cohesion, championing the civic is the responsibility of us all. Today's civic spaces are often shaped by local action, as well as from the top down. There are also innovative case studies from around the world that provide us with inspiration, precedent and learning.

But to truly succeed in protecting and developing our civic landscape we need to effect a shift in attitude: towards an awareness and valuing of how buildings and spaces contribute to a wider sense of place. We need a shared understanding of how civic spaces shape our streets, neighbourhoods, towns and cities – both in terms of the built environment and the less tangible, but no less significant, senses of place and cohesion.

The forthcoming paper on this subject will explore who does, who could and who should take responsibility for championing the civic in this day and age.