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Liverpool'08 – brand and contestation¹

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This paper examines the process of re-branding a major community - the City of Liverpool - through its role as European Capital of Culture, 2008. This year-long “landmark event” was promoted as a means of attracting investment and tourist income. The paper assesses the implications of the Capital of Culture through its impact on one particular creative resource within that city – the Picket music venue.

The success of the bid in June 2003 created changes which impacted on some of the key creative activities within the city, threatening the legitimacy of the Capital of Culture project itself. Rapidly rising property values began to deny affordable space for the very activities which underpinned the success of the bid. The author was a participant in the subsequent three year campaign to protect the Picket venue as a resource for the training of young musicians in both artistic and technical aspects of music.

The paper looks at the contestation over Liverpool and Merseyside’s highly local identity and global profile and the tension and synergy between traditional collectivity and individual entrepreneurialism characterised by the forms of social enterprise currently emerging in this creative milieu. It identifies some of the collective resources held by the Liverpool community from which were drawn key tactics in the fight to retain a significant cultural resource within the Capital of Culture

Changing 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 trade between Britain, Africa and North America. It was the principal port for North Atlantic passenger traffic until displaced by Southampton early in the twentieth century. The UK’s position of the as a set of islands off the mainland of Europe allowed the capture of outward traffic, particularly human migration. During the mass movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Glasgow captured through-traffic from the Baltic for North America, predominantly Canada, while Liverpool captured traffic via Hamburg and Rotterdam, predominantly for the NE United States. This transfer of migrants from the Baltic and northern Europe via east coast ports and west coast ports to North America left a residue

¹ This paper has been developed and updated from one presented at a Workshop on “Tribalization and Tourism Marketing Organization” organised in Utrecht by Erasmus University, November 2006

in the form of a minority of permanent settlers who maintain the connection between origins and destinations.,

The international connections of the port are cited as one reason for its history of musical creativity and innovation. Merchant seamen working the North Atlantic route brought American music and fashions to Liverpool during the pre-and post-war period. The city went through significant change during the twentieth century, enduring intense aerial bombardment as a key Atlantic port in World War II followed by postwar reconstruction and attraction of new industries in the 1960s, a period coinciding with the rise of the city as a centre of musical creativity, marked by the rise of the Beatles. This was followed by decline through the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in serious social unrest and riots. Efforts at directed inward investment during the 1980s, such as a government sponsored international garden festival were marked by the unwillingness of contractors to recruit labour from within the city, thus limiting the economic impact of such investment. Such past experiences are reflected in current initiatives such as the Construction for Merseyside (CfM) charter scheme in which signatories undertake to utilise local labour in their projects².

The transformation of shipping patterns following the introduction of shipping containers has been described by Levinson (2006). In Liverpool this meant that the docks built during the nineteenth century became derelict, and a new container port, requiring dramatically few workers, was built downriver. Changes in trade patterns meant that it was the container ports of the east coast, handling European trade, that prospered, however. Within the UK Liverpool had become associated with fierce local identity, typified by the support for its two Premier League football teams, low levels of employment, often casual as through most of the history of the docks, and a symbol of an obsolete and declining way of life

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.

At the opening of the twenty-first century the city was once again benefiting from its geographic position, this time as one end of two major cross-national routes, the first running from the East Anglia ports, especially Felixstowe, using the A14-M6 highway corridor and a second along the M62 motorway corridor between Hull and Liverpool to Holyhead and Liverpool, both linking North West England and the Irish Republic to mainland Europe.

Land and sea connections have been supplemented with the successful re-branding of the city's 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 new low cost air travel network of Europe Liverpool has gained an additional opportunity to reposition itself. These overlapping connections have recontextualised Liverpool within Britain and Europe.

² see www.constructionformerseyside.com

Saving the Picket

The successful bid for European Capital of Culture status for 2008 brought these changes to the notice of the wider British public. The city has not been considered as a serious bidder by much of the national press and subsequent publicity did much to communicate the changed circumstances of the city. However, the impact and implications of the Capital of Culture project also produced immediate and negative consequences which can be examined through the recent history of a significant music venue in Liverpool, the Flying Picket. This social enterprise was an enthusiastic supporter of the city's bid.

