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From Local to Global: Selling Belfast Abroad

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Résumé

Once described as too parochial and lacking a clear sense of where it is headed, Belfast is now actively seeking to market its local culture at home as well as abroad. Responding to new world trends such as cultural and experiential tourism that gives emphasis to creating experiences, the City Council's latest cultural strategy (2012-2015) reflects the Council's commitment to promoting new ways of visiting and discovering Belfast, notably through site-specific arts projects. Focusing on the year 2012, which saw Belfast host a series of world-class events, this article examines how central culture and the arts have become to the city's developmental strategy and its re-branding process as a cultural place with a distinct flavor. Drawing upon a host of recent artistic projects – occurring in a variety of contexts – this article examines the move towards the globalization of local culture and the internationalization of the arts sector and the consequences of this shift. It argues that while the inclusive dimension of some major urban development projects like the Titanic Quarter is questionable, the city's endorsement of a model that places culture at the heart of the city's rebranding process has led to a redefinition of what local culture stands for, opening up new avenues for arts organizations that wish to embrace the local as well as the global and explore all the possibilities the creative space offers including in the realm of conflict transformation, social inclusion and place-making.

Mots clés : Irlande du Nord – post-conflit, Belfast, tourisme, arts communautaires

Abstract

Autrefois jugée trop provinciale et dépourvue de projet d'avenir précis, la ville de Belfast déploie désormais de nombreux efforts pour promouvoir son patrimoine culturel local à l'étranger. La municipalité n'est pas restée insensible aux nouvelles tendances apparues au niveau mondial telles que le tourisme culturel ou le tourisme expérientiel qui se propose d'offrir des expériences « authentiques » mémorables. La stratégie culturelle de la ville, pour la période 2012-2015, reflète la volonté de la municipalité d'encourager de nouvelles manières de découvrir Belfast, notamment à travers des projets artistiques in situ. Centré sur l'année 2012, au cours de laquelle Belfast a accueilli plusieurs événements de renommée mondiale, cet article a pour objectif d'étudier le rôle essentiel de la culture et des arts dans la stratégie de développement et de communication marketing de la ville. A travers l'analyse d'une série de projets artistiques récents, cet article met en évidence le mouvement vers une mondialisation de la culture locale et l'ouverture croissante du secteur artistique à l'international. L'auteur souligne que si des réserves peuvent être formulées quant à la dimension inclusive de certains projets urbains culturels tels que l'aménagement du Titanic Quarter, le choix fait par la municipalité d'utiliser la culture comme levier de développement économique et facteur d'attractivité a entraîné une redéfinition de ce qui constitue la culture locale. Cette évolution a ouvert un champ de possibilités plus vaste aux organisations artistiques qui souhaitent intervenir à différentes échelles,

auprès de publics variés et explorer toutes les dimensions de la création artistique y compris dans des domaines tels que la transformation des conflits, l'inclusion sociale et l'écriture des lieux.

Keywords: Northern Ireland – post-conflict, Belfast, tourism, community arts

Due to growing urbanization and the development of a globalized economy that values mobility and exchanges, cities are now viewed as key economic drivers. In a post-industrialized, multi-scaled environment, where the local and global increasingly need to be apprehended together, the dominant discourse is that cities cannot survive unless they create value and attractiveness notably by actively supporting the creative industries¹ – one of the fastest-growing sectors in terms of wealth and job creation – as well as tourism.

In a globalized environment, however, the tourism industry has had to evolve and respond to new consumer trends as mass tourism lost its appeal. Lured by the prospect of increased revenue from growing demand for cultural tourism and experiential tourism, which places the emphasis on visitors engaging emotionally with a place, cities have been looking for ways of showcasing local culture at home as well as abroad and making the experience of visiting memorable. Additionally, in a highly competitive environment where public money has grown scarce, the need for cities to stand out by asserting their uniqueness and distinctiveness means that local culture, heritage and the arts have become key components of the marketing and rebranding process of cities seeking to attract investments. A study led by the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2012 looking at seven recovering cities across Europe², among which Belfast, highlights common features in the approaches adopted by local and regional leaders to raise the profile of former industrial cities. Like other cities that were severely hit by urban decline in the 70s, post-conflict Belfast is striving to position itself as a safe culturally vibrant city that has something unique to offer. The opening of Titanic Belfast two years ago and the hosting of other events of global resonance³ suggest that the city's ambitions have moved on to another level. In the context of these recent developments, the article examines the role culture and the arts play in helping the city champion its local culture and market itself not only across Europe but

1. DCAL is the Northern Ireland Government Lead on the Creative industries. It is stipulated in the PFG Delivery Plan Commitment 14 that "DCAL is committed to investing £4 m over 2011-2015 via the Creative Industries Innovation Fund and wider sectoral initiatives to stimulate innovation, R&D and creativity". Available at [www.northernireland.gov.uk]. In its annual review 2011-2012, the ACNI notes that: "The Creative Industries is one of the few sectors that is continuing to grow and expand during the recession." ACNI, *Annual Review 2011-2012*, Belfast, ACNI, 2012, p. 12.

2. Anne Power, *Recovering Cities : How to Create Value For Cities*, Paris, La fabrique de la Ville, July 2013.

3. The G8 summit was held in Northern Ireland in June 2013 and the World Police and Fire Games were hosted in Belfast in August 2013.

also beyond the boundaries of Europe. It also aims to capture and investigate the changes this rebranding process has brought about in relation to cultural strategies, the definition of local culture and the city's cultural offering.

