

CHAPTER 10

Limerick City Stories: The European Capital of Culture Bid Process and Narratives of Place

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Introduction

'Limerick has always been sharp, lively, passionate, proud, historic, funny opinionated, welcoming, even occasionally pure awkward and a wonderful place of culture.'

Limerick.ie (2020a, 3)

This description opened the Social Impact Report published in the wake of Limerick's year as the inaugural Irish National City of Culture¹. The report, which examined the year of events and actions held throughout 2014, clearly communicates a sense of self-confidence and a distinctive identity. The opening lines of Limerick's 2020 European Capital of Culture (ECoC) bid book, by

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contrast, reflect a sharp change of direction. The opening paragraph notes that ‘Limerick had been a non-place in Europe, in Ireland for a long time’ (ECoC Bid Book 2016 (Limerick.ie 2020b) – hereafter 2020 Bid Book, 3). The ECoC process is explicitly framed as a positive opportunity for change: ‘Limerick is creating a place of belonging in Europe’, with the competition offering an ‘invitation to all of Europe to celebrate our transformation’ (2020 Bid Book, 3).

While the reflection on 2014 offers a celebration of what *is*, therefore, the 2020 bid book suggests a process that addresses a deficit, a lack of definition resulting in it being a ‘non-place’. The term ‘non-place’ stems from the work of Marc Augé and is ‘taken to mean places divested of meaning, homogenous, and largely interchangeable’ (Trigg 2017, 127). Indeed, by the end of the opening paragraph, the idea of the ‘non-place’ is superseded by the phrase Ireland’s ‘problem city’, strongly suggesting that the transformation required is not one of creation *ex nihilo*, but one of rehabilitation and reconstruction. This chapter focuses attention on the development of place narratives as part of the ECoC bidding process. It provides a close analysis of one case study, which allows us to examine the development of place narratives in a specific historic and cultural context, and to consider the ECoC process within this localised frame. We examine the interwoven relationships between city branding and city narratives in the context of the liminality afforded by the bidding process.

Throughout our analysis, the ECoC process is not considered as an isolated event, but is located within the longer context of past and current city branding and city narrative development in Limerick. We examine the tensions that can arise between the construction of city narratives in the context of a bidding process, and the different stakeholder perspectives on these narratives. In particular, we take account of the past perceptions and narratives associated with Limerick, in terms of increased unemployment, socio-economic disadvantage, and violence during periods of economic recession, when the city was badly impacted by the closure of large industries (Hourigan 2011).

In our analysis, we look at planned and realised festival events associated with the ECoC bid as arenas for mobilising new or alternative city narratives for Limerick, and at festivity as a process through which these dynamics are enacted in the theatre of the city itself. Our consideration of the reception and response to these new city narratives for Limerick explores the extent to which they can undermine – rather than support – the themes of social inclusion and engagement commonly associated with ECoC bidding processes. This approach builds on the work of Ooi, Håkanson and LaCava (2014) in examining the tensions between what they term the ‘poetics’ and the ‘politics’ of the ECoC programme as it plays out in local contexts. It also draws on the work of Liu (2019) on the processes of ‘culture-led regeneration’ in Liverpool during 2008.

Our approach is situated within the broad frame of festival studies. This is an arena which is informed by disciplines such as urban studies and cultural policy studies, but which pays attention to the cultural meanings, dynamics and

impacts of festivity. Here, the ECoC bidding process is considered within the methodologies of urban and festival studies, allowing us to examine issues such as the liminality facilitated by a period of festivity, the relationships between festivals and the creation and expression of place identity, as well as the well-established and often contentious relationships between festivals, cultural investment, and ideas of transformation and social regeneration (Picard and Robinson 2006). It also allows us to consider the dynamics of festival experience as performed and enacted on the city streets.

The sources used to inform this exploration include the official bid book materials produced by the Limerick 2020 team, media reports of the bidding process which took place between 2015 and 2017, and photographs from the city environment reflecting the bidding process. The methods we have employed reflect those used in urban studies and festival studies more broadly, and involve the identification, description and critical analysis of relevant discourses, media and images. In doing so, this chapter contributes to existing research on the ECoC event, as well as to the research on bidding, on festivals, and on place narratives.

