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Regional Identity and Regional Development: the role of narratives in the European Capital of Culture programme

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature of the debates around the presentation of Liverpool'08 and a project which will track the development of narratives around the 2011 capitals of Turku and Tallinn, as a contribution to the larger evaluation of the impact of Capital of Culture status on these cities.

Over the life of the Capital of Culture programme for Liverpool, from the success of the bid to the final transition events held early in 2009, the narratives used to gather and maintain interest in and support for the bid shifted. At different points in this process key aspects of the history and culture of Liverpool and its region were either suppressed or neglected, only to resurface. The initial strategy of emphasising global and relatively elite activities was overturned and a more local flavour given to the whole project.

Heritage is recognized as a driver of tourism income and of distinctive identity for destinations. However, as heritage sites replace “real industry” heritage is also seen as a nostalgic retreat from current and future concerns. Narratives should not simply celebrate a “lost past”, they should also acknowledge their potential for empowering and building confidence in the community to which they refer.

Japan's rapid absorption of foreign innovations, particularly during the years following the Meiji restoration created a relationship between heritage and progress which both transformed and secured aspects of the pre-existing society. In a similar way, the Soviet Union maintained parallel narratives of progress and heritage. In the UK, examples of progressive heritage references already exist, notably in the context of natural heritage at the Eden Project, Cornwall, where the need for scientific understanding in order to conserve and protect legacy is stressed (www.edenproject.com). However, the narratives developed in support of the UK's European Capital of culture bids for 2008, and those deployed by the winning city, Liverpool, demonstrate the contestation between nostalgic and progressive forces and local and universal references most clearly.

Key words: Culture, heritage, tourism, place branding, regional development

JEL Classification: L83, M39, R11, R58

Introduction

Across the globe individual cities are striving for visibility at the first tier of their nation's urban regions. The China-Britain Business Council has surveyed 274 municipalities in China with populations over one million. Among these 35 were judged to offer the greatest opportunity as business locations for inward investment [1]. In India top and second tier cities are competing to emulate the success of key centres such as Bangalore [2].

In the current economic downturn there is some evidence that China and India may pull the global economy out of recession. This view derives in part from the genuine need for substantial infrastructure projects to ensure the sustainable future development of these national economies and to enable second tier cities to contribute effectively to economic growth. These projects include road, rail and air transportation also relevant to expanding tourism.

Such metropolitan areas have been identified as the nodes in an economy of flows [3] and the location of creative and artistic sectors that enhance inward migration and economic development [4, 5]. Equally, these cultural resources underpin their attraction as tourism destinations. Tourism is a key means of raising the profile of urban locations and of developing the identity of locations for residents and visitors. Hankinson [6] distinguishes business tourism from leisure tourism in this respect and resources and branding directed at both aspects can support the attraction of inward investment, joint ventures and local and global brand development. Place branding has become an accepted tactic to reposition locations within global networks [7].

The declining economic base of many competing large and medium urban areas in regions with less dramatic growth than India and China has led to a variety of initiatives. Traditional inward investment and government aid is sought to introduce replacement industries, often a copy-cat response to successful locations, distant or neighbouring, is pursued despite the absence of key ingredients of the cluster and growth being emulated.

Landmark events have long been harnessed to these objectives – international expos and long established major sporting event have been hosted by cities seeking to raise their profile and re-brand themselves. This paper looks at one specific programme – the EU capital of culture programme.

Heritage is recognized as a driver of tourism income and of distinctive identity for destinations. However, as heritage sites replace “real industry” heritage is also seen as a nostalgic retreat from current and future concerns. Frayling [8] analyses the representation of engineers in British culture and suggests that the impressions created by nostalgic narratives of innovation affects the educational choices of parents and school children. He suggests that the nostalgic celebration of the eccentric inventor represented by the popular animated characters of Wallace and Grommet and the simplified narrative presented at the bicentenary celebration of the radical engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel at the opening of the twenty-first century mask the true nature and challenges presented by the engineering professions, ultimately affecting adversely national innovative capacity.

Japan's rapid absorption of foreign innovations, particularly during the years following the Meiji restoration created a different relationship between heritage and progress, transforming and securing aspects of the pre-existing society [9]. The major Japanese cities host an amalgam of futuristic and nostalgic technological references, ranging from a Tokyo version of the Eiffel Tower to 1950's vintage science fiction aesthetics applied to tourist infrastructure and personal fashion alongside traditional Japanese artifacts and culture.

In a similar way, the Soviet Union maintained parallel narratives of progress and heritage. Specialist colleges trained conservators for the reconstruction of Tsarist palaces into the 1970's against a backdrop of modernist developments in urban planning. By the 1990's, however, a new relationship with the pre-1917 past was demonstrated by the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, completed in 1881, and demolished in 1933.

