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**The Spectacle of Culture in Newcastle**

**Chris Wharton and John Fenwick**

**Introduction**

*'Max Roberts, artistic director of Live [a theatre group in Newcastle], believes that the organisation "springs from a vision of social regeneration that preceded shopping, partying and art galleries as a panacea for post-industrial malaise. Live was founded according to the ideals of municipal socialism - unfashionable as that may sound today. But Tyneside has always been a passionately politicised community, with a legacy that goes back to the Jarrow marchers and the General Strike.'" (Hickling, 2002)*

This paper explores the involvement of cities in the European Capital of Culture programme and in particular that of Newcastle upon Tyne in its failed 2003 bid. This includes bidding for and hosting the event, the impact on cultural policy, and manifestations of culture and community identity. 'Culture', thus conceived, is a policy product of local government, regeneration partnerships, government agencies and business interests. This can be contrasted with culture as a way of life or lived urban experience (Williams, 1981). In the UK process for selecting the 2008 Capital of Culture, 'culture' was heavily promoted through local and national media, and significant material changes became apparent locally in cultural provision and building programmes.

Framed by the experience of Glasgow as City of Culture in 1990, the central focus of the discussion is the post-industrial city of Newcastle upon Tyne in north east

England which, in partnership with its neighbour Gateshead, formally launched a joint Capital of Culture bid in 2001. Liverpool was ultimately declared the winner and along with the Norwegian city of Stavanger is currently European Capital of Culture (ECOC). During the bidding process Newcastle-Gateshead underwent profound and highly visible changes, resulting in a change to the look and feel of the city. An extensive rebranding turned the image of a city largely shaped in the industrial revolution into a 'business friendly city with a strong cultural brand image'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the area and its local governments were responding to fundamental socio-economic changes associated with the decline of the region's industrial economy. Yet the process of rebranding has resulted, essentially, in culture as display: a visible 'spectacle of culture'. The extent to which the public has been a real participant is questionable, and the paper explores the role of elites in shaping the direction of events.

The city's identity in the late twentieth century shifted from production to consumption. The city centre was re-imagined as a place of youthful leisure and entertainment. In adopting and actively promoting the 'party city' image, much of the existing regional culture was overlooked. While it is too soon to judge the long term impact of the relentless 'party city' imagery and emphasis on hyper-consumption as aspects of the 'spectacle of culture', Newcastle's experience can be compared to that of Liverpool. Thus the important question is posed of how far the 'spectacle of culture' has become a significant aspect of the ECOC.

## **Glasgow in 1990**

The culture of a city changes over time. Intense industrialisation, inward and outward flows of people, developments in social policy, media and communications and more recently de-industrialisation are significant factors. Glasgow's industrial experience - coal, iron, cotton, textiles and shipbuilding - gave shape to its social, cultural and political profile, developing into a vital city regarded by some as the *second* city of the British Empire. The political struggles of the early twentieth century created the

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<sup>1</sup> Newcastle Plan and Partnership. Newcastle Plan 2004-7. Community Strategy Targets (<http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/newcastleplan.nsf/a/newcastlepartnership>) Accessed 12.03.06.

image of Red Clydeside, and its legacy in the 1970s Upper Clyde Ship Workers occupation gave prominence to radical left wing politics and a vibrant working class political culture. The city today retains a strong public sector and collectivist ethos. However, the prevailing impression of the city up until the 1980s was one of industrial decline with the dominant media image one of 'street violence and urban decay' (Tucker, 2008:22; Blanchini and Parkinson, 1993). The ECOC of 1990 was the first to be used 'as an opportunity to transform [a city's] image by means of cultural regeneration' (Tucker 2008:26). Kearns and Philo (1993:3) talk of a 'conscious and deliberate manipulation of culture'. £32.7m of public and £6.1m of private funding brought a net income gain from increased tourism, a trend set in place by the 1988 Garden Festival initiative. The term 'cultural tourism' became attached to Glasgow's experience of its ECOC year. In addition there were wider cultural gains with increased attendance at arts and cultural events and a high level of local approval. Tucker notes that the 'short term impacts...were huge and early indications were that the policy of targeting cultural tourism was successful' (Tucker, 2008:27). However, doubts were subsequently expressed about the impact of the event on long term regeneration: on employment, poverty and housing. Moreover, serious doubts about the purpose of city rebranding and cultural regeneration were raised: 'Glasgow's extravagant year of culture in 1990 was not about focusing on a rich and vibrant cultural milieu, but was about hiding a grim "working class" history from tourists and captains of industry' (Laurier, 1993:27). In many ways these themes and concerns generated by the Glasgow experience of 1990 resurfaced in the early years of the next decade as Newcastle-Gateshead entered the running to become ECOC 2008.