■ Culture and Tourism

Once described as parochial and inward-looking, there are signs that Belfast has taken a number of steps to increase significantly the number of people visiting the city in the hope of boosting its economic development and visibility. The city, which for years was hardly a city for tourists, has now become a tourist destination in its own right at least for short breaks. Belfast may still have to go a long way to be on a par with other cities renowned for their cultural offering and heritage but it is now on the map. A close look at a number of documents suggests that there is a consensus – at least among key stakeholders – on the need to enhance the city's attractiveness and rebranding process⁴. The Programme for Government (2011-2015), whose primary objective is to deliver a sustainable economy, recognizes the potential of culture, arts and leisure to bring about positive change⁵ and does classify the development of tourism and the creative industries as priorities. Concerning tourism, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board website reveals that 2012 and 2013 were identified as tipping points for tourism in Northern Ireland because of a favourable set of circumstances such as the staging of a series of world-class events. The *NI Our Time, Our Place* document published by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board announces that “2012 is destined to be one of the most extraordinary years in our history⁶”. It also underlines that one of the aims of the 2012 campaign is to achieve a change in global perception of Northern Ireland and “attract tourists from all around the globe⁷”. It is worth noting too that in 2012 the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Arts, Culture and Leisure led an “Inquiry into maximizing the potential of the creative industries in Northern Ireland⁸”. Numerous artists, arts organiza-

4. In an essay entitled *Three Narratives in Search of a City: Researching Belfast's 'post-conflict' Transitions*, Liam O'Dowd and Milena Komarova contend that “Belfast is now widely portrayed as having moved from a ‘violently contested’ city to a ‘post-conflict’ city preoccupied by economic development, thus joining the ranks of ‘entrepreneurial cities’ seen as putative engines of transnational capitalism”. Liam O'Dowd & Milena Komarova (2013), “Three Narratives in search of a city: Researching Belfast's ‘post-conflict’ transitions”, in *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 17:4, p. 526-546.

5. The Programme for Government 2011-2015 sets out five priorities. The need to unlock the potential of the culture, arts and leisure sectors as instruments for positive change appears under Priority 4, Building a Strong and Shared Community.

6. *NI Our Time, Our Place*, p. 12. Available at www.nitb.com. To obtain further data about the ni2012 legacy consult the document *ni2012: Our Time, Our Place, Our Story*, available at [www.nitb.com].

7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

8. In September 2011, the Committee of Culture, Arts and Leisure agreed to carry out an Inquiry into the Creative Industries.

tions and arts officers were invited to articulate their views on that issue and make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken to capitalize on the potential of the creative industries⁹. The year 2012 was also marked by the festivities orchestrated to celebrate the opening of Titanic Belfast – the new signature building – and the 100th anniversary of the Titanic's Maiden Voyage. This event coincided with the launch of the City Council's new integrated cultural framework (2012-2015) where the City Council clearly reasserts its commitment to driving the transformation of Belfast so that it can vie with other cities as a place worth visiting.

We will take a leadership role on strategic alignment and coordination at city level, articulating linkages across creative industries, arts and culture and tourism to realise opportunities. We will also work with partners in positioning Belfast as a creative and cultural city¹⁰.

The setting-up of an overarching committee that is responsible for the Council's role and remit in the development and regeneration of Belfast as well as responsible for tourism, arts, cultural issues and European issues testifies to the Council's commitment to steering the recovery process in a holistic manner. The LSE study previously mentioned identifies strong leadership with a clear vision as one of the main strands of action adopted by recovering cities to get economically stronger. There is no question that Belfast City Council has now embraced the view that culture is the most important motivation for city trips and has devised its integrated strategy accordingly. The role of culture as a key ingredient of Belfast's attractiveness is clearly spelt out in the 2012-2015 document as well as the need to promote joined-up processes: "Culture is recognized as both a key motivation and developmental lever within the Tourism framework, and all of the areas and projects identified in it, the Crumlin Road Gaol and Courthouse, Shankill, Gaeltacht, Connswater Community Greenway, North Belfast Cultural Corridor and Queen's Quarter to name a few – have culture at their core¹¹." From a developmental perspective that gives priority to cultural tourism, culture is no longer seen as a potentially contentious and divisive issue but as a "brand" that makes Belfast distinctive. The definition that appears on the fourth page of the cultural strategy document underscores the centrality of arts and heritage as a defining element of Belfast's marketable identity:

9. The outcome of the inquiry can be viewed online. Reference NIA 98/11-15. Available at [www.niassembly.gov.uk].

10. Belfast City Council, *Cultural Framework for 2012-2015*, p. 15.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

However, for the purposes of this framework, culture is defined as the quality that makes Belfast distinctive as represented through arts and heritage¹².

■ The Council's growing interest in the arts

The new integrated cultural strategy builds on two previous integrated strategies that both paved the way for Belfast's rebranding as a safe, attractive destination. The first one, which was launched in 2003, amounted to a sea-change in the Council's approach to culture and the arts given the Council's history of neglecting the arts. In May 2014, while he was answering questions from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure as part of an inquiry into inclusion in the arts of the working-class communities, Belfast-based playwright Martin Lynch, who spearheaded the growth of community arts in Belfast, gladly acknowledged the progress made since the early 1990s:

The Belfast City Council had a zero approach to the arts when I started. [...]. Now, I am delighted to say that there is a range of councillors from most parties who acknowledge and appreciate the impact that the arts can make¹³.