Limerick, Place Narratives and the European Capital of Culture

Liminality, Festivity and Place Identity

Festivals as social and cultural practices are often linked to the articulation and definition of a sense of place. As De Bres and Davis have noted, ‘community festivals frequently celebrate both group and place identity’, citing Alessandro Falassi’s observation that festivals ‘renew periodically the life stream of a community’ (De Bres and Davis 2001, 327). Falassi describes the different ‘rites’ which can be observed as part of festivity, including ‘ritual dramas’. These, he notes, can take the form of a ‘creation myth, a foundation or migratory legend, or a military success particularly relevant in the mythic or historical memory of the community staging the festival’ (Falassi 1987, 4). This component of Falassi’s festival typology relates closely to the expression or performance of identity through a festival, including group and place identities from local to national and supranational levels, and has informed many aspects of festival studies.

In this context, festivals often connect with particular historical narratives at local or national scales to articulate specific facets of communal identity, often linked to place. As Brüggemann and Kasekamp argue in their exploration of Estonian singing festivals and national identity, the corporeal, communal and emotional dimensions of festival are what make them so impactful in ‘creating cultural memory as a foundation for a national identity in a continuous work-in-progress process’ (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2014, 261).

As examined by Scully (2012), this festival dynamic can also be observed in the expression and construction of diaspora connections to specific places, with festival narratives reiterating a narrative of connection. Festival programming has also been explored as a creative process in expressing hitherto overlooked aspects of place history, as in Hunter's (2004) examination of the 1996 Adelaide Festival. The examples chosen here reflect the growing literature on the topic of festivals and the expression of place identity within festival studies, which often includes themes of regeneration, migration and diaspora, nationalism, and contested or conflicting interpretations of place expressed through festivals by different groups.

The ECoC project is, by its very nature, closely linked to the expression and articulation of place identity. It differs from festivals that are drawn from existing place-based traditions, as the designation is temporary, moving a spotlight onto specific cities across Europe. However, as well as expressing or articulating a sense of place identity, the ECoC process has become associated with an opportunity to significantly reposition place identity on an international stage. The use of the Capital of Culture designation as a catalyst for image change has been examined by several scholars, with a focus on Glasgow (1990) and Liverpool (2008) in particular. Beatriz Garcia notes that 'since Glasgow, image transformation has been a primary objective for many ECoC hosts', but that these claims to change the image of cities are rarely evidenced in a concrete or robust way (Garcia 2017, 3179). Garcia describes these image transformation claims as 'self-fulfilling prophecies', with local agencies and event organisers projecting a 'city renaissance' narrative, resulting in a media discussion that 'echoes, amplifies and legitimates' this idea (Garcia 2017, 3179).

The narrative of renaissance and regeneration has been attached to cities who have gone on to win these titles. However, in this chapter we argue that the process of bidding can be regarded as a transformative period in its own right; that is, regardless of whether the city goes on to win the title. Our close study of an individual case study builds on existing work on ECoC bidding, such as that by Richards and Marques (2016), and Åkerlund and Müller (2012). This chapter adds to this literature through its engagement with the concept of liminality (after Turner 1974, 1987) in the context of the Limerick case study. This is used to consider the ways in which the bidding process became a time where the city, its identity and the role of culture in its (regenerative) future came under discussion amongst a wide group of stakeholders. The concept of liminality has long been associated with festivity, something best expressed in Falassi's (1987) representation of festivals as a 'time out of time'. Liminal periods are regarded as transformative where the 'old' rules of cultural organising are put into flux, and where novel or creative futures can be imagined (Turner 1982). Given the need for wide stakeholder engagement and space for innovation and change, the bidding period has the potential to progress agendas of developing socially inclusive events and spatial environments.