### **Newcastle in 2003**

In the period up to 2003 Newcastle in conjunction with Gateshead could be seen to be promoting the conurbation through a specific form of cultural identity that relied heavily on image, in particular that of the party city and hyper-consumption in addition to the developing hype of the ECOC bid itself. The process began in the late 1990s towards the close of a long period of Labour party control of the City Council

and continued into the new millennium, in what the new Liberal Democrat Leader of the Council and others have described recently as a 'vibrant...and modern European city'.<sup>2</sup> Newcastle has essentially been living through an exercise in marketing and rebranding.<sup>3</sup>

## **Rebranding the City**

An extensive rebranding of the city has taken place; from the image of a city largely shaped in the industrial revolution and home to the industrial classes and their culture to 'a modern business friendly city...with a friendly strong cultural brand image.'<sup>4</sup> All this is becoming visually manifest, changing not only how the city looks, but also how it feels, in the way that its residents and visitors experience it. It has resulted in culture as display – a visible spectacle of culture.

As part of this 'make over', city public spaces were adorned with banners, flags and drapes hung from lampposts and other city features announcing and advertising aspects of the city, its culture and amenities.<sup>5</sup> This was an extensive marketing exercise rather than a real attempt at street or urban aesthetics (Greenberg, 2000; Moore, 2003). The new-Newcastle brand image appeared along the newly created boulevards that swept traffic into the city; into the bustling shopping areas, but rarely into the working class housing estates like Scotswood - then facing large scale demolition as part of the local authority's regeneration plans.<sup>6</sup> In the city centre, celebrated for its Victorian architecture and re-branded as Grainger Town, banners bearing visual and textual statements lined the pavements fronted by the pilasters and columns of traditional nineteenth century, neo-classical buildings. The banners

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<sup>2</sup> <http://newcastle.gov.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Urban branding is an increasingly familiar process and is often accompanied by a redrawing of the environment. The city of Aalborg and the Oresund region of Denmark are good comparisons to make (Jensen 2005). More generally the phenomenon is well represented by Washington DC in the USA (Gibson, 2005) and more recently by a host of English cities from London to Leeds (The Independent 03.04.06).

<sup>4</sup> Newcastle Plan and Partnership. Newcastle Plan 2004-7. Community Strategy Targets (<http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/newcastleplan.nsf/a/newcastlepartnership>) Accessed 12.03.06.

<sup>5</sup> Other cities have deployed such devices, in a wide variety of ways, from a celebration of representation of place in Camden, London in 2004 to that of Chinese culture in the 13e arrondissement of Paris in 2006.

<sup>6</sup> The original 2002 plan known as Going for Growth anticipated the demolition of 6000 houses and the building of 20,000 new homes to attract the wealthier middle classes to the city. This met with fierce criticism and public opposition against what was perceived as the fragmentation of established communities. These plans were later revised as part of the Newcastle Pathway scheme (see Newcastle Plan 2004-7, Community Strategy Targets). Nevertheless many hundreds of houses were demolished in Scotswood and further demolition is expected.

hung outside the concrete and stucco facades of twentieth century modernist buildings and fluttered over the newly paved twenty first century pedestrianised areas, with state-of-the-art steel and glass street furniture of cycle racks, seating units and waste disposal bins. Slogans, often reminiscent of advertising strap lines, decorated the banners with exhortations to 'love the buzz' (the 'buzz' was the mythic and spectacular description of the lived experience of the city used by the local authority) or displayed enigmatic single word statements such as 'smile', 'merry' etc.<sup>7</sup> This created what became known as the 'Newcastle look': a post-modern, fragmented civic imagery fluttering above, but far removed from, the social and economic urban realities of the region and the city.

### **Spectacle versus History and Community**

The spectacle of culture came to define the region's cultural discourse and shaped the outdoor visual culture of the city. Critics pointed to evidence suggesting that culture in the city was largely seen as the big statement leading to the big event, where citizen and community involvement is only that of the spectator, the result being that 'the city can get lost in its own hype and begin to substitute image for reality, advertising over people' (Chatterton & Hollands, 2001:136). The big, banal cultural plans tended to overlook the festivals, concerts, poetry readings, street theatre, and other aspects of arts and culture generated from below. It ignores other more mundane but no less important aspects of culture, the sense of local belonging, the 'being-in-community' generated from citizen participation in community activity.<sup>8</sup>

The spectacle of culture is an assembly of manufactured cultural events that demand participation and rely upon the masses for their effect. The new millennium in the city began with a supersized New Year street party accompanied by postmodern street theatre - its themes unconnected to place or history. From here the crowds looked up at numerous firework displays as expensive and striking as they were symbolic of the spectacle. Capital of Culture displays and 'love parades' were intended to follow.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Newcastle is buzzing 24 hours a day.' from Newcastle in the year 2020, Newcastle City Council, City Centre Action Plan 1999/2000.

