



UK CITY OF CULTURE

Culture is like the sum of special knowledge that accumulates in any large united family and is the common property of all its members.
Aldous Huxley

There are as many quotes as there are opinions as there are commentators as there are people when it comes to the interpretation of that single word “culture”. But Huxley’s is one of my favourites.

It not only chimes with the European Union short form definition I found buried away within all the Directives surrounding the Capital of Culture programme - “Culture can be defined as arts, literature and shared lifestyle” - but Huxley’s quote also brings with it the concept of family which, in turn, brings in the capacity for disagreement! For one of the overriding principles of the City of Culture programme must be to celebrate not just the shared lifestyles but the diverse interpretations of arts and literature which make up the mosaic that is the UK.

Liverpool, now being regarded as the most successful European Capital of Culture ever, but I would say that wouldn’t I, was almost genetically engineered to fulfill the role. It’s a city well known for both familial discord but common purpose. Traits that brought it both to the edge of disaster but to the pinnacle of success.

The statistics surrounding the outputs and outcomes are included elsewhere and as impressive as they are the two key measures are the almost 8:1 return on public investment and the improved confidence of its people. The latter being any city’s most valuable raw material.

For every pound spent there appears to have been a measureable eight fold impact on the local economy. The confidence of the people has improved not just because it had a fantastic year long festival of world class cultural events, but because they realised that great things could be done in their city. That great things had been done in their city and that great things could be done again in their city. And they could do them.

*No culture can live, if it attempts
to be exclusive.*
Mahatma Gandhi

Yet, there was something else. It was done the way they wanted it done. Other's were invited to the party but it was very clearly a family affair. Liverpool may have been the UK's host city for the EU award, but Liverpool took what was nothing more than a badge of authority and made it its own.

That is how the UK City of Culture of programme should inspire. Instilling a sense of ambition and ownership, while sending out a clear but simple message that wherever the "badge of authority" is awarded, the people there are part of the UK cultural mosaic but that they also have their own distinct culture to promote. Perhaps rediscover. Perhaps nurture. Yet, whatever the aim, like Liverpool, the badge of authority is their opportunity to make a real step change.

Whatever that is will be left to potential bidders to define, but will form part of the award criteria. It will also be a valuable asset in its own right because although the ultimate accolade, with its subsequent media exposure, will prove extremely valuable, the European programme has also demonstrated that the process of bidding, in terms of auditing assets and building cultural networks, is itself a very positive outcome.

It will be those networks that will deliver in the future. It will be those networks that will discover, like they did in a post-industrial Northern port city in 2008, that great things can be achieved individually, but even greater things can be delivered collaboratively.

Like all family's, often everyone appreciates this, but they too often need a birth, death or a "great Scouse wedding" to bring them together and realise it. All that is needed is a platform. That is what the UK City of Culture programme will provide. Every four years. With its subsequent media promotion it will be a prize to be coveted. A prize worth competing over. A prize to be proud of.

Or even, a prize of which to be proud? There's cultural pluralism for you. Which is exactly how we'll find our talent for a truly more creative UK.

Phil Redmond
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