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Cian O'Callaghan ^a

^a National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, Iontas
Building, NUI Maynooth, Maynooth Co. Kildare, Ireland

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Urban anxieties and creative tensions in the European Capital of Culture 2005: ‘It couldn’t just be about Cork, like’

Cian O’Callaghan*

*National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, Iontas Building, NUI Maynooth,
Maynooth Co. Kildare, Ireland*

Since its inception, and particularly since Glasgow hosted the event in 1990, the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) has increasingly come to be viewed by host cities as a tool to regenerate, rebrand and reposition themselves in cultural and economic terms. In recent years this has resulted in a predictable set of conflicts over cultural ownership, social inclusion and economics/arts dichotomies. In this paper, the author argues that these problems lie at the core of the ECOC itself, in that it has multiple objectives which are not mutually reinforcing and often contradictory. Based on primary research undertaken in Cork between 2005 and 2008, this paper explores how the policy framework of the event created dissonances within the cultural sector. It then uses the ambivalent outcomes of Cork 2005 as a starting point to address some of the ways in which the ECOC could be mobilised as a cultural policy designed to encourage creative dialogue through dissent.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture; cultural policy; urban regeneration; Ireland; Cork city

Introduction

In October 2004, in the run-up to its year as European Capital of Culture (ECOC) in 2005, Dr Franco Bianchini gave a lecture in Cork city, Ireland on ‘globalisation, the festival, culture and the city’. The talk was part of the Creating a Cultural City series involving prominent figures in urban planning and cultural policy, and organised by Cork City Council (CCC) Arts Office. This was an attempt by CCC to grapple with questions of how to manage and coordinate the arts as part of a culture-led regeneration approach. These questions had become increasingly contentious as the Cork 2005 event approached. During the lecture one of the arts practitioners present launched into an ‘impromptu’ protest of what he saw as Cork 2005’s top-down inscription of culture, lack of effective consultation, and vast amounts of money wasted on bureaucracy. The tirade lasted a few minutes, as Dr Bianchini was left awkwardly lingering at the podium, possibly wondering if he should answer this ‘question’, before someone from the Arts Office stepped in to diffuse the situation.

This scene was indicative of tensions and anxieties which characterised the Cork 2005 event as a whole. For CCC these lectures offered a way of exploring the city’s position within wider artistic and cultural networks. This theme of ‘art on the periphery’ (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007) would be a major component of the ECOC year. For others, it was a further sign that their art and their

*Email: cian.ocallaghan@nuim.ie

idea of culture had become increasingly peripheral to the 'official' vision reflected in the Cork 2005 programme.

Since its inception, and particularly since Glasgow hosted the event in 1990, the ECOC has increasingly come to be viewed by host cities as a tool to regenerate, rebrand and reposition themselves in cultural and economic terms. As Bayliss (2007, p. 889) suggests, '... the use of culture as a driver for urban economic growth is now an established feature of the policy agenda'. The ECOC has evolved in parallel with these trends, and host cities have been increasingly criticised for failing to enable local cultural ownership, overcome real social divides, and create lasting cultural legacies (Boyle and Hughes 1991, Paddison 1993, Richards 2000, Garcia 2005, Griffiths 2006, Herrero *et al.* 2006, Sacco and Blessi 2006). Indeed, as Palmer (2004, p. 46) suggests in his study of ECOC, most host cities mobilise the event as part of a broader strategy of urban-economic development, and organisers struggled '... to balance the demands of international arts programming and local cultural development'. Thus, the contestations described here were not unique to Cork. Williams (2004, p. 3) describes the post-industrial city as 'anxious', suggesting that it '... exists in tension with these other kinds of taste, and with the other attitudes to the urban that underpin it'. The ECOC encapsulates this perspective quite succinctly, in that the staging of the event tends to produce a space in which tensions are brought to the fore.

Two months after Bianchini's lecture, the Where's Me Culture? group (WMC?) was established as a vehicle to present an 'alternative' vision of Cork as the cultural capital. To generalise, the event divided the city's arts practitioners between those who saw it as an opportunity for Cork to stage an international arts event, and those who saw it as an opportunity to stage Cork's culture for an international audience. These two versions of the cultural city sit in a sometimes uncomfortable unison, simultaneously enabled and disabled by the ECOC event.

In this paper, I argue that these problems lie at the core of the ECOC itself. The ECOC has come to be viewed as a multi-dimensional action that must incorporate economic and cultural objectives, must represent both local cultural heritage and European identities, and must stage an international arts event while simultaneously advancing the local cultural sector and social inclusion objectives. These multiple objectives are not mutually reinforcing and often contradictory. The ECOC has become alienated from its original, comparably modest, objectives, while, in its current format, the ECOC promises more than it can realistically deliver. Many critics have suggested how social objectives frequently lose out to economic goals. Few ECOC have managed to replicate the success of Glasgow in regeneration terms or culturally repositioning themselves in Europe. With the notable exceptions of Liverpool and Lille, few cities have achieved a high profile in the international media, sustained image enhancement and tourist attraction through hosting the event.

Based on primary research undertaken in Cork between 2005 and 2008, I argue in this paper that the set of mutually antagonistic discourses and policy objectives that the ECOC is constituted within create inevitable fragmentation, anxiety and dissonance in host cities. Focussing on a number of pivotal instances during the preparation and staging of the Cork 2005 event, I explore the ways in which the discourses underpinning it produced a series of contestations within the cultural sector, and how this led to the mobilisation of a counter-narrative. The paper uses the ambivalent outcomes of Cork 2005 as a starting point to address some of the ways in which the ECOC could be mobilised as a cultural policy designed to encourage debate and dissent in order to stimulate the arts through creative dialogue.

European cultural policy and the ECOC

Some of the key debates in cultural policy arenas in recent years have centred on the use of major events as tools to regenerate and rebrand cities (Gradach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007). Critics have questioned the extent to which such initiatives incorporate the participation of local communities and stimulate local cultural ownership (Bailey *et al.* 2004, Garcia 2004, Gibson and Stevenson 2004, Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004, Lee 2007), and also the degree to which the arts can remain autonomous when increasingly judged by economic measurements (Garnham 2005, Royseng 2008, Vuyk 2010). In combination with the burgeoning support for 'creativity' agendas (Landry 2000, Florida 2002), culture-led approaches to regeneration have contributed to a redefining of the arts away from associations with the 'public good' to arguments about its economic value. As Caust (2003, p. 61) suggests:

Over the past twenty years the need to justify government support for the arts has been dominated by the desire to prove that 'art' has other benefits, particularly economic ones. It has been used as an instrument to justify investment into cities (e.g. the Cultural Capitals of Europe), boost employment, encourage export, support innovation and demonstrate leadership. By taking this approach the arts sector has arguably been diminished, divided and confused. Equating the making of the art with the selling of art undermines the process of the doing.

Since its inception in 1985, the ECOC (originally European City of Culture) event has gone from a resolute attempt to represent the cultural diversity of the EU, to a multi-dimensional action, incorporating economic and developmental as well as cultural imperatives, which increasingly supports an EU political agenda of European integration and is hotly contested by member states. Originally the ECOC claimed 'to be not just a festival, but also a venue for exchange, debate, and reflection' (Sassatelli 2008, p. 234), whereas the designation currently 'allows cities to capitalise on cultural events to implement regeneration operations' (Balsas 2004, p. 397). For the EU, the ECOC in part operates as a tool for promoting European identity and supporting development strategies on a regional level (Sassatelli 2008). Cultural policy has become an area of increasing centrality for the EU. In 2007, the European Council adopted a resolution on a European Agenda for Culture (European Council 2007), in which its importance was recognised in terms of the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialog, as a catalyst for creativity (and an economic driver), and as a vital element of international relations. A recent report by the European Commission (2010, p. 2) suggests that:

Culture lies at the heart of the European project and is the anchor of which the European Union's 'unity in diversity' is founded. The combination of respect for cultural diversity and the ability to unite around shared values has guaranteed the peace, prosperity and solidarity the EU enjoys. In today's globalising world, culture can make a unique contribution to a European Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, promoting stability, mutual understanding and cooperation worldwide.

While such agendas have been formalised relatively recently, these broader principles have been in existence over a much longer period. The ECOC is symptomatic of the proposition of 'unity in diversity' and the evolution of the event reflects the EU's increasing engagement with cultural policy to support and transmit the project of integration.

In 1999, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union gave the ECOC the status of a Community Action, establishing a number of important changes to the policy structure of the event. It was recognised that the ECOC '... initiative is important both for strengthening local and regional identity and for fostering European integration' and that consequently the '... event calls for the creation of a rotational system of designation which will ensure that each Member State will have one of its cities chosen at regular intervals ... [A] predictable, consistent and transparent rotational system is best achieved through a single decision whereby the order in which Member States will hold the event is decided' (European Council 1999). This new rotation system would take effect from 2005 onwards, with Cork as the first city designated under this arrangement. 'Each city shall organise a programme of cultural events highlighting the city's own culture and cultural heritage as well as its place in the common cultural heritage, and involving people concerned with cultural activities from other European countries with a view to establishing lasting cooperation' (European Council 1999). In addition, designated cities were asked to take into account a list of twelve different possible elements including '... the organisation of activities designed to encourage artistic innovation, the contribution to the development of economic activity and the need to develop high-quality and innovative cultural tourism' (Palmer 2004, p. 39). This decision was superseded by an updated version in 2006, which further embedded the European added value dimension of the ECOC programme while also aiming to strengthen the benefit in terms of the 'long-term cultural and social development of the city' (European Council 2006). Also, slated in this decision is a longer period of preparation for designated cities (six years) and more rigorous selection and monitoring processes throughout.

Since Glasgow hosted the event in 1990, cities have increasingly used the ECOC as a regeneration tool. Garcia (2004, p. 106) argues that Glasgow was the first city that had to demonstrate that it 'deserved' the ECOC designation, in contrast to previous host cities that were already established cultural centres. Glasgow '... was the first city to win the title after an open national competition, the first to have more than three years to plan the event, the first to gather substantial public and private support to fund event-specific initiatives and the first to understand the potential of the ECOC as a catalyst for urban regeneration through culture' (Garcia 2005, p. 844). Despite suggestions that the long-term benefits the event had on the city were primarily cosmetic and did nothing to combat entrenched social problems (Boyle and Hughes 1991, Paddison 1993, Garcia 2005), Glasgow was '... a turning point for the ambitions of ECOC...[and almost] all cities that followed have taken a similar approach' (Palmer 2004, p. 43).

ECOC have struggled to balance 'local community needs with the interests of external visitors and media viewers/readers' (Garcia 2004, p. 115) and host cities have been widely criticised for placing regeneration and tourism ambitions over any redistributive potential of the event (Paddison 1993, Boyle 1997, Balsas 2004, Garcia 2005, O'Callaghan and Linehan 2007, O'Brien 2010). However, what often goes unacknowledged is the problem of assuming that such a balance *can be* reached through the current guise of the ECOC event. As a 'catch all' event, the ECOC promises more than it can realistically deliver on. Furthermore, the sets of objectives that are presupposed in the event – such as fostering cooperation between cultural operators and practitioners in the host member state and other member states, fostering the participation of citizens and forming part of a sustainable long-term approach to local

cultural development (European Council 2006) – are not readily reconcilable with each other, primarily in that they presuppose the importance of a European integration agenda at the local level.

The city of making: Cork 2005, a ‘typical’ ECOC

As was the case with many ECOC, in Cork the event was also used in accordance with plans to regenerate the city’s industrial waterfront and to script new urban identities (O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007). In rolling out the ECOC project, CCC certainly took inspiration from Dublin’s year as ECOC in 1991. In Dublin, the event was used as the stimulus to redevelop the area of Temple Bar as a ‘cultural quarter’, and to ‘rebrand’ Dublin as a cosmopolitan European city (Montgomery 1995, MacLaran and McGuirk 2001). This type of culture-led regeneration approach was further rolled out in the redevelopment of the city’s industrial docklands over the following decade (Moore 2008), an approach also mirrored in Cork (O’Callaghan 2007, O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007). While it is perhaps a stretch to speak comparatively about Cork and Glasgow as post-industrial port cities – indeed Cork’s docklands strategy (Cork City Council 2002) takes urban design inspiration more centrally from cities such as Hamburg – CCC were certainly cognisant of the strategies used by Glasgow to rebrand its image and provide a stimulus for regeneration through the ECOC event, and aimed to follow a similar trajectory:

[Cork 2005] comes at a moment of renewal and optimism. In recent years we have become a much more open society and a more open city. Encouraged by the City Manager, Joe Gavin, people have a sense of a new kind of city, a vibrant city, a Cork of the future. Cork 2005 will not only make the new city better known, but will create a legacy of knowledge; a model of what a city can be if we all work together. (Cork 2005, 2004, p. xvi)

The event was managed and implemented by an independent company, Cork 2005, which was established by CCC shortly after Cork’s designation in 2001. This group contained members of CCC and the arts and cultural sector, along with some private-sector representation. From the beginning of the bid process, the ECOC was viewed by CCC as a vehicle to transmit new images of Cork to a global audience that would advertise evolving regeneration objectives. CCC’s Arts Officer stated that, ‘... we always recognised that cities now all over the world are in competition with each other ... for inward investment ... for tourism ... And we recognised the value of [the ECOC] ... to all aspects of the city’ (Arts Officer, CCC, personal interview, 2005). The bid document, in part, highlighted that Cork would benefit from the ECOC designation in terms of improving its international image, strengthening its tourist markets and making it a more attractive place to live and work (Cork City Council 2001, p. 56). This agenda was subsequently reinforced through the implementation of a programme of capital projects valued at €196 million (Cork City Council 2004), involving infrastructural and public realm improvements, many of which (including the redesign of the city’s main street, St Patrick Street) were intended to contribute to and coincide with the ECOC year (Linehan 2005). According to City Manager, Joe Gavin, this was intended to form a ‘twin track’ approach whereby the event was used as an incentive to ‘fast track’ urban improvements (Quinn 2010, p. 252).

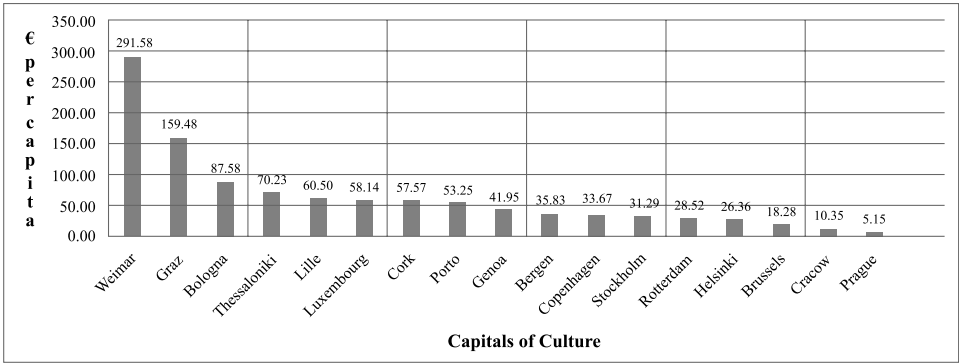


Figure 1. Spend per-capita of a selection of ECOC. Worked out from estimates of budgets reported by Palmer (2004) correlated with populations of large urban areas at the time of each city's staging of the ECOC event taken from Eurostat (2011).

The operating budgets of ECOC have been divergent, ranging from €10 million in the case of Krakow 2000 to €77.7 million in the case of Lille 2004 (see Palmer 2004). When compared to the per-capita spend of other ECOC, Cork's budget of €21 million is placed somewhere in the middle (Figure 1). While a range of other variables, such as inflation rates, currency exchange rates and differences in value for money between contexts, prevent this from being a representative comparative measure, it does suggest that in terms of its budget, Cork offers a relatively 'normal' example of an ECOC programme.

