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ANIMATION OR DENIGRATION? USING URBAN PUBLIC SPACES AS EVENT VENUES

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City events are increasingly staged outside purpose-built venues in urban public spaces. Parks, streets, and squares have always been used for civic events, but there is now pressure to use them for a wider range of occasions including large-scale, ticketed events. This article identifies why this trend is occurring and outlines the implications for public spaces. The use of London's parks as venues for music festivals, elite sport events, and trade exhibitions is the main focus of the article. These events challenge the established functions and meanings of public parks. Noted positive effects include challenging the rather stiff character of Victorian parks and encouraging different users/uses. However, ticketed events restrict access to parks and various processes currently afflicting urban public spaces—privatization, commercialization, and securitization—are exacerbated when parks are used as event venues. These effects are often dismissed as inherently temporary, but staging events can have enduring effects on the provision and accessibility of public space. The article concludes that staging events in public spaces is increasingly driven by a neoliberal agenda, with place marketing and revenue generation key priorities. This needs to be more fully acknowledged in analyses of the eventful city.

Key words: Parks; London; Privatization; Commercialization; Festivals; Cities

Introduction

Public spaces have always been used as event venues, but in the contemporary era they are being more intensively programmed to stage a wider range of events. Using public spaces, rather than formal venues, is recommended as a strategy that can produce events that are more enjoyable. In their prescriptions for the eventful city, Richards and Palmer (2010) suggested that “events should

be planned in such a way that they invade and occupy the spaces of the city” (p. 432). “Urbanizing” events in this way also offers potential advantages for cities: it can animate urban spaces and restore their sociability. Many public spaces are underused, stiff, or mundane. In these instances, events have been identified by urban designers/urban planners as tools to make public spaces more convivial, interesting, and safe. Animating public spaces via events can also diversify the uses and

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users of public spaces. However, staging events in public spaces is opposed by some citizens who complain that it disrupts use. Large-scale events are also criticized for the way they denigrate public spaces via the physical pressure exerted, and the excessive noise and waste produced. There are also more complex critiques of the use of public spaces as event venues. Programming events in public spaces is a strategy employed by “entrepreneurial cities,” which are induced to stage “cultural spectacles” to compete for inward investment (Peck & Tickell, 2002). According to some critics, events turn public spaces into consumption-based environments where only consumers are welcome (Schmidt & Németh, 2010). Events also contribute to the commodification of public spaces by allowing governments to generate revenue from them (Kohn, 2004). This revenue is needed to help pay for the maintenance of public spaces, particularly at the present time when metropolitan authorities are seeking to supplement reduced or inadequate public funding with other sources of income. These observations, which are explored further in this article, highlight that critical analysis and ideas from different disciplines (e.g., urban geography, urban studies, urban design, urban sociology, and urban political economy) are required to understand the use of public spaces as event venues.

The key aims of this article are to analyze the contemporary use of public spaces as event venues, and to explore the implications of this trend for public spaces. Initial sections of the article examine explanations for the trend and the ways in which events animate and denigrate urban spaces. The latter sections of the article focus on the use of three of London’s public parks as event venues. Agencies responsible for these parks have signed contracts with event companies to allow commercial music festivals, elite sport events, and promotional events to be staged. These events challenge the traditional functions of public parks; and they provide examples that help to illustrate and explore issues raised in the rest of the article.

The Urbanization of Events

As Hughes (1999) noted “city administered play has spilled beyond the spatial boundaries of the pitch, arena, concert hall and theatre to inhabit

the wider public spaces of the street and city centre” (p. 124). Drawing on the work of Hagemann (2010), Smith (2016) referred to this trend as the *urbanization of events*. There are multiple examples and iterations; for example, the increased prevalence of sport events on city streets, music festivals in urban parks, and orchestral concerts in city squares. The trend is also supplemented by the rise of public viewing areas, fringe events, and other activations, which extend the spatial reach of events beyond traditional venues. When events are staged in public spaces the city is not just the stage, city space becomes integral to the event. The city is not merely a container for events, but event content (Richards & Palmer, 2010) and public space is both “performed” (Merx, 2011) and “consumed” (McKinnie, 2007). Many urban events are deliberately integrated with the city to enhance the event experience, but also to generate spectacular imagery, which can be disseminated more widely. This produces “mediascapes”: “staged representations of urban spaces” that “are constituents of the branded cityscape” (Kolamo & Vuolteenado, 2013, p. 504). The close connection between urban events and city branding helps to explain why events seem to be gravitating towards city centers and/or well-known parts of cities (Smith, 2016). In many cities, staging events is becoming an established function of these urban spaces.

