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The Sheffield Media and Exhibition Centre (henceforth referred to as the Media Centre, as it was by stakeholders and the press for nearly seven years between 1988 and 1995) was the flagship of Sheffield City Council's ambitious plans for urban regeneration in the city in the 1990s. Eventually named the Showroom Cinema and Workstation—the latter a complex of offices and conference spaces for local media and creative businesses—the Media Centre was intended to serve as a cultural, economic, and social hub in the south east of Sheffield's city centre, an area that had become increasingly derelict and void of cultural and social life since the rapid decline in the city's once strong steel industry in the 1980s. Architecturally, the Media Centre was meant to signal to regional, national, and even international media and communications industries that Sheffield was a renewed city looking towards the future—'themes of the century', as it was deemed by the Council's Department for Employment and Economic Development (DEED).[1] Economically, it was meant to rejuvenate Sheffield's urban core and bring about the development of a creative economy. But more important for the cultural stakeholders involved in the project—the Board members of Sheffield Media and Exhibition Centre Ltd (SMEC), the private charity overseeing the development—it was meant to serve as a radical transformative site that would unleash the creative potential of the people of Sheffield. Far from merely being a corporate, urban redevelopment scheme, or even *just* a

cinema, SMEC's cultural stakeholders wanted the Media Centre to become a utopian space for education, production, and distribution to challenge mainstream media industries. They were attempting to reimagine the architectural space of cinema as an urban space capable of transformative societal change, in which the Media Centre would be a place for *all* the people of Sheffield. Indeed, the Media Centre was positioned by Board members as the public focus of the wider Cultural Industries Quarter (CIQ) urban development scheme in which it was located. The CIQ was a designated zone in the south east of the city centre in which former cutlery workshops and warehouses were being converted into gallery spaces, offices, and art exhibition sites.

This article traces the history of the development of the Media Centre between 1988 and 1995, focusing on the motivations of cultural stakeholders—the SMEC Board of Directors made up of academics, cultural managers, filmmakers, artists, cinema programmers, and politicians. The article situates the Media Centre's development within wider strategies of urban planning in Sheffield in the 1980s and 1990s to understand how the urban utopianism of the cultural stakeholders was borne out of the left-wing politics of Sheffield in the early 1980s, but was outdated by the early 1990s, when urban development was seen as the domain of facilitating private and public partnerships.[2] The article also situates the development of the Media Centre within the contexts of Sheffield as a post-industrial city—the 'post-Steel City'—and looks to understand the ways in which SMEC invested confidence in the media and communications industries to help the city transition from its former industrial base of steel production to a new creative economy. In doing so, the article reframes understanding of the Showroom Cinema, of its origins, of what it has become, and what it could have been, allowing for a wholesale rethinking of the urban space that the Showroom now inhabits and the radical urban potentialities it represents (but ultimately, I would argue, failed).

Current literature typically incorporates the history and understanding of the Media Centre/Showroom Cinema into wider histories of the CIQ. Linda Moss's assessment of the Media Centre merits only one brief sentence, stating that it was a project developed by DEED and handed over to, 'charitable management companies'.[3] But no mention is made of how the Media Centre became the Showroom, which itself is almost treated as a separate project. Nick Oatley's summary of the CIQ in 1996 confusingly describes the cinema as, 'the Showroom Media and Exhibition Centre', but with no further discussion of the original cultural vision for the cinema. Instead, Oatley simply states that the cinema, 'opened in the remainder of the building [Kennings]' with two cinema screens.[4] Similarly, Gordon Dabinett provides a cursory description of the Showroom as a 'performance venue' in the CIQ, while Simon Roodhouse's overview of the Showroom states that it was a central project for the CIQ, but provides no detail as to why.[5] Stuart Smith and Clifford Shaw's account of the Showroom, part of their wider survey of Sheffield's cinema exhibition infrastructure by the end of the 1990s, does not make any reference as to the original Media Centre plans.[6] This is not to suggest these scholarly accounts do not provide solid contextual studies of the cultural development of the surrounding area, but rather that they do not provide the sustained study required into the failure of the vision for what became the Showroom Cinema. Instead, the Showroom is habitually framed as being one of the few instances of success in the CIQ, a project that itself has been deemed as ineffective.[7] The existing history of the Showroom therefore either misrepresents or even ignores the original vision for the space and the compromises that were ultimately made; the Showroom is framed as having opened in exactly the way that had been planned from the beginning–as an arthouse cinema–rather than acknowledging that the failed vision for the urban space it now inhabits was very different.

This article's focus on the original vision for the Media Centre serves as an instrumental case study in contemporary new cinema history and urban cultural studies. It

allows for a focus on the development of cultural spaces within a post-industrial context to understand stakeholder motivations, aspirations, and negotiations and of how the cinema as an architectural space was being (re)conceived during this time period. New cinema history examines the cinema as, 'a site of social and cultural exchange.'[8] The field takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the architectural and social space of cinema, focusing on architecture, space, audiences and consumption via, 'history, geography, cultural studies, economics, sociology and anthropology, as well as film and media studies'.[9] The new cinema history has rewritten film and media history from the perspective of the social, cultural, and political lives of cinemas, utilising empirical methods, including interviews and archival research. This article draws upon archival documentation, including the business papers of the SMEC Board of Directors held at the Sheffield City Archive, comprised of minutes of meetings along with extensive correspondence. In addition, I have consulted the papers of Sylvia Harvey, donated to Sheffield Hallam University in 2019. The papers document Harvey's activities at DEED, as well as her various roles in SMEC. The archival documentation is used to interpret the motivations of the stakeholders involved in the project and to trace the struggles of the SMEC Board to successfully realise the Media Centre project. The archival material is used to trace the evolving vision of these stakeholders, the intense, hard work involved in attempting to bring into life a new, alternative media space, and how the vision for reimagining the architectural and cultural possibilities of the cinema within a post-industrial context ultimately failed, impeded by wider political, industrial, and economic contexts.

Origins

The vision for what the Media Centre could achieve was influenced by the state of crisis Sheffield faced by the mid-1980s, with its entire economic, cultural, and social infrastructure having been over reliant on its steel industry. The city had not diversified its industrial base and, following the dramatic decline in industrial and manufacturing employment between 1978 and 1984 (with a loss of nearly 60,000 jobs during that time period),[10] political and cultural managers in the city recognised the need for action. In 1987, the Sheffield City Council commissioned a feasibility study by the Urban and Economic Development Group (Urbed), a not-for-profit urban regeneration consultancy group based in London, into the redevelopment of the former Kennings car showroom and garage. The aim was to convert Kennings into, 'attractive studios for the "cultural industries"'.[11] It was part of a wider strategy led by the council's Department for Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to regenerate and revitalise the city's urban core and to ignite alternative industries.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Sheffield was undergoing the painful transition from 'Steel City' to 'post-Steel City'. But Sheffield was at a disadvantage as it transitioned to a new identity. One research report into the state of the city's economy concluded that, '[Sheffield] continues to have a number of "missing pieces" in its broader identity of a kind which we would associate with a fully modern city'.[12] It lacked any kind of established film, media, or communications industry (though, it did possess a radical, independent filmmaking culture, including the likes of Sheffield Independent Film [SIF] and the Sheffield Film Co-operative between the 1960s and 1980s).[13] Sheffield's cinema exhibition infrastructure in the city centre had also collapsed by the 1980s. The heyday of Sheffield's post-war cinema circuit came in 1951, when the city had over 50 active cinemas.[14] Many of these cinemas were large urban or suburban first run cinemas showing Hollywood or British films, with a lack of alternative exhibition spaces screening European or other foreign language films. There were groups such as the Sheffield Film Society, the City Film Kine Society, and

Sheffield University Film Unit, while the Library Theatre, underneath the Central Library, screened foreign language films. By the 1980s, Sheffield's cinema infrastructure in the city centre was disappearing, with even its few alternative exhibition spaces closing (Studio 5, 6, 7 on the Wicker closed in 1987 and the Anvil closed in 1990).[15] The Cinecenta Twin cinemas underneath the Fiesta Nightclub on Flat Street, which screened films that the major cinemas refused to show, was itself incorporated into a new Odeon multiplex on Arundel Gate by the beginning of the 1990s. This new Odeon multiplex became one of the only major cinemas in the city centre by 1993, with the city centre only having nine screens in operation: the Odeon multiplex with seven screens and the Odeon (Barkers Pool) with two screens. The retraction in the available cinema exhibition sites in the city centre was redressed by the opening of new multiplexes across the city's peripheries and South Yorkshire throughout the early1990s, totalling 17 screens by 1993.[16] Yet, cultural stakeholders in the city recognised the urgent need for an alternative, and substantial, film and media exhibition space in the city centre.

It was to the media and cultural industries—broadly defined by the council at the time as, 'cultural activities which are distributed to a mass audience by technological means, they include books, films, videos, and records, as well as the related technologies of "telecommunications, data transmission and audio-visual reproduction processes'—that the city's political leaders turned in a bid to regenerate its urban core.[17] It was predicted that the media and cultural industries would grow by 30 percent in the UK by the end of the 1980s, and so they became the touchstone of urban regeneration across major British cities undergoing a similar process of deindustrialisation.[18] The Greater London Council (GLC) was instrumental in asserting the role of cultural industries in local policy-making and urban regeneration during the early 1980s,[19] both as a force for economic growth, but more importantly for the empowerment of citizens and the provision of access to the 'means of cultural expression'.[20] The GLC's cultural policy, rather than focused on enterprise, was

conceived as a means of conveying radical ideas and political messages. Culture for the GLC was, 'not just about aesthetics, it was about social groups'.[21] Culture was seen as a political act that could be funded and utilised by public bodies for social good *and* potential social transformation.

By 1993 academics concluded that, 'During the last twenty years cultural policy has become an increasingly significant component of economic and physical regeneration strategies in many west European cities'.[22] By the end of the 1980s, many UK cities were turning to the cultural industries to regenerate their economies, including Birmingham (it established the Economic Development Committee), Liverpool (via its Arts and Cultural Industries Strategy), Nottingham (established the Media Consortium), Glasgow (developed the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign in the 1980s, leading to its bid for the City of Culture in 1990), and Cardiff (established the Cardiff Media City office). Each of these cities was, 'focused on strategies to expand economic activity', establishing committees, working groups and councils to expand employment across broadcasting, the audio-visual industries, music, and film production.[23]

But Sheffield, through DEED, led the way in emphasising the cultural industries as an economic enterprise in a bid to restart and grow the economies of cities, as well as providing space to cultural projects in the process of moving people out of unemployment. Sheffield's cultural industries policies led to the establishment of the Cultural Industries Quarter (CIQ) in 1987. The CIQ represented a blend of cultural provision and industrial growth and was part of the local council's plan to reinvent Sheffield as a cultural hub. It was envisaged that the CIQ would also serve as a national, even international, tourist destination and cultural attraction. The latter included plans for what became the ill-fated National Centre for Popular Music. The vision of the CIQ amounted to Sheffield's political leaders confidently predicting

that the city would become the, 'Covent Garden of the North'.[24] A number of council funded projects had already been established in the area prior to the CIQ, most notably the Leadmill—a community centre and arts venue, later to become an established music venue in the city—and Red Tape Municipal Recording Studios. There was also a series of private ventures, including studios founded by local bands such as Comsat Angels and their Axis Recording Studios, and a studio established by Human League. In 1988, the Audio-Visual Enterprise Centre (AVEC), a managed workspace that acted as a production and training base for film, music, and photography, was opened. This was immediately adjacent to the Kennings building. With the opening of AVEC, and the establishment of the CIQ, there was a growing impetus within the council and the Chamber of Commerce to develop a flagship programme that could serve as a catalyst for the future growth of the media and communication industries. As such, Kennings was chosen as the site for the project that became the Media Centre.

The Vision

Kennings was chosen as the site for the Media Centre because of its location and physical presence, serving as a gateway to the city and to the new CIQ. It was also a building owned by the council. Constructed in the 1930s as a service garage, the building had fallen into disrepair. It stood empty on the intersection of Paternoster Row and Shoreham St, opposite Sheaf Square and the central railway station. Consisting of five floors and over 112,000 square feet in size, it dominated the city centre landscape for those emerging into Sheffield from the railway station. Urbed concluded that Kennings, 'could easily create a new "landmark" with electronic display screens that would symbolise the cultural industries quarter and the regeneration taking place in the city'.[25] From the outset, the architectural

significance—the space and place of the Media Centre—was uppermost in the thoughts of stakeholders involved in the project. The Media Centre was to serve as an architectural marking post for the CIQ, acting as the public face of Sheffield's new identity, signalling to citizens and businesses that this was the gateway to the post-steel city's new cultural, social, and industrial makeup.

Urbed recommended a mixed-use strategy of Kennings, making it more than just a cinema. The aim was to maximise the location of the building by incorporating, 'major "people drawing" facilities'—cafes, bars, galleries, and of course a cinema.[26] It was an approach that appealed to council leaders, who wanted to encourage major public use of the CIQ and felt that there was a danger, 'of producing a central commercial area devoid of life and safety at night and at weekends'.[27] The strategy involved relocating the Anvil Civic Cinema, located on Furnival Gate, to the Media Centre. Part of the Media Centre would become 'managed workspace' for small, creative businesses, part of it would become a film studio, while the foyer would feature shared production facilities, including a TV studio, 'to give the building a public impact'.[28] The design of the Media Centre was meant to attract both private financing and, 'creative and productive people to the area';[29] the latter was perceived as being vital to the success of the Media Centre (and the CIQ generally) and would lead to a flourishing social scene with, 'eating places and a general ambiance'.[30]

The idea of a 'media centre' had come to dominate the cultural agenda of funding bodies like the British Film Institute (BFI) and the Arts Council in the 1980s, which were sponsoring similar schemes across the regions at the time, commencing with Bristol's Watershed, a cinema complex on the city's harbourside that opened in 1982. The Watershed's branding as 'Britain's first media centre' allowed it to attract public and private stakeholder investment and to contribute to the broader redevelopment of the harbour area.[31]

But the overriding focus on developing media centres was due to a desire to facilitate spaces of experimentation, research, training, production, and distribution for new emerging digital media art forms. And national funding bodies like the BFI were keen to facilitate regional partnerships that would encourage a deeper connection between media practitioners and the surrounding local cultures. As Andrew Dewdney and Peter Ride argue, the aim was, 'to bring the means of media production to a wider and more diverse group of practitioners'.[32]

Radical potential underpinned the idea of a 'media centre'. The aim was for such centres to go beyond providing alternative media content in the way that, for example, the municipal Anvil Cinema did in Sheffield. The Anvil, which opened in 1983, was council owned and offered a diverse programme of alternative and world cinema. But the plan for the new Media Centre was for it to act as both a site of alternative exhibition *and* production. It would stimulate urban regeneration and attract media and communications industries via a four-pronged approach: it would provide education and training, production facilities, distribution and exhibition facilities, and research and development. The Media Centre would act as a democratic space in which the forces of media production were refashioned to empower the city's citizens. The people would take ownership of the tools of production—cameras, editing, writing—as well as develop critical skills in media studies in order to hold the mainstream media to account, while the cinema itself would offer a programme of alternative media to awaken the city's citizens to the full range of global film. In summary, the Media Centre was conceived as an experimental site for political opportunity in the post-industrial city, and as a space that linked the urban environment to cultural production.

Comparisons between the Media Centre and the Anvil Cinema were strongly discouraged by all those involved, including at the BFI. Steve McIntyre, the BFI's Funding and Development Officer, noted his displeasure of references to the Anvil in a letter to

DEED: 'As I've said on a number of occasions, it is both misleading and somewhat belittling of the [Media Centre] to describe it thus. Is it possible to nail this one once and for all? This is not to say that the Media Centre will not build upon the work of the Anvil, but to be clear that it is a very different operation'.[33] David Patmore, the Director of the Sheffield City Council Arts Department, reiterated McIntyre's point to SMEC: 'The [Media Centre] would not be called the Anvil as it will have a far larger remit and impact than a regional film theatre'.[34] So just what was the vision that council leaders and other stakeholders had that made the Media Centre more than just another art house cinema?

Following a further feasibility study sponsored by DEED and delivered in December 1988, DEED assembled a Sheffield Media and Exhibition Centre Steering Group in 1989.[35] The group consisted of eight officers of DEED, seven city councillors, representatives from key council departments, representatives from the Yorkshire Arts Association (later Yorkshire and Humberside Arts [YHA]) and the BFI, Dave Godin (Anvil), architects, a council media education advisor, a representative of the central library media unit, and members of the local cultural and academic community, including Sylvia Harvey (Sheffield City Polytechnic, later Sheffield Hallam University), Colin Pons (Sheffield Independent Film), and Matthew Conduit (Untitled Gallery). Most of those involved at this stage would become directors of SMEC. All of them brought a perspective rooted in the radical potential of culture as a means of social transformation and were committed to the wider 'remit' of the Media Centre project. Beyond the Anvil's Dave Godin (who strongly objected to the Media Centre's development), most of the stakeholders on the steering group were involved in education, research, cultural policy, and media production, rather than in cinema management.

SMEC was incorporated as a limited company on November 20, 1989 and remained closely aligned with the council. This was largely as a means of accessing funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which required the company to be, 'local authority influenced'.[36] This meant there was a constant representation on the board from the council's Arts Department, the Education Department, and DEED, as well as a representative of the Chamber of Commerce. But the majority of board directors were from the local cultural and academic community, taking key positions, most notably Pons, who was appointed chair of SMEC, and Harvey, appointed deputy chair, both in August 1989.[37]

Pons was an independent filmmaker and the coordinator of Sheffield Independent Film Ltd (SIF), a company established in 1976 (Pons joined in 1983) with open membership that provided facilities and training to independent producers and filmmakers in the region, as well as other educational film and video production activities for the people of Sheffield. SIF's overriding objective was to, 'enhance the quality of life for its members through funding, redistribution, training programmes and equipment provision'.[38] The organisation was egalitarian in its approach to media production and training, principles that would inform Pons's perspective as chair of SMEC. Harvey was an academic based in the Centre for Popular Culture (CPC). The CPC was a radical centre of education with a focus on cultural policy. The academic team published a series of cultural industries reports, including one by Harvey written for the city council in 1988. The reports advocated the role of cultural industries in both the urban regeneration and the social transformation of post-industrial cities like Sheffield. Harvey was also an executive member of the Independent Filmmaker's Association (IFA), an umbrella organisation for underground, radical, independent filmmakers, distributors, exhibitors, and teachers from across the UK and which, 'represented one of the most vital currents of Left culture' in the UK in the 1980s.[39]

So what was the vision for the Media Centre that these stakeholders had? What follows is an analysis of the vision across the themes of space, education, and industry.

