

2005-05-01

## Arts Festivals and the City

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### Recommended Citation

Quinn, Bernadette: Arts Festivals and the City. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 5-6, 927-943 (2005).

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## **Arts Festivals and the City**

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## **Abstract**

There has been a remarkable rise in the number of urban arts festivals in recent decades. The outcomes of cities' engagement with arts festivals, however, remains little understood, particularly in social and cultural terms. This article reviews existing literature on urban festivals and argues that city authorities tend to disregard the social value of festivals and to construe them simply as vehicles of economic generation or as 'quick fix' solutions to city image problems. While such an approach renders certain benefits, it is ultimately quite limiting. If arts festivals are to achieve their undoubted potential in animating communities, celebrating diversity and improving quality of life, then they must be conceived of in a more holistic way by urban managers. Currently, the tasks of conceptualizing the problems at issue and devising appropriate policies are hampered by the scarcity of empirical research conducted in the area.

“What is a festival? It’s something exceptional, something out of the ordinary....something that must create a special atmosphere which stems not only from the quality of the art and the production, but from the countryside, the ambience of a city and the traditions ...of a region’ (Author’s translation). (de Rougement, quoted in Isar, 1976: 131)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The last fifteen years or so have seen a remarkable rise in the number of arts festivals in cities throughout Europe and elsewhere. Their growth has been such that it is now difficult to accurately determine the number of festivals in existence. Reasons explaining this proliferation lie in a series of inter-related factors that include changing approaches to urban management, structural changes in economic production, the use of culture as a means of restructuring wealth and job creation, and the unsettling effects of globalisation. All of these factors, in combination, have prompted a re-conceptualisation of the festival as a useful strategy for the contemporary city to adopt in the attempt to reposition and differentiate itself in an increasingly competitive world. As Paddison (1993) explains, a city in pursuit of internal investment will compete with other cities through urban entrepreneurial displays. Festivals and events, as forms of

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<sup>1</sup> *‘C’est quoi une festival?...C’est d’abord une fête. C’est quelque chose d’exceptionnel, qui sort de la routine...et qui doit créer une atmosphère spéciale, à laquelle contribuent non seulement la qualité des oeuvres et de leur exécution, mais le paysage, l’ambiance d’une cité et la tradition .... d’une région.*

entrepreneurial display, have come to be construed as vital elements in acquiring the investment needed for restructuring and regeneration (Robertson and Wardrop 2004).

While the reasons explaining this recent proliferation are clear, the outcomes of cities' involvement with festivals are far less so. A number of researchers (Evans, 2001, Hannigan 2003, Gibson and Stephenson 2004, Richards and Wilson 2004,) have argued that while cities use festivals and events with the intention of marketing themselves and creating place distinctiveness, the strategy may be counter-productive. Urban events, it is argued, run the risk of suffering from 'serial reproduction' (Richards and Wilson 2004: 1932), of becoming formulaic (Evans 2001) and hence devoid of any real connections with place. Yet, while the literature identifies in urban festivals the potentially homogenizing effects of globalisation, other perspectives on culture-led urban regeneration argue that the reproduction of sameness need not be the outcome. Bailey et al. (2004), for example, argue that homogenisation is not inevitable, but is attributable to urban management approaches that fail to understand how local particularities could be cultivated to counter the globalising influences of cultural production in city arenas.

More generally, some have questioned the prevailing 'just add culture and stir' approach to urban regeneration (Gibson and Stevenson 2004: 1), querying the extent to which it usefully serves public interests either in the short or the long term. A similar question could be asked of the role that festivals play in urban areas. Currently, the literature is very uncertain about their contribution. While there has been a lot of hype about the theoretically catalytic effect that festivals can have in terms of attracting visitors, spearheading the regeneration of derelict city districts and reclaiming public time and space for communal celebrations, hard evidence is in short supply. Evans (2001: 236) warns that the contemporary festival should be viewed as problematic if 'their purpose

and sustainability is of concern beyond the calendar cycle of ever-growing cultural feasts'. This problem provides the focus for this article. It seeks to review the current state of knowledge about how festivals contribute to shaping the functioning of urban areas. It reviews existing literature on festivals and raises critical issues concerning the outcomes, particularly the non-economic outcomes, identifiable in the use of festivals in urban contexts. In suggesting ways of addressing emerging problems, the article suggests dialoguing with other literatures that have long sought to theorise the meanings historically associated with festivals and festivity.

## **2. Festival meanings – historical perspectives**

According to Turner (1982: 11), people in all cultures recognize the need to set aside certain times and spaces for communal creativity and celebration, and festivals have long constituted a vehicle for expressing the close relationship between identity and place. Ekman (1999), writing in a Swedish context, for example, described festivals as occasions for expressing collective belonging to a group or a place. In creating opportunities for drawing on shared histories, shared cultural practices and ideals, as well as creating settings for social interactions, festivals engender local continuity. They constitute arenas where local knowledge is produced and reproduced, where the history, cultural inheritance and social structures, which distinguish one place from another, are revised, rejected or recreated. To borrow Geertz's terminology, they can be said to represent an example of a 'cultural text' (Geertz 1993), one of the many ensembles of texts that comprise a people's culture. Historically, interrogating festival settings has yielded insights into how a people's sense of their own identity is closely bound up with their attachment to place. In a European context, for example, Muir (1997) has written about the important function that public festivities played in towns across western