Urban regimes are obsessed with place marketing and city branding, but there are other explanations for the urbanization of events. Despite the extra practical and bureaucratic challenges, organizers and their sponsors are keen to use prominent public spaces for events. Staging an event in the city generates memorable experiences for participants and imagery that is more likely to be featured in media coverage. Urbanizing events can also promote meaningful connotations, which are transferred from the setting to the event. For example, fashion festivals benefit from the positive connotations of “urban” and “street” when staged in urban streets (Weller, 2013). Similarly, event franchises that want to promote their environmental values benefit when they are staged in parks.

From the perspective of city authorities, one of the main motivations for sanctioning events in public spaces is the need to generate revenue to plug holes in public sector budgets. In the current context

of austerity, many city councils have less money to spend on basic services. As a result, it is now common for local authorities to publicize hire rates for parks and squares to event organizers (Smith, 2016). Revenue can be generated from hire fees, but also from licenses, sponsorship, and charges levied on tickets sold. Parks—and other parts of the public realm—are expensive to maintain so this commercial revenue can be used to help keep these spaces in a state that will satisfy users. There is now an expectation that contemporary public spaces (particularly new ones) will be financially self-sufficient; and events are often identified as a key source of revenue. Ultimately, this means that public space is increasingly funded by temporary privatization (for events)—a form of neoliberal policy that is highly controversial because it restricts access.

Animation

Cities are staging more events in public spaces for financial and symbolic reasons, but also for experiential ones. Events are increasingly used to alter the way in which urban spaces are experienced and used, and to change the numbers and profiles of users. Festivals and events at various scales (from the street busker to Olympic events) are used to bring more people into underutilized parks, squares, and streets. This strategy is closely aligned to the notion of *animation culturelle*, a practice that emerged in France in the 1970s that involved event programming to encourage people to visit and linger in urban spaces (Montgomery, 1995). Although such programs can be interpreted as ways to produce more enjoyable public spaces, they are often thinly disguised ways to increase footfall for city center businesses and produce more secure spaces. According to Schmidt and Neméth (2010), creating a critical mass of law abiding, desirable users relies on “extensive programming” and “event planning.”

Animation means bringing places to life—introducing more people and more activity. Many public spaces, particularly those conceived in the Victorian era, were designed as places to communicate social values and codes. For example, parks were often conceived as very orderly places for formal and passive recreation. As Harding (1999) notes, 19th century parks were designed to encourage “gentle promenading” and “respectful mingling”

(p. 4). This persists in the present era, even in new iterations of urban parks such as New York’s High Line, which encourages “passive forms of leisure” and where the “most typical movement within the park [is] a bucolic walk from one end to the other” (Loughran, 2014, p. 61). Prominent city squares were often designed to emphasize monumental buildings, to commemorate historical events, and/or to revere national heroes. This means they remain quite cold and lifeless places. In these contexts (e.g., Trafalgar Square in London or Senate Square in Helsinki) events have been programmed to try and “loosen” these spaces—to make them more appealing and more enjoyable places to visit (Smith, 2016). Events can be staged in city streets for similar reasons. In these settings, festivals and events can transform the way in which roads are used and imagined. Contemporary urban thoroughfares are dominated by traffic and commerce, with traditional social functions relegated. However, when traffic is suspended and streets used for events, the rhythm of a street is altered—people slow down and interact more. They use the space differently and people deviate from the usual patterns of circulation (Stevens & Shin, 2014). However, this eventfulness is often choreographed and controlled by organizers and so events both loosen spaces and simultaneously introduce new controls. Events are regarded as special occasions and this helps justify exceptional regulations that would not normally apply (Smith, 2016).