<sup>8</sup> See Jensen (2005) for a general commentary and Byrne & Wharton (2005) specifically on Newcastle.

The Tall Ships race, held in 2005, is a good example. The festival – returning to the River Tyne for a third time, having previously visited in 1986 and 1993 - now took place in a changed cultural landscape. It was marked by a fleet of over one hundred tall-masted sailing ships dropping anchor in the Tyne, the picturesque images of masts set against the architectural splendours of the river's bridges and the redeveloped riverside, with its newly built and converted middle class apartment blocks and crowds milling on both banks of the river captured in numerous television and newspaper images (Wharton, 2005). Pictures recorded, celebrated, and made newsworthy the event itself and the crowds it drew, and promoted regeneration and development 'as seen on' Newcastle Quayside. Significantly, and symbolically for this discussion of the spectacle of local culture, what was largely absent from the event was any real reference to the reality of the seafaring past or the history of the river and its often militant seamen (Byrne, 2005). Both the representation of the event and the event itself were disconnected from the history of the riverside and its locality. All these events were surrounded by and combined with the street imagery of banners, drapes and cultural slogans represented through a hyped-up media publicity machine. The spectacle of culture is a product of urban branding: an aspect of the 'urban imaginary' created through an 'ensemble of representations drawn from the architecture and street plans of the city...the images of and discourse on the city as seen, heard or read in movies, television, in magazines and other forms of mass media' (Greenberg, 2000:228).

For the people of the locality, as participants and observers, the spectacle of culture became an increasingly significant element of the lived experience of their city and region in the build up to 2003. This, in conjunction with other aspects of urban social change, came to challenge older local and community cultural identities often associated with civic citizenship and local political culture based on activities and associations related to place, geographies, histories and traditions. Residual lived cultures were in competition with the spectacle: a competition to represent the city and its people (Jensen, 2005).

The concept of the spectacle was originally developed by Guy Debord and has recently been characterised as 'the submission of more and more facets of human sociability - areas of everyday life, forms of recreation, patterns of speech, idioms of

local solidarity...to the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market' (Boal et al, 2005:19). The spectacle of culture is about 'an unstoppable barrage of...image-motifs...aimed at sewing the citizen back (unobtrusively), individually into a deadly simulacrum of community' (Boal et al, 2005:21). The spectacle of culture requires not only presence and participation at such events as the millennium street parties and Tall Ships race, it also demands a very specific form of involvement: participant observation. The spectacle demands constant observation, representation and replication through the technologies of digital, phone and video cameras. Being there, and looking, are not enough. The participant observer captures the spectacle on camera and on video and at the same time is captured by other participants whilst the media reports and represents the event more widely. What this cultural display is not based upon is the unmediated life experience of the people of the region: their experience of work, life, community and the creativity that might be associated with these things and deemed worthy of celebration.

### **From Working City to Party City**

City spaces and social identities have increasingly become associated with consumption rather than production. Although part of wider economic, social and cultural change occurring throughout Europe, economic change and subsequent changes to patterns of work have been experienced intensely in the north east of England.

The city and its local elites, public and private, were responding to profound economic and cultural changes. In most city centres, productive elements and processes and the social relations of commodity production have disappeared, or tended to move out of the centre and to the periphery of the city territory (Sassen, 1996:26). Newcastle's experience was not unlike that of other cities, but the nature of work, based as it was on heavy industry, was less diverse and the effects more widely felt. In a world dominated by image, the industrial past became an unattractive heritage, perhaps an embarrassment: 'to be seen as industrial is to be



associated with the old, the polluted, the out of date' (Short, 1999). If the industrial past could not be wholly ignored, it could at least be confined to the heritage museum business (Howard, 2005). The industrial city, characterised by the making of things and the housing, organising and transporting people for this purpose, was now, in its post-industrial phase, to be seen through the prism of local leaders creating policy to address this loss.

With industrial decline and corresponding social changes, regeneration through rebranding became part of the city's response. The old culture was redundant, along with those who worked in the old industries. Old and new cultural forms fragmented to become part of a new pattern in which culture was reinvented as spectacle.

The city's response to fragmented culture was to generate a new urban culture as image. The re-establishment of a type of urban culture was to be found within the crowds who watched, celebrated and themselves constituted the spectacle. At best this was intended to work against the fragmented aspect of modern mass culture, reassembling crowds as part of a new regenerated outdoor urban culture, communities gathering under the ubiquitous banners and signs of rebranding. As the banners of regeneration took their place amongst the ever-present commercial advertisements in city spaces this attempt at a new urban culture became visually enmeshed and frequently indistinguishable from the visual signs of a culture of hyper-consumption. Consumption today is not only highly conspicuous: its appearance in excess of needs and wants. The volume and intensity of private provision, retail and promotional discourses and collective consumption fill the field of vision. Horizons have become obscured by the volume, intensity and spectacle of modern commodity form. The centre of the contemporary inner city is now occupied almost exclusively with retailing, the sales outlets required to market the commodities, attendant practices and transport requirements, spatial requirements such as malls, concourses and pedestrianised ways and the ubiquitous advertisements - from large scale billboards, to adshells and small scale panel ads - visually dominate the city centre.

