

CHAPTER 15

Festival City Futures: Reflections and Conclusions

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Introduction

The aim of this book was to explore urban festivity, particularly focusing upon how festivals and events affect urban places and spaces. Festivalisation processes are now well established in cities throughout Western Europe, their rise being closely associated with the prevalence of neoliberal, entrepreneurial city thinking. While these processes tend to be viewed as agents of exclusion and commercialisation, much remains to be understood about how festivals shape cities. To complement political economy perspectives, we need to know more about how festivals and events are produced and experienced on the ground in different kinds of spaces, by diverse cohorts of people (Fincher et al. 2014). This book has contributed to such analysis, in particular by examining the idea of inclusive urbanism and trying to establish the ways in which festivity affects this inclusivity.

Cities are currently under growing pressure to withstand the realities of exceptional political instability, climate change, and the need to address the challenge of building more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goal #11. Mass migration has led to

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increased levels of cultural diversity in urban populations across Europe. Abascal and Baldassarri (2015, 726) argue that ‘from the level of the neighbourhood to the nation, several studies have identified a negative association between ethnoracial diversity and measures of social capital’, indicating the challenges that countries face both in assisting migrant communities but also in encouraging a sense of interculturalism where there is progressive dialogue and interaction between cultures. Accordingly, research interest in understanding how to manage cultural diversity and social relations in times of uncertainty is on the rise (Fraser, Crooke and Davidson 2021; Abascal and Baldassarri 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic, and its attendant economic crisis, has intensified these pressures even further, having radically disrupted the dynamics and budgets of cities everywhere. Municipal leaders are now considering policy interventions that hitherto had seemed highly unlikely (Low and Smart 2020), like the introduction of basic income (e.g. for artists in Ireland) and strict controls on car use. Organisations like the OECD are trying to encourage economic and societal recoveries that privilege ‘inclusion’ and ‘transformation’, whilst at the same time trying to manage ‘just transitions’ towards low carbon futures. These contexts lend a new impetus for interrogating festivals and the implications of using festivals to ‘populate, animate, promote and subsidise’ urban spaces (Smith, Osborn and Vodicka, Chapter 2) for inclusion, intercultural exchange and ultimately for social cohesion. This concluding chapter draws together some of the observations and findings from the studies covered in this collection, and, in light of the unforeseen disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, speculates as to how festivals are likely to affect urban places and city spaces in the years to come.

The Ongoing Quest for More Inclusive Space

Public space is produced through ongoing use and social practice, and festivals constitute an important example of this phenomenon. Festivals and events have long influenced the shape and character of urban public spaces, but today their multi-sensorial presence across cities and towns, as well as their symbolic presence in urban imaginaries, is pervasive. Festivals offer a means of correlating cities with the kind of excitement and spectacle that is tailor-made for urban branding; they energise and animate urban spaces, create attractive time-spaces that generate tourist and consumer footfall; and offer opportunities to regenerate city districts. Their contemporary omnipresence arises from the instrumentalisation of festivals in urban policy, and from associated processes of festivalisation, a term used in urban policy contexts as early as 1993 (Häussermann and Siebel 1993), and subsequently elucidated in detail by several authors including Ronström (2016), as well as in Chapter 1 of this book. One could argue that all of the chapters in this book relate to festivalisation in some shape or form, with Chapter 3 presenting Barcelona as a festivalised city

par excellence and Chapter 2 explicitly reporting study findings that point to a festivalisation of London parks in the years up to 2019.