To understand the reasons that led the council to re-assess its priorities in the early 2000s, one must bear in mind the key political changes that took place in the mid-90s and in the late 1990s with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the creation of the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in 1999. In that context of new possibilities opening up, the Council, which had not traditionally been very supportive of the arts, decided that Belfast should take part in the Capital of Culture competition¹⁴ in the hope that winning the bid would help the city transform its image and reap the peace dividends. Though DCAL did not have the lead responsibility for the bid, it became the main funder of the project and in October 2001 *Imagine Belfast 2008* was officially launched. The city, however, failed to be shortlisted. The committee in charge of the selection process explained that besides being poorly equipped in cultural infrastructure, Belfast still lacked a clear and common vision of where it should be heading¹⁵.

12. Belfast City Council, *Cultural Framework for 2012-2015*, p. 4.

13. Northern Ireland Assembly, *Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of the Working-Class Communities: Mr Martin Lynch*, Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, 27 May 2014, p. 9-10. Available at [www.niassembly.gov.uk].

14. Under an EU agreement, each year from 2005 to 2019, a city is to be designated European Capital of Culture, with a UK city fulfilling the role in 2008.

15. For more information on the bid process, consult: Northern Ireland Audit Office, *Imagine Belfast 2008: Report*, Belfast, Stationery Office, 2004.

The 2003-2006 strategy¹⁶, which came out in the wake of the bid failure and in the midst of a debate over the role of culture and the arts in a post-conflict society¹⁷, was a clear sign that the Council had taken the full measure of the changes that were needed. The objectives set out in the cultural strategy reflected the Council's new commitment to raising the city's cultural profile by being far more pro-active in its support of culture and the arts¹⁸. Endorsing the creative city model disseminated by the EU as of the late 80s¹⁹, the Council opted for a more holistic approach requiring joined-up approaches notably in the field of cultural policy and urban regeneration. Three years later, the fifteen-month-long programme of activities – *Celebrate Belfast 2006*²⁰ – involving key stakeholders across the city moved culture and the arts higher on the agenda. Additionally, it provided the City Council with the opportunity to further assert its leadership on the cultural front. For the first time, for instance, the Council was in charge of organizing the potentially contentious St Patrick's Day's festivities in the city centre²¹. To make the event more inclusive and family-friendly, the Council proposed to organize a carnival procession as part of the St Patrick's Day's festivities. With a track-record of cross-community carnivals, the Beat Initiative appeared well-poised to take up the challenge. The participation of the Beat Initiative, anchored in east Belfast since 1995, made it possible to secure a consensus among community groups across the religious divide²². Thus, greater involvement of the local authorities in the field of culture and the arts occurred in a context of

16. Belfast City Council, *Culture and Arts Plan 2003-2006*, Belfast, BBC, 2003.

17. *Re-imagining Belfast* was published in October 2003. Comprising twelve essays outlining different perspectives on Belfast's cultural landscape it was conceived by the authors as a platform for an honest debate on the future of the arts in Belfast. Mark Carruthers, Stephen Douds and Tim Loane, *Re-imagining Belfast*, Belfast, Cultural Resolution, 2003.

18. The setting-up of a multi-annual funding scheme as part of the Culture and Arts Plan 2003-2006 was a major step forward for community arts organizations like the Beat Initiative, the Belfast Community Circus, etc.

19. In the late 80s, European leaders identified culture and the arts as a new resource that could generate wealth and jobs and help to revitalize cities. The assumption was that the creative city model, which encouraged participation in the arts and creative regeneration, would strengthen social cohesion and drive economic development.

20. The evaluation document of *Celebrate Belfast* states that over 1,000 arts, cultural and sporting events were held during fifteen months.

21. To obtain further information on this issue, you may consult: Hélène Hamayon-Alfaro, *Les arts communautaires à Belfast de 1979 à 2006: de la marge au consensus ?*, Ph.D diss., Paris 3, 2009, p. 435-439.

22. To know more about the decision-making process leading to this outdoor event, you may consult: Clifford Stevenson, Gordon Gillespie, John Nagle, Dominic Bryan & Orla Muldoon, *St Patrick's Day Outdoor Event 2006 – Monitoring Report*, Belfast, Institute of Irish Studies, 2006. In an article published in 2011, Dominic Bryan takes the view that the organization of such key public events in the city centre has bettered political relations within the city. O'Dowd and Komarova, however, challenge this assertion contending that these events – St Patrick's Day or Orangefest – “still draw mainly on the respective nationalist and unionist publics”. Dominic Bryan (2011), « Des droits civils au carnaval: anthropologie de l'espace public à Belfast » in *Ethnologie Française*, 41, p. 289-300. Liam O'Dowd & Milena Komarova (2013), “Three narratives in search of a city: Researching Belfast's 'post-conflict' transitions”, in *City: Analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 17 (4), p. 526-546.

heightened awareness of the role the arts could play in conflict transformation. In 2006, substantial investments in capital arts projects were announced while the three-year *Re-imaging Communities* programme, which championed participation in community-based arts projects to help transform the sectarian landscape, was launched. The subsequent City Council's cultural strategy for 2007-2011²³ pursued along the same lines but operated within a new government policy framework that promised to promote sharing over separating²⁴.