Europe between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, those centuries during which civic consciousness, or the identification of individuals with their home town, came to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of European civilization. Particularly in independent city-states, such as Venice<sup>2</sup>, public rituals and festivities were critical in consolidating civic identities in the face of internal division and external threats. Furthermore, such powerful city states used festivities to exert control over their territories. Muir (1997) explains that Venice constructed and represented its colonial dominion through ritual, forcing subject cities to celebrate the feast days of St. Mark, the patron saint of Venice. His analysis echoes Bonnemaïson's comment on the 'hallmark event', which he says 'functions like a monument, supporting and reinforcing the image of established power, whether religious or secular (Bonnemaïson 1990: 25 quoted in Hall 1992: 89). Both authors' implicitly highlight the central role that power relations play in the reproduction of meanings in festival sites. This serves as a reminder that the construction of festival practices is intimately bound up with the cultural and social divisions that structure human population groups.

As important cultural practices, festivals have a long established association with cities. It is thought that the first festival took place in Athens as long ago as 534 BC, in honour of the God Dionysos, the patron of wine, feast and dance (HOLND FSTVL 2002). Then, as in all subsequent centuries up to the present era, festivals have played important social roles both in public and private, religious and secular spheres. The forerunners of contemporary urban arts festivals can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the Bayreuth Festival in 1876 and the Salzburger Festspiele in 1920. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Bassett (1993) discusses in a UK context, the interest in cultural development was closely linked to both the growth of cities and to the rise of urban elites. The festivals that

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<sup>2</sup> Venice remained an independent city-republic until 1797.

emerged during this period tended to present programmes of high quality classical works, interpreted by renowned performers within famous theatres or concert halls for the benefit of arts connoisseurs. There was no question but that the cultural forms and infrastructures promoted at this time were unambiguously concerned with the 'high arts'. Indeed, as Bassett (1993: 1774) argues, support for the arts was implicit in the efforts made by social elites to exert their dominance and demarcate social boundaries between themselves and the population at large. Festivals like those at Bayreuth and Salzburg contributed to the process of re-affirming the civilising and educational values of 'high' culture.

The postwar period witnessed an upsurge in the number of festivals being established. In an era where the drive towards reconstruction, political stability and the forging of international linkages through trade (including through a fledging tourism industry) set the tenor for economic and social advancement, the emergence of such nationally important festivals as at Avignon (France), Edinburgh (Scotland), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Wexford (Ireland) and Spoleto (Italy) were important contributions to Europe's cultural infrastructure. While many of the leading arts festivals were based in major cities, several were not. In fact, sometimes, a more peripheral location, away from the culturally well endowed capital city functioned as a liberating stimulus for festival development. Frey (1994) has argued that in countries with highly developed cultural policies (like Germany, Austria and Italy), festivals sometimes emerged as reactionary attempts to overcome the restrictions and inflexibility associated with established cultural institutions. This seems to have been the case at Avignon, where a desire to work away from the 'confines' of Paris was important for its festival's founder, the theatre director Jean Vilar (Isar 1976). In other cases, festival initiatives have shown themselves to be highly reflective, as well as constitutive, of the resources, circumstances and people



existing in particular places. They emerged in response to artistic needs lacking within that place and crystallized the key resources available there. Very often the human resource was of critical importance, with many festivals owing their existence to the commitment and vision of one or several key individuals.

Irrespective of location, these festivals introduced vibrancy at a time when much of continental Europe's cultural resources and architectural heritage lay in ruins. They often had international programming dimensions and international ambitions, with Edinburgh, for example, aspiring to be the 'Athens of the North' (Jamieson 2004: 66) and Wexford seeking to position itself on the world stage (Quinn 1998). The preoccupation was still with the 'high' arts and there was as yet little sign of any oppositional culture, although in southern France, the Avignon festival founded by Vilar in 1947 was re-thinking the arts festival concept in an attempt to promote inclusiveness, accessibility and new forms of interaction between audience, artists and place. However, it was a pioneering initiative and its approach was as yet unorthodox. The challenge to dominant arts paradigms began to emerge more strongly in the 1960s and 1970s, when international student festivals at places like Zagreb and Nancy started experimenting with new artistic ideas and pushing out the boundaries of what was acceptable in terms of artistic production and performance (HOLND FSTVL 2002). Festivals during these decades grappled with definitions of culture, challenging accepted definitions of 'high' and 'low' arts and gradually breaking down distinctions between the two. Festivals like those at Avignon and the Fringe at Edinburgh now operationalised this radical re-thinking in their programming, their use of venues and in the ways in which they tried to engage audiences.

The forces exerting pressure for change among festivals, as in cultural arenas more generally, were part of a much broader movement seeking social change in tandem with the widespread economic restructuring being experienced throughout the Western world during the late 1960s and 1970s. These decades witnessed the emergence of grassroots social movements promoting a variety of causes such as anti-war, feminism, environmentalism and gay rights. They were driven by young people who shared a common interest in challenging prevailing norms and the existing social order. As Bianchini (1996: 4) has pointed out, these movements were often closely associated with 'alternative' forms of cultural production and distribution comprising, among others, free festivals, visual arts exhibitions in non-traditional venues, and experimental theatre groups. To the fore in using festival production to achieve social aims was the Avignon festival in southern France. Under the innovative direction of Vilar, the concept of the festival here was being developed as something to be enacted with and through local and visiting populations, as opposed to something simply presented to them (Isar, 1976). The intention was that local residents, organisers, directors and performers would effortlessly interact with each other and with their place, bringing it alive to the sounds and sights of music, dancing and art, in a spirit of festivity. To this end, festival events were housed not only in conventional venues but in the open-air, on streets and in squares as well as in cafes and restaurants. Events were programmed to happen at all times of the day and night. While the directorship of Vilar was not unique it was certainly ground-breaking and inspirational for festival directors across Europe. It privileged the communal, participative dimension so central to the original concept of the 'festival', a word which derives from the classical Latin word *festum* meaning feast (Isar 1976). As such, it signaled a move away from earlier attempts to use the arts festival, and the arts more generally, as a means of defining and maintaining social distinctions.

