

Big developments putting culture into the mix

By James Wilmore | 30 Mar 2026

Former mayor of New York City Michael Bloomberg wrote in an opinion piece in the London Evening Standard in 2018 that “cultural capital more than capital attracts culture”.



Artistic blend: the former ITV studios on London's South Bank will include a cultural hub

This, he argued, was because “the arts are a magnet for dreamers and innovators from every walk of life”.

The idea that arts and cultural assets such as theatres, museums and live music venues can be a vital part of mixed-use development proved increasingly popular in recent years.

“The appetite has grown and continues to grow,” says Joss Taylor, head of activation and enrichment at place management specialist Populate, part of developer Socius.

Developers, he argues, increasingly see the value in arts and culture and understand the benefits it can bring to a scheme: “Ten years ago they were having to do those things to fill voids, to activate space, but by doing that they have learned that there is a win-win situation”.

While few studies exist to prove the tangible financial benefits of incorporating arts and cultural assets in a development, some have shown the upsides. An Arup study for West Midlands Combined Authority, published in 2023, found that the benefits included higher tourism spend and “commercial and residential value increases”.

Wesley Ankrah, social value director at Savills, says the way developers are viewed by arts and cultural organisations has evolved in recent years.

“Developers were often seen as a cash cow to get things delivered,” he says. However, he suggests that cultural organisations are now more interested in working for the long term with developers across multiple schemes.



Captive audience: the auditorium at London Studios will be just one part of a wider cultural offering

In London, arts and cultural spaces are being incorporated into a wave of new development. On the South Bank, for example, developer CO-RE is overseeing the transformation of the former ITV studios into an £800m mixed-use development.

The 640,000 sq ft scheme will include a cultural hub known as 'London Studios', featuring galleries, rehearsal spaces, soundproof training facilities.

Having a cultural space in a scheme makes it a more attractive proposition, according to Bradley Baker, chief executive of CO-RE. "We are trying to use their buildings to differentiate themselves from the competition," he says.

Meanwhile, the revamped Olympia site in west London includes a 3,800-capacity music venue and a 1,575-seat theatre, while the £10bn redevelopment of nearby Earls Court include several arts and music venues (see box at end of article).

In Wales, a 16,500-capacity sports and music venue called New Cardiff Bay Arena is under construction as part of the wider Atlantic City masterplan. The scheme will include residential, hospitality and retail space.

However, funding remains a perennial challenge for arts venues. A 2024 study by the Campaign for the Arts found that the UK has the lowest levels of government spending on culture among the European nations. The study also found that many venues and producers scaled back their operations or shut down in recent years.

Taylor admits there are challenges for the arts and cultural sector, but says there are ways that developers can shelter themselves from these risks: "If you build it in from a pre-planning stage and work with an operator to understand their pinch points and business model allows you to weather those storms."

One option is to test what might work by allowing operators to take space for a limited period. At Earls Court, a 30,000 sq ft space was used for the immersive theatre show *Come Alive! The Greatest Showman Circus Spectacular* for the past 18 months, and prior to that the BBC Earth Experience used the same space.

Activities at the site began during the Covid pandemic, when the Underbelly Festival needed a new home.

Creating new experiences

“It gave us an insight into what we can do in terms of opening the site up, bringing people in and creating new experiences,” says Branton, development director at the Earls Court Development Company, a joint venture between Delancey, Transport for London pension fund manager APG.

Beyond the financial challenges for developers, there can be risks related to the types of venue they introduce, particularly if the residential element in the mix.

It can also affect how local authorities view any potential proposals.

“Where I’ve seen them [councils] be less enthusiastic is where the new use involves people coming out after 11 o’clock [in the evening],” says Mike Cook, arts and culture director at Avison Young. “Live music venues are less well received because they’re more likely to cause a time nuisance. But theatres, which are the majority, and concert halls and museums, would only be a benefit.”

Despite concerns, Taylor believes there is now a “far greater appetite” to deliver venues such as theatres and music venues. “That has to happen and intelligent developers that are doing masterplans are able to see it in a multiphased approach,” he says.

He has also seen a growing trend for multifunctional spaces to help drive footfall around the clock. “Developers are getting very good at delivering this,” he says. “It

could be a café in the daytime, a music venue in the evening, then a baker using it overnight.” But his advice to developers is to avoid creating a standard blueprint, as that approach inevitably fails.

Opinion appears divided over whether London is leading the way in the UK or is behind the curve on introducing cultural asset developments.

Embedding culture

“Cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and York have done it incredibly effectively, where culture has been embedded as part of the city,” says Taylor.

“Liverpool does it pretty well with music. London is catching up. It’s still seen as taking a risk if you’re building a massive mixed-use development around culture.”

Ankrah says he doesn’t see a “regional race to market” for culture being at the top of the agenda. “It depends which developers are operating in different areas.

But ultimately everyone’s getting on the same page with it. This seems to be largely the case with local government, too. A number of regional authorities have stressed the benefits.”

He cites the example of Cambridge. Last year, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council produced a cultural infrastructure strategy that stressed the importance of including affordable cultural spaces in new developments “to foster a vibrant cultural environment”.

Some London boroughs are also producing cultural masterplans to assess where assets should be located. Ankrah welcomes this as he says it will avoid mistakes of the past when developers built venues that were too similar to each other in close proximity.

Of course, the backdrop to all this is the ongoing Middle East crisis and concerns about future funding. So, could developers retreat to an outdated notion of arts and cultural assets being a ‘nice-to-have’ element in a development?

Branton is hopeful that arts and culture venues will continue to be included in major new developments. “There are always economic cycles,” he says. “We don’t necessarily anticipate every specific single one. But obviously, we anticipate there will be ups and downs.”

Transforming a 1930s icon



EC04 Culture Venue Entrance

Earls Court Exhibition Centre hosted a wide variety of events and acts before it was demolished in 2015. The BRIT Awards, the Home Show, Olympic volleyball in 2012 and legendary performances from Led Zeppelin, David Bowie and Oasis all took place at this iconic 1930s venue.

Now, after a long-running saga, the 44-acre site of the former exhibition centre is set to be transformed into a mixed-use neighbourhood with 4,000 homes, cultural venues and 20 acres of public green space.

Among the ideas put forward in the proposals for the £10bn scheme are three cultural venues: a 400-seat theatre, a 700-seat concert hall and an “immersive space”.

But as Tom Branton, development director at the Earls Court Development Company, says: “All three spaces are part of the outdoor component of the scheme, so they’re not detailed. We have done that on purpose, because we have been engaging with a whole range of operators.”

Plans are also in place for a “flower amphitheatre”, which is an attempt to recreate the stepped entrance to the original Earls Court.

“It’s the kind of Covent Garden piazza moment in terms of space outdoors,” says Branton.



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