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CAPITALISING ON CULTURE: AN EVALUATION OF CULTURE-LED URBAN REGENERATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT: Municipal authorities throughout Western Europe are attempting to drive regeneration of their urban centres through policies designed to attract inward investment and tourism. In an attempt to woo these outside economic agents in, a variety of cultural consumption oriented policies have been developed and marketed. These include investment in hard cultural-infrastructure such as museums or art galleries, and in less physical aspects such as holding events like the European Capital of Culture. A polemical debate surrounds this use of cultural policy with a clearly economic agenda. This paper gives a brief synopsis of some culture-led regeneration models, addresses the validity of arguments from both sides of the debate, and in the year that Cork 2005 celebrates its year as European Capital of Culture, looks at how the event brings the battle out into the public domain.

Keywords- Cultural tourism, place-marketing, social inclusion, urban regeneration.

1. URBAN DECLINE & THE RISE OF AN ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR CULTURAL POLICY

Cities throughout Western Europe have, from the late 1970s, undergone a process of urban restructuring. This is due to a variety of factors including: an outmigration of industry and jobs; middle class flight to suburbia; changing work patterns; the development of out of town shopping centres; and a rise in car ownership/ dependency. The impact of this is evidenced in unattractive, unloved and unpeopled urban centres. Compounding and reinforcing this dereliction have been the rising attendant social problems of joblessness, delinquency and poverty for those remaining. To counter this economic, social, and environmental decline, urban commentators and policymakers have propagated cultural policy driven renewal, through a discourse couched in increasingly economic terms. Out of fashion went the prevailing wisdom that had run from the postwar boom-years' era into the 1970s. This had conceived of cultural policy, centred on public 'cultural expenditure', to have its own intrinsic civilizing value, and thus

an end in itself. The recessions of the late 1970's to early 1980's which brought a political shift to the right, hastened this falling out of favour of the old policies. Administrations looking for new models which incorporated market forces to breathe life back into city centres, spurred on by a decline in citizens' working time and boom in entertainment spending, turned to 'culture'. A new parlance of 'cultural investment' has thus become common currency. This is used by authorities keen to promote themselves as efficient partners for the private sector to encourage capital inflows in the form of public private partnerships (PPPs) (Bianchini, 1993; Garcia, 2004; Matarasso, 1996). A commodified cultural policy, expecting tangible, quantifiable returns on investment took root. The returns expected from investing in museums, events, theatres and 'creative industries' were in the form of profits, jobs and physical regeneration, policy was driven on by what appeared to be some remarkable successes. However, critics have attacked this use of cultural policy for an essentially economic agenda as crude and divisive, a 'carnival mask' (Harvey, 1989 in Garcia, 2004) worn by the city centre to serve the needs of business or wealthy tourists that hides the social deprivation in the peripheries, and papers over the 'real' culture of their residents (Evans, 2003; Mooney, 2004; Garcia 2004).

2. 'CULTURAL PRODUCTION' MODELS OF RENEWAL

Culture-led strategies employed by urban authorities to drive economic regeneration are helpfully defined by Bianchini (1993) as production or consumption oriented models. Investment in 'production' is geared toward the growing 'cultural' or 'creative' industries. What these categories' encapsulate depends on who is using the term but are said to have their origin in 'individual creativity skill and talent' (DCMS, 2004). The 'creative industries' tag refers to a wider range of activities than simply cultural, and includes: 'advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer games, television and radio' (DCMS, 2004). Devising comprehensive agglomeration or clustering strategies for such a wide category, that incorporates such disparate activities, can be quite a challenge, one that has met with mixed results. Manchester's Northern Quarter and Sheffield's Cultural Industries Quarter are two notable examples, the former being lauded for perceived success (Brown et al, 2000, in Bayliss 2003) and the latter for its failure (Lewis, 2000; Brown et al, 2000; in Bayliss 2003). Though the sector enjoyed fast growth rates, due to an entertainment consumption boom in the 1980's, and boasts well paid jobs, its potential to make up to job losses from traditional industry is limited. This is due, at least in part, to its nature, which is skewed toward individual creativity and the technologically avant-garde. Matarrasso (1996) claims that Birmingham's creative-industry-led regeneration managed to create only 200-300 jobs in the sector, clearly not enough to offset its losses in declining manufacturing and heavy industry. The reality is that in the U.K. at least, alternatives to cultural/creative industry forms of investment are seen as few and far between as: 'they represent one of the few growth sectors' (DCMS, 2004: 22). This goes some way to explaining the inordinate faith given to the sector despite its small (in jobs terms) size. However, investing in production, and favouring what appear to be growth 'industries' is not unduly controversial, even if the optimism driving this investment would appear unfounded, the real debate concerns 'cultural consumption' strategies.