A total of 244 events/activities – divided into 'strands' that included: architectural, design and visual arts; festivals; film, media and sound; literature, conferences and publications; music; residences, research and processes; sport; theatre; dance, culture and health; and culture and community – were contained within the programme (Quinn 2010, p. 253) and staged in various venues. The ECOC was marketed through a culture-led regeneration approach that privileged a narrative of connectivity which situated Cork as a city hooked into global flows of culture, knowledge and capital. An evocative section of the bid document, written by (poet and subsequently one of two Assistant Directors of the event) Tom McCarthy presents Cork as a city of cosmopolitan culture by virtue of its port status, where common pursuits mingle with elevated artistic ideals, and where economic development and cultural expression have always gone hand-in-hand. Throughout this narrative of the city's storied commercial history, cultural pursuits were imagined as a constant force that propelled Cork from one juncture to the next, and thus, streamlined the ECOC with the docklands plans. One section, for example, tells the stories of a series of Cork artists and intellectuals (artists such as painter James Barry, satirist 'Father Prout' and writer Frank O'Connor) who were characterised as having an '... international viewpoint, [that] is typical of entire generations of Cork men and women' (Cork City Council 2001, p. 10). Cork's '... ability to connect, to hope, to dream, to trade its way back to prosperity ...' has allowed it to overcome various obstacles and that '[t]rade and art, commerce and poetry were intermingled in a single effort of will to restore local confidence' (Cork City Council 2001, p. 8).

In general, the discourses used by ECOC often try to streamline issues of 'local' culture with the image of the city as international or 'global'. In their bid document for the 2008 ECOC, for example, Liverpool described local identity as '... both

local and international – The World in One City’. Similarly, Bristol’s unsuccessful 2008 bid described ‘... 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’ (quoted in Griffiths 2006, p. 426).

While the Cork 2005 organisers were inherently aware of the opportunities presented through the event to make linkages between Cork and the wider European cultural sphere in terms of artists and organisations, and to enhance the city’s international profile, and were keen to accentuate these international aspects, the marketing of the event often portrayed it as emphasising a version of culture that was ‘rooted in its own community’ (Cork 2005, 2004, p. x). When the official programme of events (Cork 2005, 2004) was revealed in late 2004, the accompanying book contained a number of introductions and letters of support from prominent figures in politics and business in the region, which emphasised two major points. Firstly, that Cork 2005 was a key aspect of Cork’s regeneration policy and a symbol of transformations to come. And, secondly, that the ECOC was an accurate and authentic reflection of Cork culture. Firmly planting his feet on Cork’s imagined cultural ground, one commentator suggested that culture is ‘... a sing-song at two in the morning, it’s socialising, it’s black pudding, it’s sport and a sense of shared pride’, and something that is ‘constantly evolving’ (Cork 2005, 2004, pp. x–xii). Such cloying representations of place were squared with festival director John Kennedy’s assertion that the event was a celebration ‘... not only for ourselves in Cork, but for a changing Europe for Ireland’ (Cork 2005, 2005). On the one hand, Cork 2005 was something that ‘belonged’ to the local population, a representation and validation of local cultural practices, while on the other hand, it was an arts festival that needed to connect and be relevant to an international audience.

In general terms, the programme offered a wide range of events covering a variety of disciplines, focussing on local and collaborative ventures, and which could be narrated and understood as having ‘high art’, community and popular orientations. It was, nevertheless, subject to disputes over what was perceived to be included and excluded and how ‘accurately’ it portrayed the range of cultural activities in the city. While any programme of events is likely to produce disagreement among both cultural practitioners and the general public, ECOC tend to produce dissonance between the ‘official’ representation of the city’s cultural infrastructures and other representations that are variously narrated as more ‘authentic’ or representative of the locality. ECOC such as Glasgow (Boyle and Hughes 1991), Liverpool (Fitzpatrick 2009, Boland 2010) and Istanbul (Gunay 2010) have all been characterised in various ways by these disputes. Cork 2005 was affected by similar issues, which I argue were largely produced by the ‘catch-all’ discursive framework that ECOC are expected to operate within.

Art on the periphery: Cork 2005 and the ‘public call’

... It couldn’t just be a project about Cork, like. (Assistant Director Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007)

In April 2003, Cork 2005 issued a ‘public call’ for ideas and suggestions for the ECOC programme. From the point of view of the organisers, this was intended as a

way of making the event inclusive, removing the perception that '... culture is owned by a certain bourgeois sector or a certain group of leading artists of a certain generation', and stimulating debate about the nature of art and what it meant to the city. There were over 2000 ideas submitted, and in the end the public call accounted for 70% of the final programme (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007):

There was a lot of debate about it ... it was a phenomenal amount of work; we were saying no to 90% of ideas and pissing people off. But we thought it was important because we tried to foster a sense of cultural ownership so that somebody ... who wasn't a famous artist or a famous person but had an idea, could submit that and we would evaluate it ... if they had an idea that was worth delivering, we would look into it. (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007)

However, there was a disjuncture between what the public call meant from a programming perspective and how it was represented through the marketing literature. The organisers had specific thematic ideas about how they wanted to, and in some ways were required to, programme the event. In fact, '... there was ten criteria that projects had to satisfy', including being of 'artistically high value' and '... speak[ing] something about Cork to a European audience' (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007). In contrast, the theme offered for the public call was vague in ways that were characteristic of the benign discourses in which the event was promoted: '... to celebrate the renewal of our city centre environment, to rekindle our spirit of community, to explore our culture and our identity, and to demonstrate to all our vision of a confident 21st century city'. This cosy representation was upheld in the local media, at least initially, in the run up to the event. For instance, after part of the festival programme was revealed in March 2004, an article in local newspaper the *Irish Examiner* suggesting that if '... there is one overriding feature of the programme for Cork 2005 it is this: by the people, of the people and for the people', and that the committee had resisted '... the temptation to cobble together a series of events from a "Best of" selection of previous cities of culture' (Buckley 2004).

