

## **Liverpool 2008 : capital of whose culture? *The cities on the edge project***

In the last years, cultural urban policies and big cultural projects and investments have known an increasing interest due to need of qualify the image of many cities (Landry, 2000). As a consequence, economic goals are imposed even on the most interesting and extremely avant-garde cultural projects, and sometimes a substantial result is asked in order to obtain territorial re-launch and cities' good image. Cultural projects seem to rely on a formulated plan producing standardized result in every place, making "culture" as a broaden sphere of "consensus" (Miles-Paddison, 2007). It can be argued that cultural components are often disconnected from the event and politically disenfranchised (Garcia-Miah, 2005). Cultural and educational activities are then not considered truly influential in the process of winning the bid and hosting the event.

Culture is instead a multidimensional task and it is closely related to the definition of our identity. In the notion of culture several perspectives and multiple values are at least potentially in conflict and have to be defined. It is the setting condition where mediation and relation are reachable. However lately this mediation has been used in a strategic way to support an "official" cultural space that often doesn't match with the chaotic milieu that has made a city as creative.(Jones,Wilks-Hegg, 2006).

There is, arguably, a considerable gap between the dominant benefits of culture-led regeneration interventions and certain troubles that are growing such as the problem of social exclusion-inclusion, the gentrification of the town-centre or "the frequent degeneration of the 'night-time economies' of city centre into 'alcoholic agoras', dominated by heavy drinking"(Bianchini, Parkinson, 1993). These problems are particularly referred to the cities that have been regenerated by a mega-event such as the Olympics games or the European Capital of Culture. In his research into Porto's experience as city of culture, Balsas has found "that despite rich and well-participated cultural events, too much emphasis was put on attracting public investment to regenerate the public space, replacing infrastructures, and modernizing cultural facilities. This was done at the expense of institutional capacity building, building conservation and boosting civic creativity" (Balsas, 2004).

We are not just talking about the classical dilemma between consumption oriented strategies and support for local cultural resources, but about a vision that does not coincide within the spatial frame for implementing cultural policies and that brought in the Liverpool case to discrete and erase the city's past. " This is opposite of attuning development to the history and narratives of a place and popular attachment to it" ( Bianchini, Bloomfield, 2008).

### **Rebranding Liverpool**

Studying the Liverpool case, we can admit that there has been a big tension arising from two different point of view: on one hand the rebranding of Liverpool as "the World in one City", and on the other hand the emphasis on culture as a tool of economic development that posed a threat to alternative culture in the city. As Jones and Wilks-Heeg argue "the Liverpool ECoC(1) 2008 bid arises from a more general adoption of urban entrepreneurialism in the city and the emergence of an elite based growth coalition, reflecting wider trends in local economic policy in the UK's major cities. It also reflected the growing

prevalence of discourses of community involvement in British urban policy which stress that successful regeneration can only be achieved through genuine community engagement and local ownership of the regeneration process” (Atkinson, 2003).

So there has been an announced cultural policy as an expression of community based activity (“We did win and the reason we won is because we were the people’s bid” said Mike Storey, Leader of Liverpool City Council from 1998-2005 (2) ), that has been realized and implemented mainly as a tool for economic growth.

The Liverpool motto “the World in one city” shows a certain communitarian idea of regeneration but it has been unclear whether people were engaged in the planning of the event. The democratic legitimacy of the regeneration of a city winning the capital of culture bid is still not examined. Furthermore, the formation of public- private partnerships has changed the relationship between the people and the city. The Liverpool Culture Company(3) has been the main institution to manage the city during the bidding period and the event-year, and the city to manage coincided, often, with the city centre where the neighborhoods were often marginalized or just summoned with the rhetoric of engagement and participation. Determining what has been or hasn’t been part of ‘Liverpool 08’ as a brand or as a wider concept, is a complex challenge due to establishing the boundaries of assessment impact.

The strategic use of the concept of the engaged community that we can find in the bidding document, poses the question in whose interest the citizens and communities are asked to involve themselves in the event. The Creative Community programme provides an example of cultural strategies of active communities in the context of urban events.

Jones and Wilks Hegg (2007) said “ whereas the bid literature suggests that the Capital of Culture award provides the city with an opportunity for “self discovery” arguably Liverpool cultural identity is in the process of being actively created rather than being simple revealed”. As Momaas (2002) argues “the branding of the city aims at introducing a certain order or coherence to the multiform reality around us.”

The 2008 deadline hasn’t provided an opportunity for self discovering for the city, but has created a new identity embedded into official marketing vision.

