

# Aberdeen, city of culture? How best-laid plans "gang aft a-gley".

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# Aberdeen, City of Culture?

## How Best-Laid Plans “Gang Aft A-gley”

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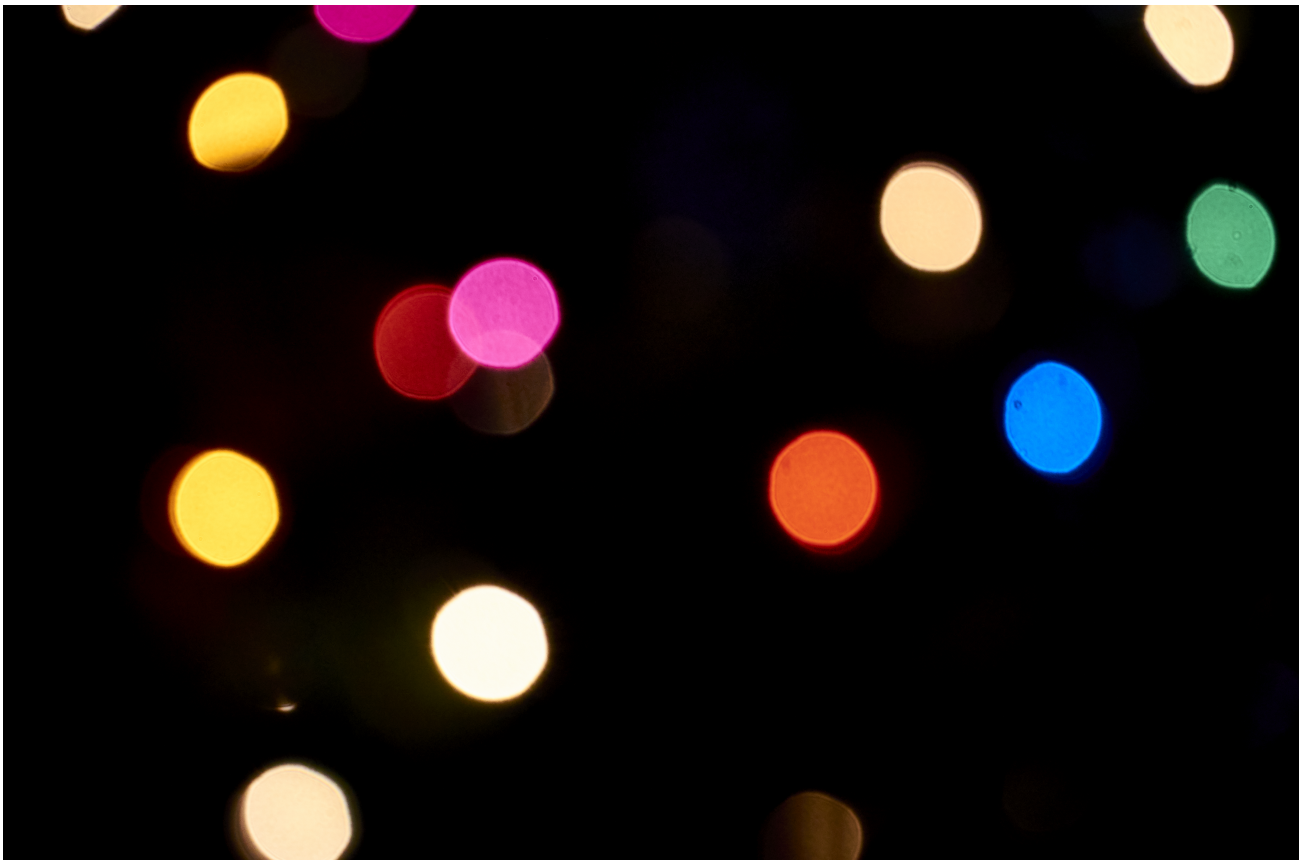
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## Introduction

This article explores the phenomenon of the Creative City in the context of Aberdeen, Scotland's third-largest city. The common perception of Aberdeen is likely to revolve around its status, for the last 50 years, as Europe's Oil & Gas Capital. However, for more than a decade Aberdeen's city planners have sought to incorporate creativity and culture in their placemaking. The most visible expression of this was the unsuccessful 2013 bid to become the UK City of Culture 2017 (CoC), which was referred to as a “reality check” by Marie Boulton (BBC), the councillor charged with the culture portfolio. This article reviews and appraises subsequent policies and actions. It

looks at Aberdeen's history and its current Cultural Strategy and how events have supported or inhibited the reimagining of Aberdeen as a Creative and Cultural City.

