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## **Legacy of Culture: The Spectacle as 'Placemaker'.**

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### **Abstract**

The two cities awarded UK City of Culture, Derry (2013) and Hull (2017), have been the second and third most deprived in the whole of the United Kingdom respectively. According to official operational strategy, for Derry 2013 - a city regarded as the birthplace of The Troubles - the remit of the City of Culture programme was to act as 'peacemaker'. For Hull in 2017, a city that suffered some of the heaviest bombing in the second world war outside of London, and yet has received some of the lowest funding resulting in decades of neglect and post-industrial decline, the year was to act as 'placemaker'.

During 2017 in Hull, the programme offered 365 days of cultural events that saw huge visitor numbers, mainly from the city and local surrounding area, with only 1% visiting from overseas. Most programme artists were of international acclaim, and whilst this offered a world stage within Hull, the lack of inclusion and minimal referencing of Hull's own culture and heritage has been criticised. A weak finish to the cultural year at its least well-regarded event, an opaque programme handover to the city's authority and ill-considered post year funding has led to an understated legacy.

This paper uses official and own field research to analyse the impact of the City of Culture programme on the reinvention of Hull and questions the ambitious remit of the programme against such engrained systemic issues. European City of Culture 2008, Liverpool, provides a longer legacy with which to consider the lessons of

cultural programmes in UK cities with similarly depressed identities. These insights make salient how Hull's transformation may further develop, and offer insight for how future title winners, such as Coventry, could provide a more meaningful legacy.

### **A city of culture and heritage.**

Kingston Upon Hull in England was founded as a port in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and saw its prosperity flourish through trade and migration. It is located along the rivers Humber and Hull and is rather isolated from other major cities, making it something of an outpost. In 1642 the city refused entrance to the king at the Beverley Gate - a catalytic act played out at the site of many historic events in Hull, contributing to the start of the English Civil War.

Hull experienced some of the heaviest second world war bombing in England and the Abercrombie plan was hatched to rebuild Hull which would have seen its remaining Victorian buildings demolished to make way for a mid-century modernist town centre, akin to Coventry. People quietly resisted this by setting business back up in the footprint of the old city, meaning the plan was abandoned and a more sympathetic rebuild took place. Hull had once more shown its character of quiet rebellious resistance. After years of destruction, industrial decline, followed by decades of underfunding a once prosperous outward looking and multicultural city became one 'down on its luck', and was named the top 'crap town' to live in in the UK. In 2015 Hull was ranked as the third most deprived local authority out of 326 in England, with high unemployment, poor housing, low qualification levels and high crime rates.

In 2013 it was announced amidst much press cynicism that Hull was to be awarded the UK City of Culture status for the year 2017, with three subsequent 'legacy' years.

### **Culture as cultivation**

The agenda in City of Culture planning reports was to act as a 'placemaker' for Hull through 365 days of cultural events – an ambitious feat for a city steeped in neglect, isolation, poverty and depression. The opening event, *Made in Hull*, which projected snippets of Hull's history and famous faces onto the buildings in the central Victoria Square proved to be the most popular event in the programme according to data collected in University of Hull's Culture, Place and Policy Institute (CPPI) evaluation; a clear indication that the people of Hull were ready, if not overdue, positive change.

The year saw large scale events and city centre regeneration boosted Hull's confidence amidst a spectacle of lights, fireworks, acrobats and new cultural spaces. As part of the placemaking marketing strategy Hull was put on the national weather maps on the main networks, where historically it had been left out in favour of better-known Yorkshire cities. Hull was branded with a logo and website and marketing of the programme was seen by millions across social media platforms. More than 20,000 pieces of media coverage of the campaign bolstered the rebranding process, but the real-world impact on the external perception of Hull is debatable. Official figures from the legacy report indicate that 80% of visitors in 2017 were from Hull and the local area, with just 1% from abroad.

Reports state that 95% of Hull's residents attended at least one cultural event during 2017 and 80% said that this made them feel happier. These figures are hardly surprising in a city that was ready for positive change to its fortunes, however, only

half of all events produced for 2017 made any reference to Hull and the amount of funding allocated to out of town acts was felt by some in the city to be disproportionate to that allocated to external involvement. It can be argued that critically engaged, world renowned culture was needed to set the bar for Hull, but the little investment put into Hull's own culture makers and places led to an outcry when just 12% of commissioning funding was allocated to Hull makers .