Consumption as culture features prominently in the presentation of place through local government, commercial and media discourses. For instance, Newcastle City

Council chose to identify the city in the visitor's section of its web site at the outset of the make over as offering 'Britain's finest city centre shopping. Its fantastic choice of shops in the heart of the compact city is without equal outside London...national names to elegant arcades, designer stores and street barrows...'<sup>9</sup>

## **Party City and Culture Capital**

The local authority has recognised the city's transition from a space of production to a space of consumption where the latter features as a foremost element and cultural identity involves both shopping and partying.<sup>10</sup> The party city image was multifaceted, in part referencing the traditional working class pub drinking culture, but one already changing into a more cosmopolitan 'cafe bar' style or as one of Chatterton and Hollands' interviewees put it 'from (a) loutish party image to a more upmarket one' (2001:122). It is worth noting the expansion of the city's two universities and further education college significantly increased the student population, of which many came from outside the region. Making culture an important part of the local and regional economy has involved a shift from culture based on the old industrial working past, to one organised around the idea of 'party city' in which visible, commodified leisure is emphatically emphasised. The council's use of design consultants to design and hang banners in support of the culture bid, from what seemed like every lamppost in the city, was part of this and added to the spectacle. Poorly designed and inappropriate to the task, hundreds of banners adorned the city proclaiming 'Newcastle – Gateshead buzzin', 'Culture 2008' and 'Love the buzz'. The 'buzz' was joined by an extensive advertising campaign that combined this slogan with references to 'café bar society' and the city centre's 'golden square mile of leisure' creating an image of party city. To whom was this aimed: tourists, potential incoming residents; high-banded council tax payers;

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> 'Newcastle – a great city - once in the forefront of 19th century industrial innovation, now, the forefront of technical innovation, leisure and culture. Newcastle is rapidly becoming one of the top UK destinations for short breaks, not just the "Party City", but a city that welcomes everyone - passionate, resilient, inventive, with a sense of carnival and zest for life.' <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/>

business investors; actual and potential employers? Or was it just an advertising agency's perception, passed off as the local population's self image and identity?

A further element - the Newcastle-Gateshead bid to become Capital of Culture 2008, formally inaugurated in the summer of 2001 and led by the Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative - was a necessary third aspect in the creation of the spectacle of culture. An extensive local authority driven multi-agency publicity and advertising campaign including billboards and other outdoor advertising forms was accompanied by unrelenting saturation coverage in the local media. The knock on effect in the national media was to engage Newcastle in a form of 'semiotic warfare' not only with its own industrial past but also with its competitors in the Capital of Culture bid (Gibson 2005).

Despite this, the bid failed. Liverpool won on the basis that it had been more successful in involving the people of the city it represented. Newcastle, on the other hand, appeared to be celebrating a consumption culture rather than fostering cultural production from the communities that make up the city. On the day the winner was announced, Sir Jeremy Isaacs, head of the independent judges, said that Liverpool's stunning dockside developments, its city centre, and strong visual arts, had contributed to its success in gaining the title, but more importantly he added, 'If one had to say one thing that swung it for Liverpool, it would have to be there was a greater sense there that the whole city is involved in the bid and behind it.'<sup>11</sup>

'Culture', as conceived within Newcastle/Gateshead's bid to be Capital of Culture, was essentially a policy product generated by local public and private sector agencies and business organisations. This definition can be contrasted with culture as a dynamic lived experience. In the UK, the process for selecting the 2008 Capital of Culture was based in this particular conception of what culture means. Significant material changes occurred locally in cultural provision and building programmes. Newcastle City Council, in conjunction with its counterpart in Gateshead, various regeneration partnerships, government agencies and businesses, became involved in wide ranging urban development. It aimed to reshape the city through building projects such as the Millennium Bridge, Baltic Art Gallery, Centre for Life, Sage

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<sup>11</sup> The Guardian June 5<sup>th</sup> 2003

Building and the redevelopment of the Ouseburn valley. In addition, 'regeneration' involved large scale housing demolitions most noticeably on the largely working class estates of Scotswood and Benwell, adding numerous new buildings to the city skyline and re-configuring large swathes of the urban spatial layout.

The 'offer' of culture within this process was that of an artefact generated politically, a notion of culture predicated upon and limited by UK policy processes.

How are such processes to be defined?