Landry's "Lineages of the Creative City" tracks the rise in interest around culture and creative sectors and highlights that there is more to the creative city than economic growth, positing that a creative city is a holistic environment in which "ordinary people can make the extra-ordinary happen" (2). Comunian develops Landry's concept of hard (infrastructural) assets and soft (people and activity) assets by introducing Complexity Theory to examine the interactions between the two. Comunian argues that a city should be understood as a complex adaptive system (CAS) and that the interconnectivity of consumption and production, micro and macro, and networks of actors must be incorporated into policy thinking. Creating physical assets without regard to what happens in and around them does not build a creative city.

## Aberdeen: Context and History

Important when considering Aberdeen is its remoteness: 66 miles north of its closest city neighbour Dundee, 90 miles north of Edinburgh and 125 miles north-east of Glasgow. For Aberdonians travel is a necessity to connect with other cultural centres whether in Scotland, the UK, Europe, or further afield, making Aberdeen's nearly 900-year-old port a key asset. Sitting at the mouth of the River Dee, which marks Aberdeen's southern boundary, this key transport hub has long been central to Aberdeen's culture giving rise to two of the oldest established businesses in the UK: the Port of Aberdeen (1136) and the Shore Porter's Society (1498). Fishing and trade with Europe thrived and connections with the continent led to the establishment of Aberdeen's first university: King's College (Scotland's third and the UK's fifth) in 1495. A second, Marischal College, was established in 1593, joining forces with King's in 1860 to become the University of Aberdeen. The building created in 1837 to house Marischal College is the second-largest granite building in the world (*VisitAberdeenshire, Marischal*) and now home to Aberdeen City Council (ACC). Robert Gordon University (RGU), awarded university status in 1992, grew out of an institution established in 1729 (RGU, *Our History*); this period marked the dawning of the Scottish Enlightenment when Aberdeen's Wise Club were key to an intellectual discourse that changed western thinking (RSA). Gray's School of Art, now part of RGU, was established in 1885, at the same time as Aberdeen Art Gallery which holds a collection of national significance (ACC, *Art Gallery*). Aberdeen's northern boundary is marked by its second river, the River Don, which has also contributed to the city's history, economics, and culture. For centuries, paper and woollen mills, including the world-famous Crombie, thrived on its banks and textile production was the city's largest employer, with one mill employing 3,000 staff (P&J, *Broadford*).

While the city and surrounds have been home to notable creatives, including writers Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Lord Byron; musicians Annie Lennox, Dame Evelyn Glennie, and Emeli Sandé; fashion designer Bill Gibb and dancer Michael Clark, it has struggled to attract and retain creative talent, and there is a familiar exodus of art school graduates to the larger and more accepted creative cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London. In 2013, at the time of the CoC bid, ACC recognised that creative industries graduates leaving the city was "a serious issue" (ACC, *Cultural Mapping* 1).

## The City of Culture Bid

This recognition came at a time when ACC acknowledged that Aberdeen, with already low unemployment, required an influx of workforce. An ACC document (*Cultural Mapping*) cites Richard Florida's proposal that a strong cultural offer attracts skilled workers to a city, adding that they "look for a lively cultural life in their choice of location" (7) and quoting an oil executive: "our poor city centre is often cited as a major obstacle in attracting people" (7). Changing the image of the city to attract new residents appears to have been a key motivation for the CoC bid. The CoC assessor noted this in their review of the bid, citing a report that 120,000 recruits were required in the city and agreeing that Aberdeen needed to "change perceptions of the city to retain and attract talent" (Regeneris 1).

