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The Re-branding of Liverpool – tensions in the European Capital of Culture 2008

Steve Little,
Center for Innovation Knowledge and Enterprise,
Open University Business School, U.K.

This paper examines one aspect of the process of re-branding a major community - the City of Liverpool - in anticipation of its role as European Capital of Culture, 2008. It describes the impact of the successful Capital of Culture bid on one particular creative resource within that city – the Picket music venue.

The success of the bid in June 2003 created changes, which impacted on some of the key creative activities within the city, threatening the legitimacy of the Capital of Culture project itself. Rapidly rising property values are denying affordable space for the very activities which underpinned the success of the bid. The author has been a participant in the subsequent two year campaign to protect the Picket venue as a resource for the training of young musicians in both artistic and technical aspects of music.

The paper looks at the lessons from this situation, in particular the blend of a highly local with a wider global identity which has become characteristic of Liverpool and Merseyside and the tension and synergy between traditional collectivity and individual entrepreneurialism characterised by the forms of social enterprise currently emerging in this creative milieu. It identifies some of the collective resources held by the Liverpool community from which were drawn key aspects of the fight to retain a significant cultural resource within the Capital of Culture

Changing Tack

Liverpool is a distinctive port city with a reputation for both music and militancy. It prospered through the cotton trade and shares with Bristol a problematic association with the triangular trade between Britain, Africa and North America. It was the principal port for North Atlantic passenger traffic until displaced by Southampton early in the twentieth century. The UK's position of the as a set of islands off the mainland of Europe allowed the capture of outward traffic, particularly human migration. During the mass movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Glasgow captured through-traffic from the Baltic for North America, predominantly Canada, while Liverpool captured traffic via Hamburg and Rotterdam, predominantly for the NE United States. This transfer of migrants from the Baltic and northern Europe via east coast ports and west coast ports to North America left a residue in the form of a minority of permanent settlers who maintain the connection between origins and destinations.,

The international connections of the port are cited as one reason for its history of musical creativity and innovation. Liverpool went through significant change during the twentieth century, from the intense aerial bombardment as a key Atlantic port in World War II to the postwar reconstruction and attraction of new industries in the 1960s, a period coinciding with the rise of the city as a centre of musical creativity, marked by the rise of the Beatles. This was followed by decline through the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in serious social unrest and riots. Efforts at directed inward investment during the 1980s, such as a government sponsored international garden festival were marked by the unwillingness of contractors to recruit labour from within the city, thus limiting the economic impact of such investment. Such past experiences are reflected in current initiatives such as the Construction for Merseyside (CfM) charter scheme in which signatories undertake to utilise local labour in their projects.

The transformation of shipping patterns following the introduction of shipping containers has been described by Levinson (2006). In Liverpool this meant that the docks built during the nineteenth century became derelict, and a new container port, requiring dramatically few workers, was built downriver. Changes in trade patterns meant that it was the container ports of the east coast, handling European trade, that prospered, however. Within the UK Liverpool had become associated with fierce local identity, typified by the support for its two Premier League football teams, low levels of employment, often casual as through most of the history of the docks, and a symbol of an obsolete and declining way of life

By the end of the 1990s, however, the city was enjoying steady improvement, partly as a result of Objective 1 European Union funding, and partly as a result of general economic recovery, both of which made the architectural heritage of the nineteenth century heyday of the port attractive to inward investment. The Albert Dock has been renovated to provide, shops, apartments and museum and art gallery space, other nineteenth century blocks had been converted to housing, leading to an increase of property values, particularly in the central city.

At the opening of the twenty-first century the city was once again benefiting from its geographic position, this time as one end of a route running from the East Anglia ports, especially Felixstowe, using the A14-M6 highway corridor to Holyhead and Liverpool which links onwards to the Irish Republic. A second route along the M62 motorway corridor between Hull and Liverpool was the basis for a proposal for a linear "super city" (Alsop, 2005). This has been re-configured by the UK government as the Northern Way, which continues to the North East of England. One additional success for Liverpool on this respect was the successful re-branding of the airport as Liverpool John Lennon Airport and the capture of a major budget airline operator who has chosen Liverpool over the larger and more established Manchester airport. As a node in the new low cost air travel network of Europe Liverpool has gained an additional opportunity to reposition itself. These overlapping connections have recontextualised Liverpool within a Britain and Europe.

Voicing dissent – Scouse identity

The Scouse accent is a distinctive component of both Liverpool, and the wider Merseyside identity. Carter et al (2003) quote Chris Bailey, web-master of the web-site established in support of the dock dispute of 1995-8 who explains that the potential of podcasting technology, then in its infancy, was not exploited. Few of the overseas activists accessing the website could understand the strong local accents of the workers.

While the Guardian newspaper and other sources have reported that ‘the soft and friendly version’ of the Scouse accent has helped to turn Liverpool into Britain's favourite location for call centres’ (Ward, 2000) the wider business community takes a different view with a 2004 survey of company directors on the business appeal of British regional accents ranking the Liverpool accent among the most stigmatized (New York Times International, 2005). Only 15 percent of the respondents believed that a Liverpool accent denoted success; and only 8 percent viewed the speaker as ‘honest and trustworthy’.

Saving the Picket

This paper describes the background and recent history of a significant music venue in Liverpool, the Flying Picket. It describes the negative impact on this social enterprise of the success of Liverpool’s bid to be Capital of Culture 2008, an ironical situation since the Picket was an enthusiastic supporter of that bid.

The Picket venue was created by volunteers within the labour movement as part of the Merseyside Unemployed Resource Centre, generally referred to as the ‘Unemployed Centre’, in the 1983 at the nadir of the city’s fortunes. Based in Hardman Street in the centre of the city the Flying Picket venue occupied part of the building, operating bars, a music venue and function rooms, plus a fully equipped recording studio. This organization had been founded by unemployed young musicians during the 1980s and had been instrumental in the development of a number of local bands.

However, with the steady recovery of the local economy, and the reduction in unemployment levels, the financial basis of the Centre was eroded. Subscriptions from labour movement supporters had declined, and in 2003 the city council made a decision to direct grants to the organisations which occupied the premises of the Unemployed Centre rather than through the centre itself. In October, four months after the success of the Capital of Culture bid the Council of Management decided to clear its debts and avoid the cost of modernizing a historic and legally protected building by selling to developers and moving to rented accommodation. Following the success of the Capital of Culture bid, properties through the city centre, virtually unsaleable during the 1980s, were being converted to boutique hotels and high value living accommodation.

Faced with the loss of a unique resource within the city, the staff and supporters of the Picket venue established a campaign, with the initial objective of reversing the decision to sell the exiting building and to establish a viable business plan for remaining in the existing premises. The Picket activities within the Unemployed Centre had to be reconstituted as a company limited by guarantee in order to pursue this prospect. The Picket brand was a crucial component of the new social enterprise, as it carried the history and identity of the preceding decades. The workers were able to claim this essential intangible asset.

The campaign organized “Save the Picket” fundraising concerts with local bands, achieving coverage in both local and national print and broadcast media¹. Endorsements and support came from celebrities in the music industry with previous involvement with the venue. Local politicians, from both national and local government expressed support. A wide variety of arts and music industry organisations also supported the campaign

¹ See links from www.savethepicket.com/legacy.html

The Picket venue had organized supporting concerts during the 1995-8 Liverpool Docks dispute, and borrowing some of the e-campaigning techniques developed in that struggle. The use of the internet had been a significant component of the dockers' communication strategy, with a volunteer web-site being used to elicit support and coordinate actions.

A 'savethepicket' campaign website² was created as both a call for support and as an archive of the achievements and developments of the Picket during the previous two decades. The guestbook linked to the site attracted input from across the U.K. and from as far away as Japan, North America and Australia, while the site itself carried information on the situation as it unfolded and instructions on how to lobby in support of the demands of the Picket workers and supporters.

This situation reflected the experience of the site developed during the dock dispute by the dockworkers which, despite its global reach, was maintained with very limited volunteer resources³. One measure of the effectiveness of the savethepicket web-site was an attempt by the Centre management to discipline the Picket employee most involved with the site for misuse of resources. In anticipation of such a move the campaign site had been built on a subscription server and was quite separate from the limited web-site previously used by the venue.

Carter et al (2003) discuss at length the experience gained from the dockers' web-site and its role in coordinating international days of action despite the need, for legal reasons, to operate outside official union structures. They emphasise the crucial role of the website in providing a means of rapid dissemination of information to a wide range of supporters. Castree's (2003) detailed account of the national and international aspects of the dockers' campaign makes only a single mention of the use of the Internet as developed by the dockers, but emphasises the multiscale nature of the campaign waged by the Liverpool workers, with significant resources devoted to building and maintaining local support within the city. This point is taken up by Routledge (2003) in his examination of grass-roots globalization networks.

The Picket campaign developed along similar lines, with appeals to the key figures in British music who had been and continued to be strong supporters, and to the wider international community, as evidenced by postings to the guest page for Australia, Canada and Japan. While the savethepicket website was used as a means of publicising the situation to a wide audience it was primarily directed at bringing pressure to bear on local actors who had some means of influencing the outcome. Ultimately the purpose of such widespread support was to maintain pressure and profile back on Merseyside and to maintain a face-to-face audience for the events that were still organised in association with the Picket.

Relocation, Relocation

When the initial plans to purchase the existing building, listed as of historic interest were unsuccessful, and the building was clearly priced beyond the means available to the newly formed Picket Limited, efforts were directed to a search for suitable and affordable alternative premises. One of the commercial venues in Liverpool had offered to host Picket branded events as an alternative to the maintenance of a dedicated Picket performance space;

² www.savethepicket.com

³ A first person account has been provided by the volunteer web-master, Chris Bailey (Bailey, 2006)

however, this was regarded as incompatible with the Picket's role in nurturing new talent in an environment complementary to the commercial music scene.

During the period from the closing event at Hardman Street in December 2004 to the re-opening at new premises in Jordan Street on 27th May 2006 the web-site took the place of the physical premises as a virtual location from which to organise events carrying the Picket brand. With the re-opening of the Picket at its new site, the campaigning site was superseded by a new site taking advantage of the wider accessibility of web technology that had come to fruition during the campaign. The move was made possible through the A Foundation and the related creation of the Independent District.

The A Foundation was created in 1998 by, James Moores, to support the development and exhibition of contemporary art in Liverpool. Moores is a member of the family responsible for a major economic activity through Littlewoods catalogue sales and football pools operations, both declining in the face of innovations in retailing and gambling. The A Foundation, a registered charity, was used to initiate the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in 1999 and by 2006 this had become the UK's largest contemporary visual arts festival.

The Independent District brand was unveiled around the 2004 Biennial to identify an area of underutilized industrial buildings close to the south waterfront of the city. The Foundation was instrumental in refurbishing these historic warehouses to create some of the largest exhibition spaces in the UK in the process, helping to regenerate this area. Interestingly much of the area was reconstructed following the riots in the 1980s to bring in new economic activity to the city.

In 2006 the Biennial launched the newly refurbished Greenland Street site, three former industrial buildings in Liverpool at the heart of the old port area. The continued effort of re-branding this area is in part a contribution to the movement to secure a lasting benefit from 2008 by aligning existing initiative and activities with the new brand identity and partly a defence against encroachment by other forms of commercial development.

The reconstruction of the Picket as a free-standing social enterprise, with the support of local government and "third sector" organizations is symptomatic of the transformation of the city and its institutions. However, the complex and contradictory heritage is still evident in the character of these new activities, and the threat of disruption to the creative fabric of Liverpool remains. The most recent threat, to a long established recording studio in the city centre, was countered with rapid and effective mobilisation along the lines of the Picket campaign.

ArcherGate and Beyond

The resignation of the artistic director for the Capital of Culture project in July 2006 sparked a flurry of argument around identity and authenticity and questions over the effectiveness of preparations for 2008. Archer, an Australian with a track record of organizing cultural festivals there had only formally taken up her contract two months earlier., although she had been acting in a consultancy capacity since 2004. She had commuted between Australia and Liverpool, and many of the artists scheduled for showcase events during 2006 had been sourced from there and North America. Criticism had been leveled at the nature of the events organised as a dry run and appetizer for 2008 and at the lack of publicity and consultation over the content for the Capital of Culture Year itself.

The problems around the director and her resignation were dubbed “Archergate” by the local press. Reaction from both the general public and from within the creative community was negative. One local journalist described the outgoing director as a Hill-Billy singer. The response to this “tribal” reaction against what was perceived as a preference for “high culture” over indigenous activities was an acknowledgement of the centrality of the grass roots dimension to sustainability. Key local personalities in the arts and broadcasting have been invited onto a reconstituted board.

The nineteenth century waterfront of the central city had been awarded World Heritage status in 2004. As the pace of physical re-development increasing in the run up to 2008, concerns were raised over the impact of particular large projects around the area. This led to an inspection in October 2006 which noted that there was no immediate threat to the quality of urban environment that has justified the status.

What’s in a Name?

In the 1980s the ‘Flying Picket’⁴ name was shared with a successful accapella music group, itself a spin-off from a left wing theatre group and was a reference to the successful use of mobile tactic during the national miners’ strike of the 1970, which were revived during the dispute of the 1980s. Arguably such associations do not sit well with post-Florida descriptions of the new creative milieus recommended for cities. Peck points out that the benefits of Florida’s formula are those of increased economic activity, and that correlation, rather than causality may be the issue. The creativity of Liverpool has, if anything, a closer association with recession, and lack of any other alternatives to migration.

Now that the brand name has been shortened to Picket it is worth noting that a picket fence is one that is driven into the ground, while the military use of the term refers to the soldiers sent beyond the front lines to provide warning of enemy movement, the most current term being “radar picket – a means of detecting threats and opportunities.. The last meanings are appropriate to the reconstituted Picket, which retains its community base, while providing early information on trend in music culture and on upcoming talent.

Naming and renaming central to the maintenance and development of identity and re-branding. Co-branding between the organisations within the newly coined Independents district has assisted greatly in this process, but the multi-scalar nature of the profile achieved through face to face and internet campaigning allows local, and global profiles to coexist and develop into “glocal” identity

Relocation has moved the Picket is now located in this area of mixed nineteenth and twentieth century industrial buildings, most are unsuitable for refurbishment as expensive residential or hotel accommodation, but in the longer term the area is potentially vulnerable to more comprehensive forms of re-development. as is the set of names by which the area is labelled, Independents district by the arts sector, and Baltic Triangle by the urban planners coordinating developments around 20008, the reference being to the plan-shape of the area and an historic dockside pub, the Baltic Fleet which stands at the northern point of this triangle.

On 18 October 2006 Liverpool City council passed a motion *“recognising that the emergence of an independent cultural district in this area is a great opportunity to support*

⁴ A picket travelling from place to place to support local pickets during any strike.(www.allwords.com)

the long term development of the City's cultural, sub-cultural, musical and artistic sector". It noted the success of the active enterprises operating there: Love Liverpool, the New Picket, Love Culture and Energywise Recycling. This formal recognition from Liverpool City Council of the value of the emerging land-use of the district is therefore significant, as is the use of a name associated with previous round of regeneration- Waterfront Business Park, Liverpool 1.

Conclusion

The experiences of the Picket suggest that the economic impact of the "creative class" identified by Florida (2002, 2005) and the "artistic dividend" for regional development (Markusen and King 2003) are in danger of being swept aside by incoming capital. In the case of Liverpool much of this capital followed a traditional route into the port from the Irish Republic where rapid economic development had reduced opportunity for further investment. The primary expression of "capital" status was becoming dramatic real estate speculation driven by incoming capital.

In any case Peck (2005) struggles with the concept of a creative class as posited by Florida. He perceives a cargo-cult dimension to arguments that by reconfiguring a location a peripatetic creative class can be attracted. Peck suggest that the actual solutions are little different from those produced by established policies of physical improvement and that property values rise through the exploitation of local heritage, rather than other forms of activity seen as measures of success c.f. Liverpool. This paper has described the response to such changes by the indigenous creative actors within a conurbation with a reputation for artistic creativity.

A key part of that response was the electronic support for the campaign through a dedicated web-site. In the wider discussion of the problematic of current regional policies, the concept of "glocalization" describes both the balancing that has to be struck between global engagement and local adjustment by regions (Swyngedouw, 1997) and the adaptive strategies of multinationals (Morris 1991). Poster (1999) speculates how shift to electronic forms impacts on national identity, in terms of the ability of nation states to generate convincing national narratives and in terms of the self-image of individuals communicating in a "potentially spaceless" medium. Abbate and Miller and Slater (2000) on Estonia and Trinidad respectively, smaller island states (Little Holmes and Grieco, 2000). Scale is significant here in that smaller states or regions often achieve penetration and take up of the new technology faster and as a consequence, achieve a new understanding more easily.

O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) argue that differences between cultures, both professional and corporate, and the primary culture in which an organisation is embedded can be bridged in a "thirdspace". For them the the tendency towards a convergence determined by the primary culture is seen as an obstacle to cross-cultural working. Culture needs to be decomposed into issues related to the historical, geographical and institutional setting in which organisation and individual must operate. The business recipes and frameworks grounded in these differences offer a view of "culture" of more direct value to actors (see for example Marceau, 1992). As a result of its campaign the Picket venue now has a virtual mode with which to support and promote its physical presence in Liverpool and to develop a "thirdspace" in which to communicate with its wider constituency of distributed supporters.

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