In the examples cited above, events are not merely staged in public spaces, they help to *produce* public space—through the social interactions they encourage. The key question is whether the qualities of these transformed spaces can be retained postevent; are these merely temporary transformations or can they provide the basis for more fundamental changes to the ways spaces are envisaged, imagined, and experienced? One of the key ideas in contemporary urban studies is the notion of “potentialities.” Events, even though they are temporary, can highlight the potential ways that urban space could be used and this may provide the foundation for different ways of thinking about/using public space in the future. It is also possible that citizens who are attracted to public spaces because of events may visit them again (for other reasons). This provides another enduring effect of a temporary event.

Denigration

Many texts, most notably Montgomery (1995) and Richards and Palmer (2010), have acknowledged the positive ways that events help to animate urban public space. Few have noted the negative consequences of staging events in city spaces. Where negative effects are addressed, the discussion is often confined to the practical problems (congestion, noise, disruption) and physical consequences (damage to structures and vegetation) of staging events in places, which were not necessarily designed as event venues (Flecha, Lott, Lee, Moital, & Edwards, 2010). Public spaces often need to be adapted physically to stage events and these permanent changes can be controversial also—especially in historic sites. However, denigration in this context can also mean the denigration of the publicness of parks, streets, and squares. The commercialization, privatization, and securitization of public space noted by commentators in recent years can be exacerbated by staging events, particularly those that are ticketed. These three processes are addressed below.

It is often said that urban public space has become commercialized—our streets, squares, and parks are now used as platforms to sell products: either directly via the introduction of commercial outlets; or indirectly via the visibility of sponsorship and advertising. It is also argued that public space has become commoditized—it is increasingly regarded as something that has exchange value, rather than merely use value. Therefore, public space is provided/appreciated because it adds value to nearby properties (Loughran, 2014), rather than because it is intrinsically important or useful. Staging commercial events contributes to both these processes of commercialization and commoditization. Hiring a square or a park to a commercial event organizer effectively means it is offered “for sale” as a commodity (Kohn, 2004), and it usually means that commercial activities are introduced (advertising hoardings, retail, and catering outlets) that are not normally present. Commoditization and commercialization can demean public spaces, making them less distinguishable from the rest of the contemporary city.

Staging events in public spaces can also be interpreted as a form of privatization. One of the defining qualities of public spaces is that they are freely

accessible; and staging events, particularly ticketed events, introduces barriers—financial, physical, and symbolic—that reduce the accessibility of our parks, streets, and squares. Perhaps we should not be too worried about these “privatizations” because they are temporary. However, this line of argument ignores the fact that some events take a long time to set up and take down—increasing their temporal reach. It also ignores the fact that some spaces are used so regularly for events that accessibility is restricted intermittently over a significant period of time. This problem is not one merely caused by ticketing and charging for events. Even when events are free, they are likely to deter some people and attract others. Because many events are staged to generate footfall for city center businesses, event calendars are often heavily skewed towards the interests and values of middle-class consumers. Therefore, events are interpreted by some commentators as ways of legitimizing exclusivity in contemporary urban public spaces (Atkinson & Laurier, 1998).

Staging events can also add to the way in which our cities are being increasingly controlled and securitized. In the past, great civic events (e.g., fairs and carnivals) were regarded as times when everyday controls and restrictions were suspended—urban authorities were prepared to turn a blind eye to drunkenness, prostitution, gambling, and other vices. However, in the contemporary era—because events are staged to present attractive images of cities—there is an incentive for cities to increase restrictions. For example, Nevarez (2007) analyzed how New York’s Central Park becomes more heavily controlled and surveyed during large events. According to Nevarez (2007), the authorities want to use these events to reinforce the park’s image as a prestigious and idyllic place so “more control, more order” is imposed (p. 165). As events are used as symbolic vehicles to communicate the status and values of a city/nation, this makes them more of a target for groups wanting to disrupt events through violent or nonviolent protests. This encourages authorities to employ even tighter security arrangements. Events also contribute to securitization of cities in a subtler way by helping to “curate and mediate acceptable uses” of public space (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015, p. 509).

