

‘Cork 2005 – European Capital of Culture’ by John Kennedy – Cork 2005

I’m not a marketer and I’m not from a marketing background. I’m not even from a strict arts and culture background, but I am passionate about live events which are what I have spent my life doing. I am passionate about what I call the ‘I see you’ moment. There is a tribe in Africa called, either the Masai or the Kikori, where rather than saying ‘Hello’, or ‘How are you?’ when they meet, they say ‘I see you’. That moment happens in every live event, whether it is when Roy Keane walks onto the field at Old Trafford, or when somebody goes into an art gallery to view an exhibition: it is that moment when they enter the room, see the paintings and it is a private moment between the creator and the viewer. This is something that I am trying to remember at all times through this immense European Capital of Culture project.

This project is so wide and big that it is very difficult to do it full justice here so I will focus on offering an overview of the Cork 2005 programme, discussing the key challenges and solutions, attracting new audiences and the thorny issue of building a legacy: many big multi-disciplinary events, whether they are the Olympics or something like the European Capital of Culture are tortured by the legacy question in terms of what will change and will it be worth it?

This designation has been handed out to cities since 1985 and up until 2004 it has been more widely known as the City of Culture. From 2005 onwards, and I have no idea why Cork is the first, it will be known as Capital of Culture. The designation is actually awarded to each country. So in the case of the UK having been awarded the designation in 2008, there was a process put in place to decide which city should have its one event that goes on for a year, which is an extraordinary long time. Any of you involved in festivals will know the struggles of sustaining interest over one or two weeks: sustaining something over a year is an immense challenge. Furthermore, it is key to state up front that this designation must be seen as a beginning rather than an end in itself. It is not a panacea to solve all the problems in any city that it is given to but it is a starting point, and in Cork, we have the view that it is an assembly point, where we gather what is there already, and by interacting with them and shift a number of things to a different place.

So, what happens next? That part of the story, which is the legacy part of the story, strangely reverts to the same communities, the same businesses, the same arts groups, the same cultural professionals who were there before the year happened. In 2005, or the by the time 2005 comes, we will be enabling over 130 projects to happen. We engaged in a call to the public and asked a very simple question, ‘What would you like to see in a Capital of Culture programme?’ Out of that public call, we will enable 130 projects to happen in Cork, ranging from the international to the very local. These projects are inclusive of the calendar of events that happen in Cork anyway every year and they will create new moments. Everybody is locked into the ‘big event’ type of thinking for something like this but for us it is about special, rather than big. Some of our special events will include the opening weekend; St Patrick’s weekend; the year-long Lagan to The Lee project; the Easter Labyrinth and The Big Sing in November. Cork will be the smallest capital of culture in the history of the designations and it is important to be aware of the stress that a series of very big events would have on somewhere like Cork. So, we have tried, in the case of St Patrick’s weekend, for example, to build on what is already there. We are trying to do things that have a resonance

either to the city, or to a wider community – we are working with people in Belfast City Hall on the Lagan to The Lee Ireland-wide project – and many of these events will involve many local participants rather than importing of famous stars. A key to a successful Capital of Culture, in our research, has been the extent to which people can engage and involve the residents, rather than a situation where the residents at the end of the year are scratching their heads and saying ‘What just happened?’ So, devising special events that are inclusive rather than big events is key to what we are doing.

In the programme will be projects from all of the full range of artforms as well as workshops, demonstrations, conferences and residencies. We believe fundamentally, going back to the ‘I see you’ moment, that the nearer we can get the makers of art to the audience and the more interaction we can have, the better it will be. Over the course of the year we are going to have about two hundred artists in residence in the Cork City and county area. We have also asked all the big names we have invited, such as The Kronos Quartet, to come and do workshops as well as a concert. Very gratifyingly, every time we have asked that question the answer has been ‘Yes’.

So, in terms of the key challenges, there are 240,000 people in Cork and this means that there are 240,000 versions of what this year should be: we have many, many masters. There is the existing arts and culture audience, and we feel it is vital to include them. So, the first three months of my time in Cork was almost exclusively spent meeting, talking, discussing and listening to the arts and culture community in Cork. I felt very strongly that if we did not have these people engaged from an early time, irrespective of what we did, it would not work. The public call came out of the same sense, that rather than curate a year’s activity into a place like Cork we wanted to give everybody, from the highest professional to the absolute amateur, to say what they would like to do. In our assessment of those submissions, we rarely started from the point, ‘Wow, that’s a big name’.

As well as listening to the community we wanted to work with tourist organisations to find a balance between the needs of visitors and residents and we also chose to involve business organisations. Businesses increasingly have to look at a place, not just from a cost point of view, because they are increasingly conscious that partners and children of their employees need to be in a place where they have a good leisure time. So, we hope that this is the beginning of some sort of new relationship between arts and culture professionals, tourism professionals and business professionals, and we have worked with the Chambers of Commerce and Corporate Business Association. We are, of course, dependent on many of those businesses for sponsorship so that dialogue has not always been easy but it has been necessary.

There are huge social and political issues around the Capital of Culture designation. Is it regeneration? Is it just arts and culture? What is it? One of the things that worries me about the life cycle was that at the halfway point through our development of this we had local elections and there is nothing like arts and culture to produce sound bites for politicians running into elections. This meant we needed to be clear on the social and political agendas. Capital of Culture is a national designation and, as in many cities where the second or third city has had the designation, the real challenge is to get the people in the first city convinced that it has value to them. So, I spent a lot of my time in Dublin meeting political people and press people to try and broaden it out, that this is not just another event happening in Cork but a designation to be dealt with sincerely and seriously at national level.

Then there is always the challenge presented by budgets. How much do you spend? How does your ambition and your view of what is possible for a place match what may well be meagre funds or funds that are difficult to get? We hope and think that we have invested our funds wisely. We are investing around seven million directly into programmes, matched by around another five million from the project partners who are bringing their own funding as well, such as their existing grants.

These are all questions that we have to keep in the backs of our minds as we attempt to satisfy the needs of all those different audiences. We also need to remember that sustainability is the key issue – how do we sustain it for a year and how do we sustain the momentum after the year is over? Of course, while we have our programme in place our prime task is to manage and to market that programme to the outer world. We are also inadvertently marketing for a city and the line between us unnecessarily replicating what is already being done is a thin one. This is especially true in Cork where some of the reasons it was are because it is a place of active workshops, studios and galleries; the arts and culture community have an umbrella operation that represents them; it has old established publishing houses, and so on. Again, without going into huge detail we are conscious that a shift is going to happen in Cork and inevitably when there is a shift some people fall off, but in general terms it is about additionality and realising ambition. I think we will surprise people with the depth and breadth of the programme that will come out of Cork and it will be an innovative moment when a city the size of Cork can suddenly take on such a large range of offerings over the year.

In terms of the legacy issue, we are aware that there is both a 'hard' and a 'soft' legacy. The hard legacy is the easier to identify of the two, including the new museum, the new art gallery, the new school of music and capital projects – the City Council are spending 190 million euros on capital projects in addition to what we are doing. The soft legacy is much harder to put your finger, but includes the improvement of self-esteem of the city which allows a repositioning to happen. Successful cities depend on the union between the business leadership, civic leadership and the cultural leadership. This project will create new networks and the legacy is about the future. In 2006, if I could overhear somebody in Cork saying 'I never thought we could do that. What can we do now?' then that would demonstrate the increased self-esteem.