### **3. Festivals and urban policy – evolving recent approaches**

By the beginning of the 1980s, the national and international contexts shaping the role of cultural production in society was changing radically. Patterns of cultural consumption had evolved radically in recent decades with huge expansions in the consumption of mass media products in the home and a corresponding rise in diverse patterns of culture as well as leisure and tourism. Cities, as Zukin (1991) noted, were no longer functioning as landscapes of production but as landscapes of consumption. The collapse of the industrial base in numerous cities had prompted a serious search for alternatives and a shift towards the service economy. Many cities were beginning to see the logic in developing the kinds of cultural facilities needed to attract the skilled workers who would make up the new service class (Bassett 1993: 1777). Simultaneous with this 'cultural turn' in the advanced industrial societies emerged a corresponding inflation of 'image production' (Zukin 1998). 'Image production' or city marketing in the post-industrial era was as Ward (1998) stresses, an American invention, which in a European context tended to sit uneasily with a more interventionist approach to urban governance (Ashworth and Voogt 1994)

The dramatic expansion of festivals in urban areas since the late 1980s is explainable in respect of these changing circumstances. Their growth represents cities' attempts to use consumer oriented, cultural forms to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive, increasingly global market-place. As Waitt (2004:403) reminds us, the concept of constructing festivals with the intention of drawing international attention to cities is not new. As long ago as 1859, the Handel Centenary Festival held in London's Crystal Palace, was marketed as a tourist attraction, with the organizers distributing some 50,000 prospectuses in the European offices of the railway companies serving the Crystal Palace (Adams, 1986: 18). The Holland Festival established in 1947 was

designed to promote economic development in the Netherlands, while in 1953 the Irish Ministry for Industry and Commerce established 'An Tóstal', a cultural festival specifically constructed to attract tourists. Festivals have, however, taken on a new significance in the context of globalisation. They are now construed as entrepreneurial displays, as image creators capable of attracting significant flows of increasingly mobile capital, people and services. Major events are seen as being particularly effective in that they ally tourism objectives with urban planning (Roche 1994), while simultaneously providing a means through which political and urban elites can refashion collective feelings of identity, emotion and consciousness (Cox and Wood 1994). This civic boosterism line of thinking argues that major events generate in citizens a sense of pride and self-esteem (Mueller and Fenton 1989: 275). This sense derives in large part from the external affirmation that the event bestows on the city and the belief that through the event, the city is increasing its stature on the world stage. Accordingly, in spite of the increasing tendency for festivals to be constructed for consumption by privileged audiences, e.g. visiting tourists or affluent locals, people in general tend not to radically oppose prevailing meanings amidst the 'showcase effect' of the event (Hiller 1998). Meanwhile, the demand from growing numbers of increasingly mobile, experienced tourists continues to rise. No longer content simply to gaze (Urry 1990), the search for experiential holidays supports the widespread orientation towards a greater consumption of cultural goods and experiences, including festivals (Heinrich 1988 quoted in Hall 1992: 27).

#### **4. Critical perspectives on the role of festivals in urban policies**

Fully aware of these evolving trends, several cities have invested heavily in festivals as part of their urban regeneration and city marketing strategies. As García (2004) points out, the level of investment in arts events does not rival that accounted for by major sports events (like the Olympics or the World Cup) or by major business showcase events (like Expos and World Fairs). Nevertheless, as part of the broader phenomenon that has seen an increasing use of the arts in urban regeneration processes, the rise of the urban festival has been very significant. The question specifically posed here is: what has this actually meant for the cities and city populations concerned? What roles has the arts festival played in advancing urban policy, contributing to urban life and facilitating the expression of cultural identities? Answering these questions is hampered by a profound lack of empirical research in the area. There has been a marked growth in the literature on festivals but this has tended to concentrate on economic outcomes and operational issues (Robinson, Picard and Long 2004, Richards and Wilson 2004). In this context, it is difficult not to concur with Bailey et al (2004) who suggest that the long-term social impact of culture-led urban regeneration remains something of a mystery. While a number of researchers have been interested in how the rise of the urban festival has impacted on the cities concerned, few if any comprehensive studies analyzing festivals' contribution to urban policy have been undertaken. However, a number of researchers have written about the experiences of cities including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Galway, Barcelona and Sydney, and this literature has revealed a number of themes that further our understanding of the relationship between festivals and cities. These themes are discussed below.