Space

The architectural vision for the Media Centre was ambitious. The aim was to create a, 'forward looking media and exhibition centre equipped with the latest technologies, capable of providing a new service for the 1990s and seeking to combine and serve the arts, education and business worlds' centre'.[40] It was to contain a mixture of retail units, social spaces, education facilities, conference rooms, a media library, cinema auditoria, offices, and studios for film, television broadcasting, and other artistic endeavours. It was to be a multi-functional space that bridged the full spectrum of media industries, from development and research through production, post-production, distribution, and ultimately exhibition. And it was to welcome both professionals and practitioners, as well as the public, to make use of the space.

The architectural focal point was to be the 'prow', a protruding new frontispiece to the Kennings building that would feature a saucer-like roof with an array of satellite dishes and electronic signage at a cost of £1.5 million.[41] The prow would contain state of the art offices and broadcasting studios. With imposing pillars, glass-fronted offices, and balustrades, it was meant to act, in effect, as an impressive front door for the Media Centre and to attract potential clients. SMEC wanted Yorkshire Radio Network (YRN) to base its headquarters in the prow. YRN had formed following the amalgamation of several Yorkshire-based commercial radio stations, including Radio Hallam, Radio Viking, and

Pennine Radio in the late 1980s. By late 1989, SMEC was in discussions for YRN to take over the prow's first and second floor broadcasting suite and to cover the costs of its construction through a higher-rental rate.[42] The prow would also incorporate social space for the wider public, including seating areas and balconies overlooking Sheaf Square. The lower floor of the prow would contain space for retail units, further opening up the Media Centre to the public and to entice them into the actual building. As such, before even getting to any kind of traditional cinematic space, visitors to the Media Centre would be greeted by a variety of commercial office suites, production facilities, and retail outlets, challenging the very notion of the Media Centre being a traditional art house cinema.

At the heart of the Media Centre would be a grand foyer spread across two floors and featuring a mezzanine level. Visitors would travel through the foyer along a walkway labelled 'the mall'. The mall would be lined with further shops, including a bookshop, a shop selling posters and greeting cards, along with cafés, a bar, and a restaurant. It also had a CIQ information point. There were also to be a number of meeting rooms, studios, and edit suites (these were to be used both by practitioners but also linked with the education activities of the centre), and an exhibition and display area around the foyer. A box office with adjacent kiosk was toward the centre of the upper ground floor. At the rear of the upper ground floor was a preview theatre with 80 seats and cinema number three with 87 seats. The preview theatre was initially designed with added flexibility, meaning that it could be transformed when needed for a, 'variety of uses, including professional presentations and product launches, conferences and education events'.[43] Adjoining the preview theatre was a library, a video booth, and a dedicated 'media club' space. The library was both an information point and study space, stocked with videos that could be rented or viewed in the video booth and that, 'reflected the programming of the cinema' but also work produced by local, independent filmmakers or funded by the Arts Council.[44] The lower ground floor featured cinema number

one, with 276 seats, and cinema number two, with 174 seats. And finally, there was to be a crèche that could be used both by those that worked in the centre and by visitors.

The Media Centre was devised as a factory of media development, production, exhibition, and education/training. One could walk along the 'mall' and encounter each of the phases of the development process in the media industries. And it also recognised that the nature of cinema was changing, both in terms of the medium it projected—film—and in the nature of its architectural space. By the end of the 1980s, there had been a rapid rise in the development multiplex cinemas across the UK. Multiplexes were multi-screen cinemas that contained a multitude of other entertainment options, including restaurants, social clubs, discotheques, and bowling alleys. The multiplex fundamentally changed the cinematic landscape and turned the space of the cinema into a fully functioning leisure and dining complex. By the start of the 1990s, Sheffield had acquired out-of-town multiplexes such as the ten-screen UCI at the newly opened Crystal Peaks retail park on the south east border of the city (opened in 1988), and with a further multiplex as part of the development of the Meadowhall shopping centre (Meadowhall opened in 1990 and its onsite multiplex, the Warner Bros Theatre, opened in 1993). The Media Centre was responding both to market changes in cinema but also to the competition that these new out-of-town entertainment venues presented.

Early plans for the Media Centre made its cafes, bar, and other catering facilities a prominent feature. As one strategy document noted, these eateries were intended to provide, 'a convivial meeting place' throughout the day and 'well into the evening for relaxation […] These facilities are not only for visitors but also provide a service for the companies and individuals who work in the [Cultural Industries] Quarter'.[45] Ian Wild, an officer at DEED and a former employee at the Anvil (and appointed director of the Media Centre/Showroom

in 1994), took a particular interest in the catering facilities. He had visited other media centres in the UK, including Bristol's Watershed and the Manchester Cornerhouse; he was particularly attracted to the tapas bar that had been incorporated into the design of the Watershed.[46] Wild sensed that there was an 'expanding market' for catering in the CIQ and that a café, wine bar, and/or restaurant was, 'a vital part of the media centre's operation and will be critical to achieving a desirable atmosphere for the centre'.[47]

Education

The SMEC Board held the belief that the Media Centre had a responsibility to provide inclusive educational activities. SMEC's Ian Wild argued that board members had a, 'cultural and social responsibility' to ensure education, diversity, and non-mainstream media provision was at the heart of the Media Centre.[48] There was also an element of market differentiation in SMEC's commitment to education, given the increase in multiplex cinemas. As was made clear in the Media Centre's draft education policy, it needed, 'policies and programmes aimed at extending access to film in a way that draws upon educational practice as a means of promoting greater participation, understanding, and enjoyment of all aspects of film and media culture'.[49] Education was the crucial focus of the initial vision of the SMEC Board, with the Media Centre's architectural design clearly foregrounding space as a site of learning. The Board also had members that were dedicated education practitioners, most notably Sylvia Harvey. As early as May 1989, Harvey was pushing for the establishment of a Media Centre Education Working Group and convened a meeting of interested media educationalists from across the region that summer.[50] The aim was to make the Media Centre a, 'pioneer in media education'.[51]

Harvey explored ways of incorporating the existing Sheffield Media Unit—a voluntary group formed in 1984 and housed in the Sheffield Central Library—into the Media Centre. The Media Unit was a unique community group that combined, 'media and arts practice (video, drama, writing, photography and computing) with critical literacy' and in the process explored how the media operates and how media texts create meaning.[52] By the mid-1980s, the Media Unit had become a leading national organisation for media education. That the Media Unit was being considered for inclusion as part of the wider educational strategy of the Media Centre is significant. It demonstrates that SMEC Board members were not overlooking education at this early stage, but actively seeking means of creating a radical education programme.