If we accept the proposition that events can leave positive, enduring effects on the public spaces that

host them, then we must also acknowledge that some of the negative effects noted above might also persist after events have finished. The normalization of privatization, commercialization, and securitization through events might provide the basis for future “incursions” (Osborn & Smith, 2015). This may happen because of deliberate strategy—where events are used deliberately as palatable precedents to justify more fundamental and more controversial changes in the future. On the other hand, it may occur incidentally, where events contribute to an evolution of the ways public spaces are used and imagined.

Urban Parks

Urban parks are complex entities that perform a diverse range of functions in the contemporary city. According to Chiesura (2004), they provide recreational opportunities, environmental benefits, and can help reduce the levels of stress amongst citizens. Parks are not merely places in which to escape, they can also be places for social interaction. Some parks are purposefully designed as meeting places in which spontaneous and planned events can occur—as Sauri, Parés, and Domene’s (2009) analysis of Barcelona’s Parc Joan Miro emphasized. More traditional urban parks might also encourage similar effects. Although nature is associated with solitude and tranquility, nature in urban areas can increase social integration and interaction among neighbors (Chiesura, 2004). According to Kohn’s (2004) criteria, it is this “intersubjectivity” that helps to turn open space into public space.

Although there is a large amount of literature on city parks, and a growing amount of work on city events, very little has been written on the use of urban parks as event venues. This is surprising, particularly as these parks are now used intensively for a wide range of events. There is some useful work on the controversial use of parks as venues for motor racing events produced by Lowes (2002, 2004) and his various co-authors (Tranter & Lowes, 2009). There are also isolated articles on park projects conceived as mega-event legacies (Davidson, 2013; Lloyd & Auld, 2003), including a fascinating article examining the conflict in Glasgow between stakeholders who wanted new park to be a place marketing tool, and local people who wanted to play

football in it (Inroy, 2000). Reconfiguring Bryant Park, New York, as an events venue was analyzed famously by Zukin (1995) and more recently by Madden (2010). However, in all these texts, events are discussed superficially, usually as one element within the reconfiguration of parks, rather than as a subject worthy of attention in its own right.

In an era of neoliberal austerity, one of the most difficult challenges facing parks is how to fund them. Reductions in government funding mean that public parks are under pressure to generate their own income. The UK provides a good example. A recent Heritage Lottery Fund (2016) report found that 92% of park managers have had their budgets cut over the past 3 years, with a third facing cuts of 20% or more. Accordingly, the biggest single issue facing parks is the need to diversify and expand sources of income (NESTA, 2013). One way of generating funds is to stage commercial events such as sport events, film screenings, and music concerts. Alongside generating income from hire fees, these events are advocated as ways of animating parks, attracting new visitors and encouraging repeat visits. However, staging events is controversial. Events disrupt normal park use, they exclude users and therefore they challenge the overriding mission of most parks—to provide accessible public space.

London Parks

To analyze how and why urban parks are being used for commercial events, three different parks in London were analyzed. London is an example of a city that has placed great emphasis on events (and eventfulness) in recent years, partly due to city’s status as host of the 2012 Olympic Games. London’s parks are regarded as one of the city’s most attractive features, and centrally located parks serve a number of functions (amenities, heritage sites, and visitor attractions). Three cases were deliberately selected to represent the diversity of urban parks, in terms of their size, general characteristics, and management arrangements. Hyde Park is a very large and historic park, which is managed by an executive agency (The Royal Parks); Battersea Park is a typical municipal park, which is managed by a social enterprise on behalf of the local authority (London Borough of Wandsworth); and Potters Fields Park is a new, small park managed by a Trust.

Hyde Park

Hyde Park is a Royal Park where public access to a large amount of public space (142 hectares) is protected via historic legislation. Public access was first granted in 1637, making it one of the world's oldest public parks. Hyde Park remains Crown Estate (owned by the monarch), but is managed by The Royal Parks; an executive agency of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (a National Government Department). The Park is also regulated by the City of Westminster, the local authority in which most of the Park is situated. In line with various planning policies, Westminster Council grants planning permission for interventions, including whether or not to permit large-scale events.

