

Connected Communities

Connecting Communities via Culture-led Regeneration

The Cultural Cities Research Network 2011-12

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Background

Executive Summary

This report summarises the activities and outcomes of the Cultural Cities Research Network, convened in March 2011 to discuss the impact of bidding for the UK City of Culture 2013 title with three shortlisted cities including Sheffield, Norwich and Birmingham. Findings indicate that the competition acted as a powerful catalyst in galvanising cities to think more strategically about their cultural offer, identity and heritage within a national context and in comparison to other drivers. Connections between relevant communities of practice and interest are strengthened considerably; issues of responsibility and representation however appear to limit the extent to which different residential, cultural or social communities engage in the bidding process. Network members expressed an interest in forming a wider learning community that would help to consider and demonstrate the true cultural value of the cultural title, and have identified a number of learning outcomes and recommendations for the on-going UK City of Culture programme, and emerging research questions on dimensions of the 'cultural city' including issues of cultural entitlement, collaboration, place-making and leadership.

Researchers and Project Partners

The project was led by Kerry Wilson (Principal Investigator) of the Institute of Cultural Capital in Liverpool, a strategic collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Liverpool, in association with Co-investigators Dr David O'Brien of City University London and Professor Ian Grosvenor of the University of Birmingham. Project events were supported by partners Sheffield City Council, Norwich City Council and Birmingham City Council.

Key words

Cultural cities
Titles
Awards
Culture-led regeneration
Community
Collaboration.

It's not the winning... reconsidering the cultural city

The Cultural Cities Research Network (CCRN) was formed in March 2011, as a platform for discussing and debating the experience of bidding for cultural titles. The UK City of Culture (UKCoC) 2013 competition was used as the basis for this discussion, and the network has brought together three of the four shortlisted cities, including Birmingham, Sheffield and Norwich. Its main objectives during March 2011 – February 2012 were to consider and debate what connects cities during the shared experience of bidding for a cultural title, including:

- Situated contexts, motivations and expectations
- Impact of bidding on:
 - » The policy-making process
 - » The role of the creative economy in city strategies
 - » Connections between different communities

Network members, including different individuals and communities involved with or interested in the bidding process, such as local authority representatives, academic researchers, arts and cultural organisations, plus other businesses, services and professions across public, private and voluntary sectors have participated in three full-day research workshops (one per shortlisted city). There follows an edited summary of a full written report¹, which presents outcomes of workshop discussions and supplementary interviews held with key figures associated with the UKCoC 2013 competition.

Participants within and across the three research workshops were unanimous in

their view that the UKCoC 2013 competition had acted as a major incentive in energising and encouraging cities (each with different motivations) within a cultural context. The bidding process helps to articulate a clear statement on a city's cultural identity and offer, which in turn becomes a compelling, persuasive argument to present to stakeholders both within and beyond the city. The experience of bidding for a cultural title seems to generate a shared feeling that 'culture is good', and is worthy of celebrating – this is otherwise difficult to achieve without such an incentive.

Within Sheffield, the competition occurred at a time when the city "felt ready" to capitalise upon its cultural heritage and identity, improve its national reputation and provided the impetus "to fire" the city's cultural strategy. The bid became a "common cause" between Sheffield's city council and cultural sector, who began to work collaboratively with a shared objective to acknowledge and promote the city's cultural strengths. Birmingham participants offered a slightly more pragmatic perspective – the decision to bid created an "added value" for projects and programmes already in development within the city, with the title acting as a vehicle from which to deliver its existing cultural strategy. Birmingham felt that they "had to bid for it", stating that it would have "said more about the city if we hadn't". This suggests a sense of obligation to the competition as well as it being seen as a genuine incentive. Norwich had a much more internally-focused, socially orientated perspective, stating that the main objective of the bid was "positive social change through culture". The Norwich bid

¹ Full report available from: <http://culturalcitiesresearch.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/UKCoC-network-FINAL-report-May-2012.pdf>

involved creating a greater sense of civic pride with a strong artistic lead from the city's cultural sector.

Bidding for cultural titles such as UKCoC clearly galvanises cities in terms of appropriating cultural and creative resources within the policy-making process, and there were several examples of enhanced collaborative working within and across sectors and local authority departments. The strongest connections created therefore between different communities within all three shortlisted cities appear to have been made between professional groups – or communities of practice – and those directly involved in cultural planning and delivery. Other non-professionally associated communities (neighbourhoods, cultural or social groups) appear to be less involved during the bidding stages. Reasons given include issues associated with geographical boundaries, cultural barriers and limitations in 'knowing how' to engage different communities amongst those responsible for managing the bid. This was accepted as an 'unintended consequence' during a process that requires a focused, managed response, with participants noting that it is easier to engage all communities when the 'title is won'. In this context, the development of professional consortia through the bidding process, such as the Norwich Cultural Communities Consortium – a new mechanism for smaller community-based arts organisations to become involved with city-wide cultural decision-making and planning – provides the infrastructure for greater community connections and participation in the future.