However, a well-established literature now critiques the contested geographies that typically ensue when event policy is driven by economic agendas (see Chapter 1). Accordingly, and for a variety of reasons including the establishment of Sustainable Development Goal 11, to ‘make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ (UN-Habitat 2016), cities are now showing a greater interest in using festivals to foster socio-cultural inclusion (Quinn et al. 2020). Hell and McPherson’s analysis of the cultural regeneration efforts in Paisley, Scotland in Chapter 14, for example, underlines an important shift of policy thinking towards one that privileges public values like well-being, in addition to economic growth. The study of George Square, Glasgow, in Chapter 4 also notes a shift in thinking towards one that recognises the need for a more participatory approach to designing urban public space. The UN explicitly recognises public space as being key to achieving SDG 11, with profound implications for human health, well-being and the liveability of towns and cities. A recent study of festival related policies in five European cities found an important affinity between festivals and public space, with public space ‘generally seen as vital in enabling festivals to meet the policy objectives they are expected to achieve’ (Quinn et al. 2020, 14). Simultaneously, academic researchers are showing a growing interest in understanding the socio-cultural values associated with festivals (Kim et al. 2015; Wallstam, Ioannides and Pettersson 2020).

The role that festivals play in creating public spaces that foster inclusivity is therefore becoming more relevant in light of sustainability goals. Contemporary debates about social justice and inclusion, as well as social activism like the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent Reclaim the Streets vigils seen in the wake of violent attacks on women in the UK and Ireland, are building popular awareness that public space is not, in fact, equally and safely available to all. Space is socially produced in complex ways that are difficult for us to fully comprehend. Several chapters in this book take theoretical ideas about how space is produced and empirically interrogate whether festivals produce shared space (Lefebvre 1991). Importantly, several chapters do this by examining event portfolios or programmes for specific urban spaces, rather than examining the effects of individual events. This links to Mair and Smith’s (2021: 1739) recent call for a greater focus on understanding how festivals and events can contribute to sustainable development, rather than merely exploring how individual events can be made more sustainable. Our book responds to this call by studying the topic through the particular lens of urban festivals. A key starting point is the belief that as with all kinds of public spaces, festivals can create opportunities for unexpected encounters (Madanipour, Knierbein and Degros, 2014), and constitute places where people are free to mingle in the company of strangers (Given and Leckie 2003). While public spaces, including the kinds of space created through festival activity, are grounded in the ‘thin sociality’ of fleeting encounters across societal divides, they hold the possibility that those

encounters could grow into the thicker sociability of a community (Bodnar 2015). These spaces also offer opportunities to encounter what is going on in the world, and expose us to activities, practices and interests that we don't experience inside our domestic, private worlds. The social interactions generated through staging festivals in public space are an important 'building block of urban social order and cohesion' (Mehta 2019, 296).

Contested Spaces

The spectacular appeal of festivals has meant that cities across the world try to replicate festivals of all kinds, and to stage festivalised events like carnivals, Winter Lights and beer festivals. Cities have long used festivals to celebrate and mark momentous occasions, establish their international standing and construct 'destination brands' (see Gold and Gold, Chapter 9). The public facing nature of these festivals was always very important but how public were they in reality? A complicated aspect to this line of questioning is the highly debated nature of what actually constitutes public space (Carmona 2010). A strong feature of this edited collection is that individual chapters deal with many different kinds of public spaces. Some of these, like streets, parks, market and civic squares, are obviously identifiable as key public spaces and easily understood as event spaces; others like libraries and canals, are less frequently thought of in these terms. Several chapters, including Chapter 7, demonstrate how the social practice of engaging in festivals creates forms of public space and communities that ebb and flow, shift and change even within the confines of very specific boundaries. Festival spaces can come to feel more or less inclusive depending on factors like the composition of festivalgoers, the nature of the programme, the timing and location of the event and the kind of atmosphere created.

The perennial question of what constitutes public space has not been definitively resolved by this edited collection, but by closely analysing how festivals produce and affect public spaces, several chapters have elucidated and illustrated some related issues. With its methodological reliance on mapping, Chapter 3, for example, very graphically points to the uneven distribution of festival activities and resourcing in Barcelona, a city thought to exemplify festivalisation processes. Colombo et al.'s study found festival activity to be concentrated in the city centre, as well as in districts highly populated and well served by cultural facilities, although the situation varied depending on festival type. This highlights concerns not only about the potential exclusion of, or under-provision for, cohorts of people who don't circulate in the city centre, but also about potential tensions and conflicts between long-term residents, tourists and recent immigrants whose lives are city-centre based. This chapter demonstrates that while festivals constitute an important functional use and social practice creating public space in cities like Barcelona, the kind of publicness being generated may be conditional on a number of factors.

