

Cultural inequality in London:

Rethinking accessibility to culture

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KEY WORDS

Cultural inequality, cultural education, accessibility to culture, cultural infrastructure, creative cities, cultural capital, mix of use.

INTRODUCTION

Despite being one of the richest cities in the world, London is a place of profound inequalities both economic and social. Besides its wealth, London also stands out for its rich culture offer and is recognized as being a global art and cultural capital, yet we can also see cultural inequality among the struggles the city is trying to overcome. These inequalities can be observed and manifest themselves in multiple ways throughout the city and affect Londoners in different forms.

Culture inequality has many causes and consequences that will be discussed further on this paper and in the ongoing graduation research and that will result and be addressed in the design project. But first it is important to define culture. "Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior."¹ This acquired knowledge can range from language, perceptions, beliefs and norms of behaviors, for example. In this paper, *culture* will be understood as the different forms human societies express and transmit these acquired knowledges, which can be in form of art, music, religions, dance, rituals, architecture among others.

The word "culture" comes from the Latin "colere", which means to cultivate and nurture, to tend to the earth and grow. It shares its etymology with a number of other words related to actively fostering growth.² Every type or way of culture manifestation is than valid if it fosters growth. For this research the focus will be on the more traditional representations of culture, or what Pierre Bourdieu and other sociologists would define as "high culture". It can be said the term is outdated and maybe that it carries some prejudice, but it is being used in order to offer clarity to readers.

1. James Spradley, "Ethnography and Culture" in *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2012) 6-12.

2. Cristina De Rossi, anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London to 'Live Science' interview by Kim Ann Zimmermann, July 13, 2017. <https://www.livescience.com/21478-what-is-culture-definition-of-culture.html>

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Considered the world's cultural and creative capital, London has been struggling to keep the title and offer to all its citizens the same opportunities regarding culture. While other metropolises are investing heavily on their own cultural infrastructure and attracting first class artists, London has seen the collapse of cultural spaces for both production and consumption³ over the last decade, a worrying trend which just aggravates the problem of cultural inequality in the city.

Cultural inequality can manifest in different ways and the focus of this research will be on investigating two of its causes: access to culture and society/personal interest. Access to culture has to do with the direct access to buildings, structures and places where culture is either consumed, produced or learned, the cultural infrastructure. While society interest is influenced by educational phenomena and social dynamics.

The low interest of part of the society can be a consequence of educational, social and economic background. Young people from a less privileged background are significantly less likely to engage with a range of cultural activities⁴ which is a problem since "involvement with arts and culture is crucial to the imagination, self-expression and creativity in young people. It also develops the skills that fuel the success of the UK's creative industries, and that will result in the next generation of creative talent across the country."⁵

The cultural infrastructure of the city and its distribution within London is resulting in clusters and voids. Initial data analysis and mapping showed a concentration of cultural places in the central-north area of London (with special emphasis to the boroughs of Westminster, Camden and Hackney ranking first, second and third respectively) while the boroughs further from the center experience voids and absence. This uneven distribution makes this cultural inequality tangible and culture can still be considered a luxury that not everyone has access to in London.

3 . Greater London Authority. *Cultural Infrastructure Plan - A Call To Action*. London: Greater London Authority (2019) 7. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/cultural_infrastructure_plan_online.pdf

4. A New Direction & Arts Council England, *Cultural Capital Quantitative Survey - Final Report*. London: Public Perspectives, November 2014.

5. "Children and young people", Arts Council England, accessed October, 25, 2021. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-creativity-and-culture/children-and-young-people>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- I. Why is there a disproportioned cultural engagement between low income and high income residents of London?
 - i. How this affect children and young people in London?
- II. Can cultural infrastructure act as a catalyzer towards improving cultural equality?
- III. What would ideally be a good cultural distribution?
 - i. Would each borough have its own and independent (from the city) cultural infrastructure?
- IV. What combination of functions, uses and activities of a building would enhance access to culture and social cohesion?

The proposed questions will help with understanding the cultural inequality in London, its issues and thus learn more about the actor's necessities. As consequence, will make it possible to develop an adequate design proposal aligned with their expectations and needs.

HYPOTHESIS

When people are not exposed to art and culture on a younger age they are less likely to engage in these activities later on life, they feel as they are not part of this environment and not attend to cultural activities later on because they feel as they do not belong, or that it is not for them. It is a cycle and it has to have its course changed.

