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## Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides an introduction to the special issue of the Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events on Festival Cities and Tourism. It provides a contextualisation of the conversations surrounding the relationship between cities and their festivals during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focussing on the 'festival city' of Edinburgh, we examine how festival organisers reacted to the challenges of the pandemic, and how they strove to maintain contact with audiences and other stakeholders. We then review the different contributions to the special issue, ranging from festivalisation and suburban food festivals in Barcelona to an art festival in Dublin, the European Capital of Culture in Hungary and the festival portfolio of Hong Kong.

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## Introduction

Cities are seeking increasingly close relationships with their festivals and events, and festivals increasingly seek uniqueness through the cities they take place in. The 'festival city' has therefore emerged as a specific type of location: a place that lends its name to its festivals, which in turn add life to their host cities. John and Margaret Gold's recent book *Festival Cities: Culture, Planning and Urban Life* (2020) encapsulates this specific relationship through a series of examples, including Venice, Edinburgh, Salzburg and Stratford. In recent years, however, many other cities have been using festivals and events as a central part of their strategy, trying to emulate the success of the established festival cities, or developing themselves as 'eventful cities' (Richards & Palmer, 2010).

One of the reasons for the widespread use of festivals as a stimulus for urban development is their flexibility: they can be viewed as a multifunctional policy tool. The many different applications of festival-led development were evident in the expert meeting jointly organised by the Events and Cultural Tourism Groups of the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) in October 2020. This meeting was originally planned to be staged as a physical event, bringing together event and cultural tourism researchers in the archetypal festival city of Edinburgh. As with so many events around that time, however, the meeting became part of the

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‘digital pivot’, shifting online because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Richards, 2022). Although this raised many challenges for our digital hosts at Edinburgh Napier University, it did provide the chance to consider the question: what is a festival city without physical festivals, or an eventful city without events?

## Edinburgh as a festival city

The questions posed by David Jarman in his introductory text for the ATLAS event became even more poignant with the arrival of the pandemic:

Edinburgh is a capital city, an international city, and an eventful city. The strategic use of festivals has benefited Edinburgh for many years, but what are the costs and who pays? Where is the space for grassroots festivals, both in the calendar and in the city’s urban topography, and what is being done to make it available to residents and communities?

The nature of the relationship between cities and festivals has never been brought into sharper relief than in 2020 – the year that festivals were physically absent from urban areas. Introducing the online meeting, Jane Ali Knight talked about a ‘festival-less’ Edinburgh, which stood in sharp contrast to earlier debates about festivals adding to ‘overtourism’ and commodification in the city. Without the Festivals, Edinburgh became a very different place, although the absence of the festivals paradoxically underlined their value. As an article in *Arts Professional* magazine argued ‘We’ll lose more than money when Edinburgh’s festivals don’t go ahead’ (Warren, 2020). As Warren noted, artists were concerned about losing their income if the festivals didn’t take place, but there was much more at stake. In particular, many in Edinburgh were worried about ‘losing the social environment – one that fosters meaningful connections through shared cultural experiences.’ Warren further posed the question: ‘if a festival is largely about the social context, is it possible to transfer festival experiences into an online space without losing its essence?’

This was one of the key questions addressed in the ATLAS online ‘Edinburgh’ meeting. Directors of the Edinburgh Festivals were invited to talk about their experience of the pandemic and how they had managed to maintain festival experiences in the absence of physical audiences.

The meeting included a series of inspiring presentations from Edinburgh Festival Directors, who talked about the challenges of staging one of the world’s leading festivals during the pandemic. Firstly, Nick Barley reviewed the experience of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, which normally provided an ‘oasis of calm’ in Charlotte Square Gardens in the middle of the busy festival city. The Book Festival offers a lively social forum, creating serendipitous encounters between writers and audiences that drive the creative life of the festival. This reflects the key role of social networks in supporting the creative industries (Potts et al., 2008).

As Nick Barley indicated, the changes forced on the festival in 2020 to some extent simply exacerbated some of the key challenges of city festivals. In terms of location, for example, the Book Festival was already coming under pressure for the negative environmental impact caused by intensive use of a park space. This meant that change was needed, even before Covid spared the grass by replacing the physical event with a digital version. Financially the Book Festival, like most cultural events, had long been

seeking new sources of funding to replace public finance hit by austerity measures. The cancellation of the live event in 2020 meant the normal £4.2 million budget received a significant hit. The festival lost over £2 m in ticket sales and other earned revenue, although sponsorship remained (£1.5 m). The challenge was to provide a different type of event online to persuade sponsors to retain their support, enabling the festival to continue to employ staff, and thus retain human capital.