The publicness of particular spaces was debated in an entirely different context in Chapter 5. Turning its attention indoors, onto local public libraries, Quinn and Ryan found a clear awareness among festival attendees that the popular rhetoric of the library as a neutral, accessible space is not always borne out in reality. The uneven and contested geographies of the local libraries studied were found to be altered through the hosting of a festival, but only to a degree, in line with the fact that festivals staged here were conditioned by the same cultural norms that ordinarily condition library spaces. Again, a recurring theme is that festivals reproduce existing socio-cultural divides by default, and require conscious intent to challenge and unsettle the status quo, as recognised by the festival organisers in Rotterdam studied in Chapter 6. As Chapter 1 emphasises, festivals may be associated with alternative cultures and experimental practice, but they now tend to be more mainstream phenomena. Nevertheless, beyond 'official' strategies to counter social divides, the liminal qualities of festival time-space (St John 2001) open up possibilities for actors with varying kinds of involvement in the festival site to disrupt prevailing social norms, or to 'step outside their everyday mundane patterns of 'normalcy' (Howell 2013), and rework social ordering within the bounded time-space of the festival. Balantyne et al. (2014) suggest that a festival atmosphere fosters a sense of escapism. In Chapter 7, Steadman and de Jong carefully explain that how festival time-spaces look, sound and feel is far from fixed, but actually is highly fluid and unstable. They do this by analysing festival atmospheres, showing how ambient power intersects with the spatialities and temporalities of festivals to influence how people feel a sense of belonging/non-belonging in festival sites. Clearly, festival organisers are important architects of festival sites. Their design decisions about physical and spatial arrangements influence atmosphere, the soundscape as well as attendee behaviours (Alves et al. 2021). However, the study of two craft beer festivals in Manchester presented in this chapter shows that while particular kinds of atmosphere may pervade festivals, attendees can actively construct micro conditions to counter dominant ambiances.

Analysing festival spaces can afford deep insight into the concept of urban space, and indeed space more generally. Much has been written about how festivals produce spatial transformations as they take over streets, quarters and sometimes entire cities, disrupting routine mobilities, appearances and patterns in how spaces are regularly used (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz 2011, Curtis 2011). Many researchers identify conflicts and tensions in this context, for example, in respect of the exclusions and omissions that characterise the commercialisation and privatisation of public space (Smith 2016). Several chapters in this book (e.g. Chapter 13) identify problems including the contests that come into play over space as a scarce and finite resource, and the difficulties agreeing marketing communications to festival and external stakeholders. Sometimes festivals are conceived as offering their host places a wealth of possibilities for positively reimagining their existence (Shields 2003, Pløger 2010). The theme of spatial transformation is taken up in this vein in Chapter 13,

with Kearney and Burns discussing how spaces within Drogheda were deliberately transformed for the purposes of staging the Fleadh. Again, contestation of space was at issue in the process used to determine how the Fleadh's activities were allocated to particular sites within the town. More generally, urban spaces here were transformed in tangible operational ways, as when temporary infrastructures were erected; as well as in more subtle, fluid and unpredictable ways as people in various guises (e.g. buskers, dancers, drinkers and spectators) temporarily filled up space and used it in non-routine ways.

Some of the chapters provided useful reminders that time is an important consideration in these discussions. Gold and Gold's chapter, for instance, places their study of the Biennale in deep historical perspective, charting not only the historical origins of the event in a location that epitomises the idea of the festival city, but also projecting forward to question how the event can contribute to a sustainable future for the city (Chapter 9). The chapters dealing with the Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh also speak to the importance of temporality. In Chapter 4, McGillivray, Guillard and McPherson present Glasgow as an example of a city that, for several decades now, has strategically used events to regenerate the economy and reposition the city internationally. As elsewhere, festivalisation in the city has meant that the use of historically important civic spaces like George Square has intensified. However, civic spaces like this tend to be associated with powerful traditions and memories, some created through the historical staging of events, none of which are dislodged without opposition. In recent times, tensions have arisen over how the space is used for event purposes, leaving the authors to suggest that George Square is an exemplar of contested geographies in action. Todd introduces us to the Edinburgh festival city place-myth in Chapter 11. Built over time and multi-layered in meaning, Todd uses semiotics to deconstruct the place-myth and reveal fractures amongst management and community stakeholders, between core and peripheral location divides, and between idealised versions and those versions informed by the need for greater inclusion and accessibility.