3. 'CULTURAL CONSUMPTION' MODELS: FLAGSHIP INFRASTRUCTURE & EVENT HOSTING

The other side of the coin is the promotion of a consumption-based strategy, often backed up with some form of investment in production. Through such a policy, city authorities attempt to develop a culturally vibrant image deemed attractive by mobile, middle class, high-tech or 'knowledge' industry workers. Cultural activities are one sellable asset that, along with a clean and safe environment, congenial climate, social capital, aesthetic qualities, and so forth, can be added together to make up city dwellers' 'quality of life'. An attractive image is also thought essential for competition in that other post-industrial growth industry, tourism. Cultural heritage now accounts for 30% of the European tourism market with attendance at cultural sites doubling in the last twenty years (European Commission, 1998, in Bayliss, 2004). Leading players in this inter-urban fight for attention are economic development agencies and tourism promoters (Garcia, 2004: 316).

Investing in big hallmark iconic cultural infrastructure is one way to draw attention (often referred to as the 'Bilbao-Guggenheim effect' after what is perceived as successful culture-led renewal there). It reads as a highly visible statement on the importance of cultural consumption to a city and can thus be used as a potent symbol in place marketing. However investing in its construction is a costly, and therefore risky, business, which could leave an embarrassing white elephant blotting the cityscape, as has been the case with London's Millennium Dome.

Hosting cultural or sporting events such as the Olympic Games, festivals or the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) are a complementary or alternative strategy to get the edge, luring footloose desirables in from a globalised marketplace. Event hosting facilitates the dissemination of a chosen image to potential investors, tourists and policymakers: National and international column inches and film reels are dedicated to the city in question and as Cork/Kerry Tourism point out: 'this publicity cannot be bought' (English, 2005). The event draws 'desirable' people into an area: over 70% of respondents in a survey of 12,000 visitors to Rotterdam's (2001) ECOC event were from managerial or professional backgrounds (Richards, 2001: 1940). Having the title 'Capital of Culture' (or other event host) is a city's equivalent to having letters after one's name. It's a form of hard-branding that can later be used in marketing (Evans, 2003). In the same way a person may want to market themselves to potential employers, city authorities are after investors and tourists. On a more immediate level, for the attention generated, the knock on effect on the rest of the economy, and a temporarily heightened status, extra E.U. or central government funding may be made available to a city to act as a regenerative shot of adrenaline.

4. GLASGOW, EUROPEAN CITY OF CULTURE 1990: A MODEL FOR CULTURAL CONSUMPTION BASED RENEWAL

The ECOC was conceived to transcend (some would argue to undermine) national boundaries by working on two levels: 1) drawing the peoples of Europe together culturally by illustrating their common cultural heritage while at the same time 2) bypassing central governments by delegating to local authorities the task of celebrating each city's individuality and artistic heritage. The first five ECOCs: Athens, Florence, Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris, were all already recognized as 'Cultural Capitals' in their own right (Athens, birth of European Culture; Florence centre of renaissance art; Amsterdam canals and architecture; etc), the ECOC title both reflected, and was given value by, their artistic heritage (Bianchini 1993, Richards 2001). Glasgow was the first to break the mould, for the onus was very much on what the accolade could bring to it.