Using Hyde Park as venue for events is nothing new. A famous Rolling Stones concert was staged in 1969 and ever since the Park has regularly hosted pop concerts in summer months. The Royal Parks (2015a) defines major events as those that involve more than 5,000 people, and Hyde Park hosts several of these events every year: including a half-Marathon, a triathlon, and BBC music concerts. However, the Park also stages more commercially oriented major events. In 2012 The Royal Parks signed a contract with AEG Live, which gave this company the exclusive rights to stage music festivals every summer from 2013–2017 (now extended to 2019). Barclaycard agreed to a deal with AEG Live¹ and The Royal Parks to be the headline sponsor. As a result, a large section (the Parade Ground) of Hyde Park is fenced off every summer for a very expensive, heavily sponsored music festival. The events are staged over 2 weekends, but installations required to stage the event are in situ for several weeks.

Turning Hyde Park into an AEG Live venue has caused great controversy, with high profile commentators highlighting how it exemplifies how “concert promoters, fair organizers, and product salesmen can now purchase the Royal Parks for money and close them to the public” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 14). The issue is acknowledged by The Royal Parks, whose Chief Executive has recently stated:

While millions attend the range of events and enjoy other commercial activities in our parks, some worry that there is a danger that the intrinsic qualities of the parks will be lost. My team and

I are aware of such sensitivities and strive to keep a balance between the two elements. (The Royal Parks, 2015b, p. 5).

The Royal Parks are seeking this “balance” via a new Major Events Policy in which they suggest that the growth of Hyde Park's events calendar will be limited to “two further major events” (The Royal Parks, 2015a, p. 11). This document also recognizes that the Parade Ground “needs to be available for the public to use, as well as to recover between events” (The Royal Parks, 2015, p. 11). There is some evidence that the public tolerate the need for ticketed events. When asked the rather leading question, “I would be happy for a limited number of paid ticketed events to be held in this park if knew that money generated would be used to help maintain the park and other Royal parks,” over 60% agreed (Ipsos MORI Research Institute, 2014).

Officially, The Royal Parks hosts events for various reasons: “to provide cultural, social, and sporting activities” and to “to promote a wider appreciation of the parks to a diverse range of visitors” (The Royal Parks, 2015a, p. 3). However, financial necessity is the main motivation for staging more commercial events in Hyde Park. Cuts to its government grant means that The Royal Parks now needs to generate more than 60% of its own income. Approximately a third of this comes from hosting events: in 2014/5, £8,989, 000 was generated from event fees across the eight Royal Parks (The Royal Parks, 2015b). To stage a commercial event in Hyde Park, The Royal Parks currently charges £3–5 per ticket sold, plus a disruption charge of £5,000–80,000 per day. Therefore, a 1-day music concert for 25,000 people could raise over £200,000. This income helps to replace lost grant funding—which is likely to be reduced in the future. Pressure to become financially self-sufficient means that The Royal Parks agency is now being transformed into a charitable corporation, an entity that will be better suited to generating commercial revenue.

Battersea Park

Covering over 80 hectares of riverside land, Battersea Park is the largest municipal park in South London. The Park was opened by Queen Victoria in 1858—one of a series of UK parks that was

opened at this time to provide much needed recreational space for a rapidly urbanizing country. Unlike Hyde Park, responsibility for Battersea Park was eventually handed from the national to the metropolitan government (in 1887), and then to the local authority (in 1986). In 2015, responsibility for the Park was transferred from the direct control of the Council to a newly formed social enterprise (Ullman, 2016). Like many parks, Battersea Park suffered from underinvestment in the 1970s (Harding, 1999); and by the early 1980s the park was described as a “classic example of the run-down Victorian park” (Nice, 1983, p. 13). It was eventually restored from 1998 to 2003 via a £7.5 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Although such funds can provide the capital needed to restore parks, they are rarely available to assist with ongoing maintenance costs, leaving many park authorities seeking alternative revenue streams—including events.