In addition, there is the matter of festival imaginaries and festival futures: the visions and aspirations of stakeholders who understand that festivals have transformative potential. Several chapters deal with this, some within the 'time-bound' window of the festival as in Drogheda (Chapter 13) where 'renovation, repurposing and painting of derelict buildings' was central to event preparations and others within much longer future-oriented contexts as in the cultural repositioning of Paisley (Chapter 14). In Chapter 10, NicGhabhann, Ryan and Kinsella draw particular attention to how Capital of Culture events are premised on stakeholders imagining, and envisaging, new possibilities for cultural practices, cultural infrastructures and for cities overall. However, such imaginaries can emanate from stakeholders who are differentially positioned in the policy-practitioner-governance frameworks that encase the process of making these types of events. Emulating established initiatives like the European Capital of Culture programme, a range of countries and organisations are

now running competitions where cities are nominated as ‘cities of culture’ or cities of specific cultural forms (film, literature, music etc). Chapter 10 highlights the tensions and negotiations that characterise the construction of these events, showing why some cohorts report disappointment with how the experienced reality of the event matches up to its promise, in line with other studies (Boland, Murtagh and Shirlow 2019).

Engaging Affectively with Space

Contestation, tensions and exclusions are uncovered in many of the discussions throughout these chapters, but sociality and communal interactivity is always a central feature of the festivals studied. Several chapters (e.g. Chapters 2, 7, 8) reinforce the realisation that participating in festivals is never one-dimensional. Rather, festivals create spaces where people engage affectively and multi-sensorially through embodied participation. The senses play a vital role in producing the transformations that festivals bring about and the sociability they enable, with Carter (2019: 201) arguing that ‘affects infuse and circulate among bodies and across spaces, all the while constructing the social worlds through which they flow’. Several of the chapters report on festivals that create particular kinds of eventscapes that privilege engagement through taste (Chapters 7 and 12), sound (Chapters 7 and 13), as well those based on aesthetics and sight (Chapter 9). Others are more ‘hands on’ and celebrate the art of making, as in Chapter 8 which discusses festivals that involve boat building. All of these chapters help us realise that in order to fully understand how festivals and events are experienced as *lived* city spaces there is a need to consider their sensuous geographies. These geographies reveal the different dimensions of festival experiences (Lopez 2019), as the chapters referenced above make clear. Equally, when we speak about contested geographies, often the tensions or flashpoints of conflict at issue emerge as an affront to the senses, as identified in e.g. Chapter 5 with the noise levels in the library, and Chapter 7 with the amounts of alcohol being drunk at the craft beer festivals. An alertness to the senses leads, in turn, to the realisation that festival participation is not only sensuous but very embodied, another factor that deeply shapes how people encounter other social actors and experience festival performances and activities. Several chapters demonstrate how an alertness to embodiment yields insight into how inclusion/exclusion, belonging/non-belonging is experienced and becomes manifest in festival sites. Discussions in Chapter 12, for example, reveal how elderly and vulnerable residents in one of the study sites felt that the degree of crowding on the town’s pavements during festival time meant they were occluded and excluded. Chapter 8 discusses how marginalised and transient communities achieved a greater sense of place-belonging by participating in water based festivals using boats they had made themselves. This reinforces the idea introduced in Chapter 1 that, in terms of producing

positive, social legacies, participating in the *making* of the event might be as significant as participating in the event itself.

