LSBU blog post

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**The UK City of Culture: from ‘left-behind cities’ to more inclusive culture-led development?**

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August 2021 witnessed a [record number of bids for the UK City of Culture](https://amp.theguardian.com/culture/2021/aug/20/record-20-places-bid-to-succeed-coventry-as-uk-city-of-culture). The twenty bidders that expressed their willingness to be the UK City of Culture 2025 included towns, cities, local areas and partnerships. In October 2021, [the long-listed candidates](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-city-of-culture-2025-longlist-revealed) were Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, Bradford, Cornwall, County Durham, Derby, Southampton, Stirling and Wrexham County Borough. Last year’s unprecedented number of bidders suggests that, despite the [huge uncertainties for the cultural sector](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/UCL_Role_of_the_Arts_during_COVID_13012022_0.pdf) and the mega-event industry [raised by COVID-19](https://www.lsbu.ac.uk/southbankthinktank/blogs/lss/2021/building-back-better-post-pandemic-opportunities-for-new-practices-in-the-live-music-industry), the interest in and [the value of large-scale cultural events are undiminished](https://www.ukri.org/blog/why-festivals-and-special-events-matter-now-more-than-ever/). Cultural mega events (as understood by Jones, 2020) such as the UK City of Culture are increasingly popular, in a moment of crisis of flagship mega-event schemes such as the Olympic Games due to the huge resources that they require and the extent of uncertainty that they entail (Di Vita and Wilson, 2020; Tommarchi, forthcoming).

The UK City of Culture initiative was envisioned in 2009 with the aim of allowing other British cities to benefit from the positive effects of event-led regeneration witnessed in the case of Glasgow European City of Culture 1990 and Liverpool European Capital of Culture 2008 (DCMS, 2009). The initiative embraced the idea that ‘left-behind cities’ could achieve ‘step changes’ through a flagship cultural event. Derry-Londonderry was the first UK City of Culture 2013, followed by Hull in 2017 and Coventry in 2021.

The narrative of City/Capital of Culture events as culture-led regeneration programmes to address deindustrialisation and economic decline should nonetheless be problematised, in the light of the diverse range of applicants, as well as of the broader issues that event programmes attempt to address. The [UK City of Culture 2025 application guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-city-of-culture-2025-full-guidance-for-long-listed-bidders/uk-city-of-culture-2025-full-application-guidance#what-do-we-mean-by-culture) stated that event programmes were expected “to be able to appeal to a wide range of audiences and to increase participation in cultural activities as well as contributing to economic growth, regeneration, community cohesion, health and wellbeing”.

The potential [county](https://durham.gov.uk/article/26903/County-Durham-finalises-its-bid-for-UK-City-of-Culture-2025-)/[regional](https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2022-02-04/acornwall-submits-bid-for-city-of-culture-to-become-first-rural-area-to-win) scale of the UK City of Culture appears to be gaining traction amongst bidders. Such a rescaling of a typically urban cultural festival would parallel a similar trend visible in the European Capital of Culture, where there have been experiments of regional mega-event programming and levelling of spatial inequalities in terms of access to culture (Essen for the Ruhr 2010, Marseille-Provence 2013, Leeuwarden-Friesland 2018, Matera Basilicata 2019 to name a few).

Previous UK Cities of Culture have displayed experiments in a range of aspects of culture-led urban policy. For example, Derry-Londonderry 2013 made use of cultural events to engage with peace and reconciliation. Hull 2017 linked culture with wellbeing, and attempted to reach isolated groups and individuals, in particular through a large-scale volunteering programme involving volunteers from across the city (Culture, Place and Policy Institute, 2018). Coventry 2021 engaged residents in the co-creation of cultural contents (Coventry UK City of Culture 2021, 2022). Aspects such as volunteering and cultural programmes in schools have become ordinary features of City of Culture events, in some cases continuing beyond the year of celebration.

Nevertheless, because of the very nature of these initiatives, broad participation in decision making is yet to be achieved. If it is true that the bidding process often entails unprecedented participation efforts and makes it possible to establish new partnerships locally and with national organisations, such bottom-up processes tend to give way to top-down, hierarchical approaches to planning and delivery. This is due to the nature of the UK City of Culture as a mega event, whose magnitude and visibility imply, for local authorities and event promoters, a certain ‘impossibility to fail’ (Tommarchi et al., 2018).

Can the UK City of Culture work as a platform for more inclusive culture-led development models beyond the rhetoric of urban regeneration? One must acknowledge that economic priorities still dominate the rationale for bidding, as well as the planning and delivery of these events. In addition, large-scale cultural events should not be perceived as a panacea to solve structural social issues. At best, they can be understood as catalysts for urban and socio-economic change, bearing in mind the risks of instrumental views of culture. Event promoters should ask themselves what can realistically be achieved through a cultural event, and they should not overpromise. Participation needs to be understood beyond audience development and engagement, by exploring co-creation and participation in decision making. Local organisations (cultural, grassroots, heritage organisations and resident collectives) need to be more involved in the planning and delivery of such large-scale events, in order to avoid the issues of lack of trust and disengagement that have been witnessed in certain Cities/Capitals of Culture. Similarly, local skills and capabilities need to be mobilised since the beginning and throughout the process, so that local expertise can benefit from the learning experience associated with the delivery of a large-scale cultural event. Finally, and most importantly, post-event strategies must be put in place from the very outset, and implemented with particular care in transition phases, beyond the rhetoric of legacy that permeates bids and programmes.

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