

Heaven for Hull?

From “crap town” to UK City of Culture 2017

by Yann Béliard

Once celebrated as the third British port behind London and Liverpool, Kingston-upon-Hull descended into disrepute with the 1970s economic crisis and has, more or less every year since then, topped the list of Britain’s “crap cities”. The contested choice of Hull as UK City of Culture 2017 has raised high hopes about a possible renaissance. But in the era of austerity and Brexit, there are reasons to question the benefits the City of Culture experience may yield for Hull’s common people.

From their inception, the EU and UK City of Culture awards have been greeted with mixed reactions. On the one hand, they have been praised as courageous gestures in favour of forgotten towns and cities – in particular by the European and British politicians who first took the initiative, but also by local politicians, businessmen and common people who perceived the schemes as an opportunity for their hometown to step out of the shadows and envisage a brighter future. On the other hand, many commentators have expressed scepticism towards the City of Culture concept, with essentially the same arguments used to question the value of “urban regeneration” in the 1980s and 1990s. The very idea of reconstructing a derelict city through the promotion of art and culture has been deemed a sham, a top-down initiative opening up new possibilities for the financially and culturally privileged rather than for the labouring majority.

So are the City of Culture events likely to positively transform Hull, or do they constitute – to put it provocatively – a waste of public money? The answer to the question is by no means evident, since past examples on which to base our reflections are scarce. Glasgow in 1990 and Liverpool in 2008 were respectively European City and Capital of Culture, so that Hull’s only predecessor as UK City of Culture was Derry / Londonderry in 2013. Though in the case of Hull it is of course too early to tackle the question of legacy, the

advantage is that the process is still in the making, and can therefore be observed on the spot. This paper, based on a long-time connection with the city and on observations and encounters made during a recent visit, analyses first the contrasted reactions to Hull's selection as UK City of Culture, then the ambiguities of the key themes placed by the organisers at the heart of the cultural programme – “freedom” on the one hand, “roots and routes” on the other.

The revenge of the North?

When in 2013 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport announced that Hull would be UK City of Culture in 2017, it came as a shock to everyone – a mostly negative shock in London, a mostly welcome shock in Hull.

At the national level, many derogatory judgments were uttered as soon as Hull was chosen – notably in Leicester, Luton, Swansea and Dundee, the cities not chosen for the title. The crudest comments came from the tabloids, but not only. Journalist Ed West, in *The Spectator* (20 November 2013), explained that Hull could not be considered as a City of Culture, “unless you mean culture in the loosest sense, as in ‘gang culture’ or possibly the culture that grows at the back of the fridge”. Because the event was state-run, he argued, it would never deliver. Without the “hiring of extra policemen” to combat local delinquents, he simply could not imagine how Hull might “attract artistic people, and the educated, middle class who will support them”. “Attracting the right people and therefore capital”, he concluded, would long be out of reach for Hull. Similar coverage was given to the opening ceremony in Hull by the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. On the occasion, Murdoch's red top published a two-page report entitled “Scrapital of culture”, and focused on the alleged “yob mayhem” that had afflicted the city on New Year's Eve. Testimonies of local police officers were much less dramatic: no injuries were recorded, and no arrests made either. Yet the *Daily Mail* told the same story with its title “Hull descends into drunken carnage” – a very distorted vision of reality. One could also quote Mike Parry, a radio presenter for TalkSport, who declared that “there is more culture in the jungle in Calais than there is in Hull” – which says more about his own narrow-mindedness than about Hull. And the list of nasty comments posted on the internet would be endless. When not with mockery, the election of Hull was met with amused indifference: “Hull where?” was the usual joke.

The avalanche of derisive remarks about the choice of Hull led, locally, to a diametrically opposed reaction: a sense of local pride inseparable from a sense of northern solidarity – many people remarking that the London papers were inflicting upon Hull the same abuse they had inflicted to Liverpool in 2008. The local press – notably the *Hull Daily Mail* and the *Yorkshire Post* – published several special editions to support the event. And the local politicians – the Labour City Council and the Labour MPs – all expressed their

satisfaction. The insults thrown at Hull gave Lord Prescott of Kingston-upon-Hull – once upon a time a leader of the National Union of Seamen (NUS) and ex-Deputy Prime Minister for Tony Blair, also known as “Prezza” – the opportunity for some of the roaring and barking that has made him famous.

Because of the bemused and occasionally hostile reactions on the national level, many people in Hull felt that the award, even coming from a London-based body, was a form of revenge on Southern arrogance, maybe even on bad times. Even those Northerners used to despising official prizes, though they *should have* felt indifferent to the City of Culture promise of glory, could hardly help feeling a secret kind of pride and joy, as if resistance in the face of hard luck was at last rewarded.

“Hull, Hell and Halifax”

For Hull is not usually associated with the notion of culture. The reason lies essentially in the history of the place, a port whose glory days are situated by most historians in the late Victorian and Edwardian age, when it was a gateway to Europe, importing timber and iron from Scandinavia, and wheat from the Russian Empire, while exporting coal and manufactured products to the rest of the world. Since then, Hull has experienced many traumas. It suffered in turns from the Great Depression in the 1930s, heavy German bombing in the Second World War, the end of its fishing industry and the modernisation of the shipping industry in the 1970s, which both led to massive job cuts. As a local vicar once said, with typical self-deprecation: “Hull always seemed to be top of most lists it wanted to be bottom of, and bottom of most lists it wanted to be top of” (*Yorkshire Post*, 31 December 2016). The city, still famous in between the wars for being “the third British port”, is now mostly ignored by tourists – and the last time I checked it was not mentioned in any of the French travel guides about Britain. So the image of Hull today is still associated with the saying “Hull, Hell and Halifax”. It is synonym of gloom and dereliction, and conjures up visions of half-bombed buildings and ugly post-war architecture, of post-industrial wastelands and smashed or boarded shop windows – not of heritage and culture.

Those grim clichés, to which it would be unfair to reduce the city and its inhabitants, are to a large extent confirmed by present-day statistics. Hull was indeed hit particularly violently by the 2008 banking crisis, the worst one in Britain since 1929 – as confirmed by the City Council’s Annual Local Economic Assessment Report for 2016. Out of 259,000 inhabitants, 170,900 are of working age but only 114,100 (67.5%) are in employment. The number of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants has been brought down from 15,000 in 2013 to 6,000 today. But that figure remains much higher than the UK average, especially among young people. In Hull, the population is younger than average, and the largest age group is formed by the 20 to 24 year olds. But what could be seen as a promising sign is a

reflection of the high rate of teenage pregnancy. Several other key economic indicators point in the same gloomy direction. With an average salary of £359 per week, Hull workers earn £83 less than the UK average. The average house price is half the UK figure, at around £108,000 – and monthly rents too are half the UK average, at £424. Four families in ten have no car or van, so are compelled to either walk, cycle or take the bus. Life expectancy figures sum up the picture. With 76 for boys and 80 for girls born this year, the figures are 3 years below the UK average – and 10 years below in the poorest parts of Hull. In fact female life expectancy has receded by two years since 2011. It is therefore quite understandable that Hull should not be seen as “hip” or “trendy”. Clearly a large fraction of the locals have more urgent dilemmas than choosing between an opera or a painting exhibition.

In spite of those harsh realities, Hull has a culture of its own, which it convincingly pushed forward in its bid for the title. Hull’s Hall of Fame does not limit itself to “culture” in the high brow sense of the word, but embraces what might be termed “popular culture” in the largest sense. In the field of literature, Andrew Marvell, Winifred Holtby and Philip Larkin are the names that stand out. The city’s contribution to the cinema was not quite so rich, with nonetheless a couple of remarkable figures, actor Tom Courtenay and director Anthony Minghella. There is no doubt that Hull’s most spectacular offerings were in the realm of pop music, from folk singer Michael Chapman to the famous Spiders from Mars, the musicians who backed David Bowie in his Ziggy Stardust period. Hull was also home to Genesis P. Orridge and Cosy Fanni Tutti, the founders of Throbbing Gristle – possibly the first band ever to play “industrial music” – and, in the 1980s, to more mainstream bands such as Everything But The Girl and the Fine Young Cannibals, not to forget the Housemartins and the Beautiful South. Hull’s popular culture cannot be evoked without mention of sport: it still boasts two Rugby League clubs, one founded in the East (the dockers’ area), the other in the West (the fishermen’s quarter); and one soccer club, Hull A.F.C. – or just “City” for its eternal supporters.

Despite the lack of heroes with a national or international reputation, Hull people in their majority did not feel the title of City of Culture was usurped. “We always knew we had culture, it’s just the world didn’t know”, Sean McAllister, a local documentary film-maker, declared. They agreed that the local culture was maybe obscure or unsophisticated, but generally underlined how “genuine”, how “authentic” it was. The promotion video produced for the City of Culture bid, precisely because of the local paucity of superstars, proposed an understanding of the word “culture” that was daring, in that it valued common people and their togetherness rather than extraordinary individuals, preferring nuances of grey to flashy colours. Even with a sceptical, critical eye, it was difficult for any Hull-lover not to succumb to the power of that trailer which represented its “common people” as interestingly “uncommon”¹. The appropriation of the official process by Hull people at large has since been made evident at every football match played at home: Hull City supporters now systematically

¹ The video can be seen on the following page: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/video/2013/nov/20/hull-city-of-culture-video> (last accessed 27 December 2017).

welcome the other team's supporters with a new chant: "You're only here for the culture!" – a tongue-in-cheek cry that may come as a surprise for those who picture all soccer fans as hooligans.

Ends and means

A 47-page brochure published by the City Council in July 2016 and entitled "Cultural Strategy, 2016-2026" encapsulates the dreams of the people in charge of coordinating public and private initiatives before, during and after the 2017 events. Presenting 2017 as no less than a "catalyst", a "milestone", a "pivotal point", it opens with a description of what Hull could look like in ten years' time: "a world class visitor destination (...) where people choose to live, work, visit, study and invest", where a renovated urban landscape has allowed a Scandinavian lifestyle to flourish, where "health inequalities are being reduced", where arts and sports participation has increased in schools, where the jobs created in green energy, boosted by a rich cultural offer, act as a magnet for crowds of highly skilled workers².

Those ambitious plans were accompanied by a presentation of the means to reach the end, essentially a financial and practical collaboration with "principal partners" – the public ones, i.e. the Arts Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund; the East Yorkshire County Council, the BBC, the University of Hull, etc. – and "major partners" – the private ones, i.e. Associated British Ports, British Petroleum, Siemens, Sewell, P&O Ferries, Smith and Nephew, etc. In 2016 the project was to see £106 million invested in the city, with 32 million going into the cultural programme itself, and 25 million into the regeneration of the city centre and key buildings by Eurovia – the bulk of the money coming from the City Council, *not* from the government. It was also suggested that, if more than one million people visited Hull in 2017 (the figure was reached in August), it would pour £60 million into the local economy.

Yet even those who greeted Hull's crowning with a smile find it hard to believe that the City of Culture year can transform the city in depth. The public-partnership principle it rests on – a New Labour favourite – has often been found wanting, with a tendency to collectivise losses and privatise profits. And the linking of Hull's 2017 adventure with hazy government plans such as "Sporting Future" and the "Northern Powerhouse" is hardly reassuring. To attract new residents "who are sufficiently financially secure to make a contribution to City revenues", Hull would need to be better connected to the rest of the country – to have an airport of its own, for example, which is unlikely to happen soon. All in

² That vision owes a lot to Richard Florida's work, especially *The Rise of the Creative Class*, New York, Basic Books, 2012 (1st edition: 2002) and *Cities and the Creative Class*, London, Routledge, 2004. For a critique of the "creative city" concept, see Benoît Bréville, « Grandes villes et bons sentiments », *Le Monde Diplomatique*, N° 764, November 2017.

all, the way private interests and political actors can profit from the business generated by the 2017 events is clearer than the way the community might draw short-term and long-term economic advantages from them. As summed up by Jonathan Heath in *GQ* (30 March 2016), Hull's City of Culture could turn out to be "a very expensive flare", "a year-long government funded PR campaign (...) to patch up the impact the government's extensive cuts have had on the city as a whole (...), generating controlled, positive spin for the government and (distracting) from the issues that really need addressing".

Surfing on the promises of the City of Culture award, the organisers of the cultural programme promised events that would be "epic", "jaw-dropping", "magical"³. Yet alongside enthusiasm the events have generated a fair dose of suspicion, in a city that has been through too many false dawns. According to a poll made by the *Hull Daily Mail* (3 January 2017), 20% of the locals declared that they were "not excited at all". Admittedly, the modernising of existing venues (such as the Ferens Art Gallery and the New Theatre) and the opening up of a couple of new ones have been largely welcomed. But many find it hard to believe that the promises of radical reconstruction will be kept. The programme for the year, designed to breed hope, was divided in four quarters: "Made in Hull" for the January to March period; "Roots and routes" for April to June; "Freedom" for July to September; and "Tell the world" for October to December. Though the titles are catchy, a parallel between the values they are meant to convey and the reality of contemporary Hull is somehow revealing of the ambiguities and limitations of the City of Culture project.

The ambiguities of freedom

"Made in Hull" is a title that could be contested, given that the Hull City of Culture CEO, Martin Green, was recruited in London on the basis of his management of the 2012 Olympic ceremonies. He insisted that his conception was not "imposing our ideas on Hull" but "allowing Hull to tell its own story". Yet the programming of contemporary street art superstar Spencer Tunick, for example, was in no way "distinctive". And the repeated claim that the city's culture is "vibrant" and "unique" sounds desperately similar to the claims made by the organisers of the City of Culture events all around the world. As David Harvey has underlined, in the end the argument of "uniqueness" becomes redundant and self-debasing.

The emphasis on the theme of "freedom", in the city where anti-slave trade and anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce was born, is understandable. But few events, if any, addressed the different and sometimes problematic meanings the word has taken over time in Hull. True, during the English Revolution, Hull stood firmly on the Parliamentary side – its governor Sir John Hotham refusing to open the doors of the city to Charles I in 1642. But

³ A dedicated website was opened for the Hull UK City of Culture Year: <https://www.hull2017.co.uk/> (last accessed 27 December 2017).

the consensual celebration of Wilberforce could be criticised. In 2017 it was rarely remembered that this iconic MP was not a democrat and condemned the radicals who marched to demand universal suffrage, or that he was hostile to most of the demands of the early labour movement. His fight for “free labour” was not a fight for social equality.

The kind of freedom championed in Hull in the decades following Wilberforce’s death in 1833 – three days after slavery was abolished in the British Empire – is not evoked either with enough historical rigour. Hull in the 19th century was represented mostly by liberal MPs at Westminster, and the Hull Corporation too was dominated by liberal politicians who were often shipowners or merchants. But the type of freedom they advocated was not freedom for all: it was freedom for the ratepayers not to pay taxes that could have improved public infrastructures for the labouring majority; freedom for shipowners to break the dockers’ and seamen’s strikes using what they called “free labourers” – in fact the members of yellow unions tailored to combat working-class militancy. The city’s maritime museum, in spite of complaints from the Hull Trades and Labour Council in the 1990s, still presents shipping magnate Charles Henry Wilson as someone “sympathetic to the cause of trade unions”, when he was in fact the man who orchestrated a seven-week lockout in 1893 to crush the dockers’ union.

The use of the word “freedom” as a slogan for Hull – where a Freedom Festival is organised every year during the first weekend in September – is therefore quite disturbing when emptied of its shifting and contested historical meanings. It is also distressing to see the City of Culture scheme in Hull sponsored by companies with dubious political records. Siemens, for example, financed the Nazi Party and exploited Jewish workers inside the extermination camp at Auschwitz. BP supported the toppling of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, and its interventions in the Middle East over the past century have taken liberties, to say the least, with the sovereignty of Middle Eastern peoples. But because Siemens opened a wind turbine factory in Hull in 2016, because it is promising to recruit locals, certain truths are better left unspoken. The same goes for BP, a job creator that should not be offended. Associated British Ports (ABP) is another major sponsor with a controversial social record – but reminding the public of the layoffs it organised in Hull and around the country in the 1980s and 1990s might endanger its engagement in a £310 million joint investment with Siemens. The local sponsor Reckitt-Bensicker could also be mentioned – a company founded by a local Quaker family and where paternalism was the rule. One of its directors, T. E. Ferens, gave his name to the local art gallery, as he was its founder and main donor, and this year’s leaflets praise him as a philanthropist. But his liberalism was of a top-down nature, and he was as ruthless as any employer of the time when his factory girls went on strike for the first time in 1911 and confronted him with their own version of freedom. So what kind of culture are public authorities promoting if it entails not biting the hand that feeds and omitting embarrassing episodes from the past? This is far from providing the “solid foundations” sold by the City of Culture organisers to their audience

When “roots” eclipse “routes”

From April to June, the defining theme was “Roots and Routes”, a play on words supposed to symbolise Hull’s double identity: a fierce sense of independence and openness to the world. This was in-keeping with the City Council’s marketing of the city as “the gateway to Europe” and “the most Scandinavian of British Cities”. Much of the cultural programming illustrated the theme, with artists coming from all over the world and many shows and exhibitions celebrating exchanges and mixtures between diverse ethnic, national or religious cultures. The paradox is that, the year before 2017, Hull was one of the British cities with the highest percentage of votes in favour of Brexit. What did it have to “tell the world”, to quote the motto chosen for the culmination of the City of Culture year, the October to December period? The discrepancy is striking between the noble intentions expressed by the politicians supporting the scheme (helping the city to “become more diverse and outward-looking”; acting in favour of all “disadvantaged communities”) and a vote that, like in the other Brexit strongholds, reflected defiance towards Europe and Europeans, if not sheer rejection of foreigners. Six months before the opening ceremony of the City of Culture year, the electoral results in Hull were a shocking reminder of the resentment and anxiety felt by large sections of the local population, feelings based on material realities and mental representations that all the cultural and artistic initiatives in the world stand little chance of erasing.

In Hull, 75 000 people (70%) voted in favour of Brexit, which amounted to more than twice the number of Remain votes. This was a much bigger proportion than in the UK at large, where Brexit won with only 51%. In a city where the majority of votes has gone to the Labour Party for decades, be it in municipal or general elections (after a short Lib-Dem parenthesis in the 2000s), this could not be equated with a pro-Conservative choice, and is probably best interpreted as an anti-Cameron vote – since the then Prime Minister was the man asking the question. Having said that, the Hull “Leave” vote, largely based on the irrational fears fuelled by the Tory right-wing, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the tabloids, was comparable to the swing towards the Front National (FN) in the north of France or towards Trump in the rust belt – a vote the causes of which need to be studied carefully.

