

Mega-events in Heritage-rich Cities: The HOMEE Research Project

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Abstract

In the past, many cities used mega-events to support their investment plans, develop tourism, or improve their competitiveness. Until recently, the focus was put primarily on creating new infrastructure for sports or culture where such events could take place. Recently, some organisers of mega-events, including the Olympics, have come to prefer using already existing facilities, revitalising them or adapting them for new purposes. For historic and heritage-rich cities this change (triggered both by cuts in city budgets as well as by a slower pace of urban expansion) represents an opportunity for development but also poses a threat to their cultural heritage that until now have been little studied. This presentation concentrates on the ongoing HOMEE Research Project, that is a three-year European research project funded by the JIPCH 2017 Heritage in Changing Environments Joint Call. It studies the relationship between mega-events and cultural heritage protection policy, as well as the impact of mega-events on heritage-rich cities. The objectives of the project are being achieved through a broad literature review and analyses of the case studies of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programs of Genoa 2004, Wrocław 2016, Pafos 2017, Matera 2019 as well as the Milan Expo 2015 and Hull 2017 UK City of Culture. These will serve as a basis for developing the policy guidelines offering innovative recommendations and planning tools, promoting a more sensitive approach to heritage in organising initiatives and cultural mega- events.

Key Words: Heritage, Mega-events, cultural policy

1. The HOMEE Project and its goals

In the past, many cities used mega-events to support capital and revenue investments and boost tourism while harnessing their competitiveness on a global scale. Until recently, the emphasis has been placed by and large on the creation of new infrastructural components, new stadiums and other public facilities to host events. In many instances today, on the contrary, mega-event organizers have opted for the re-use of existing facilities, the conversion of inner-city areas and the regeneration of neighborhoods. For heritage-rich European cities, this shift in paradigm represents both an opportunity and a threat. The HOMEE project brings together leading research centers working in the fields of cultural heritage preservation and mega-event planning, in close contact with key institutions and policy officers who have already had or will have direct responsibility for planning and implementing mega-events in Europe, from the local to the international level. The project will investigate past events and develop new policy tools for dealing with the emerging opportunities and threats in planning and implementing mega-events in heritage-rich cities.

The main research questions that the project seeks to answer are:

What are the main blind spots in our current understanding of the relationship between cultural heritage and mega-event policies?

How do preservation and conservation policies deal with the threats and opportunities generated by mega-events in heritage-rich European cities?

Do key stakeholders in charge of mega-events and preservation policies have relevant operational knowledge and planning tools at their disposal? How to improve such tools and who should be involved in these decision-making processes?

The objectives of the research:

1. *To provide better understanding of the relationships between mega-events and cultural heritage preservation policies through a study of past events in heritage-rich contexts;*
2. *To prepare cultural heritage and mega-event policy-makers at local, national and supranational levels to make explicit the opportunities and threats derived from planning and implementing mega-events and to better deal with them in the context of historic cities;*
3. *To engage local stakeholders and ensure their inclusion in decision-making processes to connect local interests with global cultural values.*
4. *Generate innovative guidelines and planning tools for promoting more heritage-sensitive initiatives and projects in cooperation with mega-event policy-makers working at different scales and at different levels.*

To improve our understanding of the changing context described above, this research addresses the gap existing within and between academic research and policy-making. The HOME E Consortium is comprised of four research groups based at the Politecnico di Milano, University of Hull, Neapolis University Pafos and the International Cultural Centre in Krakow. The four research partners are responsible for developing five case cases (Genoa 2004 ECoC, Milan Expo 2015; Wroclaw 2016 ECoC; Hull 2017 UK City of Culture; Pafos 2017 ECoC) in order to better understand the potential opportunities and threats for heritage when cities host cultural mega-events. The findings from these case studies will contribute to improving the planning, management and implementation of mega-events in historic contexts in the future. The research builds upon the excellent applied research track-record of our consortium (see for example Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Ponzini and Jones, 2015; Bianchini and Borch, 2017; Jones and Ponzini 2018; Jones, 2017) and also studies Matera, Italy, with research occurring prior, during and following the city's year as European Capital of Culture during 2019. One of the key deliverables of the project will be the HOME E Charter, a set of policy guidelines and recommendations written for local actors and decision-makers of future host cities, as well as mega-event organizers at the supranational level. Our network of Associate Partners encompasses key national and international cultural policy institutions and organizations, as well as local mega-event organizers in charge of setting up and managing mega-events, including the Matera Basilicata 2019 Foundation. The network will ensure a wide dissemination of the project findings through the platforms of ENCATC and UNeECC. The Charter will directly inform event planners and other policy makers.