Battersea Park has a fascinating history as a venue for events mainly because of its use during the 1951 Festival of Britain. Battersea Park was the site of the Festival Pleasure Gardens, and the main fairground installed at that time was retained for 20 years after the event had finished. Battersea Park has traditionally hosted community-oriented events, including a famous Easter Parade, but in recent years, more commercial events have been introduced. The Park now contains a semipermanent venue—which hosts “awards ceremonies, meetings, product launches, conferences, gala dinners, parties, exhibitions and charity fundraisers” (Battersea Evolution, 2016). The Council has also tried to generate revenue by using parts of Battersea Park for outdoor events. Major (ticketed) events staged every year include a large firework display and open-air cinema screenings. These events have been explicitly cited as precedents in proposals to stage large, commercial events in the Battersea Park, including a controversial motor race².

In 2014, an agreement was reached between Wandsworth Council and the organizers of the Formula E motor racing series to stage an annual race in Battersea Park for a period of 5 years. Event organizers were keen to use the Park because their series aims to use city center circuits rather than purpose-built racetracks. The cars used in this race are all electric (hence the name Formula E); and so the park setting fits well with the sustainable image

Formula E are trying to promote. The idea to use Battersea Park for a London edition of this new race series received high profile support from the Mayor of London. Stakeholders at the city level were keen to use a park venue because it would create spectacular media images without causing disruptive road closures. Various justifications were also cited by the officials within Wandsworth Borough Council who advocated the project: the event would provide benefits for local businesses, an exciting event for residents, and a unique, new event for the Park (London Borough of Wandsworth, 2015). However, the event was ultimately justified on the grounds that it would generate £1 million a year for the Council, part of which would be used to “maintain and improve” Battersea Park. This financial motive is linked to local authority budget cuts, but it also reflects the political orientation of Wandsworth Council—one that is keen to maximize the value of public assets to keep council tax low.

The first edition of Formula E in Battersea Park was staged in 2015 and involved 2 days of racing. To stage these races, the Park was closed for 4 days during mid-summer; and there was further disruption over a 3-week period while the event was set up/dismantled. Unsurprisingly, the use of the Park as a motor racing venue was strongly opposed by some local residents for a series of reasons, including the “inappropriate, exclusionary” nature of the event and the disruption to park use. During the consultation process, local residents complained about the way in which the park was being commercialized “little by little” (London Borough of Wandsworth, 2015), with this project viewed as merely the latest iteration. This reflects wider concerns about the way in which events contribute to the “creeping” commercialization of public space. To the dismay of many local residents, Formula E races were also staged again in July 2016. However, Formula E announced recently that this edition would be their last in Battersea Park. Their decision was heavily influenced by the persistent campaigning and legal challenge mounted by local campaigners, led by the Battersea Park Action Group.

Potters Fields Park

Taylor (1995) suggests that a park “more than any other kind of landscape is redolent of the aspirations

of its time” (p. 2013). Potters Fields Park in the London Borough of Southwark certainly represents the era in which it was (re)created—one in which property speculation, city branding, and market forces are to the fore. Unlike the two cases analyzed previously, this is a very small (1.5 ha), and relatively new park (completed in 2007) that was purposefully designed as a public space that could host events. Potters Fields Park is cited in a recent report as a benchmark example of a park “that does not need any public subsidy for maintenance” because of the income it generates via event fees (NESTA, 2013, p. 13). Approximately 69% of the revenue earned is from events (London Borough of Camden, 2016). The Park holds 4–5 major events every year that each last 2 days, for which they charge up to £9,000 per day. These events include product launches and events dedicated to promoting different regions of the world. For example, in 2016 the Park hosted events promoting Indonesia and the Philippines. One of the main factors underpinning the commercial success of Potters Fields Park is its location: next to the River Thames with views of some of London’s most famous landmarks including Tower Bridge and the Tower of London. These views are coveted by event organizers because of their potential to generate spectacular imagery; pictures that give both the city and the event extra publicity.