■ A shift in approach to local culture

In the early 1990s, prior to the GFA, the enhancement of local culture had been primarily driven by a political agenda. In the context of peacebuilding endeavours, the exploration of cultural difference either through single-identity projects or cross-community ones was meant to pave the way for the political recognition of cultural diversity as a defining feature of Northern Ireland society – a pre-requisite to power-sharing. But in the early 2000s, in the aftermath of the GFA, as tensions grew, the limitations of the model became manifest. The risk was that the cultural traditions model would continue to legitimize the idea that local culture was either rooted in the nationalist culture or the unionist culture, exacerbating cultural rivalries and deepening divisions. Released in 2005, *A Shared Future*²⁵ constituted a break away from the cultural traditions model that was thought to reinforce manufactured identities with the effect of hindering the emergence of a civic culture that was embedded in the One-City vision. *A Shared Future*, whose action plan called for the funding of cultural projects that celebrated the complexity of history and individual identities, was an invitation to re-delineate what local culture stood for and to challenge sectarian stereotypes. The new policy document clearly highlighted the value of the creative space as a conflict-transformation tool.

The incremental acceptance that an ethnic vision of the city made it far more uncertain for city-wide projects to materialize and for post-conflict Belfast to be perceived as a safe place for investors and tourists led to greater convergence in terms of local governance. The challenge for the regional capital was now to ensure that the promotion of local culture, a politically sensitive issue in Nor-

23. The Belfast City Council claims that from 2007 to 2011 they invested on average £1.35 m in culture each year to support 75 organizations and over 100 programmes and projects. A summary report entitled *Local Authority Arts expenditure 2009-2010 and 2010-2011* indicates that in 2009-2010 the total expenditure on the arts for Belfast was 9,695,372 while in 2010-2011 the figure was 8, 261,453. ACNI, *Local Authority Arts Expenditure 2009-2010 and 2010-2011*, Belfast, ACNI, 2011.

24. OFMDFM, *A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009*, Belfast, OFMDFM, 2006.

25. OFMDFM, *A Shared Future: Policy and Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, OFMDFM, 2005.

thern Ireland, would not sanction a narrow sectarian definition of culture while remaining “distinctive”. Looking at the role heritage could play in making the city unique, the authors of the Cultural Strategy point out that: “At the core of what heritage can deliver for Belfast is a strong and healthy relationship to identity²⁶.” Interestingly, the analysis of the answers the City Council collated as part of the consultation process on its new cultural framework (2012-2015) brings to the fore that one of the bones of contention was the choice of *Distinctly Belfast* as one of the four themes that structured the draft framework²⁷. Most of the people surveyed opposed *Distinctly Belfast* on the grounds that it sounded too parochial, too insular and too excluding. On the basis of the evidence gathered from the Council’s website it may be argued that in the eyes of a majority of arts organizations local does not rhyme with parochial. In a globalized and “post-conflict” environment, or at least increasingly perceived as such, promoting local talents and marketing local culture abroad goes hand in hand with opening up Belfast to other talents and establishing international connections. Thus, the globalization of local culture and the internationalization of arts organizations are two sides of the same coin.

The economic argument in favour of spending public money on culture and the arts appears in the introduction of the 2012-2015 Cultural Strategy: “Culture, arts and heritage create wealth by supporting jobs, attracting visitors and increasing investment²⁸.” The realization that the growth of cultural tourism represents a boon for the city means that culture is viewed as a resource that should be tapped into. This economics-driven approach to culture has transformed the city itself into a commodity that must suit the tastes of visitors that are increasingly coming from a wider range of countries. Interestingly, the figures provided by the City Council to justify its model of development emphasize the global dimension of this trend, corroborating the idea that the city is responding to world trends in its approach to culture: “The World Tourist Organization states that cultural tourism represents over 50% of tourism worldwide and that it is growing by 15% each year – three times the rate of growth of tourism in general²⁹”. Looking at the impact of globalization on Irish theatre in *Theatre and Globalization*, Patrick Lonergan argues that one of the features of globalization “is the spread of an international and/or global culture³⁰”. While in the 1990s and early 2000s the boundaries were still more or less those of the European Union, it seems that gradually

26. Belfast City Council, *Cultural Framework for 2012-2015*, Development Department, p. 14.

27. The Cultural Strategy is articulated around four themes: Distinctly Belfast, Inspiring Communities, Attracting Audiences, Strengthening the Sector.

28. Belfast City Council, *Cultural Framework for 2012-2015*, Development Department, p. 4.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

30. Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 18.

economic world trends are driving cities to operate on a global scale regardless of national concerns. In the book aforementioned, Loneragan holds the view that globalization is not just an economic process. He claims that it is a *mime* – in other words “a self-replicating cultural motif that survives because individuals choose to believe in it [...]”³¹. Hence, our belief that globalization exists tends to strengthen globalization by encouraging globalizing approaches. The Council’s statement that by 2020 “[...] the city’s culture and creativity should be renowned throughout the world”³² illustrates Loneragan’s point. The assumption that culture – in a broad sense – is what visitors are after is shaping the development and regeneration of cities across the world and Belfast is no exception. In the same way, the consumer’s quest for local flavor and enhanced cultural experiences is modeling the cultural offering as will be shown further on. Increasingly, the tension between local and global determines in various ways and degrees what is happening in the field of culture and the arts. Arts organizations – even those with a history of engaging with local communities – are responding to this dynamic. Answering questions about the ethos of Belfast Exposed on the thirtieth anniversary of the arts organization, Pauline Hadaway, the former director, explained:

I think communities in Northern Ireland is a really interesting space because on the one hand it is kind of locked in but on the other hand it is always reaching out and I think in a way that our positioning between the local and the global, the particular and the international, the particular and the universal is sort of what we are about, it’s quite a hard space to manage. Belfast Exposed tries to sit between the two. It is not easy. But I think it’s worth it [...]. We want to talk to the local and the global. We don’t ever want to have to choose between one or another³³.

