

STATE OF THE DESTINATION

Culture, renaissance and the sense of place

In November, the shortlist for the European Capital of Culture 2008 was announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It contained no fewer than six of the 12 cities who had been bidding: Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle Gateshead and Oxford. There was surprise in many quarters at the omission of two cities in particular, Belfast and Canterbury, which the bookies had considered to be among the favourites. The six shortlisted cities now become Centres of Culture, and continue their campaigns to win the British government's nomination for the title, which will finally be announced in March 2003.

While the six successful cities should be applauded for progressing to the final phase, it is vital that the 'losers' are not forgotten. The planning and, in many cases, capital projects that had been put in place during the bidding process provide a ready-made platform to improve the cultural infrastructure of these cities and their wider regions, and in turn to raise the profile of these locations. They now require financial support to realise their plans.

How much will the Capital of Culture title be worth to the eventual winner? The figures estimated by the remaining bidders vary significantly, in terms of likely economic benefit to the regional economy and numbers of new jobs created. Measuring the total impact of such an event, which takes place

over a long period and comprises a wide range of activities, is a complex task. Indeed, measuring the economic impact of a single cultural project can be more complicated than first meets the eye.

In Gateshead, for example, the Baltic Centre is undoubtedly playing a significant role in generating improvement of the local economy. A variety of commercial developments have chosen to locate in its vicinity – and to call upon the Baltic name in their own branding. In this case, the evidence for the catalytic role of culture is clear, and the quantification of economic benefits being delivered appears straightforward. But this is not the case with a project which many argue helped to pave the way for the Baltic's development: the Angel of the North.

After a slightly uncertain beginning, the Angel is considered a massive success by the people of the North East, standing as a powerful symbol of regional identity. It expresses, in one bold statement, pride in the region's industrial heritage and hope for the future. The major capital projects that have subsequently emerged are further strengthening the 'sense of place'. Yet while development of the Baltic is leading to direct and measurable improvement of its surrounding area, the same cannot be said of its forerunner. A quick analysis of the Angel's 'impact' would reveal that it had been responsible for

the creation of no new jobs, no new visitor revenues, and no associated spend in the local economy. Its contribution may be unquantified but there is no doubt that it has been huge. When the Angel spread its wings over Gateshead, the area's cultural confidence was given a spiritual boost. Clearly, new ways and means of measuring such subtle yet pivotal effects need to be found.

While economic renaissance with a cultural flavour is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK, it has been around for some time in the United States. Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco is a highly successful and innovative example of how culture has been placed at the heart of regeneration. Here, a run-down industrial area with no prospects has been completely transformed thanks to a combination of culture, entertainment, retail and hospitality. At the heart of the development lie the Yerba Buena Arts Center and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Alongside them sit commercial attractions such as the Sony Metreon, hotels, shops and business facilities (the Moscone Convention Center). One of the keys to success at Yerba Buena Gardens has been the will of the site's myriad occupiers to work collectively for the greater good of the destination as a whole. As John Killacky, executive director of the Yerba Buena Arts Center, puts it: 'We are only as strong as our neighbours – it's not a competition.' The net effect of this management buy-in to the

Yerba Buena Gardens destination has been the promotion of a single entity, with its own distinctive identity. This, in turn, is attracting visitors to return time and again, driving up total footfall and improving returns for investors. The same phenomenon has been witnessed at London's Covent Garden, where a mixture of artistic and cultural complexes, retail and catering, wrapped around a single destination name, now attracts 30 million visitors per annum, turning it into the UK's best performing retail location.

What is it that these successful destinations share, whether cultural or commercial or a combination of the two? The answer is simple: a strong sense of place and recognisable destination branding. The European Capital of Culture competition offers a great opportunity to cities to strengthen their own distinctive cultural identity. This applies to all 12 of the original participants, not just the six who have progressed through to the last stage. It is to be hoped that they will be given the chance to continue the good work started in the bidding period. Come 2008, there should be 12 winners, not just one.