Historically, urban parks were provided by enlightened philanthropists, but in the 21st century parks are often the outcomes of property deals between the public and private sectors. Thus, these parks are “commodified” from inception. Potters Fields Park was created using a Section 106 agreement: to gain planning consent the developers of the adjacent site were required to provide funds to help establish a new park. Although the land remains in public ownership, management responsibility has been handed to a Trust comprising various public and private stakeholders. It means the Trust can raise its own revenue and ring fence this money to be spent exclusively on the Park. This seems to be a park-related variation of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) funding model; and there are similarities with Bryant Park (Zukin, 1995) and Union Square (Zukin, 2010)—BIDs in New York where rental of park land for “outdoor product demonstrations, photo shoots and festivals” (Zukin, 2010, p. 128) has always been an important source of revenue³.

Its intensive use as a venue for private events (for up to 56 days a year) limits the publicness of Potters Fields Park. The Park is managed in a way that tries to accommodate both regular park users and event attendees, with many of the events free and openly accessible. In their guide for staging events, the Management Trust states that “The park is open to the public at all times and we ask clients to respect other users and local residents by making every effort to minimise disruption” (Potters Fields Park Management Trust, 2015, p. 4). However, even if the park remains physically and financially accessible, the possibility of symbolic exclusion remains. The Chief Executive of the Potters Fields Management Trust has acknowledged the potentially exclusionary consequences of Park’s funding model:

Funds are raised by holding events, not all of which are enjoyed by all of the people all of the time and there is a need to keep a balance between commercial and community use and open access. (London Assembly, 2010, p. 4).

Discussion

In the examples discussed above events are being staged for financial reasons, to help raise revenue for park maintenance, but this motive does not necessarily preclude other positive effects from occurring. Staging a music festival in a Royal Park or a motor race in a Victorian park destabilizes the established meanings of those spaces; allowing them to be reimagined in a different way. These sorts of events cause disruption, but they are also *disruptive*. They bring new users to public parks, and these people might become regular users in the future. More research is needed to establish whether or not event attendees return. Park spaces are animated by their use as venues, although these effects are reserved for those able to acquire tickets. A further benefit is that the spaces might be perceived as being safer by staging events. The presence of people, plus volunteers, stewards, and other event staff provides an extra layer of security that is appreciated by some. In the case of Potters Fields Park it could be argued that new public space was provided because of events—these were always envisaged as a key function and source of

funding. It seems that new parks and existing parks are being encouraged to emulate this model and the organizational structures that accompany it.

As Harding (1999) noted, “from their inception, parks have been under pressure to perform an ever-enlarging set of recreational functions” (p. 5). Staging commercial events is emerging as a significant function that now also needs to be accommodated, and this function is difficult to reconcile with others. Commercial, ticketed events are inherently exclusive and they prevent people without tickets from enjoying open/public spaces. This is a form of privatization, albeit one that changes the ownership of public space temporarily. Although these events only occupy park space for a limited time, they are staged with increasing regularity. This pushes out other uses—something that is particularly problematic given the timing of events. Parks are most heavily used in midsummer and this is when they are most intensively programmed as event venues. This is not simply a conflict between events use and other uses: commercial events can push out free, more community-oriented events, which might have effects that are more positive. This links back to the motive for staging these events: as parks now focus more on commercially lucrative events, this limits events’ capacity to achieve more progressive and more positive outcomes. Some claim that events are good ways to refresh old-fashioned parks and to “disrupt” park space. Rather than deterritorializing these spaces by destabilizing their established meanings, these spaces are developing new fixed meanings—they are being reterritorialized as commercial event venues.

The three cases analyzed also demonstrate that events are part of the increasing commercialization of public space. As well as obvious forms of commercialization such as ticketing and the installation of retail outlets, there are more subtle processes at work too. Events provide opportunities for sponsors to align themselves with event brands but also to develop associations with public spaces and the cities in which they are located. In the US, it is common for parks to be heavily sponsored, with some selling naming rights or rights to be official suppliers (Garvin, 2011). Such blatant commercialization is still rare in the UK and Europe, but events provide opportunities to circumvent this. Barclaycard’s sponsorship of Hyde Park’s summer music

festival is a good example. In other examples such as Potters Fields Park, framed views of city icons mean that event sponsors can also align themselves with London in general. This reminds us that we cannot separate the use of public spaces as event venues from the wider place marketing agenda, which tends to drive the push for more eventful cities. In this article, the cases have been analyzed as localized examples, but all are affected by London’s wider commitment to staging major events. There are also pressures from event organizers who are desperate to stage their events in symbolically rich public spaces that add value to their events. This means that many other parks and open spaces in London are now under pressure to stage commercial events.