Other learning outcomes from the bidding process linked to the role of the creative economy in city strategies included

developmental impact relating to cultural capacity and leadership; greater clarity and synthesis on the relationship between cultural heritage of cities, place-making and city branding objectives; and the need for greater cultural mediation within cities to maintain momentum and take ideas forward. Broader issues concerning the cultural value of cultural titles, and the sustainability of culture-led regeneration within urban policy development were also discussed. Recommendations made concerning the on-going UKCoC programme include increasing the visibility of title-holding cities to ensure credibility and viability of the cultural title; ensuring that the 'transformational' ethos of the programme is communicated via the bidding framework to enable flexible and equitable definitions of the cultural city; considering how the competitive bidding element may limit collaborative working and cultural knowledge sharing on a national scale; and the creation of a national network or community of interest linked to the programme.

Together the Cultural Cities Research Network has considered such learning outcomes and identified a number of shared interests and emerging research questions, which will now be used to take the network forward and shape collaborative research opportunities. This process has reflected the Connected Communities ethos of co-design and co-production of research – ideas and interests discussed during the three regional seminars in 2011 were subsequently shared with the wider academic community during an event in Liverpool on 22nd May 2012, and are listed in the full report under headings including Cultural titles and entitlement; The power of cultural collaboration; Cultural titles and place-making; Cultural titles and cultural leadership.

The idea of 'entitlement' for example featured strongly in participants' reflections on the bidding experience, linked to the notion of how the 'badge of authority' created by a cultural title inspires and empowers cities. It would be interesting to consider how pervasive this is amongst all communities within cities, and how entitlement translates into cultural participation and engagement. Specific questions raised include:

- How do different communities and groups embrace cultural entitlement, and how can this be captured and measured?
- How is the cultural status of cities explained and represented by their everyday lives?
- How do cultural titles help to model cultural cities?
- Why do cities feel empowered to bid for cultural titles? Can this be used to culturally empower others?
- Are different city cultures empowered and celebrated equally?
- How does cultural heritage affect aspiration and entitlement?
- What roles do resistance and counter-culture have in empowering the cultural city?

Similarly cultural leadership is a term that is used recurrently within international cultural policy and arts management, but is relatively under-researched as a concept and practice. Outcomes relating to leadership capacity and development have also featured in our network discussions; there may be potential therefore for a UKCoC-wide study of cultural leadership in action, including the following questions:

- How do different types of cultural leadership affect the bidding process and its capacity to connect communities?

- What happens to cultural cities and their 'connectedness' when cultural leaders change?
- How does bidding for cultural titles impact, from a developmental perspective, upon cultural capacity and leadership?
- How does the appropriation of public intellectuals and cultural figureheads represent the cultural city?

Across all identified research interests, there is an underpinning necessity for longitudinal research that continues to question and map the significance of cultural titles and self-proclaimed cultural cities, in order to fully address the contentious issue of 'impact'. Even in the heralded Liverpool 08 example, Cox and O'Brien (2012) stress that the success story remains incomplete in the absence of any continuing study of the long-term impact of the city's year as European Capital of Culture 2008. The UKCoC programme creates a national research site within which to consider this. In all network discussions of on-going research interests it was observed that "six month projects are not good enough", and that there is a desire within the network for greater collaborative, more long-term approaches to research that supports, underpins and helps to explain the development, successes and failures of cultural cities. Similarly network members were enthusiastic about co-designed and co-produced research that is representative of the ways in which cultural cities themselves are co-produced. This viewpoint was echoed by Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel for the UK City of Culture programme (and former Creative Director of Liverpool's term as European Capital of Culture 2008) Professor Phil Redmond CBE:

"...in '08 I went to so many events out in communities like Croxteth and Kirkdale and Norris Green where people just came together for an entire day and just enjoyed themselves with their own community, they didn't need to go to Liverpool One, they didn't need to go to a concert or whatever, they just had a fantastic time doing their own talent show, doing their own garden festival, doing whatever... when I was on the Youth Commission I asked to speak to a couple of the kids who had been disestablished from the curriculum and were now under special provision... after 15 minutes they became 13 year old kids just wanting someone to talk to... and in this conversation with them, they said 'why did they bother building that new sports facility'... in the old one [they] had 12 footy pitches, and two gyms and could do this, that and the other... in the new one [they have] got one pitch and an Olympic swimming pool... and then they say, and the other one was free and this one costs us £2.75 and it's crap... so instead of spending £20m, if they had said to the local community, here's a million, tart it up... another couple of million to subsidise it for the next 20 years, that would have gone a hell of a lot further than this iconic, PFI white elephant...and it's that kind of thing, we need research on that, that communities can do it themselves... we need to kind of get into the community and do the research, that goes back to policy makers and says that actually this is the way it is, and this is really what the big society is about, never mind all the political rhetoric or whatever, it's about turning round to the community and saying what do you want?"

[Phil Redmond, June 2011]

References and external links

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More information on the Cultural Cities Research Network available from: www.culturalcitiesresearch.net



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk