

# City/Culture Discourses: Evidence from the Competition to Select the European Capital of Culture 2008

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**ABSTRACT** *In the current era of globalization, manufacturing decline and place marketing, many cities have turned to culture as a favoured means of gaining competitive advantage. The European Capital of Culture (ECOC) programme has been a significant catalyst for culture-led regeneration. In 2008 the ECOC title will be held by a UK city, and in 2000 the UK government launched a major competition to decide the nomination. This article reports on a study of three of the cities that participated in the competition: Liverpool, Cardiff and Bristol. The main aim of the study was to explore how far the Capital of Culture process in the UK had led to fresh thinking on what culture can do for a city. The paper has three main sections. First, it gives a brief account of the background of the ECOC programme and briefly reviews evidence on the impacts of the programme to date. Second, it outlines the process that was used to decide the UK nomination. It then looks in more detail at the experience of the three case study cities, examining in particular the discourses of culture and the city that seem to be at work in their ECOC bids.*

## Introduction: Cities and Culture

In the UK, as in other parts of the world, the cultural sphere has been gaining a more central role in public policy over the last 10–15 years. Policy-makers at national, regional and local levels have become alert to the potential contribution that the arts and culture can make to economic development and job creation; to social inclusion and community building; and to a range of other public goals (Creative Industries Task Force, 1998; Smith, 1998; DCMS, 1999). The use of culture as an instrument for achieving wider social and economic goals is nowhere more apparent than in cities (Evans, 2001; Griffiths *et al.*, 2003). In the current era of globalization, manufacturing decline and place marketing, many cities have turned to culture as a favoured means of gaining competitive advantage. Across Europe, North America and elsewhere, cities have embarked on strategies to

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mobilize their cultural resources to help capture mobile investment, attract high spending visitors, strengthen regional identity, and foster local support for regeneration programmes.

The growing political salience of the cultural sphere seems to have been accompanied by, and in some ways has helped to generate, a good deal of conceptual confusion and terminological slippage. This can be seen by the way in which the notion of the arts has been displaced by the broader and more amorphous idea of the cultural sector; the cultural sector has in turn become the cultural industries; and the cultural industries have turned into the creative industries. Overblown notions about the role of cultural resources in fostering the “creative city” (Landry, 2000), and about the critical place of the “creative class” in the revival of urban economies (Florida, 2002), have also been absorbed rather uncritically into the rhetoric of urban policy-makers (Stevenson, 2004).

There are a number of aspects to the conceptual confusion that has come to characterize this field of policy and practice. One concerns the ever-expanding boundaries of the cultural sector. The Regional Cultural Data Framework (RCDF) published in 2002 by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) provides a telling illustration (DCMS, 2002). The RCDF was intended to be a tool for cultural agencies to collect information about cultural activities on a broadly common conceptual basis. The desire of its authors to avoid an unduly restrictive conception of the cultural sector was understandable. The outcome, however, has some decidedly odd features. Much of what is included in its analytical model of the cultural sector (for example the tourism industry and the manufacture of television sets) has only tenuous links with the creation and communication of meaning. Meanwhile, there are a number of other spheres of activity, such as religion and education, which by any standards play a major “cultural” role, but are not included. The inclusions and exclusions have, it would appear, more to do with the distribution of administrative portfolios between government departments than with a drive for intellectual rigour and critical thought.

Another aspect of the confusion has been the tendency, in the UK at least, to conflate culture and creativity. Artistic practices clearly involve creative moments, of considered innovation, the challenging of convention, the crossing of boundaries, the taking of risks. But there are many forms of cultural activity, such as mainstream film, television and popular music, that display only limited degrees of creativity in these senses. They are often largely formulaic in their manner of production, and an important part of their appeal to audiences is that they confirm, rather than challenge, dominant assumptions and identities. Cultural activities, then, are not necessarily particularly creative (Lipietz, 1999). At the same time, creativity does not only occur in the cultural sphere. Business, politics, science, technology and crime are all realms of social practice in which success depends, to a considerable extent, on the exercise of creativity and innovation, yet they are rarely grouped under the heading of the creative industries.

Putting culture at the service of wider economic and social goals has not only been a cause of conceptual muddle. It has also been a source of serious contention, with accusations that the “instrumentalization” of culture has had the effect of marginalizing or displacing local cultural distinctiveness, weakening the connections between cultural production and consumption, and damaging the long-term viability of cultural organizations. At the root of this contestation is the existence of sharply competing discourses of culture. Behind the claims about its wider social and economic benefits, there are radically different views of what culture can do for a city. The principal aim of the study that informs this article was to put these under the spotlight, and see how they might be changing.

