Conversations with cultural curators: Bid team and community leader views of PR-led participatory placemaking for UK City of Culture 2021

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Abstract

How were communities invited to participate in bidding for UK City of Culture 2021, via PR-led participatory placemaking? And how do three categories of key personnel involved – bid leaders, PR representatives and community leaders – understand, evaluate and make sense of the opportunities they created, within the tight confines of this very neoliberal competition? Taking a relational constructivist approach, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews across five locations, paying particular attention to presentation of professional self. Reported happenings were theorised using the academic concepts of critical PR (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Fawkes, 2014), participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Gauntlett, 2018) and placemaking (Musterd & Kovacs, 2013). I argue that the organisational "cultural curator" PR role (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017) facilitated the potential for autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016) or commons (Arvidsson, 2020) to emerge, generating social capital (Field, 2016) leading to topophilia (Tuan, 1990) or love of place – and a bottom-up pushback against neoliberalism, perhaps involving some redistribution of power. I assert that a low barrier to inclusion and artistic expression (Jenkins et al, 2006) made this possible, yet it had the opposite effect for some residents with pre-existing cultural capital. This is the first such work to examine UKCoC through critical PR and participatory culture theories. I present the activities under scrutiny as positive examples of applied critical PR and participatory culture in placemaking, focusing on the portal of transmedia engagement. In summary, I demonstrate that the PR role provided the potential for power-redistributing social / cultural capital and an enhanced love of place to emerge, as a bottom-up effect of the top-down and time-limited undertaking of bidding for UKCoC status. It is this exciting happening, albeit brief and pocketed, that further underlines the need to draw more and stronger links between critical PR and participatory culture.

Introduction

This study asks, how were communities invited to participate in bidding for UK City of Culture 2021, via PR-led participatory placemaking? And how do three categories of key personnel involved – bid leaders, PR representatives and community leaders – understand, evaluate and make sense of the related community engagement opportunities? The involvement in UKCoC of city residents, from diverse communities and locations within bid zones is much less documented in academia than the economic impact of bids and delivery programmes (Boland et al, 2019; Liu, 2015). This study will help to bridge that gap, and further develop links between critical PR and participatory culture in the field of consultation and placemaking in the civic realm, using the under-exploited concept of commons (Arvidsson, 2020) as a focus.

First, my literature review will examine opposing forces in PR theory and outline my position as a critical PR scholar. I will argue that new emphasis on commons in community consultation, using principles of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), can advance this discipline, and move practice and theory away from old, organisation-centric mindsets. Part two of the literature review looks at the burgeoning role of participatory culture beyond entertainment and fandom, to the civic realm. It highlights the potential of critical PR to galvanise processes in situations where change must happen following participation, and getting involved is not reward in itself. Participatory culture does not generally consider the PR or organisational voice as part of the cacophony in collaborative spaces but I argue it can and should. Part three continues discussion of the neoliberal context of these theories and further emphasises the potential for autonomous space as a generator of social capital and topophilia.

Chapter one will explore UKCoC participatory opportunities at the bidding stage, and the points at which posited potential for autonomous space emerged (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), as facilitated by PR. I will argue that while some activity can be theorised as positive, participatory culture-inspired critical PR practice, one tenet of participatory culture, the "low barrier to artistic involvement" (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.3), stands out as problematic to potential participants who are skilled and experienced in arts practice. Chapter two will concentrate on how key actors understood, evaluated, and made sense of UKCoC participatory activity. I will further discuss the low barrier as an enabler of a vast range of input, which was not valued equally, limiting critical PR ambitions. Finally, in line with my relational constructivist approach, I will argue that claims of topophilia and legacy are notable in terms of performances of professional identity as well as information imparted.

Together, both chapters continue the literature review's efforts to draw links between critical PR and participatory culture in placemaking, arguing that the PR role had the potential to enable power-redistributing social and cultural capital to emerge, despite the context of neoliberalism. This realisation is the core of my findings and my key reason for proposing further research in this area.

For context, UK City of Culture is a designation granted for one year by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in collaboration with the devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was established to build on the success of Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008. The inaugural holder of the award was Derry-Londonderry in 2013, and in 2017, Kingston upon Hull took the title. On 7 December 2017 it was declared that Coventry would be the third UKCoC in 2021. Paisley, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, and Swansea were the other, shortlisted contenders. At the time of writing, Coventry is partway through its programme, and a record 20 locations are bidding for the 2025 title (PA Media, 2021). A gov.uk news item states: "Winning the prestigious title has enormous benefits with previous hosts attracting millions of pounds in additional investment, creating jobs and attracting thousands of visitors to their local area." This is illustrative of the way governments typically evaluate regenerative city initiatives, the world over. Success tends to be measured in such neoliberal terms of quantifiable, economic gain. The influence of neoliberalism is a key theme through this study. PR, participatory culture and placemaking can all be seen as cheerleaders (Bourne, 2019, p.110) for late capitalism, and risk becoming further subsumed by the "astonishingly pervasive" (McGuigan, p.109, 2009) system, as argued here. However, such processes also have the potential to break free, using commons as "emerging alternatives to the capitalist value form" (Arvidsson, 2020, p.4). Therefore, this study is important in examining the exciting possibility of commons being facilitated by PR-led UKCoC consultation and the very neoliberal forces that it would seek to resist.

I further theorise this potential in relation to transmedia engagement, which has already been pinpointed as a portal for PR and participatory culture to meet (Pamment, 2015; Edwards, 2012; Comor & Bean, 2011). I develop a new reading and application of this established concept, using empirical examples, and explore the notion that autonomous space can lead to social capital and, subsequently, topophilia (Tuan, 1990). These three stages to an anti-neoliberal redistribution of power can be linked as a sequential process to bring together and advance the usually separate theories of critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking. My assertions prompt further questions, of course, such as whether autonomous space within neoliberalism risks becoming another way to pacify the people and maintain the system. Nevertheless, they represent a valid turn in this rich territory that could lead to further research. Firstly though, let us examine the PR landscape forming the backdrop to the activity under scrutiny.

Literature review – part one: PR in the shadow of excellence

This literature review is in three parts, concerning critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking. In interrogating each of these academic concepts I will demonstrate their resonance with each other. In part one, I will examine excellence theory, the dominant paradigm in PR academia, its principal challenger, critical PR, and their differences. I will explore reasons why critical PR has not yet succeeded excellence theory in practice, despite prominence in textbooks, and begin to address how the theories of participatory culture could enable this process. This is an area tentatively established in academia but certainly requiring further development, such as my promotion of the concept of commons or autonomous space as an empowering force for PR, with the potential to lead to the redistribution of power. My position is of a critical PR scholar, because of this approach's sceptical view of the PR role (Theaker, 2011, p.17) and acknowledgement of problems, gaps and limitations in research and practice. Concerned with critically analysing the industry itself rather than providing solutions for practice (Wolf, 2018, p.314), it is also the most ambitious model, aiming to recast PR as a force for societal good by challenging power relations, and seeking distance from neoliberalism.

As PR blossomed as an academic terrain in the US, James Grunig developed excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), focusing on "how public relations makes organizations more effective … and how the monetary value of public relations can be determined" (Grunig, 1992, p27). Excellence, or functionalist, theory rates its two-way symmetrical communications model, promoting success of organisations while achieving harmony among publics, as the optimum for PR practice. Although excellence theory has seen updates, its central premise, nearing 40 years old remains, as a dominant paradigm (Coombes & Holladay, 2012), despite the "threat or nuisance" (Coombes & Holladay, 2012, p.880-1) of critical PR, simmering since the 1990s. Macnamara (2012, p.392) asserted "the shadow of functionalism and Excellence Theory is longer, stronger and more resilient than scholars confining their attention to academic journals and conferences see or acknowledge", inferring a lack of impact of critical PR, although perhaps overlooking critical PR exponents' routine recognition and critique of this situation.

Excellence theory encompassing Grunig's four models of PR – press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical communication and symmetrical communication – while not necessarily presented as the sole underpinning force for the discipline, remains ubiquitous in "how to" textbooks e.g. Theaker & Yaxley, 2017; Tench & Yeomans, 2017; Black, 2014; and Morris & Goldworthy, 2016. Although critical PR also features prominently in academia, it is not close to

superseding excellence in practice. Critical PR is based on critical theory (L'Etang, 2005, p.521; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006, p.7) and promotes challenging assumptions and altering boundaries (L'Etang, 2005, p.521). Even its principal scholars cast it as an underdog, although it is better developed than other theoretical positions in PR, namely rhetorical / advocacy and marketplace theory, and relationship management. Outlined by Fawkes (2011, p.16-17; 2014, p.14-21), they involve grey areas that border both excellence and critical PR. In brief, rhetorical theory, or advocacy (Fawkes, 2014, p.19), emphasises the exchange of ideas in the public arena. In common with critical PR, persuasion is seen as legitimate. While I am comfortable with rhetoric, regarded as "inseparable" from PR, in rhetorical theory (Waymer, 2012, p.218), I see such enthusiasm for persuasion, without the scepticism of critical PR, as a serious limitation. This is because such an approach would not offer the rigour necessary for the interrogation of processes here. Marketplace theory also celebrates persuasion, believing that truth emerges from a "cacophony of voices promoting various interests" (Fitzpatrick, 2006, as cited in Fawkes, p.20, 2014). This relies on publics' ability to filter information and discern, and is problematic particularly for the inclusive, public participatory realm because it provides an opt out for ethical behaviour. Relationship management theory focuses on audience empowerment (Fawkes, 2014, p.21) but an overall objective of "improving business goals" makes this too close to excellence for me to consider.

I split the differences between critical PR and excellence theory into four areas, of viewpoint, role of persuasion, consideration of power and relationship with neoliberalism. I will touch on each of these in turn. Excellence takes a corporate standpoint, furthering reputations to promote organisational success. Its "cash value" (L'Etang, 2013, p.809) to business is the reason for its continuing popularity, but critical scholars dismiss the "strongly idealistic … presented as on a morally improving path" (L'Etang, 2013, p.802) model of symmetrical communication as "manipulation 'dressed up' as paternalism" (Hodges & McGrath, 2011, p.90). Critical PR, meanwhile, presents as non-partisan and emphasises societal impact (L'Etang, 2013). Excellence theory downgrades persuasion as lower in the hierarchy of practice than symmetrical communication while, in fairness, recognising that most PR activity does not meet such ideals (Grunig, 2001, as cited in Fawkes, 2018, p.162). Critical PR scholars see this as a "veneer" (Coombes & Holladay, 2012, p.881) and Fawkes (p.227, 2014) argues that recognising "the reality of the shadow material", by which she means the persuasive nature of the discipline and its less ethical and equitable elements, offers "the possibility of a deeper, richer relationship with society for individual practitioners and the profession as a whole." Important to critical PR is encompassing "wholeness not goodness" (Fawkes, 2014, p.219) as "the wellspring of moral maturity" for its ethics. This progress cannot happen if "wholeness", the full range of good and bad, ethical and unethical, is glossed over. Such a "veneer", say critical PR scholars, masks an

inequality of power between organisations and their often "unlimited resources" (Holtzhausen, 2007, p.359) compared with poorer players, e.g. activist groups, although of course, as Theaker (2011, p.7) points out, organisations vary and include charities and good causes. Meanwhile, critical PR "asks the tough questions about power, persuasion and activism that the orthodoxy of public relations chooses to ignore" (Coombes & Holladay, 2012, p.882).

The final difference concerns the theory's relationship with neoliberalism, the "all-encompassing and politically dominant ideology" (Jones & O'Donnell, p.1, 2017) shaping all aspects of life, especially in the UK. Excellence theory and neoliberalism embrace each other, whereas critical PR, using European philosophers' theories including Habermas (1984, as cited in Coombes & Holladay, 2012, p.881), is decidedly anti-neoliberal, even Marxist. Exponents of neoliberalism see its primary value as individual human freedom, including to pursue wealth (Luxton & Braedley, 2014, p.3, 7). Detractors point out that after 40 years of neoliberalism, the UK economy is "failing to meet basic human needs … for many citizens" (Jones & O'Donnell, 2017, p.1, 246) and "aggrandising markets and business at the expense of democracy and civil society." Similarly, Fuchs & Mosco (2016, p.4) feel neoliberalism is "no longer seen as common sense" due to a "rising income gap between the rich and the poor, widespread precarious labour, and the new global capitalist crisis." In defence of neoliberalism, for context, a small body of research highlighted by Attuyer (2015, p.809) argues that neoliberalism's integration of "concepts of community and inclusiveness" has led to activists effecting policy change and that "neo-Marxist authors have overstated the pervasiveness and power of neoliberalism" (Attuyer, 2015, p.210) in this respect.

Excellence-flavoured PR is neoliberalism's "cheerleader" (Bourne, 2019, p.110) with its "relentless focus on optimism and futurity", synonymous with an ideology that "confidently identifies itself with the future". This resonance encompasses neoliberalism's "cult of numbers" (Mao & Howe, 2019, p.5) changing "the way we construct and understand value or desirability." PR practice with its online "vanity metrics" (Wolf & Archer, 2018, p.505) makes comprehensive use of these numbers. Quantification "in order to facilitate greater control and thus intervene more effectively in social affairs" (Mau & Howe, p.3) is undeniably a tool of power. In the face of this evidence, Steger & Roy (2010, as cited in Bourne, 2019) caution: "Attempting to position PR as a source of public voice is deeply problematic, considering that PR has been a chief advocate of neoliberal capitalism for nearly a century." Meanwhile, Hodges & McGrath (2011, p.90) reasonably observe that PR is "typically founded upon an anticipation of prosperity, which in turn is based on dominant commercial or capitalist foundations". Weaver (2016, p.44) echoes both these sentiments, stating "public relations has always been implicated in capitalism's exploitation of the working classes".

However, I argue that it is excellence theory, not PR in general, that is fatally shackled to neoliberalism, and some theorists agree. Moloney & McKie (2017, p.154) say "power is not inherent in PR messages: it lies instead in the political, economic and social forces which call up PR to serve their own ends" and describe the discipline as "a neutral set of communicative tools." Similarly, Fawkes (2014, p.23) states: "I prefer to see communication as inherently neutral, capable of being deployed ideologically of course, but not essentially so." In exploring such possibilities for PR, new interest in Marxist / post-Marxist theory since 2008 is particularly useful, especially as L'Etang (2005, p.521) confirms critical PR's roots in Marxist critical theory. This has coincided with a "radical sociological turn" in PR, identified by Edwards & Hodges (2011, p.1) as involving L'Etang, Pieczka, Moloney and others, and recognising PR as a "locus of transactions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings". When Fuchs & Mosco assert (2016, p.4) that "communism is not a condition in the distant future but present wherever people resist capitalism and create autonomous spaces", I argue that this can be facilitated by PR, as the locus that Edwards & Hodges describe.

The concept of free or autonomous space appears in Marxist and Marxist-informed theory across disciplines, using various terminology. This principle is rooted in the Marxist concept of interstice explained by Bourriaud (1998, p.6) as "a space in human relations which fits, more or less harmoniously and openly, into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system". Karl Marx first used the term to describe activities such as bartering, removed from the law of profit, but Bourriaud applied it to the contemporary art exhibition, which he saw as creating "free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life". Martinez & Polanska (2020, p.1246) talk about commons or "urban commons" as the collective self-management of resources, spaces, services and institutions in city settings, and Terranova (2015, p.17) describes commons and "social cooperation" involving the "socialization of knowledge and technology". Talking about academic publishing, Peekhaus (2016, p.379) writes of "spaces of commons" tending to "emerge out of struggles against their negation" and representing "strategic problems for capital". Meanwhile, Hall & Stahl (2016, p.66) describe emergent technologies as "spaces for dissent" with the potential to "re-inscribe a different set of possibilities upon the world". Finally, Arvidsson (2020, p.3) theorises the "digital commons" as a "significant source of resistance to capitalism". All of these variations share the core notion that people can carve out space to share ideas and things they have made, meaningfully, away from money and metrics – perhaps with the help of PR.

In considering autonomous space in relation to PR, Weaver (2016, p.44) points out that there has been no extended discussion of how Marx's theories can be applied to understanding the functions of PR – but believes a return to Marxist concepts is required "if critical public relations enquiry is to

be a purposeful project, engaging with and contributing to the transformation of the welfare of those suffering from the vast inequalities that capitalism is perpetuating" (Weaver, 2016, p.50). Weaver's summation resonates with others, including myself, who argue that critical PR must develop further, to begin to effect that difference. This study will further explore and exploit the role and possibilities of commons for critical PR. Fawkes (2018, p.167) admits there is no "grand unified field theory" to succeed excellence, and while Willis credits critical PR as adding "spice and richness" (2017, p.391) to the field, others admit a lack of "workable theory" (L'Etang, p.808, 2013) has limited its power thus far. I propose that new emphasis on commons can offer new shape and focus in defining such workable theory. Despite obvious room for development, Ford (2016, p.16-17) believes critical PR "has the potential to lead the corporate world forward into a more participatory culture" and offers a dazzlingly seductive manifesto:

> [We] must be counsel to corporate decision-makers: listeners more than orators; ombudsmen for what publics want and need from the company rather than agents for aligning publics with the corporate point of view; and strategic advocates for how a company should change its logics to be true participants in today's communication reality rather than tacticians for executing campaigns.

This "communication reality" can be defined by the new and fast-developing area of participatory culture – and, as Pamment (2015, p.2,049) asserts, "there is now an opportunity to put participatory culture at the core of PR". This is beginning in academia at least with Hutchins & Tindall's book *Public Relations and Participatory Culture: Fandom, social media and community engagement* (2016) and related work, concerned with integrating stakeholder and publics theories with those of participatory cultures. In summary I argue, as Fawkes and others do, that it could be possible to separate PR from excellence-based, neoliberalist values, if participatory activity is used as a tool to carve out Fuchs & Mosco's autonomous space (2016) within capitalism. Ford's vision could be seen as unrealistic – but not if this happens in pockets, by degrees. Participatory culture, with its broadly equitable and democratic premise, could enable critical PR to move at last beyond the shadow of excellence, via the use of commons or autonomous space. This work intends to continue the conversation about this unfolding opportunity.

Literature review – part two: Critical PR, participatory culture and autonomous space

In part one, I claimed the theories of participatory culture could help critical PR emerge as a force to re-balance power in society, and at least partially free the discipline from its neoliberal stranglehold, using Fuchs & Mosco's autonomous space (2016), both online and offline. Now I will explore participatory culture, its own difficult relationship with neoliberalism, and the point at which participatory culture and PR align, advocating new fusions in theory to advance both ideologies. As a critical PR scholar, interested in arts and heritage, I align my own vision of participatory culture most closely with the optimistic, creative ideas of David Gauntlett. These are concerned with social media-fuelled making, sharing, self-expression and feeling connected, where both motivation and reward are being part of an active community (Gauntlett, 2018, p.80, 93). While participatory culture theory focuses primarily on online activity, I argue that it is equally relevant to the offline get-togethers of UKCoC consultation, which of course have been supplemented by social media's "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2005, as cited in Wyatt et al, 2013, p.153), given that we live in an era when people look to their smartphones to find out about local matters. Participatory culture and critical PR both focus on communication as a path towards equality and I argue that bringing them closer together will fortify each, while remembering that not even Jenkins believes that a permanent "equal power position of all actors" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p.267) can be reached.

The term participatory culture was established in 1992 by Jenkins (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.7) and focused on fans and entertainment media. It has since been extended to other domains including the political, cultural and educational (Literat, 2016, p1788-90), in which the concept of power is arguably much more important. Relevant, earlier theory includes Arnstein's 1969 ladder of participation (Arnstein, 2019, p.25) and Pateman's 1970 principles of participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p.267), which both emphasise citizenship and democracy. Jenkins' ideas, applied to the public realm, build upon these models, and aid their continued currency. Scholars' interest in linking participatory culture and PR (Phillips and Brabham, 2012, as cited in Hutchins & Tindall, 2016) has amounted to a small body of literature, on which I aim to build.

For this study, I am using Jenkins et al's (2006) definition of participatory culture, involving low barriers to engagement, support for creating / sharing, informal mentorship, social connection and meaningful contribution. As background, the context of convergence culture is important. Consumers have become "produsers" (Bruns, 2008a, as cited in Literat, 2016, p. 1791) or "prosumers" (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p.14-16), annotating, appropriating and recirculating

content at a minimal cost. Accessibility and affordability are blurring the distinctions between professional and amateur media content (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016, p.103) although Fish (2013, p.374) reminds us that most communication technology begins as amateur, before being professionalised. Some optimistic theorists believe this "here comes everybody" culture (Shirky, 2009), including the corporate voice, can be a springboard for change. Pleios (2016, p.130) said "it is no longer essential to seize power in order for someone to be able to change the world" suggesting that Marxism-inspired social change can happen from below and in parts. Levy (2011, p.89) is similarly enthusiastic, calling "creative conversation" the "fundamental engine of knowledge communities", leading to collective intelligence and action.

Other scholars see flaws in this vision. Gauntlett (2018, p.25) relates growing engagement with making and doing to the ideas of 19th century designer and activist William Morris, who felt people needed to voice their creativity to avert a "sick and degraded" system (Gauntlett, 2018, p.40) and make communities more contented. Therefore, it can be reasoned that participatory culture serves the same purpose as Morris's engagement with craft, and in doing so could actually support and maintain neoliberalism, just as shopping does. Gauntlett (2018, p.24) observes:

> [M]odern capitalism succeeds not by menacing us, or dramatically crushing our will on the industrial wheel, but by encouraging us to enjoy a flow of convenient, cheerful stuff, purchased from shops, which gives us a feeling of satisfaction, if not happiness.

Roberts (2014, p. 98, 107) sees "prosumption" as an "ideological means to co-opt consumers into the hegemonic project of neoliberal consumption" and Langlois (2013, p.92) describes the rise of online technologies as creating "new forms of control over … cultural, political, and social life". Carpentier (2016) asserts that much participation simply protects the power positions of the privileged to the detriment of the non-elite, while giving the impression of opportunity. This brings us to criticism of Jenkins, including from Carpentier (2011, p.69) and Hassler-Forest (2016, p.27), who argue his positive theorisation downplays or ignores the forces of capitalism, is too fluid and unstructured, and glosses over complex politics. However, while participatory culture's reward can be the experience or journey (Shirky, 2002, as cited in Carpentier, 2011, p.69), this is not enough for activity in the civic realm, where something must change, or a degree of power must be redistributed, as a return for the the effort of getting involved, as I will address.

At this point, it is also important to note that participation is not necessarily the social leveller that some scholars claim. Jenkins' low barrier is perhaps higher than he believes, considering that joining in can require skill, time and effort (Blank, 2013, p.591), and status is easier to come by for those who already have it (Faucher, 2018, p.25). Another consideration is that whenever people are encouraged to participate, this can be theorised as unpaid work, as highlighted by Carpentier (2011,

p.69), in further criticism of Jenkins. Terranova (2000, p.48) argues free labour sustaining the internet is not exploitative, because it is not imposed, but willingly exchanged for the pleasures of communication. It only becomes exploitative when organisations turn shared "gifts" among a fan community (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p.273) into "user generated content" for their own profits.

The presence of corporate representatives in participatory spaces brings us to the realm of PR. While it could be argued that the rise of citizen content is bad news for the PR practitioner, the counter view is that this abundance of chat creates opportunity for organisations to contribute, and by doing so, further organisational self-interest. One theory is that the growth of participatory culture provides PR *more* opportunity to control and influence, not less – and that as a result, PR is thriving in "untramelled territory" under "warm tropical conditions" (Demetrious, 2011, p.119, 129). This would suggest that rather than breaking free of neoliberalism, PR and participatory culture combined have the potential to further galvanise this dominant system. I would accord with Jenkins (2006, p.18) when he argues: "Some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power … the truth lies somewhere in between".

The way PR professionals sometimes move within participatory spaces may appear two-way and even symmetrical. However, within the shadow of excellence theory, organisational fortunes are usually prioritised over greater societal good. In a positive theorisation, the PR professional has become a "cultural curator" (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p.14-16) who cannot control but only join in "organic exchange". They must be comfortable with this situation, in order use it to their advantage, e.g. leveraging momentum to "harness campaigns that align with their client's needs". According to Tombleson & Wolf (2017, p.24) full immersion in two-way discussion is necessary or the PR industry will be "forever on the fringes" of social media. Jenkins (2006, p.26) echoes this, predicting: "Producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues". The ideal would be for social media to not be a battleground between "active first-hand engagement" and "mediation by others with mysterious and untrustworthy agendas" (Haskins & Benson, 2015, p.119) but a "continuum of practices", combining engagement and mediation, leading to civic consequences.

While participatory culture could be a democratising voice for PR, this would require typical brands, Governments, etc, to change long-established mindsets. Macnamara (2018, p.18-19) emphasises the need not just to "afford voice" to citizens, but to really listen, and see this as a challenge to improve public access to decision making and representation. However, the charges against excellence theory-rooted, neoliberal PR representatives, who do not do so when interacting with publics, are many and varied. I will address some of them here.

Firstly, there is the colonisation of what began as playgrounds for community contributors, for PR messages (Archer, 2019). Brands are harnessing unpaid fan publics, conceptualised as those who support an organisation by enthusing online, to be part of this effort. Calling this phenomenon "brandom", Guschwan (2012, p.20) says:

> Social media has enabled fans/consumers to easily congregate online, but it has also created an opportunity for marketers to exploit the labor of these fans/consumers ... Through 'pass along' and 'viral marketing', campaigns, marketers encourage their customers to act as co-marketers and salespeople.

Krishna & Kim (2016, p.21) are right when they describe brandom as an extension of long-held strategies to foster independent, vocal goodwill and recommendation. Another accusation levelled at PR in a participatory context is the aping of democratic processes for commercial gain, described by Cronin (2019, p.54-55) as using the language of democracy and representation in expanding practices of "stakeholder engagement" and "public dialogue". Arnstein (1969, p.216, as cited in Literat, 2016, p.1,790) said: "participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows powerholders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible only for some sides to benefit". In this territory, we have also seen astroturfing, "a form of staged public relations event designed to convey the false impression of an authentic, naturally-occurring … grass roots movement" (Henke, 2018, p.69) and front groups, which focus "more specifically on influencing policy makers and election outcomes" (Cho et al, 2011).

Clearly there is much room to do better, and returning to Pamment's assertion (2015, P.2,049) that now is the time to put participatory culture at the core of PR, he and others (Edwards, 2012; Comor & Bean, 2011) identify transmedia engagement as a portal for the two areas of theory to meet. This practice of sustaining consumer interest by supporting "a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (Jenkins, 2006, p.98), across multiple channels and methods of communication, could translate to the civic realm in achieving greater support for and involvement in a cause. Could PR as the "cultural creator" (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017) facilitate Fuchs & Mosco's autonomous space (2016, p.4) and motivate participants through playful, sticky activity (Walmsley, 2016, p.76) without dominating, or harnessing efforts for commercial gain? If the answer is yes, this could move our society nearer to Gauntlett's (2018, p.119) ideal for people "to feel part of meaningful, productive, social processes which have a past and future", with participatory opportunities key to the range of online and offline transmedia channels. Critical PR can also help participatory culture further understand and involve the organisational voice, as simply a part of the cacophony.

The potential for such activity, where hired communicators are speaking among others in a more equal exchange than is traditionally associated with PR, has not yet been comprehensively theorised

in relation to critical PR, or participatory culture, or indeed transmedia engagement. Here, I argue it could and should be. My aim is to examine potential examples of real-life autonomous space within our capitalist, neoliberal system, using evidence to draw closer and stronger theoretical links between critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking. Returning to the relevance of Marxism, is it possible that PR-facilitated civic imagination, the "capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political or economic conditions" (Jenkins et al, 2020, p.5), could herald a "shimmering communist horizon" (Hassler-Forest, 2016, p.22) in this domain?

Literature review – part three: Participatory culture in PR-led placemaking – towards equity and justice via topophilia

Placemaking faces similar, neoliberalism-centred concerns as those of PR and participatory culture. Part three will begin with some key definitions, followed by a summary of theorisation of good practice, before examining placemaking as another cheerleader for neoliberalism, involving the commodification of culture for economic gain. With the PR role still in mind, we will consider the sometimes-poor treatment of stakeholders in such processes, perhaps leading to "place-faking" (Courage, 2017, p.56) or "place-masking" (Ponzini et al, 2016, p.529). To build upon existing theory, I will discuss the relevance of the concept of autonomous space or commons, linked of course with critical PR and participatory culture, to meaningful placemaking. Moreover, I propose that building social capital, leading to topophilia, is *only* possible if there is some autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), and that critical PR taking influence from participatory culture is the conduit for this to happen.

I use Musterd & Kovács' (2013, p.100) definition of placemaking as measures to invest place with specific cultural characteristics, and for which sense of place, "belonging, meaning, attachment and inclusiveness" (Fincher et al, 2016, p.518), is an outcome. This summation reflects the aims associated with City of Culture (UKCoC). Other definitions include Avarot's (2002, p.201) "intention to re-establish quality of place", Courage's (2017, p.53) creation of locations "desirable for the public to visit" and Arefi's (2013, p.5) how places are "made, transformed and perceived or framed." These do not contradict Musterd & Kovács but are less specific and complete. Placemaking's theoretical heritage has been described as "imprecise and vague" (Fincher et al, 2016, p.518-9), and Gertner (2011, p124-5) noted a lack of "hefty theory". Fincher et al (2016, p.517) argue that placemaking has been promulgated as a managerial technique, suggesting space in academia for this study, with its ambition to examine its potential as a social leveller.

Placemaking looks to create "contentment and joy" (Tuan, p.15, 1990) for inhabitants or visitors; for places to evoke "profound attachment or love", otherwise known as topophilia, and be a source of assurance and pleasure (Tuan, 1990, p.247). Topophilia emerged as a counter to placelessness (Lang, 1994, p.9, as cited in Avarot, p.201; Musterd & Kovács, 2013, p.99), a phenomenon identified in the 1950s. Pozini et al (2016, p.524) described "resorts, golf courses, luxury hotels, marinas" built to make destinations feel unique, but achieving the opposite. As a result, a hunger for anything feeling "authentic" in a "world of inauthenticity" developed (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.3).

Theorists inspired by Tuan have progressed the concept of topophilia, with Oliveira et al (2010, p.802) introducing "terraphilia", affording greater focus to homeland, social roots and shared heritage, although the concept of "elective belonging" (Savage et al, 20015, p.29) describes how passionate advocates for a location attach their arrival and settlement to their own identity. Although terraphilia is described as a "pro-developmental extension" (Tidball & Stedman, 2012, p.297) of topophilia, I will use the original term as it encompasses home and history as well as newcomers' affection. Other theorists explore "restorative topophilia" (Frantzeskali et al, 2018, p.1047; Tidball & Stedman, 2012, p.297) as a tool for urban resilience. Topophilia already manifest in communities is also important as a starting point for placemaking, or a "powerful base for individual and collective actions that repair and/or enhance valued attributes of place" (Tidball & Stedman, 2012, p.297), which brings us to the concept of community itself. Researchers across disciplines agree on three necessary components to any definition of community. All involve shared territory, meaningful social interaction, and social ties (Vine et al, 2013; Mackay, 2009; Driskell & Lyon, 2002; Kusenbach, 2008; Karp, 1991). Vine et al believed in 2013 that society's most significant communities were still face to face and local, rather than online, although this may have altered since then.

In considering social capital, the idea developed by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam, focuses on the value of networks (Field, 2016, p.2-3), which can be invested in for a return. Putnam (2000, as cited in Bell & Wallace, 2018) saw social capital as collective "value" from people's participation, for example in civic matters, in pursuit of their own interests (Field, 2016, p.2). However, Bourdieu was concerned about unequal access to resources and the maintenance of power. A related term is cultural capital, first used by Bourdieu (1984) to conceptualise the trading on hierarchies of taste. For this study with its focus on equity and justice, Bourdieu's tributary is the most useful. Gauntlett (2013, p.93) describes social capital as a "stock of social relationships" that "make it easier to do things that otherwise you could not", and value is attributed to "bottom-up local, community activities" (Beel & Wallace, 2018, p.698). According to Grenfell & Hardy (2007, p.30-1, 44), social and cultural capital can become a currency of competition and power relations that is only useful "because some possess more than others".

I argue that with careful involvement of communities via Fuch & Mosco's autonomous space (2016, p.4), PR-led placemaking has the potential to redress power through the empowerment of participants. My interest is in topophilia and social capital rather than economic benefit, although these may blur, when considering what success could look like. Effective placemaking creates a "must visit" city (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p.245, 248) defined as much by "atmosphere" as specific attractions. This city often has a strong leader (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p.130) such as the Mayor of

Den Bosch in the Netherlands, a "stable figurehead" who oversaw a major city rebranding around the painter Hieronymous Bosch (Greg, 2017). Festivalisation of spaces (Cunningham & Platt, 2019, p.315) is not enough. Happenings must be "tied into the fabric and life of the city to ensure a close relationship between events and the experience of a particular place" (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p.249) and generate topophilia.

Scale does not automatically correlate with impact, and mega events do not necessarily garner community support. The "expensive import" of a Guggenheim art gallery in Bilbao, opened in 1997, (Miles, 2007; Clark & Rice, 2019; Sainz, 2012) was a hit visitor attraction, yet had no tangible connection to Basque culture. The 2008 Beijing Olympics did little to drive social change or boost China's international standing (Lee, 2010) and its branding was deemed to be so top-down that it led to a mismatch in the city's identity (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). Meanwhile Kenyon & Bodet (2018, p.245) reported that Londoners' uppermost associations with the 2012 Olympics were traffic congestion and disruption. Writing about Glasgow, European Capital of Culture 1990, Mooney (2004) said "flagship cultural events can do little but gloss over and divert attention away from the major structural problems which characterise many ex-industrial cities" so it seems reasonable for Bodet & Lacassagne (2012, p.372) to suggest that bidding to host an event based on a placemaking strategy might not be worthwhile. In contrast, project leaders in Den Bosch created multiple meanings for neighbourhoods (Greg, 2017), including a mediaeval master chef element. A festival centring on mussels in Løgstør, Denmark, also worked well because residents *and* visitors identified shellfish as integral to the town's heritage and appeal (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014).

Bid processes in themselves can offer a city a significant boost. According to Cunningham & Platt (2019, p.323) simply being in the running "can develop a strong place-based story which local communities recognise they have a stake in". Richards & Palmer (2010, p.255) describe Manchester's 1996 Olympics bid as useful "for galvanising the various stakeholder groups" as well as providing a platform for events and other activities. Win or lose, clear partnerships are essential, say Boland et al (2016, p.258) to "focus on social, as well as economic, impacts". A city's reasons for seeking UKCoC status are relevant to my study, and according to literature, an economic boost is usually the aim, with social benefit secondary. In this field, like PR, neoliberal metrics and measurement are habitually used to indicate success (Richards and Palmer, 2010, p.245). Peck et al (2009, p.49) say cities have become "strategically central sites in the uneven, crisis-laden advance of neoliberal restructuring projects" and even "increasingly central to to the reproduction, reconstitution and mutation of neoliberalism itself since the 1990s". It seems neoliberalism and urban regeneration advance each other, in a relationship that flourished under the New Labour government of 1997-2010 in the UK (Fuller & Geddes, 2008, p.276) with techniques "highly

influenced by neoliberal distrust of the public sector" (Hesmondhalgh et al, 2014). While giving the impression of free markets, neoliberalism has involved "dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to *impose* versions of market rule" say Peck et al (2009, p.51, 64), with city place marketing playing a key role.

McGuigan (2009, p.109, 115) highlights neoliberalism's emphasis on culture when setting regeneration agendas in once-great cities:

> A distinctive yet seldom mentioned feature of neoliberal development is to translate issues of social policy into questions of cultural policy … The predominant rationale for cultural policy today is economic – in terms of competitiveness and regeneration – and, to a lesser extent and as an afterthought, social, as an implausible palliative to exclusion and poverty.

Musterd & Kovács (2013, p.100) say place branding is used as a "panacea for economic and social ailments", an idea echoed by Kavaratzis (2008, p.45, as cited in Richards & Palmer, 2010, p.270)**:**

> City branding is understood as the means both for achieving competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, but also as … achieving community development, reinforcing local identity and identification of the citizens with their city and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest.

Boland et al (2016, p.258-9) argue neoliberalist economic impact was used as a measure of success for Derry-Londonderry's year as inaugural UKCoC in 2013, at the expense of community engagement, social cohesion, and civic confidence. Cunningham & Platt (2019, p.317) also acknowledge issues of "romanticism" in gentrification, resulting in the alienation of some communities. Boland et al (2019, p.245) commented: "The current trend in public policy is to valorise culture as a tool for social, economic and political transformation."

