

Celebrating Enterprise Festival Futures Seminar Series

That Time of Year Again: Community Festivals and the Challenge of Sustainability

City University
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Summary

The second seminar in the series aimed to take a detailed look at the practice of running annual events: what challenges does this annual cycle throw up, how do events develop over time, what motivation drives festival organisers, and how can we help events become sustainable? The issues raised by the various speakers are summarised below. Several common issues emerged:

- **Licensing**
Several issues relating to licensing were raised. First, the array of different licences is complex and confusing, especially since many don't seem appropriate to one-off events. Second, local authorities require details of programming etc further in advance than is often practicable for organisers juggling programming with fundraising until the last minute.
- **Sustainability**
The challenge of ensuring an annual event is sustainable in the longer term was clearly a pre-occupation of many participants. For example, at what stage is it possible for some staff time to be paid, rather than all being voluntary? Where does core funding come from, and how do you secure it? And the tricky question of recognising when something simply isn't sustainable in its existing form.
- **Personal commitment**
Several contributors made reference to the enormous reserves of personal passion and commitment which are essential for success in organising festivals and events. This is what makes it all so rewarding when things work out well. But we were reminded that very often it's the organisers who drive *themselves* unacceptably - when the buzz of creativity and problem-solving gives way to the anxiety of unbalanced budgets.
- **Relations between festivals and local authority**
Contributors outlined a variety of connections between festival organisers and local authorities, from arm's length licence-providing roles, to close partnership and infrastructural support, and even full festival ownership. Clearly this is a crucial relationship, which can be recast over time as political priorities change, or as festival organisers' capacity develops.
- **Communication and mutual support**
What was clear from the contributions of both speakers and audience was the benefit of getting together to share experiences. This was useful in finding solutions to practical problems, but also, as one participant put it, in 'reminding us why we do it', and inspiring renewed energy and enthusiasm. It

was suggested that there is a need for more such opportunities for festival organisers. In addition to the self-help function, these gatherings (whether physical or virtual) could also help form a critical mass that could have an advocacy role in communicating with funders and policy makers.

Session One: Sharing Experience

Nuala Riddell-Morales, Carnaval del Pueblo

Nuala is co-founder, with Mario Tasama, of Carnaval del Pueblo, held annually in Burgess Park, South London. It started as a Colombian event, but now involves representatives from most of the Latin American countries, and around half of the audience are now non-Latinos. CdP is thought to be the largest Latin American event in Europe; it has been running for 7 years, and now attracts over 100,000 people. There is a float procession from London Bridge to the Park. 'We create havoc and anarchy and all the rest of it', says Nuala. In Burgess Park there are four stages, including an international stage. There's also 90-100 stalls, serving food, and selling handicrafts. These traders get a great opportunity to develop their businesses through Carnaval.

Looking around the room today I see lots of young faces, and it's very nostalgic, because Mario and I have both been involved in community work for around 20 years. Out of that has grown Carnaval, which is a high profile event. I was watching a video recently in Elephant and Castle of some dancing from Colombia, and was glued to my seat for an hour and a half by the passion and enthusiasm of the dancers, especially the children. That's really why we have Carnaval - that's the obsession and the motivation. We still don't have this in London and we need it - it brings pleasure to everyone it touches. Twenty years ago, when we began community work, life was very tough for Latin Americans here: many people arrived as asylum seekers and refugees. Things have changed slightly, but not dramatically; many Latin Americans still work in manual jobs such as cleaning. At the weekends, though, there'd be terrific parties, hidden away, and I realised this cultural heritage was marketable: it can be life-changing for those who practice it, and those who can enjoy it as well. For me it's an inspiration.

Our work has been to pick up on people's talents, and to encourage them to form and formalise groups and be able to apply for funding - to mainstream their talents. If you were plonked into the middle of Tokyo tomorrow to set up your own business, and practice the highland fling, or whatever you might have - that's what in effect the Latin Americans have done: people without language and often literacy skills.

Our success has been due to our partnerships. The luckiest thing that ever happened to us was being taken on in partnership with Southwark Council. If you put money on it this support is worth about a hundred thousand pounds in infrastructure, security, etc, but there's also all the practical help with the 15 separate licences required for the event. I spent two years going round councils begging and pleading, but now we work shoulder-to-shoulder with the events team, and of course we're part of the Celebrating Enterprise Equal project. Then in terms of profile and access to the media I think the biggest lift has been being adopted by the GLA. We're now in the process of a Big

Lottery application – if it's successful, this will provide the stability we need to maintain staff, and develop quality.

It used to be a question of firefighting, but now planning and strategy and all these grown up things are beginning to happen. It's still stressful trying to secure international artists, but the event's status is growing, and it's very much on the circuit these days. Immigration hassles still arise, but our partnership with GLA has helped that too. Salaries have been bits and bobs as we go along, but our salaries are currently paid by Equal.

Julie Flavell, Joule Events ([see powerpoint presentation](#))

Shoreditch festival is a free event, spread over 16 days in August, with a grant from the New Deal for Communities. Julie works six months part time and two months full time as festival manager. Communicating with local people is crucial. Joule organises a steering committee, but also does extensive outreach with diverse local groups, if they can't come to her. Park user groups are especially important. Community outreach and liaison continues throughout the planning process, and influences all aspects, including marketing (allowing for limited literacy, for example).

Joule has developed an event assistant course as a way to attract volunteers to help with local events. Local people can do the course for free – it's 15 hours so doesn't interfere with unemployment benefit. The course, which has been well-received, also includes a work placement at the festival, and can contribute to CVs, etc.

There can be issues with coordination in local authorities, so you might need to have separate conversations with each relevant department. There can be some problems – for example licensing departments tend to want information too far in advance, when you've not yet secured funding, and are unable to confirm details. Newspaper announcements for licences can cost more than the licences themselves.

Funding is always a question of timing – Joule has decided to begin planning the Shoreditch festival earlier, which has implications for Joule as a busy events company, trying to fit everything in. There can be a cash flow problem over the summer, as people often don't pay until the end of the job. There are only 2 fulltime staff, the other 8 project managers work as freelancers, who need paying on time, so this is an issue.

Helen Marriage, Artichoke Productions

The Sultan's Elephant project might seem like a very big thing, but it started from the same place as you all start, from a sense that something needed to be done. The company that made it had never been to Britain before, because we'd been too frightened to put in the effort which made their work achievable. I wanted the arts to occupy the space in the centre of London that is very regularly occupied by military parades, political demonstrations, moments of sporting triumphs, royal and ceremonial occasions.

The idea of causing all that disruption simply for the pleasure of doing it was initially anathema to those involved. The five years of preparation revolved around the question of why: why would you do it? In the end I could only say 'because everybody would love it, and making people happy ought to be part of your job'.

Finally, the question moved from ‘why?’ to ‘why not do it?’ No one wanted to be the person who said no.

The grinding anxiety of the annual cycle: there is a huge amount of pressure involved in fundraising and programming simultaneously. It’s that ridiculous game of telling someone you’re going to do something, at the same time as trying to raise the money to pay for it. All of this results, in my case, in an escalating sense of terror. Writing the programme is a reality check; for me this is contract with the public – if it says something will happen on Tuesday at 7.30 then it has to happen. You’ll then need to look at your income and start cutting things, until you realise the cheapest thing to do is to do nothing at all. We drive *ourselves* – your audience will not notice if you do 23 events rather than 33 events. *You* notice and *you* care, but you need to decide what emotional cost you’re prepared to pay. It’s unbearable. Three months before the Elephant was due, my budget was £500,000 adrift. The money is the hard part – the other stuff is what we love. There’s an adrenaline rush in problem solving, but that stuff about artists making their best stuff when they’re starving is rubbish. The view that this adds to the artistic buzz is held by people who have salaries.

Helen also described her experiences at a provincial arts festival, which revolved around the cathedral. She aimed to challenge and stimulate the festival’s usual visitors, without losing sight of its traditional roots, and to encourage new audiences to use the habitually ‘off-limits’ space of the cathedral and its environs. She also outlined her career path, and explained that it’s not usually possible to support yourself doing this kind of work, and it’s necessary to do other paid work along the way.

Session2: Wider Perspectives

Prakash Daswani, Cultural Cooperation (see also his written paper – coming soon)
My earliest memory of a festival is probably when I was about four in India, and I just remember waking up on the morning at Diwali, and I remember the smell of cordite in the yard from the firework display. Later, I remember travelling on the back of a friend’s Vespa to a pop festival at Shepton Mallet, and the year after to the Isle of Wight, and sleeping through a Hendrix gig at four in the morning! Another memory from the late seventies is hitchhiking through Galway in Ireland, where there were very few Asians at that time, finding myself in a pub and being amazed at how welcome I was, and how welcoming people were to each other, the spontaneity about the drinking, and the music, and you really felt part of the community. I felt much more at home there than in the presence of a skinhead on the street looking for a Paki to bash. There is something about these festivals that makes them a safe contact zone. This feeling flows through the work I’ve done over the last twenty years. We bring international artists from all over the world to London, to try and make sense of who we are here, what our relationships are and what they could be, by reference to what has gone on in other parts of the world.

Prakash’s contribution here is a meditation on the relationships between community and festivals: festivals are an archetypal expression of community, but we should think more about what we mean by community. ‘Community’ is from ‘common’, meaning ‘belonging to all’, but also ‘shared burden’. Events can reinforce relations of belonging, so that festivals that look like failures by external measure can continue to

carry important value for their participants – Notting Hill Carnival is the classic example. New festivals, that assume a pre-existing community can have a harder time, but they can actually bring community about, if they are future oriented.

Festivals can be agents of political change, for example by bringing together migrants from disparate origins, who are poorly represented in the upper echelons of civil society – giving people a chance to affirm their existence and their right to be here, in public.

Fahim Qureshi, Luton Borough Council

Fahim is involved in Luton International Carnival and Luton Mela, among others. The local authority, initiates and manages festivals on behalf of the community. Most carnivals are run by independent carnival committees, but Luton Borough Council have organised the carnival for the last 30 years. It's the largest one-day carnival in the UK. It attracts 150,000 people, within a 6 square mile site, which includes the town centre and several parks. Over 2000 people are involved in the parade itself, many of the costumes are produced locally in mas camps, by local carnival artists, who also do schools workshops. There are around 100 traders.

Slightly unusually, the Local authority has two roles; it both manages events and enables local participation, but it also regulates and licences. Sometimes this causes contradictions. We don't just do events, but they do tend to use up most of our resources. There is a higher staff turnover when events are run by local authorities, as people move on.

Now that the event is part of the national carnival calendar, more people from outside the town are now travelling to the carnival, which raises its own tensions, with local people asking why they should pay for something out for their taxes which attracts 20,000 people from London on the train alone. It's a victim of its own success in this sense – the parade is actually longer than the three mile route!

Funding is increasingly available for carnival as an art form. In Luton, the new National Centre for Carnival Arts has been funded by Europe and the Arts Council, on the back of the growing profile of the Luton event, to be opened by 2008. A local consultation showed that carnival arts was one of the most popular art forms with young people.

In 2004 it was estimated that the carnival generates around £3 million of local inward investment. The event this year cost £250,000 (of a £700,000 total arts budget for a borough with a population of 182,000, around 30% of which is BME). The licence alone cost £10,000, which is a new cost. Policing and security are around £80,000. Only £20,000 is spent on the arts, though the plans is to improve this disparity. The council is hoping to do more commissioning for work for the event. Very little income comes in through sponsorship – businesses don't want to support a local authority initiative. The council would never consider cutting the carnival as it has such strong political support.

The local authority plans to hand over control of the carnival to the Luton Carnival Arts Development Trust, incrementally, over a period of 5 to 6 years. At present, the Trust acts as a steering group, with the council setting out clear milestones and acting

as mentors. This is the process they followed with the Luton Mela, though the first attempt at handover in 2002 ended in conflict between community groups fighting over control. The council resumed control, but slowly brought in ‘cultural activists’ from the South Asian population. Last year an ad hoc Mela group was formed, and this year there was a fully fledged independent organisation, with a constitution, etc, to take the event forward.

Lawrence Target, www.melafestival.com

Melafestival.com is a network bringing together information about each Mela in the country, to champion and promote them, and to aid communication between the events. Within the site each event has its own microsite, giving details on logistics, programme, photo gallery, interviews, etc.

As a career Lawrence is a web developer, and has done some work on the problems of marketing annual events through websites. He stressed having plenty of new content, as soon as possible, especially as this is the way search engines find hits. He encouraged us to think about the branding of events and sites, have a good, easy-to-remember web address, make them clear and simple to get around, with interesting material, and a good range of relevant links – quality, not quantity is the issue here. It’s also a good idea to think about having a facility where interested people can sign up to receive updates, or go on your mailing list. Getting mobile numbers as well as email addresses can be useful, if you want to send promotional text messages.

It’s never too soon with an annual event to start promoting the next one. Straight after this year’s events, post reviews of performances. This is the way to build the audience for your event, Try to think around three years ahead in terms of how you want your website to develop. Don’t forget to include your website address on all your mailing materials.