

Alternative Cities

Franco Bianchini on the attempts to construct new cosmopolitan images of Britain's regional capitals



Birmingham's International Convention Centre: Home of Rattling good music

In 80s Britain, one of the key features of municipal entrepreneurialism was the notion of the city as an economic entity. The belief was that, in order to adapt to structural economic change, the external images of cities could, and indeed should, be constructed and marketed like those of any consumer product. By the mid-80s, the need for many cities to respond to the decline of the manufacturing industry, to find new economic roles and to attract footloose international capital, developers and tourists, had brought about the emergence of aggressive strategies to market themselves as 'places'.

These campaigns were quite different from those pioneered by the GLC earlier in the decade ('Working For London', do you remember?) through which local authorities had tried both to promote an image of serving and caring for their population, and (implicitly) to protect local autonomy against Thatcherite policies of centralisation.

In cities like Glasgow, Newcastle, Bradford, Sheffield and Birmingham, 'city marketing' was driven mainly by economic imperatives. Policy makers consciously attempted to shed negative images of economic decline, environmental decay, and related social phenomena – for instance, in the case of Glasgow, drunkenness and razor-gang street violence. A classic theme in such attempts to reverse civic fortunes, was the emphasis on the superior 'quality of life' competing cities could offer.

Cultural amenities and resources are an important component of this nebulous concept, partly because the cultural enlivening of a city can act as a powerful symbol of regeneration, of renewed energy and confidence. Culture has therefore been mobilised to the marketing cause by local authorities, alone or in cooperation with urban development corporations and chambers of commerce.

In Glasgow the key year was 1983, with the opening of the Burrell Collection and

the launch of Mayfest, the first building block of an annual programme of arts festivals. Both events provided some evidence to support the claims made by the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' advertising campaign, and helped create the conditions for the 1990 'European City of Culture' nomination.

The award was trumpeted as the clearest proof of the city's renaissance, while the 'European' theme became an important marketing tool. A brochure produced by the Greater Glasgow Tourist Board for the 1990 celebrations declared that 'Glasgow doesn't really feel like a British city... Glasgow looks like a European city. And feels like one'.

The brochure listed among the qualities that made Glasgow 'a great European city becoming even greater' the atmosphere of the recently opened Princes Square shopping centre ('an air of opulence reminiscent of La Galleria in Milan'), in addition to more abstract, city-wide attributes like 'rich culture' and 'style'.

This summer finds Birmingham and Sheffield at the centre of attention. The former for the recent opening of its International Convention Centre (ICC) and Symphony Hall, the latter for the World Student Games, to be held in the city from July 14-25. In both cities the emphasis on new cultural attractions and infrastructures emerged from the need to compensate for the rapid decline of the traditional manufacturing industry. An attractive ambience and a lively cultural scene were seen in both cases as key requirements in finding new economic functions in such sectors as advanced services, media, tourism, and hi-tech industry.

Birmingham launched new festivals (of jazz, literature, cinema and tv), attracted prestigious arts organisations (including the D'Oyly Carte opera company and Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, renamed Birmingham Royal Ballet), established a media development agency within an especially designated

'Media Quarter', and is successfully using the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, led by Simon Rattle, as its ambassador worldwide.

Sheffield, for its part, restored its Lyceum Theatre, and created a 'Cultural Industries Quarter' encompassing a municipally-owned cinema, an arts centre/nightclub, municipal recording studios and rehearsal rooms, a photographic gallery, a developing 'Audio-Visual Enterprise Centre', and a sprinkling of small businesses mainly related to music, film and tv production. However, perhaps because of financial and organisational difficulties, the cultural festival to be held within the World Student Games is strangely not focusing on youth culture, which appears to be the key strength Sheffield could exploit in image terms.

Lastly, both Birmingham and Sheffield developed public art strategies to 'beautify' their environments. In Birmingham in particular, the need to 'humanise' the city-centre, after a series of postwar planning disasters, was perceived by local decision-makers as one of the main problems to be tackled. An investment of over £800,000 in decorative art and sculpture in the ICC area was combined with cultural animation initiatives aimed at making the city-centre more pedestrian-friendly. In an effort to become more lively at night, the city is also openly discussing how to reform its traditionally stringent licensing laws, with a 'Birmingham: dead or alive?' debate in which local youth and the business/tourism lobby are allied in favour of liberalisation.

The cities which have been relatively successful at marketing themselves have often done so in the name of celebrating the uniqueness of local cultures and identities. Yet these strategies tend to adopt broadly similar images and metaphors, are often based upon similar 'flagship projects' (convention centres, concert halls,



A sporting chance: Sheffield's World Student Games facilities

glitzy indoor shopping malls, marinas, prestigious office buildings and residential complexes), and prioritise similar target audiences: financial investors, developers, managers, technologists and other skilled personnel.

Seen in this light, the new art of marketing cities could be interpreted as merely an aspect of a wider process of cultural standardisation, primarily driven by the need for old industrial cities to repackage and reposition themselves according to the global economy, often by 'normalising' their public image.

It is partly because of the social costs of such urban restructuring that 'heritage' themes are so very popular in the attempts to market new images of cities. The appeal to shared roots and to the allegedly 'organic' communities of the past is a way to soften the traumatic consequences of a city's search for a new identity, and growing social polarization.

Although in some cases campaigns produce a revival of local pride and interest in the locality, they are never primarily aimed at fostering the 'rediscovery' of a city by its residents. Instead marketing strategies are generally conceived and implemented by small groups of professional strategists and image-makers. They are not legitimized through genuine public consultation, and the emphasis is very often on

the 'exclusiveness' of particular, customised urban environments, and very rarely on the enjoyment of the city as an organic whole.