2. Research Context

In the last 25 years, most European cities have aimed at restructuring their economic base following the decline of industry and increasing global competition, resulting in many cities turning to culture and heritage (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Willems, 2014). Within these strategies, one longstanding approach has been the use of a mega-event to invest in and promote the city globally. Mega-events are seen as a means to boost infrastructural investments, ignite tourism and improve the image of the city. Successful iterations have been largely popularized and replicated elsewhere, to varying degrees of success. Mega-events were long aimed towards growing cities and had limited interaction with the historic city. However, this approach is changing with mega-events now increasingly turning towards the re-use of facilities, the conversion of existing areas and redefining a city's image and identity (Gold and Gold, 2008). These changes are bringing mega-events into the historic city and interacting with urban heritage and landscapes, not only physically, but also in relation to how they are defined and valued.

Mega-events can vary greatly in their content ranging from cultural happenings to sport competitions, but can be defined as "large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance" (Roche, 2000:1). This characterization recognizes the desirable secondary effects of these events, rather than their specific theme or focus. Whether the Olympics, Expo, European Capital of Culture or World Cup, cities have often viewed these events in similar ways, even readjusting some of the components of bidding documentation from one event to another. Past research has largely focused on newly built iconic structures and key development in the existing transport infrastructure. However, due to the changing dynamics of these events and the way they interact with the existing city, more thorough research of their impacts on the existing built environment is required. Particular attention should be paid to the process through which urban heritage components are 'chosen' and 'forgotten' within the contexts of civic and commercial narratives of the past.

In a globalized competitive environment, European territories and regions can count on unique artistic assets and cultural landscapes. In this context, mega-events represent both opportunities and threats for cultural heritage in Europe. The strategy of hosting a mega-event often focuses on attracting high volumes of visitors for short stays, but with the intention to retain tourists over a longer period. This can imply increased attention and resources for heritage and cultural policies, making events particularly attractive, especially in times of urban austerity (Ponzini, 2016). These changes can significantly or even irreversibly alter the physical spatial qualities and social uses of an area and its heritage value. The ramifications of mass tourism can inundate and overcrowd areas beyond their capacity while increased transit and pollution can damage sensitive sites (Nasser, 2003). The hijacking of heritage for mere marketing purposes and the overexposure of heritage areas as part of pro-growth campaigns can lead to physical damage as well the loss of the multifaceted cultural meanings of local heritage. Evidence suggests that such approaches can dramatically affect the authenticity of cultural heritage, sanitising and standardising it into a more easily consumable tourism product (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994; ICOMOS, 1994; Russo, 2002). Gentrification is already a well-known outcome that may physically improve a location's conditions, but also alters the socio-economic makeup and displace local citizens. Such heavily top-down narrated approaches risk isolating locals from their own heritage.

