

Ethno-city

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Central Statistic Office figures demonstrate the growing diversity of the nation's population. In April 2004, the population stood at just over four million, the highest figure recorded since 1871. Nearly one-third of immigrants in the year ending April 2004 were nationals of countries outside the European Union or the United States. Since May 2004, the numbers coming from the newly joined EU member states have been in the tens of thousands. While these new immigrants are fanning out across the country to work in the manufacturing, agricultural and services sectors, their presence is increasingly visible in large urban centres like Dublin.

Indeed, in all sorts of subtle ways, the increased diversity of the capital city is manifested at street level and in everyday urban practices. The former Jewish quarter centred around the South Circular Road has, since the early 1990s, become home to many members of the Irish Muslim community. A former church on the South Circular Road serves as a mosque, and there are several halal stores on Clanbrassil Street. Harold's Cross in the south of the city now boasts a Russian Orthodox Church, while Mass is celebrated in Polish in St Michan's Church in Smithfield. During the Polish presidential campaign in October 2005, election posters made a brief appearance on hoardings in South Great Georges Street. The Pentecostal Church on

Pearse Street boasts a vibrant African congregation. So many Africans have set up grocery stores on historic Moore Street that it is known as 'Little Africa'.¹ There has been a proliferation of ethnic bars and ethnic shops and outlets throughout the city. To view these changes requires a perambulation through the city streets, particularly the side streets and back streets that are not on the regular tourist or shopping trails. You need to move into the 'backstage' of the city in order to really soak up the ethnic atmosphere and observe the cultural transformation close up.

All of these new urban outlets and practices have emerged organically from within ethnic enclaves of communities that have reached a critical mass. New ethnic consumers have created niche markets for particular ethnic goods and services that are provided in the first instance by others within their communities. This process follows a pattern established by migrants globally across space and time. In time-honoured tradition, ethnic communities create goods and services directed in the first instance at their fellow countrymen and women. In the process, they evoke curiosity on the part of the indigenous population. Over the years 2003 and 2004, the visible growth in the numbers of Chinese immigrants living and working in Dublin created an impetus for a new kind of ethnic initiative in the city – the Chinatown festival – to mark the beginning of the Chinese New Year. Launched in January 2004 by the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, John O'Donoghue, the festival appeared to tap into the zeitgeist of a city coming to terms with its new multi-ethnic status. This chapter explores the motivation behind the festival and examines some of the reasons for its success. I raise some questions about what the festival is actually supposed to represent in the cultural calendar of the city, and whether or not it fulfils its goals of promoting Chinese culture in Ireland and creating a better understanding of Chinese New Year celebrations.

¹ E. J. White, 'Forging African Diaspora Places in Dublin's Retro-Global Spaces', *City*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2002, pp. 251–270.

Harnessing ethnicity in the selling of the city

Dublin City Council (DCC) has not been remiss to date in pursuing strategies aimed at building, developing and re-imagining the profile of the city. Writing about cities in general, John Hannigan identifies the strategies pursued by boom towns and cool cities in their quest to place themselves on the international stage, to attract inward investment and to open themselves up to the tourist gaze.² A cool city has a certain cachet. It is perceived as a desirable place to live, work, socialise and visit. Dublin has pursued a number of different approaches in its quest for 'cool' status. The 'fantasy city' style of development relies on tax subsidies and public-private partnerships to underwrite the construction of heavily themed and branded retail, arts and entertainment palaces: sports stadiums (such as the doomed Abbotstown project), casinos, convention centres (still proposed for Spencer Dock), art galleries, megaplex cinemas and shopping centres. There are a number of drawbacks to these projects. To be financially viable the retail component usually has to be dominant, and this means that ancillary activities – for example arts, culture and community programmes – may be sidelined. Furthermore, megaplex cinemas and out-of-town shopping malls tend to 'cannibalise' cinemagoers and consumers who would previously have frequented smaller cinemas and outlets in the downtown area. The main criticism, however, that is advanced against the fantasy city approach to revitalisation is that such flagship projects frequently fail to enhance or revitalise adjacent rundown neighbourhoods.

