

## ***Festival Cities: Culture, Planning and Urban Life***

*Review of Festival Cities* by John R. Gold and Margaret Gold.

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On July 15 1989, the rock band Pink Floyd held a concert in Venice, performing from a floating platform in the *Bacino*, the area in front of the Piazza San Marco, the most acclaimed space in the Venetian lagoon. More than 200,000 people filled the Piazza and the waterfront, while many thronged on boats that were moored in the Basin. Coinciding with the Feast of the Redeemer - the Redentore - inaugurated in 1578 to celebrate the end of a terrible plague - the concert was a spectacular event in a tradition of floating theatres, processions and mock battles that have been celebrating the identity of the amphibious city over the centuries. Gianni de Michelis, the vice president of the Venetian council, had lobbied hard to bring the concert and the 2000 Expo to Venice. Yet in its aftermath a number of officials saw the event as an assault that defaced a fragile historic urban environment. A series of political controversies led to the fall of the entire council and local government. The architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri issued a strong attack, describing the concert and de Michelis' Expo campaign as other instances of exploiting the historic city for economic reasons and marketing.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Venice and the Renaissance*, Tafuri had cast the history of the city in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries as a political battle between two elite groups: the traditionalists (*giovani*) and the progressives (*vecchi*).<sup>2</sup> The former group defended traditional aesthetic values in Venetian architecture and the principle of *mediocritas* in public life. In contrast, the latter pursued innovation, aspiring to embellish the city with Classical monuments - the then new architectural style - in the city's most celebrated locations.

Tafuri's position falls within a lineage of debates on tradition versus innovation, which in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century expanded to include other dichotomies, such cultural memory and its destruction, economic development and gentrification. The abundance of festivals in the last four decades brought about a significant narrowing of the gap in these binaries, blurring the distinction between fine arts and popular culture, beneficial regeneration and predatory commercial exploitation. The explosion of cultural events during this period served cities and their prosperity into the future. But it also raised strong challenges related to security, large-scale tourism, urban identity and commercialisation, raising the question: whose city?

Yet, a comprehensive historical analysis of festivals is largely missing from urban studies literature. *Festival Cities* by John R. Gold and Margaret Gold fills a critical gap in planning, urban conservation, tourist studies and the cultural sector. The starting point of their inquiry covers a wide temporal span of festive activities from the classical world through the medieval and early modern period to contemporary times. Festivals, the authors explain, reach back several millennia in the life of urban communities. From ancient Greece and Rome to Venice's medieval *Festa delle Marie* and London's Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield, and from the Venetian *Carnavale* to the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, festivals have been important not only for religious, economic and cultural life but also for unifying communities, the poorest neighbourhoods with the richest quarters regardless of economic class.

Drawing from Venice - the 'proto-festival' city - and the Venice Biennale, the authors focus on the relationship between festivals, culture, place and economy in Western cities in European and Northern America since the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their aim is to provide a 'critically reflective and historically constructed survey' of the ways in which festivals are embedded in the lives of cities, mainly highlighting urban festivals and carnivals. Organised in nine chapters, *Festival Cities* offers contextual background of the long history of festivals and their significance. The four main chapters present case studies of pioneering European arts festivals, beginning with the Venice Biennale and Film Festival, and moving to the Salzburger Festspiele, the Cannes International Film Festival and the Edinburgh International Festival. In the last three chapters the authors review the proliferation of

festivals providing a thematic overview of theatre festivals, literature festivals and biennales. The penultimate chapter (chapter 8) visits carnivals dedicated to the causes of solidarity and identity, such as the exported festivals of black communities in the USA and Europe, St Patrick Day celebrations and Pride Parades, providing the LGBTQ+ communities with opportunities to declare their identities in a world of changing moral values.

*Festival Cities* is essential reading and important contribution to planning, geography, heritage, urban studies, including research-led and practice-led campaigns to protect social and cultural infrastructures. From the ceremonial celebration of cultural memory to urban prosperity, and from media-borne spectacle to the branding of entire neighbourhoods as cultural quarters, the authors highlight the conflicting nature of festivals as sacred and secular, authentic and placeless, including the ways in which celebrations of identity, ethnicity, gender and sexuality can be blunted by commodification, political ideologies and lifestyles. Equally significant to these debates is the authors' discussion of these events under two rubrics: 'festivalisation' and 'tradition versus innovation'.