The Picket venue was created by volunteers within the labour movement as part of the Merseyside Unemployed Resource Centre, generally referred to as the 'Unemployed Centre', founded in 1983 at the nadir of the city's fortunes, some two years after widespread rioting in the city. Based in Hardman Street in the centre of the city the Flying Picket venue occupied part of the building, operating bars, a music venue and function rooms, plus a fully equipped recording studio. This organization had been founded by unemployed young musicians during the 1980s and had been instrumental in the development of a number of local bands.

However, with the steady recovery of the local economy, and the reduction in unemployment levels, the financial basis of the Centre was eroded. Subscriptions from labour movement supporters had declined, and in 2003 the city council made a decision to direct grants to the organisations which occupied the premises of the Unemployed Centre rather than through the centre itself. In October, four months after the success of the Capital of Culture bid the Council of Management decided to clear its debts and avoid the cost of modernizing a historic and legally protected building by selling to developers and moving to rented accommodation. Following the success of the Capital of Culture bid, properties through the city centre, virtually unsaleable during the 1980s, were being converted to boutique hotels and high value living accommodation.

Faced with the loss of a unique resource within the city, the staff and supporters of the Picket venue established a campaign, with the initial objective of reversing the decision to sell the existing building and to establish a viable business plan for remaining in the existing premises. The Picket activities within the Unemployed Centre had to be reconstituted as a company limited by guarantee in order to pursue this prospect. The Picket brand was a crucial component of the new social enterprise, as it carried the history and identity of the preceding decades. The workers were able to claim this essential intangible asset.

The campaign organized "Save the Picket" fundraising concerts with local bands, achieving coverage in both local and national print and broadcast media³. Endorsements and support came from celebrities in the music industry with previous involvement with the venue. Local politicians, from both national and local government expressed support. A wide variety of arts and music industry organisations also supported the campaign

The Picket venue had organized supporting concerts during the 1995-8 Liverpool Docks dispute, and borrowing some of the e-campaigning techniques developed in that struggle. The use of the internet had been a significant component of the dockers' communication strategy, with a volunteer web-site being used to elicit support and coordinate actions.

³ See links from www.savethepicket.com/legacy.html

A 'savethepicket' campaign website⁴ was created as both a call for support and as an archive of the achievements and developments of the Picket during the previous two decades. The guestbook linked to the site attracted input from across the U.K. and from as far away as Japan, North America and Australia, while the site itself carried information on the situation as it unfolded and instructions on how to lobby in support of the demands of the Picket workers and supporters.

This situation reflected the experience of the site developed during the dock dispute by the dockworkers which, despite its global reach, was maintained with very limited volunteer resources⁵. One measure of the effectiveness of the savethepicket web-site was an attempt by the Centre management to discipline the Picket employee most involved with the site for misuse of resources. In anticipation of such a move the campaign site had been built on a subscription server and was quite separate from the limited web-site previously used by the venue.

Carter et al (2003) discuss at length the experience gained from the dockers' web-site and its role in coordinating international days of action despite the need, for legal reasons, to operate outside official union structures. They emphasise the crucial role of the website in providing a means of rapid dissemination of information to a wide range of supporters. Castree's (2000) detailed account of the national and international aspects of the dockers' campaign makes only a single mention of the use of the Internet as developed by the dockers, but emphasises the multiscale nature of the campaign waged by the Liverpool workers, with significant resources devoted to building and maintaining local support within the city. This point is taken up by Routledge (2003) in his examination of grass-roots globalization networks.

The Picket campaign developed along similar lines, with appeals to the key figures in British music who had been and continued to be strong supporters, and to the wider international community, as evidenced by postings to the guest page for Australia, Canada and Japan. While the savethepicket website was used as a means of publicising the situation to a wide audience it was primarily directed at bringing pressure to bear on local actors who had some means of influencing the outcome. Ultimately the purpose of such widespread support was to maintain pressure and profile back on Merseyside and to maintain a face-to-face audience for the events that were still organised in association with the Picket.