Pauline Hadaway’s analysis suggests that arts organizations increasingly need to navigate in an economic and cultural environment where conflicting logics are at play. As the pull of globalizing approaches drives cities to support ever bigger urban development projects and events that resonate globally, local priorities are at risk of being neglected. In that respect, it is worth noting that when she stood in front of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Paula MacFetridge was keen to underline the need for smaller grants for tourism arts projects so that local organizations might be able to create “small-scale animations that are more attractive to”³⁴...” local government and local borough councils. Unchecked, the trend

31. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

32. Belfast City Council, *Cultural Strategy for 2012-2015*, Belfast, BBC, 2012, p. 5.

33. Video document from NvTv (Northern Visions Community Television). To mark its 30th anniversary Belfast Exposed organized an exhibition spanning 30 years of photography in Northern Ireland.

34. Northern Ireland Assembly, *Inquiry into Maximising the Potential of the Creative Industries in Northern Ireland*, Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, 19 April 2012, p. 2.

towards greater visibility might indeed prove detrimental to apparently less ambitious projects.

■ A changing city

One of the consequences of a greater awareness of the role culture, arts and heritage could play in furthering Belfast's rebranding has been the upgrading of Belfast's cultural facilities. For years, the arts sector in Northern Ireland³⁵ had been neglected and underfunded with Belfast lagging behind other UK cities and suffering from a severe lack of cultural infrastructure. The situation started to improve significantly in the mid-2000s following the *Imagine Belfast* failure with the opening of the Black Box on Hill Street, the building of the Grand Opera House extension and the refurbishing of a number of arts organizations premises in Cathedral Quarter³⁶ funded through the channel of Peace II and Peace III. In 2009, the Ulster Hall – a Victorian music hall – reopened after being extensively refurbished. First confined to the city centre, renovation programmes extended to other parts of the city. In South Belfast, work began on the Lyric in 2009 and was completed in 2011. Today, the theatre is three times as big as the old one and provides spacious lobbies and all sorts of facilities. After years of neglect and tight budgets, prominent community arts centres, often based in disadvantaged communities adjacent to the city centre, were renovated: the Crescent Arts Centre – a fixture of Belfast's cultural life and the only community arts centre perceived as neutral – re-opened in 2010 after a £7.2 millions facelift. For years, it had been falling in a state of disrepair despite its popularity among Belfast residents. Similarly, in West Belfast, Culturlann – a long-established centre for Irish language and culture on the Falls road – was revamped with a new extension opening in 2011³⁷. About the same time, Conway Mill – a disused linen mill that became a radical cultural hub in the 70s and 80s and a site for all sorts of alternative projects – underwent major changes as part of an extensive regeneration project involving multiple funding sources. The same year, the Metropolitan Arts Centre

35. It is not easy to assess in a very accurate way the amount of money spent on the arts per capita in Northern Ireland and other regions in the UK. But according to a briefing paper prepared for the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2010, in 2008-2009 the spending on the arts per capita reached £14.04 for Scotland, £8.47 for England, £7.58 for Northern Ireland and €17.92 for the Republic of Ireland. The author of this paper points out that depending on the methodology adopted, figures may vary. If one looks at the primary source of funding only (The DCAL model for arts spending), the figure is 14.42 for Scotland, 7.89 for England, 9.95 for Northern Ireland and €18.45 for the Republic of Ireland. Kirsty Bell, *Arts Spending per Capita in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, Northern Ireland Assembly, 24 November 2010.

36. The premises of Belfast Exposed, Northern Visions and the Belfast Community Circus were all refurbished.

37. The centre was officially re-opened by President of Ireland Mary McAleese. The restoration work was funded through multiple funding: DCAL, Arts Council, NI Tourist Board, the Department for Social Development and the International Fund for Ireland.

(MAC) – a state-of-the art purpose-built venue³⁸ – opened in Cathedral Quarter next to the University of Ulster campus due to be extended as of 2015³⁹. Information compiled on DCAL's website indicates that: "Government allocated £18 m for arts infrastructure, primarily in Belfast, underlining government's strategy to encourage arts and culture to lead the way in the city's social and economic regeneration⁴⁰."

The restoration work carried out on the Conway Mill building and on the Crescent Arts Centre reveals that in recent years another strand of action in the realm of regeneration and rebranding has gained momentum. Long overlooked, over time, the issue of the conservation of Belfast's built heritage – from linen mills to small red-brick terraced houses – has garnered attention. In the early 2000s, a couple of initiatives heralded this change. In 2004, for instance, the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society along with the arts community, a handful of pub owners and the active support of the Council launched the *Let's Get It Right Campaign* to protest against urban development plans that showed little consideration for the city's built heritage in Cathedral Quarter. Two years later, the "Urban Alchemy – The transformative Power of Art and Architecture" conference, which brought together the Arts Council, the City Council and the Royal Society of Ulster Architecture, confirmed a shift in approach to regenerating the city as well as greater convergence in the decision-making process. Growing interest in the economic benefits cultural tourism generates means that the need to enhance heritage, local architecture and re-use derelict buildings instead of building new ones is now on its way to being widely acknowledged. On paper, the Council's latest cultural strategy does reflect a new awareness of the value of restoration. One of the earliest and most emblematic examples of this trend was the restoration by the Council of the Victorian St George's market in the city centre in the late 1990s. Today, the building holds a lively market with home-grown products every Friday as well as a number of cultural events throughout the year such as the Festival of Colours led by ArtsEkta – Belfast's leading ethnic arts organization. Yet, though the Council's strategy emphasizes how crucial it is to support conservation, the section of the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) report commenting on the Council's approach to heritage suggests that the latter needs to be more focused; one of their recommendations is that restoration efforts should target every historic building "whether it is large or small⁴¹". It is worth

38. The newly-built arts centre should be able to host a range of international exhibitions that require certain standards.