Aberdeen's CoC bid was rejected at the first shortlisting stage, with feedback that the artistic vision "lacked depth" and "that cultural activity in the city was weaker than in several other bidding areas" (Regeneris 3). In an exploration of the bidding process, McGillivray and Turner highlight two factors which link to other concerns and feedback about the bid. Firstly, they compare Aberdeen's choice of a Bid Manager from the business community with Paisley's choice of one from their local arts sector in their bid for CoC 2021, which was successful in being shortlisted, highlighting different motivators behind the bids. Secondly, Aberdeen secured a bid team member from "Pafos's bid to be 2017 European Capital of Culture (ECC), who subsequently played an important role" for Kalamata's 2021 ECC bid (41), showing Aberdeen's reluctance to develop local talent.

## A Decade of Investment

ACC responded to the "reality check" with a series of investments in the hard assets of the city. Major refurbishment of two key buildings, the Music Hall and the Art Gallery, caused them both to be closed for several years, significantly diminishing the cultural offer in the city. The Music Hall re-opened in 2018 (Creative Scotland) and the Art Gallery in 2019 (McLean). In 2021, the extended and updated Art Gallery was named "Scotland's building of the year" by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) (Museums Association). Concurrent with this was the development of "Europe's largest new events complex, TECA [now P&J live] part financed through a £370 million stock market bond issue" (InvestAberdeen).

Another cultural asset of the city which has been undergoing a facelift since 2019 is Union Terrace Gardens (UTG), the green heart of the city centre, gifted to the public in 1877. The development of this asset has had a chequered history. In 2008 it had been awarded "funding from Aberdeen Council (£3 million), the Scottish Arts Council (£4.3M) and Scottish Enterprise (£2 million)" (Aberdeenvoice) to realise a new multi-disciplinary contemporary art centre to be called 'Northern Light' and housed in a purpose-designed building (Brizac Gonzalez). The project, led by Peacock Visual arts, a printmaking centre of excellence and gallery founded in 1974, had secured planning permission. It would host Peacock Visual Arts, City Moves dance company, and the ACC arts development team. It echoed similar cultural partnership approaches, such as Dundee Contemporary Arts, although notably without involvement from the universities.

Three months later, a counterbid to radically re-think UTG as a vast new city square was proposed by oil tycoon Sir Ian Wood, who backed the proposal with £50 million of his own funds, requiring matching finance by the city and ownership of the Gardens passing to private hands. Resistance to these plans came from 'Friends of UTG', and a public consultation was held. ACC voted to adopt Wood's plans and drop those of Peacock, but a change of administration in the local authority overturned Wood's plans in August 2012. A significant portion of the funding

granted to the Northern Lights project was consumed in the heated public debate and the remainder was lost to the city, as was the Wood money, providing a highly charged backdrop to the CoC bid and an unfortunate divide created between the business and culture sectors that is arguably still discernible in the city today. According to the Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce (AGCC) 2022 Investment Tracker, the nearly complete UTG transformation has cost £28.3m. The AGCC trackers since 2016 provide a useful reference for a wider view of investment in the region over this period.

During this period, ACC commissioned two festivals: Spectra (ACC, *Culture Programme 5*), a festival of light curated by a Manchester-based organisation, and NuArt (VisitAberdeenshire, *Nuart*), a street-art festival curated by a Stavanger-based team. Both festivals deliver large-scale public spectacles but have little impact on the development of the cultural sector in the city. The drivers of footfall, income generation, and tourism are key motivators for these festivals, supporting a prevailing narrative of cultural consumption over cultural production in the city, despite Regeneris's concerns about "importing of cultural activity, which might not leave behind a cultural sector" (1) and ACC's own published concerns (ACC, *Cultural Mapping*).

It is important to note that in 2014 the oil and gas industry that brought prosperity to Aberdeen was severely impacted upon by a drop in price and revenue. Many jobs were lost, people left the city, and housing prices, previously inflated, fell dramatically. The attention of the authorities turned to economic regeneration of the city and in 2015, the Aberdeen City Region Deal (UK Gov), bringing £250m to the region, (REF) was signed between the UK Government, Scottish Government, ACC, Aberdeenshire Council, and Opportunity North East (ONE). ONE "is the private sector leader and catalyst for economic diversification in northeast Scotland" with board members from industry, enterprise, AGCC, the councils, the universities, the harbour, and NHS. ONE focuses on five 'pillars': Digital Technology, Energy, Life Sciences, Tourism and Food, and Drink & Agriculture.

## A Decade of Creativity and Cultural Development

Aberdeen's ambitious cultural capital infrastructure spending of the last decade has seen the creation or refurbishment of significant hard assets in the city. The development of people (Cohendet et al.), the soft assets that Landry and Comunian agree are essential to the complex system that is a Creative City, has also seen development over this time. In 2014, RGU commissioned a review of Creative Industries in the North East of Scotland. The report notes that:

the cultural sector in the region is strong at the grass roots end, but less so the higher up the scale it goes. There is no producing theatre, and no signature events or assets, although the revitalised art gallery might provide an opportunity to address this. (Ekos 2)

This was followed by an international conference at which other energy cities (Calgary, Houston, Perth, and Oslo) presented their culture strategies, providing useful comparators for Aberdeen and a second RGU report (RGU, *Regenerating*). A third report, (RGU, *New North*), set out a vision for the region's cultural future. The reports recommend strategy, leadership, and vision in the development of the cultural and creative soft assets of the region and the need to create conditions for graduate and practitioner retention.

Also in 2014, RGU initiated the Look Again Festival of Art and Design, an annual festival to address a gap in the city festival roster and meet a need arising from the closure of both Art Gallery and Music Hall for refurbishment. The first festival took place in 2015 with a weekend-long public event showcasing a series of thought-provoking installations and events which demonstrated a clear appetite amongst the public and partner organisations for more activity of this type. Between 2015 and 2019, the festivals grew from strength to strength and increased in size and ambition, “carving out a new creative community in Aberdeen” (Williams). The 2019 festival involved 119 creatives, the majority from the region, and created 62 paid opportunities. Look Again expanded and became a constant presence and vehicle for sectoral and skills development, supporting students, graduates, volunteers, and new collectives, focussing on social capital and the intangible creative community assets in the city. Creative practitioners were supported with a series of programmes such as ‘Cultivate’ (2018), funded by Creative Scotland, that provided mentoring to strengthen business sustainability and networking events to improve connectivity in the sector. Cultivate also provided an opportunity to undertake further research, and a survey of over 100 small and micro creative businesses presented a view of a tenacious sector, committed to staying in the region but lacking structured and tailored support. The project report noted consistent messages about the need for “a louder voice for the sector” and concluded that further work was needed to better profile, support, and connect the sector (Cultivate 15). Comunian’s work supports this call to give greater consideration to the interplay of the agents in the creation of a strong creative city.

In 2019, Look Again’s evolving role in creative sector skills development was recognised when they became part of Gray’s School of Art. A partnership quickly formed with the newly created Entrepreneurship & Innovation Group (EIG), a team formed within RGU to drive entrepreneurial thinking across all schools of the university. Together, Look Again and EIG ran a Creative Accelerator which became a prototype for a validated Creative Entrepreneurship post-graduate short-course that has supported around 120 creative graduates and practitioners with tailored business skills, contextual thinking, and extended peer networks. Meanwhile, another Look Again collaboration with the newly re-opened Art Gallery provided pop-up design events that many of these small businesses took part in, connecting them with public-facing retail opportunities and, for some, acquisitions for the Gallery’s collection.

## Culture Aberdeen

During this time and after a period of public consultation, a new collaborative group, ‘Culture Aberdeen’, emerged. Membership of the group includes many regional cultural and arts organisations including ACC, both universities, and Aberdeen Civic Forum, which seeks “to bring the voice and views of all communities to every possible level of decision making”. The group subsequently published *Culture Aberdeen: A Culture Strategy for the City of Aberdeen 2018-2028*, which was endorsed by ACC in their first Cultural Investment Impact Report. The strategy sets out a series of cultural ambitions including a bid to become a UNESCO Creative City, establishing an Aberdeen Biennale, and becoming a national centre of excellence for an (unspecified) artform. This collaboration brings a uniting vision to Aberdeen’s creative activity and places of culture and presents a more compelling identity as a creative city. It also begins to map to Comunian’s concept of CAS and establish a framework for realising the potential of hard assets by strategically envisioning and leading the agents, activities, and development of the city’s creative sector.