Drawing on van Heerden (2009) we can point to liminality experienced during a competitive bid process such as that involved in the ECoC, one marked by a ‘heightened sense of now’ and intensified by the ever-present deadlines throughout the bidding process. The liminal quality of the bid phase plays a role in the mobilisation and enrolment of key multi-agency actors required to be involved in the bid process (e.g., community and civic groups, the business community, elected local politicians, members of the cultural community/artists). Further, any transformation in a liminal time is not a *fait accompli* and requires much effort to realise (Ryan 2019). This was echoed throughout the bid book, with phrases such as ‘we are ready to meet the challenge’ and ‘we have a lot to do’ peppered throughout the text (2020 Bid Book, 6). As Kinsella, NicGhabhann and Ryan (2017) identified in relation to the cultural policy formation process, the time-bound nature of the bid period enabled a space for ‘lean’ policy engagement, with clear expectations from stakeholders that the process would produce positive outputs for the city. The same heightened, accelerated process can be observed in relation to the process of articulating place narratives, with a usually slow, fragmented or incremental process being made explicit and formalised in the liminal context of the ECoC bid. As will be outlined below, this more explicit process of place narrative development makes space for both consultation as well as tension.

In Limerick’s attempt to become the Irish city designated as ECoC in 2020, both the bid period and the imagined year as designated city were explicitly envisaged as liminal periods of potential and transformation, made possible through the festive opportunity. The chance offered to the city by this liminal festive opportunity was of reshaping the city narrative on both a national and an international stage. This narrative shift, as will be explored below, was aligned with imagined and projected futures of prosperity and activity for the city, futures that according to the internal logic of the bidding process, required significant change to be achieved. As McGillivray and Turner have highlighted, ‘frequently, a successful bid will make use of an emotional “narrative” to supplement its professional-technical competencies and to convince awarding bodies to choose it over similarly technically capable candidates’ (McGillivray and Turner 2018, 55). This perspective provides valuable context for the bidding team’s decision to foreground this narrative of transformation for Limerick at the centre of their ECoC application. One strand of the emotional narrative centred economic and social regeneration and renewal as a key concept in the bid book.

Limerick 2020 and City Narratives

Although Limerick’s bid for the ECoC designation was ultimately unsuccessful – Galway was chosen as the winning city – the bidding process can be seen as a period during which multiple diverse stakeholders came together, focused on

the potential of culture to transform or change the city and region in specific ways. In this context, festivals and festivity are seen explicitly as opportunities to change the meaning and perception of the host city. This emphasis on redefinition and narrative was evident in the opening paragraphs of the Limerick 2020 bid book, which expressed a sense of the city as an ‘up-and-coming cool urban space’. It also included the statements that ‘Limerick had been a non-place in Europe for a long time’, that the ‘power of culture made us discover our city as a place on the European map’, and that ‘we are ready for a new Limerick’ (2020 Bid Book, 3). The different strands of Limerick’s bid reflect the pressure to engage with the different agendas and priorities of the programme itself, which as Immler and Sakkers (2014) have demonstrated, shift between celebrating local culture and celebrating a ‘universal’ sense of shared European cultural identity.

The Limerick 2020 Bid Book, titled ‘Belonging’, was made available to the public in July 2016. It included key demographic information on Limerick city and county, insights into the existing cultural infrastructure and information on the proposed governance and delivery structures should it be awarded the ECoC designation. Proposed events are described in some detail, including the opening ceremony and a street spectacle titled ‘Lifting the Siege’. This is described as a city-wide performance involving multiple groups and street spectacle theatre companies, reflecting the historic sieges of seventeenth-century Limerick, but also the idea that ‘in modern times, large areas have been under siege from crime, social disadvantage and economic deprivation’. The aim of this spectacular event would be to raise ‘a new flag to celebrate the flight, song, dance, and colour that will lift the siege – allowing our citizens to emerge brighter, happier, more confident, proud of our people and place’ (2020 Bid Book, 33). These images and ideas of transformation, overcoming, and renaissance inform the creative content of the proposed programme as much as the positioning statements that open the document.