For festival organisers, Cork 2005 was predicated through a focus on 'high-quality' art and interrogating Cork's position within international cultural infrastructures. Some of the most high-profile events in the programme exhibited these themes. The Relocation theatre event, for example, brought four prominent European theatre companies to Cork in order to stage productions in various public spaces, Translations was an exchange whereby Irish and Eastern European poets translated each others' work into their respective languages, while Cork Caucus brought cultural practitioners to Cork to discuss art practice through talks and workshops (Cotter 2005). Most prominently, this was exhibited through the over-riding theme of 'art on the periphery', which was used to emphasise a desire to integrate Cork into international (and particularly European) cultural and creative networks. The ECOC programme reflected a desire to interrogate the idea of peripherality in terms of arts and culture and the inter-connections *between* Cork and Europe. This concerned Cork's ability to host an international arts spectacle and also interrogated the extent that artists living and working in Cork (and by extension places like Cork) could meaningfully participate within international assemblages:

[Artists should] be able to stay in a city like Cork and still have that international enrichment of themselves and of their work ... We make ourselves culturally significant by the

work of the artists and arts organisations we facilitate ... Because otherwise, you do become effectively a backwater in Europe, which I don't think we are, because the majority of European populations actually live in cities like Cork (Arts Officer, CCC, personal interview, 2005)

There was definitely a core intellectual idea about being on the periphery and what that means ... [Cork is supposedly] at the centre of the global world ... [But] People still feel Cork is small and insignificant ... so that they shouldn't have to achieve any sort of high cultural value, because they're somewhere that's not a capital city. So we tried to raise debates about what it meant to be a capital city through projects and talks and I suppose creative engagement. (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007)

While such constructions were not necessarily antagonistic, they played against the discourses that marketed the event, constructing it as rooted in its own community. For CCC, the ECOC itself offered a vehicle within which to stage new ideas about Cork. It invoked a series of urban projects in previous host cities that Cork would now be associated with and signalled its entry into the 'pantheon' of European 'cultural' cities. Yet, at the same time as it sought to produce new identities, it claimed to celebrate established ones.

Reds under the bed: image and brand of Cork 2005

The branding of the Cork 2005 event offers another example of the ways in which these anxieties were manifested. Cork's county colours are red and white. It is known as the 'Rebel County' due to its history as a stronghold for guerrilla fighters during the Irish war of independence and civil war. This 'rebel' status still resonates in the local psyche, and Corkonians are notorious for a sometimes partisan (though often tongue-in-cheek) sense of local pride. Probably the best known example of the mobilisation of such identities is the 'People's Republic of Cork' (PROC) brand, which plays on Cork's status as the 'Rebel County' to cultivate an image of exceptionality. Taking design inspiration from socialist propaganda, the humorous initiative proclaims Cork to be a 'people's republic', independent from the control of centralised government. In the run-up to Cork 2005 a regular column in the local paper *The Evening Echo* was characterised by opinions such as the one quoted as follows:

Cork city will never and should never be the capital of Ireland. It will be the capital of itself, beginning by being the Capital of Culture. The aim must be to put a plan in place for the gradual (or preferably instant) severance between the Irish state and County Cork with the aim of creating a people's republic where Cork people can finally govern themselves. (People's Republic of Cork 2004)

Through a popular website and discussion forum, and iconic t-shirts, PROC have created a brand that resonates with local and diasporic communities. PROC is characteristic of a cultural heritage in Cork that is protective and supportive of home-grown institutions and talent. This extends to a history of 'do it yourself' (DIY) activity in the local arts scene. Cork has a strong track record for putting on gigs and club nights, which nurture local songwriters, bands and DJs, and for a city of its size attracts more than its share of touring artists. Similarly, institutions such as theatre company Corcadorca, and now defunct music venues Sir Henry's, the Lobby Bar and the arthouse cinema The Kino, emerged out of a DIY philosophy that sought to produce events in

and for Cork rather than relying on a transferral of cultural products from Dublin. This all feeds into a sense of cultural separation and self-sufficiency in Cork, which people identify with in various ways. Such identities were recognised by the Cork 2005 organisation as too partisan to satisfy the multi-scalar and multi-stakeholder nature of the ECOC:

Everyone [involved in stakeholder workshops] was kind of keen to move away from the sort of red republic image of Cork ... there was a strong feeling, both nationally and in our team that that was what was separating Cork from ever establishing a truly national agenda. This whole insular thinking that can exist in Cork ... There is a strong Cork identity but that can be read nationally as a big chip on the shoulder ... We felt that Capital of Culture did not belong just to Cork, it was a national designation. So that was why there was a move away from the colour red, away from that whole branding as the People's Republic ... The image that we were trying to create was a national one, one of celebration (Assistant Director, Cork 2005, personal interview, 2007)

The programmers, therefore, eschewed Cork's existing brand elements in favour of a more neutral image, a stylised design of fireworks against a black sky (Figure 2). Aiello and Thurlow (2006) suggest that the EU tends to operate within a generic image system, which allows for 'intercultural exchange'. They view promotional images of ECOC within this semiotic system:

One of the most common visual motifs are firework images, depicted with varying degrees of abstraction, from photographic images of actual firework displays to the kind of stylised representation in Cork's publicity. An already cross-culturally available visual resource, fireworks also symbolically invoke a sense of celebration and perhaps persuasively hint at anticipated victory in the competition for European Capital of Culture status. What is more telling about this type of visual resource, however, is that it is both uncontroversial and again highly generic. These features are typical of visual design work undertaken within the institutional framework of the EU – quintessentially



Figure 2. Cork 2005 logo. Copyright Cork City Council. Used with permission.

exemplified in the design of the Euro banknotes, which depict widely recognisable European architectural styles without representing a specific or actual construction. (Aiello and Thurlow 2006, pp. 153–154)

While the negation of the more local brand elements may have kept all the stakeholders satisfied, it also served to further politicise these issues. Therefore, the key artistic themes of Cork 2005, which sought to construct the event in a relational way and as a debate about the place of art on the periphery, also became politicised and contested. This lack of alignment between the image and objectives became a stimulus for discontent, disengagement and ultimately the production of an alternative cultural agenda.

Where's me culture in the creative city?

I remember feeling very angry throughout 2005 feeling that Cork wasn't being represented ... the city of culture was supposed to be inclusive but only if [Cork 2005] said you are included. (WMC? member, 2006, personal interview)

I don't consider WMC? a grassroots organisation. I don't know what I consider it. I think it was a movement, that it was just a collection of people that were disgruntled let's say and felt not included and just wanted to be included. (WMC? founder, 2006, personal interview)

In the run up to and during the Cork 2005 year, issues of cultural identity and local ownership became highly politicised. The manifestations of these tensions were most readily expressed through the WMC? group that were established in late 2004 by three prominent individuals working within the arts and events promotion in Cork. Cork 2005 and WMC? mobilised selective representations of Cork's cultural sector. Their respective perspectives can be seen in their different approaches to opening the cultural year.

On January 8, Cork 2005's 'Awakening Ceremony' presented Cork to the world through an extravagant display of fireworks and pageantry staged on the River Lee. The same evening, WMC? opened the year with the 'Big Party', a hodgepodge cocktail of local music, comedy and art played to boisterous revellers freewheeling through the cavernous corridors of crowded club. Both events staged Cork as a cultural space but did so differently. The former projected outwards, imagining Cork as hooked into European networks, and demonstrated the city's institutional and cultural credentials through its ability to stage an international arts spectacle. The latter was more insular, a celebration of the 'recognition' of the importance of Cork's cultural heritage, practices and pursuits.

While the example of WMC? offers perhaps a more distilled counter-cultural narrative around the ECOC than those evident elsewhere, many of the group's concerns were those commonly associated with the event. According to the WMC? founders, the group's genesis was an attempt to create a space through which people's discontent with the ECOC event could be channelled into a productive creative outlet. It was not designed to produce a coherent programme of 'fringe' events that would act as a unified statement of opposition from the group. According to the WMC? 'manifesto' '... the responsibility for celebrating Cork as a cultural city is neither the sole preserve nor the sole responsibility of the Cork 2005 office. Cultural expression is the responsibility of all ... as a collective we wish to work alongside and not against Cork

2005, however, it is fair to say that individuals within WMC? are critical of Cork 2005 to varying degrees and for a variety of reasons' (Where's Me Culture? 2004). In the early stages of their formation, WMC? made strategic moves to foster a sense of local cultural ownership, through the organisation of a public meeting and the establishment of a website and Internet forum. This first meeting, although attended by a group of only around 70 people (McNamee 2004), was nevertheless a pivotal moment in terms of the culture year, in that it created a discursive and creative space in which events outside the official programme could be implicated within the ECOC. WMC? quickly garnered a considerable media profile, featuring in the Irish and UK print and television media:

... at the start it was really trying to encourage people just to get out and do stuff yourself, if you're not happy with the way it is [being done by Cork 2005]. Like we didn't want to be protesting, I certainly didn't. [We] basically tried to encourage people ... [to] take something from the meeting and go and do something That's what we said to people, we can help you, we can try to get you, through the website, to as many people as possible. (WMC? Founder 2006, personal interview)

While WMC? were not strictly 'oppositional' to Cork 2005, the way in which they constructed an identity and brand image was oppositional to how the official group constructed theirs (Figure 3). Their name was a play on the song title 'Where's me Jumper?', a hit for Cork band Sultans of Ping FC during the 1990s, and a reference perhaps primarily identifiable to a local audience. In contrast to Cork 2005, WMC? embraced the city's existing brand elements. They made prominent use of the colour red, PROC style socialist iconography and discourse. WMC? worked as a decidedly 'local' counterpoint to Cork 2005's more 'cosmopolitan' image. WMC? organised a number of events that epitomised this ethos. The most significant of these were the Big Party and Big Picnic events organised throughout the year. In addition, WMC? produced a magazine, and ran weekly 'Speaker's Corner', while various other groups and individuals used the website to organise and promote their own events.

The initial creative surge of WMC? dissipated over the following months. As WMC? became more visible, there were variant ideas within the group about its identity and purpose. The group later became somewhat characterised by disagreement and in-fighting, and only a small number of core people remained actively involved. The Cork 2005 Assistant Director, perhaps rightly, suggests that WMC? inevitably '... began to have the same problems as they were criticising us for'. The experience of WMC? reiterates the pitfalls associated with channelling the creative energies and cultural identities of disparate groups and individuals into a common framework (even one as loosely defined as WMC?). Such a trajectory – from the initial creative surge to a certain stagnation once group identity is established – supports Bey's (1985) observation that the creative potential of a group dissipates once it has been 'defined'. WMC? questioned the notion that it was the 'right' of any one group to mobilise a place-based representation of culture. In doing so, a series of creative engagements were produced within and through the collective that were based not around a consensus about cultural representation but rather dissonance from such a consensus. This sense that there is something organic, inexplicable and context specific about the nature of creativity is missed in the understanding of creativity emerging from Florida's (2002) analysis, which essentially sees it in terms of a business-oriented model of problem-solving (Markusen 2006, Scott 2006, O'Callaghan,



Figure 3. Where's Me Culture? Design by John Foley, Bite! Design. Used with permission.

2010). The notion that culture has economic value increasingly informs the EU's cultural policies. As a symptom of this policy framework, the ECOC is expected to produce a consensus around culture that links to and supports the economic development of the region.