A successful project was the *Hull International Beermat Festival, with Winners Chosen by Martin Parr* by artist and lecturer Graeme Oxby, who admits to using Parr's name to get the funding as he 'knew it would appeal to the commissioners' and he wanted to reflect Hull by Hull people within the programme year. This festival was deliberately inclusive to Hull people and their images were printed onto beer mats and distributed throughout the pubs and bars in Hull, referencing the drinking culture so prevalent to Hull while producing a high quality and inclusive outcome for the city.

### **Moving towards a legacy.**

*Where do We Go from Here?* the last event of 2017 was designed to be a handover to a new Hull led company called 'Absolutely Cultured' and the project 'Back to Ours' would run the legacy programme. HCOC website links became redundant as [www.visithull.com](http://www.visithull.com) was developed. Each person independently interviewed for this research has said they have found the new companies confusing and were unclear as to what each of them did, as the communication of information was poor. The sparse Back to Ours website shows commissions given to familiar names in Hull's arts clique in familiar patterns that echo Hull's cultural scene prior to 2017.

Hull City of Culture reports a 346% rise in successful applications for grants for the arts from Arts Council England coming from Hull, meaning that the City of Culture year has spurred on confidence to apply for funding. I argue that there is scope that these applications are made mostly by organisations either already fluent in artspeak or able to access support with the process. Grantium, the arts council application system is notoriously difficult to use, and in a city with some of the lowest education levels in the country and with very limited provision for training and developing Hull's artists for this kind of process put in place by either HCOC2017, Hull City Council or Hull's cultural industry, this points to the larger issue of gatekeeping of arts funding by organisations and excluding money away from individual artists.

So, is Hull still a 'crap town' post City of Culture? The city has attracted further funding for more redevelopments such as the historic Pearson Park and as of September 2019, Hull has dropped one place on deprivation tables and ONS data shows that in the past two years Hull's economic output has seen growth at levels beyond the national average, thanks to increased tourism/visitor numbers; but growth at what cost?

The regeneration of the city's original cultural area, Fruit Market, saw commercial developers move cultural community venues out to make way for newly developed 'artist studios', clothes shops, a new contemporary gallery and multiple bars aimed at day trade and tourists. A curated capitalist bohemia took over this area that the city's history and artists had created, that I would argue could have been invested in, instead of being moved out.

Ali Hubbard of Thieving Harry's café in the Fruit Market, the only original business to survive the regeneration, describes the main cultural year as being very busy and

profitable. But the streets footfall drops in 2018 and 'off a cliff' in 2019, meaning a huge drop in takings and no profit. Amidst empty units and repeated failures of independent businesses in the area the developers who were once aggressively trying to move them out and put up rent are now having to compromise with Hubbard to keep the street alive.

It is important to acknowledge the positive implications of the year of culture for Hull, such as creating global media moments, increased civic pride, rejuvenation of public spaces, the improvement in rankings (to 4<sup>th</sup> most deprived) and proven appetite for arts; I would also suggest that there is a greater sense of motivation in the city to keep a positive momentum going and, in some pockets, this is finding a way.

In response to the 2018 artwork left by Banksy in the city's Bankside industrial area previously known for graffiti and illegal raves, local man David Harrison teamed up with Spray Creative group to create Bankside Gallery. This ongoing project sees national graffiti artists rub shoulders with amateurs in a burgeoning area, and this community aspect was a deliberate intention of its founders. A tourist trade is now establishing with new bars and cafes opening to take advantage of the footfall. In an interview I conducted with Harrison in 2018, he said that the project was not funded, and that everything was 'coming out of his own pockets' or is donated paint from local companies.

### **From Liverpool to Coventry and beyond.**

The spectacle of 2017 did provide an opportunity for Hull's identity to be synonymous with art and culture, but the minimal inclusion of Hull's voice in the city of culture year has been felt by some that art happened to people and not with them. Visitor data indicates that Hull has not become a destination place, but should a

programme like the UK City of Culture put such pressure on its own shoulders? The evidence from Hull is emerging and ongoing, but Derry and Liverpool offer longer legacies to examine.

