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• Interview with Paul Jones*

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The invention of Liverpool

Since the 2008 European Capital of Culture (hereafter abbreviated by the acronym ECoC), Liverpool presented its strategies for urban regeneration to the media and the entire world, becoming a peculiar best practice in the international scenery. This success has been mainly due to two causes:

- the event marketing strategy, which was particularly simple and straightforward, re-positioning the city on the top destinations map;
- the branding strategy of the event, presented as a sort of event with no architecture (Garcia 2010), privileging the preservation and the enhancement of city culture.

Indeed, the first point consists of a simplified and communicative image of the city, artificially built to match with a selection of labeled items, circulating in the media: the place is the centre of the city, and its time is the future, its inhabitants are for the most part not poor, not old, not an ethnic minority, not unhappy.
The second point is the most critical: although there was no urban and architectural transformation for the event, the event is a reflection of a wide process of physical regeneration, evaluated in the long term. Beyond the event, the brand of Liverpool as a competitive and innovative city, continues to lead political choices in the city. The most hazardous result of this oriented storytelling was not to convey rhetorical and unrealistic images; the real risk was the resulting occurrence of selective actions and policies, and the distortion of existing meanings and contents, searching for a coherence between the built city and its carefully predetermined image.

The transformation of Liverpool started before the ECoC, through the construction of a new, strong and competitive image. In particular, there was an effort around the symbolic background of the fordist city: disused industries and abandoned docklands, central places for the city of Production, were turned into city of consumption benchmarks. Public-private partnerships realized projects to replace the old city centre; the ECoC helped this process by spreading the new entertainment and leisure economy.
Since the 80s Liverpool began to transform itself, chasing an image that, starting from the emblematic places of industrial culture, achieves a split from city recent past: the urban landscape of red brick warehouses and terraced housing, has gradually been replaced with a new centre, characterized by leisure amenities and shopping facilities. The city is "customized" by the new hyper-aesthetic cult, in a clear post-modern architectural style: the most significant emblem is the new heart of the city, Liverpool 1, presented as the largest shopping centre in Europe: it consists of a whole new neighbourhood substituting the old urban areas, disregarding ancient meanings, pursuing consumer lifestyles, accessible to everyone.
The regeneration of the city, following a concentric structure, due to the city specific morphological settlement, started from brownfield sites along the waterfront. In particular, in 2004 the waterfront was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, for its relationship with the coastal front, denied for a long time by the presence of the dockland. The revitalization consists of a series of flagship projects (among which, the conversion of the Albert Dock is the best known), followed by the systematic redevelopment of public spaces and the realization (still in progress) of a business and financial settlement, to enhance the city economical restart.

Beyond the waterfront, the regeneration interested dock hinterlands, old warehouses neighbourhoods boosted as creative clusters. Since the 70s creative industries established themselves in these neighbourhoods, in former industrial buildings. Regeneration policies for these areas built on these energies, mending a morphological relationship between former industrial areas, 19th century neighbourhoods and green areas of the university campus. Nevertheless the existing horizon is getting poor because of the gradual replacement of old benchmarks with consumption city symbols (international firms, shops and restaurants). The consequence is the dislocation of spontaneous energies, whose enhancement was programmatically the primary goal.
A similar effect of dislocation of existing values has also happened in the working class neighbourhoods, gradually demolished and replaced with new building types external to English tradition. Here more aggressively than in the city centre, although using the same rhetoric of selective images, regeneration distorted the values, privileging middle class models of development. In the meantime housing market collapse and a serious demographic shrinkage, led to the abandonment of a lot of houses in recent decades: the national program called Housing Market Renewal (2003-2011), trying to raise property values and, more generally, to address the question of life conditions in the affected communities, proposed the construction of a series of new mixed neighbourhoods, with the attraction of new segments of population in more decent homes. But the regeneration of these areas has been carried out through open disputes with communities and residents, unable to re-establish themselves in new expensive settlements. In this framework, ECoC and similar community events were used to mask the brutality of an operation of speculation in real estate values and substantial gentrification. The question was exasperated by contemporary crisis of financial markets: indeed, recent regeneration actions in Liverpool produced just a landscape of unsold model neighbourhoods.

Overall, the branding strategies designed for promoting the regeneration and the cultural events designed to build consensus (above all the ECoC), carried on the concept of a competitive city (see the Liverpool First campaign, to transform Liverpool into a "thriving international city "), culminated with the participation at the Shanghai Expo 2010. Liverpool was presented in the international event through three key words: Visit, Study, Invest. But this thriving international city is distant from the genuine legacy of the working-class city, consisting of fragile liminal spaces, trades and docklands, which would have been developed better within a perspective of sustainable recycle of contemporary city parts, than in a one way process of substitution and displacement.