Methodology Matters

The research based work that features in this book also has methodological significance. Given the focus on inclusion, experiences and contested spaces, it is perhaps unsurprising that the chapters advance understanding of the ways qualitative methods can be used in festivals and events research. Contributions have highlighted the value of an array of qualitative research methods including mapping (Chapter 3), visual methods and semiotics (Chapter 11), social media analysis (Chapters 11, 7), qualitative surveys (Chapter 2), participatory workshops (Chapters 4 and 11), personal involvement in festivals (Chapters 7 and 13) as well as more conventional interviews and observations. Much of this book has tried to understand the relationship between festivals and city spaces from the perspective of audiences/participants (Chapters 5, 8), or the wider users of urban spaces (Chapters 3, 4, and 11), which helps the book to reach important conclusions about *experiencing* festive spaces. Some chapters also focus on the perspectives of festival organisers (e.g. Chapter 6) or local officials (e.g. Chapter 13). In trying to work out how urban policy and event policy intersect, it is important that future work also focuses on other significant stakeholders, in particular representatives of organisations tasked with managing urban spaces. In the contemporary era these include Business Improvement Districts; development corporations; neighbourhood associations, amenity groups, Community Interest Companies (CICs), trusts plus various other community partnerships and social enterprises, as well as City Councils. Whilst more work is needed to trial innovative ways of capturing festival experiences and atmospheres, perhaps the most significant methodological challenge is how best to capture the ongoing, longitudinal effects of festivals and events. Given the need to analyse programmes and portfolios, and the imperative to understand events in the plural, researchers need to think about how best to capture cumulative effects and legacies produced outwith the time-space of individual events. Only then will we be able to understand the wider effects of festivalisation.

Pandemic Disruptions and the Shift to Digital Space

As outlined in the preface, this edited collection emerged from the workings of the HERA funded FESTSPACE project which began in 2019. The specific genesis of many of the chapters in the book lie in a call for papers issued in early 2020 for a symposium sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society's (UK) Geographies of Leisure and Tourism Research Group (GLTRG). At this time,

we had no idea that the world was about to be turned upside down by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, by March 2020 it was quickly becoming clear that festivals were under serious threat as governments issued public health guidelines that required social distancing and limited personal mobility. Shared space became something of an alien concept during the Covid-19 pandemic. Public health guidelines advised against sharing space, outside prescribed domestic units. Strict social distancing, ‘contradict(s) everything that drives us as a social species’ (Tonkin and Whitaker 2021, 2). For Courage (2021, 1) the pandemic has been at odds with ‘the particularly urban design of collective occupation’ and has ‘taken from us our familiar collective social experiences.’ It completely undermined the ethos of festivals and festivity, which is premised on communal interactivity (Falassi 1987). Having said that, the absence of festivity somewhat ironically fostered a new found appreciation of its importance in invigorating and enlivening the appearance, sounds and feel of city space, whether city-central or suburban, large or small scale, indoors or outdoors. City streets and squares unpopulated by social interactions and activities during the pandemic were vacant, empty and still.

As the pandemic passes and restrictions on using public space ease, it seems certain that festivals will return to parks, squares and arenas. Indications of this likely development emerged early on in the pandemic with numerous reports in cities and towns throughout Europe of spontaneous gatherings of people collectively creating and performing sociable public space, whether by dancing on balconies in Menorca (Villalonga-Olives, Kawachi, and Hernández-Aguado 2021) or by publicly displaying artwork on windows and garden railings in Dublin (Quinn 2021). Research during the pandemic pointed to a strong public appetite for the return of festivals (Peoples 2020). Undoubtedly, a desire for social connectivity is a key factor feeding this appetite. However, the effects of the pandemic will shape the return of festivals into the future, and while festivals and events will return to public space, there are unknowns and many unanswered questions.