While the Cork 2005 agenda questioned what constituted a cultural place, they did so in the context of an established political and discursive framework hinted at through the 'Creating a Cultural City' lecture series. In contrast, WMC? sought to question what culture meant to the individual through a DIY ethos encouraging praxis:

... what we were trying to question, *in* the question actually, in the play on the name of 'Where's Me Jumper' [was where is *my* culture]. But ultimately, that was the question. I think I answered it for myself, personally, in that I went and did things ... because ulti-

mately, that's what you should be asking: the question, where is my culture? What is my culture? (WMC? founder, 2006, personal interview)

While it is probably fair to suggest that the image produced by WMC? situated the collective most centrally within a certain cohort of the city's cultural sector, and therefore was perhaps more inclusive to certain groups, the space for engagement with the ECOC year provided by them was fundamentally 'open', in contrast to the carefully curated programme of Cork 2005. I do not wish to suggest here that WMC? mobilised an 'authentic' representation of Cork's cultural industries while Cork 2005 failed to do so, but rather to highlight that the subjective nature of cultural representation will inevitably produce dissonance as the residual of consensus, and moreover that this does not need to be construed as negative.

For their part, the attitude held by Cork 2005 towards WMC? was ambivalent. The official response was positive. For example, CCC's Arts Officer suggested:

... I actually think it would've been a loss if there wasn't a group like [WMC?]. I think that it would be a sign of very stagnant culture in the city if a group didn't take it upon themselves to criticise [Cork 2005]. (Arts Officer CCC, 2005, personal interview)

However, apart from acknowledging their existence, Cork 2005 engaged little in the line of a constructive dialogue with WMC? The emphasis on regional development objectives and on European integration as part of the ECOC event places a premium on putting forward a consensus on what the city 'means' culturally both in and of itself and in relationship to Europe. The messy image of culture expressed by divergent and competing representations does not fit with the perspective of culture as an economic driver of the region or as an expression of 'unity in diversity'. Yet, it is often within the context of such divergent meanings that culture becomes vibrant and interesting, the relationship between Cork 2005 and WMC? being a case in point. While the ECOC created a space in which such anxieties of cultural representation could come to the fore, the inability of the organisers to get beyond its politicised identity meant that the creative space afforded by such contestation was not utilised. This offers an example of how the structure of the ECOC can in fact stifle creative engagement, rather than encourage it.

After the party: the legacy of Cork 2005

... the ECOC constituted an undoubted boost for the cultural sector in Cork, although the boost was not as spectacular as the cultural actors studied had initially hoped. Cork City Council, which established Cork 2005 Ltd., remains a critical public funder of the arts in the city. (Quinn 2010, p. 261)

The legacies of the Cork 2005 event have been ambivalent. In the immediate aftermath of the ECOC year, the city saw a boost in numbers of visitors and tourist revenue and Cork 2005 was, by many accounts, deemed a success. In a statement on their website, coinciding with the completion of an economic assessment of the year (Maloney 2006), CCC proclaimed the ECOC '... an outstanding economic success and greatly exceeded what we might have reasonably expected. Our total revenue investment in Cork 2005 was €17m [not inclusive of private-sector sponsorship]. The extra €90m earned in 2005 was the immediate economic return but "Cork 2005" has

laid foundations for continuing benefits into the future ...' (Cork City Council 2007). The economic report showed a 38% increase in visitors to Cork during 2005 in comparison to figures for 2003, and suggested a 28% increase in direct revenue from visitors between 2003 and 2005 (Maloney 2006). Most pointedly, Cork was named by Lonely Planet as one of the top 10 cities to visit in 2010 (Lonely Planet 2009). In their estimate of the city's potential, they made particular reference to the ECOC event suggesting that:

The stock of the so-called 'Rebel County' has been on the rise even more since it was named the European Capital of Culture in 2005: modern glass-and-steel offices and apartment buildings adorn the banks of the River Lee; new galleries, arts festivals, bars and shops have added to the city's cache; and restaurants and local food producers have come into their own to make Cork a foodie paradise. (Lonely Planet 2009, p. 103)

However, critics have noted that such measurements often present a biased and unrealistic representation of the impact of the event, in that they can be short-term (Richards 2000) and can obscure the impact it has had on issues that elude quantitative measurement, such as alleviating social inequality and increasing access and participation in the arts (Bianchini 1990, 1999, Albet 2004, Richards and Wilson, 2004, Sacco and Blessi 2006). In the years following the event a number of important cultural venues in the city have been closed. In addition to a number of music venues, higher profile cultural institutions, such as the independently run art-house cinema The Kino and Opera 2005 (an organisation that received one of five legacy grants by Cork 2005), both shut down due to financial difficulties, while the historic Cork Opera House has had to scale back its operations and its future is uncertain. Quinn (2010) suggests that the long-term cultural legacies of the ECOC on Cork's cultural infrastructures have been limited. She describes Cork 2005 as attempting to adopt an 'event' (staging a cultural festival) and 'process' (using the ECOC to leverage more sustainable cultural gains) approach to hosting the ECOC, with neither approach being fully realised:

... the survey findings repeatedly showed participants criticising Cork 2005 Ltd., for inadequately shaping a creative vision for the Year and for failing to develop a coherent artistic framework to guide individual artistic contributions (from individuals to organisations). Survey respondents repeatedly spoke of operating within a context devoid of any overarching vision ... [and] having little sense that their work was contributing, in a planned way, to a bigger whole. The absence of vision was reiterated by members of Cork 2005 Ltd.'s programming team and Board of Directors during the course of key informant interviews. (Quinn 2010, p. 259)

This suggests that, even to those centrally involved, the event was a void of meaning, confused about its place within the city and uncertain about the vision of culture that it was promoting. Despite the bestowal of five 'legacy grants' (each worth 50,000) to four initiatives and one organisation launched during 2005, the fact that Cork 2005 Ltd. was disbanded in 2006 after providing groups with once-off funding meant that the potential for sustainable impacts were severely limited.