Placemaking initiatives usually involve PR teams and are beset with the same issues as seen in any other situation where communications professionals meet publics. There are so many ways for participatory placemaking to alienate, disempower, offend or exclude. People are as likely to be consulted because of their potential power to disrupt plans – perhaps complaining of noise or traffic (Richards and Palmer, 2010, p.165, 252) – as for their worth as involved, engaged parties, with much to benefit. These "stakeholders" are often "seen to have strategic importance for the benefit of the organisation, and not in themselves" (Tench & Yeomans, 2017, p.152), which is not a surprise when it is acknowledged that stakeholder theory in PR is tightly linked with excellence theory and therefore neoliberalism. Freeman (2010, p.9) observed: "Stakeholder theory is about value creation and trade and how to manage a business effectively. 'Effective' can be seen as 'create as much value as possible.'"

For participatory placemaking to achieve a degree of equity and justice, the neoliberal view of stakeholders must be challenged, and corporations must develop "better, more equitable, more humane business relationships" (L'Etang, 2006, p.53). Stakeholder classifications are often complex and Ooi et al (2010, p.316) point out "although studies have shown how place brands fail because of lack of consultation, building up consensus among stakeholders is easier said than done". The "somewhat missionary" language emphasising "outreach" and "engagement" can easily imply that participants are outside of mainstream culture and need to be brought in (Ploner & Jones, 2019, p.2). Generalisations and/or simplifications can mean members of ethnic minority/migrant communities may feel distanced from "local" discourses, which have little in common with their own identities. Groups can also be underestimated, for example, young people considered mere consumers, rather than active producers (Ploner & Jones, 2019, p.2).

For project leaders, there is a challenge in reaching a full range of community members, not simply a few "spokespeople" who are better with technology, or first in the queue, and end up representing others. Turner et al (2016, p.253) advise: "Shifting reliance from working with a key person to … a group of key people will also help to create shared ownership and responsibility, ultimately leading to a more sustainable … project". Musterd & Kovács (2013, p.98-100) encourage the viewing of a city as a mosaic of neighbourhoods with distinct characteristics, each with a sense of place influenced not only by history and culture, but also personal experience, or media. Disconnects can be especially heightened when marketable clichés are focused upon, such as the "friendliness" of Liverpool people (Jones, 2019, p.1907-8) as a "valuable commodity" used to sell the city as European Capital of Culture 2008.

In UKCoC processes, Platt (2017, as cited in Cunningham & Platt, 2019, p.315) reported shortlisted cities having difficulty attracting community involvement, leading to strategies becoming uneven or unrepresentative of the populace. An outcome of "place-faking" (Courage, 2017, p.56), too – "the process whereby artists are placed into a project and where placemaking is *done* to a community, not emergent *from* it" – can also be a risk. Related to "place-faking" is the term "place-masking", an even more problematic accusation, although not levelled at UKCoC, involving actively erasing opportunities for lowest-income existing residents in remaking a place in a gentrified image (Ponzini et al, 2016, p.529). Derry-Londonderry's year in the spotlight provided a boost to jobs and tourism, and its unofficial renaming of LegenDerry "worked well in public consciousness" (McDermott et al, 2016). However, Boland et al (2019, p.255) found UKCoC status did not lessen working class residents' sense of being on the edge of happenings, despite "significant door knocking and leafleting", and offered lessons regarding overpromising, especially for investment and employment. This resonated with Friedmann's assertion (2010, p.150) that "in the current eagerness to build

glass-sheathed office towers, airports, opera houses and spectacular sports facilities" the needs of ordinary people and neighbourhoods are forgotten or, as Avarot (2002, p.518) described, "basics" such as public transport, jobs and affordable housing are "perpetually deferred" behind shopping centres and upmarket developments.

Placemaking's challenge, very much like PR's, is now to move beyond its neoliberal heritage to become a truly power-redistributing force for communities. This literature review has addressed how participatory culture is relevant for critical PR and vice versa, pinpointing the area of civic consultation as a juncture at which the two can be synergised with theories of placemaking. In summary, I argue that the building of social capital, leading to topophilia, and greater equity and justice, is only truly possible if there is some of Fuchs & Mosco's autonomous space (2016) afforded. Moreover, participatory culture-influenced critical PR, with its ambitions of facilitating a fairer society, can make this happen. Placemaking, like PR, is not yet generally theorised in the terms of Jenkins, Gauntlett et al. This is a marked absence in existing literature. Of the small selection of work discussing UKCoC, which as a concept has existed since 2009, there is very little regarding PR or participatory elements. As well as drawing further links between PR, participatory culture and placemaking, this study will be one of the first to consider UKCoC through this combination of lenses. My aim is to draw theory from these areas together, to advance current thinking on how social capital and topophilia can emerge through UKCoC and its posited autonomous space.

Methodology

For this study I wanted to find out how three key categories of facilitating personnel understood, evaluated and made sense of the benefits and limitations associated with the processes of inviting residents to get involved in UK City of Culture bids. To achieve this aim, I focused on the five shortlisted locations for 2021, which were Coventry, Paisley, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland and Swansea. All are cities, apart from Paisley which is a large town, and as such was eligible for the title, due to flexible criteria.

This work is empirical in that it identifies and brackets a portion of reality (Jensen, 2013, p.267) for further enquiry, through systematic data collection and analysis. In chapter one I will consider the participatory opportunities involved, as detailed by 20 interviewees. Chapter two focuses on the nature of participants' responses, as understood by the same interviewees. My objective was to continue to build connections between the academic concepts of critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking, and advocate their relevance in theorising participatory placemaking in the civic realm. The study is the first to specifically examine both the PR practitioner role and participatory culture theory in relation to UKCoC. My approach is relational constructivist, with a focus on "what people do together and what their "doing" makes" (McNamee & Hosking, 2011, p.1) in terms of "shared meanings" reflecting social constructions (Williamson, 2006). I banished notions of objectivism, empirical realism, objective truth, and essentialism, agreeing that "what we view as objective knowledge and truth is nothing more than the result of a specific perspective" (Charierre Petit & Huault, 2008, p.75). This was to ensure that "the complexities of the real world may have some chance of emerging" (Williamson, 2006) as a result. I adhered to a constructivist framework involving co-construction of knowledge between myself as a researcher and actors, avoiding the risk of assigning "subordinate" and "superior" subject positions (Charierre Petit & Huault, 2008, p.87).

While remembering that discussion of these events is "limited to a specific point in time" (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013, p.547), I emphasised the role of qualitative evidence, described by Bell & Waters (2018, p.24) as using "non-numerical data and … broader research questions … that home in on a narrower range of issues" through in-depth interviews. Although consideration was given to adding a quantitative survey element, I recognised the difficulty in obtaining a representative sample of a relevant demographic. Even if this were achievable, such a strategy would contradict my own summation of the issues surrounding use of metrics as a sometimes simplistic and unhelpful way to uncover complex findings, in concurrence with scholars Beer (2016) and Mao & Howe (2019, p.5) who described metrics as a "cult of numbers" with a rise in prominence

synonymous with neoliberalism. Given my critique of neoliberalism and its effects on society, I did not want to risk reducing my study to a set of soundbites. Beer (2016, p.26) warned of quantitative evidence's tendency to both define and verify truth. Nuanced reality, emerging from the human testimony relied upon here, is not black and white, and therefore perhaps more helpful to our understanding of the situations recounted.

While I originally wanted to run focus groups, the difficulty of finding enough willing participants led me to concentrate on one-to-one interviews. Another early intention was to talk to residents without a particular connection with the arts, who had nevertheless participated in consultative opportunities. This strategy also required reassessment when it became clear that such candidates would be hard to find, or not volunteer themselves for interview, or indeed see themselves as someone who could talk about UKCoC , especially given the elapsed time since their involvement. It is not always possible for researchers to recruit exactly who they would like (Barbour, 2011, p.63) but I met my revised ambition to conduct three to five interviews with key players in each bid, including ideally at least one in a defined PR role (although it was not possible to find a PR representative for Swansea). While the minority of my interviewees were working in PR-based roles, all of those speaking from an organisational perspective were performing the PR function of engaging meaningfully with local people. While some wrote press releases and populated city social media platforms, others were figureheads interviewed by the media, or facilitators at church hall meetings. While the majority of my interviewees did not design logos or banners, they were certainly instrumental in their development and sign-off. Snowballing (Liamputtong, 2011, p.61) played a part, where interviewees were able to recommend other people to ask, and though I was mindful that participants would point to others with similar viewpoints, and that his could lead to bias, my recruitment methods were suitably mixed.

It was very important that I selected interviewees who would provide rich data (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.119) rather than simply "convenience sampling" (Neuman, 2014, p.248) whoever was easy to reach or readily available. However, my sample needed to be flexible as the study evolved (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.119) due to the difficulty of engaging a sufficient number of interviewees. Before I could "snowball" (Carey, 2016) I required initial volunteers. To find interviewees, I searched regional and national journalism, bid documents and promotional videos on YouTube about city bids, looking for likely candidates. These included project leaders and community representatives quoted in stories, interviewed on screen, or mentioned in publications. I contacted them via social media or the organisation they represented. Using my data gathering for Sunderland as an example, I initially contacted bid leader Rebecca Ball and the PR team at related organisation Sunderland Culture. While Rebecca Ball did not reply, the PR team referred me to

Rebecca's fellow bid leader Keith Merrin who agreed to speak to me. At interview, Keith mentioned the bid's head of PR, Rob Lawson, and I was able to find contact details for him. Keith's implicit endorsement (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.120-1) in having given an interview, may have encouraged Rob to take part. During our conversation, Rob talked about a Sunderland community champions scheme that he had organised as part of his publicity efforts. I searched online for Sunderland community champions and found my third interviewee, Alan Parkinson, who I approached via Twitter. Alan then suggested community leader Ram, who was perhaps afforded confidence in my project because I had already spoken to Keith, Rob and Alan, all of whom he knew and had worked with. As a senior figure in the bid, Keith was effectively a "gatekeeper" (Minichiello et al, 1990, as cited in MacDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.119) with the power to grant or withhold access. Similarly, for Coventry, Laura Macmillan may not have agreed to an interview if bid director David Burbidge had not already spoken to me and recommended her.

Triangulation in research, the "strategy for gaining several perspectives on the same phenomenon" (Jensen, 2011, p.301), can be achieved by mixing methods. However, this study focused on the single method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews due to the amount of time I had (McDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.122) as well as the potentially rich findings that this method offered. Therefore, triangulation in this study is provided by the synthesis of interviewee testimony on topics, in evidence across my chapters, rather than different categories of evidence. Examples of triangulation include interviewees' similar recollections about resident negativity towards bids detailed on p.53, and testimony regarding renewed love of place, discussed on p.61. However, I was mindful not to assume that triangulation could provide absolute certainty (Hammersley, 2008, p.24-5) and that seeking triangulation for all information could be a "lengthy, and possibly never-ending, process".

My data gathering period was January 2021 to April 2021 with May 2021's sole appointment an addendum to this, given that interviewee's limited availability. As outlined on p.4, this study concerns activity during the bidding process for City of Culture 2021 culminating with the announcement in December 2017 of Coventry as the winner. To ensure a cohesive data set, a stipulation for interviewees was meaningful involvement in the bidding and shortlisting stages of the competition, and their testimony was focused on this period. Including recollections from personnel involved in programme delivery for Coventry in 2021/2 would have compromised the rigour of my process, given the difference in experience. As discussed in my [Pointers for further research](#), engaging residents much less central to bid processes could have broadened and strengthened this survey, had volunteers been traceable and willing. However, those involved during the UK CoC year, while potentially invaluable to another perhaps follow-on project, would not have been relevant for this specific data set.

List of interviewees.

Location	Name, date interviewed, duration of interview	Position in 2017 and 2021	How found	Involvement
Coventry	David Burbidge 31/3/21 39 minutes	2017: Bid director 2021: Chair, Coventry City of Culture Trust	Mentioned in bid publicity / on Coventry 2021 website	Bid leader with business background
	Chaitrali Chitre 27/1/21 30 minutes	Founder and chair, Sahyadri Friends Group	Organisation named in bid publicity	Involvement in consultation, organised dance performances during bid stage
	Kate Hills 10/2/21 27 minutes	Community radio broadcaster and artist	Recommended by Colin Scott	Involvement in consultation
	Laura McMillan 12/4/21 29 minutes	2017: Bid coordinator 2021: Director of audience strategy, Coventry City of Culture Trust	Recommended by David Burbidge	Marketing and PR as well as operational involvement
	Colin Scott 09/2/21 45 minutes	Chair, Positive Images Festival	Recommended by Chaitrali Chitre	Involvement in consultation, Positive Images Festival incorporated into festival programme
Paisley	Louisa Mahon 26/3/21 47 minutes	Head of marketing and communications, Renfrewshire Council	Through media coverage of bid campaign	PR and marketing
	Sharon McAulay 12/4/21 42 minutes	2017: Project manager, STAR Project 2021: Chief executive, STAR Project	Recommended by Louisa Mahon	Bid planning and operations / community engagement
	Alan McNiven 7/4/21 50 minutes	Chief executive, Engage Renfrewshire	Recommended by Louisa Mahon	Bid planning and operations / community involvement
Stoke-on-Trent	Amelia Bilson 17/3/21 34 minutes	Executive director, Middleport Matters Community Trust	Recommended by Danny Flynn	Ran workshops, helped with consultation
	Susan Clarke 22/3/21 43 minutes	Artistic director, B arts	Recommended by Danny Flynn	Bid planning and operations / community engagement

	Danny Flynn 11/3/21 54 minutes	Chief Executive, YMCA North Staffordshire	Through short film about bid online / mentioned by Paul Williams	Bid planning and operations / community engagement
	Emma Rodgers 29/3/21 46 minutes	Head of communications and marketing, Stoke-on-Trent City Council	Through media coverage of bid campaign	PR and marketing
	Paul Williams 8/3/21 48 minutes	2017: Bid director	Through media coverage of bid campaign	Leading bid
Sunderland	Rob Lawson 14/1/21 51 minutes	2017: Head of PR	Mentioned by Keith Merrin	PR and marketing
	Keith Merrin 11/01/21 51 minutes	2017: Chief Executive, Sunderland Culture 2021: Director, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums	Through Sunderland Culture	Leading bid
	Alan Parkinson 22/01/21 46 minutes	2017: Bid community champion / author	Through media coverage of bid campaign	Bid planning and operations / community engagement
	Kumareswaradas (Ram) Ramanathas 10/2/21 24 minutes	2017: Manager, Young Asian Voices	Suggested by Parkinson	Involvement in consultation, giving performances as part of events
Swansea	Paul Davies 29/3/21 39 minutes	Artistic Director, Volcano Theatre	Named in a bid document	Involved in consultation
	Tracey McNulty 8/4/21 53 minutes	Head of Cultural Services, Swansea Council	Mentioned by Paul Davies	Leading bid
	Clr Rob Stewart 11/5/21 27 minutes	Leader, Swansea Council	Mentioned by Tracy McNulty	Leading bid

Conversations were conducted via Microsoft Teams, following a semi-structured format (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.211), and were recorded with interviewees' permission. Video calling applications have become "ingrained in our lives" (Kalia, 2020) since the pandemic restricted human contact, with users of one provider, Zoom, rising from 10 million in December 2019 to 200 million three months later (Kalia, 2020). This situation continues post-lockdowns, with Office for National

Statistics data revealing that a third of working adults were doing their jobs from home in 2022 (Kirk, 2022). Conversing on a screen for work purposes is sometimes seen as a poor substitute for physical interaction (Deeks, 2022), with actual face to face meetings key to research dialogue (Minocha & Petros, 2012, as cited in Bell & Waters, 2018, p.218). However, I argue that the benefit of "sitting down face to face" and "seeing facial expressions and body language" (Wilson, 2012, p.96) is facilitated by video calling, making being in the same room unnecessary. Research suggests a remote mode for qualitative research interviews does not mean rapport is more challenging to establish or maintain (Weller, 2017, p.623). Furthermore, a video appointment can be more fruitful, fostering a sense of ease and even a "greater (emotional) connection" without the "pressure of presence" (Weller, 2017, p.623) for each participant. As my interviews were conducted during Covid restrictions, it is likely that the majority could not have taken place at all in person. Given my time constraints, travelling for two or more hours each way to relevant towns and cities would have limited the number of appointments I was able to attend, making my data less rich.

A total of 10 interviewees (shaded blue) are classed as leading members of bid teams and four are PR representatives (shaded yellow). Although Laura did not have PR in her title, she approached her role from an arts marketing background. The remaining six interviewees (shaded pink) are community leaders who engaged with consultation processes but who were not central to proceedings. The mean average duration of a meeting was 41 minutes, and this was dependent upon what people had to say, and how much time they were willing to offer, established beforehand or as meetings began. My standard request was for a 45-minute call.

I was present, co-constructing knowledge with actors, a strategy in line with my constructivist standpoint (Charriere Petit & Huault, 2008, p.75). While my core questions were uniform between interviewees, directions of conversation were shaped by my follow-on questions, often informed by shared professional knowledge as a PR practitioner. It is "fundamental to reflect and act upon the nature of the exchange between the researcher and participant," (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.76) given the "highly subjective" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.210) process of conducting interviews, with its potential for bias. However, this vocational rapport was certainly beneficial to gathering rich and plentiful data. While my attention to rigour detailed on p.29 fostered a keen awareness of my influence as a co-constructing actor (Fawkes, 2015, p.677), the researcher's presence cannot be negated. Moreover, Charriere Petit & Huault (2008, p.87) assert that researchers should *avoid* exteriorising their own stance, and firmly place interviewer/interviewee interaction at the heart of the analytical approach with its potential to develop a "shared perspective" (Walliman, 2018, p.244).