Relocation, Relocation

Initially the Picket campaign sought to purchase the existing building, listed as of Grade II historic interest. It quickly became obvious that the building was priced beyond the means available to the newly formed Picket Limited and the listed status would add further expense to any improvement or development to offset the initial cost. Efforts were then directed to a search for suitable and affordable alternative premises. One of the commercial venues in Liverpool had offered to host Picket branded events as an alternative to the maintenance of a dedicated Picket performance space; however, this was regarded as incompatible with the Picket's role in nurturing new talent in an environment complementary to the commercial music scene.

⁴ www.savethepicket.com

⁵ A first person account has been provided by the volunteer web-master, Chris Bailey (Bailey, 2006)

During the period from the closing event at Hardman Street in December 2004 to the re-opening at new premises in Jordan Street on 27th May 2006 the web-site took the place of the physical premises as a virtual location from which to organise events carrying the Picket brand. With the re-opening of the Picket at its new site, the campaigning site was superseded by a new site taking advantage of the wider accessibility of web technology that had come to fruition during the campaign. The move was made possible through the A Foundation and the related creation of the Independent District which offered a different model of urban development from the commercial mainstream.

The A Foundation was created in 1998 by, James Moores, to support the development and exhibition of contemporary art in Liverpool. Moores is a member of the family responsible for major economic activity through Littlewoods catalogue sales and football pools operations, both declining in the face of innovations in retailing and gambling. The A Foundation, a 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.

The Independent District brand was unveiled around the 2004 Biennial to identify an area of underutilized industrial buildings close to the south waterfront of the city. The Foundation was instrumental in refurbishing a mixture of historic and contemporary warehouses to create a range of exhibition spaces in the process, helping to regenerate this area. Interestingly much of this area had been reconstructed following the riots in the 1980s to bring new economic activity to the city.

In 2006 the Biennial launched the newly refurbished Greenland Street site, three former industrial buildings in Liverpool at the heart of the old port area. The continued effort of re-branding this area is in part a contribution to the movement to secure a lasting benefit from 2008 by aligning existing initiatives and activities with the new brand identity and partly a defence against encroachment by other forms of commercial development.

The reconstruction of the Picket as a free-standing social enterprise, with the support of local government and "third sector" organizations is symptomatic of the transformation of the city and its institutions. However, the complex and contradictory heritage is still evident in the character of these new activities, and the threat of disruption to the creative fabric of Liverpool remains. A subsequent threat, to a long established recording studio in the city centre was countered with rapid and effective mobilisation along the lines of the Picket campaign.

Back to the Future: Archergate and Beyond

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. As the pace of physical re-development increased in the run up to 2008, concerns were raised over the impact of particular large 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 two months after the re-opening of the Picket at its new venue 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.

The problems around the director and her resignation were dubbed “Archergate” by the local press. Reaction from both the general public and from within the creative community was negative. One local journalist described the outgoing director as a Hill-Billy singer. 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. The Scouse accent is a distinctive component of both Liverpool, and the wider Merseyside identity. Carter et al (2003) quote Chris Bailey, web-master of the web-site established in support of the striking workers during the dock dispute of 1995-8 who explains that the potential of podcasting technology, then in its infancy, was not exploited. Few of the overseas activists accessing the website could understand the strong local accents of the workers⁶.

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 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.

What’s in a Name?

Naming and renaming are central to the maintenance and development of identity. Co-branding between the organisations within the newly coined Independents district has

⁶ While the Guardian newspaper and other sources have reported that ‘the soft and friendly version’ of the Scouse accent has helped to turn Liverpool into Britain’s favourite location for call centres’ (Ward, 2000) the wider business community takes a different view with a 2004 survey of company directors on the business appeal of British regional accents ranking the Liverpool accent among the most stigmatized (New York Times International, 2005). Only 15 percent of the respondents believed that a Liverpool accent denoted success; and only 8 percent viewed the speaker as ‘honest and trustworthy’.

assisted greatly in this process, but the multi-scalar nature of the profile achieved through the combination of face to face and internet campaigning utilized by the Save the Picket campaign allows local, and global profiles to coexist and develop into “glocal” identity.

During 2008 a wide range of “blogs” are monitoring the progress of the Year of Culture, from both supportive and critical perspectives. These reflect the opinion of the local community and its diaspora within the UK and beyond⁷.