Liverpool Vision: policies, practices and projects

The rebirth of Liverpool began more than twenty years ago. The deep economic crisis affecting cities in England since the 50s of the last century, hit more severely in Liverpool than elsewhere, leading to the closure of many factories and the consequent loss of jobs. The thriving city, that reached almost one million inhabitants before the Second World War, became a shrinking city with a population in serious decline, up to the present age.
Since the 70s and the 80s, Liverpool administration stimulated private investments, for the first significant flagship projects: the Garden Festival of 1984; the restoration of the Albert Dock, the historic warehouse complex, main landmark of the city since then; Great St. George's residential settlement, close to the Anglican Cathedral, Wavertree Technology Park, etc..
With the designation of the Merseyside Objective 1 region and the arrival of the European structural funds during the period 1993-99 and again during the period 2000-06, Liverpool profited from resources for the projects of regeneration. The transformation process was guided by Liverpool Vision, the first Urban Regeneration Company in the United Kingdom, founded in 1999, which developed the Strategic Regeneration Framework (2000), a strategic plan and process, evolving together with the city, throughout twenty years, which allows to substantially re-design problematical parts of the city centre, promoting a new image of the city: the idea of the 2008 European Capital of Culture firstly appeared in this document, as an exceptional event to reconstruct Liverpool identity.
In 2004 there was also the designation of the waterfront as UNESCO World Heritage Site, because it testifies the times of the great British merchant fleet. The first step was the redesign of the Pier Head, the historic pier dominated by three great historic Victorian buildings, the Three Graces, combined with the design of the Liverpool Museum, the so-called Fourth Grace, similar to a telescope looking from the city to the external world. The design of the waterfront is characterized by a great attention to public and open spaces, with the creation of a promenade for pedestrians, connecting the renovated old docklands with contemporary architecture examples.
The regeneration spread within dockland hinterlands areas, the new Retail Core, designed around the oversized Liverpool One shopping centre, a post-modern icon in place of old warehouses and dockland facilities, symbol of the city of consumption displacing the city of production; then, the regeneration process transformed the creative clusters, Ropewalks and Baltic Triangle. In particular, in Ropewalks the attention for green areas, street furniture and urban art, together with some relevant additions of facilities and public amenities, become a key to the re-interpretation of places, incorporated into a process of regeneration of the area, today one of the most vibrant and livable in the city. The experiment in Ropewalks followed the traces of other Liverpudlian cultural quarters (The Georgian Quarter during the 60s and the area of Matthew Street/Whitechapel, Beatles "Cavern" neighbourhood, during the 80's), building on a pre-existing cluster of creativity within the area, constituting a first wave of gentrification, stimulated by: abundant availability of abandoned buildings; the central, but isolated, location; the lure of industrial heritage. The administration tried to attract the investment of intelligent actors, in the attempt to replicate this spontaneous phenomenon. However, this resulted into a huge sell off of the built heritage, in the attempt to make money, because the buildings were

too decaying to be managed exclusively by public sector. The neighbourhood was transformed by a proliferation of commercial firms and shops, symbols of a wide globalization, through successive waves of gentrification, and it's today more similar to an urban showcase than to a real neighbourhood.
The intervention of Ropewalks is also an urban mending in relation with the Georgian and Victorian residential neighbourhoods, and the green areas of the university campus. In the area of Hope Street, the axis which connects the two great cathedrals of the city, the early century Anglican Cathedral and the recent Catholic Cathedral, the administration proposed a strategy involving the implementation of the character of the neighbourhood as a district of knowledge and culture. Two documents, in particular, the Knowledge Quarter Prospectus and the Green Infrastructure Plan, have been published for the creation of a network of sustainable paths between existing facilities (the cathedrals, the old church of St. Luke, the Philharmonic, the University, the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, etc..), within the development of new public spaces and with great attention to the overall public realm.
Meanwhile, northward, the entrance corridors towards the city centre have been redesigned: Edge Lane transformation, the redevelopment of Lime Street Central Station, the residential district of Kensington, etc.. All of these interventions, in parallel with the waterfront, transformed the external look of the city, of its iconic places and landmarks, and above all the first impression for new city visitors and tourists.
But these actions have also drastically changed the outskirts of the city centre, above all the residential areas, re-designed to attract a creative class of young professionals. Creating Neighbourhoods for the future was the slogan of New Heartlands, the national program for the revival of the housing market, which carried out the regeneration of many areas in Liverpool throughout seven years and has been dismantled in 2011. Residential areas in decline were expropriated to build better quality and more expensive housings. In many cases there was a severe conflict with the City Council because the communities were losing both their old home and the chance to afford a new accommodation in the same area.
This model of aggressive entrepreneurialism is not yet over. Currently the most important projects for the city of Liverpool interest the construction of a large complex of offices and residences, the so-called Liverpool Waters redevelopment, with an extension of the waterfront northward, which compromises the designation of UNESCO for the waterfront as a World Heritage Site. The project is modeled as an old style paradigm, where the private interest leads disproportionately a highly unsustainable transformation, which is particularly risky in a shrinking city because it proposes the doubling of the current housing stock, even if the existing new housing is largely unsold.