At the same time, other events in Cork testify to the continued resilience of grassroots cultural activity. An unsuccessful grassroots campaign to save The Kino cinema from closure in late 2009 began with online social networking activity, translated into a public meeting and, ultimately, a website and a trustee bank account through which

people could donate money, highlighted both the cultural significance of the venue and, in terms of its economic failure, the continued need for public arts funding. The Camden Palace initiative offers another example of grassroots organisation in the face of public sector funding cuts. Located in a large vacant building on the city quays, Camden Palace 'offers space and opportunities for artists and performers to participate in a dynamic working experience on a scale which has not been seen in Cork City to date. Part studio and rehearsal space, part collective project' (Camden Palace 2010). It facilitates arts projects, exhibitions, screens films and hosts Ceilis (Irish dances). The venture is not underwritten by any public funding but follows on from the participatory ethos exhibited by WMC? during 2005.

Thus, the long-term impacts of the ECOC on the city are not easily reconcilable within the aims and objectives of Cork 2005. The regeneration policies have clearly had some effect in repositioning Cork for international tourism. However, the extent to which this can be sustained is questionable. As Griffiths warns '... 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 or Amsterdam' (Griffiths 2006, p. 418). This is especially resonant at a time when cutbacks in public spending have forced the closure of arts venues and organisations. Despite the ambivalence of the outcomes of this culture-led regeneration approach, since 2005 CCC has increasingly seen the arts as an integral component of their urban and economic development strategies.

This is indicative of the general co-opting of the arts into a justification of itself on economic terms. As Caust (2003, p. 58) argues, '[t]here is a real danger that this approach will lead to the production of safe, consumer-oriented arts product which, in the end, may not be what the audience wants or needs'. Furthermore, in light of the current recession, arts practitioners may fail to justify their worth when limited to doing so in only economic terms.

Revaluating the ECOC as a cultural policy

Although ECOC have different experiences, they tend to be typified by some key similarities in terms of design, implementation and contestation (Palmer 2004). Within this framework the experience of Cork can be seen as 'typical' of the ECOC programme. The money it raised and the regenerative effects it created were modest, the lasting cultural impacts have been ambivalent, and efforts to mobilise city's cultural resources were left short despite attempts by both CCC and WMC?. Like most ECOC, it created dissonance between different versions of culture and different ways of representing place. In terms of the plethora of stated objectives, the event fell short. Nevertheless, it did create effects, which, while not as grandiose as those envisioned, have been significant for the city. Many of these effects were predetermined by the structures of the ECOC event, which presents a representation of culture based on consensus.

In a recent paper, Belfiore (2009) draws upon Frankfurt's seminal essay 'On Bullshit' to critique the discursive rationale underpinning UK cultural policy. In Frankfurt's view, bullshit differs from lying in its 'lack of connection to a concern with the truth ... [an] indifference to how things really are' (quoted in Belfiore 2009, p. 345). Belfiore sees this quality reflected in how politicians and practitioners construct arguments for the arts through the use of selective data and information to build a case

based on quantitative and economic terms, 'sidestepping the more complicated and potentially controversial matter of cultural value' (Belfiore 2009, p. 349). She cautions against the use of such strategies because they serve to further move debates on cultural value away from the realms of reality:

... philosophers and scholars have struggled to describe and understand the way that people respond to the arts uninterruptedly since the times of Plato. Any simple, straight-forward solution to this riddle ... bypassing or refusing to address such complexity, is likely to be – let us be honest – bullshit. (Belfiore 2009, p. 355)

The policy framework of the ECOC is similarly couched within the terrain of bullshit. While year after year ECOC struggle to balance the multiple demands placed on them and end up with less than incendiary outcomes, host cities continue to promise these same outcomes. In the majority of cases the ECOC will not culturally reposition cities in a major way, will not dramatically alter the demographic profile of cultural audiences and will not create a legacy of social inclusion. At this stage it must be obvious to ECOC that this range of objectives is untenable and that the discourses underpinning them have little to do with the reality of staging the event. Thus, the ECOC programme follows a trajectory that forces host cities to construct the event in parameters that rely on a selective mobilisation of the event's history and potential (essentially a romanticised version of Glasgow 1990). The policy framework of the ECOC should be relaxed in order to allow for a greater scope of interpretations of the event. This means moving away from the view of cultural and creativity as components that streamline with the economic development of cities and regions and the 'flattened' version of culture that this implies (O'Callaghan 2010).

The ECOC must be reinvigorated as a cultural policy if it is to remain in any way vital. Judging by the experience of Cork, the ECOC *can be* a potent tool for cultural policy. This potency lies not in its ability to 'represent' or 'promote' culture, but in the ways it draws out debates *about* culture. The ECOC can enable a creative space through which questions of culture, representation and place can be contested. It provides a framework for asking questions about what culture and the arts mean for communities and places. The aim should not be to answer these questions but to use this contested space to stimulate dialogue through creative responses; practice as an end in itself. While many ECOC claim to encourage debate, the politics of the event stops them from truly engaging in real creative dialogue. One of the original aims of the ECOC was as a forum for cultural discussion. When the meanings of the event are set in advance, discussion is disabled and we are left with resistance. In order for the ECOC to function as a dynamic cultural policy, it must openly embrace the praxis that comes out of contested meanings.

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