

Breaking down barriers or putting them up? Festivals, events and the inclusivity of urban parks

Programming can provide flexible ways of connecting city parks to surrounding communities, helping to attract a range of users. Festivals, events and other activities can make parks more inclusive, especially when local communities are involved in organising them. However, these events can also exclude, especially when the main aim is to generate income to help pay for parks. Local government budget cuts and ongoing neoliberalisation mean this is an increasingly common objective for organisations responsible for managing UK parks. Despite increased attention to activating and animating public spaces in academic work and policy discourses, there is surprisingly little written about programming parks. This paper examines the implications of staging festivals and events for the inclusivity of parks by assessing the ways they affect other park activities and everyday use.

The paper is based on detailed analysis of Finsbury Park in London which hosts a wide range of organised activities and events every year. The research involved regular observations of the park at times when organised events/activities were and weren't happening, over an extended period. This included weekly observations pre-pandemic (2019-20), and another extensive set of observations once restrictions had eased (2021-22). Examples of festival and events that contribute positively to the park's inclusivity are identified, but the paper also notes the incompatibility of some events with inclusion objectives.

Various problems associated with programming driven by financial objectives are discussed, especially the exclusive nature of large scale music festivals. Whilst some events and activities help to break down barriers that restrict park use, fenced festivals are responsible for introducing physical, financial and symbolic barriers. The paper highlights the potential value of programming to achieve greater inclusion. However, it also concludes that over-programming should be avoided and recommends a looser approach that blurs the lines between organised events and more informal socialising.

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