I also included a minor dimension of "secondary data" (Walliman, 2018. P.86) to this evidence, including from journalism, official documents, and social media. While I do not call my method a "mixed approach" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.25) as it relies primarily on interview testimony, these other, secondary, sources certainly add richness, and sometimes triangulation. The time available (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001, p.120-1) was a factor in pursuing a single method approach. I originally aimed for my interview data to be supported by a smaller-scale, netnographical (Rageh et al, 2013) inquiry of social media as spaces for discussion on UKCoC from the relevant period. However, the data-scraping tools trialled, primarily Vicinitas, returned only very scant and dilute material. Reasons for this included the time elapsed since the bid period, and a tendency for a majority of posts about UKCoC to be short statements of support, without any particular detail. While I did find and retrieve regional and national news media coverage in my initial investigations, interview excerpts – for example, with relevant community leaders – were found to be superficial, centring on overall support for bids. Recognising that semi-structured in-depth interviews with their "rich descriptive detail of people's experience capability, relations or attitudes" (Carey, 2016, p.32) offered much greater potential for insightful data, I concentrated on these.

I checked my plans against the methodologies of 10 comparable studies (Archer, 2019; Boland et al, 2016; McDermott et al, 2016; Crawford et al, 2014; Cunningham & Platt, 2019; Lee, 2009; Liu, 2015; Ploner and Jones, 2020; Vine et al, 2014; Zhang and Zhao, 2009) concerning the areas of UKCoC, European Capital of Culture, Olympics, placemaking, audience development, PR and community relations, from the past decade. These were chosen because I read them all as part of my literature review and they are relevant to my context. In these studies, the most common research methods were interviews. In-depth one-to-one conversations were typically conducted with paid professionals such as bid team members, teachers, educationalists, and arts practitioners (Boland et al 2016; Cunningham & Platt, 2019; Ploner & Jones, 2020) yet when those same researchers wanted to talk to unpaid community participants, and topics were live or current, they used focus groups. I argue that emulating this method could compromise my constructivist stance and risk fostering an inequality between actors, because it would infer that the professional voice has greater importance.

My four-month timescale for gathering qualitative data constrained the total amount of research conducted. This window was much shorter than some studies, such as McDermott et al (2016) who conducted fieldwork over two years, and Archer (2019) who held interviews across five years. My approach was more in line with Ploner & Jones (2020) and Cunningham & Platt (2019) in terms of the extent of my investigation, although these authors did not specify how long data gathering took. Each interview involved a "framework" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.214) of five defined areas for

discussion ([Appendix 1](#)). These were common to all interviews, to aid analysis (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.213), which can be more difficult for less structured discussion. Within this, there was room to pursue avenues of enquiry based on interviewees' responses and to allow "the freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.214). I paid attention to the manner and order in which I asked questions, to help establish an "easy relationship" with each participant (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.211). As Tracy (2013, p.144) suggests, questions were simple and clear, asking one thing at a time. I began with open-ended experience questions (Tracy, 2013, p.147) and left more difficult matters, for example addressing what could have been done differently, until near the end, before a catch-all opportunity for people to add anything else they felt might be useful. My questions were designed to ensure common areas of discussion across interviews, prompted by the exact same phrasing (McGrath et al, 2019) of open questions. This approach resulted in "a set of responses that can be fairly easily recorded, summarized and analysed" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.212). The question sheet / discussion sheet was tested on my first two interviewees then followed up with a discussion with my supervisor Professor Matt Hills to help refine my process. While my questions were well thought-out and did not need to be modified, the first transcripts – produced by editing scripts automatically generated by Microsoft Teams while watching and frequently pausing the recording – revealed points at which I had neglected to "probe, in order to dig deeper" (McGrath et al, 2019) on a potentially interesting topic, or ask for clarification on a point. This process served to improve the quality and insight of data gathered in subsequent interviews.

I took a thematic analysis (Bell & Waters, p.37) approach, as did Crawford et al (2014), Cunningham & Platt (2019) and Ploner & Jones (2020), involving exploring qualitative data with an open mind, to look for themes and patterns in responses, with the help of a coding system – labelling data in order to organise it (Walliman, 2018, p.153). Thematic analysis, the categorisation of interviews with reference to their content and form, is widely used in media studies (Jensen, 2011, p.277) and allows for the abstracting of meanings. Possible alternative approaches include grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, as cited in Jensen, 2011, p.277) but this would have necessitated several, distinct stages of analysis and "constant comparisons" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.36) to achieve "theoretical saturation" (Jensen, 2011, p.277), creating unwanted distance from the original context. Linguistics-inspired discourse analysis, with its specific potential for redeveloping statistics and systematics, could have avoided such "decontextualization of meaning" (Jensen, 2011, p.278-9) but its more rigid categorisation of data segments and emphasis on language would have been less useful than thematic analysis's focus on *what* was said, and how, in "exploring qualitative data with an open mind" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.38).

Carey (2016, p.42-3) said priority should always be given in research to achieving rigour and this should involve critical, reflexive thinking – in my case, to ensure that my "open minded", thematic approach led to findings that were accurate and meaningful. The quality of my list of semi-structured areas for discussion (appendix 1) and consistency in execution of interviews was key to this rigour, ensuring rich and cohesive data for analysis. While informed hunches or first thoughts on categories for coding developed (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.262) as interviews progressed, I tried not to overload interviews with excessive attention to my search for convening and diverging thematic trends (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.77.) These began to take shape as "similarities and differences, groupings, patterns and items of particular significance" (Bell & Waters, 2018, p.262) that were further refined over several weeks to become the seven sections of my two chapters.

To code segments of conversation, I printed out all interview transcripts and assembled them in a ringbinder. I then read and re-read this material, using sticky notes (Appendix 2) and a pencil underscoring system to colour-code insight from different interviewees on these seven topics. There are many software packages available to help with tagging sections of data including NVivo and Atlas.ti (Cote & Raz, 2015, p.112) but I preferred a traditional, paper approach because I felt confident in my ability to sort, shuffle and organise, and I was mindful that interviewees' variety of terms used in discussing common experiences could make electronic searches unreliable. I did however use Microsoft Word's 'find' tool as a back-up measure, to check for any further, relevant material on a particular subject. Despite advancements in technology, "memos to yourself, a folder of your written thoughts … a collection of sticky notes" (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.122) or a combination of these alongside digital tools, remain an acceptable way to code "chunks of conversation" (Carey, 2012, p.218). Bell & Waters (2018, p.143), too, suggest keeping to manual methods of data analysis for small, time limited surveys. On exhausting thematic possibilities (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.150) I moved into synthesis, drawing on both the empirical and theoretical, though these were not "separate acts", rather an "iterative process" (Jensen, 2011, p.276) that began to crystalise with the cross-referencing of themes and sub-themes against the findings of my literature review, which I printed and assembled in a second ringbinder. In a separate colour tagging system, I then coded theory areas and matched them against the clustered topics that they had resonance with or revealed meaning for. This then led to a "generative process" of writing (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.153), further developing ideas and waves of interpretation (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.172) over a series of drafts in tandem with extensive further reading.

I accepted the difficulty in making qualitative analysis as systematic and "scientific" as possible and recognised the element of "art" backed up by a good argument and sound logic, as well as high-quality evidence (Walliman, 2018, p.151). Regarding ethical issues, I abided by the University's Code

of Practice for Research which includes consideration of ethics at several points, and the principles of GDPR when handling personal and organisational data. In addition, I was guided by principles of discourse ethics (Tench & Yeomans, 2017), founded by Habermas (1989), with its basis of equality among people involved – in this case, researcher and interviewees – and processes of reasoning and argument, in line with my relational constructivist principles. Interviewees were given a participant information sheet, and asked to sign a consent form, offering an option to speak anonymously when addressing a difficult topic, such as criticising processes. My conditions and guarantees (Bell & Waters, p.90) included chances to review quotes attributed. The anonymity option was taken up by one interviewee on reviewing their quotes and applied to part of their testimony.

While writing up, I maintained my relational constructivist approach. This paradigm highlights the difficulty of seeking objective knowledge and truth when testimony always comes from a specific perspective, and is further shaped by the researcher's presence, and particular questioning. As previously alluded to, recognition and consideration of these factors does not discount or limit possible findings but rather opens them up, allowing complexities to emerge. As part of this, I explored Goffman's theories of presentations of self (Goffman, p.242, 1959, as cited in Fawkes, 2015, p.677): "When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part." This can involve professional optimism (Gabris et al, 1998, p.336) or comparative optimism (Le Barbenchon et al, 2016, p.279), when leaders deliver an upbeat and positive version of events, perhaps to cast themselves and their projects in a favourable light. Although interview questions for this study did not create "face-threatening situations" (Fawkes, 2015, p.677), some asked directly about professional failures, that could lead to a desire to "preserve one's own and others' 'face', or 'public self-image'". In his seminal work, Goffman drew parallels with theatrical performance, yet Giddens (2009, p.291) made the point that "The theatre is all about makebelieve and is meticulously prepared beforehand. In everyday life by contrast, 'things are real' and performances 'sometimes not well rehearsed'". interviewees may "perform" professionally, but the act of giving a research interview could be seen as a semi-regular part of everyday life, rather than an opportunity to project a carefully polished, word-perfect "performance", such as when delivering a keynote speech. Caldwell's (2008, p.2-3) observations about interviewing Los Angeles film industry workers are relevant here. He argued that "insider knowledge is *always* managed" and professionals' habit was to "speak from corporate 'scripts'". Fallers (1962, p.190) said the performer can choose their clothing, décor and behaviour, but cannot wholly control the encounter: "Performances are never perfect, and the observer may find in faux pas and 'out of character' behaviour his most revealing clues to performers' problems and purposes."

My interpretation was mindful that "meanings are always based on the perspective of the creator …
and his or her intentions" (Walliman, 2018, p.160) and that as discussed, as a researcher I was a co-
creator bringing my own viewpoint. In comparable studies, approaches have varied. Cunningham &
Platt (2019, p.317) for example, adopted an interpretive philosophical paradigm, recognising
subjectivity behind social actions. Boland et al (2016) used interpretivist epistemology, with an
emphasis on capturing a diversity of voices. My relational constructivist approach was built upon
narrative analysis (Walliman, 2018, p.162) as the most useful of several possibilities, as cited in
Walliman, given its focus on "the construction of subjectivities and experientiality through stories"
and "stories as methodological tools to make sense of events and situations" (De Fina et al, 2015,
p.3,5). Talking about civic imagination, Jenkins et al (2020, p.3) say: "Stories have always been
vehicles for people to pass along shared wisdom, question current actions, and direct attention to
shared desires" and the tales told in this study are no exception. My rejected possibilities include
discourse analysis with its emphasis on context, relationships and environment, rhetorical analysis
paying attention to persuasive language, and semiotics based on signs and signifiers – all of which
could be used, but none in my summation as usefully as narrative analysis's focus on storytelling. Its
aim in extracting themes, structures and interactions, plus, crucially, *performances* "from stories or
accounts that people use to explain their past, their present situation or their interpretation of
events" (Walliman, 2018, p.162), makes it the method most closely-aligned with my over-arching
philosophy of co-creation. This encompasses my attention to performance and aligns with my choice
of a thematic analysis (Bell & Waters, p.37) approach, using labels, tags and pattern coding
(Walliman, 2018, p.153) while working manually with transcribed interviews.

Gibbs (2007, as cited in Flick, 2011, p.107) states the background of coding and categorising can be
realist or constructivist. Categories are developed as a result of themes uncovered in the data, rather
than existing theories, as took place in this study. De Fina et al (2015, p.240) make an explicit link
between narrative analysis and "connections with a postmodernist and/or constructivist turn in the
sciences" with an interest in narrative harmonising with an emphasis on contextual construction of
meaning and "the possibility of multiple perspectives on reality, including the idea that relevant
truths are grounded in social relations and everyday interaction" including perhaps granting an
interview to an academic researcher. Although narrative elicitation is not explicitly part of the
research design, I allowed it to "just happen" (De Fina et al, 2015, p.244) and become my focus of
analytical attention. This narrative is typified by interviewer and interviewee often constructing an
evaluative stance based on shared perspective, points at which the interviewer's role becomes
backgrounded and subservient to the interviewee's goal of narration, and elsewhere a "pulse of
questioning" leading to "interactively accomplished narration" (De Fina et al, 2015, p.242,244).

In summary, this empirical piece of research followed a strong, relational constructivist approach in both evidence gathering and analysis, with a particular focus on co-constructed meanings from the point of view of multiple story tellers. In analysing PR-led participatory processes, I built connections between the academic domains of critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking.

Chapter 1

Community processes in UKCoC bids – from the low barrier to the limits of consultation, via participatory branding and PR

This chapter will examine the breadth and depth of the participatory opportunities created for residents of UKCoC locations, while bearing in mind interviewees' presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) when recounting success and good practice. The top-down, time-limited nature of consultation, with activity funnelled into curating and distilling ideas for inclusion in competitive bids, will be outlined. While these happenings are not typical of participatory culture in its core, bottom-up form, I argue UKCoC consultation can be theorised as a practical application of participatory culture in the civic realm, driven by critical PR ideals. The value to academia I attach to this empirical evidence is justified by processes' potential to create autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016) and therefore have the possibility of redistributing societal power. In exploring this, I note that participatory culture tends to focus on online activity and assert that the principles are equally useful when applied offline. My second argument of the chapter is that the conditions to facilitate autonomous space were only possible due to project leaders' participatory culture and critical PR-flavoured recognition of the need to listen properly to participants. This is because, while the concept of "participation as a reward in itself" may be relevant in fandom and entertainment, having your say in civic consultation is not enough, unless your say can contribute to actual change and improvement.

Thirdly, this progressive attitude among practitioners was further demonstrated in the way they welcomed the appropriation and recirculation of branding and encouraged proactive citizen behaviour. People's reported excitement, empowerment, and readiness to champion city bids, will be touched upon as a form of fan culture, and/or a challenge to neoliberalism. I will then turn to the limitations of processes, governed by neoliberalist systems. These include a culture of proving success or otherwise with numbers, the competitive practice of pitching places and people against each other, and – most crucially – the pace at which players were made to carry out important consultation work, with limited funds. While the reach of UKCoC processes was certainly curtailed, my fourth argument is that this did not preclude work from being worthwhile and that critical PR and participatory culture ideals were possibly neared at intervals. Therefore, the happenings of

those five locations in 2017, flaws and all, can be embraced and learned from, as material for the advancement and synthesis, if not convergence, of the academic concepts in question.

Finally, I will examine a particularly interesting finding with implications for participatory culture's core pre-requisite of the low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006) to participation and artistic expression. Usually an enabling force, allowing for wide-ranging involvement, I argue that the low barrier can serve to exclude people who already have cultural and creative capital, and therefore represents a conceptual flaw requiring further development. I also theorise artists' sometimes reluctance to take part in UKCoC as an effect of neoliberalism; that creative people concerned with permanent job insecurity, in our late-capitalist gig economy, perhaps cannot consider giving their labour for free, or using their talents for fun, for the good of their hometown or city.

All interviewees were willing to proactively discuss elements of failure or omission, although there were plenty of caveats. At points, participants would say they may be wrong, or that this was just their personal point of view. This is perhaps not a surprise, given that people were recounting events from three or four years ago, without specific preparation or aide memoire. Sometimes when an interviewee was criticising a process, they would state they did not have knowledge of, or remember, full details or wider context. In similar circumstances an interviewee might also apologise, as if to cushion their summation. Bid leaders and those representing an organisation central to a bid tended to be the most upbeat about activities and experiences and make greater claims about success and legacy. Le Barbenchon et al (2016, p.270, 279) said studies had shown people speaking enthusiastically tended to be viewed positively, whereas those exhibiting comparative pessimism could face social rejection. Moreover, comparative optimism may be "a self-presentation strategy to achieve social acceptability" and "reflect a current goal to present a favourable self-image". More peripheral community representatives, or those who dipped in and out of processes, and who were less of an official spokesperson were on balance less impressed, although there were exceptions. Given that community representatives co-opted to collaborative processes "risk becoming professionalized" (Attuyer, 2015, p.809) as they assimilate skills and knowledge, and "tend to internalize the values of their new peers and distance themselves from their community-based agendas" it is possible that a potential for more vociferous dissent was quietened along the way, as comparative optimism spread further than just between salaried bid leaders and PR representatives.

Listening very carefully: Participatory culture, UKCoC style

The overriding objective of this study is to continue to draw connections between the academic concepts of critical PR, participatory culture and placemaking through the interrogation of UKCoC processes and what is said about them. Pitts and Price (2021, p.54) observe: "Audience experience, beyond the counting of international visitors and local participation, is largely absent from the narratives of UKCoC research" and this study offers more insight into how people were invited to be involved, albeit from the point of view of those facilitating the experiences. In theorising all agents' experiences of getting together to work with local people to reimagine the place where they live, it is important to take an overview of the sorts of opportunities that were staged at this point in time, leading up to the selection of Coventry as UKCoC 2021, in December 2017, and the important role of organisational listening in making this meaningful. Official assessment criteria for cities bidding to be shortlisted in *UK City of Culture Guidance 2021* (Gov.uk, undated*)* make clear the requirement for "local people, groups and communities" to be consulted on the bid, and involved in its development, to the point of asking for a full list of contributors as an appendix, and it is evident that project teams duly set out to achieve this and quantify their efforts.

According to interviewees, bid locations typically started with open calls for any interested parties to get involved, public meetings in town halls and community centres, and the formation of working groups or committees, to focus on different themes. Outreach work included visiting groups and organisations to deliver talks and workshops, during which participants would converse about what culture meant to them, in relation to their neighbourhoods. In at least one location (Stoke-on-Trent) residents were invited to populate large, paper maps with their stories and associations. In Paisley, a promotional bus toured different localities, with goodie bags and circus performers, to generate interest in and awareness of the bid. This was an alternative to expecting people to attend a pre-determined time and place in response to community requests to "come to them". Other meetings followed a more public information, presentation-led format. There were forays into hard-to-reach communities, described by Rob Lawson, Sunderland bid's head of PR (Sunderland, 14/1/21):

> Sometimes you'd be talking to five or six people. Sometimes a few dozen or 100 people. But it was treating them with the same respect and treating every meeting as a possible excuse to get over the importance of the bid.

Similarly, Stoke-on-Trent bid director Paul Williams (Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) described considerable legwork: "We went out, we engaged. We never turned down an opportunity to attend any forum." There were also points to physically post place-related thoughts, stories and anecdotes, and online repositories for similar materials, all of which were purported to be funnelled into the bid-writing process – although of course much selection and adaptation of these contributions would take

place. This in itself is important and unlike participatory culture in its core form. Susan Clarke, artistic director of B arts (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) reasonably pointed out: "So how do you generate a programme? Because it's not all about everybody just flinging ideas into the pot, and you know, I mean there's a little bit of leadership that has to happen." Keith Merrin, Sunderland bid leader (11/1/21) said similarly: "Inevitably, there is a curatorial aspect to it … you're gonna get ideas and you sort of choose the ones that seem to have the most potential around them", therefore articulating the organisational framing and shaping, so integral to cities' processes and the theorising of them.

UKCoC activities were orchestrated by bid teams, using funding, and carefully staged and timetabled. Although some interviewees did recount spontaneous, proactive participation, the processes were organisation-led, top-down consultation, to meet pre-defined objectives within given deadlines, akin to Kemp et al's (2015, p.720) summation of well-developed participatory procedures in Berlin, under which: "Budget constraints, legal parameters and institutional jurisdictions provide the framework that all participating actors have to respect if they wish to remain part of collective bargaining processes." However, UKCoC processes arguably provided "a space where multiple voices are heard and are able to have some impact on the decisions that impact their own lives" (Jenkins, 2019), or autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016. I argue they can therefore be theorised as an application of participatory culture in the civic realm. While participatory culture grew from entertainment and fan culture, it is now relevant in aspects of life from education to democracy as well as social movement and civic engagement, and these areas are all covered in Delwiche & Henderson's *Participatory Cultures Handbook* (2012). Indeed, Stokes (2012, p.143) credits expansion of civic engagement in part to scholars of participatory culture who have "helped to pull the civic into an analysis of everyday life" in ways that are dependent on the low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.3) to involvement.

So, UKCoC placemaking is a practical application of participatory culture principles, driven by critical PR, to facilitate progressive and potentially power-redistributing activity. I argue that these processes had the potential to involve pockets of free-thinking collaboration, worthy of comparison with Fuchs & Mosco's autonomous space (2016, p.4), or Peekhaus's spaces of commons (2016, p.379). These could be further defined with testimony from ordinary residents, were they traceable or willing, given the time that has passed since then. Fuchs & Mosco say such spaces are "present wherever people resist capitalism" but the leap to apply this to civic participatory culture, PR and placemaking is mine.

My interview material is populated with stories recounting such spaces, although not described as such – and notably, they happened in person, face to face, rather than online. Perhaps mainstream social media, or bespoke online portals, were not as conducive as an effectively ring-fenced arena for fresh thinking and free exchange in person. While participatory culture theory is concerned primarily with online exchange, offline activity is also relevant. "Creativity didn't begin with the internet," Gauntlett explains to Jenkins (2019, p.29) in interview, and making and sharing can be facilitated by "new technologies or ancient ones." In exploring new media practice in civic and cultural institutions, Joseph and Czarnecki (2012, p.222) point out that the "primary sites of learning were not online but in person." Jenkins (2006) stresses that convergence is not about technology but individuals and their social interaction with others. Regarding the civic realm so central to this study, Veil et al (2015, as cited in Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p.16) underline the importance of "practical offline actions" in support of hashtag activism to effect change. Echoing this, Fuchs & Mosco (2016, p.4) assert that: "Communism needs spaces for materializing itself as a movement" and that those spaces are the likes of Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol and Zuccotti Park rather than Facebook or Twitter, so possibly by extension, Keel Square in Sunderland or Burslem Town Square in Stoke-on-Trent.

Although we must remember professional interviewees' tendency to manage insider knowledge (Caldwell, 2008, p.2/3), much joyous, spontaneous, and productive activity was described in data collection, notably by Alan McNiven, chief executive of Engage Renfrewshire (Paisley, 7/4/21):

> There was just tons and tons and tons of energised community, local poetry, local dance, just that thing of just being you know, alive, you know during the whole process enough of the time, to make people realise it was something they could get involved in if they chose to do so.

Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) articulated a widespread willingness to take part from the off: "I just started holding these conversation events and invited just shed-loads of people and they all just came." Sharon McAulay, manager, STAR Project (Paisley, 2/4/21) emphasised the fun of the proposition: "It was high energy and people definitely mirrored it. I think it's hard not to mirror when you're surrounded by people where there's laughter and there's joy … and there's a lot of motivation and there's funding". Encouragement for participants to be proactive was also a feature. Emma Rodgers, head of communications and marketing, Stoke-on-Trent City Council (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21), said: "we were very clear … don't wait for an invitation … get involved. We don't own this." Digital opportunities included Paisley's 'What's our story?' described by Louisa Mahon, head of marketing and communications at Renfrewshire Council (Paisley, 26/3/21):

> We had people posting videos of them telling us how much they loved Paisley through the medium of dance. It was basically like a pub where you said any ideas, anything you wanted to tell us, you can tell us digitally.

The What's Our Story website states: "Every story is important to us" and:

> It could be … a photograph, a poem, a drawing. It could be a story of your family history that's never been told. It could be a big show, idea or event that you'd like to see come to the town and be part of.

So far, so resonant of Gauntlett's upbeat ideology of "making and doing" (2018, p.24), but where participatory culture is a tool to effect change, particularly involving the public realm, the experience of participation itself is not reward enough. In consultation processes, the lively sharing of thoughts and ideas is valuable only to participants if those views are listened to and taken forward towards a greater prize of actual social change and improvement. Mcacnamara (2018, p.19) said: "Affording voice to citizens and increasing the voice of marginalised groups will not improve their access to decision making, policy making or representation … unless there is effective listening by government, non-government and non-profit organisations." I argue that project leaders' critical PR-oriented understanding of the need to listen, equally important in participatory culture theory, is crucial in theorising activity as holding the potential for autonomous space. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, p.178) said listening demands an active response, "not just gathering data but doing something about it. Such action might include reaching out in response to what audiences are talking about: thanking them for their enthusiasm, offering support or additional resources, addressing concerns, and correcting misconceptions." In illustration of the reported application of these key principles of critical PR and participatory culture, Alan (Paisley, 7/4/21) said of outreach work:

> You really need to go in and really listen and just accept what some of the folks are bringing to you … there's no point in going in there with preconceived ideas, you need to go in and say look, you know, what is it you want to say?

Amelia Bilson, executive director of Middleport Matters Community Trust (Stoke-on-Trent, 17/3/21) (Stoke-on-Trent, 17/3) said: "do the listening properly. Really believe in the material you're bringing. Really believe and listen and go through it, say here's the things that are coming through time and time again." One of Jenkins' prerequisites for participatory culture is feeling one's contributions matter (Jenkins et al, 2006), and it was essential for project teams to make sure this happened for residents to then be empowered to perform their subsequent task of cheerleading on behalf of their city, to be outlined in the next section.

Appropriation and recirculation: UKCoC branding and PR as spreadable media

"If it doesn't spread, it's dead" is Jenkins et al's (2013, p.127) edict for any form of content in the 21st century, and it was this picking up and running with spreadable media that made the UKCoC PR efforts come alive among the relevant populace. In facilitating this, we see project teams trying to live the identity of Tombleson & Wolf's (2017, p.15) "cultural curator", engaged in "cultural values shared as an organic exchange, rather than a manufactured one." We see their strategic investment based on authenticity, engagement, and relationships (Wolf & Archer, 2018, p.505) creating the potential for the autonomous space that Fuchs & Mosco (2016, p.4) advocated as an arena for the redistribution of power. This included considerable effort to relinquish some ownership of standard PR tools such as media relations and brand guidelines. Official guidance asked for rather proper branding: "We will expect all those bidding to use the candidate city version of the UKCoC logo, rather than developing your own branding" (*UK City of Culture Guidance 2021*). However, some cities appeared to ignore advice, go rogue, and produce materials to offer freely, for adoption and adaptation. PR representatives saw the potential for encouraging supporters to make these motifs their own. Louisa, (Paisley, 26/3/21) described branding that was:

> … bright, colourful, featured the Paisley pattern, was really accessible, and we did what brand custodians don't do and we basically said we don't want to control this, this is yours … you know we're not the Disney police … we created toolkits to allow anyone … to go forward, create, tell the world what we are trying to achieve … we saw the brand appearing on vans, on the sides of buildings, on posters, it just started to permeate everywhere.

Keith (Sunderland, 11/1/21) recounted a similar approach: "Quite early on we gave businesses the branding and the materials … we were essentially giving away the right to put our logo in people's windows and, you know, make their own statements." Emma (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) said: "we wanted to be the opposite of how you would be with the Olympic brand where you're protecting it and you don't want people to use it all the time. We said anyone, everyone, whoever wants to get involved. We don't own culture … This is your city, get behind it."

I argue that this stance can be seen as a particular mirror to participatory fan culture, which involves the annotating, appropriating, and recirculating of media content (Jenkins, 2006, p.18). Community members embraced their UKCoC bid and wanted to help spread the word. Perhaps they even became fans of it, a possibility theorised by Williams (2018, p.102, 104) who considered "fandom of spaces" when people "respond strongly to a particular place", and the sense of belonging evoked when this happens with other people. Social media, too, provided an opportunity for endorsing and

sharing. The PR success of the hashtag #WelcometoSunderland which trended nationally on judging day is one example of this. Keith (Sunderland, 11/1/21) said "actually people loved spending a day just saying really positive things", although when Coventry's success was announced there was still the odd "#shithole" and "what a waste of money and time" in the 68 comments under @SundCulture's commiseratory tweet of 7/12/17. Louisa (Paisley, 26/3/21) spoke of Twitter users' self-coined hashtag #OurJourneyContinues following Coventry's success, which illustrated a degree of community ownership. Where celebrities were involved, they were sometimes enlisted as a figurehead, for example the cult film director Kevin Allen for Swansea, but other times their endorsement was spontaneous, such as the actor David Tennant wearing a "Straight Outta Paisley" t-shirt on primetime TV, and the comedian Jason Manford tweeting his love for Stoke-on-Trent. However, there was also some uncertainty and reticence among some residents in running with UKCoC, perhaps because encouragement to speak out was not expected to extend further than official channels, as would have been the case under a more "command and control" (Macnamara, 2016, p.371) model of PR. I argue this contributes to evidence of practitioners' progressive and inclusive approach. Laura McMillan, Coventry's bid co-ordinator (21/4/21) said:

> All of a sudden, we had this really odd thing where people were asking for permission to put on events that they'd been putting on for like 10 years and all of a sudden, they'd ask us and we were like, don't ask us, we are one organisation in the city … we're not the be-all and end-all of culture in Coventry.

Emma, (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) articulated a similar shift:

> The traditional relationship (between the city and the council) was that we were the matriarch and then people, you know, came to us and found us old and archaic and authoritarian. We're so much more collaborative, listening very much two-way.

Art, events, and visual stunts also played a part in bringing people together and creating a sense of excitement, impending change, and ownership. Examples include the simple wrapping of buildings in Coventry, the illuminated branding of the Penshaw Monument, a landmark in Sunderland, and the grandstanding of the Paisley pattern as an emblem for the town. Stoke-on-Trent chose a 30ft duck, inspired by the colloquial term of endearment. Emma (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) said: "the idea of really trying to be a bit creative and a bit quirky … would you say that's highbrow culture? No, but it was all about us and people just really got behind it." The town also commissioned a piece of participatory public art, a mosaic featuring thousands of photos of residents. Of this, Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) said: "the final image is still out in the public realm now and, you know, it's great. I walk past and you can hear people talking about it explaining it to each other." All these interventions can be theorised as focuses for transmedia engagement, through which people gave UKCoC their stamp of approval.

The media was another audience reportedly enthused, with cities recounting editorial support, for example David Burbidge, bid leader (Coventry, 31/3/21): "we did have a lot of help from our local and regional media. They all saw the benefit of this title coming to Coventry", and Emma (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) of their local newspaper "as soon as they signed up to be part of the bid process then it was very much, right we'll do that." In summary we can see a sense of community members, including journalists, stepping up and getting involved, taking the initiative, and therefore embodying some of David Gauntlett's grassroots ideals of "individual and collective creativity, self-expression and sharing" in "a challenge to the neoliberal vision of society, consumerism and education" (Gauntlett, 2018, p.187). However, where this happened, perhaps in those autonomous spaces (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), the forces of neoliberalism were always close by, curbing opportunity and calling time on more radical tendencies.

Autonomous space in a neoliberalist wrap: The limits of UKCoC consultation

As if in direct illustration of neoliberalism's very permeation of all areas of life and society, its fingerprints are all over UKCoC consultation. This includes the need to put hard numbers to the outreach work detailed here, the competitive nature of bidding, and perhaps a sense of communities as a resource to be mobilised, within tightly pre-determined timescales. Certainly, interviewees spoke in neoliberal terms on all these elements, which is wholly understandable and to be expected, given that this system is so well established as to simply be modern life, for which "there is no alternative" (Fisher, 2009, p.40). In Coventry, I was told the project team recorded 45 hours of consultation with 3,500 people (Laura, Coventry, 12/4/21) and in Paisley, 36,000 people were purported to have been engaged over a year, according to the Arts Council's *Cultural Cities Enquiry – Case Studies*. Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) described conversations with 150 practitioners and on another occasion, 250 people at a meeting, and Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) talked of "thousands and thousands and thousands" involved – although I did not specifically ask about numbers. As project leaders working within neoliberalist systems, the need to demonstrate success with "huge quantities of data" spat out for a "variety of purposes" (Mao & Howe, 2019, p.2) is constant, and therefore familiar territory for professional conversation, perhaps explaining these unprompted inclusions with conscious or unconscious performances of professional selves (Goffman, 1959) at play.

Linked with this "cult of numbers" (Mao & Howe, 2019, p.5) is the competitive nature of the whole undertaking. Beer (2016, p.29) says: "competition in its various forms and with varying effects, is a key feature of … neoliberalism" and the act of bidding against other cities is central to UKCoC. This

was not generally seen as problematic or even particularly noteworthy in discussion. Emma (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) said: "We absolutely drilled it down to the tangible benefits and we made it into a competition." Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) offered: "We do like a good competition, you know. I think there's nothing like, you know, saying to somebody, sort of, can we do that? Can we do it? And for them to go 'aye we can'." Meanwhile, Danny Flynn, Chief Executive of YMCA North Staffordshire (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) recalled: "The City of Culture bid ... did give the people involved in the city a prize to go for ... 'it'd be brilliant if this happens, it would be really good'." Keith (Sunderland, 11/1) however, inferred distance from this viewpoint, saying: "For a lot of people, I think in the wider community, most people who are not in within the sort of sector or whatever, for them it was a competition and, you know, we didn't win it."

Also potentially reinforcing of the neoliberal power relations at play are indicators, at points, that communities were a resource to be mobilised. Alan (Sunderland, 22/1/21) said: "you almost have to, not trick people, but get them doing something like 'ah this is what you mean by culture'." This extended to the involvement of artists, with Clr Rob Stewart, leader of Swansea Council (Swansea, 11/5/21) talking about a desire to "harness" and "take the best of" a buzzing community of artists. There was also a question over whether everyone had the chance to participate, and this is linked with the limitation of time and money involved in fast-paced city bidding, perhaps the most notable demand of neoliberalism on this process. Inclusivity was clearly important to project leaders but hard to ensure. When talking about project groups, for example, Keith (Sunderland, 11/1/21) said "they were never fixed groups. They were always open. Anyone could come to events." Although I did not specifically ask about equality of players (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p.266) this emerged in the context of factory workers perhaps unable to devote time to involvement unlike their older and younger family members. Alan (Sunderland, 22/1/21) reflected: "people who were out all day – when do you get them involved, how do you get them involved … we had all these businesses but I don't know whether or not we got to speak to the workforce", highlighting a potential inequality as part of a wider, but minor, narrative about limitations of reach, including a desire to have visited more schools (David, Coventry, 31/3/21).

Inequality in participatory culture can take many forms with Jenkins et al (2013, p.189) citing a lack of digital access, money or cultural knowledge as other potential reasons why "the powerful, inclusive, happy message that 'anyone can do this'" (Gauntlett, 2018, p.75) is not always achievable. Definitions of culture invariably involve 'human self-creation' (Arato & Gerbhardt, p.185) and "human activity" (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018, p.338-9) so therefore participation in cultural activity

can only happen when people can make the appointment, whatever that is. Finally, if time and budget constraints were keenly felt, so was the weight of organisational baggage, chiefly mixed experiences of past council projects, and recent wider-ranging cutbacks to public services. Emma (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) said: "because a lot of people dislike the council, still do, they were like 'well it's council so it's shit'." Keith (Sunderland, 11/1/21) recounted similar attitudes: "a lot of suspicion of the council from within community groups or the public … there was a bit of a history of big ideas that had fallen flat … You know, 'we've heard it all before'." However, this was not suggested in Paisley, rather the opposite, as Louisa (Paisley, 26/3/21) said: "The council has might and influence, the council I work in does" although again, this assertion could be coloured by comparative optimism (Le Barbenchon et al, 2016, p.279).

It is possible that a more thoroughly resourced, longer-lasting consultation, involving the keen listening already discussed, could better promote equality of players, and lead to more significant redistribution of power. Although there was the potential for some autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), it was limited by duration and resources. Attuyer (2015, p.809) said: "[E]nsuring efficiency in planning by promoting speedy decision making may not allow the time required for meaningful participation" and "collaborative practices are … used as a legitimating tool for their policies – a proof of inclusiveness despite the dismissal of oppositional voices." Testimony about rushed processes and the issue of using consultation to legitimise plans included one interviewee's recollection: "I felt like it was really last minute and that they were kind of like 'quick, we need to get the community all on board in order to get through the next stage' or something", and that workshop facilitation fell to unpaid volunteers. Artistic director of Volcano Theatre, Paul Davies (Swansea, 29/3/21), said: "Everything pointed towards a straightforward process of legitimisation" in talking about consultation he felt was about processing existing policies, rather than developing new ones. Kumareswaradas Ramanathas, manager at youth group Young Asian Voices (Sunderland, 10/2/21) talked about his involvement in organising a cultural event with fewer than 21 days' notice, and a feeling of "tokenism" in the earlier days of the process when his BME youth group was at first seemingly overlooked for participatory opportunities, before being welcomed in when he pointed this out.

While some arts and culture-based community groups were happy to be offered a platform to perform, for example dance, and some funding (Chaitrali Chitre, founder and chair of Sahyadri Friends Group, Coventry, 27/1/21; Ram, Sunderland, 10/2/21), others were less easily pleased. An

example of community groups experiencing frustrations was described by Colin Scott, chair of Coventry's Positive Images Festival (Coventry, 9/2/21) who said:

> They held … a whole load of workshops across the city … I think some of the people felt from some of the organisations that they were saying 'oh, we're going to do this' and some of the organisations said 'that's what we do' and they felt ignored.