Liverpool was European Capital of Culture in 2008 and the subsequent decade of legacy has been framed as one of triumphant success with it now in the top five UK cities for overseas visitors.

Both Liverpool and Hull are historically deprived cities in socio economic decline, with a lack of confidence and bottoming out of industry. Mike Stubbs, artist and director of Liverpool Biennial, argues that Liverpool is a larger city with a more established cache of culture to work from that was allocated more money from a European title, and more lead in time. It also had a longer legacy from Glasgow 1990 to reference, and so was in some ways bound to become more of a destination city. He also attributes success to the strategic political structures that were already in place in the cultural sector who placed arts and heritage at the centre of economic investment, which struck more of a balance between the city witnessing the art and it making the art which enabled ownership of the programme by Liverpool.

There has been a deliberate emphasis and spending on Legacy in the arts sector and Stubbs commented that Liverpool now feels like a progressive outward looking city, whereas Hull is more insular – something illustrated by Hull being one of the country's top Brexit voting areas. I would raise the idea that this illustrates the need to also strike more of a balance between external acts and community voices in this kind of inward-looking city.

Liverpudlian artist Tabitha Jussa cites the pre-existing cultural institutions that were “already giving a leg up to local artists for years”. In the build up to 2008, Liverpool



received substantial European funding designed to elevate certain areas because it's economic and social deprivation levels were amongst the highest in the country.

Londonderry/Derry was the first UK City of Culture in 2013 and the remit of the programme was to act as 'peacemaker', an auspicious ambition for an area with fragile and complex politics and violent troubles. The programme was launched on Peace Bridge as a gestural moment to unite people, and a year of events and regeneration allowed more people to witness arts and feel more pride in their city. Critics of the 2013 year have called it a twelve-month party with a lack of investment in pre-existing cultural communities (BBC, Nov 2014), but in its defence it was the first episode of a new initiative. In April 2019 journalist Lyra Mckee was murdered in an act claimed by the New IRA while she was observing rioting in Londonderry's Creggan estate 21 years after the Good Friday peace agreement (BBC, April 2019).

This paper raises the question of whether cultural programmes should put such ambitious remits of transformation of identity in their agendas, against such systemic and engrained issues that are so profound to the communities they affect. Whilst creating defining moments on a global scale for a media audience, can they change the identity or fortunes of a place without adequately involving it's community in a meaningful way?

Festival 2022 was announced in an election campaign by Theresa May with the ambition of healing a nation, and newly elected Prime minister Boris Johnson has given it the go ahead. Sir Martin Green of HCOC17 has been announced as the director saying it 'would bring the nation together, showcase British creativity, and on a basic level bring some "joy, hope and happiness"'. Cynics have dubbed it as 'Brexit Festival' and that it is 'like putting a plaster on a bullet wound' (Guardian: Jan, 2020).

I contend that alternate perspectives of previous programmes provide research that evidences that these cultural programmes are not able to fulfil these ambitious remits, and that careers are being built on the back of them.

This paper acknowledges that the terms arts and culture are used interchangeably by the participants and the literature of this research, and whilst their meanings differ, Eagleton divides the concept of culture into two: “culture as art and culture as way of life”. (Eagleton: 2000). I propose that the UK City of Culture programme is uniquely positioned to work with both the *art* and the *way of life* of a place, if it is to succeed in transforming the identity of the city in the long term. The European model is not a perfect one but has provided further reaching benefits on the back of this transformative experience.

Jussa says that during Liverpool 2008 some felt that international artists were elevated above local ones, and that opportunities were smaller in scale because,

*“... a lot of the problems that they had were about defining what Culture meant.”*

The etymology of the word culture is rooted in the word cultivate or cultivation of the soil (Williams:1986), a direct implication of the need to look to the homegrown when discussing the culture of a place. Coventry is set to take the 2021 City of Culture mantle in less than a year, and future iterations of the programme have the opportunity to work with a growing body of research providing lessons from both Hull and Derry as well as Liverpool and Glasgow, if they can look beyond the glossy media spectacle and into the communities they are set to serve.

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