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Embodying Arts Festivals as Infrastructural Transformation of Places

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Chapter 12

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Introduction

Arts festivals are important forms of cultural production and consumption (Négrier 2015). Irrespective of genre (e.g., visual arts, music or film) and whether single or multidisciplinary, their primary endeavour is to engage people in the making, showcasing and performance of art. Yet arts festivals do not necessarily receive recognition or attention based on their cultural attributes alone. Festivals and events have become "central to entrepreneurial cities' efforts to generate commerce, regenerate place and stand out on the highly competitive global stage" (Quinn et al. 2020, 1875). Along with arts and cultural activities more generally, recent decades have seen cities use them to "lure… consumption, property development, and knowledge industries" (Grodach 2017, 89) as a means of addressing social and economic urban problems. Inspired by neoliberal, creative-city style thinking, arts festivals now commonly feature on urban policy agendas the world over, with several researchers highlighting the prevalence of festivalisation processes as "entire cities have transformed themselves into major stages for a continual stream of events" (Richards & Palmer 2010, 2).

Amidst all the economic ambition, with its attendant commercial hype and spectacle, the role that arts festivals play in the cultural life and wider cultural systems of cities is often ill understood. Their ephemeral, intangible and immaterial nature lends them something of a chameleon quality which can be interpreted to mean that festivals do not matter as much as the other forms of creative practice that programme year-round activities and/or have a physical building to call their own. The invisibility that attaches to their immateriality, in contrast to the hard fixity of other cultural forms, is a particular problem when it comes to understanding how they form part of a city's cultural infrastructure. Researchers tend to focus on what Allen and McCreary (2020, 51) call "enduring material landscapes rather than temporary enactments such as festivals and parades". City planners, when conceiving of cultural infrastructure tend to invest mostly in hard, material elements like art galleries, museums, theatres and performance spaces.

Yet while arts festivals are commonly defined by their short duration, in reality, they are always connected into wider, year-round arts activities in complex ways that defy their apparent temporally bounded nature. As such, they represent "a local articulation within a wider whole" (Massey 1994, 4), with Hjalager (2009, 267) discussing how festivals "contribute to, and establish links in, rather complex value chains and innovation systems" in the wider musical economy. Quinn and Wilks' (2013, 26) study of traditional music festivals in the UK and Ireland supports this argument. They point to "the highly mobile, fluid and internationally connected circuit of flows that make up the world of festivals", finding festivals to be materially and immaterially linked to different traditional music spheres involving, for example, performers, media professionals, artistic directors, and audiences, all embodying diverse resources, knowledge, expertise and practices.

In light of the above, this chapter asks how arts festivals can be understood in terms of cultural infrastructure? Posing this question is timely because the idea of social gatherings for cultural purposes, especially in conventional, indoor venues like theatres and concert halls has become inordinately problematic because of pandemic-related public health and safety concerns. There is a sense that we must find new ways of socialising without fear, and of reconfiguring social spaces to alleviate health risks and anxieties about being in proximity with others. The temporal and spatial flexibility and agility of arts festivals make them well placed to experiment with different ways of bringing people together to encounter art and culture. For this reason alone, the infrastructure of urban arts festivals needs to be better understood.

Arts festivals as material and fixed

As several researchers note (Howe et al. 2016; Dodson 2017), there has been an infrastructural turn in several areas of study, but few researchers have tried to understand whether or how this might have relevance for arts festivals. The term infrastructure has a strong association with fields like engineering and with material artefacts and elements like pipes, cables and tunnels. Even when the focus is on cultural infrastructure the tendency to think in terms of built structures and tangible entities seems strong. References to cultural infrastructure in practice and in academia usually refers to physical buildings like theatres, museums, cinemas and libraries (Getzner 2020) and overall, the impression created is that cultural infrastructure is physical,

tangible and material in nature. Such an understanding accommodates those arts festivals which have dedicated venues, but a great many festivals do not fall into this category. Accordingly, they can all too easily be dismissed for being transient, critiqued for being unstable, and overlooked as being unimportant, relative to other cultural infrastructure components.

Certainly, many festivals are known to have been established with few resources and very shaky material underpinnings. However, recent scholarship reminds us that infrastructure is never static (Korn et al. 2019), but rather is dynamic, open to negotiation and alteration, and constantly evolving. Silver (2014a) similarly explains that infrastructure is incremental in nature and this often applies to festival infrastructure. Some very well-established arts festivals now have a fixed material presence, often achieved after many years of successful festival activity, campaigning, and activism. This is borne out in the histories of festivals like the Shaw Festival which began in Niagara on the Lake in Canada in 1962. Conolly (2011) describes how it was first housed in very rudimentary conditions in the assembly hall of the local courthouse. Over time, the festival has become deeply embedded into the place such that it now stages 10 or more productions, in three theatres, for audiences that can exceed 250,000. The Salzburg festival in Austria is another example. First staged in 1920, the period immediately prior to its founding, as well as its early years, were characterised by the repurposing of pre-existing buildings and the development of new buildings to house festival activities. The Wexford Festival Opera is a further example. It was established in Ireland in 1951, and its sustained success over time led to the development of Ireland's first arts centre outside of the capital city in 1974, and to the development of the country's first custom built opera house in 2008. Internationally, there are numerous other examples of how festivals have a catalytic effect, developing venues and serving to stimulate the development of further festivals and cultural activities in ways that expand, deepen, and/or diversify the cultural offering of a place. Very importantly, examples like these point to the vital role that local activism involving artists, arts enthusiasts and other social and cultural actors campaigning and taking risks to establish festival activities, can play in cultivating cultural demand that gradually attracts resourcing and support from public agencies. Such supports can fund the establishment of resource centres, professional networks, and venues to accommodate creative production and performance. Upon deeper investigation, they further illustrate not only

the inherently dynamic quality of infrastructure but also the contestation and negotiation that shapes their constant evolution as politically charged endeavours.

Sometimes, as argued above, softer arts festival structures develop into material forms as people mobilise, campaign and secure fixed infrastructural elements in the process. However, often, they do not become fixed; yet this does not detract from their vitality or vibrancy in shaping cultural life. In rural areas, for example, where permanent venues are scarce or possibly non-existent, festivals are vital. Even in metropolitan areas where recognisable cultural infrastructure is often plentiful and possibly magnificent, festivals matter precisely because they can act as counterpoints or even as sites of opposition to the cultural activities associated with more permanent infrastructural elements. Frey (1994) makes this point, arguing that festivals enable a freedom of expression that is denied to cultural institutions bound by government regulations and weighed down by tradition and societal expectations. Obvious examples of this are the fringe festivals found in many cities, like the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland. According to Jamieson (2004, 67), its "initial unauthorized status added to its rebellious and provocatively playful character and pitted it against the legitimate and civilizing International Festival". Fringe festivals whether in Edinburgh, Montreal, Sydney or Dublin frequently repurpose vacant or under-used premises (e.g., empty shops, factories, warehouses) and reimagine small public squares, green spaces and plots of under-used land as festival venues. Over time, claiming space and creating cultural infrastructure in this way unsettles and challenges established ideas about how urban space should be used and equally about what constitutes an appropriate cultural venue. It can also lead to the creation of new relationships between cultural actors/venues and actors operating in all kinds of commercial, social and political arenas which in turn can lead to new collaborative opportunities.

In a variety of more mainstream and more tangible ways, urban planners and designers are now taking increasing account of how cities can be transformed into stages for festivals and events and how urban physical space can be programmed with activities (Smith et al. 2021). Public spaces are being upgraded with a view to making the task of staging festivals and events easier, less disruptive and more environmentally friendly. The development of a new civic office complex in Dublin City in 1994, for example, incorporated an outdoor amphitheatre for concerts

and events. Such amphitheatres are now to be found in many cities and towns. In the theatre district in Montreal, the Daoust Lestage designed *La Place des Festivals* project (2012), repurposed surface car parks into outdoor theatres for both everyday urban life as well as for large-scale festivals (Lestage 2018). Much more modestly, city spaces are now increasingly being fitted and upgraded with in-built power and water supplies, fixtures that can be used to anchor temporary structures like tents and awnings, and storage facilities to store materials needed to stage festivals and events as the need arises (Sendra 2015). These developments demonstrate the prevalence of arts festivals and other events in urban cultural life, their elevated standing in urban political agendas and their influence on urban cultural and recreational infrastructure more generally.

The wider literature on infrastructure frequently distinguishes between "hard" and "soft" infrastructural elements, and this dichotomous thinking is helpful to a point in understanding the arts festival phenomenon. However, it fails to fully capture the complexities at issue. To fully understand how arts festivals contribute to cultural life and shape infrastructure, it is vital to realise that festival-making is a creative practice that extends far beyond the spectacle showcased during the timebound staging of the festival programme itself. Festivals can manifest in hard, fixed infrastructural form, as explained earlier, but they always exist as flows and networks of people, ideas, creative impulses and resources of all kinds, all of which are contextualised in dynamic time-space. During festival periods, festival organisations programme events that animate and fill the spaces of the permanent cultural venue infrastructure (e.g., theatres, concert halls, libraries, etc.) available to them. Outside of the festival window, engaging in collaborative practices like co-commissioning and co-production, as well as other activities like creative workshops and rehearsals, are further examples of how arts festivals extend and develop their own creative practice and reach, as well as that of other cultural infrastructure entities with which they collaborate. According to Portmann (2020), the linkages between festivals and other cultural institutions are becoming harder to disaggregate as festivals increasingly collaborate as co-commissioners and co-producers with other cultural organisations, as opposed to working alone. She argues that it is no longer possible to separate festival work from that of other cultural institutions like theatres, especially not when the production and consumption of culture is now so heavily mediated by digital technology.

Arts festivals as embodied, sensuous and affective

To fully appreciate how arts festivals function as cultural infrastructure, it is necessary to emphasise their human characteristics. Arts festivals flourish everywhere in the guise of people, individually and collectively, developing and utilising varied resource networks to create and perform culture. Arguably, they exemplify the role of networks in infrastructuring cities and perfectly illustrate Simone's (2008) argument that people are the means through which culture flows in cities. For researchers like Pløger (2010), festivals are full of potential, always a force in the "becoming" of cities (Sheller and Urry 2004), serving as "ongoing mechanisms for investing and replenishing economic, spatial, socio-cultural, and symbolic resources" (Wynn 2015, 12). While arts festivals are ever present, they are perhaps not very obvious all of the time. They function year-round, engaging in networks of activity, performing culture in a variety of ways as earlier discussed, as they prepare to bring their spectacle to the public for the days/weeks of the staged festival programme. Then they emerge to energise, animate and transform the sights, sounds, atmosphere and possibilities of city spaces. Meyboom (2009) has written about the need for infrastructure to design lively public space and arts festivals have this ability in abundance.

Through the spectacles they create, arts festivals demonstrate why festivalisation holds such appeal for the entrepreneurial city. However, arts festivals mean much more than spectating. They offer "out of the ordinary" (O'Grady 2015), participative and immersive experiences that are not only affective but multi-sensorial in nature. Being fluid, flexible and somewhat subversive—particularly those staged in public spaces—they have the potential to transform space in ways that are "multi scalar and varied, involving the human and the non-human, the social and the material" (Sweeney et al. 2018, 573). Public space is never neutral or fixed. It is always open to change and influence and, as Merx (2011) notes, it matters a great deal how social engagement is performed there. Staging festivals holds the potential of churning places into motion (Falconi, 2014) and of encouraging different ways of being in, belonging to, and engaging with, place. Increasingly, researchers understand festivals as performative sites that "spatially concentrate and vigorously mobilize a wide range of artistic practices, sensory experiences, and embodied practices" (Kingsbury 2016, 223). Studying the material and corporeal transformations through which festivals are produced and consumed is now of growing