In the European context, the significance of the connection between cities and culture has been taken up not just by local, regional and national levels of governance but also by the European Union (EU). The most visible initiative in this regard was the decision of the European Commission in 1985 to introduce its European City of Culture (ECOC) programme. The programme provided for the title of City of Culture to be awarded annually to an individual city, enabling it to act as a focus for artistic activity, and a showcase of cultural excellence and innovation. Following changes to the details of the programme in 1999, the procedure for making the selection was altered. Instead of the European Commission making the choice of city, each member state was assigned a year in which it could nominate one of its cities for the title. The UK was assigned the year 2008, and in September 2000 the UK government set out the terms of the competition it planned to hold to decide its nomination. The competition extended over more than 2 years, with 12 cities making bids. It culminated in June 2003 with the announcement that Liverpool was to be put forward as the UK nomination to be European Capital of Culture 2008.

The competition itself was a rigorous two-stage process, in which the contending cities had to address a series of searching questions about their plans, and the thinking behind them. As such it provides a valuable window on current ideas about what culture can do for cities. This article reports on an exploratory investigation of the UK bid process and of the ideas contained in the bids. The study was based on an analysis of bid documentation and interviews with key personnel. In the next section, a brief account is given of the Capital of Culture programme and the process that was used to decide the UK nomination. The article then looks in more detail at the experience of three of the cities that made it to the final stages of the process.

### **The European Capital of Culture Programme**

At the time of the launch of the ECOC programme in 1985, the main idea behind holding a major cultural festival in a nominated European city was that it would “help to bring the peoples of the member states closer together”. It would do this by drawing on the fact that Europe possesses “a culture which, in its historical emergence and contemporary development, is characterised by having both common elements and a richness born of diversity” (European Commission, 1985). The founding principles, then, were to do with the capacity of culture to act as a source of cohesion, and with the distinctive role which cities have played, and continue to play, as sites of cultural exchange and innovation.

The first city to receive the designation as ECOC was Athens, in 1985. Since then the title has moved between cities around the member states. For the first few years of the programme, the chosen cities were all recognized artistic and cultural centres: Florence in 1986, Amsterdam in 1987, Berlin in 1988 and Paris in 1989. While each of the cities differed somewhat in how they used the title, the focus in general was on portraying the fine arts, with relatively small budgets, limited planning, and little attention to long-term investment (Richards, 2000).

The watershed in thinking about the possibilities of the City of Culture title came in 1990, when Glasgow was given the designation. Glasgow differed from the earlier title-holders in a number of ways. In the first place, while undoubtedly a place of great cultural significance for Scotland, it was not an internationally recognized cultural centre. Rather, it was known as a gritty industrial city with severe social problems and an economy that

was undergoing a painful process of contraction and restructuring. Its nomination was supported by the UK government largely because of the city's plans to use the year as cultural capital as a means of promoting economic regeneration and image transformation. It also promised to draw funds from a wide range of private and public sources, which chimed precisely with the emerging orthodoxies of public–private partnership.

Glasgow's experience was widely seen as a major success, and has been a significant factor in encouraging other de-industrializing cities to try the cultural capital route to a more secure post-industrial future. Since 1990 many of the cities that have been awarded the city of culture title have been declining industrial centres without a major cultural reputation. They include Antwerp (1993), Rotterdam (2001) and Lille (2004). Forming an assessment of the impact of the cultural capital title on the designated cities is difficult because there has been only limited independent evaluation. However, attempts have been made, notably by Richards (2000) and Palmer (2004), to draw some conclusions from the available research.

The motivations and objectives of ECOC nomination have varied from city to city, with most cities citing multiple objectives (Palmer, 2004, p. 13). In general, however, the main concern of the host cities has been to gain the economic benefits associated with increased numbers of visitors, image enhancement, urban revitalization and expansion of the creative industries (Palmer, 2004, p. 18).

Some host cities, for example Glasgow and Antwerp, have been able to point to substantial increases in visitor numbers. In the case of Antwerp, visitor numbers in 1993 more than doubled from the previous year. But in other cases, such as Stockholm in 1998, the impact was far less marked, and in some cases (for example Dublin and Madrid) the number of overnight stays dropped in their year as cultural capital. Moreover, as Richards points out, even where visitor numbers did increase, the economic benefit of the cultural capital designation needs to be viewed cautiously, for three main reasons. In the first place, most of the increase was made up of day visitors, whose economic impacts are much lower than those of overnighters. Second, a large share of the increase can be attributed to factors only marginally related to the cultural capital event, such as the international sailing event that took place in Antwerp in 1993. Third, cities have not found it easy to maintain the higher visitor levels beyond the title year. The Glasgow experience shows the difficulty of sustaining a more elevated position in the hierarchy of urban tourism. In 1991, the level of overnight stays dropped by 20%, to a level substantially below that of the year before the cultural capital event. Although the city's image as a culturally important place remained higher than it had been, the number of people visiting cultural attractions declined each year from 1991 to 1995.

The indications are that the effect of the event on cultural visits was purely short term. Visitor numbers did not recover until 1996, when the new Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) was opened . . . (T)his underlines one of the weaknesses of such event-led strategies—the need for continual innovation of the product in order to generate repeat visits. (Richards, 2000, p. 175)

The reality, then, is that the established hierarchy of urban cultural destinations is strongly entrenched. It is a tall order to expect former industrial centres to compete, in a sustained way, with the huge stocks of real and symbolic cultural resources of Europe's long-standing cultural centres, such as London, Paris and Amsterdam.

