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Glasgow lessons can help Liverpool

By Dr Beatriz Garcíaⁱ

Thirteen years after hosting the European Capital of Culture title Glasgow remains a key point of reference for city regeneration through cultural programming. In the run up to the nomination of Liverpool as the second UK city to host this title in 2008, there were constant references to Glasgow in the media as well as in most candidate bid documents. At this point, some questions arise: how relevant is Glasgow's experience to Liverpool? Which are the key lessons? And, importantly, which aspects cannot be replicated and might require new models and new approaches to regeneration?

The relevance of Glasgow's experience today

Despite the passage of time, Glasgow's experience is still relevant to cities that, like Liverpool, have suffered the effects of post-industrialisation and have an image problem, diminishing the public recognition of their cultural vibrancy. Glasgow demonstrated that cultural programming can assist tackling urban issues and accelerating regeneration processes. This was first realised through a wider plan to revitalise the city centre, which involved developing new infrastructures - cultural sites like the Royal Concert Hall combined with shopping and leisure centres - and bringing all year-round street activities in the form of festivals, a busking policy and the extension of opening hours for restaurants and bars. An important factor in this revitalisation was the use of a wide definition of culture that incorporated not only the arts but also sport, design, architecture and other cultural facets relevant to the city and its citizens.

Glasgow also demonstrated that investing in cultural programming and its promotion can result in a major image boost. Changes in the way that the media refers to the city since then are being analysed by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow. The analysis reveals the progressive reduction of negative city stereotypes within the UK press and the overwhelming predominance of celebratory approaches by the international pressⁱⁱ.

The benefits of the experience can be recognised by pointing out their immediate economic impacts in terms of leisure tourism and business growth. Greater Glasgow and Clyde Valley Tourism Board quotes an increase of 88% UK and 25% international visitors between 1991 and 1998 and a 200% growth in conference sales since 1997.

Key lessons

At this point, it must be noted that these benefits were not a direct result of the European City of Culture title but part of a larger city initiative, which started in the late 1970s with the cleaning and subsequent lighting of heritage buildings. Other strategic components included the opening of an award-winning museum to host the acclaimed Burrell Collection, the launch of a major communication campaign - 'Glasgow's Miles Better' - the establishment of a city Tourism Board, and the hosting of the Garden Festival in 1988. This reveals the importance of embedding one-off events within a broader regeneration strategy that uses the event as a catalyst to accelerate inward investment and ensure a wide visibility of the process but does not rely entirely on its success and is not exclusively linked to its timing and remit.

Another key lesson is that of developing and sustaining partnerships as a core-working scheme. From the bid stage onwards, first-time public-private collaborations were established between developing agencies, tourism boards, corporations and cultural institutions. Most importantly, a critical partnership was that of the then Glasgow District and Strathclyde Regional councils, which involved sharing the costs for the year in almost a 50% basis and secured the distribution of activities between inner city and outlying estates.

Other important lessons emerge from the areas that were not properly addressed in 1990. The most relevant is that of planning ahead to secure long-term cultural legacies. Although Glasgow's improved image has been sustained, most 1990 initiatives did not survive the year. This was due to a lack of forward thinking – rather than failing to last, many of the initiatives vanished because they were not meant to continue in the first place. This outlines the excessive focus that is often given to address immediate needs such as attracting media and visitor's attention via spectacular shows at the expense of the less visible but deeper-rooted needs of the local community.

The above leads to a further key lesson: getting the priority balance right – between city centre and periphery, high arts and grassroots activities, mainstream and minority cultural expressions etc. This balance is to cover not only programming and funding but also the approach to PR and marketing. Very often, and Glasgow was no exception, visitors and media are only made aware of mainstream activities and few records are kept of the rest. This diminishes the chances for alternative activities to have an impact beyond those directly involved and contribute towards the overall regeneration process.

New challenges

There is a limit to how much can be learnt from Glasgow's Year of Culture. Indeed, the city's context was very different from that of Liverpool today. Beyond obvious political and economic differences, a major contrast lies in the definition of the event itself and the popularisation of similar events as tools for urban renewal. As such, Liverpool in 2008 will face a far stronger competition than Glasgow did in 1990. This has already been evident during the bid process, where the proposals from Newcastle-Gateshead and Birmingham were perceived as favourites and as popular as Liverpool's.

There has also been a remarkable increase in expectations about the regeneration benefits of cultural events, which are often unfair or unrealistic. This makes more difficult to secure a strong impact and satisfy all levels of public opinion. Furthermore, the increasing specificity of event hosting guidelines has brought a level of standardisation in the core elements of cultural programming that tends to diminish the perception of them being 'unique' and/or representative of the host community. This can affect the visibility and credibility of the regeneration process.

To maximise the chances for sustainable regeneration, Liverpool needs to embed its Capital of Culture programme within a wider strategy that looks beyond the temporary and quick-fix aspects of a tightly scheduled celebration. The 2008 event should not be seen as the peak of the city's regeneration but rather as a platform to publicise a wider process. This involves giving priority to activities and infrastructure schemes that can survive the year. Addressing the needs of the local community is fundamental to ensure sustainability – this requires wide popular consultations and a bottom-up approach which is always time consuming and might lead to contradictory demands but can ensure more unique and representative proposals than any apparently successful initiative borrowed from outside. Finally, the Glasgow example shows the importance of valuing the non-physical aspects of regeneration, such as renewed perceptions and the recovery of citizen confidence and satisfaction of the city as a place to live and work.

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ⁱⁱ Check the development of this research at www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk