

The cultural value of event-led city regeneration. What makes a European Capital of Culture sustainable

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Ever since the realisation that culture can have economic value, cultural expressions have been commonly interrogated through an economic and, often, purely instrumental lens. Cultural events have been at the forefront of economic impact narratives, viewed as a catalyst for growth and becoming one of the most sought-after vehicle for culture-led regeneration strategies. However, by 2015, it has become apparent that a narrow focus on economic measurement alone leaves unexplained the most sustainable dimensions of an event hosting process.

This paper shows the importance of developing a holistic methodology to capture the value of a cultural event as opposed to just measuring its economic effects. The paper offers an overview of the comprehensive methodological framework developed to assess the multiple impacts of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC), a EU title launched in 1985 and hosted by nearly 60 cities in 30 countries to date. The paper proves that, despite the emphasis on narrow statistical evidence to claim success, the most sustainable event experiences have taken place in cities capable of engaging in cultural conversations that can only be assessed through locally sensitive and internationally aware methodologies.

The paper interrogates two high profile ECoC examples, taking place two decades apart: Glasgow 1990 and Liverpool 2008. It shares a detailed comparative analysis of the media coverage surrounding these cities from the moment of being awarded the title until several years post award. Such assessment, which builds on a comprehensive media content and discourse analysis methodology, shows the effect that events can have on image change, identity formation and city renaissance debates. The paper concludes with a reflection about the importance of media narrative analysis as a tool to capture cultural value and its sustainability in the context of other emerging qualitative and quantitative impact methodologies.

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