European cities have pursued a variant of this fantasy city approach through *grands projets culturels* – big projects aimed at stimulating both tourism and civic renewal. Ever

² J. Hannigan, 'Boom Towns and Cool Cities: The Perils and Prospects of Developing a Distinctive Urban Brand in a Global Economy', paper presented at the Resurgent City Conference, London School of Economics, London, 19 to 21 April 2004.

since Glasgow managed to put itself on the cultural map during its tenure as European City of Culture in 1990, European cities have competed for City of Culture designation, including Cork which held the title in 2005 and presented a year of arts and cultural events intended to raise the profile of Ireland's second city, nationally and internationally. Such projects often founder because no significant and sustainable link is made between the cultural projects and the creative industries themselves. Furthermore, Hannigan points out that blockbuster cultural projects are often financed at the expense of local and regional cultural development.³

An alternative to the fantasy city, is the 'cultural incubator' approach, a policy of cultural clustering that is aimed at creating spaces, quarters and milieus for the promotion of cultural production and creativity. One of the paradoxes of such approaches is that they often lead to the sanitisation of the very bohemian quarters and bohemian culture that they set out to promote. Hannigan concludes that 'disneyfication' and gentrification often result, leading to the displacement of artists and bohemians. This outcome reflects the experience of Dublin's Temple Bar quarter in the 1990s. Places in the city that are deemed to have the potential to be developed and marketed for a wider public run the risk of losing the very qualities that gave them a sense of difference in the first place. Their 'coolness' or cultural cachet may in the process be undermined.

More recently, the focus in urban planning has moved from culture to diversity. Sharon Zukin has commented, for example, that cities have begun to view the increasing multi-ethnicity of urban populations as a source of cultural vitality and economic renewal.⁴ The idea of making

³ For example, John Hannigan notes that to build the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, now a major tourist attraction, subsidies to a broad range of cultural groups in the region were reduced.

⁴ S. Zukin, 'Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardization in Spaces of Consumption', *Urban Studies*, vol. 35, nos. 5/6, 1998, pp. 825-839.

'diversity' a plus for cities has most recently been endorsed by Richard Florida in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Florida argues that a new professional class of creatives – such as account executives, engineers, educators and filmmakers – express a preference for living in cities that are diverse, tolerant and cosmopolitan. He argues that cities that have relatively large local gay, bohemian and *ethnic* (my emphasis) sub-communities attract more creative/knowledge workers than those that have not. Therefore, the more visibly diverse the city, the more likely it is to act as a magnet for highly skilled, high-income-earning and income-generating professionals. Furthermore, this new class of creatives dislike entertainment and leisure that is typical of fantasy city development. They prefer a lively street-level arts scene populated by cool cafés, small art galleries, jazz clubs and avant-garde theatre. In other words, they seek out a grittier, edgier kind of city space, such as that offered in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.

Florida's work has not been without criticism but it is clear that his ideas, like Robert Putnam's on social capital, have entered the consciousness of city burghers. The heightened visibility of ethnicity and cultural diversity in and around Dublin has the potential to be a major resource in the development and further regeneration of the city. Diversity, inclusiveness and multiculturalism are the new buzzwords of the urban planners. Arguably, one of the features that Dublin historically lacked as a provincial outpost on the periphery of Europe was the kind of ethnic diversity that has come to define contemporary world cities. The 'other' on the streets of Dublin is a relatively new phenomenon. Irish emigrants who returned in the 1990s were simultaneously delighted at the new signs of multiculturalism in the city and horrified by the inchoate racism of sectors of the city population. The increased ethnic diversity of the population provides an opportunity for the city to re-invent itself once again, not as literary Dublin or as 'hip and cool' Dublin, but as multicultural Dublin. To begin this process of re-imagining, an appropriate project

must be identified, preferably one that enhances the profile of the DCC while appearing to reach out to a targeted ethnic group and the wider citizenry at large.

China comes to Dublin

Of the 50,100 people who migrated to Ireland during the year to April 2004, 9 per cent were Chinese. The number of Chinese students in Ireland increased from a few hundred in 1997 to more than 30,000 in 2004, making them one of the most significant groups among the more than 200,000 international students who come to Ireland to study English. The clampdown on international student visas by the US, in the aftermath of 9/11, has made Ireland a more attractive destination for Chinese students. Under work/study visas, students can legally work up to 20 hours a week. According to a *Business Week* report, faced with high living costs, many Chinese students work far longer hours, sometimes dropping their studies or overstaying their visas.⁵ Chinese students are to be found working in all sectors of the economy, and it is tacitly recognised that many of them are in fact economic migrants. Visiting Dublin in May 2004, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao estimated that as many as 60,000 Chinese people live in Ireland. Most of the Chinese population is based in and around Dublin, with a particular concentration on the city's northside.

The idea of a Chinatown festival was initially mooted in 2003 by local activists in Dublin who were conscious of the large number of Chinese people living in Smithfield and its environs. Their aim was to create an intercultural dialogue between the new immigrants and the indigenous community, and also to provide a focal point for bringing together different groups of Chinese people, who speak different languages. Participation in sport is seen as a central ingredient in creating intercultural dialogue and a

⁵ K. Capell, 'Ireland a Nation of Immigrants', *Business Week online*, 26 July 2004, www.businessweek.com, accessed 27 September 2005.

small local festival mainly featuring marital arts took place in Dublin in 2003. Following a newspaper article that set out the case for having a more permanent celebration of the Chinese New Year in Dublin,⁶ the impetus grew to do something bigger and better in 2004.

The DCC, through the City Development Board, joined forces with local community activists and members of the established Chinese community to plan for an inaugural Dublin Chinatown festival in January 2004. The community activists wanted to keep the focus on education and intercultural dialogue, but found it increasingly difficult to advance their agenda. Rather, the festival's commercial potential in terms of the high-profile sponsors it could attract, as well as the trading opportunities offered to stallholders, ultimately set the tone of the event. The inaugural Dublin Chinatown festival, marking the beginning of the year of the monkey, was held in the Smithfield plaza in the north inner city, with fringe activities occurring on the side streets. In terms of visitorship, the festival exceeded all expectations. The organisers had planned for about 40,000 visitors over the four days but instead, largely because of a highly professional public relations campaign, more than 150,000 showed up in Smithfield. However, because it was run under the auspices of the DCC, the event could not be allowed to spill out further around the surrounding streets of Smithfield. In line with the safety statement, barriers were placed around the main festival site to control the flow of people inward and outward. The monitoring of admission to the public plaza at Smithfield meant that people had to queue for up to ninety minutes along the quays in order to get in. The event became a victim of its own success. Essentially, public space was semi-privatised over the course of the festival, with people more or less corralled on site. Once admitted, people had access to stalls selling

⁶ N. Haughey, 'Today Smithfield, Tomorrow Chinatown', *Irish Times*, 1 February 2003.

everything from Chinese dumplings to phone cards, yoga lessons to paper lanterns, trinkets to pot noodles.

For a few days, Dubliners had become tourists in their own city. Lured by the idea of the exotic, they came to experience Chinatown. But the experience was more akin to that which you would have in a theme park. You waited your turn, finally gained admission and then you paid for some trinket, trophy, snack or ride that you probably did not want or need in the first place. Because the festival had so nearly run out of control in 2004 by dint of its success in attracting a crowd, steps were taken the following year to better manage crowd control.

The Chinatown festival was moved to the National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks. The main quadrangle and other spaces in and around the museum constituted the site. Tickets for entry to Chinatown had to be purchased in advance from a kiosk near the Luas stop. Once inside, the emphasis again was on consumption. Visitors were treated to over-priced noodles in plastic containers that quickly chilled in the February air. The museum courtyard featured a mishmash of stalls selling all kinds of Chinese bric-a-brac. In the 'Asian pavilion' (a room set aside in the museum proper) a rather stilted series of photographs of Chinese culture and everyday life were on display. These photographs were highly reminiscent of the catalogue produced by John Hinde of a kind of imagined Ireland in the 1960s. Two diffident Chinese officials pressed copies of Chinese postcards into the hands of visitors. Elsewhere in the museum an extremely eclectic set of holistic therapies were demonstrated by their practitioners, intended to celebrate the Eastern tradition of holistic medical practice. On a stage in a wet and windswept corner of the quadrangle, small children performed traditional Chinese dances in a scene reminiscent of open air *feiseanna*. A funfair attraction completed the picture.

The target audience once again appeared to be middle-class Dubliners – with buggies and young children in tow – looking for something interesting or mildly exotic to do on

an otherwise uneventful winter afternoon. What they were served up in the main was a very safe, sanitised kind of diversity, one that did not require much response beyond a few cash transactions and bemused spectatorship. One certainly would have found it difficult to come away with a better cultural appreciation of all things Chinese in Ireland.

What's really going on here?

Dublin: A City of Possibilities outlines the economic, social and cultural strategy for Dublin for the period 2002 to 2012. A core enabling theme of the strategy is the need to make Dublin a diverse and inclusive city, and the blueprint endorses the idea of celebrating diversity and multiculturalism. Yet this policy document remains aspirational; it fails to outline a strategy or mechanism for actively including an ethnic voice in the running of city affairs. Indeed, the document takes very little cognisance of specific ethnic groups and immigrant communities and how they might be incorporated into the city. Perhaps this is not surprising because traditionally the membership of the urban regime is less ethnically diverse than the city itself, and much of the city's ethnic diversity has only become manifest in recent years. According to one member of the Chinatown festival committee, DCC has failed to take diversity seriously. Unlike the case in comparable cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, there are no staff members at DCC whose specific task is to address the issue of diversity in the city and to promote interculturalism.

In fairness, local government must operate within the financial and policy parameters set at national government level. In the absence of a national policy on diversity, therefore, there can be little or no local policy on diversity. Funding tracks at local level are largely determined at national level. If no central government funds are made available for diversity or intercultural education programmes, then initiatives at local level are stymied.