The desired outcome of Limerick’s proposed ECoC programme as articulated in the bid book was a transformed city with a transformed ‘brand’ or presence on a European stage. The bid book referenced the impact of globalisation, migration and new community formation on the city’s social and economic fabric and sought to incorporate these new elements into Limerick’s transformed and explicitly ‘European’ brand (2020 Bid Book, 17). This new city brand, encapsulated in and expressed through the Limerick 2020 logo, was to communicate this narrative of triumph over past adversity, as well as the associated values of a creative city, an ‘edgy’ city, and a more prosperous city. The projected programme outlined in the bid book for Limerick’s year, with its anticipated economic and social benefits, was explicitly intended to enact this process of transformation. The Limerick 2020 brand was underpinned by this narrative of transition from problem to success city. As Lichrou, O’Malley and Patterson (2008) have pointed out, place marketing can be supported by utilising narrative as a frame for the dynamic and multifaceted nature of



Figure 10.1: ‘Ní neart go cur le chéile’. Irish *seanfocal* or proverb broadly translated as ‘there is no strength without unity’, with Limerick 2020 logo on the side of a Georgian red-brick building taken from Limerick’s O’Connell Street. Photograph: Niamh NicGhabhann (July 2016).

places. Bendix (2002) points to the consumption of place as mediated by narratives ‘through the narrative morsels it plants itself or that are put in circulation by others’ (Bendix 2002, 476, as cited by Lichrou, O’Malley and Patterson 2010).

Throughout the bid year, the Limerick 2020 logo was made visible across the city in multiple ways, reinforcing this narrative for citizens and visitors alike (Figure 10.1). For example, businesses displayed Limerick 2020 stickers on their shop windows. The bid team also used a range of city surfaces – the sides of Georgian buildings and the river walls, for example – to write messages (‘narrative morsels’) associated with the Limerick 2020 brand, using the distinctive Limerick 2020 font. In this way, the Limerick 2020 brand was embedded in the experience of the city itself, encouraging people to engage with the liminality of the bid period, and with the ideas of potential and change offered by the ECoC designation. By embedding this brand into Limerick’s urban fabric, the city itself could be read as being in a liminal state, awaiting transformation into something else.

However, while this narrative of transformation from a ‘non-place’ or ‘problem city’ certainly provides an example of the ‘emotional’ content aimed at convincing bid adjudicators (McGillivray and Turner 2018), this narrative was

more complex for local stakeholders. Given the need to maintain competitive advantage over the other Irish bidding cities, the bid book itself was not made public until after the adjudication process. At the point that the bid book was released, the narrative of change that had been presented to the judges was made available more broadly. On 22 September 2016, the *Limerick Leader* newspaper reported that ‘a number of locals were astonished, shocked, and saddened’ by the characterisation of Limerick as a ‘problem city’. The article quoted a local councillor as stating that ‘we all supported #Limerick2020 with such a great enthusiasm, and people are now asking how many of us, the Limerick audience, would support or share the view that Limerick is or has ever been a “non-place”?’ (*Limerick Leader*, 22 September 2016).

At a local level it can be argued that the Limerick 2020 brand had been understood as celebratory, as an opportunity to build on unique strengths and existing cultural richness, and to enact transformation through greater strategic focus by the local authority on the creative and cultural sectors. This was evidenced by the formation of new local groups during the bidding process, such as PLAN (Professional Limerick Artists’ Network) and LACE (Limerick Arts and Culture Exchange). These groups focused on showcasing and supporting local arts and capacity-building across the creative sector in the city and region (Limerick Arts and Cultural Exchange 2021). However, the local media coverage of the bid book release made it clear that significantly different interpretations of the Limerick 2020 brand that had been in operation throughout the bidding period. In their analysis of the dynamics of Limerick’s year as 2014 National Capital of Culture, Dillane, Power and Devereux (2017) identify and describe similar tensions between celebrating and enhancing the city and its communities as they are, and an emphasis on regeneration led by a ‘top-down’ management process. This analysis highlights the questions raised in 2014 by the artistic community as to whether ‘the project was primarily about rebranding the stigmatised city or about being truly participatory’, reflecting many of the critical disconnections also evident in 2020.