If the economic benefits of the cultural capital title appear uncertain, the longer term cultural impacts are also open to doubt, though the intangible nature of the processes involved makes this even more tricky to pin down. For each of the ECOC programmes to date it is possible to point to a range of cultural gains, such as increased participation in cultural activity by young people, and the use of new and unusual places for projects and events. But in many cases the organizational and financial demands of mounting a programme of unprecedented scale and complexity have placed serious strains on the delicate web of relationships between the city's cultural institutions and the multiplicity of independent groups and artists that form the base of its cultural landscape.

The benefits to designated cities have therefore been decidedly mixed. In spite of this, the competition to win the title has become so intense that the European Commission was unable to decide between the candidates for the 2000 nomination, with the result that nine cities were named as joint cities of culture for that year. This may well have been a factor in the change in the selection procedures in 1999. Under the new rules, the designation has become "European Capital of Culture" and, with effect from the 2005 nomination, the cities are chosen by the member state designated for the year in question. The choices by Ireland for 2005 (Cork) and Greece for 2006 (Patras) were made without a large-scale competitive process. The choice of the UK's nominee for 2008 has involved the most rigorous, and fiercely contested, selection process to date.

Under the procedures announced by the UK government in 2000, 11 selection criteria were identified, and bids had to spell out how these were to be met. To structure the submissions 11 questions, based loosely on the criteria, were posed (see Table 1). By the closing date in March 2002 12 cities had made applications: Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Brighton and Hove, Canterbury, Cardiff, Inverness, Liverpool, Newcastle-Gateshead, Norwich and Oxford. To assess the bids an independent panel, under the chairmanship of Sir Jeremy Isaacs, was appointed. Following a review of the submissions and visits to the 12 cities a shortlist of six was announced. One of early favourites (Belfast) failed to make the shortlist, while one of the distant outsiders (Oxford) was included.

In a second stage of the decision-making process, the shortlisted cities were given until the end of March 2003 to update their original applications and respond to a series of detailed technical questions (DCMS, 2003). After a further round of visits by the panel and presentations by the bid teams, the panel's final recommendation was endorsed by the Prime Minister and the nomination was announced by the culture minister in June 2003. The hotly-tipped favourite, Newcastle-Gateshead, had lost out to Liverpool, from where televised scenes of jubilation were broadcast to the country at large. Meanwhile, the unsuccessful cities were left with difficult decisions about how far to proceed with their intensely debated and carefully crafted plans.

### **Organizing the Bids: Three Cities Compared**

In this section the process by which the bids were formulated in three of the cities that reached the final stage of the competition, Cardiff, Bristol and Liverpool, are briefly considered. The cities in question were chosen for investigation on the basis that they had significant differences in terms of their economic circumstances, their relationship to their wider regions, and the nature of the strategic drivers at work.

**Table 1.** Selection criteria and questions for candidates

Selection criteria	Questions for candidates
<p>The successful city will have:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clearly defined objectives for a year long programme, and the ability to deliver them</li> <li>2. The ability to create an event of excellence with maximum impact for all its residents and visitors</li> <li>3. A programme of events which will increase awareness of and participation in cultural opportunities, particularly amongst the young and within community groups, and contribute to the promotion of social inclusion</li> <li>4. A programme of events which presents opportunities for learning and development to individuals and communities</li> <li>5. The ability to ensure coordination and full partnership between stakeholders and investors</li> <li>6. The ability to display the city's cultural wealth within a European context and encourage other European states' participation</li> <li>7. The infrastructure to deliver the above, or a well developed plan to secure these</li> <li>8. The financial resources to deliver the above, or a well developed plan to secure these</li> <li>9. A well developed tourism strategy for the year, and the infrastructure to support it</li> <li>10. A well developed media strategy which will promote the Capital of Culture at home and abroad</li> <li>11. A programme of events which is sustainable both financially and in terms of projected attendance figures, and the ability to translate this into long lasting benefits, both cultural and economic</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your concept of "culture" for your city?</li> <li>2. How does this fit within a European context?</li> <li>3. What are your themes and objectives?</li> <li>4. What organizations will be involved?</li> <li>5. How will you ensure local commitment and participation, particularly amongst traditionally under-represented groups?</li> <li>6. How will you involve people from other parts of the UK, Europe and the wider world?</li> <li>7. What is the scale of your budget and how will resources be provided?</li> <li>8. What is the nature of the city's cultural, transport and tourist infrastructure and how would these be utilized or developed in the delivery of the programme?</li> <li>9. How will the event utilize the potential of the historic heritage, urban architecture and quality of life of the city?</li> <li>10. What innovative/imaginative means would you employ to increase dissemination of various events?</li> <li>11. What do you envisage as the long-term outcome of the event?</li> </ol>

### *Cardiff*

The idea of making the Cardiff bid came initially from the city's marketing body, The Cardiff Initiative, early in 2001. The rationale at that time was essentially a marketing one: participating in the competition for the nomination was seen as a useful method of raising the city's profile. There was little expectation that Cardiff would be the eventual winner. The city

council itself was not initially an active proponent of the bid. However, in response to arguments from various arts and cultural communities about the growing importance of culture to the city, the council leader became an increasingly strong advocate.

With the city council having effectively taken the tiller, an independent body, Cardiff 2008 Ltd, was set up to lead the bid. Reflecting the view that a Cardiff bid would have to have the support of Welsh institutions generally, and not just from the city, the board of the lead body was put together with representatives from key national stakeholders, including the Welsh Development Agency and the Sports Council for Wales. In the early months, much of the effort was given over to building a constituency of support among Welsh local authorities and the National Assembly. This, coupled with the prevailing marketing orientation of the lead body and the limited cultural sector expertise among the seconded staff, meant that the cultural content of the bid was being given insufficiently careful attention. In January 2002, Cardiff 2008 appointed a new management team, including a new chief executive with a background in the performing arts and international connections in the arts world. Although it had not been seen widely as a front-runner, Cardiff was named on the shortlist of six, giving the recently-installed team a further year to fine tune the bid and extend the network of support. By the time the second stage documentation was submitted, Cardiff had spent around £2.7 million on making its bid.

### *Bristol*

As in Cardiff, the city council in Bristol was also initially reluctant about entering the competition for the ECOC nomination. There were concerns among the leadership of the council about the anticipated cost of making a good quality bid, coupled with a lack of confidence about the likelihood of success. The lack of confidence was based on several factors. There was a realization that other cities would be able to make a much stronger case on economic and social regeneration grounds. There were widely acknowledged gaps in the city's cultural infrastructure. And there was a collective memory of less-than-happy experiences of dealing with national bodies over funding for cultural projects over the previous few years. The case for making a Bristol bid was taken up by the head of the city's main cultural development body, the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership (BCDP), a three-way partnership that had been set up in 1993 by the regional arts body (South West Arts), the city's chamber of commerce, and the city council (Bassett *et al.*, 2002; Griffiths *et al.*, 2003). The BCDP saw the ECOC bid as a means of keeping up the campaign for cultural development, and was able eventually to win over a hesitant city council and an initially sceptical local press.

The preparation of the bid was led by the BCDP, but under the name of a new entity, Bristol 2008. Its staffing was made up of the two existing members of staff of the BCDP augmented by a small number of secondments from the chamber of commerce, the city council, and an insurance company. The council also contributed some £500,000 towards the £2 million total cost of making the bid, but otherwise stayed in the sidelines, leaving it to the BCDP head to both coordinate the bid and front it.

### *Liverpool*

What distinguishes the bid process in Liverpool from the other two cities under consideration is the leading role played by the city council from the outset and, relatedly, the close

interconnection between the ECOC bid and other local strategies. More than any other UK city, Liverpool's post-war political history has been extremely turbulent. The 1980s in particular were marked by deep social and political divides within the city, as well as between the city's political leadership, the Conservative government and the national Labour Party. This did little to help the city either to address its trajectory of decline or to challenge the generally negative image which Liverpool and its citizens continue to hold in the national consciousness. In 1998 a new administration was elected to the city council, closely followed by the appointment of a new chief executive. The declared intention of the new council leadership was to make a break with the past and pursue a more strategic and integrated approach to the city's governance. To underline this commitment the council published a "strategic vision" which talked of turning Liverpool into a 'premier European city'. In the same vein, the council also took the lead in putting together a "strategic partnership" between key agencies in the city, the Liverpool Partnership Group.

Against that background, of an ambitious strategic vision for the city and a newly strengthened institutional capacity to bring it about, the opportunity to make an ECOC bid came at exactly the right time. With the Glasgow experience very much in mind, the city's political leadership recognized that it offered an ideal way of symbolizing the city's hoped-for transformation, and instilling confidence in the city's ability to achieve it. The council immediately threw its weight solidly behind the bid, making Liverpool the first city to declare that it would make an application. A new body, the Liverpool Culture Company, was set up to organize the bid, and Sir Bob Scott, a high profile figure who had led the two (failed) Olympic bids by Manchester, was appointed to head up the body. A concordat was also reached with Manchester, by which long-standing rivalries would be buried, leaving the path clear for Liverpool to present itself as the sole candidate for the north-west of England. Because of the city's access to European structural funds, it was possible for the bid to be staffed and resourced to a substantially higher level than that of the other contenders—a source of some bitterness in the bid teams of the rival cities. Perhaps more importantly, the leaderships of the Liverpool Culture Company, the city council and the strategic partnership group were almost identical. This made possible a high level of coordination and reinforcement between the ECOC bid and other key strategies, such as the (subsequently overturned) decision to build a "Fourth Grace" to complement the three iconic buildings on the city's pier head.