At the core of the process was a coalition of elites drawn from different sectors in the regional hinterland of Newcastle and its neighbour across the River Tyne, Gateshead. This coalition comprised the two local authorities concerned, other public agencies, business interests and regionally influential individuals including sometime MP, Ian Wrigglesworth, who chaired the Newcastle/Gateshead Initiative and said (on the occasion of Newcastle/Gateshead being shortlisted by the UK government in 2002) that:

*"The goal for us in the coming weeks and months is to promote the strength of the bid's potential impact in addressing the city's social and economic regeneration challenges. Clearly winning the title will be the catalyst for us to create more new jobs and build stronger communities across this region"* (Newcastle University, 2002)

The argument for the bid was also articulated by national political representatives, including then Member of Parliament Joyce Quin. In Parliament, she questioned the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on preparations for selecting the UK Capital of Culture, drawing attention to Newcastle-Gateshead's bid:

*"The link between culture and economic regeneration is important. Does [the government minister] agree that awarding capital of culture status is not simply a matter of high-profile cultural projects, but a matter of considering what it means in reaching out to local communities, promoting employment and enhancing the quality of life?"*

The reply by Tessa Jowell, at that time the government minister responsible, is of some relevance to the themes of our discussion:

*“The short list that I announced on 30 October was recommended by the panel according to the clear criteria for capital of culture status that were established by the European Union and developed by the Department. Regeneration is not a specific criterion, but I accept my right hon. Friend’s point that arts and culture can be powerful drivers of successful regeneration, as her cities of Newcastle and Gateshead clearly show”. (HC Deb 18 November 2002 vol 394 cc346-7 [346](#))*

Arts and culture, then, may drive regeneration: indeed, they are said to be ‘powerful drivers’. Economic regeneration is the core goal of the bid, and represents the objectives of the actors involved. ‘Culture’, in the special sense defined within this process, was seen as a vehicle for securing such regeneration. This is important for our discussion, in two senses: first, building the Capital of Culture project in Newcastle was an aspect of regional public policy, a political enterprise, not primarily an aspect of cultural policy; secondly, the definition of culture embodied within the process was a limited and limiting one, constrained by the political and economic agenda driving the bid. Both these elements will now be considered further.

### **The Capital of Culture as Part of the Policy Process**

Our view is that the bidding process to be UK Capital of Culture was an urban managerialist project, driven by private and public sector elites in pursuit of economic rather than cultural goals. A narrow and particular view of culture was employed as a means of achieving these managerial goals, not as an end in itself.

As an elite process, the voices of local and regional culture were largely excluded, partly because they were deemed to signify the old culture based on heavy industry and manufacturing (rejected, like the old politics, as a barrier to modernisation), and partly because the voices of such culture were not as convincingly articulated as the voices of the new and modern. The new culture of regeneration reflected consumption rather than production, and the culture itself was consumed avidly within the new ‘spectacle’ on offer.

The policy process in Newcastle was affected (as it was in Liverpool) by the geographically peripheral location of the city. It is far from the centres of influence in London. Indeed its cultural stance and self-image makes a virtue of that distance. This shaped the way in which policy actors attempted to maximise the chances of success for their Capital of Culture bid, before awaiting the final decision from London.

The bid was not unique in its reliance upon a coalition of local elites. Much the same might be said of other local initiatives around regeneration, inward investment, or, indeed, the doomed bid to introduce an elected regional assembly. The key difference is in the use of a particular view of culture as a means to success.

A feature of the policy process is also, of course, that some actors are stronger than others. This is not only a matter of different sections of the local community possessing differential access to power and influence, it also relates to the relationship between Newcastle and Gateshead. Newcastle is historically the dominant partner, even if the conflated 'Newcastle/Gateshead' terminology glosses over this.

### **An Instrumental Conception of Culture**

The Capital of Culture in Newcastle/Gateshead was predicated upon a notion of culture as an instrument of delivering economic goals, and, within that, a cultural emphasis on consumption (and particularly on youth) with little input from other cultural voices in the city and region.

In a publication highlighting the six British cities that were deemed Centres of Culture – prior to one being selected as overall Capital – further insight is gained into the objectives of the project (Locum Destination Review, 2002). The Chief Executive of the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative commented that;

*'This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate our distinctive identity, to change out dated perceptions of the North East and give us a stake in the future. It will generate investment, create 17,000 jobs in tourism alone, attract around 4 million*

*extra visitors and allow the city to take centre stage in Europe and the rest of the world... Newcastle Gateshead's Bid was undoubtedly a showcase for the transformation of the North East. But we must now demonstrate how our landmark buildings and world-class cultural infrastructure touch the lives of the whole community - for this generation and the next, by showing people that culture has a role in their lives and acts as an enabler to help them to aspire and achieve. We must be able to show that the kind of city that will host the 2008 title can make a difference to the poorest areas of society - not just the vibrant city centre".*

The words being used here appear to broaden the scope of the bid. There is reference to the poorer parts of the community as well as the city centre. There is a core reference to investment, jobs, skills and creativity. Yet there is but one reference to culture, and that is to the 'world class cultural infrastructure'. This is a meagre helping of the culture that could be offered. Indeed, the novel juxtaposition of 'culture' and 'infrastructure' points to the materialist ideas that would prevail.