Harvey next formed the SMEC Education Working Group in June 1989.[53] The group was attended by representatives from Sheffield Polytechnic, the Media Unit, the council's Education Department, Sheffield Libraries, DEED, Norton College, and SIF. Together, these stakeholders looked to outline a vision of what media education in a post-industrial city could achieve. Education was linked to both the issue of space—opening up the Media Centre as a site of social and cultural transformation and allowing access to all groups in society—and industry. This latter point was emphasised through the very architectural design of the Media Centre; its conference spaces, studios, and post-production suites were not envisaged as exclusive spaces for professional media practitioners, but as spaces that opened up the entire process of media production to the people of Sheffield.

The Education Working Group explored plans to deliver in-service provision at the Media Centre, including short courses to members of the public. These courses would be focused on film and media studies and media production (incorporating classes on script writing, video production, radio production etc), concentrating on areas that regional

educational providers were not delivering. It was agreed that the short courses could serve as, 'non-academic courses for general interest students who were not necessarily seeking any qualification'.[54] The Media Unit could collaborate with other organisations, like SIF, to provide technical training to the public. Many of the production focused courses at places like Sheffield Polytechnic were expensive, presenting a barrier to opportunity, but the Group believed the Media Centre could provide a lower-cost/lower-level technical education of a broadcasting standard. This could only be achieved if all media production educationalists in the city pooled their physical resources into the Media Centre.

It was agreed that some members of the public may not have previously considered undertaking a cultural education, or may not have had access to university education, meaning that the Media Centre could provide courses that were 'easily accessible' to a broader section of society.[55] If sites of higher education were seen as elitist by members of the public, then the Media Centre had a responsibility to serve as a link between the people of Sheffield (and beyond) and the formal education provided by further and higher education institutions. In short, the Media Centre would, 'provide the link into media studies'.[56] This link would also be developed through the cinema programming activities of the Media Centre, with programmers reflecting on the course content of surrounding educational institutions so as to provide complementary screenings, seasons, and talks.[57] The Group also wanted the cinema programme to respond to issues of diversity to encourage audiences that may have previously been shut out from alternative media venues. The Group agreed that cinema programming and educational activities had to engage with local and national events i.e. International Women's Day, or issues of representation on screen.[58]

Industrial Vision

Integral to the vision of the Media Centre was the idea that it would be an active site of media production and distribution. This depended on encouraging independent media professionals and larger media organisations to base themselves wholly or partially within the Media Centre or the surrounding CIQ. And the SMEC Board had genuine optimism that such a vision was achievable. It was an optimism predicated on a variety of wider industrial and regulatory contexts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which time the national media industries landscape was rapidly transforming. Between the Peacock Committee of 1986—a review into the financing and structure of the BBC—through the white paper *Broadcasting in the 90s: Competition, Choice and Quality* (1988)—which recommended putting ITV franchises out for private tender—to the 1990 Broadcasting Act—which allowed for the creation of a fifth analogue channel, the outsourcing of BBC production to independent companies, and the growth of satellite television, among other things—the SMEC Board sensed that the 1990s presented a, 'broadcasting big bang'.[59] The then Conservative government was initiating a process of opening up opportunities for more television and radio channels, as well as presenting new opportunities for private independent production companies to provide content to the major national broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4. The 1990 Broadcasting Act also invited bids from UK cities to host the headquarters of the new fifth channel, Channel 5.

The original Media Centre feasibility study had noted that the transforming regulatory landscape of the media industries presented, 'both dangers and opportunities for more locally based media production, in radio, cable, video and television. A Media Centre could be a major focus for altering media producers, distributors and viewers of this new potential market'.[60] Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Sheffield based producers had primarily had success in devising programmes for broadcast through two Channel 4 franchised workshops based in the city, Steel Bank Films and the Sheffield Film Co-Op.[61] But SMEC feared that if

Sheffield did not substantially invest in its media facilities, then it would ultimately be bypassed in the 'broadcasting big bang' for either emerging or more established 'media cities' such as Cardiff, Manchester, and Leeds. The latter was the primary centre of media production in Yorkshire and was the main base in the region for both ITV and the BBC, placing Sheffield at an immediate disadvantage.

SMEC did not rely solely on the main space of the Media Centre to act as the industrial hub for Sheffield. It was developing a 'managed workspace' within the Kennings building (what eventually became the Workstation), which would ensure that the Media Centre was part of a wider cultural industries complex. Board members were encouraged to utilise their cultural networks to lobby individuals and businesses to move into the managed workspace and to promote the overall development of the Media Centre. In doing so, the utopian vision of the Media Centre being a space for the people of Sheffield and providing alternative media content did at times become blurred. For example, in late 1989 and early 1990, the Board briefly flirted with the idea of introducing an IMAX cinema in the CIQ. The Board believed the IMAX could act as a tourist attraction for the area, whilst not being in direct competition with the Media Centre operation.[62] The latter point was predicated on the belief that the IMAX would only screen 'specialised product'.[63]

The IMAX proposal was pursued by Ian Wild. It was Wild, along with Pons, Harvey (who was, together with her role at SMEC, now a media advisor at DEED), and Matthew Conduit (also of DEED), who were prime drivers of the Media Centre's industrial vision. Wild and Pons visited venues around the UK similar to the proposed Media Centre, often to observe how they operated, but also to seek out potential new collaborations and partnerships. For them, the Media Centre could not just be a site that exhibited 'other' people's media content, but had to be an active site of production and distribution,

developing, promoting, and selling local filmmaking talent. In short, the Media Centre had to become a production and distribution network, linking up with local organisations such as SIF to commission new pieces of work and then selling those films as part of a package to other regional theatres around the UK.

