

Defining a DECADE

Glasgow and the 1990 City of Culture

In 1990, Glasgow was the European City of Culture, as it was then called. As the only British city to have been awarded the title, what can the current crop of contenders learn from Glasgow's experience? We asked Dr Stuart MacDonald, director of The Lighthouse, one of Glasgow's new generation of innovative cultural destinations, to reflect on the long-term psychological and economic impact of the year.

Whether your abiding memory of the last decade is Diana or the Dome, retro or reality TV, it was in the '90s that we learned to love our old industrial cities. What became a European phenomenon - the post-industrial transformation of cities through cultural regeneration - is the mark of how Glasgow, through its reign in 1990 as European City of Culture, helped define a decade.

The timing was crucial. Helped by Roger Hargreave's graphics and the marketing acumen of the then Lord Provost Michael Kelly, Glasgow commenced its long and painful journey from the gloom of its industrial past with the renowned 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign in the mid-1980s and one of the biggest urban groundshifts in history. With its associated inward investment and cultural strategies - the Garden Festival, the opening of the Burrell Collection (a landmark building predating Bilbao's Guggenheim by a decade), that campaign secured the City of Culture crown and created a virtuous circle of creativity leading to the prize of UK City of Architecture and Design 1999.

Three pillars of wisdom

There are at least three prevailing pieces of wisdom about the impact of 1990 on Glasgow. The first has it that the City of Culture

Glasgow Science Centre





The Lighthouse, Glasgow

award had little effect - at most 6,000 jobs were created in the cultural sector and most of these disappeared two years later. The second is that 1990 sparked off a renaissance in the city's economic regeneration by creating a platform for new service industries such as call centres and for new creative companies - media, design, architecture, music - set up by a growing army of cultural entrepreneurs. The reality is that elements of both those stories are true. The third 1990 story is that repositioning Glasgow as a city of culture amounted to more than hype. Sure, it did not solve all of the city's problems but what it did do was drive a process of adaptation and self-learning in which the city, in conjunction with the private sector, sought to develop Glasgow's cultural assets.

If any help is needed in this exercise then one only has to try to visualise what the city would have been like had there been no investment in Glasgow's progress as a city of culture - the outcome, quite frankly, is unimaginable. What many external commentators miss in these three accounts is the demise of Strathclyde, Glasgow's economic region, which was 'disaggregated' along with the rest of Scotland's regional authorities by the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Forsyth, in 1996. The role of the former Strathclyde in the cultural and economic regeneration of Glasgow, especially 1990, is legion. Without 1990 there would have been no propulsion to the 1996 International Design Festival and then to UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999. Glasgow has been a model in that sense, with its momentum building techniques copied

elsewhere in Europe. But arguably, without the cohering support and wider economic framework that was possible with Strathclyde, some forward direction has been lost due to extraneous factors.

However, if you believe the first account, that Glasgow has lost its momentum and dissipated the advantage created by 1990, then there is another piece of the analytical jigsaw that has to be considered. With the advent of the Scottish Parliament there was an exodus of former local politicians to Holyrood, and at the same time many of the main protagonists and stakeholders in cultural regeneration moved on. And if the second is to be believed, Glasgow is a vibrant mix of culture and commerce, which has completely reinvented its historical, heavy industrial image. The reality, of course, is that the knowledge economy has some way to go in Glasgow. The call centres and other service industries, once seen as major components in the city's salvation, have proved to be as vulnerable as shipbuilding and engineering were to global economic shifts.

The third and probably most accurate account is that the 'place marketing' that started with the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign, which was the multiplier effect in the City of Culture year, carrying through the 1996 and 1999 city festivals, did focus strategy on narrowing the gap between hype and reality. It also projected Glasgow as an innovative city. It has certainly earned a 'can do' reputation. What other city in the past decade has launched what in its time was the largest performance and exhibition space in Europe



Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow

with Tramway (1990)? The transformation of Tramway from industrial to contemporary art space has been widely copied, most recently by the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and BALTIC in Gateshead. Tramway was recently revamped at a cost of £3 million. Or opened a Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) for which the sobriquet 'gallery of popular culture' might be more appropriate but which, nonetheless, attracts half a million visitors a year? But GOMA was in one sense a distraction from the innovation agenda set by Tramway. The £7.5 million rehabilitation of the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) will consolidate Glasgow being at the cutting edge of the contemporary art scene. 'Transmission', which nurtured prize-winning, international artists like Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Roddy Buchanan and Toby Patterson, recently celebrated its 15th birthday. All of these assets are crucial in attracting and retaining the 'creative class', that new breed who create wealth from thin air.

The legacy: new models for culture and the economy

Developing a reputation for innovation linked to the creative economy has accelerated with The Lighthouse - the £12.5 million conversion of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's *Glasgow Herald* building

into Scotland's centre for Architecture, Design and the City and the first national institution in the City - and the £75 million Glasgow Science Centre on the old Garden Festival site. Both projects demonstrate a continuing of the change mentality. Certainly they are about cultural tourism but they also sit on the cross-over from cultural consumption to cultural production. The Lighthouse especially, with its crossover of exhibitions, events, education and design into business and the creative industries' network, is on the commercially active side of the arts-economy equation, and is establishing a new business model for the sector. This, in a sense, is the real legacy of 1990.

In the creative economy, it is uniqueness and innovation that will be the key. It is these things that make Glaswegians as unique as Muskovites or Parisians and Glasgow as intriguing as Barcelona or Chicago. Glasgow European City of Culture 1990 spun that identity and can rightly lay claim to kick-starting the rise of the creative city.