By the time the bids were submitted in March 2002, Liverpool was widely seen as one of the leading contenders to win the nomination, closely behind Newcastle-Gateshead. The Liverpool and the Newcastle-Gateshead bids had a number of significant features in common. In both there was a local leadership network that was firmly and visibly behind them. They were clearly embedded in wider strategic visions. They both had strong regional backing. And they were able to draw on the fierce civic loyalty of local populations that felt disregarded, disadvantaged and misunderstood by the country at large.

### **Making a Case: Discourses of Culture and the City**

The aim of this section is to review how the cities articulated a case for being selected as European Capital of Culture. What language did they use, and what ideas did they employ, about what culture can do for a city and what a city can do for culture? What discourses or understandings of culture and the city were put to work in the competition?

The review here is based primarily on an analysis of the written submissions made by the cities, and on a limited number of interviews with members of bid teams and other

interested parties. It is therefore necessary to enter a few qualifications in advance. As noted earlier, the bid teams were obliged to formulate their bids around a series of questions set by the UK government's culture department. These questions inevitably framed the arguments that were employed. They set out, or at least they strongly implied, a number of buttons that bids were expected to press. The ideas in the bids are therefore as much a product of the framework set by the DCMS as they are the result of the negotiations that occurred in the cities themselves. It also needs to be borne in mind that the submissions were the written applications addressed primarily to the DCMS and its panel. It is to be expected that there were significant differences of emphasis, tone and language when the case for a bid was being addressed to other (for example, local) audiences, and even to the panel itself in the face-to-face meetings that occurred. The written submissions nevertheless give an important insight into the case that the cities were making.

The discussion here focuses on three key aspects of the bids: their conception of what culture is; their claims about what is distinctive about their city; and their ideas about what culture can do. There are a number of other important elements in the bids (for example the themes and objectives of the proposed programmes, and the claims of the contenders about their capacity to deliver them) that are not considered here.

### *Conceptions of Culture*

It is notable that all three of the bids align themselves strongly with a wide and inclusive conception of culture. However, they articulate this in slightly different terms. The Cardiff bid (Cardiff 2008, 2002) declares that it rests on a "broad definition of culture", but makes no attempt to alight on a precise definition of the term. Instead it emphasizes the wide range of forms it can take: the voice; authorship; the visual world; heritage and museums; sport; food; the rural environment, gardens and parks; performance; enjoyment of the landscape and environment; and expression of faith. The bid also draws on the idea that culture is embedded in everyday life: in the words of the Welsh minister of culture cited in the introduction: "... our cultural life cannot be parcelled up separately from the rest of living. Rather it infuses everything" (p. 6).

The Liverpool bid (Liverpool Culture Company Limited, 2002) is similarly grounded in the idea that the city "takes a very broad view of the nature of culture, and is the richer for it" (p. 1). As for what this "nature" is, the bid document, like Cardiff's, is careful to avoid giving a static, reified definition. Instead, it focuses on how culture is interwoven in the texture of daily life and plays a part in the performance of a number of important social activities:

Culture records how Liverpool learns from the past, innovates and commemorates, deals with disaster and success, treats citizens and visitors, informs, educates and organises. Culture also enables Liverpool's citizens to express affiliation and identity, whether through mass support for Liverpool and Everton Football Clubs or through more intimate icons. (p. 1)

The Bristol bid (Bristol 2008, 2002) is distinctly less cautious about offering a definition of culture. The conception it sets out is strikingly all-encompassing:

For us culture is what we do and how we do it—as individuals, groups and collectively. Our culture is the values we hold: it is what we have in common and what sets

us apart . . . It is the ordinary and the extraordinary—the everyday encounter and the unique experience. (p. 13)

The definition goes on to itemize the variety of ways in which culture can be expressed:

It results in art, sport, architecture, science and technology, parks and gardens, hobbies and pastimes. It can be high culture, popular culture, sub-culture and emerging cultures. It can be commercial activity or subsidised. It can be the dialect we speak, the clothes we wear, the places we visit, the music we listen to, the fun we have, the games we play, our politics and faith. (p. 13)

A common thread in the bids, then, is that they all distance themselves quite explicitly from a traditional (exclusive or elitist) view of culture, as art works and artistic expression undertaken by specialist cultural producers and received by largely passive audiences who have learnt the codes necessary for their interpretation or enjoyment. In all of them, culture is something that resides in and grows out of the daily lives of communities; is expressed through a wide variety of (popular as well as high art) expressive forms; and performs a range of social functions besides those of enjoyment and recreation. There are, clearly, several benefits that city authorities can gain from setting out the conceptual terrain in this (expansive or inclusive) way. In drawing attention to the rootedness and relevance of culture in daily lives, it makes it easier to extend the base of popular support beyond the usual audiences for cultural events. It signals the potential connections with other (not obviously “cultural”) policy goals and programmes. And it prepares the ground for making a case for the cultural distinctiveness of the city making the bid.