SMEC was affiliated with the Sheffield Media Development Unit (SMDU). The SMDU was based in DEED and was seen as being a 'proto-area screen commission', part of a new wave of regional screen commissions that aimed to promote the, 'attractions, facilities and technical expertise of an area to the film and television industry and to offer an efficient liaison service to incoming producers'[64]. Together with Yorkshire & Humberside Arts, the SMDU aimed to establish a Yorkshire Screen Commission, which would be headquartered in the Media Centre. At the time, the SMDU operated the Media Development Fund, which provided development funding of up to £5000 to local filmmakers and television producers. The eligibility criteria required that applicants, 'normally be resident in Sheffield'.[65] The fund was part of the wider strategy to develop the growth of the media industries in Sheffield and to, 'help local companies and writers prepare for the opportunities that may be opened up by Channel 5 television; to obtain commissions from a variety of existing TV channels and to draw feature film production investment to the city'.[66]

At its heart, the industrial strategy was about creating a self-sustaining production sector in the region. The Media Centre would provide the initial training and education to local media practitioners, as well as offering media facilities for them to use. It would link up with local partners, such as SIF and regional educational institutions, to again provide hardware and expertise. DEED would back up the Media Centre's role through the Media Development Fund, ultimately allowing filmmakers to access vital production funds available either through the BFI or European agencies. Once projects were completed, the Media

Centre would premiere the films and even look at ways of packaging and selling them. This would be achieved by establishing a micro-distribution network. Wild and Pons were actively investigating this possibility, accessing funds via the European RECITE programme (Regions and Cities of Europe) to visit cities like Dublin and Edinburgh to meet with leading figures from the Irish Film Institute and the Edinburgh Film Festival. They discussed ways in which a micro-distribution network could operate, including via exchanges of filmmakers and packages of films not in mainstream distribution and even developing packages of films to sell between partner venues in the network.[67]

The idea of the Media Centre developing and distributing packages of films was an idea that became more prominent between 1992 and 1993 when the SMEC Board began work toward hosting the first ever Sheffield International Documentary Festival (later renamed Sheffield Doc/Fest). While the festival clearly had an international remit, the SMEC Board was keen to host and develop the festival as a means of promoting both the Media Centre and local filmmaking talent. It was hoped that the festival could feature Sheffield / Yorkshire based / produced films and television programmes, which would ultimately boost the reputation of the city's production sector. As such, the festival was to be the final element of the overall self-sustaining industrial strategy. It would serve as the distribution and exhibition wing of the city's media industries and would be hosted in the Media Centre.

So confident was the SMEC Board and political leaders in Sheffield of this industrial vision and of the opportunities that the Media Centre presented that, by the start of 1990, Media Centre promotional videos were submitted to festivals around the world. One such video, *Sheffield – Where Else!*, produced by Gogglebox Productions for Sheffield City Council, won the Best Advert category at the international trade show Communicaville in Toulouse in 1990. Sheffield had entered the event with numerous intentions, not least the aim

of hosting the international event at the Media Centre in 1992. But more important, it was an opportunity to showcase the vision of the Media Centre and of the self-sustaining production strategy that was being developed. As Pat Nelson, the city councillor that collected the award for the film, told journalists: 'This is an excellent result, both for Sheffield's film industry and the city's bid for Channel Five. It shows beyond doubt that Sheffield is capable of film production of the highest quality and there can be no question of our ability to compete at a truly international level'.[68]

But the optimism espoused by the representatives at the Communicaville event would not be borne through. Sheffield's bid for the Channel 5 headquarters failed. And the Media Centre project entered a prolonged period of financial struggle that threatened its very development. The Media Centre project relied on a range of public and private sector funding initiatives, bringing SMEC's utopian vision into conflict with a variety of competing business interests. It was a point the Board members reflected on when considering how to obtain private sponsorship: 'Whatever [sponsorship] package we work out, there must be a detailed plan, stating exactly what is available for each level of sponsorship. It must be acknowledged that there is potential contradiction here – care must be taken to ensure that we don't offer the sponsors so much that it inhibits the aim of the Media & Exhibition Centre i.e. a high-quality facility available to all the people in Sheffield'.[69] Going forward, this would be the crucial issue: how to obtain funding for the construction of the Media Centre without compromising on the vision. But without compromise, the Media Centre itself would fail.

The Struggle

Between 1989 (and the formation of SMEC) and 1995 (and the opening of the Showroom) there was a series of frustrations and struggles that severely compromised the vision of the

Media Centre, much of which was the result of a changing funding landscape for independent cinemas and for urban regeneration schemes nationwide. By late 1989, the cost of the Media Centre was approximately £4.1 million. Funding for the project was received from numerous sources, including £600,000 from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), but this required the Media Centre to open within two years. The aim was to open by January 1991 at the latest.[70] Further funding for the project included £150,000 from the BFI, with hopes that this would eventually increase; an Industrial Improvement Area Grant (IIA) from the government's Urban Programme; substantially delayed revenue funding from the city council; and significant sponsorship funding from charities and private companies, most prominently British Telecom (BT), but also the Foundation for Sports and Arts. But the Media Centre business plan required at least another £2 million in capital funding to ensure its successful development. And the Media Centre did not open until 1995, by then renamed the Showroom and only with two of its planned four cinema screens in operation. This was four years *after* the intended opening date, with the delay impacting on scheduled cultural events, not least the first ever Sheffield International Documentary Festival, hosted in 1994 at alternative venues (such as the Odeon multiplex) while the Media Centre remained in development.