For the PLAN and LACE groups, the brand reflected an opportunity to showcase and develop existing strengths, but the bid book narrative foregrounded ideas of absence or deprivation. The *Limerick Leader* article noted the response of the bid team, who argued that cities who had identified challenges had been most successful, citing the examples of Glasgow and Linz, and added that it was ‘important to be honest when referring to our city’ (*Limerick Leader*, 2016). These comments reflect an understanding of the bid book as being aimed primarily at the adjudicating team, rather than acting as a meaningful cultural strategy and action plan for local stakeholders. Ultimately, however, those local stakeholders held expectations that the bid book would be representative of the process of engagement and inclusion that had been undertaken, and that it would reflect their perspectives. As Dillane et al. (2017) note, these expectations were reinforced by the 2020 slogans of ‘Belonging’ and ‘We

Are Culture’ used throughout the campaign. It is worth noting that Limerick’s cultural strategy process was not launched until 2016, after the ECoC bidding process had finished. Therefore, while the ostensible function of the bid book is to act as a persuasive document aimed at winning over the judges, it can also be seen as ‘acting’ as a strategy for the region. These different interpretations of the bid book, or implicit expectations of its function, are further consequence of the accelerated planning process and network-building necessitated by the ECoC programme.

The Limerick 2020 brand had been able to act in different capacities throughout the bid period, articulating a narrative of transformation (from negative to positive) for the adjudicators, and quite a different narrative of transformation (celebrating, enriching and enhancing) for the local stakeholders. An analysis of community stakeholder-focused, as opposed to adjudicator-focused communications around the brand also reflect this change in emphasis. For example, a communication to local communities from the bid campaign published on 3 June 2015 invited the ‘broader Limerick community to engage, discuss, and get involved in Limerick’s bid’, noting that the bid ‘needs to reflect the ideas, ambitions, and values of its communities, and what Limerick can offer to the common European culture’ (Limerick.ie 2015). This text reflects a shift in emphasis from that displayed in the bid book, from transformation towards celebration.

This tension that emerged between these perspectives reflects the pressure on the ECoC bid team to highlight the narratives that they felt would be most persuasive and impactful, drawing on the ‘city renaissance’ strategies that had been successfully used elsewhere. These tensions are one result of the specific conditions of the bid period, with its accelerated pace and fast-paced formation of new stakeholder groups, all with high expectations of return. Bid teams need to work within this accelerated context while ensuring that different agendas are met – for instance, return on investment for certain stakeholders, and enhanced social inclusion for others. Participants are therefore invited into a process of time-pressured ‘liminal’ thinking and transformative imagining shaped by the rhetoric of genuine inclusion and collaboration. However, it is worth considering that the tensions that often result from this accelerated process could undermine relationships and trust built throughout the bidding period, particularly in relation to developing new, sustainable stakeholder relationships and engagements across communities.

In this context, the pressure to use specific ‘emotional’ or persuasive narratives to drive the bid book could have a negative impact on long-term stakeholder relationships in the area. Indeed, following the splintering of the accepted meaning of the Limerick 2020 brand (from city celebration to city renaissance) the installations throughout the city would be read quite differently, as citizens continued to encounter the branding, now fading, across the urban fabric and in shop windows (Figure 10.2). However, as is discussed in more detail below,



Figure 10.2: Faded Limerick 2020 logo. Photograph: Niamh NicGhabhann (November 2016).

the sometimes-competing priorities of different stakeholders, and the different agendas that the bid team must attempt to satisfy, can be veiled in the image of the ‘festive city’, with the symbols and images of festivity and conviviality being used to represent coherence, inclusion and collaboration.