The merging of historical rivals Newcastle and Gateshead (for centuries gazing, with mutual hostility, across the river from their respective counties of Northumberland and Durham) into one awkward concept of 'NewcastleGateshead' was another significant aspect of the bid, of some interest in its own right. It was a marriage based within a conception of shared economic interests: of attracting investment. Not surprisingly, the key focus of 'cultural' development was focussed on a quayside area where the two places are geographically close, and where the feeling can be engendered that this might after all be one place, not two. The large scale artefacts of culture are now on the Gateshead side of the River.

As Hickling (2002) comments:

*"Historically, it was Newcastle that retained all the commercial benefits of the river, so that the north bank flourished while Gateshead remained the poor relation.*

*Not any longer. The extraordinary surge of creative enterprise that lies behind Newcastle and Gateshead's joint bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008 originates south of the river. The scale of the cultural rebranding of Gateshead is unprecedented...*

*...Tyneside's cultural heritage runs much deeper than the rash of millennial projects, however. The region is as rich in writers and artists as it used to be in coal: one can trace an unbroken seam of influence from the novelist Sid Chaplin and the playwright CP Taylor through to Alan Plater and Peter Flannery and the young inheritors of the tradition, Lee Hall and Peter Straughan. Novelists such as Pat Barker and Julia*

*Darling continue to make the north-east their home, as do acclaimed children's writer David Almond and poets Tony Harrison and Sean O'Brien.*

*Tyneside's established artists view the new developments with a degree of scepticism. "We now have a waterfront that contains more art galleries than shipyards," observes Plater...*

*...O'Brien, meanwhile, says: "Though many of us would agree that it is better to have lots of art galleries than no art galleries at all, it is ironic that big cultural gestures are somehow seen to redress history, while effacing it at the same time."....*

This eloquent analysis of the cultural strength and rich cultural history of the area is strikingly at odds with the business-led, economic orientation of the Capital of Culture bid. It is a portrayal of what might have been, were the Capital of Culture process to have been about the images of culture evoked here.

We argue that the images of culture offered within the Capital of Culture bid in Newcastle were a pale reflection of the potential richness of regional culture: spectacle, rather than substance.

From now on, how the city's visible 'look and feel' will develop is dependent upon a range of policies and factors associated with national and local governance, not least those of city planning, arts and cultural policy. Other less visible aspects of culture, perhaps found amongst forgotten but residual communities or surfacing through emergent cultural activities or organised as conscious cultural activisms, may be working to create spaces and even a politics of cultural resistance to the recent Newcastle spectacle of culture.

## **Liverpool in 2008**

In June 2003 Liverpool was designated European Capital of Culture for 2008, beating Newcastle-Gateshead which had been considered as the favourite. In many ways the historical and contemporary experiences of the two northern English cities were similar. Liverpool, developing around its river and docks became one of the British Empire's most important ports. Facing the Atlantic, it traded in goods such as cotton, and before the abolition of slavery, people. On the east coast Newcastle's industrial profile was based on coal, iron and shipbuilding on the Tyne. By the late



twentieth century, both places were characterised by industrial and economic decay. Regeneration began with the Albert Dock redevelopment in Liverpool and the Quayside in Newcastle, with 'culture' an important symbolic element of both. Major retail and leisure developments, seen as being central to reversing the decline, were to follow.

Liverpool lost over 192,000 jobs, a 53% decline in total employment between the early 1970s and mid 1990s and by the late 1980s the city was placed 114<sup>th</sup> out of 117 city regions in a European Community economic performance league (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004: 344). In May 2008 amidst the cultural celebrations and extensive construction work of the city centre, Liverpool was deemed the most deprived area out of England's 354 local authorities in a report commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Similarly the Health and Wealth Commission confirmed the city as capital of deprivation, with incapacity benefit levels 75% higher than, and life expectancy, three years below the national average (Independent 02.05.08). As The Independent put it: a city 'rich in culture and poor nearly everywhere else' (Independent 02.05.08).

Liverpool like Newcastle had to manage post industrialisation and a city culture which at its core was a working class 'way of life' from which the work and economic background had been stripped away. As the importance of image and place marketing took hold, Liverpool had acquired the image of a city based on 1980s' left wing politics (represented by the Trotskyist Militant Council of Deputy Leader Derek Hatton), of urban unrest (the 1981 Toxteth riots or 'uprising' as Liverpool's alternative press prefers to call it) and worker solidarity (Dockers' strike 1996-8). Laurier, discussing Glasgow's experience in 1990, suggested: 'There is nothing more useless to a city-seller than a working class city that is still working class' (Laurier, 1993: 276).