### *Cultural Distinctiveness*

How, then, do the bids set about portraying the cultural distinctiveness of their city and its region? What narratives of their city do they articulate? In this regard, Liverpool’s story is probably the most sharply defined, and arguably the cleverest in terms of the way it turns potentially negative attributes into positive ones. The representation set out in the bid is of a city that is marginalized, unorthodox, resilient and combative, and for this reason able to reflect and speak to the experiences of other stressed areas in Europe and the wider world:

Liverpool is not a chocolate-box city. It is unconventional, pioneering, unruly, unpredictable. It lives on the edge of Europe, the edge of America, and the edge of Africa, on the fault-lines of culture. (Liverpool Culture Company Limited, p. 1)

These features are linked in the bid firmly to the city’s history, as a port, as a centre for imperial trade and as the principle transit point in one of Europe’s main channels of migration:

The cultural map of Liverpool is grounded in the experiences of traditionally under-represented groups and individuals. As a port, it acted as a magnet for social migration, as a focus for the slave trade and as a place of settlement for different communities . . . In the late 20th century, the city had to draw on its enormous

capacity for resilience and re-invention to deal with harsh economic change . . . This has been a response which is distinctively Liverpoolian—mining those qualities which can be detected in the accent—combative, comic, determined and laced with a healthy cynicism. (p. 1)

The city's history, the bid document argues, has not only left it with an unrivalled infrastructure of cultural institutions: Georgian buildings, museums and performance spaces. It has also given it a cultural identity that is "both local and international—The World in One City" (p. 1). The cultural attributes that the city has acquired make it possible for Liverpool to act as a "microcosm for Europe". Europe faces "challenges from many directions" (p. 2): declining industrial and rural economies; unemployment; the impact of new technologies; coping with a mix of cultural identities, especially those resulting from the admission of new member states. Liverpool, it is suggested, "mirrors these aspirations, challenges and concerns to a remarkable extent" (p. 2). The distinctive cultural resources it has developed over a very long period to cope with the pressures of economic decline, long range population movement and the mixing of cultures make the city an "excellent role model" for today's Europe—and thus perfectly fitted for the role as European Capital of Culture.

The city narrative underpinning the Cardiff bid is less sharply defined than Liverpool's, partly because of its status as a bid for the whole of Wales as well as for the city, and partly because Cardiff has been far less subject to the (negative) stereotyping to which Liverpool has had to respond. Like Liverpool, it makes much of the "quintessentially international" orientation of Cardiff and Wales. However, this is anchored as much in the city's Celtic heritage as in its history as a port:

Cardiff's Celtic roots go back to a time when nation states did not exist and culture did not recognise borders . . . The de-centralised structures of our past give us the template for the future—a future where Cardiff will energise the internal cultural networks of Wales and engage them in the cultural networks of Europe. (Cardiff 2008, 2002, p. 8)

The Cardiff submission also emphasizes the city's multi-cultural character. Again, this is a theme that is articulated through the metaphor of "webs" and "networks" that pervades the bid document:

Cardiff is a web of transactions and interactions. Its open, networked structure means it is essentially egalitarian. Our communities in Cardiff are extremely diverse—Cardiff is one of the oldest multicultural societies in the UK and our structures allow ease of access . . . the Cardiff docklands offered the world a lesson in the possibilities of multicultural harmony. (p. 8)

In a similar fashion, the bid also draws attention to Cardiff's experience in handling the interplay of cultural identities at different spatial scales. It is "an integral part of the UK culture and shares its cultural values" (p. 8), but it is also the cultural heart of a region that has its own national identity:

It is forging a dynamic relationship between the city and its region, the Capital and its Nation. This is a model that is going to be increasingly needed in an enlarged

Europe. Cities will need to represent their culturally distinct regions and at the same time work with each other across boundaries. (p. 8)

The most prominent narrative themes in the bid, however, are those of youth and creativity. While acknowledging the importance of its roots in an ancient Celtic culture, Cardiff is represented above all as being “a young city and a youthful capital” (p. 7). Several different aspects of the city’s youthfulness are picked up: the comparatively recent awarding of city status (in 1905); its recent designation as the capital of Wales (in 1955); and the high proportion of young people in the population. This youthfulness is important culturally, it is suggested, because it gives Cardiff “a fresh approach to the way culture and the city work”.

Untrammelled by historic institutions and conceptions of culture, it is characterised by a youthful spirit of energy and inquiry . . . It is alive to new ideas and fresh approaches and welcomes young creative people who want to enjoy the “Hwyl”—the spirit of Wales and Cardiff. (p. 8)

The city’s energy and creative drive is shown, it is argued, by its growing importance as a centre for the creative industries, notably in television, film, new media and music. The creative industries have experienced an “explosion of activity” (p. 14) and account for more than 8000 jobs in the city. It is “these creative people and their work” that are “at the heart of the city’s commitment to 2008” (p. 14).

