

Culture, community activity, place management and health

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” Jacobs, J. *Death and Life of Great American Cities*

This document looks to bring together two strands of place management practice and consider how individually they relate to the success of a place (vibrant and vitality, Parker et al. 2017) and combined how they could affect the health of a location.

The first strand is the requirement of a place to be unique and distinctive to attract people and investment. Within tourism literature the distinctiveness of a place is directly related to its history and culture. (Ginting 2017). Scotland as a destination has history and culture in abundance but the effort to promote this often by-passes the users of a place to only include occasional visitors. In extreme examples like Edinburgh and Venice this leads to the hollowing out of places as purely tourist destinations. The aim of the tourist tax in Edinburgh is to protect local communities as much as regulate visitor numbers.

The aim of promoting history and culture to a local population is to increase attachment to a place which in turn increases visits and interactions.

“the emergence of the new economy is undermining our ability to form attachments with people, places and companies. However, one of the unintended effects of this is that it has strengthened the value of place and aroused a longing for community.” (Inalhan 2004)

Even though there is a plethora of literature looking at the value of place attachment there is less on practical steps to increase it. Assuming there is a direct link between a place's culture and place attachment then it is important to consider how best to promote history and culture. By limiting resources to existing infrastructure and media within a city or town centre then effective promotion is based on maximising outdoor media opportunities and forms of experiential marketing.

Towns and cities have access to large amounts of outdoor media. Defined as non-traditional media this uses existing infrastructure, not available to commercial advertisers, to promote a place. To date this has been under-utilised because the media owners (councils) have little appreciation of its value. The advantage of outdoor media is that it cuts across demographics and can communicate with large sections of the population. Effective use of outdoor media is an art not a science as it has to appeal to people.

The best example every year is Christmas Lights. These significantly change perceptions of place, increase footfall and increase place attachment. Using the same infrastructure but with more direct communication can underpin a strategy to increase understanding of history and culture. As temporary installations these can prove highly effective at raising awareness. An example in Scotland is the use in Perth of livery banners on catenary wires to celebrate the medieval history of trade in the city.



As with any co-ordinated media strategy another media source needs to be employed to tell the story, once peoples interest and attention have been gained. This is akin to reading the description of a painting in a gallery after looking at it. To achieve this use street based media including notice boards, information towers, ground graphics, hoarding and shop graphics.

As well as considering which is the most appropriate media then it is important to work on the best story. People remember stories not as events but as characters so concentrating on some important characters in the history of place and juxtaposing them can lead to the desired results. Below is an example of juxtaposing music and poetry in Dungannon, Northern Ireland. The graphics were so well received that it led to a music and poetry festival in the town.



Finally using temporary solutions keeps a message fresh. There are a great many examples of public art commissions to display history but the cost and time lag in implementing these often results in the message losing its relevance. Was it purely coincidental that the effective use of temporary media in Leicester to celebrate King Richard III pre-dated by 1 year the winning of the Premiership title by Leicester City Football Club?

The next strand is Community Activity. Within the context of a town or city centre the term community activity refers to opportunities for people to meet and socialise in a given place. *Opportunities to do, opportunities to connect and opportunities to be.* (Langager 2014). For the last 4 decades the dominant activity in city centres has been shopping and centres have been organised predominantly as retail destinations. Shopping is not a community activity. This has transformed town centres from the place the community came together to the place we used to shop. Once again the media is full of stories around the 'Death of the High Street' but this death is only predicated on 10-15% of retail outlets closing down not on the multiple uses a town centre traditionally served.

Similar to promoting history and culture town centres have untapped resources to encourage casual and formal community engagement. Formal community engagement tends to be around formal venues and is a well-researched area. Informal community engagement is more important in that it can target a wider population and significantly broaden the number of participants and thereby support a wider level of community engagement.

What actions can a town take to facilitate greater informal community engagement? Simply put, create conducive spaces for communities to meet up. Spaces need to be indoor and outdoor, to target different demographics and to be exciting and inspirational. If we limit this to temporary installations, then they can be more responsive and adaptable. Examples include Pop Up Parks and indoor parks, board game café's, Ping Pong parlours and student hubs. Indoor these are located in empty retail using short term tenancies, outside a Pop Up Park can be in the market place or town centre.

An example in Newcastle in 2018 is the transformation of the main high street from purely a retail destination to a community hub by installing a 12 metre long temporary park with a giant sofa and life size Rhino made out of artificial grass.



How do these interventions effect the health of people in a place? Many town centres in Scotland have an ageing population and study after study demonstrates how important socialising is in reducing mental health problems and alleviate strain on health practitioners. One study looks at the concept of 'Civic Socialising'. (Stewart 2015) This measured social interactions specifically in town centres and considered the benefits to not only the individual health but also the overall economic and social health of a place by providing 'an enabling environment'. Older people are also guardians of history and culture so can be enabled to promote place history.

Looking at a different demographic then physical activity amongst children helps foster place attachment. (Langager 2014) If children have a keen awareness of place this relieves anxieties and helps them to develop. Using empty spaces (particularly shops) will help build community engagement and impact upon health. To encourage use it is important that the children's parents and guardians also have a sense of belonging. This is where history and culture play their part.

Looking at the population in general then the infographic below demonstrates clearly the benefits of building temporary environments that encourage outdoor activity. Temporary green space in city centres encourages informal activity as well as socialising.

IMPACT OF A TEMPORARY POP UP PARK ON COMMUNITY PHYSICAL HEALTH (Salvo, d. et al 2017)



Park is the main reason they have not gone elsewhere



Would be spending time in front of a screen



Would be spending time at an indoor location



Only, would be at another park,



In conclusion a policy to promote a city centre as the centre of a community using history and culture to develop a keen awareness of belonging to a place, combined with greater opportunities to socialise will have an impact on the health of both a place and its residents.

References

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