Hull workers suffered greatly in the 1970s and 1980s with the transformation of the port industry, and the jobs that eventually emerged were mostly casual and low-paid jobs in the service sector. So although Hull and Humberside still form a remarkably dynamic maritime hub, because their activities do not employ as many workers as before, there is a sense that the port has declined, and that the decline can be linked to the parallel rise of European ports such as Rotterdam or Antwerp, which are often said to have grabbed activities that Hull should have retained – a sentiment which, however ill-founded, has encouraged anti-Europeanism. Immigration from Eastern Europe since 2004, though not massive, has affected the make-up of the local population and transformed some areas in Hull – with the opening of many Polish shops along Beverley Road, for example. Those mutations can also be

seen as having led a number of inhabitants to vote for Brexit, especially as the gutter press presents Eastern European immigration as a threat. Fear of a foreign invasion in Hull seems all the more absurd as the 26,000 foreigners living in Hull only represent 10% of the population, when the UK rate is 14.5%. Besides, most newcomers in the coming ten years are likely to come from the UK (80 000), and only 20,000 from abroad. So the vision of Hull as a “gateway to Europe” is not seen in a positive light by everyone in Hull. Like in any port in the world, frequent contact with foreigners breeds both openness and intolerance, internationalism and jingoism.

On 27 June 2016, the day after the Brexit victory, American news channel CNN broadcasted a very telling report about the referendum in Hull⁴. It presented the causes of and the reactions to the results in a balanced way, which is all the more appreciable as the sociological explanation should be nuanced. Yes, the mostly working-class constituencies of East and West Hull voted massively in favour of Brexit. But so did the wealthy villages situated west of Hull, such as Anlaby or Ellerby, villages which Hull’s more affluent classes have long preferred to the city of Hull – not out of bitterness towards the government, but more plausibly because they identify with the most reactionary branch of the Conservative Party. A Hull curiosity that deserves to be mentioned: UKIP’s campaign was lead by a certain Sergi Singh, a Sikh businessman, a citizen of foreign origin who nonetheless embraced Farage’s xenophobic discourse. Though the Hull electorate was not unanimous in its rejection of the EU (after all, 49% abstained), the overall results did convey the impression of a city that is more “rooted” than “en route”. Appreciation of and even participation in the City of Culture events – originally an EU idea, recycled in the UK by the New Labour governments – should therefore not be read as a sign of Euro- or xeno-philia.

Another culture

If the programme devised by the City of Culture maestros, with their emphasis on community cohesion and their “think positive” leitmotiv, leaves little room for less consensual visions of the city’s past and present, it does not mean that efforts to propose a less sanitised discourse were not made. Countless artists and volunteers made the most of the 2017 opportunity, in particular of the Creative Communities Programme, to go beyond the production of innocuous “feel good” shows, and reach out to the community with more provocative messages. The “We Are Hull” video show written by Rupert Creed was a case in point, with its projection all over Victoria Square of images retracing some of Hull’s most trying times in the 20th century. Sean McAllister’s documentary on local jobseekers, “Dignity of Labour”, was not selected for projection in such a glamorous setting, but it left a lasting

⁴ The report can be seen on the following page: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/27/europe/happy-brexite-hull/> (last accessed 27 December 2017).

impression on those lucky enough to watch it. Local historian Brian Lavery was also a key actor in the production of a “bottom-up” vision of Hull: his efforts led to multiple tributes to Lillian Bilocca, the “headscarf revolutionary” who campaigned in 1968 so that fishermen and families hit by a major trawling disaster would not be forgotten by employers and the State. One of the most convincing attempts at combining artistic ambition with interaction with the community was RUSH, a dance spectacular set up by the Southpaw Dance Company in collaboration with one hundred Hull residents, and evoking 21st century mass protests and the daily struggles of ordinary women and men in a series of captivating scenes.

