

2018: The Anniversary Year

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In 2008 the term “organising a great Scouse wedding” went viral. It was a phrase that popped into my head when trying to describe to the world’s media what lay ahead while co-ordinating Liverpool’s time as the UK host for the European Capital of Culture. 2018 will be the tenth wedding anniversary and time to celebrate the fact that the marriage has survived, people introduced that year are still talking to each other, the matrimonial home has been spruced up and even the neighbours are getting on to the extent of forming their own neighbourhood watch scheme. And, staying within the family tradition, squabbles have broken out over who should Chair t’committee. But would we expect it to be any other way? Really?

In a world that seems to be undergoing a time of cultural shift, globally, nationally and locally, when the so-called ruling elites are finally realising they have become detached from those they are supposed to serve, rule or exploit (choose your own world order preference) the tenth anniversary provides exactly the same possibility that the wedding itself did: an excuse to try something different.

This was the greatest asset of being awarded the title in 2003. Having five years to focus on one year. To bring together political, social, and economic aspirations and use 2008 as a target. The fact that the media spotlight would be aimed at the City provided an opportunity to change both internal and

external perceptions. The city centre was rebuilt and re-energised and its people regained a confidence that had been beaten down by 30 years of negative press.

UK City of Culture legacy

This was exported through the UK City of Culture (UKCoC) legacy project, a chance every four years for one city to rediscover who, what and where they were. With the UK's cultural organisations, backed by the BBC, the media spotlight would give them their time. Time to define their own culture, and once done, decide what they would do with that culture to bring about step change. Already almost 30 cities have been, or are going through that process.

[Derry-Londonderry](#) and [Hull](#) have been given the official title, in 2013 and 2017 respectively, but it is a win-win competition. The process of just bidding forces cities to come together and define what it is that distinguishes them from others. It forces people and organisations that have co-existed independently to engage in co-operative conversations. I now no longer log how many conferences have been held around exactly what that means; although the tally itself proves academic entrepreneurship is alive and well.

However, for me, it boils down to the same thing: the excuse to try something different. It is about intangibles. Things like confidence and ambition. Proving that if we come together, pool resources and know-how we can make the sum greater than the parts. If you succeed once you know you can do it again. Ambition and aspiration follow confidence. Business leaders know this instinctively. Politicians come to discover it. Policy makers wish for it. Bureaucrats are charged to resist it: without evidence.

There is no lack of evidence. The day before the 2013 award people referred to Derry or Londonderry. The day after they spoke of Derry-Londonderry. The day of the 2017 award Network Rail reversed a decision to stop the electrification of the East Coast line short of Hull. Durham failed even to make the shortlist but saw visitor numbers increase by 40% due to the publicity surrounding the bid. And in 2017, having also failed to make the cut, Southend is planning to capitalise on its collaborative conversations by holding an 'Alternative City of Culture'.

So the anecdotal evidence is there. For those engaged in culture it is a given, but to drag our bureaucratic, risk-averse policy makers to the funding table we need more. That is why the [Institute of Cultural Capital](#) was formed, another

direct legacy of 2008, to gather and evaluate the empirical data. Like the [Joining the Dots](#) project. Pulling together data from cultural interventions in mental health care. There are many. They work. They may not be known unknowns, more intangible tangibles.

By engaging people in cultural activity it lifts them out of loneliness and depression, builds self-esteem, self-confidence and increases wellbeing. That reduces conventional medical treatment costs. We know this. We saw it across 2008. But we have to prove it. To provide the evidence-based research that satisfies HM Treasury's Green Book appraisal system. And it's starting to work. Even the Iron Chancellor recognised that further [cuts to arts and culture was a false economy](#) in what also turned out to be his last Autumn Statement. But the legacy remains.

Culture is the rocket fuel of economic growth

The city of Liverpool has benefited because its current Mayor has demonstrated a belief that culture is the rocket fuel of economic growth. This comes from witnessing large events succeed in the city. Culture brings footfall; footfall is people; people have cash to spend and that is the fuel of regeneration. That is why a cultural strategy is at the heart of the Liverpool City Region Devolution Agreement. That deal comes into being in 2017, along with a new [Local Cultural Partnership](#) (LCP).

I have agreed to Chair this region-wide initiative with the aim of developing a long-term cultural strategy for the region. This will start by re-importing the two underlying principles of the UKCoC programme. To ask each Borough to define their own culture. Once defined, how it sits within the wider region and not what sets us apart but what brings us together. In other words, remember who, what and where we are.

The LCP will neither be an arts consortium, or another bureaucratic body for funding 'the arts', but would be a strategic mechanism to stimulate better community cohesion, localism and enterprise. It will have a strong commercial ethic to make both its activities and funding sustainable. To do this it will not define either culture or creativity as the narrow preserve of the few, but will promote both, as a wider consequence of collective endeavour. It will be neither quango, quangette nor committee, but a broker of true partnerships between all cultural stakeholders to promote creativity wherever it can add value.

I can already sense the conference party planners reaching for their booking forms to unpick all that, but could I suggest two themes. One, post-Brexit how do we grow more of our own talent? Two, with Liverpool's tradition as a pool of creative talent, it is not a case of inventing the wheel, only making it spin a bit faster.

And as in 2008, you are all invited to the party.