For all these reasons, last summer's seemingly parochial debate about the 'Elspeth King affair' in Glasgow is important. Elspeth King, the distinguished curator of Glasgow's People's Palace since 1974, was effectively forced by Glasgow district council to apply for her own job, when a new post of keeper of social history was created. Given her achievements in 16 years at the Palace, many assumed the job would be hers as of right.

The council decided instead to appoint Mark O'Neill, the curator of Glasgow's Springburn Museum. The substance of the ensuing debate — which occupied much space in the Scottish press — can be summarised with a quote from an article by one of King's supporters, Michael Donnelly, who was also her deputy at the People's Palace: 'The wish locally to bury the facts of a past which had become inconvenient, and to superimpose a new, sanitised, marketable image of the city required not a critical social history rooted in the verities of our existence, but a bland, self-congratulatory hype, which found its true apotheosis in the insultingly patronising "Mr Happy" of "Glasgow's Miles Better."'

Without wishing to take

Nicole Ward Jouve on the drama of family snaps

The Magic Box

◀ sides in this controversy, one can only hope that it will help shift city marketing into the arena of local politics and political debate. The civic agenda for the 90s includes issues which are too important to be left to narrow groups of professionals.

There is a need to rethink the contribution of minority cultures – political and racial – in shaping the city's public image. The different perceptions of a city's image and identity, in different contexts – local, regional, national, European and global – must also be taken into account. For instance, there is a need for much more sophisticated information about perceptions of cities by decision and opinion-makers in key places in Europe and the rest of the world. At the moment the main indicator on which marketers base their interventions and evaluate their success is the perspective of business executives and investors based in London and the south east.

Finally, there is the important question of whether it is possible for cities to choose strategies of co-operation and complementarity rather than competition and differentiation. For example, why are the co-ordinators of Manchester's Olympics bid not thinking of using some of the excellent sports facilities Sheffield has built for the World Student Games? Or, more generally, how could 'provincial' cities co-operate to counter-balance London's continuing economic and cultural hegemony, and leapfrog the capital by forming linkages and networks involving their counterparts in other European countries?

The success of Glasgow and Birmingham in this respect is encouraging. With post-GLC London paralysed by traffic congestion, administrative fragmentation and a lack of imaginative urban leadership, these cities have challenged the capital's monopoly of cultural excellence and innovation, especially in the 'pre-electronic' arts (in classical music, for example). They are, far more than London, active exploiters of EC resources and

active members of international urban networks (like 'Eurocities', in Birmingham's case), and are also keen to initiate projects which would further improve their ambience internationally.

Some of these strategies of regeneration – the attempt to create an attractive environment, to construct a more cosmopolitan image, as well as appealing to investors and visitors from other regions – cannot be denied. But the challenge for the next decade will be to go beyond narrowly consumption-oriented strategies, and the ultimately destructive 80s zero-sum-game of competing for limited pools of inward investment or tourism revenues. It will be necessary to develop more locally-controlled production systems, be they in the manufacturing sector or in cultural industries like film, fashion and design.

City marketing should be a celebration of local production – independent film in Sheffield or popular music in Liverpool and Manchester – and not only of imported culture. Trade exhibitions of both 'old' and 'new' local manufacturing products and processes (including advanced technology and art/industry links) could be a legitimate part of future programmes of urban cultural animation.

Moreover, cities should be more imaginative in the 'quality of life' messages they seek to transmit. It is possible to envisage the establishment of 'green' flagship projects, to embody and communicate a city's concern for the environment, or a 'black' flagship – for instance a centre of excellence for black arts – in a city shaped by the growing social, economic and cultural presence of racial minorities.

This kind of intervention, based on the skills of local residents, should be able to generate wealth and employment locally, to give a genuine, modern meaning to a city's identity and external image, and to revitalise a public sphere in which debate about the future of the city itself can take place. ●



Notre Dame de la Garde. The golden statue at the top of the steeple towers over the white church on top of the highest hill in Marseilles. She holds her child in her arms. Looks out to sea.

You enter the upper church. A myriad candles. A hushed flicker at the altars of the side chapels. The walls are covered with a myriad colourful little pictures. Our lady appears in the sky, saves a family from an overturned coach, a burning house. She saves a child from a fever, sailors from sinking ships. *Ex votos*, my brother the photographer said. They're all over the country churches, all over the churches of the Catholic Latin countries. 'They're the paintings of the poor. For the poor. Ordinary people who couldn't afford the expensive painters, wouldn't have dreamt of having their own portraits painted. Yet if they were saved from the extremity of distress, they would get somebody local to do them, so they could give thanks to the protective

Good Mother. *Ex votos* are the only images of poor families to have existed before photography. The only expression of the right of the poor to their own image.'

Photography seems to have provided even the poor with some right to their own image at a surprisingly early date. The 1890s, the first age of tourism for the masses and of the bicycle craze, were the years in which Kodak and Eastman developed their inventions and in which the idea of domestic photography spread, Don Slater tells us in the collection **Family Snaps: The Meaning Of Domestic Photography** (Virago, pbk £14.99), edited by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland.

As photography's popularity increased, Terry Dennett shows, the social album became an organ of agitation and propaganda. Cheap photo-postcard production enabled various trade-union and labour organizations to raise funds, to illustrate and record working-class life and struggles both in Ger-