39. It has been announced that the new Belfast campus is due for completion in 2018. In a few years there should be around 15,000 students and staff based in the city centre.

40. Data available at [www.dcalni.gov.uk].

41. MAG response to Belfast City Council's consultation on the Draft Cultural Framework for Belfast, August 2012, p. 4. Available at [www.dcalni.gov.uk].

noting that, as part of the Review for Public Administration (RPA), which was put on hold in 2010 and should get restarted in 2015, greater planning powers will be transferred to the Council, giving it a stronger say in the field of community planning. It is thought that this change in governance will allow the City Council to have more leeway and work with larger budgets not only in relation to regeneration but also culture and the arts. Another major development in a post-conflict context has been the conversion of the Crumlin Road Gaol in north Belfast into a cultural attraction providing guided tours of the prison seven days a week. The project is emblematic of a European-wide cultural trend which consists in the transformation of iconic disused historic buildings back to commercial use. In the broader context of a rise in cultural tourism worldwide, Belfast's legacy of the conflict in the shape of murals and peacewalls has become a marketable asset and a profitable source of revenue for some. On the Falls road and in the Shankill area, the constant flow of black taxis driving around tourists eager to get a close look at the murals testifies to the success of such tours. One cannot help wonder, however, how the residents feel about being gaped at or turned into a "cultural attraction". It remains to be seen, in particular, whether these socially disadvantaged communities have truly benefited from the dividend of "conflict tourism".

As pointed out in a previous section, another key feature of the strategies adopted by former industrial cities to boost their economy has been the choice to bring back to life a glorious industrial past – in the case of Belfast a history of shipbuilding and expertise in engineering⁴². People's new appetite for forms of tourism that "tell a story" has given rise to a series of theme projects such as Titanic Belfast – a regeneration initiative that could capitalize on the massive global success of James Cameron's blockbuster to promote itself. Built on reclaimed disused land, the cultural attraction has proved extremely successful at least from a quantitative perspective. The NI tourist board website provides evidence that Titanic Belfast did indeed draw droves of tourists:

Exceeding its forecasted annual visitor figures of 425,000 by welcoming 500,000 in September it continues to beat expectations with an anticipated 750,000 visitors experiencing the attraction by its first birthday⁴³.

Criticisms, however, have been levelled at the project⁴⁴. The authors of the MAG's response to the Council's consultation on the draft cultural framework

42. The renovation of the Harland and Wolff shipyard area in the inner east of the city is critically analyzed by O'Dowd and Komarova in the article aforementioned.

43. Data available at [www.nitb.com], News and Updates on 29th March 2013.

44. In the article aforementioned, O'Dowd and Komarova denounce the fact that the new capitalist city model that is being applied to Belfast promotes ambitious regeneration projects that are meant to attract wealthier categories at the expense of the regeneration of marginalized communities.

have expressed misgivings about the regeneration choices that were made, pointing out that the Titanic signature building is “essentially a new exhibition space” and regretting that little consideration had been given to the historical setting through the restoration of “genuine historic buildings relating to the Titanic⁴⁵”. The prevalent discourse is that Titanic Quarter is expected to increase the level of employment and entertainment in that part of the city, but the discrepancy between the visions of Belfast the new Quarter and the adjacent disadvantaged communities respectively convey in spite of their spatial proximity raises questions about the supposed trickle-down effect of such ambitious urban developments. Discussing the access issue in a report entitled *Shared Space 2011*, Forum for Alternative Belfast writes: “Titanic Quarter is, of course, similarly cut off from the adjacent East Belfast neighbourhoods⁴⁶.” The authors of the report point out that, as in other parts of the city, the absence of physical connections between new developments and working-class communities constitutes a major obstacle to shared development and should therefore be addressed⁴⁷. In their analysis of Titanic Quarter, which, in their eyes, epitomizes the ‘new capitalist city narrative’, O’Dowd and Komarova state that little consideration has been given to the development of affordable social housing⁴⁸. On the basis of the choices that have been made in the field of housing, one may infer that while the more affluent categories are likely to benefit from the new economic, residential and cultural opportunities arising from these urban projects, other segments of the population are condemned to remain excluded from the dividend of regeneration.

■ Multi-scaled approaches

As pointed out earlier on, some areas have clearly benefited from the cultural rebranding of Belfast: the culture and arts sector is a case in point. One must bear in mind for instance that the opening of Titanic Belfast – happening the same year London hosted the Olympic Games – coincided with a series of cultural events that were designed to draw visitors to the new site. A look at the shows organized to celebrate the launch of Titanic Belfast suggests that the need for cities to position themselves on a global scale is driving them to achieve greater visibility by staging big spectacular outdoor events that are likely to draw a crowd and be broadcast. *Land of Giants*, which was advertized as “the largest

45. MAG’s response to the Council’s consultation on the Draft Cultural Framework, August 2012, p. 7.

46. Shared space 2011 was a project and research conducted by Forum for Alternative Belfast for Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium. It primarily looks at the issue of access to the city and services. Forum for Alternative Belfast, *Shared Space* report, Belfast, 2011, p. 5. Available at www.forumbelfast.org.