To understand the local reception of a narrative of transformation from problem to success city, it is important to put the dynamics of the ECoC bid and Limerick 2020 brand into broader local context. As Devereux, Haynes and Power (2011) note, specific areas and Limerick city more broadly had been associated via media coverage with violence, social exclusion, social disorder and criminal gang activity. Indeed, some news coverage explicitly linked Limerick’s year as 2014 National City of Culture as an attempt to ‘reinvigorate an identity that was not defined by crime’ (*Euronews* 2020, 2 January). The Limerick Regeneration Agency, launched by the then President of Ireland Mary McAleese in 2008, was tasked with a process of transforming ‘some of the most

deprived areas of Limerick city' (*Irish Examiner* 2008, 11 February). However, media coverage of the process reflects some of the tensions experienced by residents of the 'regeneration' areas, who expressed a sense of frustration and disillusion with the process, and in particular with the gap between the narrative of renewal and improvement, and the slow pace of progress on the ground (*Irish Examiner* 2012, 28 March 2012).

Further to this process of regeneration, Limerick has also been the subject of a number of different branding campaigns led by the local authority and aimed at increasing both local and international tourist footfall, as well as promoting the city more broadly as a place for investment (Power, Haynes and Devereux 2021). Examples include the designation of Limerick in 2011 as European City of Sport, the '061' campaign (reflecting the area telephone code), and the roll-out of Limerick's 'Edge Embrace' brand in 2020 (*Irish Examiner* 2020, 30 January). Indeed, the strong reaction and pushback from residents and public representatives in response to a *Forbes* article published in April 2021 which reiterated and exaggerated associations between the city and gangland violence reflects ongoing local concern with place identity and the external perception of the city (*Irish Examiner* 2021, 11 April). The local reaction involved the sharing of images of the city and region using the #limerickandproud hashtag, which received over 8.6 million impressions on Twitter (*Irish Examiner* 2021, 21 April). Local response to the narrative of transformation embedded in the ECoC Limerick 2020 brand, therefore, must be considered in the context of these broader histories of rebranding, reshaping and repositioning. While attention has been paid in previous scholarship to the viability or otherwise of the 'renaissance narrative' associated with the ECoC designation, we argue here that close attention to local context and to prior stakeholder experiences with urban revitalisation or city rebranding processes is valuable in understanding the local resonance of such bid campaigns.

Articulating and Performing Transformation in Limerick

Performing the Festive City

Our exploration of the different perceptions of the Limerick 2020 brand and its associated values and narratives reflects specific facets of festival studies: the exploration of stakeholder relationships, festival impacts, and the perceived agency of festivals and festivity within a regional context. In our final section, we wish to draw on critical insights from festival studies in relation to festivity as a performed activity, and to consider how this approach enables further examination of the Limerick 2020 ECoC bid. This approach attends to festivals and festivity as performed, experienced and enacted in public space by visitors and citizens alike. It connects us to the 'corporeal, communal, and emotional dimensions of festival' mentioned by Brüggemann and Kasekamp (2014), and

the role that these play in enabling the intended outcomes of festivals such as the ECoC itself.

The bid process itself took the form of meetings, consultations and world café events, with public festivity being engaged following the submission of the bid and on the eve of the judging and announcement of the successful candidate. To mark this milestone, the city hosted a street party which included public music celebrations, aerial dancers, the closure of the main city streets to traffic allowing pedestrian access and street performers. The city was festooned with green Limerick 2020 bunting and flags, and people wore green Limerick 2020 t-shirts, mobilising the brand further across the city streets. According to the Limerick council website, ‘thousands of people enjoyed the carnival atmosphere at a street celebration and thank-you to the public for its support of the European Capital of Culture bid’ (Limerick.ie 2016, 13 July).

The decision to use festivity in this way is, on one hand, an obvious choice, but it also reflects the desire to present the city to its citizens and to visitors as a ‘festival city’. This draws on Kirstie Jamieson’s analysis of the Edinburgh festivals, and the way in which this city ‘self-consciously adopts the identity of ‘Festival City’, with its centre becoming a stage for colour and revelry. As Jamieson points out, while the aesthetics and dynamics of festivity suggest freedom, the ‘upside down’ world of carnival, potential transgression and play, and seem ‘spontaneously formed by the company of strangers and the collective experience of performances’, the ‘city *en fête* is also the result of painstaking planning that seeks to control the ways in which public spaces change’ (Jamieson 2004, 65).