Although Positive Images found a home within the UKCoC delivery programme, such tensions are illustrative of the delicate task of keeping stakeholders happy and involved. A short Swansea Council document, titled *What next for Swansea*, summarising the city's bid following Coventry's selection admitted: "Resources were tight due to parallel priorities … so it was turned around in a short time frame by just a few people … We didn't have the capacity and time to research effectively."

In summary, I assert that the most significant hallmark of neoliberalism was the speed at which consultation was carried out, with limited resources. Perhaps at points this necessitated participation for legitimisation of plans, rather than their organic development. With this in mind, free-for-all consultation and inclusive branding and involvement opportunities were the progressive, critical PR-flavoured highlights of a process that was, unavoidably, neoliberal at its core. Although interviewees did not articulate it, they recognised the practical effect of this ideology on the ground, at least partly, in their admission of the pressures they faced in terms of meeting budgets and deadlines. Indeed, this apparent unchecking of overall organisational power resonates with Weaver (2016, p.44) who observed: "The power which comes with capital, and the consequent ability to dominate public debate and decision-making is rarely fully acknowledged in normative public relations theory" and, as discussed, perhaps so inherent that it goes unnoticed.

This situation, however, does not preclude work from being worthwhile, and I accord with Cunningham & Platt (2019, p.323) when they say, in the context of UKCoC:

> If the bid process can develop a strong place-based story which local communities recognise they have a stake in, win or lose, the benefits of a top-down scheme could be felt from the bottom-up; creating a strong, culture-led legacy that not only showcases cities on a global stage, but also responds to the specific people who inhabit and thus make place.

I argue that good, progressive intentions, based on listening and responding, were in evidence, and that they approached critical PR ideals at intervals. Within this context, mixed experiences all round can be embraced and learned from, as critical PR-recognised flaws, in the spirit of "wholeness" rather than "goodness" (Fawkes, 2019, p.219) – as a basis to build upon, rather than to deride. This summation and its relevance for the advancement of both critical PR and participatory culture, around that crucial portal of transmedia engagement, make this work important and original.

Within the overall positivity described, however, there was one group not usually theorised as hard-to-reach, who often did not want to join in, despite invitations. In addition, they were not shy in voicing their scepticism and dissent. I will conclude this chapter with a noteworthy finding that, ironically, people active and interested in arts and culture were sometimes the trickiest for bid teams to enthuse.

"What's in it for me?": Artists' expectations and the unwelcome low barrier to involvement

Although there was plenty of testimony about artists' positive contributions, their dissatisfaction was also reported. While a disconnect between UKCoC initiatives and the creative economy has been identified before, emphasising the question of who gets to define the cultural city (Wilson & O'Brien, 2012, p.36), I theorise this tendency as a failure of the participatory principle of the low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.3) or low threshold (Hassler-Forest, 2016, p.27) to artistic expression, for this particular group. This is so central a principle to the academic concept of participatory culture that it is mentioned eight times in Delwiche & Henderson's *Participatory Cultures Handbook* (2012, p. 3, 19, 60, 143, 148, 220, 267, 271), yet as a prerequisite to free-flowing involvement, it appears to have had the opposite effect for those with some pre-established cultural capital. There are significant barriers associated with being accomplished in the arts – with education said to be the "principal dimension along which arts participation is stratified" (Reeves, 2015, p.625), ahead of social class or status, although "opportunity, motivation and ability" (Kemp and Poole, 2016, p.60) are also acknowledged as contributory factors.

This suggests artists and even the "cultural elite" (Jancovich, 2017, p.119) did not want to be simply counted in among the wider populace, despite Paisley's assertion that "there was no 'cultural community' and then 'the rest of the toon'" (Alan, Paisley, 7/4/21). Related to this was artists' arguably reasonable belief that their expertise should be recognised, and contributions professional rather than personal, as a resident of the city. A feeling that they should be remunerated for their involvement was a definite theme. This is significant, because it is at odds with the central premise of participatory culture, which is built upon "stuff provided for free by users", according to Gauntlett interviewed by Jenkins (2019, p.34, 37) "just because they want to." However, in the top-down nature of these processes within the civic realm, players such as bid team members are paid, so why not artists too? Laura (Coventry, 12/4/21) offered an insightful overview, with caveats:

> I think that independent artists are always going to be the most difficult to engage with. Choosing my words carefully … an independent artist who vehemently believes that their

work should be platformed nationally, internationally, as part of City of Culture, whose work for whatever reason isn't appropriate, is always going to be one of the loudest detractors and the independent sector never really buys into City of Culture, they saw it in Hull, they saw it in Derry, we're seeing a bit here even although we're trying really hard.

Although this study does not provide a representative sample of artists, Kate Hills, artist and community radio presenter (Coventry, 10/2/21), for one, would appear to accord with this summation. She felt that she and others had not been sufficiently heard:

> There was lots of people like myself … and I wasn't the only one who said OK we've come here, we've given lots of ideas, we've talked about what we do, so what happens now? Absolutely no feedback … no further engagement … they've kind of done their own thing.

Kate also mentioned money: "The funding that was available to me and some other artists and writers, £250 each, you know I'm sorry but in some cases that doesn't even pay for your time." Difficult meetings were described by Danny Flynn, Chief Executive of YMCA North Staffordshire (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) who reflected, affectionately: "artists are a funny bunch of people … they can't come to a consensus in a room." Meanwhile, Paul (Swansea, 29/3/21) recalled: "People who felt like giving out just gave out … there was one late middle-aged man who just went on and on about something he was passionate about. And I was like … this is not my idea of fun."

This testimony combined offers stories on similar experiences across locations. One interviewee felt artists' and bid objectives did not align, saying:

> I think that it (consultation) was very artist heavy, and I think a lot of them thought they would be paid to do various arty things for a few years and that was their motivation, other than what should really have been their motivation, which is to boost the city, right?

The interviewee, recounting that some artists did achieve their ambition of paid involvement, continued: "That's how it felt and there was some legacy funding which the usual suspects of artists just got … it just felt like they were doing it for themselves … it didn't really feel like a massive benefit to the actual city at all."

Keith (Sunderland, 11/1/21), echoed this: "Some people saw it as a way of achieving their aspirations." Meanwhile Rob (Sunderland, 14/1/21) suggested there was professional vulnerability among artists, explaining that some expressed a nervousness of being "at the back of the queue" behind big-name "fancy dan" artists from outside of Sunderland. In Paisley, scepticism from artists was progressively seen as "part of the discipline of what the bid was going to be" (Alan, Paisley, 7/4/21) and incorporated into the consultative mix as such. Again, this demonstrates shades of Macnamara's (2016, p.371) assertion that "engineering" consensus leads to to "command and control" approaches to PR, whereas acceptance of diversity and dissent "informs critical thinking and

societally orientated approaches." Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) considered the "What's in it for me?" mindset as a consequence of artists' misconceptions about what to expect from UKCoC. She said: "This is not going to be the thing that everybody wants, which is money will come and rain from the sky and all my dreams will come true. It's not, and unfortunately it feels like it's going to be."

As well as an issue surrounding the low barrier, I also theorise artists' responses as a reluctance to offer the sort of unpaid labour or "playbour" (Nolan, 2021, p.6) that went unnoticed, or at least unchallenged, among other actors. The reality of some artists' motivation seems to have been "What's in it for me?" rather than perhaps "What's in it for my community?". In examining this tendency, the effect of neoliberal pressures on artists as well as bid team professionals must be considered. In recent years, artists have seen a structural move away from state support and public funding to more market-oriented production, measured only in economic terms and involving "deteriorating social and working conditions in the context of the … gig economy" (Segbars, 2019). It may be that artists forced to see themselves as entrepreneurs, facing "more work for less money, permanent job insecurity, increased competition and the resulting effects of exhaustion" (Segbars, 2019) simply cannot consider giving their labour away for free. This brings us back to our constant theme of UKCoC consultation under neoliberalism.

In summary, this chapter has argued that flashes of autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016, p.4) had the potential to be present within well-established neoliberal systems. These were moments during which community members could step up, articulate their thoughts, be listened to, and take proactive ownership of their UKCoC bid. This was made possible by tenacious project team members, including PR representatives, *despite* the power systems they were working within. They saw and took the opportunity to afford voice and redistribute power in small and local ways – in effect achieving a distance, in pockets, from the neoliberalist rhythms of everyday life. However, they were keenly aware of the conventions and constraints of their professional remit and therefore, implicitly, the neoliberal forces demanding the numbers, stoking competition, and hurrying processes along.

In continuing to draw links between critical PR and participatory culture in placemaking, I argue that the disciplines have much to contribute to each other, through the portal of transmedia engagement, so well-illustrated by UKCoC activity. As discussed, the processes under scrutiny amount to a degree of meaningful participation in the civic context. These practical applications of participatory principles, driven wittingly or unwittingly by critical PR aspirations, highlight the key issue of the low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006) as an enabler of involvement. However, this "support for

creating and sharing" and the feeling that all contributions matter (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.3) had the opposite of its intended effect for some people in a stratified community. If critical PR can be enriched and enlivened by participatory culture, the theoretical relationship is reciprocal. Where participatory culture sometimes assumes equality among players and glosses over the "complex political economies" (Hassler-Forest, 2016, p.27) of our neoliberalist society, critical PR is typified by rigorous scrutiny of this, an acceptance of flaws and an emphasis on "wholeness" not "goodness" (Fawkes, 2014, p.219), which participatory culture could become stronger for embracing. While the low barrier was only particularly unappealing for those with cultural capital, bidding cities did not experience unbridled enthusiasm from all other community groups. Scepticism, derision, and disbelief were rife among those for whom the low barrier could in theory provide encouragement, and this will be a key focus for chapter two before we turn to the question of legacy.

Chapter 2

Community participation in UKCoC bids – towards topophilia through low-barriered, autonomous space

This chapter continues to examine the concept of the low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006), so central to participatory culture, this time in the context of the roles of city residents who did not have a professional interest in the arts. In essence, I argue that the low barrier made possible the potential for autonomous space leading a degree of topophilia, or love of place (Tuan, 1990). These interlinked stages had the potential to redistribute power and disrupt the neoliberal norm despite capitalist societal forces close by, at every juncture. Firstly, I will show that the inclusive mindset of UKCoC bid-leading organisations empowered widespread interest and involvement, including from those who offered seemingly negative contributions. However, thoughts and feelings challenging a pre-determined positive narrative could be side-lined or ignored, as if the invitation was to participate, only not like that. This, I will assert, was contradictory to critical PR ideals that would seek to involve a more impactful redistribution of power, or greater equality of voices. Secondly, I will demonstrate that possible reasons for people's scepticism including poverty, past experience and reasonable doubt about UKCoC as a magical panacea, were valid. They revealed an implicit awareness of the influence and demands of neoliberalism in shaping and limiting bid ambitions. I will argue that if project leaders, accepting of the late capitalist status quo and neoliberalism's "relentless focus on optimism" (Bourne, 2019, p.119), had the chance to afford more time and attention to naysayers, a keener sense of issues for addressing may have been uncovered, through cultural programming or otherwise. Thirdly, I will show that the posited possibility of low-barriered autonomous space during consultation served to develop people's sense of place, defining authenticity, building cultural capital (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007, p.30) and increasing community confidence.

My fourth argument is that the autonomous spaces, commons (Peekhaus, 2016, p.379), or interstices (Bourriaud, 1998, p.6) of UKCoC processes created new connections and fresh perspectives, leading to a degree of topophilia (Tuan, 1990), among some people, some of the time. Moreover, this represented an anti-neoliberal redistribution of power, albeit localised or temporary. Anecdotal evidence of topophilia – of "falling in love" (Sharon McAulay, manager, STAR Project, Paisley, 12/4/21) or seeing one's hometown through "fresh eyes" (Alan McNiven, chief executive of Engage Renfrewshire, Paisley, 7/4/21) – was plentiful in my interviews, especially from personnel

who were central to bid processes. However, it is quite possible that this testimony was at least in part an intended form of professional validation of project success; a romanticised expression of identity (Walliman, 2018, p.352), as much as a mere recollection of facts. With complex limitations surrounding use of metrics (Beer, 2016; Mau & Howe, 2019) and the evidencing of success by way of monetary investment, my final argument is that that, by default, those slippery and unreliable love stories emerge as the most valuable data available on this topic, and any attempt to prove topophilia as a UKCoC-related phenomenon.

Participate, just not like that: Derision and disbelief among residents

Bidding for UKCoC is a straightforward proposition, according to Laura McMillan, Coventry's bid co-ordinator (Coventry, 12/4/21) given that: "You're not asking much … you're not asking people even to book a ticket, you're just asking them to think it's a good idea." But despite this simplicity, and lack of a need for commitment, such requests from the masterminds of the 2021 contender locations were sometimes badly received. In support of my first assertion of this chapter, that invitations to participate were reported to have been, in general, popular and meaningful, I will outline some of the elements contributing to this perceived success. It is evident, for example, that PR did its job of raising awareness, with levels of knowledge and recognition for UKCoC campaigns said to be high among people without a particular connection with the arts. Residents knew that bids were going in. If each city's UKCoC journey was a fairy tale, this stirring of civic intrigue is where the emotive storytelling begins, and it is important to remember that interviewees' versions of events number just a few of an infinite number of "particular truths" (De Fina et al, 2016, p.240). They clearly rely on some generalisations and comparative optimism (Le Barbenchon et al, 2016, p.279). Such love stories will be fully discussed in part three of this chapter, but it is relevant here, as we talk about awareness levels, to report claims that "everyone" knew about their home city's bid and had something to say about it, because this widespread knowledge of plans afoot was a prerequisite to participation. Louisa Mahon, head of marketing and communications at Renfrewshire Council (Paisley, 26/3/21) recalled: "You could stop in one of the shopping malls and sit and someone would sit next to you and say 'What do you think about this culture bid?' Everyone was talking about it." David Burbidge, Coventry's bid leader (Coventry, 12/4/21) said: "I think we had a … very, very high level of awareness … that the city was bidding." Meanwhile, Stoke-on-Trent bid leaders achieved a particular ambition to permeate football fan communities. Remembering a Stoke City v Sunderland game, Emma Rodgers, Stoke-on-Trent City Council's head of communications and marketing (Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21) said: "we always said if we could get someone on the terraces

singing 'we're gonna beat you' (in relation to UKCoC) which they did … that's a massive achievement."

At town hall meetings, shopping centre roadshows and other gatherings, many people were happy to be part of an exciting conversation, making connections (Gauntlett, 2018, p.80). This was all made possible by a low barrier (Jenkins et al, 2006) to involvement. People did not need any special knowledge or experience to join in. Some of the time they did not even need to go somewhere to take part, given digital opportunities and neighbourhood happenings. Jenkins in conversation with Gauntlett (p.30, 2019) talked about cultural hierarchies rating fan production as "less valuable" than, say, a postmodern artist's output, and parallels can be drawn with this situation. Residents were suddenly encouraged to share their important and relevant thoughts and ideas. People not particularly connected with the arts, invited only because they happened to live or work in a particular place, enjoyed fun, consultative experiences and perhaps attained some social capital (Field, 2016, p.2-3) as a result. Such situations would be contrary to the norm of domination of the arts by an educated elite where the same resident's input would certainly have much less kudos, and probably not be sought at all. Carpentier (2011, p.9) talks about "the social need for participation and the desire of people to exert control over their everyday lives, but also of the difficult relations people have with the ways that their participation is organized, structured and (thus) limited" and this is particularly relevant when considering UKCoC. Jenkins' vision of participatory culture is of fluid activity, lacking in formal structure (Carpentier, 2011, p.69). In contrast, UKCoC participation, however low-barriered and welcoming to all comers, was essentially a "top down" (Cunningham & Platt, 2019, p.314), time-limited exercise, with the purpose of gathering information that could be filtered into bid documents and future programming. Despite such restraints, it is evident that consultation was facilitated in a critical PR-resonant "respectful, thoughtful and democratic way (meaning, everyone gets to talk, everyone learns to listen)" (Conner, 2013, p.138).

There was a suggestion that community members were interested in the promise of things to see and do, such as concerts and festivals, purely as audience members rather than providers of content, unlike the artists discussed in Chapter 1. "Communities get it, and they get excited, and I felt really strongly that I wanted Sheila to have something to take the grandkids to," said Laura (Coventry, 12/4/21), in the context of difficulty in engaging independent artists. This key difference between residents and arts people can aid our understanding of their generally positive response to bid consultation. Where arts people wanted to achieve professional recognition through UKCoC, there was no such pressure for other residents, who just wanted to join the party. However, this did not make them all happy and supportive. A significant minority felt that bids were pointless, or "a joke", and crossed the low barrier to say so.

Perhaps due to a perceived lack of culture in their area, or a disbelief that their city could be successful, some people did not support their local bid. Particularly in the early stages of consultation, interviewees across locations described encountering "negativity" (Keith Merrin, Sunderland bid leader, 11/1/21; Susan Clarke, artistic director of B arts, Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21; David, Coventry, 31/3/21) among local people. While this happened face-to-face at public meetings, it also took place online and more anonymously, often in response to local media coverage and on social media, with comments to stories on news sites and media social channels. This is an example of "innovative combinations of both high and low tech solutions" facilitating "open and active participation" (Ciolfi, 2012, p.85) whether or not all contributions were welcomed. It is no coincidence that Jenkins et al's low barrier and indeed participatory culture itself is most synonymous with happenings online via social media. Participating on Facebook requires only a smartphone and an opinion, and this platform in particular has been noted to nurture a culture of negativity in response to local news – prevalent much more widely than UKCoC matters. Of his Cumbrian newspaper launching a Facebook page in 2011, former local journalist Lytollis (2021, p.122/3) recounted: "Posting a story on Facebook was like throwing it to the wolves … Some people commented on stories they obviously hadn't read, or asked a question that was answered in the first paragraph … The hatred was extraordinary." Colin Scott, chair of Coventry's Positive Images Festival (Coventry, 9/2/21) mentioned hostility and cynicism in print, too:

> In the beginning with the local newspapers, every other letter was something about 'City of Culture, what a joke, why don't they do something about sorting the city'… a lot of people are cynical about anything that goes on that does not quite meet what they are interested in.

Rob Lawson, Sunderland bid's head of PR (Sunderland, 14/1/21), himself a former local newspaper editor, described "a lot of people saying we'll never get it and why would we get it." In wondering why this would happen, Rob said "it comes back to this cynicism about projects and programmes and then nothing happening." This theme was echoed by others including Keith, Sunderland, 11/1/21; Louisa, Paisley, 26/3/21; David, Coventry, 31/3/21; and Susan, Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21. Amelia Bilson, executive director of Middleport Matters Community Trust (Stoke-on-Trent, 17/3/21) made the most specific link between poverty and negativity:

> The gist I was getting from local people was that … Stoke is quite a poor place to live, right, and Middleport is in like the 1% most deprived, so my local residents are struggling on a daily basis. So when you start talking City of Culture and you start talking about bringing tourists into the city, you often get a bit of a response saying 'stop wasting our money on art and help us to live'.

Given this background of past disappointment, and perhaps poverty, it is understandable that some people could feel this way. In combination, a clear theme emerges from this testimony, in support of my claim that naysayers' views were valid. Arnstein's (p.216, 1969) assertion that "participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless" resonates here. Perhaps less enthusiastic residents simply did not want to take the risk of such a happening? Could it be that they sensed the neoliberal limitations of UKCoC bidding more keenly than the professionals in charge of civic efforts? It is possible they were suspicious of being "invested in", with the expectation of a return (Field, 2016, p.2-3), as stakeholders key to be seen to have "on board", rather than being important in themselves (Tench & Yeomans, 2017, p.152). Did they fear that their own interests, the basics of social equity, would be "perpetually deferred" (Fincher et al, 2016, p.518) behind the more pressing business of attracting new people and new money? We cannot reliably understand reasons for negativity from this data set because, although interviewees had some suggestions on the topic, there was no specific talk about having asked people why they were unenthusiastic. Tracey McNulty, head of cultural services at Swansea Council (Swansea, 8/4/21) recognised this as an area for future development:

> If I was to do it again there, there has to be a different kind of approach, so we get to the root of understanding people's reluctance to take ownership and to put themselves on the line. Being a champion for such a corporate and wide-ranging ambition exposes us and our vulnerabilities to criticism when we may fail. There is something about this part of the world as well, which is to not be too 'in the camp', because then you may lose your edge – and you can't throw stones at the camp if it's not working. The council as lead was necessary at the time but I would want us to be the support, in future.

Across locations, such stone throwing did not tend to gain attention from bid representatives. Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) said: "we told people this is about watering the flowers and not the weeds", a strategy also mentioned by Alan (Paisley, 7/4/21):

> They (Sharon and colleagues) kept saying 'let's water the flowers', you know. Rather than pointing out the weeds. OK, yeah sounds good. Let's do that for a while. Let's be positive about the place, why can we not feel good about Paisley.

This could be read as a side-lining of concerns, echoed elsewhere, including by Stoke-on-Trent's bid director Paul Williams (Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) who said:

> The minute you put your head above the parapet you are going to get alternative views, alternative perspectives, people want something in a programme rather than this. You just have to keep working and keep focused.

David (Coventry, 9/2/21) described criticism as being there alongside a wider sense of "enthusiastic support" but it was not "disruptive." Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) similarly said: "You always get

somebody going 'well … it's a shithole and it's like oh yeah, whatever, shut up'. But then you could just dismiss that because the overwhelming narrative was people were going 'yes, absolutely yes'." This testimony suggests opposing viewpoints often remained on the peripheries, as only a minor distraction to the positive view. Sometimes, bid representatives tried to persuade the sceptics. Persuasiveness is an acceptable strategy in critical PR and Paisley found that acknowledgement of problems – a "wholeness" not just "goodness" (Fawkes, 2014, p.219), another tenet of critical PR – helped in this effort. Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) said:

> We had to make sure we did … acknowledge the sort of difficult bits of Paisley, because if you didn't acknowledge them people would go, 'but what about the potholes? What about the fact that the high street's closing, you know, boarded up windows? What about this? What about that?' So then we started saying, 'well, we know Paisley's got problems … but that's not all we are'.

While there is nothing wrong with persuasiveness in PR, I argue that the fast pace and tight parameters of consultation meant an important step, in digging deeper into the "negative" mindset, was missed. Although bid teams did not seem to see such contributions as particularly valuable to the UKCoC conversation, I suggest that with some further exploration of thoughts and feelings, they could have added richness, diversity and understanding. Levy's (1997, cited by Macnamara, 2016, p.251) theory of "wisdom of the crowd" challenging "elitist views of intelligence, knowledge and power", and "acceptance of diversity and dissensus" (Macnamara, 2016, p.371) above any old-fashioned command and control approach is important to critical PR theory. Here, there was a crowd, taking advantage of a low barrier to participation, yet its wisdom was not fully sought, elitist views were not rigorously challenged, and dissent was not accepted. In summary, this lack of sustained curiosity limited critical PR ambitions, although it did not derail them. However, this was not the end of the story for the people who felt negatively about UKCoC. Some of them were about to change their minds.

The narrative unfolds: Empowered residents begin to take ownership

Across locations, interviewees described residents warming to the idea of their hometown or city as a UKCoC, as bidding processes continued. It's at this point that the concept of autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016, p.4), becomes important. Here, I assert as far as possible, given I talked only to key bid figures rather than ordinary residents, that such space served to develop people's sense of place. Groundwork for increased levels of topophilia was lain. Recollections were of ground shifts in opinion and belief. Although quite possibly plumped up as part of a wider co-constructed narrative, dependent on the relationship between teller and hearer (Shuman, 2015, p.38), testimony suggests

significant empowerment and even excitement among communities about the possibilities ahead. Alan Parkinson, Sunderland community champion (Sunderland, p.105, 22/1/21) said: "There was almost a tipping point where people were reluctant to get involved … all of a sudden people thought 'well I'm going to back this now'." Alan (Paisley, 26/3/21) also described a dramatic change in perceptions:

> Saying to people in an impoverished area like Ferguslie Park in Paisley, one of the most deprived areas Scotland, or it was then, and saying we're going to use culture to regenerate this place. You know there's a lot of people going 'oh aye'. 'That'll be shining bright' was the kind of line, but the reality was after two months, three months, people actually started to embrace it, and the voice became a community voice actually, almost by default, because you know, you find that once a community buys in, they're the ones that sweep it along, they are actually energising the thing.

Some interviewees mentioned enlisting support from football clubs (Emma, Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21; Keith, Sunderland, 11/1/21) as well as celebrities; influencers who could encourage local people to cheerlead for their bid. For Swansea, endorsement and public facing promotion from Kevin Allen was important and helped to counter a "constant onslaught of 'what's the point of that', 'you know there's no culture here', 'what a waste of time, what a waste of money'" (Tracey, Swansea, 8/4/21) largely from a male demographic in their 30s and 40s, who stayed silent in the face of support from their favourite cult film director. For Clr Rob Stewart, leader of Swansea Council (Swansea, 11/5/21), such an awakening among the populace was a predictable civic process rather than a fairy tale. He described a previous council leader's advice to him:

> When you set up your plans, people will say it'll never happen here, you know, it will always happen somewhere else. We don't believe it will work. As you start to deliver it, they change from that to you know, are you doing it? Yeah it is happening, but I don't think it's quite the right thing. I'm not sure it's the right colour in the right place. Too big, too small. All of that, and then the final stage of course is it was their idea and they told you to do it.

This testimony reminds us that we are dealing with top-down consultation and limited opportunities for participants to shape outcomes. Nevertheless, many people across locations were becoming more confident of their city's potential due to participatory opportunities, that crucial process of getting together and connecting. They were reportedly activated and energised. This can be seen as an embodiment of Frantzeskaki, et al's (2018, p.1,047) vision of civic engagement as "spaces of dialogue and intervention that can help shock the system … by empowering communities, facilitating dialogues, and actions for moving forward and fostering innovations for sustainability". It has distinct resonance with theories of Marxist free space, described by Bourriaud (1998, p.6) as:

> A space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system … whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an

interhuman commerce that differs from the "communication zones" that are imposed upon us.

Curtailment of such space by neoliberalist norms all around is a key concept in this study but this context is part of the very definition of the commons (Peekhaus, 2016, p.379), which emerge out of "struggles against their negation." In this instance the "alternative social forces" colonising such territory included the UKCoC sceptics and the dialogue and intervention took place in shopping centres and town halls but also Facebook and Twitter. Through taking part, whether in the "playful appropriation" of transmedia engagement online (Pamment, 2016, p.2,049) or articulating thoughts and feelings as part of a planning group, people had the potential to gain confidence in themselves and their surroundings. These small yet distinct redistributions of power were made possible only by stepping away from usual routines and conventions. Conversation included the gentle, organisation-led development of ideas about what constituted culture, possibly leading to residents feeling empowered about their appreciation and participation in arts activity. Alan (Sunderland, 22/1/21) said:

> I think the word culture scares people. We've tried to make people realise what culture could mean, that it doesn't just mean theatre and opera and stuff … there were certain events where people possibly saw stuff and thought 'I really enjoyed that, I didn't think that sort of stuff was for me'.

Others mentioned re-assessing going to the football as a form of culture, or a "wee knitting group" (Sharon, Paisley, 12/4/21). Alan (Sunderland, 22/1/21) said:

> There seemed to be a common theme that people … would spend a lot of time creating art if you like but they didn't consider it that … so there were people who wrote poetry … there were some secret writers, people who wouldn't let anyone know they were writing … that all fed into the project.

Similarly for Paisley, "it was about getting people to recognise that what they did was a creative or cultural activity." (Sharon, Paisley, 12/4/21). In autonomous space, perhaps people attached new importance to their hobbies and interests and saw them in a fresh light, as cultural activity. In Renfrewshire's *Cultural Strategy*, a helpful definition of culture was offered:

> By 'culture' we mean the following: performing arts; visual arts; literature; music and sound; events and festivals; architecture; crafts; design; fashion; film; tv; radio; photography; animation; gaming; everyday participation (hobbies and pastimes); play; food; museums; galleries; libraries; archives; historic environment (buildings, monuments and historic landscape); ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage – living traditions like games, song and stories) and blends and mixes of any of the above.

The list is all-encompassing, and in regarding their own leisure activities as cultural pursuits, it is possible that people gained some cultural capital "at a local level, through community activities and shared understandings that are "bottom up" and even oppositional to mainstream hegemonic culture" (Beel & Wallace, 2018, p.698) and therefore power shifting, and anti-neoliberal. Moreover, this cultural capital emerged through social capital (Beel & Wallace, 2018, p.700), a collective "value" added to society from social networks and civic participation, meaning there were two distinctly beneficial steps to this process. There is some evidence, too, that the upturn was lasting, and translated into an ongoing increase in cultural activity. Alan (Paisley, 12/4/21) said:

> I do think there was a rediscovery, a wee bit of the kind of bohemian quality of Paisley. More people see it now more as a niche wee town. The town has quite a cool wee vibe. It's a vibrant town … yeah, there's some difficulties and issues, but there's amazing buildings and a great art scene and da da da, so I think that there's a change in perspective.

Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) added: "There are little creative shops and businesses popping up all over the place. There's more groups or organisations, even small ones, who attribute what they do to contributing towards the creative and cultural agendas." Danny Flynn, Chief Executive of YMCA North Staffordshire (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3) said: "I think what City of Culture did more than anything was create that raising of social capital, which is to stay, which is continuing." Perhaps most powerfully, Kumareswaradas Ramanathas, manager at youth group Young Asian Voices (Sunderland, 10/1/21) claimed:

> People are being creative and have been starting up small businesses from home that fits in rightly with the culture. I think in our BME community there are 17 small businesses set up, not all of them are registered yet, from crochet to cake making to wood carving.

Again, a lowered barrier facilitated participation, this time in culture-related commerce. Moving onto the ways in which autonomous space facilitated topophilia, Ciolfi (2012, p.81) talked about participation as a means of "enriching existing knowledge" and the way that UKCoC brought local stories and legends to the fore clearly exemplifies this. History and heritage, defined and refined during consultation, undoubtedly provided the essence and integrity for bids, as well as fuel for new levels of love of place. Narratives were enthusiastically recounted at interview, from Coventry's comparative youth of population (David, Coventry, 31/3/21) to Stoke-on-Trent's identity as a "city of makers" (Paul, Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) and for being "quirky and a little bit different" (Emma, Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21). During data gathering, interviewees mirrored the emotive feel of the city bids they submitted, rather like "the Romantic poet-cum-philosopher who provides rich insights into the most mundane of objects and practices" (De La Fuente, 2007, p.122), especially Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) who provided perhaps the most emotive story of all:

We're only here because a certain sort of coal was dug out the ground next to a certain sort of clay, and people used their hands … and ingenuity, to make that into something beautiful and useful. And it's bloody brilliant … that's our creation myth, that's our story, so all we wanted to do with this City of Culture bid was to build off that because I think you can go anywhere with that point. You can go sky high, you can get yourself to the moon with that.

Danny (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) added: "We Stokies were potters. Everybody in Stoke knows about ceramics. Everybody knows what they are. Everybody was proud of the big marks like Doulton or Wedgwood and you had a bit of history in that, or community." For Paisley, an important narrative was of strong women and social movement (Louisa, Paisley, 26/3/21) as well as "poets and philosophers and weavers", and in Sunderland themes of industry and invention as well as friendship loomed large (Keith, Sunderland, 11/1/21). This lent an authentic feel (Banet-Weiser (2012, p.3) to the "history, cultural and environmental settings" (Musterd & Kovács, 2013, p.99) of bids, to galvanise senses of place, so that proposed programmes would be tied into the fabric and life of the city (Richards & Palmer, 2012, p.248), and based on more than "marketable cliché" (Jones, 2019, p.1907-8). Once more, the low barrier is important here and may have led to a more diverse array of participants contributing to civic stories, in those posited commons or interstices, during which ideas and aspirations were shared. In summary, placemaking via autonomous space, and made possible by the low barrier, can be said to have fulfilled its role as an intervention to encourage feelings of belonging, meaning and inclusiveness (Fincher et al, 2016, p.518-21) and therefore empowerment.

No interviewee claimed support for bids from all communities, although several reported a form of back-handed endorsement of their hometown, from cynical locals happy to criticise the place where they live, while defending it valiantly, if an outsider were to attempt the same. Of Coventarians, Laura (Coventry, 12/4/21) said: "They're a pretty grumpy lot … but if anyone else dares to say anything about the city … they are vehement about their love of it." (See also Emma, Stoke-on-Trent, 29/3/21; Alan, Paisley, 7/4/21; and Rob, Swansea, 11/5 /21, who all made similar claims about their locations). As these assertions were quite general, and unlinked with UKCoC, they resonate with Tidball & Stedman's (2012 p.297) emphasis on topophilia as a powerful base for "individual and collective action" to "repair and/or enhance valued attributes of a place." In other words, a "love of place" (Tuan, 1990) must exist before people will "fight for the places they care about" (Tidball & Stedman, 2012 p.297). Chaitrali Chitre, founder and chair of the Sahyadri Friends Group (Coventry, 27/1/21) mentioned that people were not "any less proud of our city" before the bid, and that UKCoC merely spotlighted existing good feeling. This reserve of love is an important prerequisite for "restorative topophilia", an act of "hope and faith in between the people and the environment" (Tidball & Stedman, 2012, p.297) as a direct result of people's collective actions, perhaps representing a meeting in the middle of "top down" and "bottom up."

Feeling the topophilia: A host of local love stories

Even topophilia's principal theorist, Yi-Fu Tuan (1990, p.112) admits it is "not the strongest of human emotions", although the feeling can be compelling. Tuan (1990, p.247) explains:

> Topophilia takes many forms and varies greatly in emotional range and intensity. It is a start to describe what they are: fleeting visual pleasure; the sensual delight of physical contact; the fondness for place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past, because it evokes pride of ownership or of creation; joy in things because of animal health and vitality.

In my final argument of this chapter, I assert that all of these were provoked or stoked by UKCoC activity, even joy in "animal health or vitality", meaning in this context the physical or sentient, whether the sweeping shorelines of Sunderland or Coventry's brutalist architecture. This breadth in possible incarnations of topophilia is useful when trying to establish whether the love was felt in relation to UKCoC bidding processes. All interviewees had plenty to say about good feeling and legacy, when I introduced the concept of topophilia in each interview. The majority were convinced that bids had a significant effect on confidence and pride in their cities. Before we address this, we must explore possible means of measuring this phenomenon, other than through anecdotes, which are effectively all we have in this study.

Interviewees across locations recounted the securing of further funding and investment in the three and a half years since bidding, as an indicator of success. This is understandable in a climate of neoliberal "status insecurity" (Mau & Howe, 2019, p.4) "where people have a stronger interest in asserting their standing – ideally by means of objective data" and as part of a performance of professional identity. The backdrop of UKCoC as a competition and measures enabling "the production of winners and losers" (Beer, 2016, p.26) also helps explain the offering of such evidence which, like metrics regarding consultation discussed in Chapter 1, was unprompted. This included information about new buildings and investment (Paul, Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21; Louisa, Paisley, 26/3/21; Keith, Sunderland, 11/1/21; Rob, Sunderland, 14/1/21; Rob, Swansea, 11/5/21). However, metrics do not help us reach conclusions about the social effects of UKCoC, as Beer (2016, p.60) makes clear:

> Measurement is powerful not just for what it captures and the way it captures it, it is also powerful because of what it conceals, the things it leaves out, devalues, or ignores. In other words, measurement draws attention to certain things, illuminating them in a very particular light, whilst pulling our gaze away from other aspects of the social and personal.

Almost nothing, although I did not specifically ask, was offered in the way of survey-type metrics as proof of topophilia. Laura (Coventry, 12/4/21) mentioned a "biannual household survey" measuring levels of civic pride such as a statistic that 64% of respondents felt more likely to invite friends or family to Coventry during UKCoC but said this data could not be shared as it was "just for us", for marketing purposes.