Despite the opportunities and threats that mega-events tend to generate, currently, very little research and limited policy guidance is available to inform and support decision-makers and event organizers. It is thus paramount to explore how ECoCs and other mega-events can creatively and resiliently respond to the challenges presented by changing environments. A clear trade-off exists between involving heritage assets, sites and urban areas in the planning, management and promotion of a mega-event and the risk of negatively affecting the city's heritage (e.g. physical change, overuse of sites, incompatible uses between mass tourism and heritage appreciation, marketing of the city, etc.) (Ponzini and Jones, 2015). Balancing the appreciation of cultural heritage and the promotion of urban development through cultural, sport or other mega-events is a great challenge for heritage-rich European cities. Recent research on cultural mega-events (Jones, 2017; 2020) has studied the wide ranging impacts and relationship between mega-events and built heritage. Events can impede physically through the construction of new infrastructures or rehabilitation of unused structures and public spaces. Beyond physical transformations, these events also intervene in the management of heritage through new governance structures or facilitate public participation in decision making processes that inform the understandings, definitions and valuing of heritage. The impacts also derive from indirect secondary effects, such as motivating private investments in heritage, increasing real estate prices or processes of gentrification.

The concentration on the economic function of heritage and its potential leverage in city-marketing undermines social and political values. Events have addressed a range of issues and conflicts, but a stronger framework and set of guidelines are required to bring attention to these issues and effectively transfer knowledge of how to practically and inclusively address them while preserving and reinterpreting the meanings of local heritage within a European context.

3. First year Progress/Outputs

For the reasons discussed above, studying mega-events and promoting critical assessments undertaken with and by policy-makers during the Matera 2019 celebration constitute a unique opportunity. In March/April 2019 one of the first outputs the project promoted was the international seminar series "Cultural Mega-events and Urban Heritage: Threats and Opportunities for European Cities" at the Politecnico di Milano. This seminar series invited several experts to come and speak about a range of issues pertaining to the research project in cities across Europe. In June 2019, in coordination with our local Associate Partners, particularly the University of Basilicata, the HOME E Project organized the 'Matera in Dialogue' Living Lab Workshop that brought together a group of local experts and policy makers to discuss how these issues were being experienced in their local context compared to the experiences of other cities across Europe. Based on responses to a set of prior interviews, the living lab focused on two core themes: Participation in/during/after the event and planning/governance/legacy of mega-events and local identity/heritage. This public event was useful for starting dialogue regarding these issues in Matera and gathering a range of different perspectives and approaches. The end of the first year also saw the publication of the HOME E Literature Review and the set of National Case Study Report Briefs, which summarize the key findings from

each of the five case studies. These two documents were presented at the 5th Heritage Forum of Central Europe in Krakow in September, 2019. Further information about these outputs along with documents themselves can be found on the HOMEER website: <http://www.tau-lab.polimi.it/research/homeer>

In the second year of the project, the HOMEER team will gather the learnings from the five case studies and experience in Matera to begin working on the development of the HOMEER Charter. A number of experts and policy makers will also inform the charter by providing feedback on the document and providing insights from their personal experience.

In particular, a set of issues have already emerged from the research activities, which call for further research within the project and more generally and that the HOMEER Charter will aim to address:

- Responding to call or bidding for a mega-event should be thoroughly considered. Cities shall investigate and publicly discuss if and how to bid according to their actual conditions and local potentials (infrastructure, accessibility, etc.).
- Heritage is an important component that can be in favor (in terms of being recognizable or appealing for tourists) or against this decision (fragility of certain areas). In both cases, having early assessments and involvement of heritage decision makers allows the process avoiding impasses due to binding heritage regulations.
- Mega events can become accelerators and amplifiers of development processes and urban policies. Their potential can be harnessed better within a shared vision for the development of the city in the long term, where culture and heritage actors are positively mobilized in an integrated set of policies and measures.
- A broad definition of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (and not only of heritage objects or landscape backdrop only) can help the process of sense making and selecting the spaces and places that suit mega-events better, build stronger identity for the local communities and an effective image for the city.
- Civic engagement and targeting shared solutions and outputs of mega-events should be commensurate to the actual capacity of keeping the promises during and after the mega-event. In this sense participation can be interpreted not only as a way to anticipate potential conflicts that are inherent to the intensified use of heritage places but also to avoid political backlash.

The project have been involving stakeholders and policy makers and with do more and more so while elaborating these emerging issues and developing a charter that is intended to help heritage-rich cities to deal with the threats and opportunities of hosting mega-events.

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