#### 4.1 The festival as image maker

Any attempt to analyse the role that festivals play in cities rapidly uncovers the very narrow manner in which cities tend to construe festivals. Above all else, city management's need to construct them as key elements of the city's place-marketing strategy predominates. Raising the city's international profile and attracting visitors seems to have become the *raison d'être* of the city festival. The emphasis is very much on the spectacular as opposed to any real consideration of process. It seems more a matter of style than of substance. As Evans (2003: 417) put it 'hard branding the city through cultural flagships and festivals has created a form of *karaoke* architecture where it is not important how well you can sing but that you do it with verve and gusto'. Even when the festival or cultural event has been strongly culturally orientated at the outset, the city marketing impetus seems to overwhelm the process and crowd out any other potentially driving force underpinning the use of festivals in urban arenas. The European Cultural Capital event (established in 1985) arguably illustrates this point. Its original aims were purely cultural, being concerned with achieving cultural expression, celebrating cultural diversity while simultaneously promoting unity among Europeans Richards and Wilson (2004: 1936). However, over time, individual cities have used the event to achieve different aims and often have used non-cultural measurements to calculate the event's effectiveness. Typically, it is the change in visitor numbers that is used to demonstrate success, as in the cases of Copenhagen (Fridberg and Koch-Nielsen 1997) and Antwerp (Richards 2000) or to predict success, as in Cork (Roche, 2004) and Liverpool (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 06/04/2003)

While the concept of city marketing can be interpreted holistically to include social, cultural as well as economic aspirations (van den Berg et al 1980), in practice the application of the concept in the US and in the UK has usually been limited to economic

ideals (Paddison 1993). Furthermore, by definition, city marketing strategies are duty bound to emphasise the attractive elements of place while simultaneously down-playing or diverting attention from less salubrious features. The festival, with its connotations of sociability, playfulness, joviality and community provides a ready-made set of positive images on which to base a reconstruction of a less than perfect city image. Add the 'arts' dimension to the festival, and another series of positive images are available for manipulating according to the positioning requirements of the city. It is not surprising, therefore, that many cities have seen in festivals a sort of 'quick-fix' solution to their image problems.

Of the cities discussed in the arts-led urban regeneration literature, Glasgow has received particular attention. Designated as European Cultural Capital in 1990, the city is credited with using the event to overhaul its image as a depressed, problem-ridden post-industrial city into an attractive and culturally interesting service-driven contemporary city. While this particular cultural event is held to have been critical in Glasgow's image revolution, the city already had a history of involvement with festival events since the previous decade. It supported the Mayfest festival in the early 1980s and progressed to involvement with a jazz festival in 1986 and the Garden Festival in 1988 (García 2004). The bid for the European Cultural Capital therefore grew out of a context of commitment to cultural events and a belief in their ability to contribute to turning around a city's fortunes. Whether or not the 1990 Cultural Capital designation had sustaining effects on the city's image remains a subject for debate. While the city's image was boosted during the year itself, a study conducted by Myerscough in 1991 suggested that it was not being maintained. A somewhat similar finding was reported in the case of the North of England's designation as 'Year of the Visual Arts' in 1996. The Arts Council of England (1997) reported that while the Year had succeeded in raising awareness of the arts in

the region, a more sustained arts programme would be needed if longer term attitudinal change was to be achieved. Nevertheless, in the Glasgow case, media commentary (Ryan 2002) and local tourism agencies (GGCVTB, 2002) continue to applaud the positive image transformation.

#### **4.2 The festival as tourist attraction**

Glasgow, with greater certainty, can point to the increase in visitor arrivals that the 1990 designation stimulated. The year before Glasgow made its bid in 1983, visitors to the city numbered 700,000. By 1990 they numbered 3 million, of whom 600,000 were attributable to the event (Paddison 1993). By 2002 they numbered four million annually, by which time the city had become Europe's fastest growing conference destination (Ryan 2002). Undoubtedly, the ambition of generating large-scale tourist flows is a priority for many of the cities that use festivals as part of their urban regeneration / city marketing strategies. The European City of Culture examples cited earlier are cases in point. There is now an extensive tourism literature treating the rise of festivals as tourist attractions. The use of the term 'festival tourism' is increasing among tourism researchers, the vast majority of whom conceive of the festival primarily in terms of its economic potential. Increasing numbers of empirical studies capture the growing reality of city managers devising/re-constructing festivals as economic catalysts and report gains in terms of numbers of visitors attracted, revenue generated, extension to the tourist season and columns of media inches generated. Far fewer studies hint at, much less problematise, the narrowness of vision inherent in such approaches. Some researchers acknowledge that several of the festivals currently functioning as key city marketing strategies initially evolved from a more rooted connection with either place, community, tradition and / or art form. Yet while this has many implications (Hughes 2000), these are rarely treated in the literature. Robertson and Wardrop (2004: 123) for



example, point to the importance of acknowledging that the Edinburgh festival was not established with tourism objectives in mind yet fail to elaborate on this point. They go on to suggest that some involved in festivals and events have historically held that applying strategic frameworks to festivals and events serves only to stifle entrepreneurship and creativity. However, this comment is left without further development.