The first hurdle facing SMEC was the ERDF funding requirement that the company obtain charitable status. On November 25, 1989, SMEC registered with the Charity Commission.[71] However, by mid-December 1989, the Board's registration was not processed. The Commission felt that elements of SMEC's structure and business plan could not be regarded as charitable.[72] While the Commission welcomed the proposed 'educational elements' of the Media Centre, the problem was with those objectives of the Centre that it perceived to be, 'directed to the economic re-generation of sheffield'.[73] Crucially, the Commission believed that the Media Centre was providing facilities that were ultimately,

'not for the benefit of the public, but for the benefit of individual local, commercial concerns'.[74] Instead of seeing the Media Centre as a new form of post-industrial cinema with public space combined with commercial space, the Charity Commission argued that the facilities were fully geared toward business, with the Media Centre, 'acting as a "showcase for Sheffield industry"'.[75]

The SMEC Board revised its case for charitable status throughout January 1990, but conceded that some elements of its business plan were more justifiable as charitable than others. For example, the Media Centre's film programming would be in line with wider initiatives of equality and diversity. And its education strategy was also justifiable, particularly the plans to work with local education providers. The main issues were the trading elements of the Media Centre—from the operation of its catering facilities, to the leasing of studio space to private tenants—and its supervision of the redevelopment of the managed workspace section of the Kennings building.[76] As a compromise, SMEC siphoned off its commercial obligations to a wholly-owned subsidiary, Paternoster Ltd, incorporated in September 1990. Paternoster was run as a trading company and oversaw the development of the Media Centre's managed workspace. It arranged lease agreements with tenants and all profits it made were paid as a tax deductible covenant to SMEC, the parent company. This was a model that SMEC mimicked across other activities going forward. All catering facilities were taken over by The Showroom Catering Company Ltd and the annual documentary festival was run by International Documentary Festival Sheffield Ltd (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 SMEC Business Structure

SMEC obtained charitable status on February 27, 1991, following amendments to the Media Centre's aims and objectives and to the overall business structure of SMEC.[77] But whether as a result of the changes or not, SMEC now prioritised the commercial activities of the Media Centre over the educational remit that had been so central to the original vision. SMEC's own remit was now principally, 'to design, build and manage a media and exhibition centre in the disused Kennings building', with no mention of promoting wider educational activities or social inclusion.[78] The Media Centre was starting to transform from a new post-industrial media space to something that resembled a more traditional cinema.

The gradual mutation of the Media Centre vision was also a result of a series of financial crises between 1991 and 1994, a combination of either delayed financial applications, undelivered promises from funding bodies or the city council, cuts to local funding, and even a two-year economic recession. The project was depending on funding that had been applied for between 1989 and 1990, but much of which was still pending by 1993. Take, for example, the annual revenue support promised to the Media Centre by the Sheffield City Council's Arts Department. This was set at £100,000 a year and was a budget that had been transferred from the Anvil Cinema across to the Media Centre. But by the end of 1991, the figure had been deleted from the Arts Department's budget. The SMEC Board had been depending on the annual revenue support. Without it, the ramifications to the Media Centre were sizeable, as was made clear to the council: 'Should this budget be cut, I do not think it is too strong to say that, in effect, three year's work, considerable council resources and a major consultancy, will have been wasted'.[79] At worst, without the revenue support from the council the Media Centre was at risk of being abandoned. At best, the SMEC Board would have to further reconfigure its vision: 'If SMEC decided to continue with the scheme, it is likely that they would choose to build a more "commercial development" reducing the "non-

profit-making" areas, such as the library and educational/training suite, that give the centre its uniqueness'.[80]

The problem was that the council faced substantial local authority budget cuts imposed by the UK government and was reviewing its overall budgets. It could no longer commit to providing an annual grant of £100,000, but neither would it stipulate what it *could* provide. Without this commitment, the Media Centre's development was thrown into a state of existential crisis that impacted on every element of its development, right through to the ability to appoint a managing director.[81] The revenue was needed in order to cover operating costs that were being incurred prior to the opening of the Media Centre when no income was being generated.[82] It wasn't until the summer of 1994 that the annual revenue grant was secured, though at a much-reduced figure of £50,000.

By the early 1990s, political leaders at Sheffield City Council and in the UK government were looking to urban regeneration as a vehicle of economic stimulation, rather than social transformation, and SMEC's had come into conflict with these changing priorities. By 1994 there was also a marked change in the SMEC Board's own language toward the Media Centre. In order to address the financial problems it faced, the SMEC Board began to mutate the original vision. In contrast to how the Board had stressed to the Charity Commission that the Media Centre was *not* an urban regeneration programme (strongly emphasising that was instead an overriding motivation of the Sheffield City Council), the Board now conceded, in correspondence from Colin Pons lobbying government ministers and local councillors, 'that [the] Media Centre was part of a city centre regeneration strategy and that it was a project that has started out in the public sector but was now run by a private board'.[83]

Similarly, the Board's draft job description for the post of Director of the Media Centre side-lined the utopian urban vision. Instead, the key duty of the director was, 'to maximise the Centre's earning potential, grant and sponsorship income, and overall financial performance'.[84] Financial prudence was emphasised ahead of visionary plans for education and cultural policy, with the latter now pushed into 'future phases' of development.[85] SMEC further made its priorities clear by suspending the activities of the SMEC Education Working Group.

Following the appointment of Ian Wild as the Director of the Media Centre in 1994, the entire project took a 'corporate' turn. A marketing firm was commissioned to develop a 'corporate identity' for the Media Centre, including company logo, in June 1994.[86] In developing a corporate identity, it became clear exactly what the Media Centre now represented, as set out by Wild: 'The cinema will primarily be targeted at art house film viewers, but it is hoped that the bar and café will have wide appeal […]. It is important that the venue's logo and all associated promotional material create the right kind of image—attractive, welcoming, accessible, and arty but not elitist'.[87] The corporate identity was also a means of luring private businesses to hire out the Media Centre preview theatre, in a bid to generate further revenue. The SMEC Board wanted to hire out the preview theatre at non-peak times to private organisations at a cost of up to £200 per session. This would be a joint-commercial venture between the Media Centre and Sheffield Hallam University's new Northern Media School (NMS), with profits being split fifty percent each way. This followed a deal between SMEC and NMS, in which the latter would invest a financial sum into the Media Centre to ensure its timely completion, in return for the exclusive use of cinema screens for morning lectures and student screenings.[88] The NMS was becoming a major partner in the development of the Media Centre, as well as a key tenant of the Workstation,

where the new school was to be based, occupying offices, seminar rooms, and studio/production facilities.[89]

Some SMEC Board members feared that, in partnering so closely with Sheffield Hallam University, the original vision for the Media Centre, in particular its education policy, was being fully sacrificed. Members wanted reassurance that, regardless of the size of the investment made by the University (figures of up to £1 million were proposed, though it is unclear exactly how much it finally invested), SMEC must be, 'protected as the vehicle to run the Media Centre, its independence will not be threatened and the service it intends to provide to the public will not be threatened'.[90] But the Media Centre's vision had already been compromised, a point conceded in a discussion document put to the Board in mid-1993:

> The pressure to produce an income, particularly in the early years, could skew the operation towards those activities that can most easily do this, such as more 'popular' film programmes or additional conference activities. Conversely, the activities that are most vulnerable to these pressures are those that the centre may wish to encourage. These may be formal educational events or community activities.[91]

The objective of SMEC by 1993 was to ensure that the Media Centre's facilities were 'used to the maximum extent', which meant forsaking the educational vision.[92] All of the Media Centre's cinema screens had to be utilised as much as possible throughout the day. The preview theatre had originally been intended as a flexible space to allow for teaching and group work, but a decision was made to change the preview theatre's floor design from flat to raked.[93] The decision had an enormous impact on 'educational purposes' due to the lack of a

flexible space. The decision was made on the basis that raked flooring made 'economic sense' because, 'when films are shown simultaneously in both cinemas it would be more desirable to have the same quality seats in both rooms'.[94]

As for the original industry strategy, this was reduced to a vague commitment to screen local independent filmmakers as part of the cinema programme. But again, the commitments were incredibly light touch and revealed that the focus was on maximising audience numbers by showing films that would be 'popular', while independent local films 'should be encouraged', the Centre 'should attempt to show', and local short films 'could accompany the main evening feature'.[95] As for the Media Centre serving as a hub of cultural production, instead it would now encourage the commercial use of its conference facilities and of the proposed Media Library. Industrial conferences and events might also be hosted, again as a means of maximising the use of the Media Centre's meeting rooms.

The difficulties and delays in obtaining funding ultimately meant that the original vision of refashioning the space of the cinema, along with the comprises in the education and industrial strategy, meant that the design plans were scaled back. The Media Centre opened as the Showroom Cinema in 1995, but with only two screens instead of the envisaged four. Architecturally, the Media Centre had become an ordinary art house cinema. The 'mall' and 'prow' features of the original design did not come to pass—the capital funding could not be raised—while the social space of the Centre was divided between a café/bar and a kiosk/box office. Whereas the original vision had envisaged that the exhibition facilities of the Centre would almost be secondary to all of the other activities and production facilities, the Showroom placed the cinema at the heart of the social space.

Conclusion

The opening of the Showroom in March 1995 was a far cry from the original vision for the Media Centre in 1988/89. After only three years of operation, the Showroom closed for a two-month refurbishment in February 1998 following the SMEC Board's successful application for a £3.3 million grant from the National Lottery. The Showroom reopened with four screens (boosting audience capacity to 700, making it the largest UK independent cinema outside of London at that time), and a new foyer, café, bar, and atrium.[96] But the fact that the cinema underwent such significant refurbishment so early on in its life indicates the extent to which the original vision for the Media Centre had failed, how overly ambitious it was, and the compromises that had been made. In the end, the SMEC Board simply needed to get a cinema opened, as it did by 1995, but it was not what any of the board members had planned or hoped for in the late 1980s.

The archival research undertaken demonstrates how it is possible to reframe understanding of independent cinemas like the Showroom, particularly when situated within broader debates about regional cultural policy and urban development. The Media Centre was a failure because the SMEC Board was attempting too much, even trying to redefine the purpose of a cinema in a post-industrial city. However, by the 1990s a new form of urban planning and regional cultural policy had emerged, one that stressed corporate management. As such, the SMEC Board had to make compromises in reaction to this changing political landscape in order to obtain funding and to convince local and national political leaders that the Media Centre was a viable commercial operation. The troubles faced by the SMEC Board reveal how difficult it was, and is, to bring to fruition an independent, alternative film and media exhibition space in the UK, even when backed by regional funding from national bodies such as the BFI. It raises the question of how many other media centres across the UK had to make similar compromises.

We also need to consider the legacy of the Media Centre project and of the CIQ it was meant to champion. To a large extent, it did not achieve an urban utopianism, but actually reinforced existing cultural barriers. By 'quartering' off culture and placing it into a designated zone (the CIQ), it immediately transformed the urban space into an exclusive territory for the creative class (time and again, it is middle class professionals that were seen as being vital to the success of the Media Centre and the CIQ) and excluding many others from participating. However, the importance of the Showroom in providing an alternative media space in the past twenty-five years has strengthened, with Sheffield's mainstream cinema exhibition infrastructure having grown rapidly. In contrast to the 1980s, when the vision for the Media Centre emerged in a city lacking a cinema infrastructure, by 2019 the Showroom was one of four major cinemas in the city centre alone, totalling 26 available screens: Curzon Sheffield (three screens), The Light Cinema (nine screens), the Odeon Luxe (ten screens), and the Showroom (four screens). In recent years, the Showroom has taken a leading role in regional cultural policy, for example through its partnership in the Film Hub North consortium, distributing funds on behalf of the BFI and National Lottery to support film and media culture in the North of England. It has also been the host of the Sheffield Doc/Fest since 1995, a festival that has been instrumental to the cultural life and economic activity of Sheffield and in internationalising the city's profile. The Showroom has ultimately fashioned a role and purpose within the city and on an international stage, arguably working towards the original cultural vision set out by the SMEC Board.

The article also makes the case for the importance in undertaking detailed micro-case studies of post-industrial independent cinemas and their relationship to urban space. Such investigations can reveal the motivations of stakeholders and how they individually navigate and negotiate wider policy concepts. This article presents only a snapshot of the failed urban vision for one new, post-industrial cinema. There are arguably many other similar histories

across the UK, which can reveal new perspectives on the relationship between media centres and regional cultural policy. And there is much more research to be done on the operation of the Showroom over the past twenty-five years and how it and its managers (Ian Wild continues to serve as the Chief Executive) have responded to changing political, social, and cultural contexts. The next stage in understanding the vision and legacy of those media centres that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (both in Sheffield and elsewhere) is to examine, through archival research, the ongoing operations of a cinema like the Showroom, investigate its continuing relationship with regional cultural policy and policy makers, and consider how the urban space of the Showroom and its surroundings have been utilised for cultural use and citizen access in the years since its opening.

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