

Pride in place must mean power for communities

Matthew Reardon's account of architecture students working with communities in Bargoed, Maerdy and Tredegar offers an encouraging vision: regeneration shaped through relationships, learning and sustained involvement <https://lnkd.in/p/ecDjmYTE> From a Welsh co-operative perspective, its success will depend on whether community voice develops into genuine decision-making power and shared ownership.

The promise of ten years of Pride in Place funding creates opportunities that short funding cycles rarely allow. Trust takes time. So do developing organisations, testing ideas and building partnerships. The programme's guidance recognises community participation and accountability, providing a foundation on which democratic local regeneration could grow.

However, one part of Reardon's argument deserves careful reflection. Communities disappointed by decades of tokenistic engagement should not be understood primarily as lacking confidence or skills. Valleys communities possess knowledge, creativity and organising experience. Often, what they have lacked is access to resources, sustained support and institutions willing to share power.

Universities can contribute enormously when they recognise that expertise already exists locally. Residents understand the buildings people avoid, the journeys that feel unsafe, the missing services and the places holding collective memories. Architectural knowledge should work alongside that understanding, with learning flowing in both directions.

This means agreeing expectations before projects begin. Who chooses the questions? Who owns the resulting designs? How will residents of all ages be included and see their contributions reflected in decisions? What happens when students leave? A lasting partnership needs continuity, accessible information and clear responsibilities, so communities gain something useful beyond presentations and attractive drawings.

Co-operative approaches can turn participation into enduring influence. Community benefit societies, community-owned buildings and worker co-operatives offer practical ways for residents and workers to shape local assets and enterprises. Appropriate safeguards can help retain benefits locally and protect shared purposes beyond individual projects or political terms.

Community wealth building should therefore be central. Investment should support co-operative education from early years onwards, decent local employment, apprenticeships, smaller suppliers and democratic enterprises. A refurbished building achieves more when its construction, use and management also strengthen the surrounding economy. The question is not simply what gets built, but who benefits over time.

That requires funding people as well as premises. Communities need paid development workers, independent advice, accessible meetings, childcare, transport and support with governance. Relying on unpaid effort risks excluding those already balancing insecure work, caring responsibilities, disability or financial hardship.

Children and young people must have meaningful roles too. "Nothing About Us Without Us" should apply to their streets, gathering spaces and future opportunities. Welsh-language

participation and different communication needs should be planned from the outset, rather than added after decisions have effectively been made.

Pride in Place must also connect with Wales's wider regeneration and wellbeing priorities, as programme guidance recognises. Local collaboration should strengthen democratic accountability, with transparent budgets, declared interests and published explanations showing how community priorities influence spending.

Matt Reardon is right that this is a long game. Its strongest legacy would be communities with greater resources, stronger institutions and lasting control over their futures. Wales's co-operative contribution is clear: pride grows when people can act together, own together and decide together. That is regeneration worth sustaining for future generations