A contrasting set of perspectives can, however, be found among researchers who locate their enquiries within different domains. A well established line of social science enquiry into festive practices has paid considerable attention to commodification, authenticity and cultural identity issues. Here, the extent to which the presence of tourists negatively affects festival processes is a key question (Boissevain 1996, Sampath 1997, Hitchcock 1999). There has been a school of thought that associates tourism with the inevitable debasement of cultural meanings (e.g. Greenwood 1976, 1989), with Greenwood (1976: 141) arguing that it is 'only the local people who have learned about the 'costs' of tourism. The outside investors and the government have been reaping huge profits and are well satisfied'. However, this view is countered by the assertion that change is inevitable, and has always been integral to the reproduction of festivities. Cohen (1988), for example, argues that through commoditization, cultural entities can assume new meanings for the producers. This more nuanced interpretation suggests that 'rituals that may have been meaningful in the past for an internal public can evolve, under the influence of tourism, to become a culturally significant self-representation before an external public' (Cohen 1988: 382). Theoretically, an important argument implicit here is that local residents, as producers and as established audiences, can engage meaningfully in festivals in ways that address both their own needs as well as those of visitors at the same time. Empirically, however, evidence to support this theoretical

position is scarce, and from artistic and broader cultural perspectives, the merits of engaging with tourism remain highly debatable.

A symposium of festival producers, policy-makers and directors in the Netherlands (HOLND FSTVL 2002), for example, spoke of festivals leading to a 'tourist invasion', as at Oerol (Netherlands) and Avignon (France), where places come to 'look more like a holiday resort than an arts festival' (HOLND FSTVL 2002: 11). Landry et al (1996) argue that when a festival focuses on external audiences, a result can be to limit the ability of the artists to question, challenge and criticize. At such points in the festival's evolution, critical questions as to its ability to retain artistic autonomy, to maintain the quality of experience in the face of increasing pressures to commercialise arise. Such questions are debated in Quinn's (2005) analysis of the Galway Arts Festival. Set in the Western seaboard city of Galway (population of 67,000, Central Statistics Office 2001), this combined arts festival was established to celebrate and promote appreciation of the arts in the region in 1978. Informed initially by socially inspired objectives, the festival has expanded greatly from modest beginnings to become one of the largest and most popular festivals in the Republic of Ireland. The festival's growing popularity as a tourist attraction for both national and international audiences and its growing commercialism has created a series of dilemmas for the festival. Since the mid 1990s, it has been grappling with the tensions posed by trying to balance deep-rooted, socially aligned artistic goals on the one hand with often conflicting economic imperatives on the other. Adapting to changing circumstances is not an easy process. The Galway Arts Festival remains committed to serving local needs but the city's rapidly changing social and economic contexts mean that both production and consumption contexts have changed. Developments in the city's cultural infrastructure, partially achieved through the efforts of the festival, have facilitated a more commercial approach to arts production, for

example. Meanwhile the city's rapidly growing population, in both residential and tourist terms, is creating an unprecedented breadth and diversity of artistic needs.

For local people these changes are all too evident, and survey data gathered among city residents demonstrated clear concerns that the festival was losing its meaning for local people in the face of pressures to internationalise both its programme and its audiences from such gatekeepers as the national media, the state tourism agency and major sponsors. There was a clear sense that the festival's growing commercialism is problematic for local people. Increasing professionalism and the growing stature of the festival both as commercial enterprise and as tourist attraction underpinned a perception that the festival is becoming increasingly exclusive and inaccessible.

Yet, it is the very possibility of involvement and participation, and the potential to challenge, re-order, subvert and disrupt, that social scientists and others have held to be inherent in the concept of festivity (Willems-Braun 1994, Ozouf 1988). Social theorists have construed festivals as liminal, 'time out of time' spaces (Bahktin 1984), replete with possibilities for challenging social conventions, social order and authority, and inverting society's cultural norms. Cultural commentators conceive of festivals as risk-takers, as opportunities to challenge the status quo and push out boundaries. Within the prevailing conceptualization of arts festivals as city marketing strategies, festivals are permitted little scope for unlocking such potential, potential that would seem to be unlimited. Of even greater concern is the possibility that conceived of as such, festivals may be both compounding the social difficulties that necessitate renewal and regeneration programmes in the first place, and heightening tensions in already contested arenas. In the light of existing research knowledge about urban arts festivals it does not seem unreasonable to ask whether city authorities have even begun to exploit the potential of

arts festivals? The use of culture only for marketing purposes is limiting (Landry et al 1996) and the broad-ranging conceptualizations of festivity evident in the literature contrast sharply with the tangible but narrow construction of festivals merely as economic generators.

### **4.3 The festival as community**

As Landry et al. (1996) argue, the crude interests of the local economy and of the city as a whole do not always coincide. There is often a failure to appreciate that image campaigns with little grounding in local needs and aspirations can backfire. This is because genuine festivals must be 'rooted on society, in real life' (Isar 1976: 126), while arts festivals, if they are to be 'artistically responsible festivals' (Degreef 1994: 18) must respond and evolve in tandem with the changing artistic needs felt by diverse resident and visitor community groups within a place. These concepts can become lost in the face of increasingly persuasive city branding. Hannigan (2003) recently introduced a series of articles that highlight the rising influence of commercial marketing strategies in the shaping of the contemporary city. His comments emphasized growing concerns about consumer democracy, the integrity of public space and the cultural diversity of the metropolis. In theory, festivals could have a role to play in countering the social crises faced by cities in the context of globalisation. Hughes (1999) suggests that the growing interest in festivity in the 1990s is linked to its use as a social strategy to combat the growing alienation and insecurity felt in public space. Indeed, festivals have been historically construed as mechanisms through which place-based communities express identities, celebrate communally held values and strengthen communal bonds (Jackson 1988, Marston 1989, Smith 1996). In reality, however, how do these functions fare under the prevailing entrepreneurial approaches to urban management? (Putnam 2001, Waitt 2004). According to Zukin (1998) strategies of urban redevelopment based on

consumption focus on visual attractions that make people spend money. Festivals as visual attractions require willing participants in the guise of spectators as well as consumers. Yet, what of more participative, communal engagement? Nurse (1999) argues that the Caribbean carnivals, now found in almost every city in North America and Britain, represent good examples of festivity in action. Spread along diasporic networks to globally disparate communities with Caribbean kinship ties, these carnivals constitute the largest event in terms of attendance and economic activity generated in their respective host cities (Nurse 1999). Yet, the substantial tourism and economic activity dimensions don't overshadow the profound social meanings of these festivities. For diverse groups living within and attracted to these carnival cities, the carnival maintains its status as a hybrid site (Bhaba 1994) where cultural identities, notions of belonging and values systems are celebrated, contested and negotiated. Evans (1993 quoted in Evans 2001) concurs, arguing that large-scale cultural events such as the carnival *Mas* in Trinidad and their diasporic reproductions in Toronto (Caribana) and London (Notting Hill) still retain indigenous involvement and strong shades of their original purpose. There is nothing inevitable about this sort of rooted cultural reproduction. Rather, it reveals the nurturing of specific broad-based objectives and deliberate efforts to achieve certain outcomes. As Owusu and Ross (1988) discuss, such carnivals actively seek to combine local, participant and tourist, and believe months of planning, workshops, craft production and rehearsal before the events themselves take place.

In general, however, there is often little sense of collective or social responsibility evident in the contemporary promulgation of festivals in urban areas. Garcia (2004: 108) argues that two widely criticised aspects of Glasgow's 1990 European Year of Culture event were its failure to assist widening the access and involvement of geographically

peripheral and socially deprived communities in arts activity, and its inability to act as a platform for representing local cultures. According to McLay (1990), Glasgow's Year of Culture acted as a 'superficial make-over', focusing on the privileged few while 'covering up' the real concerns of the city's working-class majority. Paddison (1993) similarly asks whether the 'new Glasgow' emerging through this cultural reconstruction process had any relevance for those experiencing poverty on the city's margins. Somewhat relatedly, Jamieson's (2004) research offers critical perspectives on the Edinburgh Festival. 'Edinburgh, the Festival City', with its numerous annual and contiguous summer festivals, is widely accredited with stimulating large scale tourist flows (Scotinform 1991), generating some £125 million expenditure, sustaining nearly 4,000 jobs across Scotland (Edinburgh International Festival 2001) and creating a strong city image (Prentice and Andersen 2003). Jamieson moves beyond the economic indicators to reveal a festival city that is spatially structured in a way that privileges visiting festival audiences and contains them within parts of the city deemed 'appropriate' for cultural consumption. Meanwhile, according to Jamieson (2004) the city's outskirts, where Edinburgh's socially deprived reside, remain relatively free of festival activity. This structuring of the festival, she argues, serves both to reassure cultural tourists of a safe encounter with the city and to marginalize those Edinburgh residents living in its peripheral housing estates. In consequence, there is little possibility of the festival engaging in 'processes that might disrupt the social construction of the festival or challenge the dominant social meanings being reproduced therein' (Jamieson 2004: 72). It is tempting to argue that the type of festival landscape discussed by Jamieson is associated only with 'high art' festivals. Waterman (1998: 66) asserts that high-brow festivals still explicitly prefer to present themselves as elitist, citing the case of the Israel Festival as one that is unashamedly elitist, directing itself at the few who can afford to attend and believing that it should not be denigrated for this. However, the reproduction of difference through festival practices

can equally characterize festivals more commonly perceived to be populist and accessible. Quinn (1998), for example, found that in the case of the Galway Arts Festival, the inclusive image of the festival belied a more complex agenda underpinning the construction of the festival. In this case, high art forms like classical music and more traditional forms of theatre involving the Irish language, and their devotees, were marginalized in favour of the more popular music, film and street theatre events that have become the festival's hallmarks. Similarly, the reproduction of difference, irrespective of the power dynamics at play, will in all likelihood encounter strategies of opposition or resistance (however passive) from those groupings who feel themselves to be excluded from the key decision-making processes (Quinn 2003). It is such processes that at least partially account for the emergence of fringe / unofficial / alternative festival offerings in places like Wexford, Edinburgh and Avignon.

More generally, however, the implication in the literature is that what is often consumed and experienced in festival settings is an idealized, sanitized version of the city where real opportunities for genuine engagement with the culture and multiple realities of the place, for both local and visiting populations remain sidelined. The examples cited above echo Judd's (1999) critique of Disneyfied 'Latin Quarters' and their associated festivals as 'islands of pure consumption' for visiting populations. Such 'islands' are more likely to contribute to racial, ethnic and class tensions than to an impulse towards local community' (Judd 1999: 53). The centuries-old Lenten carnival celebrations in Venice, revitalized in the late 1980s with a tourism remit, provide an insight into this problem. In tourism terms, the contemporary Venice carnival is a magnet attraction, attracting some 900,000 visitors to the city over a 12 day period (Busolin 2002). During peak carnival periods, it is no exaggeration to say that the city becomes overwhelmed. Bridge closures and one-way pedestrian systems are often needed to maintain mobility, and many