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Over the life of the Capital of Culture programme, from the success of the bid to the final transition events held early in 2009, the narratives used to gather and maintain interest in and support for the bid shifted. At different points in this process key aspects of the history and culture of Liverpool and its region were either suppressed or neglected, only to resurface. The initial strategy of emphasising global and relatively elite activities was overturned and a more local flavour given to the whole project.

Florida [4] has developed a formula to make destinations attractive to a key "creative class" while Markusen and King [5] focus on actual economic role of creative and artistic sector. More recently claims for a role for cultural and heritage based development start from an understanding of differentiation. Langrish argues that the balance between nostalgia and progress can reflect economic cycles, with nostalgia blossoming in downturns and claims for reappearing innovation appearing with recovery [10].

Liverpool'08 presented a particular blend of highly local and wider global identities which has become characteristic of Liverpool and provides an example of trajectory from the successful bid against intense national competition to the development of a distinctive programme for the year itself, pre and post activity. The enduring issues of shift in perception and lasting economic activity reveal some inevitable pitfalls in process, and provide a basis for comparison with the trajectory of Turku and Tallinn for 2011.

Liverpool Changes Tack

Liverpool is a distinctive port city with a reputation for both music and militancy. It prospered through the cotton trade and shares with Bristol a problematic association with the triangular traffic between Britain, Africa and North America. It was the principal port for North Atlantic

passenger traffic until the twentieth century. The international connections of the port are cited as one reason for its history of musical creativity and innovation. During the second half of the twentieth century, despite postwar reconstruction and the attraction of new industries, the 1970s and 1980s saw drastic economic decline, culminating in serious social unrest and riots. The city's population peaked at 867,000 in 1937 but by 2001 had declined to below 442,000. Efforts at directed inward investment during the 1980s included a government sponsored international garden festival.

By the end of the 1990s, however, the city was enjoying steady improvement, partly as a result of Objective 1 European Union funding, and partly as a result of general economic recovery, both of which made the architectural heritage of the nineteenth century heyday of the port attractive to inward investment. The Albert Dock has been renovated to provide, shops, apartments and museum and art gallery space, other nineteenth century blocks had been converted to housing, leading to an increase of property values, particularly in the central city. In addition to the new initiatives linked to the docks, such as the Tate-Liverpool art museum and a new maritime museum, established cultural resources were re-branded, with the city museum becoming a component of the national museum system as World Museum Liverpool. However, success in obtaining Objective 1 funding implied high levels of social and economic stress, which undermined the message of progress. Private and third sector support was also needed.

One re-branding success for Liverpool was the renaming of the airport as Liverpool John Lennon Airport and the capture of a major budget airline operator who has chosen Liverpool over the larger and more established Manchester airport. As a node in the emerging low cost air travel network of Europe Liverpool gained an additional opportunity to reposition itself.

The A Foundation was created in 1998 by, James Moores, to support the development and exhibition of contemporary art in Liverpool. This registered charity, was used to initiate the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in 1999 and by 2006 this had become the UK's largest contemporary visual arts festival [11].

An 'Independent District' brand was unveiled around the 2004 Biennial to identify an area of under-utilized industrial buildings close to the south waterfront of the city. The Foundation was instrumental in refurbishing these historic and modern warehouses to create some of the largest exhibition spaces in the UK, helping to regenerate an area much of which had already been reconstructed following the riots in the 1980s as an area of light industry intended to bring in new economic activity to the city.

The Long and Winding Road to '08

The development path of landmark events is rarely smooth, whether the event is ultimately successful – the Sydney 2000 Olympics - or less so - the London Millennium Dome - support and confidence can wax and wane once the initial euphoria of a successful bid recedes.

The nineteenth century waterfront of the central city had been awarded World Heritage status in 2004. However, as the pace of physical re-development increased in the run up to 2008, concerns were raised over the impact of particular large re-development projects around the area. This led

to an inspection in October 2006 which noted that there was no immediate threat to the quality of urban environment that has justified the status, but the issue re-focussed attention on the failure of a key landmark project on the waterfront shortly after the success of the 2008 bid.