## Challenges for Delivery of the Strategy

In delivering a strategy based on collaborative efforts, it is essential to have shared goals and strong governance “based on characteristics such as trust, shared values, implicit standards, collaboration, and consultation” (Butcher et al. 77). Situations like Aberdeen’s tentative bid for UNESCO Creative City status, which began in late 2018 but was halted in early 2019, suggest that shared goals and clear governance may not be in place. Wishing to join other UNESCO cities across Scotland – Edinburgh (Literature), Glasgow (Music), and Dundee (Design) –, Aberdeen had set its sights on ‘City of Craft and Folk Art’; that title subsequently went to the city of Perth in 2022, limiting Aberdeen’s future hopes of securing UNESCO Creative City status. In 2022, Aberdeen is nearly halfway through its strategy timeline; to achieve its vision by 2028, the leadership recommended in 2014 needs to be established and given proper authority and backing.

Covid-19 has been particularly disruptive for the strategy, arriving early in its implementation and lasting for two years during which collaborators have, understandably, had to attend to core business and crisis management. Picking up the threads of collaborative activity at the same time as ‘returning to normal’ will be challenging. The financial impacts of Covid-19 have also hit arts organisations and local councils particularly hard, creating survival challenges that displace future investment plans. The devastation caused to city centres across the UK as shops close and retail moves online is keenly felt in Aberdeen.

Yet the pandemic has also seen the growth of pockets of new activity. With falling demand for business space resulting in more ‘meanwhile spaces’ and lower rents, practitioners have been able to access or secure spaces that were previously prohibitive. Deemouth Artists’ Studios, an artist-run initiative, has provided a vital locus of support and connectivity for creatives in the city, doubling in size over the past two years. ‘We Are Here Scotland’ arrived in response to the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, as a Community Interest Company initiated in Aberdeen to support black creatives and creatives of colour across Scotland. Initiatives such as EP Spaces that re-purpose empty offices as studios have created a resource, albeit precarious, for scores of recent creative graduates, supporting an emerging creative community.

The consequences of the pandemic for the decade of cultural investment and creative development are yet to be understood, but disrupted strategies are hard to rekindle. Culture Aberdeen’s ability to resolve or influence these factors is unclear. As a voluntary network without a cohesive role or formal status in the provision of culture in the city, and little funding and few staff to advocate on its behalf, it probably lacks the strength of leadership required. Nevertheless, work is underway to refresh the strategy in response to the post-pandemic needs of the city and culture, and the Creative Industries more broadly, are, once again, beginning to be seen as part of the solution to recovery as new narratives emerge.

There is a strong desire in the city’s and region’s creative communities to nurture, realise, and retain emerging talent to authentically enrich the city’s culture. Since the 2013 failed CoC bid, much has been done to rekindle confidence and shine a light on the rich creative culture that exists in Aberdeen, and creative communities are gaining a new voice for their work. Considerable investment has been made in hard cultural assets; however, continued investment in and commitment to the region’s soft assets is needed. This is the only way to ensure the sustainable local network of activity and practice that can provide the vibrant creative city atmosphere for which Aberdeen has the potential.

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### Hilary Nicoll, Robert Gordon University

Hilary Nicoll is a Senior Lecturer at Gray's School of Art where she delivers the Creative Futures programme, and Co-Director of Look Again, a creative unit embedded in the school that supports and promotes the creative sector in the region through a range of exhibitions, events and learning programmes, including the Creative Entrepreneurship course delivered with Sally Charles. Prior to joining Academia she worked for key institutions in the UK cultural and creative sector, including for The Arts Council of England, Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Aberdeenshire, and as consultant for Creative Scotland. She has a particular interest in organisational and creative sector development and artist-led initiatives.

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