scholarly interest. Distinctive sensory notes encompassing noises, smells, sights and tastes accompany all these transformations and come together to produce very distinctive festival atmospheres. These affective dimensions alone make festival activities especially important for delivering and consuming cultural experiences because they enable affects to "infuse and circulate among bodies and across spaces, all the while constructing the social worlds through which they flow" (Carter 2019, 201). For Jiang and Yu (2019), place must be felt if it is to make sense, and festivals have the ability to make a place come alive. Increasingly we understand festivals as opportunities for embodied experiences: people watch and listen, but they also move, sing, laugh, taste and engage viscerally. Furthermore, festival audiences often do so in community with others, with Dickson's (2015, 718) study of Glasgow Film Festival arguing that festivalgoers may actively develop "commonalities with strangers through modes of appreciation (e.g., laughing at the same parts, synchronised clapping)". Studies like this promote the suggestion that the performativity involved in festivals offers possibilities for different cohorts of people to find common ground. As such, it is argued that they can help to foster dialogue between diverse groups by creating alternative structures of identification and social configuration, disrupting the symbolic boundaries that impede people's ability to engage (Rapošová 2019). Finding common ground in festival settings is not, however, inevitable. In communities characterised by entrenched divisions, as in the Northern Irish city of Derry/Londonderry, it can prove too difficult to be the case (Devine & Quinn 2019).

Nevertheless, researchers have been noting how in festival settings, sensuous bodies, rhythms and movements between different actors, create "dynamic, … varying and emerging relations to each other" (Giovanardi et al. 2014, 113). The bodies in question may include visitors, perhaps attracted by festival city branding, as well as cohorts of residents, workers, and other regular city users. All of these presences, gathered together through the festival, change the dynamics of the place, disrupting regular routines, creating encounters with others and offering what Zukin (1995) calls the transformative co-presence of strangers. Even in a context where powerful tourism stakeholders lobby cities to support arts festival infrastructures in ways that privilege tourism interests, "envisage only spectating roles for local residents" (Quinn 2005, 940) and erase local communities from their tourism vision, it is possible for diverse cohorts of the public

(e.g., recent immigrants, long-standing residents, city-centre and suburban dwellers) to simultaneously derive meaningful festival experiences.

In essence, arts festivals create infrastructure—networks of people and resources, places, and moments—that support the production and consumption of cultural experiences. All arts festivals hold the potential to occupy and transform space in ways that surprise, disrupt, renew and unsettle the status quo. By creating engaging emotional atmospheres, and encouraging embodied social interactivity, they have the effect of turning everyday space into convivial spaces. Accordingly, festival space offers opportunities for individuals and groups to negotiate and contest the everyday cultural politics of race, sexuality, gender and class, as well as normative ideas about who/what belongs in particular spaces. Consistently, researchers, including Waitt (2008), emphasise how festivals and other events have the ability to confront and challenge established geographies of all kinds because of how they can temporarily suspend social relations and sustain playful practice. Fringe and community grassroots festivals can be seen to be investing energies in creating infrastructure as, for example, both informal and formal networks and, more materially, through the innovative and transformative use of public, communal and sometimes private space (e.g., staging dance workshops in playgrounds, programming concerts in churches, displaying art work in shopping centres, etc.) as a means of performing their own, alternative interpretations not only of culture but of urbanism more broadly (Zilberstein, 2019).

Pandemic restrictions, infrastructural adaptations and the embodied experience of festivals

The global onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the subsequent introduction of public health guidelines restricting personal mobility and advocating social distancing severely disrupted cultural activities. The public spaces of towns and cities normally bustling with life fell silent. Somewhat ironically, the fundamental importance of arts festivals, so often appreciated by city managers mainly for their tourism and associated values, was suddenly laid bare as the public spaces of cities lay silent, empty and still. The images shown in Figures 12.1 and 12.2 show contrasting images of Dublin's Smithfield Square: in fully festive mode in July 2019 on the one hand, and devoid of activity during the pandemic in 2020 on the other. Never was it so

apparent that festivals bring places to life, and that urban public space is nothing if not socially produced through the energetic, interactive and expressive activities of endeavours like festivals.

[INSERT FIGURES 12.1 AND 12.2 HERE]
Figures 12.1 and 12.2: Smithfield Square, Dublin, in festive mode during the Hotter than July festival in 2019 and during the pandemic in 2020 (Source: Bernadette Quinn).