47. Researchers have noted that the residential parts of Titanic Quarter do not include any social housing units.

48. Liam O’Dowd & Milena Komarova (2013), “Three Narratives in search of a city: Researching Belfast’s ‘post-conflict’ transitions”, in *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 17:4, p. 529-531.

ever outdoor event” in Northern Ireland, exemplifies this trend. Funded through the Legacy Trust as part of London 2012 Festival – another international event of global resonance⁴⁹ – *Land of Giants* moved on to Derry/Londonderry in 2013 as part of the UK City of Culture programme. Far from being a mere one-off event, *Land of Giants* was a joint project involving several Belfast-based partners such as the Beat Initiative, the Belfast Community Circus School and Young at Art. The project, which was supported by the Belfast City Council, was a great opportunity for organizations that operate both at a local level and international level to work together over a period of several months and demonstrate their skills in street arts, carnival and circus arts. There is no question that the expertise gained by these local arts organizations over the years was key to the success of *Land of Giants*.

Though the arts are being used as a marketing tool, projects linking up the local and the global are not necessarily driven by a cultural tourism agenda even though they may contribute to opening up Belfast in their own way. In a post-conflict city, where the role of the arts is crucial in the field of conflict resolution, various agendas overlap. In that respect, the *Ambulatorio Belfast* project, which took place during the 2012 summer in one of the most contentious interface areas in North Belfast, deserves attention. Part of a broader initiative entitled *Draw Down the Walls* (DDTW)⁵⁰, a collaborative project involving North Belfast Interface Network, Lower Shankill Community Association and the Golden Thread Gallery⁵¹, *Ambulatorio Belfast* used the medium of photography both to encourage dialogue in interface communities and challenge perceptions. In 2011, Peter Richards, the Golden Thread Gallery director, made a presentation to Ruth MacKenzie, creative director of London 2012 Festival, about a project creating the conditions to imagine a city without barriers. The idea appealed to Ruth MacKenzie and DDTW obtained the money they needed for an ambitious yet ephemeral artwork⁵². The organizers deliberately chose to work with someone from outside Northern Ireland to assert their desire to transcend the mental and physi-

49. London 2012 Festival was a twelve-week festival of the arts running parallel to the Olympics and Paralympics.

50. *Draw Down the Walls*, which focuses on re-imagining the city through community engagement and visual arts activities, is a cross-interface community relations initiative. It came into being in 2009.

51. The key project partners were Breandan Clarke (NBIN), Ian McLaughlin (Lower Shankill Community Association) and Ruth Graham from the Golden Thread Gallery (first established in 1998 in a former linen mill on a contested “peace line” in North Belfast, it is now based next to Belfast’s Cathedral Quarter). As underlined by Breandan Clarke in a book published in the aftermath of the project, the feedback from the residents was fantastic. There is no denying that the project could materialize because it obtained the necessary funds but it is clear that it would never have emerged in the first place had the key project partners not developed a strong relationship with the communities involved. *Ambulatorio Belfast* built on the community work that had been done in the area for several years notably with young offenders who were given the opportunity to familiarize themselves with photography.

52. *Ambulatorio Belfast* necessitated the temporary opening of the interface for the first time in about twenty years. A metal gate had to be cut on Flax Street with the approval of the Department of Justice. One of the key conditions for DDTW was that the artwork had to be temporary.

cal boundaries of territorialism. After meeting the residents and visiting the area, Oscar Munoz, a renowned Colombian artist, decided to create a site-specific installation with aerial pictures of Belfast in the vacant space between two security gates that had been closed for more than 30 years. Involving various stakeholders such as community groups working at the grassroots level, the Golden Thread Gallery, the Arts Council and the Department of justice, the project attracted a lot of visitors – including some ministers⁵³ – and drew positive media coverage. In addition to being a great example of successful collaborative work, *Ambulatorio Belfast* brilliantly showcased the value of the arts in relation to conflict transformation. By bringing together interface communities (Ardoyne/Shankill-Woodvale) via photography, DDTW demonstrated the arts could offer a change in perspective and help the locals tread new grounds physically as well as mentally. The reopening of a section of the interface and its transformation into an “open-air art gallery” where people could actually experience walking on a contentious strip of land while simultaneously imagining another city as they contemplated aerial pictures of Belfast beneath their feet worked as an invitation to question the function of this interface zone and apprehend the future from a different angle.

■ The city as a place to experience

Site-specific productions may also be a way for visitors to discover the city on a more personal level especially at a time when the emergence of new trends in the tourism industry has led local authorities as well as the tourist board to rethink the way they approach tourism and sell Belfast abroad. Experiential tourism rests on the premise that visitors want more than cultural products and services; they want to be immersed and emotionally engaged. The Creative Vibe document published by the NI Tourist Board highlights this point in its introduction: “Visitors want to feel something from the places they visit, they want to be touched by the stories of the people and actively participate in culture and community⁵⁴.” The next quotation clearly spells out the agenda: “We are no longer merely selling visitors “a product” – we are selling them experiences of our country and we, its people, are an essential part of this product⁵⁵.” Kabosh⁵⁶ – an independent Belfast-based company that is “committed to challenging the notion of what theatre is and where it takes place” – has proved extremely imaginative in the field of

53. The project was launched by Culture Minister Caral NiChuilin and supported by Social Development Minister Nelson McCausland and Justice Minister David Ford.