This meant thinking strategically about the function of the festival, and what it seeks to achieve. One of the important outputs of the Book Festival is to support intelligent public discourse. The Book Festival is not only about books, but also the audience, the readers and the writers, who together create a community of thought. A digital version of the festival allowed these important conversations and contacts to be maintained, and also extend the conversation to a wider global audience. Enabling this meant a considerable investment in terms of technology and also know-how. The festival built two TV studios, with facilities for sign language. Having two locations meant that it was easier to deal with social distancing, and the studios could be cleaned between events. The festival also created a platform with chat room, facilities for donations, and the ability to mix views of the event. The producers could take questions from the audience and allow for audience voting. Separate channels were created for sign language and for live captions. This made the digital experience much more dynamic than a normal Zoom meeting. The festival even managed to stage live book signings by authors in one-to-one online sessions. Book purchasers could see their copy being signed live, and later receive the physical book at home.

The results of the book festival in 2020 were positive. The festival remained true to its values, staging over 400 events for a diverse audience. There were 210,000 viewers during the festival period, with an average 43 min viewing time (meaning most stayed for the full hour of the individual event). Around 50% of the audience was located outside the UK, compared with 5% normally. The most important effect of the digital pivot, however, was the increased institutional value developed by the festival (Richards, 2021). The interactive hybrid festival provided future opportunities for the organisation – according to Nick ‘the most important thing we could do.’

At the same time, however, the digital pivot also implies increased competitive pressure. Events everywhere can invite participants from everywhere, and all the content is usually available online after the event as well. How does a festival become unique and offer something special? Uniqueness is often provided by the festival location – but how can this be sustained in hybrid events? One idea is to develop new hybrid festival hubs in the city which will offer the place-based experience, backed up with online experiences that link to the global audience. This should help the Edinburgh Festivals retain a sense of affiliation and friendship with both local and global participants, developing a deeper relationship, which should lead to more sustainable festivals in the future.

The digital pivot has also supported the move of festival content to the city suburbs. This is important, because most festivals have a large local audience, but people in the periphery often feel excluded from events in the city centre (Richards, 2017). The festivals have therefore been making extra efforts to connect with local communities, for example through projects such as ‘Stories and scan’ (scan being Scots for food), in which participants were sent a meal at home, which they could eat while sharing stories and experiences via Zoom (The NEN, 2021).

In spite of these creative reactions to the lack of physical festival audiences, digital connections make the relationship with the festival public more complex. Digital events might be able to reach people who would not normally be able to physically travel to a festival. But there is also digital exclusion – not everybody has access to the Internet. The pandemic also produced a new form of digital exclusion related to too much online content. ‘Digital fatigue’ is complex – many people who would have come to live events are not turning on digital content because they feel it is not for them. Another issue is that many digital events are not of a high enough standard.

The challenge of Covid was perhaps even greater for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which is the largest of the Edinburgh Festivals, and also the most decentralised. The sheer complexity of the Fringe is a challenge in normal circumstances, but an enormous puzzle in Covid times. The Fringe brings together a wide range of stakeholders who participate in the festival in different ways: 500 local residents, 3 million people buying tickets, 1600 arts industry buyers from 31 countries, 31,000 artists staging 3,800 shows in 300 venues and 1000 media representatives from 25 countries. In this ‘glorious melting pot’ it took a long time to bring all the stakeholders together to decide what would happen.

Olly Davies of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival explained how the largest event in the Edinburgh festival calendar had reacted to the pandemic. The Fringe happens in public spaces, which were deserted in 2020. There was a lot of pressure to cancel events over the summer of 2020. Around 70% of the core team was on furlough, so developing a digital festival was also challenging. The Fringe as an informal festival does not have a curator – so it is also difficult to work out what will happen when unexpected events such as Covid come along.

Most importantly, with ‘financial Armageddon’ looming for many stakeholders through cancellation, the Fringe began lobbying government for resources. It gained a £1 million loan from the Scottish Government, which meant it could repay performers who had paid a deposit to perform at the festival. An important factor in this decision was the economic impact of the Fringe – estimated to be worth £200 million to the Scottish economy. In addition, the Fringe opened up crowdfunding possibilities to allow artists to raise money and helped them with training. Over 100 artists and venues got involved, raising £360,000, and this continued beyond 2020. The average value of a crowdfunding donation was about £20 pounds, indicating the broad base of support for the event.

In addition to finding money, it was important to maintain the role of the Fringe as a platform for creative artists and their content (Jarman, 2021; Richards, 2021). The Fringe Marketplace can arguably be seen as the ‘Netflix of the Fringe’, which helps to connect artists with buyers. In 2020 some 2500 curators and buyers joined the Marketplace. Artists were also supported through panels and discussions online around issues such as mental health, parenting and issues of equality. The Fringe also engaged in outreach through the Fringe Days Out, linking to local charities and helping to reduce social isolation. This included community online arts sessions, community events online and socially distanced street performances. The Fringe also created two platforms. The Fringe Pick n’ Mix provided one-minute snapshots from artists, and the online audience could pick particular videos, or view a mix of different ones. The 400 videos on this platform attracted a total of 300,000 views. Another platform provided 9 online acts, at 9 pm, for £9 a ticket. This raised £76,000 from ticket sales.

Julie Armour of Festivals Edinburgh provided an overview of how the festivals as a whole have developed and how they have been affected by the pandemic. She illustrated how the festivals have evolved together with the city and become an important expression of the city's identity. As a collaborative organisation, Edinburgh Festivals essentially acts as a 'Chamber of Commerce' for the festivals, maintain the value of the festival city brand. In addition, Edinburgh Festivals took a central role during Covid, coordinating the Festivals' response.

Julie provided a picture of the festival audiences pre-Covid, which showed a total of 4.7 million visits, generated by 1.1 million visitors – more than the FIFA World Cup. Of these, 40% came from Edinburgh, indicating the strong local base for this international event. Pre-Covid there was significant growth in Edinburgh tourism from 2012 to 2018. Most of the growth came in overseas tourism and year-round tourism, creating a strain that affected the city and which generated serious debates about how to move forward. Tourism figures for 2020 indicated a 70–90% fall in activity in August 2020 compared with August 2019. In August 2020, the main Festival season, the city lost 2 million visitors.

The new Edinburgh tourism strategy, published just before Covid, prioritises people, place and planet, a focus that is also likely to continue in the post-pandemic era. It also puts culture and festivals at the heart of the recovery. The top short-term priority will be stabilisation (the festivals need to survive), and in the longer-term fragility and sustainability issues will increase, as there is a need to safeguard live events for the future. In practical terms this will mean more focus on domestic audiences, and young audiences who are more comfortable with crowds. There are likely to be shorter planning lead times for both artists and audiences. The hybrid festival model developed in 2020 is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Most of the Festival events for 2021 took place either online or in a hybrid format, with some outdoor events, such as street theatre during the Fringe, and a few indoor events.

Lessons for the future include the need to create 'lifelines through culture'. The festivals are planning to use public sector funding to support creatives and festival suppliers to the maximum, as well as providing advance funding for creatives to support content production. The need to ensure a quick return to live events is important for community life and the leisure economy. But this will also depend on a more strategic use of open spaces around the city to increase certainty for event organisers.

The festivals have learned that digital is not the whole answer. It is certainly not sustainable as a replacement for festivals. But the nature of live events does need rethinking. The festivals are looking for new ways to enable audiences to value artists' work. This also raises the question of what is a festival, particularly in the post-Covid city landscape? In the past, festivals have been defined by concentration of performance and audience in space and time. But now the Edinburgh Festivals are all part of a 'living laboratory working on the future of the festival format.' Part of this laboratory focusses on how to deal with Intellectual Property (IP) issues. The 'watch again' function means you can still view a festival long after the artists have departed. In fact, festivals are now busy creating 'digital footprints' for themselves, which can make an impact on new audiences. As the Book Festival announces:

you can enjoy watching Festival events on the website, have a look at our Festival photographs, listen to or download free podcasts of event recordings and watch exclusive interviews and Festival highlights from past Book Festivals on our YouTube channel and your favourite podcast platforms. (Edinburgh Book Festival, 2022)

One of the big challenges of this online, 24/7 format, is trying to generate income for the artists and the festivals through content sales. Why should audiences pay for this type of content, when festivals around the world have made it available for free? ATLAS has also done the same, as you can find out by visiting their YouTube channel, where you can watch the full proceedings of the Edinburgh meeting (ATLAS, 2022). The hope is, of course, that this will increase the reach of these activities, and help the organisations build stronger ties with (potential) audiences.

### **The special issue on festival cities and tourism**

The papers presented in this special issue were researched and written before the height of the pandemic, and so they tend to reflect the 'old normal' for festivals. However, many of the issues raised in these papers are still relevant for festivals, even in the post-Covid era.