In all three cases analyzed here, the organizations responsible for managing the parks are aware of the threat posed by event-related commercialization. Each is striving to “balance” commercial priorities with the need to protect accessibility and everyday uses. However, this is difficult to achieve in practice. One of the ways this can be addressed is through agreements regarding how many events can be staged each year and how much park space these events can occupy. Such arrangements ensure minimum levels of physical and financial accessibility, but they do not address the symbolic effects of staging events. Because events are staged to generate revenue, they are aimed at more audiences that are affluent. This tends to promote an image of exclusivity and privilege that deters marginal groups—reinforcing existing patterns of disadvantage and exclusion (Kohn, 2004).

Given some of the concerns noted above, it is not surprising that there has been considerable resistance to turning parks into event venues. This takes a number of forms: formal and informal, pre-event and during event. Several obstacles hinder opposition to events. Objectors are often dismissed as selfish NIMBYs or as miserable “party poopers” intent on spoiling everyone else’s fun. This relates back to the widely shared view that events are enjoyable, temporary occasions, which makes them seem less threatening than other development proposals. In applications to stage commercial events in public spaces, events are conflated with civic celebrations—something that make them seem like propositions that are essentially attractive.

Conclusions

When commercial events are staged in public spaces, they can help to transform space and loosen fixed meanings, but they also contribute to processes of commercialization and privatization. In this sense, commercial events animate public spaces, while simultaneously denigrating their wider publicness. Exploring the influence of neoliberalism helps to explain why and how this is happening. Peck and Tickell (2002) explained how space is “neoliberalized” via the application of “state downsizing, austerity financing and public service reform” (p. 381) and through the push for cities to act more entrepreneurially. This article illustrates that events are inherently linked to urban entrepreneurialism, and the discussion highlights how commercial events are increasingly used to replace government funding for public spaces in an era of austerity. This is not merely the inevitable outcome of the current financial climate, but a product of the prevailing political philosophy, namely “the neoliberal prescription that public parks must be financially self-sustaining” (Loughran, 2014, p. 62).

A neoliberal agenda is pursued by governments at the national and local levels who regard events as ways of realizing the monetary value of key assets. Brand (2007) suggested there are seven key characteristics of urban neoliberalism: and several of these (e.g., the trend for marketisation and the rise of the cultural economy) are illustrated by the examples and issues discussed in this article. Indeed, the article highlights how commercial events act as vehicles of neoliberalization: they marketize parks and integrate them into an urban economy that is increasingly reliant on the production of experiences. Other characteristics of neoliberal cities, including the introduction of new forms of governance and the promotion of an enterprise culture, are also evident (Brand, 2007).

This article makes an important contribution to the events literature, an emerging field of study which tends to neglect political-economy perspectives and which tends to paint an overly rosy picture of the role of events in the contemporary city. There are many positive aspects of the “eventful city,” but it is important to unravel the motives driving the new emphasis on events and to ask who benefits? The article also contributes to the urban studies

literature where events are often mentioned in the context of neoliberal urbanism, but rarely discussed at length. More empirically based research is now required to support the exploratory work presented here. Research on cases outside London and the UK is needed to examine whether these issues are also apparent to other contexts. This article focuses on one particular type of public space and more work is needed on other types. Understanding the enduring effects of temporary events on the ways spaces and places are used, interpreted, and imagined would also facilitate a better appreciation of how city events help to produce urban space.

Notes

¹Part of the AEG group who control many of the world major entertainment venues including the O2 and Wembley Arena in London.

²The use of Battersea Park as a location for holding large-scale events has already been established through a number of previous planning applications. The Park has long been associated with large public and entertainment events, involving crowds of people, the erection of temporary structures and extensive activity” (Wandsworth Council, 2015).

³Zukin (2010) was critical of BIDS as “the public gain the use of safe, clean space and lose control over it,” but she does admit that the events staged “make the park more pleasant and broaden its user base” (p. 128).

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