

Festivals, Carnivals and Urban Regeneration

Dr Andrew Tallon, April 2014

Staging hallmark events has become an increasingly important aspect of urban regeneration strategies in cities and towns of all sizes and in countries globally, the most topical at the moment being the XX Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the 2014 FIFA Football World Cup Brazil. Urban festivals and carnivals have been long recognised by city authorities as components of regeneration. The initial focus of urban regeneration policy on physical regeneration has increasingly become more holistic with social cohesion and capital becoming more integral to regeneration. Festivals and carnivals can contribute to physical, cultural, social and economic regeneration, though the benefits of one-off events are not as sustainable in the longer term as those of annual festivals. The involvement of the local community in decision-making around festivals and carnivals is of vital importance.

Three main types of events can be identified: rolling events, running from year to year; site specific, one-off events; and peripatetic events which different cities compete to host¹. Hallmark events are: 'major one-time or recurring events of limited duration, developed primarily to enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of a...destination in the short and/or long term. Such events rely for their success on their uniqueness, status or timely significance to create interest and attract attention'². Generic examples of hallmark events include major fairs, exhibitions and World Expositions, and cultural and sporting events of international status³. One key type of event with regenerative potential is the local festival. A festival can be defined as 'a day or period of celebration, especially one kept traditionally; a feast or saint's day; a season or series of performances (of musical, theatrical or other cultural events)⁴. Usually they are based on characteristics sensitive, unique and relevant to the local community or environment. They focus more on the intangible rather than the tangible aspects of community. Heritage festivals often make links with community or religious roots, such as Caribbean-style carnivals. The scale of festivals can vary from the local to the national to the international, and they provide the host community with an opportunity to secure prominence in the tourism market.

The focus of the festival might be on music, literature, food, art, culture, religion, language or parades of masqueraders. Festivals offer an opportunity to celebrate all cultures present in a community and cultural identity can be reinforced through festivals. Festivals promote the 'carnavalesque'⁵ and festive and can emerge as a response to economic and social problems^{3, 6}. They can be led and funded by the city authority in a top-down mode, with instrumentalist aims, for example Leeds St. Valentine's Fair⁷ and Bristol Harbour Festival, or community-led and bottom-up such as St. Pauls Carnival, Bristol and the south-west of England illuminated carnivals which are celebratory events⁸.

Characteristics of festivals are that: they range from one-day community events to month long celebrations; they can have a significant impact on the cultural and economic regeneration of an area; they can increase interest in a city as a tourism destination, promoting a particular image of a city or elements of its culture; direct benefits stem from employment opportunities in the festival itself; indirect benefits are derived from the retail, catering, accommodation and transport sectors; they stimulate and increase civic pride, and social and cultural capital.

One of the most famous UK annual festivals is the Notting Hill carnival held over the August Bank Holiday for three days. It essentially began in 1959 to celebrate cultural diversity after the race riots of August and September 1958, although it evolved to its existing format in 1964⁵. In recent years it has attracted around one million spectators; £36 million was spent at the 2002 carnival which contributed £93 million to the economy⁹. New Year's Eve festivals have become UK-wide and since the Millennium have emerged as global attractions. They are funded by city authorities and held in public space. Firework displays are centred on and around iconic buildings so as to maximise their media appeal. Edinburgh's Hogmanay Festival costs £29 million to stage and attracts 80,000 people¹⁰.

Food and drink and music festivals have become especially prominent in the UK. Food festivals are often associated with the promotion of local food and cuisine. They can also be used to promote multicultural communities and are part of the sustainability, heritage and local identity nexus. They establish links between food production and food consumption, and can help to establish and develop networks within urban and rural communities. Their local focus assists marketing and brings a local audience and local benefits¹¹.

Music festivals in the UK in 2010 totalled 715, of which 147 were in the south-west region¹². However, the heavy reliance of music festivals on the youth market is risky, so music festival promoters are attempting to broaden their appeal by staging heritage and revival acts aimed at a wider audience. Different festivals attract different markets, though music festivals generally attract younger audiences who are not usually associated with high spending. Arts festivals attract older, more educated audiences who are already interested in the arts. Lack of awareness by local populations of individual festivals has been shown to be responsible for non-attendance so the local population should be an important target.

As a subset of the wider term festival, 'carnival' is generally recognised as deriving from *carnem levare* meaning the removal of meat, or *caro vale*, farewell to meat, both referring to festivals before Lent⁵. This form of carnival is common in Europe and was taken by Catholic European colonists to the New World⁵. A third possible origin of the word is from *Carrus Navalis*, a component of the Roman festival of Saturnalia which involved a simulated ship accompanied by a festive street procession which more closely relates to the indigenous float-based carnivals in England.