Glasgow's external image had grown in tandem with the shipyards on the banks of the River Clyde and had declined alongside them too. Glasgow's authorities 'Cannily' used the ECOC event as part of a longer term arts based strategy which attempted to engineer economic, social and, perhaps most importantly, image change (Booth, 1993) to facilitate its emergence from a conceptual steel clad cocoon as a beautiful post-industrial butterfly, a centre of cultural creativity. Glasgow had already established (in 1983) its cultural anchor: the flagship Burrel Collection, had arts infrastructure to rival anywhere in Britain bar London, and had a growing cultural industries sector (ibid). It had also established a marketing angle to get the message out and the investment/ tourists in, with the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign. But official endorsement, with its attendant prestigious status, and the extensive (free) publicity that accompany winning the title, were seen as pivotal in underpinning the turnaround by appointed advertising agents Saatchi and Saatchi. Saatchi & Saatchi continued their reworking of its image, trying to shift public conceptions of a declining, partly derelict, environmentally unsound urban centre riven with social problems, to a growing, creative, fashionable, buzzing centre of entertainment, leisure and learning: a cultural hub (Booth, 1993; Myerscough, 1991). The policy has largely been seen as successful and is held up as a model for culture-led regeneration. Glasgow's image has indeed widened and the city has become a cultural, entertainment and even retail, tourism centre: Glasgow is now the U.K.'s largest retailing centre after London, serves a large IT industry, and has become the U.K.'s third city for tourist visits, (The Herald 2001). It is a success story many of Britain's city councils are trying to replicate: 'They may now talk about trying to become the new Barcelonas and Bilbaos, but realistically England's northern cities want to be the new Glasgow' (Khan, 2003).

5. WHOSE CULTURE? CHALLENGING OFFICIAL CULTURE-LED URBAN REGENERATION NARRATIVES

Mooney (2004) argues that not all Glaswegians were happy with its recasting as an arty, fashionable, cappuccino sipping, theatre going city. It just didn't ring true for the many residents living in run down housing estates riven with stubbornly high unemployment and a myriad of other social problems that were left out of the picture. He sees Glasgow 1990 as a defining split in conceptions of local culture and identity. There was no longer one Glasgow but two: an official sanitized version which overlooked or deliberately blotted out the existence of another ever poorer and more deprived section of society (2004: 337). Although he doesn't make the link and explain how a culture-led renewal policy caused poverty he does elaborate on Booth's (1993) illustration of how local (militant) groups attempted to contest the glossy reimaging of who they were, what they were about, and how they lived their lives (their 'culture' in a wider, anthropological understanding of the word). 'Workers' City' group, for example, reworked the Saatchi & Saatchi slogan 'There's a lot of Glasgowing on….' to read 'There's a lot of con going on….' (Mooney 2005: 331). Mooney's criticisms are largely economic and while criticisms of poverty and a widening gap between rich and poor are valid (the three most deprived areas in the U.K. are Shettleston, Springburn and Maryhill, all in Glasgow (Khan, 2003)), they need to be seen in the context of extensive and popular community events programme which reached out into the peripheral estates (Booth, 1993). Furthermore, the pushing of a rose tinted spectacled vision of a great manufacturing industrial rebirth isn't, at least on an environmental level, an attractive alternative. Be that as it may, empirical evidence supports the argument of a cultural apartheid operating, whereby though there was balanced grassroots and elite cultural provision during 1990, support has been one-sided since (Garcia, 2004).

The Cork 2005 pageant also has dissenting voices, though possibly less bitter than those in Glasgow. These have come together to form 'Where's Me Culture', a group set up to give

expression to local creative talent they see as left out of the confines of the official show: a 'fringe' ECOC. A fringe ECOC would seem an ideal medium to contest the symbolic order being imposed on a city by authorities' vision of how things are or how they should be. As there is no corporate sponsorship, gone are the constraints of keeping up an attractive image, leaving artists with the leeway to partake in societal roles for which they have traditionally excelled such as satire, spontaneity and subversion. All this is likely to strike a cord with former Irish Minister of Culture and poet Michael D. Higgins, who has called for more fun or play and less economics in policy objectives:

'Financial institutions have used their hegemony to set limits to policy in other areas, constantly diminishing the cultural space in which so much radical or innovative thinking is possible' (in Bianchini, 1999: 201).

6. ANOTHER MODEL: REGENERATION VIA PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY ARTS PROGRAMMES

A third, alternative, culture-led regeneration strategy focuses on achieving renewal from the bottom up. This vision turns the old 'civilizing' argument for cultural policy on its head and enables social actors to be more than passive consumers of official art handed down to them by above. Advocates would stress the interconnectedness of the economic, physical and social spheres arguing that development in one necessarily has a knock on effect elsewhere. Comedia (an arts focused urban policy consultancy) claim the benefits for participants to be multiple. Results have included: enhanced social cohesion; improved local image; reduced offending behaviours; promoted interest in the local environment; developed self-confidence; built public/private sector partnerships; explored identities and visions of the future; enhanced organisational capacity; and supported independence (Landry, 2000). The ECOC event can be a perfect forum for the setting up of such programmes, and a testing ground for their comparison, indeed the Department of Culture Media & Sport (DCMS) in the U.K. demands such action. Cities vying to host the event are asked for specifics on how local commitment and participation, particularly among traditionally under-represented groups would be ensured (Guardian, 2003). The challenge is to get self-sustaining projects up and running that will be able to continue playing their part after the ephemeral year has come and gone.