In the 1980s the ‘Flying Picket’⁸ name was shared with a successful accapella music group, itself a spin-off from a left wing theatre group and was a reference to the successful use of mobile tactic during the national miners’ strikes of the 1970s, which were revived during the dispute of the 1980s. Arguably such associations do not sit well with post-Florida descriptions of the new creative milieus recommended for cities.

Peck (2005) points out that the benefits of Florida’s formula are those of increased economic activity, and that correlation, rather than causality may be the issue. The creative activities of Liverpool are equally associated with recession, as one of the few alternatives to migration.

Now that the brand name has been shortened to Picket it is worth noting that a picket fence is one that is driven into the ground, while the military use of the term refers to the soldiers sent beyond the front lines to provide warning of enemy movement, the most current term being “radar picket – a means of detecting threats and opportunities. The last meanings are appropriate to the reconstituted Picket, which retains its grounded community base, while providing early information on trend in music culture and on upcoming talent to Liverpool and beyond.

However, the Picket name still contains echoes of a period which is 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 but 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 has 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.

In October 2006 Liverpool City Council passed a motion “*recognising that the emergence of an independent cultural district in this area is a great opportunity to support the long term development of the City's cultural, sub-cultural, musical and artistic sector*”. It noted the success of the active enterprises operating there: Love Liverpool, the New Picket, Love Culture and Energywise Recycling. This formal recognition from Liverpool City Council of

⁷ See for example an oppositionist view at <http://www.liverpoolsubculture.com> and broader views at <http://www.yoliverpool.com/> and <http://www.artinliverpool.com/blog/>

⁸ A picket travelling from place to place to support local pickets during any strike.(www.allwords.com)

the value of the emerging land-use of the district is therefore significant, as is the use of a name associated with the previous round of regeneration- Waterfront Business Park, Liverpool 1.

The alternative visions of development and progress continue to play out in the Capital of Culture, with the opening of the first stage of the billion pound Liverpool One retail development coinciding with the McCartney concert marking the 2008 mid-point.

Conclusion

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. The experiences of the Liverpool Picket suggest that the economic impact of the “creative class” identified by Florida (2002, 2005) and the “artistic dividend” for regional development (Markusen and King 2003) are in danger of being swept aside by incoming capital pursuing a real-estate driven approach to profit. In the case of Liverpool much of this capital followed a traditional route into the port from the Irish Republic where rapid economic development had reduced opportunity for further investment. The primary expression of “capital” status was becoming dramatic real estate speculation driven by this influx of capital.

Regeneration based on attracting incomers rather than engaging an indigenous community raises the prospect of uneven development and reduced social cohesion. Peck (2005) struggles 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 solutions 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 other forms of activity seen as measures of success c.f. Liverpool. Social and cultural sustainability in development requires a balance between incoming resources and the indigenous identity which attracts those resources. This paper has described the response to such changes by indigenous creative actors within a conurbation with a reputation for artistic creativity.

A key part of that response was the electronic support for the campaign through a dedicated web-site. In the wider discussion of the problematic of current regional policies, the concept of “glocalization” describes both the balancing that has to be struck between global engagement and local adjustment by regions (Swyngedouw, 1997) and the adaptive strategies of multinationals (Morris 1991). Poster (1999) speculates how shift to electronic forms impacts on national identity, in terms of the ability of nation states to generate convincing national narratives and in terms of the self-image of individuals communicating in a “potentially spaceless” medium. (2000) and Miller and Slater (2000) on Estonia and Trinidad respectively, smaller island states (Little Holmes and Grieco, 2000). Scale is significant here in that smaller states or regions often achieve penetration and take up of the new technology faster and as a consequence, achieve a new understanding more easily.

O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) argue that differences between work cultures, both professional and corporate, and the primary culture in which an organisation is embedded can be bridged in a “thirdspace”. For them the synergy between levels is a potential resource, but the tendency towards a convergence determined by the primary culture is seen as an obstacle

to cross-cultural working. Culture needs to be de-composed into issues related to the historical, geographical and institutional setting in which organisation and individual must operate. The business recipes and frameworks grounded in these differences offer a view of “culture” of more direct value to actors (see for example Marceau, 1992). As a result of its campaign the Picket venue now has a virtual mode with which to support and promote its physical presence in Liverpool and to develop a “thirdspace” in which to communicate with its wider constituency of distributed supporters.

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