For example, David McGillivray, Alba Colombo and Xavier Villanueva have analysed the tensions over public space in two important festival cities in Europe, Edinburgh and Barcelona. The authors discuss the way outdoor urban public spaces are used for events and the effects of this use for different stakeholders. In their paper, they highlight emerging tensions and controversies over who controls, decides about and influences the use of public spaces for festivals and events. They describe contemporary phenomena in festival cities, such as the rise of 'festivalisation' as a term to describe the tangible and intangible effects of festivals on the places that host them. Many of the marketing efforts directed at attracting festivals to cities are aiming to reinforce the notion of a festival city as a mechanism to support the branding of the city. Undoubtedly, festivals have been shown to generate significant economic benefits for cities, but according to Gold and Gold (2020), festivals are also associated with inequities in visitors' and residents' experiences. Therefore, McGillivray, Colombo and Villanueva focus their attention on understanding the implications of festivalisation processes linked to mass tourism inflows to cities. They start by highlighting the similarities and differences in Edinburgh and Barcelona. Then, they analyse the tensions that have arisen over the use of public space for festivals and events in each city by focusing specifically on city centre public spaces. Tensions between event organisers, participants, and spectators related to the use of public space are evident in both cities, although they materialise differently depending on event type and differing spatial demands. The paper concludes that both festival cities have experienced similar problems associated with tourism growth and the festivalisation related to the use of public space. On the other hand, one major difference highlighted relates to the tradition of street festivals in Barcelona, where taking over the streets represented a challenge to conventional authority. In contrast, Edinburgh has a more recent history of contested outdoor spaces for events, starting with the privatisation of the Hogmanay festival in the late 1990s (Howie, 2000). This analysis shows the value of comparative analysis for highlighting the context of festivals and the role of stakeholder networks in the festival city.



The complex relationship between festivals and place is further examined through a local urban festival in the city of Dublin by Danielle Lynch and Bernadette Quinn. They raise the question of how place influences festival making and artistic production in the art festival context. They adopt an interpretative approach to analysing what place means for those who create and produce local art festivals. Analysing the Five Lamps Art Festival (FLAF), an annual festival that has a strong connection with local community groups, they illustrate the festival's role in promoting local artists and enhancing the community through arts. In particular, they underline the role of the situatedness of artistic production drives the festival, with local characteristics guiding the selection of artists and commissioning of works and generating artistic inspiration.

Lynch and Quinn argue that the cultural production of the festival is a means for storing the history of places that have been changing through urban transformation. These findings reinforce Merrington's (2016) view of festivals as processes shaped by the local, cultural, and material dimensions of the locality in which they occur. Moreover, the results exhibit the influential role of festival organisers as actors who preserve the collective memory of a local area. This placemaking role also implies that festival actors need to have a tacit understanding of the location and its attendant social challenges and tensions.

Continuing with the relationship between festivals and places, Maria del Pilar Leal Londoño, Alexandra Georgescu Paquin and Jordi Arcos look at a relatively unusual setting for a food festival: the suburban area of L'Hospitalet on the outskirts of Barcelona, Spain. The proximity of L'Hospitalet to the high-profile destination of Barcelona makes it difficult to create a distinctive image for the municipality. They focus on a small-scale food festival promoted by a local gastronomic association, and which is financed by the local authority. Analysing the role of this festival in the construction of destination image based on Gartner's (1994) model of information sources, they highlight social media as a contemporary source of information. A content analysis of the comments made by tourists on Tripadvisor and the information posted by local food agents on Facebook revealed the affective, and hard and soft cognitive attributes that were important for image construction. This analysis confirmed the key role of affective attributes, underlining the importance of using emotional and affective cues to stimulate the interest of tourists. For the local food festival analysed, the affective, soft, and hard cognitive image attributes projected by local agents differ from those perceived by tourists, revealing an important 'image gap', despite a shared interest of both groups in gastronomy. This study also supports the idea that food festivals and events are important in developing a positive destination image, because gastronomy is an important soft cognitive element in the electronic Word-of Mouth (e-WOM) created by tourists. This contribution also highlights the relationship between food festivals and place, and the role played by local stakeholders as framers of the new urban landscape in this suburban area.

A different group of festival stakeholders is analysed by Edit Kővári and Ágnes Raffay in their analysis of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme in Veszprém, Hungary. They analyse the willingness of students to participate as volunteers and the factors that affect the likelihood of volunteering in the ECoC programme for 2023. The paper examines the influence of cultural and emotional intelligence on cultural consumption and how these factors may influence willingness to volunteer. In contextualising the European Capital of Culture initiative, the authors discuss the volunteer



programme launched for the city of Veszprém and review previous studies on volunteering and motivations to volunteer.