There are clearly limits to this model, though arts programmes may address 'softer' aspects of social development such as building social capital and a sense of community, they cannot address the 'harder' aspects of social regeneration such as lack of schools, shops or cultural facilities and do nothing to counter physical dereliction. Huge problems also lie in acquiring a meaningful appraisal of their social worth. Sara Selwood (2002: 45) claims the existing body of quantitative data in the U.K. is not only patchy, inconsistent and incomplete, but also fails to generate any useful information on the outcomes of the services or on the social impact they make. She is equally sceptical of qualitative attempts to measure the socially regenerative impact of arts investment. Citing 'Resource' research into available evidence on 'soft' (qualitative) indicators, much of which is in the form of advocacy-cum-policy documents published by Department of Culture Media & Sport and the Arts Council, Selwood concludes: 'few pass muster in relation to current critiques (of) apparent bias' (Selwood, 2002: 47).

7. MOVING THE DISCOURSE ON: FROM ECONOMIC TO HOLISTIC REGENERATION

Large sums of money, especially throughout Britain, are currently being invested in providing for cultural consumption through the construction of hard infrastructure, and softer aspects such as event hosting. £2 billion is being pumped into Liverpool, European Capital of Culture 2008, in the years 2004-2008 (DCMS, 2004: 13). The economic rationale when translated into crude figures for profits or job creation is likely to prove disappointing. For example, a return to Liverpool of just £50 million p.a. is expected in tourist spend over the same period (DCMS, 2004: 13). As businesses have an ever growing list of 'culturally vibrant' cities to invest in, and only so much to invest, there will be winners and losers in inter-urban place marketing competition. Despite the impression given by some economic development agencies, cultural amenity provision doesn't figure at the top of companies' relocation priorities. The bubble bursting when the relatively easily quantifiable economic returns of investing in culture are shown not to be paying off, raises the fear of disillusionment setting in, and consequent abandonment of cultural policies.

Practical steps to move the discourse on and avoid this scenario would include the development of a more thorough and rigorous investigation of the relationship between cultural policy, and social, environmental and cultural improvement (Bianchini, 1993; Greed 1999; Garcia, 2004). This echoes Sara Selwood's (2002) call for more robust data collection and evaluation methodologies regarding the social, as opposed to economic, impact of cultural policy. Satisfying the need for tangible results is essential, for it is hard to push a social argument if it is not backed up with hard evidence. Participation is the key to answering Mooney's (2004) 'whose culture' critique and to counter accusations of regressive taxation of the poor (where lower earners' lottery money is used to buy expensive cultural infrastructure for use by the well-off). Accessibility is vital to participation, if there is little geographic spread of amenities then there must be good, regular servicing of marginal areas by cheap public transport. Sustainable culture-led regeneration requires consultation with and input from citizens, their subsequent participation, acceptance or 'ownership' of the infrastructure, event, or programme in question cannot be depended on without it (Garcia, 2004). Finally, cultural policy has to be more fully integrated into other aspects of spatial planning. As Bianchini (1999) makes explicit, city planners' training would be greatly enriched through the input of disciplines like art history and philosophy, which increase aesthetic and historical appreciation and enable them to reach their full potential as artists performing the 'cultural production' of a city: the adoption of a 'cultural planning' perspective.

Following these steps may bring to fruition a vision of the postindustrial city where a decommodified cultural policy reaches its full potential. Within this vision, cities' new 'cathedrals' are dogma-free centres of accessible (e.g. free/ cheap) entertainment, education and interaction (e.g. galleries, concert halls, open squares & marketplaces). These cathedrals would reflect the will and ways of life of all citizens, exist in a clean, pedestrian-friendly environment, and be fed by good public transport networks. It's a vision of a city regularly nourished and regenerated by the staging of events and festivals that invigorate citizens' creativity and build communal cultural identity. With the accomplishment of this vision, the debate's current dominance of an economic rationale for investing in cultural policy may subside as it is quietly subsumed within a wider recognition of intrinsic worth.

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