The hypothesis is that where there are clusters on the cultural infrastructure, people, especially children and young adults, will visit more cultural places and attend more often cultural activities regardless of their educational, social and economic background. In this way, having a more balanced and well distributed cultural infrastructure will facilitate the access to culture, while easing educational programs to happen in these places and as one of the consequences also influence the society interest.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this research will explore cultural inequality phenomes in order to understand social inclusion/exclusion in the context of London. It will analyze the social aspects that culture plays as well as the relation between location and cultural practice in contemporary London. This will be done in accordance to the works of Tony Bennet, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Ward, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright who published together the book *Culture, Class, Distinction (2008)*, among other publications and have extensive contribution on the studies of culture on the British context.

Considering his contribution to the field of social and cultural practices, Pierre Bourdieu will also be included in the framework of this research. Bourdieu concepts on cultural capital and how it can contribute to inequality will be an important base for the research. Another relevant theoretical source for a later stage of this research is *The Craftsman (2008)* of Richard Sennett, which explores the universe of skilled work, offering a new perspective on craftsmanship and the realm of its work.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This research started from my interest in inequalities and combining it with my fascination in art, crafts, cinema and social programs the main topic became clear: Cultural inequality. Historical and literature review combined with data mining were the starting point. With the initial data analysis it could be observed an asymmetry in the distribution of the cultural infrastructure of London. While investigating this asymmetry, quantitative research through data mining was carried in order to understand better this asymmetry in numbers. In possession of the data of the cultural infrastructure, the numbers were converted into positions in maps and the clusters and voids became evident.

In order to understand the cultural inequality in London it was necessary to investigate the causes of this phenomenon and which were the best ways to answer the research questions. So, besides more literature review, data analysis and cartographic mapping context-led research will also be relevant for the understanding of each place's values, the existing qualities and what would be an adequate response.

In parallel to the context-led research a typo-morphological research will also be conducted not to only understand the London cultural infrastructure itself, but the type of buildings these cultural institutions function in, see if there are common features among them and so on. Maybe material culture research could also be interesting, because there could be a connection to the functions and typology of these buildings. Case studies will also assist the investigation on cultural buildings with mix use, help to identify which functions, uses and programs would possibly enhance access to culture from an early age.

Since the Studio did not yet have the chance to visit London, fieldwork will be on a later stage than I am used to, but it is also important to do a qualitative analyzes of my findings after the fieldwork. Besides fieldwork, a combination of diverse heuristics techniques are going to be used for this research as cartographic mapping, photography and maybe videography. The qualitative analyzes alongside all the mappings with the different layers will help me in identifying suitable places which can support new developments and opportunities for enhancement.