In the depths of city lockdowns when governments decreed that public space and communal socialising was off limits, the profound need that people have for social connectivity came through in multiple examples of grassroots, spontaneous social activism countering the new regulations. From a New York neighbourhood diner playing the iconic 'New York, New York' song over loud speakers as "cheering residents in the surrounding block leaned out of their doors and windows to sing along" (Tett 2022) to dancing on balconies in Menorca (Villalonga-Olives et al. 2021) and displaying artwork signalling thanks to frontline workers on windows and garden railings in Dublin (Quinn 2021), people instinctively and ingeniously created their own cultural infrastructure to keep them socially connected and to sustain them through the crisis. A marked feature of the pandemic period has been a shift to digital space, and it is here that many arts festivals quickly reinvented themselves to keep creating, programming, and engaging with audiences. The digitization of cultural infrastructure has been ongoing for some 20 years but remains a work in progress. For many aspects of social, cultural and economic life, the pandemic meant an accelerated transition to digital space (Florida *et al.* 2021).

For most arts festivals, performing in digital space is a relatively new endeavour that poses challenges in terms of delivering quality experiences in the absence of live, in-person staging. During the pandemic, many festivals lacked the resources to avail of the potential offered by rapidly developing digital technologies and were unable to sustain engagement with their audiences. However, others, like the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, found that mapping their activities onto digital infrastructure significantly increased their audience reach (https://nationalartsfestival.co.za/about-us/). Everywhere possible, festivals creatively performed their cultural activities in digital space in ways that continued to encourage highly affective and embodied engagements. Illustrative examples from Dublin are the St Patrick's

Festival and Culture Night, which encouraged people to record themselves creating content (e.g., dressing up and performing a parade), using private spaces (e.g., homes and back gardens) and local public spaces (e.g., parks and streets) as stages. This material was then curated and widely shared digitally. Dublin Fringe Festival developed activities that involved mailing audiences contextual material and asking them to download an app with instructions to engage with their local environment (e.g., by walking in the rain or by being in a green space while experiencing a soundscape as in the 1000 Miniature Meadows project pictured in Figure 12.3). John Gerrard's *Mirror Pavilion*, a digital art installation, created in response to the escalating climate crisis and commissioned by the Galway International Arts Festival (GIAF) (pictured in Figure 12.4), invited deep reflection on nature, the past and the future.

[INSERT FIGURES 12.3 AND 12.4 HERE]
Figures 12.3 and 12.4: Dublin Fringe Festival 2021, *1000 Miniature Meadows* and *Mirror Pavilion*, Galway International Arts Festival, 2021 (Source: Figure 12.3, Fergal Styles; Figure 12.4, Bernadette Quinn).

Many festivals mixed elements of physical and virtual creation and delivery, experimenting with ways of stimulating creativity and capturing festivalgoers' imaginations. These are but a few examples of the ways that many festivals continued during the pandemic to urge people to actively interpret and engage afresh with the material realities and traditions of their cities and to creatively encourage affective embodied experiences. These creative endeavours signal an aptitude for continuously reinventing immersive and highly affective engagement with place. However, they also demonstrate how resilient, flexible and agile festivals can be when they need to adapt and innovate to maintain their creative practices and maintain audience engagement. In the highly restrictive conditions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic when normal cultural venue networks were unavailable, festivals proposed new ways of engaging with art and turned a variety of everyday spaces into art galleries and performance spaces. Sometimes this meant that the harder infrastructure required to stage festivals became more obvious, as organisers were obliged to comply with public guidance on social distancing and health and safety. Often this resulted in festivalscapes looking like the one pictured in Figure 12.6, which shows Dublin's Barnardo Square during Culture Night 2022. In some jurisdictions, public health measures

continue to regulate personal mobility, social contact, hygiene practices and behaviour more generally, and in the operational setting, these requirements are manifest in hard infrastructure like barriers, cordons, security presence, signage and sanitation stations. All of these highly visible structures, in addition to possible limitations on audience size, undoubtedly disrupt the usual ambiance and atmosphere effected by festival performances. They also increase the cost of producing and maintaining arts festival infrastructure, a factor that may widen divergences and inequalities in arts festival production and consumption.

A hybrid future?