Gold and Gold use the concept of festivalisation to explain the explosion of festivals, the cultures of consumption and the economic restructuring of cities in post-industrial societies. Their discussion of tradition and innovation, is balanced between the authentic and timeless nature of festivals on the one hand, and economic needs leading to their proliferation on the other. The authors explain that any of the historical examples of festive urban experiences discussed in the book resonate with present day practices in cities. However, they suggest that the pace of cultural innovation in the last two centuries has meant that 'many forms of events which now exist have few antecedents of any real longevity with which they can be convincingly associated'. While any historical understanding of festivals needs to embrace the interplay between tradition and innovation, the proliferation of festivals in contemporary times points more to cultural innovation, economic stimulus and neoliberal approaches to urban management. Festivals, the authors argue, are economic expressions of post-industrial urbanism, addressing the economic restructuring of cities after de-industrialisation.

Tradition versus innovation and festivalisation in *Festival Cities* are seen from the perspective of urban management and planning. Explaining that the municipal authorities take a subsidiary role in festivals, the authors seem to imply that they play a less influential role than what is expected from them based on their responsibilities to the citizen's demands. In some cases they might hand over the city to the festival organisers providing only small amounts of finance and agencies that foster further events. As such, the intention to provide a critical examination of festivals cannot distance itself from approaches to urban management aiming to attract tourists, stimulate production of souvenirs and festival merchandising. The very same financial logic is the one that produces the city, its architecture and public spaces with shocking shortages in housing, inequalities and the privatisation of public space. Discussing the latest Venice Biennale, Carolyn Smith asked whose interests is the event serving?<sup>3</sup> How can the history and representations of cities through festivals be used to ask questions about cities and our societies? How do they reveal power relations? What is the role architecture and public space play in the process? What models of creativity do city planners and architects promote? Are there alternative models for celebrating identity and creativity in cities and our everyday environments?

Caught between the magical romanticism of the floating city and the underfunded municipality that pursued the economic benefits of spectacular consumption, the Pink Floyd concert in Venice came just before the big explosion of festivals at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the good intentions of the rock band that offered free attendance to all, the events that followed the concert demonstrated what can happen to cities when *experiential values* are confused with *exchange values*.<sup>4</sup> Enveloped in the narratives of the 'creative industry', 'urban renaissance', 'placemaking', and 'arts washing',<sup>5</sup> we are incapable of breaking free from a mode of thinking that converts the experiential values of festivals into market values in pursuit of economic growth. But an account of festivals should be seen

not simply as a historically constructed survey but also as a work of theory; not simply as a history of festivals but also as a reflection of how this history can show that there is a difference between *festival cities* where multiple identities, imaginaries and economic prosperity are achieved, and *festival economies*. The latter are creating a legitimised mythology about innovation that can eventually undermine the sustainability of festivals and the city's prosperity. *Festival Cities* makes an important contribution to thinking about collective and individual creativity in cities and is highly recommended for reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Szacka Catherine-Léa, "A Momentary Lapse of Reason: Tradition Versus Modernity in Venice and that Time Pink Floyd Played St. Mark's Basin". The Architects' Newspaper, August 12 2016 <https://www.archpaper.com/2016/08/pink-floyd-venice/> (accessed 4 August 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Tafuri, Afredo, *Venice and the Renaissance* (trans. by Jessica Levine, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Carolyn. "Outrage: The Venice Biennale Makes a Mess Architectural Review" 21 May 2021 <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-the-venice-biennale-makes-a-mess> (accessed 4 August 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Varoufakis, Yanis. *Talking to my Daughter: A Brief History of Capitalism*, (trans. Jacob Moe and Yanis Varoufakis. Vintage: London, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Mould, Oli. *Against Creativity* (Verso: London + New York 2018).