54. NI Tourist Board, *Culture & Creative Vibe*, Intelligent Perspective Series, 2013, p. 3. The document can be downloaded from [www.nitb.com].

55. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

56. Kabosh was founded in 1994.

experiential and cultural tourism. The company, whose work is organized around four strands – conflict resolution, social cohesion, international development and cultural tourism – has devised productions enabling audiences to experience the city in a unique often interactive way. In 2010, building on the success of political tours, Kabosh commissioned and curated *The West Awake* written by four playwrights who had been asked to choose a location along the historic Falls Road and bring it to life. The same year, Paula McFetridge directed *Belfast Bred* written by Seth Linder. Taking the shape of a walking tour, the production provided the audience with the opportunity to discover the city's culinary history. As they walked around the city, the participants were invited to stop at a number of locations and taste free samples. More recently, *Titans*, which was especially created for the Titanic Belfast Festival, was performed as a promenade taking the audience and the actors behind the scenes of Titanic Belfast. The geographic location chosen for one of the latest theatrical tours produced by the company, *Shankill Stories*, testifies to Kabosh's commitment to finding ways of linking up with all communities across the city. Easily moving from newly-redesigned sites to more abandoned neighbourhoods, the company has demonstrated its ability to embrace the local and the global on its terms. Like other Belfast-based arts organizations, Kabosh refuses to choose between the local and the global and limit the possibilities the creative space offers.

The move towards promoting more creative ways of discovering cities has generated other interesting initiatives such as the *One Book, One City* project whose first edition with Glenn Patterson's novel "The Mill for Grinding Old People Young" took place in 2012. The pilot programme, which proved extremely popular, offered people across Belfast the opportunity to share the experience of reading the same novel. It also included a host of events in various locations and a series of workshops and walking tours in relation to the novel and the writer. The success of this type of initiative – mixing the real and the fictional Belfast – seems to confirm the idea that people are increasingly seeking multi-faceted experiences rather than unidimensional ones.

Over the past few years, another facet of Belfast's rebranding strategy as a culturally vibrant city has been the promotion of festivals across the city through the City of Festivals programme funded under Peace III. Last year, about 47 festivals ranging from community-based festivals to international ones were programmed under the supervision of the Council's Development Department. In a post-conflict context, these festivals have been a way to bring people back to the city centre, to re-occupy contested space and de-politicize certain events. As with other arts projects previously mentioned, they have contributed to re-mapping the city creatively. In a place where the city centre tends to get deserted after 6:30 pm, Culture Night – first launched in 2009 – has been praised as a fantastic

initiative enabling visitors and locals to enjoy a night of free arts and entertainment. Initiated by a group of arts organizations based in Cathedral Quarter, the project is supported under Belfast Peace III Plan and receives funding from the Arts Council. Meant to be as inclusive as possible, Culture Night offers people the opportunity to submit a proposal and take part in the event. In the same way, the promotion of music in various forms has been a way to help people reclaim the streets of the city: Belfast Music Week, which was first launched in 2012 at over 70 venues from local pubs to the new venue in Crumlin Road Goal, has drawn visitors and international journalists to different parts of the city. Supported by the Belfast City Council in partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board Belfast Music week allowed the city to market itself globally and promote music as a defining feature of Belfast's identity.

More than a decade after the failure of *Imagine Belfast 2008*, which highlighted the city's weaknesses in terms of cultural infrastructure and common vision, there is no question that Belfast's cultural landscape has been radically transformed. The endorsement by central and local government of the creative city model as the best way to sustain economic development and create value has brought about major changes notably in terms of local governance with the City Council taking on a much stronger leadership in the field of culture and the arts. The growth of cultural tourism worldwide has led Belfast City Council to support more actively projects that link up culture and tourism as well as regeneration initiatives designed to enhance the city's cultural provision and built environment. Ten years after the launch of the first integrated cultural strategy, there seems to be a shared vision of what is best for Belfast in terms of economic and cultural development. It remains to be seen, however, whether the changes the city has undergone benefit everybody. As pointed out throughout this article, the access issue – be it from a spatial or socio-economic perspective – is still a pressing issue. Large-scale regeneration projects that target tourists and middle-class residents and promote a consumerist lifestyle do not directly address the needs of adjacent working-class communities whose life experience remains extremely localized and difficult⁵⁷. Yet, while it is true that the city's model of economic development reinforces class segregation, for instance through gentrification, it seems that the increased diversity of artistic and cultural projects resulting from a shared belief that culture and the arts can create value benefits a wider range of population segments and helps to sustain place-making and conflict transformation in the city. One of the positive by-products of the globalization of local culture may well be the possibility for arts organizations to operate more easily on different

57. In 2014, the Northern Assembly decided to launch an inquiry into inclusion in the arts of the working class communities following the publication of a piece of research carried out by Dr Dan Hull in 2013.

scales and engage with different types of audiences in various ways and environments. However, in a context of funding cuts that will directly affect the culture and arts sector⁵⁸, it will certainly prove difficult for arts organizations to maintain the same level of activity and intensify their efforts in the field of social inclusion and conflict transformation.

58. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has launched a campaign to protest against cuts to the arts. The draft budget for Northern Ireland 2015-2016 is out for consultation. The document proposes a 10% cut to the budget for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. [www.artscouncil-ni.org].