In addition to branding and cultural presentation, real material processes of change are taking place in Liverpool. The restructuring of the city has included not only a focus on culture, the arts, and tourism but at the heart of the city centre a £1bn private retail and commercial development known as the Liverpool One Project. The leasehold of the 42.5 acre site was obtained by the Duke of Westminster's company

Grosvenor from the local authority and the privately owned space is intended to draw 'high class' shoppers back into the city. Policing by a private security force has given rise to fears about maintaining universal access and rights of way from which 'undesirables' might be excluded (Guardian 28.05.08). The project relies on private funding but much of the cultural strategy for ECOC 2008 rests with organisations such as Liverpool Vision and Liverpool Culture Company largely made up of private sector business in a partnership between private and public sectors in the creation of 'circuits of power in the trajectory of city centre regeneration' (Coleman 2004: 119). Not only is there an issue of accountability here, but these developments also mark a change in Liverpool regeneration policy, away from direct attempts to alleviate social deprivation in inner city areas and peripheral sink estates toward 'the promotion of business growth in the city centre' (Jones & Wilks-Heeg 2004:346). Coleman identifies this as a feature of the 'neoliberal city' where the focus is on 'revitalising city centres and downtowns and the built in assumption...that these investment-come-growth strategies will result in a "trickle down" of wealth creation to replenish poorer constituencies' (Coleman, 2004:231). Criticisms of this approach come from the letters pages of local newspapers not just academic or policy circles: one community representative talks of being "'sold out" in favour of "property speculators"' (Coleman, 2004:231). Property prices in the centre of Liverpool reportedly rose by 20% on the day that the ECOC announcement was made with the local media forecasting increases in property development, investment and tourism in what was referred to, in the local press, as 'Boom Town' (Liverpool Echo, 6 June 2003).

Increased tourism was identified as an outcome for the rebranded city with the claim that annual visitor numbers would double in 2008. By May 2008 visitor numbers were being rolled out as evidence of the success of the year with statistics for a range of venues showing a 25% increase on the previous year, and the Liverpool Culture Company chairman claiming that the 'Capital of Culture is having an impact on cultural and tourism sectors in a way that few, if any, previous culture cities have experienced' (<http://www.liverpool08.com/archive/>). Press release material like this has of course a twofold effect in talking up tourism and providing the basis for further media publicity and this becomes part of the momentum of the events perceived

rolling success: one that becomes difficult to challenge.<sup>12</sup> However it is worth noting that claims to tourism growth – both numbers visiting ECOC events and in subsequent years – have been challenged (Griffiths 2006).

Advertising is an important element of 'place marketing'. An extensive advertising campaign proclaiming that 'This is Liverpool's year. Make yours with a visit' appeared during the summer months in a range of media outlets from London Underground billboards to double page spreads in the national newsprint media. In one such example, one of Anthony Gormley's life size cast iron figures from the installation 'Another Place' on the coast at Crosby is juxtaposed with a series of Liverpool cultural signifiers of 'high' culture - art exhibitions and a prestige neo-classical building facade. Gazing down the River Mersey the figure looks across the Liverpool City skyline bathed in an orange-yellow glow but one curiously omitting the ubiquitous contemporary signifiers of city centre reconstruction and regeneration: the cranes and skeletal buildings that dominate Liverpool's lived reality skyline (The Observer August 24<sup>th</sup> 2008). The advert offers the promise of 'chic boutiques...stunning new shops...cool bars and eateries', using a similar style to Newcastle in selling the image of the rebranded city. 'There has never been a better time to visit Liverpool,' announces the strapline which beggars the question 'and a better time to live in and partake in the culture of the city?'

The affirmative but often meaningless language of advertising has been moulded and stretched in order to sell the city. The place marketing slogan 'Newcastle-Gateshead buzzing' appeared as a strap line for the city's advertising strategy with only a hazy relationship with any referent in lived reality. However, Liverpool's slogan 'the world in one city' does at least appear to refer to some form of tangible reality attached to the city's multicultural experience based not least on its position as a leading port through which inward and outward migration has taken place (Lane, 1997). In some real sense the ECOC slogan acknowledges the presence of ethnically diverse peoples such as the Black, Chinese, Irish, Somalian and other communities that make up the Liverpool population. The question is how, or to what extent, do the cultural experiences and manifestations of different communities,

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<sup>12</sup> Media coverage has been important to and adds to this perceived success with the Liverpool08 web site reporting over '4,200 articles in UK print media alone - including rave reviews of '08 artistic productions' about Liverpool ECOC in 2008. (<http://www.liverpool08.com/archive/>).

including the indigenous white, largely working class and often deprived population, surface as part of the cultural experience of the year. Several commentators have also pointed to the ambiguity of 'the world in one city' slogan. On the one hand it seems to refer to the world being represented in the city or of the city constituted of many peoples through a plurality of cultures. On the other hand it points to global features of inequality in income and wealth, health, access to resources, power and the conflicts that arise from these inequalities both globally and in the city of Liverpool (Coleman, 2004: Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004). As Jones & Wilks-Heeg put it 'the lived reality of Liverpool as the 'world in one city' includes large degrees of inequality and poverty that, while not in keeping with the re-branded image of the city, powerfully shape the social and cultural milieu of many people in Liverpool' (Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004:353).