Interview with Paul Jones[1]

2008 European Capital of Culture is a starting point in the Italian perception of Liverpool.

I think that Capital of Culture was a milestone for Liverpool local economy. It was an opportunity for the local authority to transform exterior perception of the city. It was less about drawing, as in the common ECoC, it was more about positioning the city as attractive for investments, for tourists. I think this ECoC has represented a conscious attempt to break with the past. Liverpool has been a paradigmatic example of expansion during the 19th century, when it was an important mercantile city. Liverpool historic wealth was based not so much on manufacturing, but more on trade, connections with other places. In the 20th century this economic model declined quite sharply and urban areas around the waterfront started shrinking. So from the last part of the 20th century, a lot of different regeneration strategies were designed to stop the shrinkage and encourage the growth. That's the contexts in which the ECoC becomes one of the strategy to arrest the economic decline and encourage different types of economic growth. A crucial moment, just before the ECoC Bid, was a change in urban authority in 1996 with the Liberal Democrat taking power. They adopted a very entrepreneurial model of local government, directing a lot of energy in the attraction of private investments, positioning Liverpool as a city where business can flourish, an attractive destination for tourists. They commissioned an important local document, the Strategic Regeneration Framework (2000). The suggestion for bidding for ECoC first emerged in this document.

Has ECoC helped to build people consensus around the regeneration strategy?

ECoC built consensus in at least two important ways: first of all, it was a way of building consensus within locally powerful institutions and actors; secondly, it largely used participation strategies and local communities engagement. The extent that local communities saw themselves represented in this positioning became a crucial point to understand the extent to which the communities were officially in the process. Main big events were really successful, raising the pride of the city. I would raise an issue related to the investments attracted on the back of the award, leading to privatization and commodification of public spaces. The major transformation, Liverpool 1 shopping centre, not directly connected to ECoC, was one of the outcomes of a re-positioning of Liverpool. It consisted of a large part of central urban spaces given over to private developers for 150 years at least. This sort of move made participation more difficult for a very long time. I think this was one of a numbers of contradictory political moves.

What do you think of the overall regeneration choices for Liverpool city centre?

Classically regeneration is a response to the problem of urban shrinkage. One of the backdrops to regeneration strategies in Liverpool in general has been the shrinking population. Liverpool population has been shrinking by about 10.000 people a year, in between 1979 and 1997-1998. Today it's actually growing, but the problem is less demand in houses; the question is what population grows: the city centre ac-

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commodations attract young professionals. The ambition was effectively to attract new people in Liverpool because local economy is disproportionally reliant on the public sector. But those kinds of jobs don't attract types of population in a position to buy city centre apartments. That's why the expansion of that type of residential spaces appears as a very risky strategy; of course it was led by the private sectors, it wasn't public money, but of course this money could be used for more sustainable interventions!

Liverpool regeneration is still private sector-led. Why there's no turning point?
For a long time Liverpool economic strategy has been aggressively entrepreneurial, the local authorities focused their attention on attracting capitals. There's a circular zone, right along the waterfront, that could be put in more profitable uses. The local authority has pursued private developers very aggressively, trying to encourage them to invest in these spaces. It caused a big sell off of urban spaces, moved from public into private hands. I would personally see the Liverpool Waters development as an extension of that type of policy, a very aggressive, entrepreneurial form of governance. It's a rather unsustainable model, because the Liverpool Waters project proposes a doubling of the existing residential spaces in the city centre!

This aggressive model is not even in line with examples in the UK, as the Olympic case in London.
Liverpool is a particularly extreme case of an entrepreneurial regeneration strategy. Liverpool has an incredible rich cultural district, reflecting a fascinating history of vibrations, of mercantile trades, of connections with far places. Urban regeneration is always characterized by a re-valorization of history, drawing on cultural and historic resources. This is one of the contradictions in the model that Liverpool has pursued and continues to pursue. Liverpool has an Urban World Heritage site awarded by UNESCO. UNESCO put Liverpool state on a watch-list precisely because of the plan proposed along the waterfront, that compromised the existing heritage.