The representation of Bristol in its ECOC 2008 bid is less sharply defined than either Cardiff’s or Liverpool’s. Although Bristol’s bid document is arguably the most imaginatively presented of those under consideration, the authors seem to have struggled in their attempt to articulate a distinctive identity, or personality, for the city. Indeed, one of the central themes is the city’s paradoxical character—the ambiguity of its real nature:

It is a city of paradoxes: parochial and international; conservative and radical; maverick and traditional; old and modern; laid-back and ambitious; independent and collaborative; comfortable and restless. (Bristol 2008, 2002, p. 13)

It is possible to suggest a number of factors that lie behind the difficulty in articulating a clearer cultural personality. As the bid document notes, Bristol is at the core of a prosperous city region offering a “high quality of life for most residents and visitors” (p. 17). As such, it is not able to call on the kind of fierce civic pride that tends to grow out of social and economic adversity. Likewise, Bristol has not had to contend with the harsh stereotyping that Liverpool has experienced. It also sits on the edge of a large, predominantly rural, region that is too diverse to have a strong sense of regional identity or to have agreed on a single undisputed “regional capital”.

Much of the city narrative presented in the document alludes to general qualities that any candidate for capital of culture would insist on claiming. It has “always been an international city” (p. 14), and is now a “point of focus for connections between the local and the global” (p. 23). It is a “cosmopolitan city” and a “home for alternative lifestyles” (p. 13). It is a “multicultural city” (p. 15), with people “from 40 ethnic backgrounds speaking over 70 languages” (p. 49), albeit one with a “shameful” (p. 18) history of involvement in slavery, with which it is now beginning to come to terms. It is a “young city” with a “can-do attitude” (p. 33), and a “regional centre of cultural excellence” (p. 16).

The bid document's effort to articulate a distinctive cultural identity for the city revolves mainly around two key narrative themes: partnership and participation, and innovation and discovery. Bristol is represented as a "friendly city of villages where people work together" (p. 13). It is this spirit of participation and working together that has enabled it to initiate a "new style of civic leadership, based on partnership and the value of independence of thought" (p. 23). Bristol is also described as a "radical and creative city of pioneers and explorers with a tradition of experimentation, innovation and discovery" (p. 13). Its "unparalleled record of innovators and invention" (p. 25) is said to be evident in the accomplishments of Cabot (in fact from Genoa) in the fifteenth century and Brunel (in fact from London) in the nineteenth, as well as in the city's more recent achievements in the fields of aerospace, natural history and animation.

### *What Culture Can Do*

What, then, do the ECOC 2008 bids have to say about the contribution that culture can make to the life and success of a city? Perhaps the most notable feature of the bids in this regard is the emphasis they all place on the relationship between culture and social cohesion. Each of them draws attention to the economic benefits that culture can bring to a city. Significantly, it is the economic importance of the cultural and creative industries that is played up, rather than that of tourism and visitors. The language of economic impact is therefore far from absent in the bid documents, and is likely to have been even more prominent when the bids were being presented to particular (political and business) audiences. But what is striking is that the language is overwhelmingly one of integration, of fostering "bonds" and "bridges" between people and communities. The Bristol bid talks of how cultural programmes can "help build the strong, dynamic and diverse communities of the future" (Bristol 2008, 2002, p. 29). Expanding on this idea, the document sums up the vision behind the bid in the following way:

Our aim is nothing short of using 2008 to create the Bristol of the future . . . We make the commitment to create a city where all are more aware of where they have come from and their role in Europe; where there is greater understanding of the role and potential of cultural activity; where communities and the people in them are strong and confident. (p. 133)

The other bids are no less emphatic about the capacity of culture to foster new, more inclusive, identities; to generate stronger bonds of mutual understanding and respect between people; and to act as a catalyst for "social progress" in general. While not necessarily referring directly to the concept, the underlying framework of understanding is principally about social capital, why it is important and how it can be fostered. This evidence from the ECOC 2008 process therefore seems to suggest that official discourses of culture and the city, in the UK at least, have moved on from the unrelenting economic instrumentalism of the 1980s and 1990s. The role of culture, it would appear, is being framed in different, more socially-directed, ways.

On closer analysis, however, such an interpretation needs to be treated with caution. One reason for caution concerns the method by which the evidence presented here has been obtained. As indicated earlier, it derives largely from a textual analysis of official bid documentation, produced within a framework of bid evaluation set by the DCMS. According to

this framework, cities had to show how their programmes would “increase awareness of and participation in cultural opportunities, particularly amongst the young and community groups”, “contribute to the promotion of social inclusion”, present “opportunities for learning and development to individuals and communities”, and “ensure coordination and full partnership between stakeholders and investors”. It is not surprising therefore to find that this language, of partnership, participation and inclusion, is foregrounded in the bid documents. This does not mean, however, that other frames of reference, emphasizing tourism revenues, job creation, inward investment, place marketing and other “economic” goals, were not being used to shape and justify the bids, to other audiences in other settings.

This leads to a further reason for caution in how the evidence should be interpreted. This concerns how “social” and “economic” themes interact with one another in contemporary policy discourse. At one level these might seem to be in tension, if not opposition: one focusing on (the quality of) the social relations between people; the other on (the quantity of) material gains that can be achieved. But, as Stevenson (2004) has argued in her discussion of current notions of cultural planning, the rhetoric of social inclusion is not necessarily at odds with a liberal economic development agenda.