Although the stated aims of the Chinatown festival were to promote Chinese culture in Ireland and to create a better understanding of Chinese New Year celebrations, the potential economic role that the festival could play in furthering Irish–Chinese trade interests was not missed. A ‘successful’ festival which garnered huge crowds and very favourable press coverage that went around the world – as far afield as the US and the People’s Republic of China – obviously had the potential to make Dublin an attractive prospect for inward Chinese investment. Promoting Dublin as an enterprising city with a substantial Chinese population dovetails neatly with the national policy of fostering Sino–Irish relations. Equally, China has been identified as a virtually untapped market for a range of goods and services. Ireland’s open and highly globalised economy lends itself to seeking joint ventures and other kinds of investment opportunities in the Chinese market.

The Irish government has been actively building relations with the Chinese administration. Over eighty Irish companies and institutions accompanied President Mary McAleese on her official visit to China in September 2003. Bilateral trade between China and Ireland rose by 63 per cent in 2003 and some sixty companies, including high-profile firms such as Glen Dimplex and Treasury Holdings, have opened outlets or involved themselves in joint ventures in China.⁷ Furthermore, the Irish government has recognised the potential role that China will play as the largest outbound tourism market in the world. In May 2004, an authorised destination status agreement was made with China, which allows designated Chinese tour groups to visit Ireland. That same month, Minister O’Donoghue visited Beijing for the Ireland–China Cultural Festival sponsored by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism and used the opportunity to promote awareness of Ireland in the cultural and tourism spheres. In January 2005, Taoiseach Bertie

⁷ M. O’Halloran, ‘38,000 Visit Smithfield Chinatown’, *Irish Times*, 26 January 2004.

Ahern led the largest ever trade mission from Ireland to China. Creating a buzz about China on the streets of Dublin through the Chinatown festival reinforces 'our special relationship' with that country and conveniently sets aside the thorny issues of China's record on human rights, labour exploitation and religious persecution.

Conclusion

According to Bernadette Quinn, 'the festival with its connotations of sociability, playfulness, joviality and community provides a ready-made set of positive images on which to base a reconstruction of a less than perfect city image'.⁸ Chinatowns in general owe their origin to the late 1800s. When Chinese sailors and workers came to New York and Vancouver, both cities demonised certain aspects of Chinese culture and restricted Chinese settlements to 'Chinatowns'.⁹ The very characteristics that led to the 'ghettoisation' of the Chinese immigrants are now primed, packaged and sold as quintessential experiences for the middle-class consumer in cities throughout the Western world. Dublin has not yet served up a Chinatown, but city government and interested commercial parties have been busy at work creating the simulacrum of a Chinatown through the festival strategy. Rather than being an organic, grassroots festival that plays out spontaneously in the city streets, the festival was domesticated, choreographed and required payment of an admission fee.

The website of Dublin's Chinatown featured a colourful picture of the Taoiseach in Government Buildings with a group of cute Asian and Irish children (the Irish kids are the ones with the green jerseys and the red hair!). While these Irish children may aspire to the corridors of power, it is

⁸ B. Quinn, 'Arts Festivals and the City', *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, nos. 5/6, 2005, pp. 927–943, p. 932.

⁹ UN Habitat, *The State of the World's Cities, 2004*, UN Habitat, Globalisation and Culture Programme Report, 2004.

doubtful whether those corridors are so open to the Irish Chinese community. Furthermore, this photograph was taken at the launch of the 2005 festival, at the same time as the government was deporting other immigrant children from the state. The holding of the Chinatown festival and its perceived success (in terms of raw attendance numbers) allows the city government to clap itself on the back and tick its diversity box when doing up the annual balance sheet. But more crucially, they had identified a new money-spinner for the city. The festival can act as a vehicle for increasing revenue through inward investment and tourism. Indeed, a spokesman for the Dublin Chamber of Commerce remarked, 'the hope would be that the Chinese New Year would one day be as big as St Patrick's Day'.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the visiting Dubliners can revel in their own tolerance and their delight in engaging with the exotic. As Quinn suggests, festivals as visual attractions mainly require visitors that look and consume; they do not promote more participative community engagement.¹¹ The Chinatown festivals have enabled the diverse communities of Dublin to overlap but in a temporary, monitored and highly choreographed space. The Chinatown festival masks the unevenness among neighbourhoods in Dublin as measured by both class and ethnic segregation. High rents will keep Chinese immigrants out of the well-heeled suburbs for some time to come, and the places where they actually live will hardly attract the average Dubliner concerned about his or her personal safety. Events such as the Chinatown festival give the impression of Dublin as an ethno-city in the making without it having to make a sustained outreach or create structures that would support meaningful intercultural dialogue with the Chinese communities.

¹⁰ E. Morrissey, 'Chinese New Year to be Marked by Festival in Dublin', *Irish Times*, 26 January 2005.

¹¹ B. Quinn, 'Arts Festivals and the City', *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, nos. 5/6, 2005, pp. 927-943, p. 935.