In July 2006 the artistic director for the Capital of Culture project, Robyn Archer, resigned. This sparked a flurry of argument around identity and authenticity and questions over the effectiveness of preparations for 2008. Archer, an Australian with a track record of organizing cultural festivals there, had only formally taken up her contract two months earlier, although she had been acting in a consultancy capacity since 2004. She had commuted between Australia and Liverpool, and many of the artists scheduled for showcase events during 2006 had been sourced from there and North America. Criticism had been leveled at the nature of the events organised as a dry run and appetizer for 2008 and at the lack of publicity and consultation over the content for the Capital of Culture Year itself [11]. This reaction against what was perceived as a preference for “high culture” over indigenous activities prompted an acknowledgement of the need for a grass roots dimension to achieve sustainability for initiatives launched during the Capital year

Initial plans had gone to some length to avoid “Scouse stereotypes” and focus on new rather than traditional activities. However, in September 2007 Phil Redmond, a key local identity, became deputy chair of Liverpool Culture Company, effectively replacing Archer within a streamlined planning structure. Redmond had pioneered successful television soap serials base in Merseyside, establishing local television production companies.

Symptomatic of the change in focus was Redmond’s decision in December 2007 to support a community mural proposal previously regarded as not sufficiently “cutting edge”. This move deflected criticism that 2008 planning was focused on the city centre and waterfront, to the detriment of other inner city areas and the outer suburbs.

The surviving members of the Beatles were finally invited to contribute. Ringo Starr performed at the official opening events and Paul McCartney marked the mid-point of the year with a concert at the ground of Liverpool Football Club at Anfield.

Relocating, renaming and recovering

Naming and renaming are central to the maintenance and development of identity. Co-branding between the organisations within the newly named Independents district assisted greatly in this process. However, some names held associations which were not considered appropriate to the narratives of renewal, particularly that of the Flying Picket.

In the 1980s the ‘Flying Picket’ name was shared with a successful accapella music group, itself a spin-off from a left wing theatre group and a music venue established in the Unemployed Centre in Liverpool at the height of the economic recession, to provide facilities for young musicians. The term was a reference to the successful use of mobile tactics during the national miners’ strikes of the 1970s, which were revived during the key dispute of the 1980s. Arguably such associations do not sit well with post-Florida descriptions of the new creative milieus recommended for cities.

The Picket was one of a number of independent creative resources which were supportive of the Capital of culture bid but were subsequently threatened by the very success of that bid. The premises it had occupied were put up for sale to developers and after an unsuccessful campaign to remain in the city centre, a new location was found.

The brand name has been shortened to the Picket, Liverpool but still contains echoes of a period which was either absent in the mainstream narratives for 2008, or submerged in a general account of past “hard times”. Civil unrest was present in other British cities during the “structural adjustment” period of Thatcherism and acknowledgement of this period is essential to any understanding of Liverpool’s present character. Unfortunately evocations of rioting and arson, and the collapse of local government finances do not sit well with the promotion of inward investment.

Relocation moved the Picket to an area of mixed nineteenth and twentieth century industrial buildings. Most are unsuitable for refurbishment as expensive residential or hotel accommodation, but in the longer term the area is potentially vulnerable to more comprehensive forms of re-development. These alternative prospects are evident in the names by which the area is labeled by the different stakeholders: Independents district by the arts sector, and Baltic Triangle by the urban planners coordinating developments around 2008, the reference being to the plan-shape of the area and an historic dockside pub, the Baltic Fleet which stands at the northern point of this triangle [11].

The year following the Capital of culture also saw a number of anniversaries of key events which had little visibility during 2008. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike which led to profound changes in the British economy and its industrial base, the twentieth anniversary of the Hillsborough stadium disaster in which 96 Liverpool soccer fans died meant that the suppressed element of the cities heritage re-emerged in the post Liverpool’08 period to provide a fuller and more reflective context for the changes achieved.

Conclusion

The experiences of small independent organisations such as the Picket venue suggest that the economic impact of the “creative class” identified by Florida and the “artistic dividend” for regional development of Markusen and King are in danger of being swept aside by the incoming capital which they have, in part, attracted to their location. The primary expression of “capital” status was becoming dramatic real estate speculation driven by financial capital rather than the cultural and intellectual capital essential to sustainability in a “knowledge economy”.

Cultural tourism is seen as a significant resource in many urban areas. Physical regeneration of historical areas and the creation of commercial and cultural attractions are seen as a component of wider economic regeneration. However, regeneration based on attracting incomers rather than engaging an indigenous community raises the prospect of uneven development and reduced social cohesion. Peck [12] sees problems with the concept of a creative class as posited by Florida. He perceives a cargo-cult dimension to arguments that by reconfiguring a location a peripatetic creative class can be attracted. Peck suggest that the actual projects are little different from those produced by established policies of physical improvement and that property values

rise through the exploitation of local heritage, rather than through the presence of the activities identified by Florida.

Social and cultural sustainability in development requires a balance between incoming resources and the indigenous identity which attracts those resources. Real estate driven and increasing property values militate against this, as do policies which privilege nostalgia over innovation. It remains to be seen whether Langrish's view of the relationship between economic cycles and emphasis on novelty or tradition [10] will emerge in our current conditions.

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