Citing the work of Greenhalgh (1998), Stevenson argues that contemporary trends in cultural planning have been “significantly influenced by its origins within Labour-dominated councils in the United Kingdom and the emerging Third Way schema of the British Labour Party” (Stevenson, 2004, p. 125). This influence has had an international purchase because of the operation of an extensive knowledge network (involving such organizations as Comedia, Demos and Partners for Livable Communities), drawing on a common armoury of concepts (such as “creative capital” and the “creative economy”) and making reference to a recurring portfolio of urban “success stories” (such as Glasgow and Dublin). A key feature of Third Way philosophy is the way in which it “melds economic development with a reconceptualization of civil society and citizenship” (Stevenson, 2004, p. 125). This melding has been made possible because the emphasis of the traditional Left on the goal of social justice has been displaced, in the revisionist Left viewpoint of the Third Way, by the quite different goal of social inclusion:

Where social justice is premised on a commitment to social equity, social inclusion is concerned with social order. The goal of social justice requires an interventionist state with a redistributive agenda, while social inclusion legitimates mutual obligation and “small” government. Also important with regard to cultural planning is that, in the language of the Third Way, the “social” of social inclusion has become synonymous with the economy to such an extent that participation in society (full citizenship) can only be achieved through participation in the economy. Developing creativity through cultural industry and infrastructure development thus are imagined as ways of nurturing participation in society and developing citizens. (Stevenson, 2004, p. 126)

That the prevailing rhetoric of the ECOC bid documents is deeply infused with the language of social inclusion and social capital can be taken as evidence that official discourses of culture and the city have, in some ways, become more sophisticated. They are capable now of weaving together a broader array of thematic strands. It does not necessarily mean that the earlier logic of narrow economic instrumentalism has now given way to a contrasting “social” logic. Nor does it mean that these new discourses are not open to challenge.

## Concluding Comments

During the course of the ECOC competition, the bid process itself came under heavy fire from a number of cultural commentators for having set up an unhealthy clash between cultural values and bureaucratic principles. Their argument was that the “box ticking” needed to get through the bureaucratic hoops set up by the DCMS was preventing cities from differentiating themselves from each other, and squeezing out creativity. In the words of *The Guardian’s* design critic Jonathan Glancey:

The six British contenders . . . are very different. Yet, because of the rules of engagement, they are doing their best to appear indistinguishable from one another . . . This is not merely the stuff of political correctness and potty blue-sky-thinking, it will also rein in individualism and artistic creativity. What has culture got to do with ticking boxes? (Glancey, 2003)

The analysis here does not entirely support that view. It is true that there are similarities between the cities in terms of the organizational vehicles created to make the bids. There are also strong similarities between the bids in terms of what they say culture is, and what they say about the benefits it can bring. A shared underlying discourse about culture and the city seems to be at work. In its emphasis on social cohesion and integration, it is a discourse that is deeply consonant with what several commentators have described as the shift in UK urban policy under New Labour from “hard” (economic) to seemingly “soft” (social) goals (Tiesdell & Allmendinger, 2001; Kearns, 2003).

The fact that such similarities can be observed, however, does not necessarily mean that they can be attributed to the bureaucratic nature of the bid process. Leading participants in the bids have expressed various criticisms about the process: that the second stage was unnecessary; that the panel contained too many journalists and too few people from a design background; that the panel judged the cities rather than the technical merits of the bids. But it seems to be a matter of common agreement among them that, far from being a dry and uninspired box ticking exercise, the process was generally highly productive in provoking a wider recognition (if not a deeper questioning) of the part that culture can play in the life of cities. In each city a range of imaginative projects were undertaken during the formulation of the bid, to encourage participation and generate ideas, that would not otherwise have occurred. Even in the losing cities there is talk about a “momentum” around culture built up during the bid that participants are anxious to keep going. Different, and less bureaucratic, “terms of engagement” may not in themselves have produced more “creative” outcomes.

We have also seen that, far from the cultural differences between cities being submerged by the demands of the competition, cities were in fact able to articulate substantially different cultural “personalities”—some more successfully than others. In addition, while the vehicles created in the three cities to organize the bids seem on the surface to be remarkably similar, their relationships to wider political structures were quite different. Some bids appeared to be closely integrated with other local and regional strategies, while others were much more disconnected.

The idea that the ECOC 2008 competition has served only to generate bland uniformity and mindless bureaucracy is, therefore, hard to sustain. There do nevertheless remain important questions about the new discourses of culture and the city that have been

emerging. That the narrow economic instrumentalism of the last decade has lost its place as the master discourse will be welcomed by many. But the emerging discourses, while in some respects more sophisticated, are hardly more challenging to established interests. There is little sign, in any of the bids, of culture being viewed as a medium for collective emancipation; of culture as a field of struggle and resistance; of culture as a source of oppositional identities; of a more fundamental politics of culture. This, perhaps, is what we need to focus on next.

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