FESTSPACE:

“Festivals, events and urban space: Problematics and Potentialities”

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FESTSPACE PROJECT CONTEXT: CONTESTED SPACES

Long tradition of hosting (cultural) festivals and events in urban public spaces

Festivals and events affect who uses public spaces and how they are used

Cities across Europe use festivals and events for economic development objectives, but also to encourage cultural engagement and social interaction

Festivals and events could facilitate development of more welcoming and diverse spaces, hosting exchanges between people from different cultural, ethnic, socio-economic and socio-demographic backgrounds

However, there is also a risk that festivals and events might exacerbate social and economic exclusion, allowing (and restricting) the celebration of certain identities
FESTIVALS, EVENTS AND PUBLIC SPACE (1)

Festivals and events create special atmospheres, animating public spaces that might previously have been ‘dead’ and making them more convivial and/or sociable.

Festivals and events can make public spaces more people-friendly and bring different parts of the population together for surprise encounters – strengthening social ties.

These include cultural festivals like Mela that celebrate the diversity of our populations, or civic events that acknowledge the importance of key times in our lives and recognise the value of collective celebration in public space.

Trends across the world towards ‘festivalisation’ and the ‘urbanisation of events’ reflect the value (economic and social) of festivals and events to urban areas.
FESTIVALS, EVENTS AND PUBLIC SPACE (2)

Associated with processes of privatisation, commercialisation, securitisation and ‘erosion’ of public space.

Criticised for their exclusivity, and exploitation in destination marketing endeavours.
PROJECT AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A: To explore how festivals and events affect the inclusivity of Europe’s urban public spaces

RQs:
1: What different types of festive public space exists across Europe and what lessons can we learn about inclusivity from these models?

2: How do festivals and events affect who uses outdoor and indoor urban public spaces and how they interact within them?

3: What are the enduring effects on inclusivity of festivals and events staged in public spaces?
FIVE EUROPEAN CITIES

Glasgow
Dublin
London
Barcelona
Gothenburg
FESTSPACE METHODS (1)

1. Mapping secondary data (RQ1)
2. Visual ethnographies (RQ2)
FESTSPACE METHODS (2)

3. In-depth interviews (RQ1 & 3)
Institutional and non-institutional actors responsible for: planning and delivering events; urban design functions and social policy.

4. Go-along interviews (RQ 2)
‘in situ’ go-along interviews with event participants involved in targeted festivals and events

5. Charrettes and salons (RQ 1 & 2)
Participatory planning sessions with key actors
ANALYSIS 1: RE-VITALISING URBAN PUBLIC SPACE?

Events and festivals as a means of revitalising ‘public space’ – what Smith (2016) calls ‘eventalisation’:
- Placement of ‘festivals of fun’ in central civic spaces (parks, city centres, squares)
- Attracting families, visitors, locals to share spontaneous space – generating ‘communitas’ and enhancing ‘celebrations of sociality’ (Chalip, 2006)
- ‘Public’ display of identity – whether local, national or globalised – bonding, linking and empowering social capital
- BUT they attract specific sorts of performer, as the event space created correlates with a pre-defined subject position that enacts ‘self-observation and self-regulation’ (Rose, 1999: 45) – embodied behavioural codes
- Investment follows these pseudo events in place of less spectacular ‘local’, ‘rooted’ and, some might argue, meaningful rituals
Disciplinary techniques now found in ‘fields of play’ (Danaher et al, 2000)
- Festivals and events (esp commercial ones) manufacture and accentuate drama and spectacle BUT within a predominantly ‘disciplined set of spatial practices’ (Frew & McGillivray, 2008: 181)
- Which correspond to contemporary restructuring of urban public space – from sites of production to consumption

Audience is objectified, normalised and spatially located, ‘policing consumption’ (Koskela, 2000: 245)
- This reflects the idea of ‘perceptual space’ (Lefebvre, 1991) – spaces which naturalise visibility, gating, branding…
- **Control** and **containment** the dominant discourse
ANALYSIS 3: CONSUMPTION SPACE

Events and festivals can create an example of consumption-biased spaces (Lowes, 2002)

- The civic (public) colonised by consumption logic and the privatisation of space
- Events represent a platform for corporate partners to dictate policy
- Cities’ promotional discourse reinforces shift from citizen to consumer as the focal point of policy – urban public spaces are symbolic spaces which are saleable
- YET, these public spaces hosted by local authorities accountable to citizens - who ‘owns’ these spaces? Who has the right to control and experience them and when?
SOME CONCLUSIONS

- Festivals and events can extend processes of commodification impacting on urban space, exploiting the embodied desire of consumers to project gregarious atmospheres to a captive media-saturated global audience.
- But, they also reveal how space is constantly being de- and re-territorialised in the interplay between the formal ‘corporate’ brand world and the collective social body.
- To meaningfully use festivals and events to generate ‘inclusive’ public spaces there needs to be greater recognition of:
  - Who uses public spaces and what for (and who doesn’t and why)
  - The ‘effect’ (over time) of drawing people into urban public spaces through festivals and events
  - The most ‘inclusive’ festival and event genres that minimise ‘threshold anxiety’ and encourage active social mixing and intercultural exchange
CRITICAL QUESTIONS?

1. What types/genre of festival or events are most likely to produce inclusive outcomes associated with encouraging greater diversity and social cohesion in urban areas?

2. To what extent do processes associated with commercialization and commodification work against inclusive agenda and why?

3. What impact do different political, economic, social and historical contexts have on the sorts of festivals and events hosted in Europe and the public spaces they use?

4. How can the most vulnerable or marginal communities inform and influence decision-making around the festivals and events they want to see in their environments, and using what public spaces?

5. As COVID-19 has affected the sustainability of the festivals and events sector, what is the future of gatherings in public space?