Were the first regeneration projects of 80's more sustainable than nowadays regeneration?
This model of regeneration wasn't built by local government, but by a conservative central government which set up one of the first Urban Development Corporation to regenerate the waterfront and to reposition Liverpool as a city you could do business with, a desirable location for tourism. Liverpool was a test case of regeneration, borrowing from the Baltimore model the re-positioning of cultural heritage but also the transfer of land from public administration into the private sectors. A very important policy was the Local Government, Planning and Land Act (1980), that empowered local government to purchase land that were not being put to profitable use on a compulsory base, to re-sell it to private sectors for more profitable uses. David Harvey, the geographer, talks about this moment as the point in which local government becomes involved into selling "places" not just land, positioning the city symbolically. That leads to the Albert Dock transformation and to the International Garden Festival (1985) too.

Liverpool disregards the modern paradigm of recycle. Is it a risky situation in local actors opinion?
It's important to remember that Liverpool remains a city of extremely poverty, as it was historically; at the moment it has 6 of the poorest 10 areas in the UK; so the attempt to attract job and investments is become one of the principal goal for the city council. One of the questions I would raise is the sustainability of this model: what types of jobs and wealth it creates. The model represented by Liverpool Waters, based on a trickle-down economy, frankly doesn't work: wealth doesn't trickle down very far! For example Liverpool One development created jobs, but only in the retail sector, really unsecure jobs. I think these questions are really absent from the political debate, there's a consent around a very aggressive way of developing.

Which area do you think has mostly, positively or negatively, changed during the last decades?
A very successful development was the one of Lime Street Station. Regeneration is always very careful about the first impression of a city, what you firstly see of a city when you get off a train or into an airport. In Liverpool what is now called "the museum quarter", a collection of neo-classical public buildings, were built in the 19th century to impress people getting off trains. One of the major projects after ECoC was to 'open up' that space around Lime Street Station. There are other areas in the city centre that were repositioned as an opportunity for investments, but in the context of the economic crisis developers aren't developing, they're not investing so much money in these projects as they were 10-15 years ago.

What is the situation outside the city centre?
The wider context outside the city centre had the same sort of projects trying to beautify gateways into the city: this led to the purchase and demolitions of a lot of houses around the other corridors towards the centre. Those projects always reflect the attempt to reposition the city, but they are also material attempts to attract investments. This has massive implications for communities, back to the question of participation and the role of different publics in Liverpool economies and reinvention.

If it continues this way, in your opinion which is the future that Liverpool will have to face?
There's a very interesting research project carried out about private developers, but it's difficult to get information on because it is commercially sensitive: certainly there are high levels of vacancy in city centre apartments. I think we're planning unsecure spaces, connected to a volatile market, to very speculative investments and disinvestments. Regeneration is often considered as a response to shrinkage, but many of the strategy pursued just create new volatilities, new crisis. Liverpool for example has so many processes that stretch so far into the future: if you've got a site owned by a private developer for 250 years, even if that site is successful, it means that the vast majority of the wealth goes into the private sectors. Now, of course this is the way that cities have always worked, but Liverpool has followed this model of privatization of public spaces in a very aggressive way. In two hundred years there could be a conversation like the one we're having now and where people would be saying 'what happened in 2013? why they gave all the land to the developers?' These are questions

and issues we, as academics, need to question, and politicians too.

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Images

Figure 1. Baltic Triangle. The areas close to the waterfront will be the core of the transformation and reinvention of Liverpool into a thriving and successful city, digging and demolishing the previous image of the working-class city. Annie Attademo ©

Figure 2. The city is moving fast towards a new and vibrant image for the centre: Albert Dock complex in the 80s was a masterpiece in urban regeneration of abandoned areas, today it represents the only past the city is willing to preserve. Annie Attademo ©

Figure 3. The view from the top of the Liverpool Big Wheel shows the new developments, alongside the ancient historical buildings and the 80s flagship projects evidences.
Annie Attademo ©

Figure 4. Pier Head, postcard of the new waterfront development, with the three historical buildings, the "Graces", facing the newly built Fourth Grace and the system of welcoming public realm and waterways. Annie Attademo ©

Figure 5. Liverpool waterfront by night, seen from Birkenhead: the new museum of London lights and the business centre skyscrapers are seriously changing the city appearance. Annie Attademo ©