

## Grassroots festivals and place making

### *Introduction*

The papers in this special issue are another valuable contribution to the examination of festivals and events beyond their economic and business application and benefits. The issue further explores the close link festivals have with the communities that support and engage with them and further emphasize the value and importance of the places where they are delivered. This sense of place and community involvement is a key driver in critical event studies (Lamond and Platt, 2016). The role that events and festivals (from sporting mega-events to annual arts festivals) play in place branding has been well documented (Herstein and Berger, 2014; Lee and Arcodia, 2011; Derrett, 2004; Jago *et al.*, 2003). Further, the role of event-led policy in shaping urban regeneration strategy making has also received widespread attention (Foley *et al.*, 2012; Richards and Palmer, 2010; Smith, 2012). However, as Richards (2017) suggests, we are seeing a shift in the understanding of the value of events from a branding function to a more holistic placemaking function. Indeed, de Brito and Richards (2017) acknowledge the tensions between bottom-up placemaking process that originates in communities and, more top-down, state-led interventions using major events.

By extension, there remains a lack of attention paid to grassroots festivity as contributing to, or functioning as, placemaking. The role that festivals play in communities has predominantly been explored in relation to the impacts on the communities themselves. There has been a rise in studies related to the role of social capital in music festivals specifically (Wilks, 2011) and the involvement of communities in the planning and running of events (Clarke and Jepson, 2011; Jepson and Clarke, 2013, 2015). Indeed, Clarke and Jepson (2011, p. 8) comment that, “to be successful community festivals must ensure that the community is central to all cultural production processes and that the communities’ cultures are evident throughout the festival. The anthropological foundation of the study of festivity has always placed an emphasis on the importance of place and identities, and the need to further examine and critique to understand how places are shaped, through festivity, as liveable spaces in the twenty-first century or, conversely, used as acts of resistance against place-making processes is imperative. The papers in this special issue go some way to fill that gap.

### *Placemaking and grassroots festivals*

We define grassroots festivals as those that originate from within a community and are place-based. They are embedded in place and delivered by and for the communities in which they take place. Grassroot festivals do not have to be based in traditions long since forgotten, or be, what is often termed a “fringe-festival” set up in resistance to a mainstream festival event – they might be these, but they are not limited to these typologies. They could be what Giorgi and Sassatelli (2011) term “post-traditional festivals” whereby they emerge from and develop with contemporary culture. Many of the examples featured in this special issue could fall into this categorisation. Indeed, as we will argue, there may be a tipping point when a festival that was delivered by a community is co-opted into the mainstream, maybe through sponsorship, funding or a new organisation structure; this does not necessarily mean that it is no longer grassroots. In fact, for the efforts to be sustainable and future-proof for the benefit of place and community, a grassroots festival may need to use a more commercial approach to its delivery.



Placemaking, in recent times, has been identified as, “not limited to experts but is a practice that can be performed by ordinary people” (Strydom *et al.*, 2018, p. 174). In general terms, it is seen as a process through which places are made liveable whether through socially engaged projects, the development of physical infrastructure or urban design. Placemaking can be both instigated by a community-led, bottom-up approach and then further developed by state-led or external stakeholder intervention (i.e. property developers). Indeed, there is an increasing critique of placemaking being co-opted by city planners and urban elites seeking to differentiate place to attract investment and/or tourism (Fincher *et al.*, 2016). However, even from a bottom-up perspective, placemaking can be seen as exclusionary and problematic particularly when tied with notions of the creative or cultural city (Pollock and Paddison, 2014; Shaw and Montana, 2016). Indeed, there is often a tendency to place these two perspectives on placemaking in contrast with each other – with strategic-led initiatives positioned as the continued march of neoliberalism and community-led approaches as resistant to the former. We would argue that in reality it is less clear-cut.

Festivals contribute to placemaking in a myriad of ways which go beyond the usual critique of “festivalisation” of place (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2018; Rota and Salone, 2014). Whilst there has been some evidence (Van Aalst and van Melik, 2012) that there is a weak tie between place and the event, we contend that in the main, place-embeddedness is a key contributing factor to festival success. Although how success if measured is contentious and problematic as a popular festival does not necessarily mean it can be sustained, and likewise, a profitable festival may not have local support. The papers in this special issue contribute to the development of these debates in varying ways. Through this special issue, we argue for a more nuanced understanding of the fluid and inter-relational way that placemaking manifests through grassroots festival development.

#### *The special issue contributions*

The first paper in the issue by Mason and Scollen discusses the role of a grassroots initiative in engaging local people in a fringe festival. *Avant-garde* (2007-2008), initiated by community members in response to long-term drought, engages locals and tourists in a positive re-imagining of place via site-specific public artworks. The paper is evidence of how festivity can contribute to placemaking in response to crisis from the “bottom-up” and can be used as a tool to re-engage with the local community and re-build pride and optimism.

The next paper by de Jong and Varley similarly addresses the value of festivals in sustaining local communities. The paper examines events and social sustainability through a local food festival, for a rural coastal community on Scotland’s west coast. They ask in what ways is social sustainability enhanced through a local food festival, who benefits from this sustainability and how, offering an important critique around social sustainability and defining community in this context.

Following this and staying with gastronomy, the annual “Fête de la Soupe” held in a village in Auvergne provides a small-scale example of the ways in which space, time and festivalization interact in placemaking. In her paper, Ducros explores the importance of place, people and ritual in rural communities. Soup is an expression of memory and identity and one which is rooted in place; the festival is used as a vehicle to express this.

Festivity as an act of resistance is taken up by Catanzaro and James. Their paper explores how a profit-driven strategic intervention in place can exclude individuals with, they argue, a problematic shift towards a “creative economy”. However, the impact of this is that alternative counterculture(s) emerge from the grassroots, and the case study of an activist collective, the Marrickville Warehouse Alliance, focusing specifically on its Star

Shitty River Retreat festival, provides an interesting and challenging counterpoint to debates.

Methodologically innovative, Jarman presents a social network analysis of a festival in Scotland. Through the analysis, he found that the festival was widely endorsed as contributing to local place-making, though not uncritically. By examining management and volunteer networks, he found that social relationships are shown to have profound implications for festival identity, in relation to its host neighbourhood.

It seems apt to end the issue with a paper that examines legacy and one which illustrates the balance between community-led approaches whilst ensuring sustainable futures through innovation. Duignan, Kirby, O'Brien and Everett's study of "EAT Cambridge" emphasises the importance of "serendipitous leverage" for enhancing positive emergent legacies. In turn, this enhances the cultural offering and delivers longer-term sustainability for small local producers, thus ensuring place remains distinctive.

### *Conclusions*

We hope that the papers presented in this special issue add to the continued debates around the role that festivity has in places. From a place management perspective, there is no reason why festivity cannot contribute to placemaking as a strategic approach or as a community-led initiative as long as they are "of place". Indeed, we are not arguing against top-down initiatives. As can be seen in the examples in the special issue, there is room for new grassroots festivals to be created as long as they are done so *in-place* and *with-place*. However, there is the danger that grassroots and place-embedded festivals become taken for granted because of perceived strong links to place and the fact that they are being driven by committed local people. Success in terms of attendance and high satisfaction might not be enough to ensure sustainability for the future. Often, communities need to secure the future of their events in terms of skills development of volunteers and financial security through income generation activity. Indeed, the latter might depend on the former.

Our final message to place managers is that a festival will not make place unless care is taken to work collaboratively and understand the people and the nature of the place. You cannot effectively "parachute" festivity into place. Also, if there is already a community-led or volunteer-run festival happening successfully in your town, support it, nurture it and find out what they need to make it sustainable for the future – this might be skills development or in-kind support. As evidenced in these papers, grassroots festivals have excellent potential to contribute to placemaking in an emergent and organic way.

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