Undoubtedly, the pandemic accelerated festival infrastructure's intersection with digital technologies and networks. The evidence emerging shows that in digital space arts festivals perform differently. As the potential to extend audience reach increases, there is tremendous opportunity to create immersive experiences in new directions with technology enabling social connectivity. Accordingly, cities are increasingly investing in adapting their spaces to enable digital events. Figure 12.5. shows an image of a LED screen funded through a public-private arrangement, in Wilton Place, Dublin. However, research on infrastructures highlights its power to "disclose differentiation within cities" (McFarlane *et al.*, 2017, 1396) and there is a concern that arts festivals will now become a more uneven social practice. Operating in digital space demands resourcing, upskilling and capacity building with some cities will be better able than others to invest and support the development of arts festival infrastructure in this direction. Accordingly, the ability to produce and sustain festival infrastructure may become more variable across cultural sectors and across cities in different jurisdictions. It also seems likely that arts festivals will become more contested terrain in that the extended audience reach that the broadcasting and livestreaming of arts festivals engender will likely heighten their commodification and appeal for corporate and tourism interests. This may intensify tensions between a festival's cultural vision and the commercial demands placed upon it by sponsors or municipalities. In a context where public finances stretched by the costs associated with the burdens of the pandemic make economic recovery a top urban policy priority, digitally enhanced events seem very well placed to advance the entrepreneurial city's array of city branding, economic development and urban regeneration objectives. Already, physical spaces festivalized by arts events are useful assets widely employed for city branding. Once digitised, the urban

imaginaries created in festivalized settings have the potential to extend much further through virtual and social media channels. Finally, while researchers argue that festivals have long created spaces of encounter that forge belonging and foster cultural exchange (McClinchey 2008), there is now uncertainty about what digitally enhanced arts festival infrastructure will mean for the unpredictability and inclusiveness that public space represents (Low & Smart 2020).

[INSERT FIGURES 12.5 AND 12.6 HERE]
Figure 12.5: LED screen, Wilton Place, Dublin; Figure 12.6: Temporary infrastructure, Culture Night 2022 Barnardo Square, Dublin (Source: Bernadette Quinn).

There is also uncertainty about the extent to which arts festivals will embrace digital infrastructure into the future. In the summer of 2022, in cities where the pandemic has eased, indications are that the urge to perform and to experience culture in physical space is very strong. While the move to digitise infrastructure is likely to continue, the delivery of arts festivals in physical space will certainly not disappear. The earlier discussion of the explosion of spontaneous, localised, grassroots efforts to create public space and improvise cultural venues where art could be staged and communally experienced (e.g., on apartment balconies, the gable ends of buildings and garden railings) attests to this. However, physical delivery in terms of production and consumption will change. Digitisation will become a stronger feature as cities with available resources invest in reconfiguring physical space to facilitate the installation of broadband connections and LED screens, enabling arts festivals, and live performances more generally, to straddle the physical/virtual divide with blended, hybrid events.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a rarely asked question: how can arts festivals be understood as cultural infrastructure? This question is seldom posed largely because, as a support structure for cultural activity, festivals only publicly materialise at certain points in time. Over the course of any given time period, they act to gather people and generate activities with varying degrees of intensity. However, they exist as flows and networks of people, ideas, creative impulses, materialities and resources of all kinds, all of the time. As with all infrastructure, a key feature of arts festivals is

their mobile, fluid and flexible quality. Their particularly human nature is also very striking. Indeed, at first glance it is tempting to see them as oppositional to the hard fixity usually associated with the term infrastructure. However, categorising arts festivals as soft is mistaken. Indeed, the "hard"/"soft" dichotomy that tends to characterise discussions on infrastructure is not necessarily helpful given the multifaceted roles that arts festivals play in creating, performing and consuming culture. None of these roles are easily identifiable, visible or even measurable. Furthermore, festivals perfectly illustrate what it means to say that infrastructure is incremental in nature (Silver 2014a) and dynamic. As festivals become more embedded into place, their infrastructural form morphs accordingly. The fact remains, however, that the infrastructural turn in festival studies is only beginning. Empirical evidence supporting many of the assertions made in this chapter are scant and numerous unanswered questions remain. Viewing festivals through an infrastructural lens can help develop understanding of a complex phenomenon that is sometimes viewed in rather simplistic terms. Hopefully, this chapter will stimulate further enquiry into how urban arts festivals change in form and character over time as they continuously reinvent their role in the ongoing reproduction and consumption of artistic activities and experiences in cities around the world.