citizens in this ageing city choose to stay at home because they cannot negotiate the crowds. If mere visitor numbers were indicators of success, the Venice carnival would be impressive. However, while it extends the city's tourist season into the early part of the year (the carnival typically takes place in early February) and thus achieves one of its core revitalization objectives, it is arguable whether the carnival contributes anything to reducing the city's detrimental over-reliance on the excursionist market. Meanwhile, from a local resident's perspective it is clear that the carnival is not meeting local needs. Even the 2002 carnival director, Fabio Momo, accepted that 'the people of Venice cannot stand the carnival anymore'. He elaborated further by saying 'the local becomes a spectator and isn't a participant anymore. But the carnival is a party and you cannot be a spectator in a party, you have to participate' (Momo 2001). Data derived from surveys undertaken among a representative sample of the local population during the 2002 carnival revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the current reproduction of carnival and suggestions for change revolved around three key areas: more spontaneity in the programming, including more events in outdoor public spaces, increased participation for locals, and tighter controls on the presence and movements of visitors in the city during carnival (Quinn 2004). The 'Friends of the Venice Carnival Association' founded in 1987 and chaired by Guido Rossato is very aware of declining local participation. In an attempt to counter the problem it organizes courses, free of charge, where local people can learn how to make inexpensive carnival costumes and be encouraged to take part in Carnival activities in greater numbers. At the same time, however, local people's declining participation in, and negative attitudes towards the contemporary carnival in no way imply a disinterest in this deep-rooted cultural practice. On the contrary, survey data identified a deep attachment to, and recognition of, the historic tradition of civic ritual that has been such a signifier of Venice for centuries.



In considering ways in which to re-ignite collective endeavour and restore civic engagement, Putnam (2001) asks that we consider increasing participation in, rather than consumption and appreciation of, cultural activities. He also suggests that we 'discover new ways to use the arts as a vehicle for convening diverse groups of fellow citizens (Putnam 2001: 411). This is easier said than done. Local respondents interviewed as part of the Venice study could easily point to solutions. However, these are unlikely to be implemented or even made known to the carnival organizers because of the conflicts of interest at issue. As mentioned before, festivals are not natural occurrences, they are social constructions that bear heavy signs of authorship. In the case of the Venice carnival, tourism-dominated business interests prevail.

#### **4.4 Globalisation and local diversity**

Despite the role of agency and the politics inherently involved in the negotiating and challenging of meanings reproduced in festival settings (Jackson 1988, Marston 1988) a recurring charge in the literature is that originality is often replaced by imitation. Far from adding to place distinctiveness, the proliferation of festivals is at least partially explained by a formulaic approach to duplicating festivals found to have been 'successful' in particular city contexts. This is part of the phenomenon identified by Scott (2000), who writes about a deepening tension between culture as something grounded in place, and culture as a pattern of non-place globalised events and experiences. In response, arts commentators have been prompted to deplore the dilution of quality, originality and difference. Clark (2004: 34) is not alone in arguing that 'the modern festival...is a sort of supermarket where the paying public is persuaded to bulk-buy processed culture' and that 'such events quickly start to look the same'.

Any assessment of the role played by globalization processes in reproducing sameness should consider that festivals have long had an outward orientation. They have been always characterized by 'interrelations' rather than 'autonomy of place', to use Hannerz's (1988) terminology. From a purely artistic perspective they serve as forum for exchanging and comparing experiences and ideas, and for prompting collaboration with other arts festivals and practitioners. From a broader social perspective they serve as vehicles through which cultural meanings are expressed for interpretation both by the place-based communities themselves and by the outside world. Thus, current problems concerning the dilution of originality and difference are not inevitable. Rather, as the performing arts literature would argue, they result from a failure to acknowledge that while festivals are in part produced by and through globalisation processes, they can simultaneously respond to the challenges posed therein (Klaic et al. undated: 30). From a purely artistic perspective, this requires a finely balanced approach. The danger facing internationally oriented festivals is that they may neglect their local resources and cultural needs in the process. Building relationships with artists, audiences, with the local artistic environment, as well as with business, external audiences, and with the media is critical to the effective functioning of an arts festival (HOLND FSTVL). Festivals 'have to augment the existing supply and the local infrastructure. They have to add something ..... that would not exist without the festival' (HOLND FSTVL: 18).

The Symposium organized by the Holland Festival in 2002 offers the LIFT festival in London as an example of a festival that reflects on its own role, on its contribution to local cultural supply and reconfigures itself accordingly (HOLND FSTVL 2002). This degree of self-analysis, also evident in the Galway Arts Festival (Quinn 2005) is necessary if festivals are to maintain integrity and continue to contribute in a meaningful way to the social and cultural contexts in which they operate. Another festival offered

as an example of one that manages to balance the needs of different stakeholders is the Malta Festival in Poznan, Poland. This festival attracts people from the area in addition to domestic visitors from elsewhere in Poland and professionals from abroad. A key part of its success is its programming to attract different audience groups simultaneously (HOLND FSTVL 2002).