A more instrumental economic logic has led culture-based regeneration in Liverpool. As reported in the Impacts08 final report “In the aftermath of the ECoC title award in 2003, which generated significant levels of enthusiasm and expectations across Liverpool, the local population tended to have increasingly mixed views about the potential impacts of the Liverpool ECoC on their community. This lasted until the end of 2007. Concerns related in particular to the possibility that the expected positive change might not spread beyond the city centre and that the Liverpool ECoC might not impact on their neighborhoods or on ‘ordinary people’.

The regulation of culture in public space and the tentative to promote an “official culture” have represented the main approach in contrast of the one of “Cities on the edge” project(4).

There have been many “surplus” spaces that could be used for band rehearsal, cultural venue or used by people to express themselves in many ways; but they have been filled with markets and flats (see Paradise Street Development Area) and this does contrast with the promotion of a creative and inclusive city.

The city as a brand is also visible in the creation of cultural quarters as a geographical area of the city that

is relevant for culture-led regeneration strategies. The point here is that a creative milieu should emerge from the cultural vibrancy of a particular area, while during a mega-event is often established by planners. In the Liverpool case the city center has been filled by property areas and shops center, while the location of the creative center has been shifted to another area just near the commercial center. This tendency brings to the end of the grassroots cultural quarters (see the Ropewalks district in Liverpool) and builds up some new cultural areas that after the mega event remain without artists.

In the next part we try to explain another logic to approach culture-led regeneration and then we compare the two visions.

## ***Cities on the Edge project: towards a controversial vision of European Capital of Culture***

“Cities on the edge” is a cultural cooperation partnership involving 5 European cities, Liverpool, Naples, Marseilles, Istanbul and Gdansk and urban-cultural-policy making organizations. It has been adopted by the Liverpool Culture Company when the DCMS noted the lack of a European dimension in the Liverpool bid and suggested to reflect on it and proposed some projects.

Although the cities involving in the project are different for size, economic and political functions, they are all port cities which are in contrast to the political power in their countries and are famous for a sort of independent thought. “ They are at the edge of their countries and with an edge to their attitude” ( Bianchini, Cote book of Photography , 2008).

The original concept of edgy cities derived from the idea that port cities as Liverpool, Naples and Marseilles – in particular – share a strong cultural identity, shaped by their history as ports, their openness to the sea and the wider world, their flux of seamen and migrants bringing with them new ideas, musical styles and fashions. This has transformed these port cities into places of rebelliousness, of independent thought and unofficial political action and religious, and of cultural diversity. Simultaneously these cities enjoy a culturally iconic status abroad. Allied to these positive attributes, a difficult darker side is generated by job insecurity, unemployment and disorder, illicit pleasures and informality that could often bring into addictions and organized crime, problems which appeared insoluble, but to which the re-evaluation of edginess offered a new, more fruitful sense.

CotE’s broad original aims have stressed the centrality of intercultural dialogue in order to face the problematic and darker side of the six cities (including criminality) in a open-minded and creative way, using local traditions of rebelliousness and independent thought. The port cities are rich in informal spaces because they are immediate threshold: they are spaces of mixing and settlement.

The CotE project has refused the city-branding logic, fostering a multidimensional vision of the city. It has refused to reduce a diverse range of living experiences into a ready and consumable package or image. While the CotE one tried to depict an existing social reality and to put this reality in relation to other similar or different cultures to trigger a learning process between cultures and cities, the Liverpool ‘bid and its implementation tried to create a new reality with a coercive approach that contrasted with the main cultures present in the city justifying the discourse of participation to legitimate an economic regeneration strategy to exhibit “the world in one city” to the rest of Europe. The questions of whose and which city we want to celebrate and who will have benefit from it remain open. The spatial implications are evident where the Cote project was the only one to concentrate on the boarding space of the city ( see for example the Rotunda project in Kensington or the Coming and Going project in Toxtheth). The Capital of Culture year

was perceived as an event just in the city center and did not allowed the people who enjoy the city to connect to the transformation of the cities they live in. And this allowed people to react and to pursue alternative options. As Guidi (2008) sustains: “these practices are more or less temporary micro-privatizations of urban space that stand in distinct contrast to the monumental ready-made public spaces”.

The Capital of Culture year in this sense was a missed opportunity that could have been used to draw on the values and resources of the grassroots communities and creators and to find creative solutions to the endemic problem of the city. If the CotE network or similar project will be adopted in the mega-event there will be real possibilities that practices and ideas based on creativity and informal spaces will become a ground for a culture-led renewal of the city.

More generally, in the politics of Capital of Culture there will always be a tension between the construction of city branding by organizations of place marketing and the social reality they represent.

## Notes

(1) ECoC stands for European Capital of Culture.

(2) The Observer, 7 september 2003.

(3) The Liverpool Culture Company is the organization in charge to manage Liverpool Capital of Culture year and beyond.

(4) For example the paradise street development area included the Quiggins which was an alternative centre for music, clothing and so on. This was replaced by “prime retail space”.

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