As well as marking the shared effort, the use of festivity as part of the ECoC bid encouraged people to engage emotionally with the bid message and to associate communal celebration in public space with the Limerick 2020 message, as well as further amplifying this message and the associated images across social media. The use of festivity also allowed the bid team to capture a series of images that framed the city in relation to festivity, with festival encounters across the city streets being photographed and shared widely. These images became an important tool in further positioning Limerick as a ‘festival city’, with the associated values of conviviality, inclusivity and excitement (Figure 10.3). As noted above, these images also elide many of the tensions inherent in the bid process into a public image of festive conviviality, community and inclusion.

The use of festive events to create iconic images which can further be used as part of city narratives was also evident during Limerick 2014, in particular in relation to the images generated during the Royal DeLuxe ‘Giant Granny’ event. This event, which featured oversized puppets making their way through the streets, drew thousands of people, and these images of the city ‘*en fête*’ have been widely used by city authorities since (*Limerick Post* 2019, 30 March). While this was a powerful communal event for citizens and visitors alike, and was an example of creative street spectacle and narrative on a grand urban scale



Figure 10.3: Street performer July 2016 street party. Faces blurred to protect privacy concerns. Photograph: Niamh NicGhabhann (July 2016).

working extremely successfully, it also provided an opportunity for the city to position itself as a city with festive space. Jamieson argues that such images produce ‘a distinct way of looking at the city’ that ‘insinuates the freedom of festivalized streets,’ suggesting that such festivalised spaces are the safer, risk-free environments sought by cultural tourists (Jamieson 2004, 69). Furthermore, Jamieson notes that these highly visible, festivalised spaces also act to eclipse the ‘social worlds that are not neatly assimilated to a festival gaze,’ and that exist beyond these ‘spontaneous’ festival environments (Jamieson 2004, 70).

The festive event itself, therefore, can be seen as an opportunity for communal celebration but also as a way to deepen engagement with the Limerick 2020 brand, and as an opportunity to create and gather valuable images of the spectacular event which can be circulated via print and social media, and used in city branding and other promotional materials. This reflects what Jamieson has termed the ‘fetishized’ image of creative expression and liminal excess that have come to be associated with the ‘Creative City’ as an urban type within global networks, with festival performers and audiences required to be complicit in ‘spatializing and temporalizing city brands’ (Jamieson 2014, 299). In

the economy of global city reputations, therefore, the street festival provided city administrators with an opportunity to enhance Limerick's reputation as a cosmopolitan, safe, creative environment.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the 'city stories' that are produced in the context of an ECoC bid process. It has explored some of the pressures and conflicts that can emerge in the time-bound, liminal, context of the bidding window. While Limerick was ultimately unsuccessful in winning the designation, a close focus on the bidding process itself allows us to examine the 'imagined city' that is created during this process, through brands, stories, enactment, and images. Through a close focus on one city, we point to the importance of examining ECoC bidding dynamics within longer histories of city narratives. We also point to the importance of considering the impact of 'emotional', persuasive bid narratives in the context of unsuccessful bids, and what this may mean for trust relationships between stakeholders as they move onwards.

For regional cities like Limerick, the ECoC bid process was a period of intense focus on its cultural offering, requiring the bid team to negotiate the expectation of inclusion together with agendas of ensuring return on investment with a successful bid. This period also required stakeholders to form into new groups with sometimes competing agendas, and to create a coherent sense of place in a relatively short period of time. Reflecting on our exploration of Limerick's experience in the ECoC bid process, it is worth considering the aftermath of such a process on cultural infrastructure, the dynamics of inclusion, and communities at a regional scale, and whether changes could be introduced to support the transition from an imagined 'creative city' renaissance to a more sustainable set of ongoing conversations and relationships.

Notes

- ¹ In April 2014, Ireland was announced as one of two countries that would host the 2020 European Capital of Culture. This was during the year that Limerick was awarded (without a competition) the inaugural Irish National City of Culture. The competition to decide which Irish city to host ECoC was open to all cities.

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