

IMPACTS 08

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By Jenny Taylor

With 7,000 events, 15 million spectators and a boost of £800 million for the city's economy, Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture was officially hailed a success, transforming its image and repositioning it as a premier European city.

But as Liverpool continues to bask in the glory of 2008, a ground-breaking research programme has been looking beyond the statistics at the social, cultural, political and environmental effects that Capital of Culture has had on the city, and at how the results of this research will help to inform similar events in the future.

Led by Dr Beatriz Garcia from the School of Sociology, *Impacts 08* is a unique research initiative designed to investigate how staging a European Capital of Culture programme operates in the context of wider regeneration strategies.

Carried out over a five-year period, the programme has enabled in-depth analysis of changes in outcomes, experiences, perceptions and understanding, from the pre-bid period through to post-event reactions.

As well as analysing potential economic impacts, it explores the social and cultural effects that come with projects of this scale; how attitudes and opinions about the city are affected, how media representation of the city has changed, and how 2008 has impacted on discussions about Liverpool's identity.

Traditionally, research of this kind has been handled by private consultancies, but Liverpool was the first city to recognise that academics could play a pivotal role in advancing understanding about the impact of cultural policy and regeneration strategies.

Dr Garcia is an expert in the effect of culture-led regeneration programmes and has worked all over the world, investigating the experiences of cities such as Sydney, Athens and Beijing (hosts of the 2000, 2004 and 2008 Olympics), Manchester (2002 Commonwealth Games) and Glasgow (1990 European City of Culture). She has also acted as an academic advisor to London on the 2012 Olympics.

"My research has always focussed on city regeneration," said Dr Garcia. "I used to live in Barcelona, a city that underwent an incredible renaissance following the 1992 Olympic Games, reinventing itself as Spain's leading cultural and tourism centre. I became interested in the way that staging a major event could be used as a catalyst for development and improvement and how this could be sustained after the event was over."

Dr Garcia was appointed to the School of Sociology and Social Policy in April 2006 as Director of *Impacts 08*, a project specifically designed to develop a research model

for evaluating the multiple impacts of culture-led regeneration programmes that can be replicated and applied to events across the UK and beyond, including future European Capital of Cultures and the London 2012 Olympic Games.

The research programme, which will eventually inform a final report to be published in March 2010, is structured across six thematic areas: economic growth, cultural vibrancy, cultural participation, image and identity, physical sustainability and management of the process. Moving beyond the usual quantitative indicators, it focuses on measuring job creation and tourism growth in order to take into account the lived experiences of the people of Liverpool, and providing a major contribution to the debate on measuring the impacts of culture-led regeneration.

The research has also included more than 23 special projects which had a strong qualitative focus. One of the projects, a three year survey and consultation with local residents, was designed to assess whether the Capital of Culture programme has led to any meaningful social impact in their local area and personal lives. The team identified four different neighbourhoods in Liverpool that would provide a good representation of the city, and 800 members of the public from those areas were surveyed at three stages - in 2007, part way through 2008 and then again in 2009.

“What emerged from our initial survey was a general feeling of confusion,” explains Dr Garcia. “Liverpool had opted to have a series of themed years to compliment 2008, but what it meant was that nobody knew when ‘Capital of Culture’ actually kicked in, and that put a real strain on delivery.

“The organisers were presenting Capital of Culture as the answer to Liverpool’s problems, but many people had real concerns that the programme was going to fail, opening up the city to yet more criticism. Our findings revealed that there was a large gap between the expectations that had been raised at the bid stage and what it was possible to deliver via a cultural programme. It became evident that the city had to work harder at clarifying exactly what the programme could (or could not) offer and introduce more of a focus.”

When the official programme was finally launched in 2008, some events inevitably worked better than others, but few would have predicted that one of the most successful would involve a series of scaled-down versions of one of the city’s main public sculptures, the Superlambanana. This hybrid form – literally a lamb’s head and a body that becomes a banana – was cloned and dotted around the city, each one sporting a different outfit and theme.

“The public reception of the Superlambanana project was a massive surprise. The organisers had not predicted the extent to which local residents would relate to it and appropriate it. It managed to attract media attention, be owned by the local population and develop an iconic status that is now perceived as unique to Liverpool. It established the right connections with the city by revisiting a piece of public contemporary art and adapting it so that it had a closer connection with residents throughout the city,” says Dr Garcia.

Other highlights of the city's eclectic programme included a 50ft mechanical spider, the 2008 Tall Ships' Races, an open-air concert at Anfield headlined by Sir Paul McCartney, Ben Johnson's *Liverpool Panorama* at the Walker Art Gallery and an exhibition of 20th century artist Le Corbusier at the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral.

What is particularly clear from the Impacts 08 research, is that these events had a significant effect on Liverpool's representation in the media. In fact, following the Capital of Culture announcement in 2003, the number of articles in the national press commenting on culture in Liverpool increased by 200% in the national media, 95% of which were either positive or neutral. Previously, articles about the city's cultural offer invariably focused on football or The Beatles, but now there are references to art and museum exhibitions, plays, films and architecture. In 2008, arts and culture stories dominated over any other subject, including social and economic issues.

"Liverpool is perceived and represented by the media as a much more complex and attractive city now than a decade ago," explains Dr Garcia. "Its creative character is being highlighted by mainstream media in the UK as well as internationally. In the longer term, the image transformation that the city has experienced could be a driver for economic change, attracting visitors and investment and strengthening the city's ability to attract and retain students, which is one of the city's main priorities for the future and reflects the important role that universities have to play too."

There has also been a change in the way the city operates. Due to the pressure to deliver the shared title of European Capital of Culture within a fixed time period, organisations across Government, business, cultural and community sectors have developed a common agenda and a common timeframe, which has led in many cases to a stronger sense of partnership. This experience may improve the chances for all of these sectors to work more collaboratively in the future.

But as well as identifying the strengths of the year, one of the key objectives of the Impacts 08 programme was to identify weaknesses that could be built on in the future.

"Large-scale regeneration initiatives cannot do everything for all people, so we want to identify not only who may have benefited, but also who missed out," says Dr Garcia. "It's important that we remain independent and retain our academic perspective. The mainstream perception of 2008 is one of success, but there are things that could have been done differently to more successfully address ongoing issues of inequality and access to resources and opportunities. It is our job as a research team to identify them, so that the city can learn valuable lessons from this experience."

Once the emerging data has been analysed, a full report will be published that will highlight the strengths as well as the limitations of Liverpool's reign as European

Capital of Culture, although it may be some time before the full impact of 2008 is felt.

“In 1990, when Glasgow was awarded Capital of Culture status, tourism figures for that year were through the roof, but over the next couple of years there was a dramatic drop,” says Dr Garcia. “The same is likely to happen in Liverpool, particularly in the context of a global economic recession, but this should not necessarily be seen as evidence that Capital of Culture has not delivered what it set out to do. We are trying to assess the long-term legacy of the year and distinguish direct as well as indirect impacts. To achieve this, we need to study ongoing effects over time and ensure that we have developed a research legacy.”

When the Impacts 08 project is complete, Dr Garcia will continue her work advising and researching the cultural programme in the lead up to the London 2012 Olympics as well as other Capitals of Culture throughout Europe, and other major events, such as the Shanghai 2010 Expo. Part of her role will be to build bridges between Liverpool and subsequent Capitals of Culture, adapting the methodology used in the Impacts 08 programme into a more generic model for research of major events. An important aspiration is to demonstrate that universities have an important role to play in improving the evidence base, assessment and discussion of the benefits and challenges of hosting large-scale events in the context of urban regeneration.

“There’s no perfect formula; just because something worked in Liverpool doesn’t necessarily mean it will work elsewhere,” says Dr Garcia. “But prospective Capital of Culture cities could learn a lot from Liverpool’s experiences about what does and doesn’t work when trying to put together a year-long programme of activities and redefine the image of the city.”

“The challenge now is to maintain the momentum and build on the lessons emerging from the Capital of Culture year so that the city protects its cultural and creative vibrancy, improves conditions for local people, and retains and continues to attract talent, visitors and investors in 10 year’s or 20 year’s time. Only then will we fully understand the real impact and sustainable legacies of 2008.”