The general orientation of the UK City of Culture scheme, in Hull and elsewhere, follows essentially the same logic as the urban regeneration of the 1980s, with a focus on the city centre, business and tourism. But the examples listed above demonstrate that there are plenty of artists, intellectuals and residents who, without refusing to play by the rules, are capable of playing with them to destabilise stereotypes and imagine the “world turned upside down”. As was the case in Glasgow, Liverpool and Derry / Londonderry, an alternative narrative has thus emerged on the margins of the event, one that explores the contradictions in Hull’s identity instead of painting a homogenised and ultimately unreal portrait. For Hull, like every port in the world, has been and can be both radical and reactionary, parochial and worldly, cosmopolitan and racist – contradictory and intertwined characteristics that sociologist Alice Mah has teased out in her study of Liverpool. What matters is first to admit it, second to rescue the local radical culture from oblivion, so that the place’s complicated past does not weigh too heavily on its future adventures. Mah has mapped out that living heritage in Liverpool and, whatever the silences and distortions, it can also be found in Hull (Béliard, 2010). The City of Culture award was too happy an announcement for the need for a counter-festival to be felt, as even the local representatives of the radical left recognised. But the Hull branch of the Socialist Party (the local descendents of the Militant Tendency) has published a special City of Culture brochure, entitled “A Different Kind of Culture”, which illustrates that heritage of waterfront radicalism quite vividly and constitutes a useful complement to the official tales⁵.

Conclusion

What could the City of Culture’s legacy be? For a lot of people, a feel-good factor will have been injected into the atmosphere, and surely they will have pleasant memories to cherish – something not to be neglected in a city where “times are still tough” (Angus Young, *Hull Daily Mail*, 13 January 2017). After all, though situationists reject entertainment and escapism as forms of social control, distracting the masses from reflection and rebellion, one may argue on the contrary that there is value in light and easy pleasures, pleasures that should

⁵ Hull Socialist Party, *Hull: A Different Sort of Culture*, Socialist Party (CWI), 2017.

not be reserved to the happy few and can help boost both the morale and creativity of working-class people. The 2017 events were undeniably an opportunity for many to discover new forms of art and become involved in new artistic practices, as well as in volunteer work, individual and collective experiences which, without necessarily being “life-changing”, can open horizons and enhance self-confidence.

Yet the most tangible legacies are likely to concern mostly the upper reaches of society. The re-branding and the re-vamping of the city, if they survive the New Year, could push house prices up, but in the Old Town, in the avenues and university quarter, not on the Bransholme, Southcoates East or Orchard Park estates. If some amount of gentrification eventually takes place – and Hull still has a long way to go in that direction – there will be little surprise as to who the prime winners are. The inhabitants of a high rise building off Anlaby Road were invited by a group of well-meaning artists to decorate their exterior corridors with patches of primary colours. The visual impact at night was stunning, and the residents were quite moved that someone should at last take interest in the beautification of their derelict environment. But once the party is over, they will still be stuck in their bleak neighbourhood. For most of the refurbishing has been carried out in the city centre, not in Hull’s deprived areas. The same is true on the cultural front. Some surveys have already shown that when the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra came to Hull in March, less than 10% of the audience was local, the bulk coming from Beverley, Kirk Ella, Willerby and Anlaby, i.e. Hull’s “posh” suburbs.

So will the City of Culture year help regenerate Hull economically? Will it foster social cohesion, thereby helping to debase xenophobic sentiment? One can only give an extremely cautious answer: in and of itself, probably not; and, if so, only superficially. For the fundamental objective of the scheme – transforming Hull into a “competitive” city – is inspired by a pro-business philosophy that cannot result in a more equal and humane society, unless one believes in the “trickle down” theory. The City Council’s brochure on “Cultural Strategy, 2016-2026” overflows with generous intentions. But it is tinsel around the present, not the present itself.

Yet Hull people have a local heritage of waterfront radicalism, grassroots solidarity and internationalist networking on which they could build to face the future ups and downs of the economy, and the future sacrifices that both company owners and the State might demand from them should British capitalism fail to recover. Though memories of social upheavals and direct action have had little place in this year’s events – as they go against the marketing strategy devised by the local elite to appeal to investors – it is the kind of memory that deserves to be rekindled. It could offer an alternative kind of culture around which to unite, and inspire Hull’s second class citizens in their fights for a more desirable future.

Further reading

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