Float-based illuminated carnivals in Somerset, as well as those smaller ones in the adjoining counties of Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon, have been a key element of the economic, social and cultural fabric of many urban and rural communities for over 400 years. Dating from the celebrations following the failure of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, carnival in this region has evolved from ad hoc street celebrations and bonfires to spectacular organised parades witnessed today which typically consist of around 50 illuminated floats (of up to 30 metres long, five metres high and three metres wide) plus around 50 masquerading walking entries, taking over two hours to pass any spot on the parade route, each of which is around two miles. It is estimated that there are around 220 traditional 'English' carnivals still taking place, which can be differentiated from English 'African-Caribbean style' carnivals that have originated from the immigration of black communities to the UK¹³. Around half of the float-based carnivals in the UK take place in the south-west of England. There are currently around 30 night-time illuminated carnivals in the region, the only such carnivals that take place in the UK, the most famous being the 'magnificent seven' of the Somerset County 'Guy Fawkes' circuit in November. These parades have

important economic, social and cultural benefits for former industrial towns and rural communities, although there are a number of threats to the future of these spectacular and unique parades.

Each year it is estimated that the local economy benefits to the tune of around £40 million during the carnival season which lasts from late August until mid-November. Local businesses within the service sector benefit, particularly accommodation suppliers, retailers, pubs and other leisure providers. In addition, local specialist creative industry businesses benefit from trading with carnival clubs and organising committees. Around £120,000 is raised from street collections during the seven County circuit parades which is contributed directly towards the cost of staging the carnivals, with the significant remainder being donated to local charities and voluntary organisations. In addition, clubs and committees fundraise and spend in the local economy the whole year around⁸. Carnival is undoubtedly an important economic contributor to the tourism-rich south-west economy, which should be all the more valued in an era of economic austerity.

Carnival is also a social and cultural way of life for many people and communities across the south west of England, contributing to social capital and cohesion. It is estimated that over 10,000 people are involved in south-west carnival, including those in clubs, on committees, and those who act as helpers. 'Carnivalites' (as people involved in carnival are locally called) are committed all year round, taking part in fundraising activities, building of the carnival entries, running and attending social and awards events, and stewarding and participating in other local festivals such as the Glastonbury Festival. Through these activities, people of all ages and social backgrounds learn and develop an array of practical, team working, and social skills and attributes. These encompass a wide range of fields such as engineering, electrics, carpentry, painting, costume making, performance arts, public speaking, administration, and accountancy. An average club member can spend anything up to 1000 hours a year involved in carnival-related activities⁸.

Carnival has a rich cultural tradition. Due to their historic roots among communities themselves, the illuminated carnivals remain bottom-up, grassroots, community-led events. Carnival is a tradition which brings communities together and is organised by and predominantly for these communities on an entirely voluntary basis. This is in contrast to the majority of other festivals and carnivals in the UK which are funded and run by local authorities, often at great expense, sometimes with additional public and private sponsorship. Usually city centre-based, rather than small town or rural events, these have much more recent origins based on economic regeneration rather than cultural tradition, creativity and heritage, and are therefore instrumental in nature^{5, 8}.

Despite their recognised importance among local communities, the public sector and businesses, the illuminated carnivals face a variety of threats to their future viability and vitality. The economic downturn of the late 2000s/early 2010s has affected carnival clubs, as floats can cost up to around £30,000 to put on the road when considering construction materials, fuel, tractor and generator hire, costume and make-up costs, and insurance and health and safety costs. Carnival organising committees face similar outgoings, which include insurance, licences, barriers, road signs and prize money, and can total between £10,000 and £30,000 annually. Illuminated carnivals receive little in the way of private sponsorship and limited financial support from public sector bodies such as the Arts Council, and thus rely on fundraising activities and voluntary donations⁵. In addition, there is the challenge of enthusing the younger generation to participate in carnival in the age of

the internet and other competing interests. Clubs are also losing the older generation over time meaning a shortage of members in many clubs, some of which have subsequently folded. Health and safety regulations, in particular, appear to be disproportionately applied to Somerset illuminated carnivals⁵.

In the 2013 carnival season, 49 different carnival floats appeared in the seven Somerset county processions along with over 50 walking entries. This number compares with 90 floats in the early 1990s. Some smaller towns and villages have lost many or all of their carnival clubs which had acted as a focal point of their local communities. Additionally, annual carnivals in Yeovil, Wincanton and Crewkerne finished in the late 2000s, with other town carnivals currently under financial threat. However, illuminated carnivals continue to contribute to the rich tapestry of traditional and creative festivals in the south-west of England, and continue to have highly significant economic, social and cultural impacts in terms of regeneration. They provide a unique example of bottom-up community events which were not initiated for instrumental reasons, but are increasingly becoming linked to various forms of regeneration. As a model, it would be difficult to apply carnival in a top-down fashion to larger cities without the specific religious and cultural tradition.

Overall, there are a range of benefits of festivals and carnivals to urban regeneration. Festivals and carnivals: boost the image of the city and increase civic pride; attract investment, skilled workers, students and creatives; attract international and domestic tourists; give people something to be involved in, especially in deprived areas; increase racial harmony; do not require high levels of investment or special facilities; create jobs, albeit temporary; and contribute to the upgrading and animating of buildings, spaces and neighbourhoods.

However, festivals and carnivals bring with them neighbourhood effects such as noise, rubbish, displacement, gentrification and loss of local character; public service effects including additional pressures on health care services and policing; and labour market effects relating to the creation of low paid, casual, seasonal jobs in the service sector. It can be further argued that festivals and carnivals represent the appropriation of culture through spectacularised and commodified forms of entertainment.

References

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