Liverpool's cultural strategy for the year was, in common with the other ECOC bidding cities, based on a 'wide and inclusive conception of culture' rather than 'a traditional (exclusive or elitist) view of culture' (Griffiths, 2006:423). What is an 'inclusive' cultural strategy? For Newcastle-Gateshead this was to include people in organised spectacles of culture without reference to their history or the cultural productions they are themselves involved in. It is worth recalling here Raymond Williams definition of culture as an interplay between the 'ideal', the 'documentary' and the 'way of life' of a people and his insistence that 'any of the categories, which exclude reference to the others, is inadequate' (Williams, 1981). Liverpool's multicultural events list is impressive. However, attempts at cultural participation have not got much further than taking part in activities organised by cultural professionals, like voting to choose the design for a seating area bench, choosing a design for a 'fourth grace' on the waterfront (abandoned when the preferred choice was voted out by the people) or voting in a ECOC song contest or contributing to an 800 line poem about the city organised by Mersey poet Roger McGough. Critics point to the 'Superlambanana' which began as a serious piece of sculpture by Japanese artist Taro Chiezo. It was a mutant sculptural form, intended as a comment on genetically modified food: lamb was exported and bananas imported through the port of Liverpool. The concept became the basis for a series of activities described by Mute magazine as 'hysteria...the city of culture grasped the potential of

this piece of public art and turned it into a symbol of “wacky” Scouseness’ (Singer & Paillard, 2008).

What of the cultural way of life of the people of Liverpool in 2008 and beyond? Concern about restrictions in the privatised shopping mall have been noted. Quiggins an alternative shopping venue was closed down in 2006 after a prolonged public campaign on the part of the 50 or so small businesses and their 250 employees due to be ‘developed’ by Liverpool One. ‘Nerve’ a grassroots arts and culture magazine on Merseyside catalogues a series of other cultural discontents in the city centre with the closure of independent galleries and music venues, art studios, and bookshops and older people feeling uncomfortable in the young cafe-bar culture (Nerve, No 4 Autumn 2004). These are cultural venues and activities that are paradoxically the bedrock of the distinctive local culture that it was claimed the ECOC sought to celebrate.

Liverpool is being rebranded: a new look that will be amenable to tourism and retail and property development. But the creation of the new image, like Newcastle’s is not only intended as an outward pitch but is intended as an inward projection creating a cultural veneer that relies on consumption and a limited participation. It is intended to interpellate the people of the rebranded city to a cultural conception of themselves: to see themselves as fit to be part of this rebranded life style. This is part of the culture of spectacle and this recruitment function is what has been termed ‘urban patriotism’ (Goss 1996:228). Coleman building on the concept, refers to the Liverpool presentation of urban patriotism as a ‘reworked notion of “the public”... tied...to a wider and depoliticised ideology of urban patriotism that is articulated by growth managers, media outlets and other new and old primary definers’ (Coleman, 2004:236. Urban patriotism is important not just for how it is articulated, appearing ‘apolitical, banal and funny...focussed on simple images, emotive, celebratory...’ but on what it is articulated to ‘a love of consumption, “heritage” iconic buildings or objects like the Lamb Bananas, etc’ (Singer & Paillard, 2008).

For Coleman this aspect of the spectacle of culture is backward looking and selective, dealing with safe, carefully marketed slogans that deny aspects of a city’s past. As Coleman puts it: ‘These safe representations hide the respectable fears of

returning to a past that is the antithesis of neoliberal order – 1980s left wing politics, worker militancy, urban degeneration and disorder and the flight of capital' (Coleman, 2004:236). We shall see.

## **Conclusions**

With particular reference to Newcastle's failed bid to become European Capital of Culture 2008, we have argued that the bidding process was a political and managerial project directed toward economic objectives, led by local elites from both private and public sector. The process embodied a specific, and limiting, conception of culture as commodity and as spectacle. The experience of Newcastle resembled in key respects the processes in Liverpool and in Glasgow. We cannot claim applicability to Capital of Culture experience in other parts of Europe. It may be that in other national – and other cultural – contexts, the process allows the articulation of different voices and the pursuit of other goals.

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