This leaves us with "storied communication" laced with "self-presentation and personal awareness" (Boylorn, 2021, p.4), a narrative "present in myth, legend, fable, tale … in every place, in every society … it is simply there" (Franzosi, 1998, p.517). The UKCoC love stories flowed, although Coventry stood alone as the only city with an expectation of the real impact of UKCoC not yet felt, given that a programme of events was about to start at the time of my data gathering. David (Coventry, 31/3/21) said: "I have absolutely no doubt at all that the people of Coventry will feel a significant boost from being City of Culture, but I think it's yet to come. I think it's not really there yet." Moving on to words of love, Paul (Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) said: "there's a lot of public domain feedback which says that we galvanised the city. That we raised aspirations. And I'm quoting other things I've seen, again from general feedback, that people fell in love with Stoke again." Susan (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) added: "I think for at least a year we were 'yeah', you know it was like 'wow' … if you wanted to lift a mood that was how to do it" and "I think, to a certain extent, I think the city has … fallen back in love with itself … and that is what that process, I think, did." Sharon (12/4/21) said that in Paisley "people did fall in love a bit more with their town. You know a bit like a kind of rekindled love story." Alan (Paisley, 12/4/21) said: "I think the idea of fresh eyes or seeing things from a completely different perspective ... Some people going 'wait a minute, look at the buildings' or something, there were definitely moments like that for people I think." Such a narrative was not universal, however. In Stoke-on-Trent, Amelia (17/3/21) said: ""I haven't noticed any long-term difference – although it's a nice memory. We had fun for a bit, but it came to an end." Regarding Swansea, artistic director of Volcano Theatre Paul Davies (Swansea, 29/3/21) said very rationally:

> To attribute that (topophilia) back to the bid seems to me, you know, a piece of sociological invention … especially now we're all supposed to love data and causation … there would be no way of proving that. So, I think it's fantastical and lovely, but I have no sense of that.

However, Amelia and Paul were less central to bid processes than the more effusive interviewees, and perhaps therefore less likely to colour recollections to reflect well on the project. No great claims of topophilia were made for Swansea's efforts – perhaps partly because a warm glow might be harder to sustain following two shortlistings and no win. In addition, at the time of my interviews, the city had a wider cultural agenda under way, involving bigger money than UKCoC would bring.

Tracey (Swansea, 8/4/21), a key figure in the bid, maybe therefore felt less pressure to make bold assertions when asked about topophilia via UKCoC. She said: "I think it it depends on who you talk to and where your point of view is," which would certainly be true of all locations, as well as resonating with the principles of narrative analysis and its "particular truths" (De Fina et al, 2016, p.240).

In Chapter 1, I described a point when empowered residents took over from bid leaders in driving momentum before final bids were submitted, and this appears to have happened again directly after Coventry was announced as the winner. The final part of the story, the aftermath, is also compelling, not least as an example of transmedia engagement with people picking up and running with the UKCoC story. Sharon (Paisley, 12/4/21) said:

> I don't think we quite expected the amount of powerful feedback with people going 'well we don't need that, we're just going to do it anyway, yeah because we are absolutely better than this' and you know that sense of stepping up and just getting it done, which I love.

Confidence was also high in officialdom, as local authorities sought to ride the UKCoC wave. Paul (Stoke-on-Trent, 8/3/21) said: "We had a number of legacy events which continued to keep the journey going. You know, we might not have the badge, but we're a city of culture. You know, what it gave us is permission." Rob (Sunderland, 14/1/21) said: "The council came out quite quickly and said we know we didn't get it, but we'll still put things on, it won't be the same, it will be different, but we'll still do it." Tracey (Swansea, 8/4/21) recalled a similarly optimistic but perhaps short-lived climate:

> The politicians felt particularly motivated to keep on going in the face of the loss. They retained a 'well tough we'll do it anyway' position and we all felt the same – that we don't need the UK government's or Phil Redmond's (UKCoC 2021 panel chair) backing. We're going to build an arena anyway. We're gonna have new public art anyway … So we pretty much kept going on that basis, there would be some big dramatic projects anyway, but then people forget, you know, the big statements die down and the normal business starts to creep in.

There were some mentions of bidding possibly having made civic officials bolder and braver in their decision making. This could be read as additional instances of the boosting of social and cultural capital among this particular group, and a lowering of barriers to allow participation in bigger money ventures. For example, Louisa (Paisley, 26/3/21) said she was not sure council leaders would have agreed to funding levels for redevelopment in the town, had it not been for the bid. Talking about significant investment in a new arena, Paul (Swansea, 29/3/21) said the bid "gave the council leaders confidence to go yeah … and think big, absolutely."

These stories illustrate Cunningham & Platt (2019)'s assertion that a "strong place-based story" and "culture-led legacy" is possible from being simply in the running for UKCoC. Sharon (Paisley,

12/4/21), for one, clearly recognised this, saying: "It wasn't the outcome that we wanted, we wanted to win, but I always knew that it wasn't about the outcome. It would be about the process. It was the process that made the difference." However, perhaps one of the most significant snippets of interview came from Ram (Sunderland, 10/2/21) who described young people being empowered by UKCoC, inferring barriers to participation had been lowered, and local possibilities reconfigured:

> Well people are creative but they need to have that platform and skill to do it so City of Culture has raised hopes for these individuals so they have seen a lot of things that have been displayed, it's given them aspiration and hope 'actually I can do that' or 'I can learn to do that', I've had people going to university and doing graphic design and things because they've seen these banners and stuff around Sunderland.

Although this assertion stood alone and no other interviewee mentioned similar happenings, it resonates with Susan's (Stoke-on-Trent, 22/3/21) reflection on rising confidence and aspiration that:

> Actually you know it isn't going to fix lots of things. It may not necessarily bring lots of jobs, but it might change how you feel and how you are able to tackle the challenges that we've got. And part of that is by collaborating and is by this opportunity for new collaborations, which come out of new conversations.

Returning to my relational constructivist approach and putting centre stage the difficulty of seeking objective knowledge and truth, I argue that testimony regarding topophilia in particular is influenced not just by romanticism of place and performance of identity, but also a professional optimism. This can "precipitate a kind of altruistic naivete" (Gabris et al, 1998, p.336) although on the other hand encourages the optimist "to take control of our social and material destiny." Much of my data is the words of optimistic leaders simply doing their job as "civic agents, capable of making change" (Jenkins et al, 2020, p.5) with the drive to influence success (Gabris et al, 1998, p.345). Through my interviews, they externalised their passion for work (Pollack et al, 2020, p.324) as part of their personal identity, as well as their duty in terms of organisational citizenship behaviour (Perrewe et al, 2014, p.146). All articulations of unfolding sequences of events (Franzosi, 1998, p.517), whoever the source, are subject to questions of validity, accuracy, and integrity (Shuman, 2015, p.50) and these are no exception.

My interviewees, both knowingly and unwittingly, at points projected their own definition of a situation, with a conception of themselves as an important part of this tendency (Goffman, p.242, 1959, cited by Fawkes, 2015, p.677). It is a given that "narratives are often used to express and negotiate both individual and collective identities" (De Fina et al, 2016, p.352). What people chose to tell me was prompted by their own intentions (Walliman, 2018, p.160) as much as my questions about what they remembered of those events.

However, in narrative analysis we must not lose sight of *what* is said, which is equally as important as the *nature* of the telling (Walliman, 2018, p.162). As there are always multiple perspectives on reality, it's possible that the truths reported here, "grounded in social relations and everyday interaction" (De Fina et al, 2016, p.240) exist only in this study, in that precise form. In seeking to reveal undercurrents (Walliman, 2018, p.162) I have also considered the simple narrative of stories. This is because, when discounting metrics as too neoliberal, and money matters as economic rather than social, stories about UKCoC are all we have. This elaborately woven tale of a particular time in five UK towns and cities shows the significance of Jenkins et al's low barrier (2006) at every turn, in potentially facilitating Fuchs & Mosco's (2016) autonomous space in brief pockets, at various points, in each location. These stories point to autonomous space leading to social capital, and subsequently topophilia. I argue this empirical evidence of redistribution of some power, in some small ways, via transmedia engagement, despite the powerful forces of neoliberalism all around, demonstrate a combination of critical PR and participatory culture theory in action, in placemaking.

Conclusion

In this study I set out to discover how communities were invited to participate in UK City of Culture bids and how bid team members and other key participants understood, evaluated and made sense of this process. Across all locations investigated, local people were asked to help re-imagine their city and contribute their support, knowledge and expertise to bid campaigns. Participatory activity was organised by bid personnel to raise awareness and enthusiasm for the undertaking, and to provide content and colour for submissions, with the intention of making them authentic, inclusive and representative of the aspirations of the populace. I was particularly interested in the process of community placemaking to this end, and the PR role in facilitating dialogue with people who were "not just passive observers of festivalisation, but active participants in shaping this process" (Richards & Palmer, 2012, p.249). I decided to concentrate on the five cities which had been shortlisted to be UKCoC in 2021. Coventry was announced as the winner in December 2017 and for the unsuccessful locations – Paisley, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland and Swansea – I incorporated some testimony about the aftermath and legacy of bids. As discussed in my methodology, I chose not to use material referring to Coventry's year-long programme events from May 2021, to maintain my focus on the bidding process only.

The literature review providing the bedrock for this study examined the changing face of the PR role, from 20th century command and control (Macnamara, 2016, p.371) to that of a "cultural curator" (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p.14) joining conversations to influence what people think and do. Given PR's relatively recent colonisation of such exchange, the human activity so central to participatory culture theory, I argued for further links to be drawn between the two academic disciplines. My work develops a portal recently established by scholars, most notably Hutchins & Tindall with *Public Relations and Participatory Culture: Fandom, social media and community engagement* (2016) and related work.

Chapter one toured the landscape of participatory opportunities offered to people living or working within a UKCoC bidding location, identifying tactical themes, such as the community-empowering, spreadable media involved in campaigns, itself an exciting phenomenon with combined flavours of critical PR and participatory culture. I claimed that some of the consultation activity could be theorised as possibly facilitating autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016, p.4) although I acknowledged this would be fleeting, due to neoliberalism's tight, results-driven timescales. I argued that despite such curtailment, this activity was certainly an example of good, participatory-inspired critical PR practice, for academia to embrace and learn from. Finally, the otherwise-enabling role of

the low barrier to artistic involvement (Jenkins et al, 2006) was highlighted as having the opposite effect, when bid teams attempted to elicit the involvement of skilled and educated arts people. This, I asserted, was particularly interesting as a limitation to the key participatory culture principle of the low barrier, as well as indicating artists' potential difficulty in engaging with anything constituting "playbour" (Nolan, 2021, p.6).

Developing my examination of the low barrier, chapter two analysed its role in creating autonomous space, which could generate social capital, and lead to a degree of topophilia. The low barrier, encompassing online opportunities as well as face-to-face, offered a valuable array of contributions to bid consultation and placemaking. This included the "negative" ones which I argue were undervalued and under-explored by bid teams, who were perhaps understandably focused on a positive narrative, in line with neoliberal expectations. This, I asserted, was a limitation of critical PR ideals, which would promote more careful listening (Macnamara, 2018, p.18-19) as vital to improvements in any decision making, policy making or representation. However, I argue this shortcoming was a flaw rather than the cause of a full derailment of such ambition. As mentioned, my mindfulness of interviewees' tendency towards emotive storytelling, in places undoubtedly romanticised and generously laced with comparative optimism (Le Barbenchon et al, 2016, p.270), is evident throughout my findings. This was particularly where professionals talked about communities taking ownership of their bids, having had the time and perhaps the autonomous space to warm to plans, and help shape their development, picking up social and/or cultural capital along the way. Finally, I argued that the claims of topophilia and legacy were notable in terms of performance or "presentation of self" (Goffman, 1959) as well as information relayed.

Together, both chapters emphasised the parallel principles, if not convergence, of critical PR and participatory culture in placemaking, used concurrently to make sense of what happened among communities involved in UKCoC 2021 bids, and why. I argue that UKCoC processes and the capitalism-resisting commons (Peekhaus, 2016, p.379) or autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016, p.4) I have associated with them, represent a meeting of the forward-thinking ideals of critical PR. Key to this were the intuitive, DIY sensibilities of our evolving culture of "here comes everybody" (Shirky, 2009), as typified by the "produser" (Literat, 2016, p.1791) or "prosumer" (Tombleson and Wolf, 2017, p.17), with transmedia engagement providing a portal. A clear theme emerged of the low barrier as pre-requisite to the emergence of autonomous space, nurturing topophilia (Tuan, 1990), via social and cultural capital (Gauntlett, 2013; Bourdieu, 1984), and some small redistribution of power; a pushback to pervading neoliberalist systems. In summary, I demonstrate that the PR role enabled power-redistributing social and cultural capital to emerge as a bottom-up effect of a top-down and time-limited undertaking of bidding for UKCoC status. It is this exciting happening, albeit

brief and pocketed, that further underlines the need to draw more and stronger links between PR and participatory culture.

Limitations of this study

There were both advantages and disadvantages to asking people about events from more than three years previously. Interviewees had plenty to say and could recount details of their city's whole process. They could reflect on success or otherwise, as well as any lasting, or indeed short-lived, meaning and effect for their localities. However, when people looked back, they were sometimes unsure of exact details or timescales. Interviewees willing to help were generally paid professionals or community leaders, who had been relatively central to bid processes, and could take an overview. While their recollections provided a rich and insightful data set, there was an absence of more diverse voices, most importantly residents without a particular connection to the arts, and artists whose feelings towards UKCoC were mixed. This is significant because the thoughts and actions of both these groups are discussed so thoroughly in my findings. The reason for this omission was the difficulty of finding or indeed piquing the interest of those who crossed the low barrier to participate in some way, perhaps only for a short period of time, or chose not to engage, given the time that has elapsed since then. In 2021, such potential interviewees would probably not have much to say about their involvement, or even see themselves as someone who could talk about UKCoC.

In terms of ordinary residents, the absence of their testimony limits the development of my argument that autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016) featured in consultation processes. We do not hear from participants who may have experienced this empowerment and developed their "creative agency" (Alevizou et al, 2016, p.206). Did they see their ideas and opinions taken forward? Did they change what they thought or did as a result? Such voices would help to triangulate the testimony of my other interviewees. Similarly, the involvement of more artists could develop the section at the end of chapter 1 that examines their reticence to involve themselves in UKCoC. I will return to these two issues when addressing starting points for further research.

However, a strong data set was provided by the 20 interviews with key figures involved in five shortlisted bids that I was able to secure. As discussed in the methodology, this process was aided by the pandemic, due to a normalisation of video meetings as part of many workers' daily routines (PA Newswire, 2021). This undoubtedly made people more willing to meet, as travelling was not necessary. It could be argued that video meetings are inferior to in-person appointments, but I assert that talking on screen can facilitate a greater connection without the pressure of presence

(Weller, 2017, p.623). "Snowballing" (Liamputtong, 2011, p.61) played a part in this success, too, as several interviewees recommended others who had been pivotal in UKCoC consultation, to take part.

Interview transcripts total 98,014 words of conversation. As addressed at length, they clearly feature people's particular definitions of situations and their own intentions and identities, whether conscious or not (De Fina et al, 2016; Fawkes, 2015; Walliman, 2018), and this apparent unreliability could be seen as a flaw. However, I mitigated this possibility with a methodology of narrative analysis (Walliman, 2018, p.162), focusing on truth as a construct, as negotiated via stories, to make sense of events and situations (De Fina et al, 2015, p.5). I demonstrated a keen awareness of interviewees' presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) and expressly considered this at points in my findings. In summary, these stories collected via semi-structured interviews and coloured by my own enthusiastic involvement leading to interactively accomplished narration (De Fina et al, 2016, p.244), are the only data in this study, and combine to provide its key strength.

Pointers for further research

Regarding further research, firstly I would recommend time in the field, as consultation unfolds. The burgeoning UKCoC 2025 campaigns would offer this possibility. An ethnographic study of community involvement in one or more of the eight shortlisted locations would be a slower-moving, longer-term undertaking, valuable for two reasons. Firstly, if such participants were caught in the moment, ideally in their autonomous space, in the thick of an exciting process, their thoughts, feelings and insight could be captured in a manner that has eluded this piece of work. Secondly, they could also be revisited at least once, to seek more evidence on the potentially short-lived nature of topophilia and social capital. In addition, "piggybacking" existing consultation meetings or forums (Barbour, 2011, p.68) could provide a particularly vigorous and immediate set of data because the researcher could witness proceedings first-hand, rather than relying on the reports of others. This could offer a powerful triangulation of data. While it could be argued that entering such commons risks the "undesirable influence of the outsider" (Elliott and Jankel-Elliot, as cited in Rageh et al, 2013) I assert that participating directly in the setting (Brewer, 2000, as cited in Bell and Waters, p.35), could develop the researcher's more positive influence as a co-constructing actor (Fawkes, 2015, p.677), a strategy that played a significant role in this study in terms of building relationships with interviewees, and eliciting meaningful information.

Secondly, the concept of the low barrier to participation (Jenkins et al, 2006, p.3) in relation to artist involvement could be further researched, explored, and tested by speaking to artists in the UKCoC 2025 locations. This conversation could be undertaken as one-to-one interviews or in focus groups. Wider work on the low barrier is also recommended, due to its relevance to critical PR but also its complexities and range of possible effects as a tenet of participatory culture. Thirdly, the notion of autonomous space (Fuchs & Mosco, 2016, p.4), interstice, or commons, could be investigated more thoroughly and more widely in a myriad of contexts, within the neoliberalist systems that serve to define it. Such space is usually described as a bottom-up occurrence, a struggle against capitalism, but here it was constructed, wittingly or unwittingly, by the PR representatives of the neoliberal system. While I argue bid teams' efforts resulted in small, local redistributions of power at points, did this autonomous space serve more overarching capitalist objectives, as simply part of the "cheerful stuff" (Gauntlett, 2018, p.24) ensuring the success of the system? Or could it be a form of commons that could "affirm itself as an alternative to a capitalist economy in decline" (Arvidsson, 2020, p.25)? This is a complex question that goes further than the remit of this work.

In summary, this study asked how communities were invited to participate in UK City of Culture 2021 bids, via PR-led participatory placemaking, and how facilitators of such opportunities understood, evaluated, and made sense of the benefits and limitations of these happenings. These questions were answered via a detailed interrogation of participatory processes, revealing how the potential for autonomous space or commons was made possible by participatory culture's low barrier to participation, led to a degree of topophilia, through the eyes of interviewees. The theorisation of my findings is important and original because this study has been the first to consider UKCoC through the lenses of critical PR and participatory culture, building upon a small body of work bringing these concepts together.

Furthermore, as discussed here, this study has generated a trio of potential research ideas in embryo, each of which could be used as a starting point to further make sense of what happens when people are invited to get together to reimagine the place where they live.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions:

Tell me about your role with City of Culture

How did local people become engaged in this process?

What worked best and why? What were the major challenges?

What could/should be done differently if you started afresh?

What are the ongoing community benefits to bidding for City of Culture?

What else could I consider in this study?

Appendix 2

Photograph of coding system.