DIAGRAM

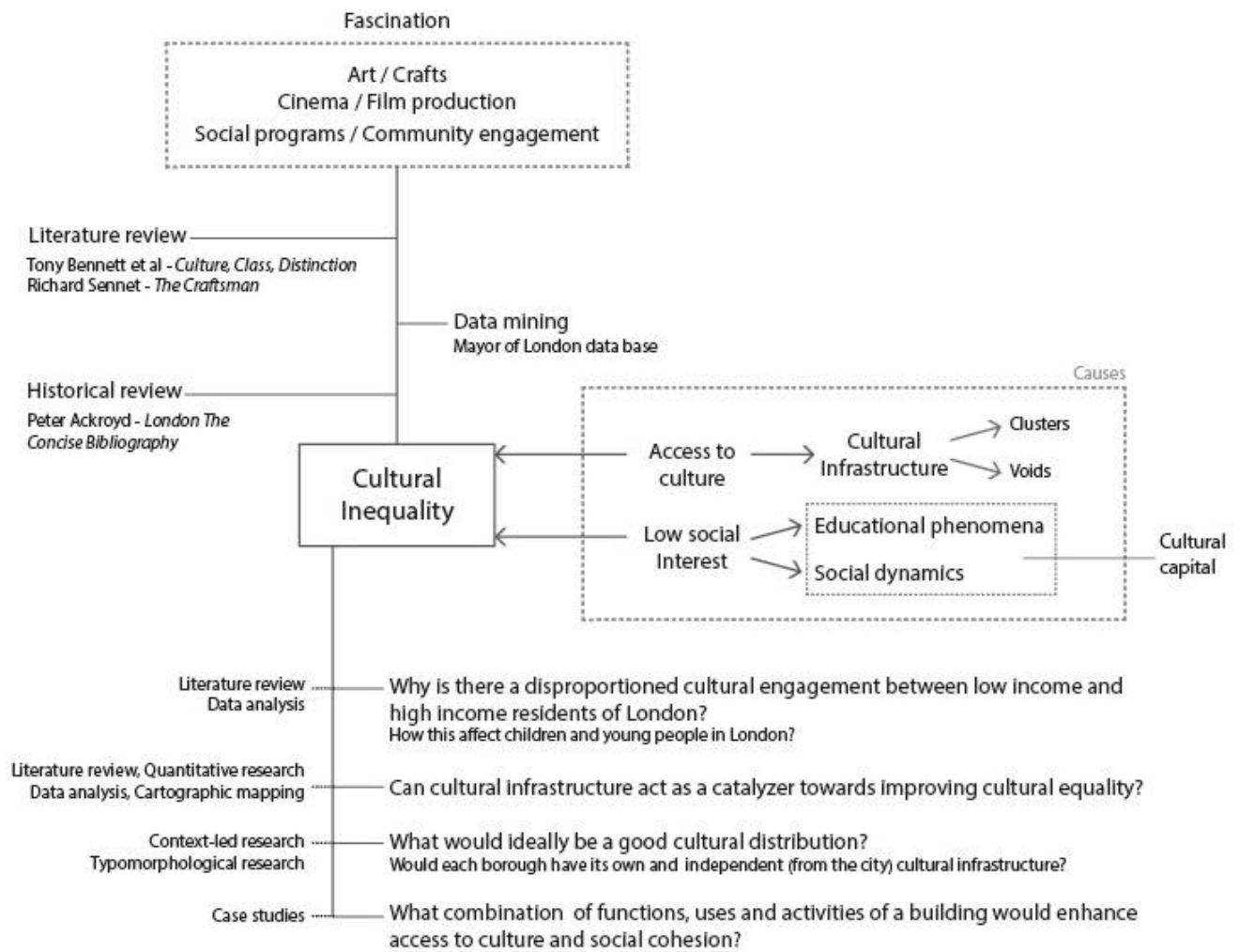


Figure 1: Research plan Diagram – The research process

RESEARCH RELEVANCE

The Mayor of London is mapping the cultural infrastructure of the city as well as the opportunity areas for future investments in the sector. The cultural inequality and the inequality in access to culture is already of their knowledge, but studies are still being carried out as more data is being made accessible.

They see the problem of the inequality and are asking for help in form of studies, investments and new ideas. So, the need for research in this area is clear and hopefully this research could help them in analyzing the data they have been collecting and offer a different point of view or approach.

The research is also based in the insight that London has a “natural” capacity for change and to adapt.⁶ Overlaying layers and layers of historic information, cultural and educational infrastructure data with other pertinent information will make it possible to understand the contemporary city through different perspectives and reconsider what to prioritize in new project developments.

6. Jane Manning et al, *Complex city: London's changing character*. (London: RIBA Enterprises, 2020), 153.

GLOSSARY

Cultural inequality: Unfair/unequal distribution of cultural capital among society.

Cultural infrastructure: Comprises the virtual and physical connection between all buildings, structures and places where culture is either consumed, produced or learned. In other words, the term includes the full range of premises and places that reflect the interests and needs of Londoners. It's about facilities like local arts centers, libraries, pubs, community centers, legal street art walls, creative workspace, rehearsal spaces and nighttime venues all playing an important role in bringing our communities together. ⁷

Cultural consumption: As cultural consumption are being considered the places where culture is experienced, participated in, showcased, exhibited or sold. For example, museums, galleries, art centers and outdoor spaces for cultural uses.

Cultural production: As cultural production are being contemplated the places where creative work is made. It includes: artists workspaces, makerspace, creative co-working desk space and creative workspaces for example.

Cultural education: For cultural education libraries, archives, community centers and schools are being considered. Understood as places and institutions where knowledge is passed through in written or oral mean.

Cultural leisure: As cultural leisure are being counted theatres, cinemas and music venues.

Cultural Capital: Tangible and intangible assets held by an individual or society as a whole as related to education, history, social dynamics, arts, costumes among others.

Accessibility: The concept consists of the ability to get something easily.⁸ The absence of obstacles that jeopardize a person's engagement with something.

7. GLA. *Cultural Infrastructure Plan - A Call To Action*.

8. Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

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