Some of the chapters in this book raise concerns that prioritising inclusion might now become more problematic, given that the diversity of the festival populations in European towns and cities may have been depleted by the pandemic. In the UK, this is a particular concern given the demographic shifts associated with Brexit. Very obviously, the move to hybrid and online festival programming during the pandemic signalled the consolidation of virtual space as an additional important context for the inclusivity of festivals into the future. Florida, Rodriguez-Pose and Storpor (2021) argue that cities post-pandemic will experience a reconfiguring of urban space. In festival and event terms, this is likely to translate into investment in public spaces with, for example, the installation and upgrading of LED screens to enable events to function in hybrid form. Such investment is likely to be uneven, and highly dependent on the resources and political will existing at city, district and town levels, thus leading to new variations on the kinds of contested geographies already

apparent throughout the interventions contained in this book. Undoubtedly, the rise of digitally enhanced festivals and events brings new opportunities in terms of expanding audiences, broadening the geographical breadth of programme inputs, extending the ‘afterlife’ of productions, and creating material for archives. However, somewhat counterintuitively, while digitisation makes it easier than ever for cities to create spectacles that animate spaces and create footfall, it does not inevitably foster inclusion. Simultaneously, another effect of the pandemic may have been to provide a space for reflection and a potential re-orientation of festival direction with inclusion in mind. Chapter 11, for example, suggests that the pandemic offers an opportunity for Edinburgh’s festival managers and other city-based festivals stakeholders to ‘shift focus towards stronger engagement with local communities’, rather than prioritising external visitors and city centres. In focusing on more localised audiences and participants, it may be that festivals re-orient their activities to neighbourhoods and non-central areas. This has happened already in London. The Greenwich and Docklands International Festival received plaudits for taking performances into housing estates and suburban locations in 2020 with their ‘On Your Doorstep’ programme, introduced because of Covid-19. This was retained in 2021, notwithstanding the easing of restrictions. Another interpretation, however, is that for both festivals and an associated array of urban based stakeholders, more pressing financial imperatives may now take hold and strengthen the tendency to instrumentalise festivals to achieve financial returns and economic development in the years ahead. Irrespective of all these uncertainties, overall, the ongoing disruptive effects of the pandemic require, as Chapter 12 notes, that festivals and urban festival policymakers demonstrate a degree of ‘adaptive capacity and resilience’ (Wrigley and Dolega 2011, 2358).

Final Comments

This book has developed our understanding of cities as contested spaces by putting the interrelationships between festivals, urban public space and inclusion firmly on the research agenda. By foregrounding inclusion, this book has addressed an obvious gap in the literature and responded to calls for multiple actors – festival organisers, urban policymakers and academics alike – to conceive of festivals as potentially powerful tools to achieve social policy goals. In terms of future research priorities, there is a need to broaden enquiries to include different kinds of public space, including indoor sites. Public, cultural, institutional spaces such as libraries (as in Chapter 5), galleries, museums, and theatres are increasingly being festivalised too. Locating future studies here will advance our understanding of how festivals and events affect city spaces and the communities that use them. It will also prompt questions about the dynamic, yet under-acknowledged role, that festivals play in shaping urban cultural infrastructures. Equally, further work is needed on spaces like

waterways, transport spaces, markets and religious buildings located in a variety of central and peripheral locations, to probe further into the kinds of geographical unevenness alluded to in Chapter 3. Various social and cultural groups have long standing associations with spaces like these and locating enquiries here would yield new insights into how, and by whom, urban spaces are constructed, controlled and experienced as festival and event spaces. As stated above, there is an obvious need for more research to be carried out on the enduring effects of staging festivals and events in urban spaces, in ways that move the focus beyond the time-bound staging of the actual event. Temporality arose as a key idea in several of the chapters in this book (e.g. 4, 9, 11) but it deserves to be prioritised so that we learn more about how the recurrent staging of events in particular spaces informs place associations and patterns of routine use, and shapes urban design decisions.

While these chapters were commissioned before the advent of Covid-19, there are indications throughout the book as to what the future might hold. The continued importance of festivals and events to the economies, societies and cultural lives of towns and cities is not in doubt. Indeed, it may well be that one of the effects of the pandemic is to further encourage festivalisation. The evidence presented in this book suggests that festivals and events will continue to (re)produce spaces and places in uneven and always contested ways. Hopefully further research can inform policies and practices that allow festive space to be ‘democratic space where the performance of culture requires the interaction of artists, audience and locality’ (Chalcraft and Magaouda 2011, 175).

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