The study found significant differences between international students and Hungarian students in terms of their willingness to participate as a volunteer in the ECoC. Hungarian students were perhaps surprisingly less likely to be willing to volunteer in 'their' cultural event. This may relate to the relatively recent uptake in volunteering activity in Hungary, which is typical of other Central and Eastern European countries as well. For the international students, however, one could also question whether their higher willingness might be due to their relatively short stay in the city: they are less likely to be around when the event actually takes place in 2023. A key motivator for both groups of students is the event theme: willingness to volunteer is highest for music events, followed by sports events. The findings reveal a positive significant relationship between factors of cultural consumption and the level of cultural intelligence. Moreover, they found that the higher one's emotional intelligence, the more time one spends in the company of others with sports, reading, hiking, and attending cultural events. In the final analysis it is important for 'festival cities' to understand the motivations of volunteers in cultural events, given their growing reliance on volunteer labour.

Greg Richards and Brian King examine the reactions of visitors to cultural festivals in the city of Hong Kong, addressing the question of whether festivals provide a special experience that is attractive to tourists. Using the Event Experience Scale (De Geus et al., 2016) to measure tourist's experience of three cultural festivals across four dimensions (cognitive, affective, conative, and novelty experiences dimensions), the authors analyse the effect of festival experiences on attracting visitors and in supporting the marketing and branding efforts of local authorities. Their findings show that festival visitors have a more positive experience than other tourists in Hong Kong. This suggests that the development of cultural festival programmes can support the marketing goals of the Hong Kong Tourism Board, and the positing of the city as the 'Event Capital of Asia'. Festivals also attracted higher spending tourists than fixed attractions or tours, showing that festivals may also be more effective in stimulating economic impact. Finally, the paper highlights how festivals provide positive outcomes, including higher levels of satisfaction, intention to recommend and intention to return.

A final contribution to the special issue is made by Marisa de Brito in her review of Barbara Grabher's book *Doing Gender in Events: Feminist Perspective in Critical Event Studies* (Grabher, 2021). The book review introduces this volume, which presents an anthropological examination of the relationship between gender and events. In particular, the book focuses on how gender is 'lived, politicised and imagined in the context of celebrations', through a detailed analysis of Hull UK City of Culture in 2017. Each of the six chapters into which the book is divided, reveals not just the synergies between gender and events, but also the future of this relationship, developing an agenda in terms of debate and the potential impact of Covid-19 on events. Moreover, the book presents additional research perspectives in gender equality.

## Conclusion

The different papers presented in this special issue together give a broad view of the dynamics of the contemporary festival city in a variety of settings. These range from

the Asian metropolis of Hong Kong to established festival cities such as Edinburgh, Dublin, and the suburbs of Barcelona.

The overall impression that emerges from these contributions is one of complexity: the festival city is composed of multiple stakeholders, with intricate and sometimes conflicting relationships to multiple cultural and creative expressions. What unites these different cases, however, is the strong and recursive relationship between festivals and the city as a place providing a stimulus and inspiration for events, which in turn support the city. The festival city is, as McGillivray et al. show in their contribution, a collection of spaces which are turned into festival places through collective action.

As the experience of the Edinburgh Festivals in 2020 showed, however, that this complex ecosystem is at once fragile and resilient, because of the different stakeholders and networks that it embraces. Without a wide range of actors drawn from different sectors and disciplines, the festivals would not have been able to withstand the shock of Covid-19. However, many future challenges remain for festivals in the short and medium-term, including developing more positive relationships between locals and residents. This will also raise questions about how to create stronger bonds between event managers and the communities where festivals take place? How can events contribute to regenerating communities, neighbourhoods and places in a more sustainable and responsible way, while avoiding over-festivalisation? Is it utopian to develop sustainable urban festivals with a positive balance of cultural, social, and economic dimensions? Might the tourist become a real part of the solution if event managers can appeal to their ethics and individual commitment? Who are the decision-makers in the festival city who can make a real difference in the future relationship between cities and their festivals?

Undoubtedly, events have been reshaped by Covid-19, with the digital pivot producing a greater reliance on technology and social media. Therefore, questions emerge regarding the relationship between events and technology. Will there be a return to more localised embedding of events, or a trend towards greater global reach supported by new technologies? Or can globalisation and localisation be combined through hybrid events attracting physical audiences locally, and digital audiences worldwide? The challenge of the 'digital pivot' is underlined by issues of intellectual property, of differential access to, and tolerance of, new media, and the essential role of physical places in providing unique settings in the festival city.

The differential use made of social media platforms found in the paper by Leal Londoño et al. also points to an essential aspect of the future festival city. As cities become more dependent on digital platforms to support online and hybrid events, they will increasingly encounter issues of platform power and interoperability. The future festival city may well be one that combines a rich landscape of physical spaces of cultural production and consumption with channelling of information flows through new technology platforms to provide dynamic curated content.

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