More fundamentally, structuring festivals such that they connect with, but are not overwhelmed by, globalisation processes requires a much deeper consideration of the social and cultural particularities of the cities in question. Bailey et al (2004) argue that the future could lie in viewing cultural planning as being about engaging with the lives of those people who live in the city rather than being about regenerating the city itself. In their view, cultural forms of consumption can actively enhance and enliven communities. They do so 'because culture matters for its own sake and not merely as a means to an economic end' (Bailey et al 2004: 64). According to Zukin (1998:836) cities have begun to view the increasing multi-ethnicity of urban populations as a source of cultural vitality and economic renewal. The diversity afforded by multiple cultural practices and value systems are construed as a series of opportunities that can be cultivated to strengthen the city's overall appeal and distinctiveness. However, cities must move beyond a preoccupation with image making. Landry et al (1996) highlight the case of Bradford city as one which has successfully involved local ethnic communities. The Bradford Community Festival was started in 1987 by the Economic Development Unit of the City Council and runs over 3 weeks. Its objectives were that the whole community irrespective of origin, geography or interests, would be involved and would find a voice through the festival. The Mela was launched as part of the festival programme in 1988. Since then the popularity of the Mela has increased such that by 1996 it had approximately 140,000 visitors. Landry et al (1996: 42) concluded that while the Mela

has an undoubted impact on tourism in Bradford its greatest value is the fact that it has succeeded in stimulating significant involvement among the local Asian community. In contrast, Garcia (2004), in an analysis of the Olympic Arts programme hosted in Sydney in 2000, reported a series of criticisms from local arts groups representing cultural minorities regarding the event's failure to capture the diversity of contemporary Australia. She concluded that the Olympic Arts Festivals were not able to provide authentic cultural experiences, but rather exotic commodities for the enjoyment of visitors and white locals' (Garcia: 110).

### **5. 3 Conclusion**

*Now it's festivals, festivals everywhere. Big ones, small ones, wild ones, silly ones, dutiful ones, pretentious ones, phony ones. Many have lost purpose and direction, not to mention individual profile. Place a potted plant near the box office, double the ticket prices and – whoopee – we have a festival' (Bernheimer 2003)*

As Bailey et al (2004) argue, cultural forms of consumption can actively enhance and enliven local communities. However, there is a strong sense in the literature that festivals, as examples of cultural forms of consumption, are not managing to achieve this end. The crux of the problem appears to lie in the failure of cities to acknowledge the critical importance of understanding and responding to the needs of local places, and of closely linking city marketing and urban regeneration strategies with the specificities of particular city contexts. Arts festivals are conceived of in far too narrow a vein. City authorities seem to misunderstand the social value of festivals and construe them simply as vehicles of economic generation or as 'quick fix' solutions to city image problems. However, the tasks of conceptualizing the problems at issue and devising appropriate

policies are hampered by the scarcity of empirical research conducted in the area. The literature is replete with passing references to the social and cultural value of arts festivals, but there is a real shortage of in-depth, empirically grounded analyses of the issues involved.

Could not urban policy makers be persuaded to conceive of arts festivals in terms of quality of life, cultural and social outcomes and not simply in terms of their economic and image creation outcomes? Such a shift would of course require a more long-term, holistic approach to city management. It would also require a much more integrated, consultative approach. Garcia (2004) has already identified a lack of coordination between event organizers, tourism bodies, city planners and the arts community as a key difficulty. An obvious void in the literature is the absence of any sort of dialogue between those who theorise about arts festivals within performing arts and theatre studies domains and those who strategise around them in urban planning contexts. It is insightful to note how the same subject is conceived of in completely different ways. The way of thinking and even the language used in these different literatures is starkly contrasting. Central ideas in the arts literature on festivals include: that festivals be 'artistically responsible' (Degreef 1994:18), that they respond to specific artistic needs genuinely felt within their place; that they be conscious of the need to add to the regular supply of arts provision existing on a year-round basis; that they dialogue with their diverse constituents and reflect on their social and cultural functions. Klaic et al (undated: 48) infer a strong recognition that festivals are not simply artistic entities, but that they can be implicit in local development and urban regeneration processes. They suggest that a festival 'enables the residents to create a new vision, a way of looking at the place where they live from another point of view. It can improve the quality of communication among the residents and enhance the mutual understanding of social,

ethnic, age and cultural groups'. All of this helps to create / reinforce the self confidence of residents and change the perception of the area within and outside the community. This, they argue is 'an essential step in any process of urban regeneration' (Klaic et al undated: 48).

The strong emphasis on understanding the place and the communities who live within that place is striking, and is mirrored in reverse measure by the extent to which it is often absent within the city marketing literature. Bakhtin's (1984) theories on carnival, as well as depicting ambivalence, challenging binary oppositions and circumventing regular social structures also posit the people involved as both actors and spectators. Festivity depends on multiple forms of engagement. Too often contemporary urban arts festivals envisage only spectating roles for local residents and this strongly dilutes the cultural meanings that could be promulgated. Too often also, they fail to acknowledge the multiple realities and conflicting meanings that can be hidden beneath their image conscious 'stage-managed' veneers.

In conclusion, given the store of empirically-grounded literature currently available on arts festivals in city contexts, it is difficult not to agree with Bailey et al's (2004: 47) assertion that when the democratization of culture and the empowerment of local communities are cited as outcomes of culture-led regeneration, the rhetoric is drawing on mere assumptions. Urban policy-makers need more than assumptions to inform decision-making. If arts festivals are to achieve their undoubted potential in animating communities, celebrating diversity and improving quality of life, then they must be conceived of in a more holistic way by urban managers. Researchers have a role to play in investigating the multiple ways in which festivals realize such potential. Ultimately, as Landry et al. (1996) stress, cultural investment can only do so much. Equally, arts

festivals can only achieve so much. However, it seems abundantly clear that the growing investment evident in urban arts festivals in recent times is not yielding optimal returns. Until prevailing conceptualizations of festivals acknowledge their latent social and cultural potential, this will remain the case.

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