

City of Culture: We mean it literally

John Gray

Two centuries ago Belfast's leading citizens declared that their town was 'the modern Athens'. When in 1985 Athens won the first contest to be official European City Capital of Culture, it was merely following in our self-declared footsteps! There has been something of the same over-wearing pride in our now failed bid to formally become City Capital of Culture ourselves. Bookmakers placed us first, but Belfast citizens, well versed in the unreliability of horses, were increasingly unconvinced. In the end only *Imagine Belfast* and its immediate backers were 'shocked' when the judges failed to shortlist us.

Let's be fair. Although the City of Culture contest is now down to second ranking cities, Belfast had to leap enormous hurdles to get into contention. Our brief eighteenth century 'Age of Enlightenment' has long since vanished. It gave way to nineteenth and early twentieth century expansion fueled by devotion to 'God and Mammon', a period that still characterises the city's physical fabric – hence a city centre without a single building, save only the Linen Hall Library, devoted to cultural purposes. While on the one hand we have long been a byword for cultural conflict, there has been a consistent lack of commitment or investment in the more positive possibilities of culture and the arts. Much of the major infrastructure that any city requires, if it is to take these things seriously, is simply missing.

And yet in some measure the potential was there. *Stepping Stone: the Arts in Ulster* (Belfast, 2001) provided a useful survey of what was or what was not going on in the major arts disciplines on the eve of the bid. Poetry and drama were obvious strengths, but much was emerging elsewhere. The revival of the city centre from the early 1980s onwards has provided a toehold for a widening imaginative life, and an increasing range of mould breaking groups, constrained only by the pitiful level of public funding available to them.

Against this background, a Belfast bid, to have a chance of succeeding, had to offer a radical and transforming agenda, and needed a favourable following wind. The very title of the bid, 'One Belfast', implied an ambition for overarching change, albeit one that no other city would need to proclaim. The use on the title page of Tony Blair's phrase catching the moment of the Good Friday Agreement, 'Where hope and history rhyme', implied a bid building on the momentum of the agreement.

The most eye catching proposal was 'to live life without walls', which was to involve nothing less than the removal of the peace-lines. In the strange Belfast demotic developed for the bid, a kind of sub-Tom Paulin patois, the judges were assured, 'we mean what we say. We mean it literally. This is the City of Belfast shouting at you.' They didn't mean it though: even in the bid document we were told that a centre exploring the history of the Belfast conflict would be built at Conway Street (between the Falls and Shankill), but the surrounding peace line would remain in place. As those huddling under daily assault behind peace-lines voiced alarm, removal of peace lines became a vaguer aspiration.

During the short history of the bid, events, and more events, conspired to undermine one of its central thrusts. Executive crises were followed by Executive collapse, and rising governmental instability triggered protracted interface violence. How could we speak of 'One Belfast' while Unionists

refused to appoint a Deputy Mayor to serve under a Sinn Fein Lord Mayor? The favourable wind that the bid needed had turned into an adverse gale. On the morning of the bid's failure, as its advocates, in a final indignity, were evicted from a coffee bar because of a bomb scare, one prominent councillor blamed terrorists for the whole fiasco. It was more certainly a failure of politics.

Yet the credit for making the attempt, and credit it still must be, lies with Belfast City Council who initiated the idea. It is a pity that they and other prospective funders were unwilling to entrust the development of the bid to the creative forces already available in the cultural and arts sector. Of the 25 *Imagine Belfast* board members only two had any active connection with practice, and elsewhere the board was padded with representatives of bodies such as the *Tourist Board* and the *Northern Ireland Events Company*, bringing their own tarnished records with them.

In the event *Imagine Belfast* struggled with the crucial question asked of them: 'What do you understand by culture.' Perhaps it is an impossibly dangerous question in post cease-fire Belfast where culture has been a major focus of 'war by any other means'. The bid evaded definition, but proceeded by conflicting assertions. On the one hand, culture was overarching, about every aspect of life as we live it, and in particular a marker of 'citizenship', even if this was 'contentious as well as joyous'; and if you need to cherish culture in this context then you need to 'renew and restore tradition, custom and icon' – this, an essentially conservative perspective and one that does not challenge the emerging 'separate but equal' model for cultural development that all too many espouse. On the other hand they assured the judges that 'culture is for change', 'transformation', and 'transfiguring' even if they were unable to explain exactly how.

And just where did the arts fit into this? An early press statement was revealing: it spoke of 'recovering the whole city as a place of social, cultural and communal commerce', and went on; 'upon that vision depends every value that we might place on the arts themselves.' Thus the arts were denied any significance or enabling potential in their own right.

Certainly arts and cultural practitioners were consulted at an early stage, but any sense of ownership was lost by the time the bid emerged, and in a form that seemed merely bizarre to many. None would have disagreed with the need to address the issue of conflict, but most would have advised that the approach to the peace-lines issue was simply naive. Let us indeed create new possibilities for children as in the bid theme 'Through the eyes of a child', but why the heavy dependence on a new C.S. Lewis based centre? True, he was born here but the world of Narnia and its public school children does not obviously relate to the urban children of our here and now. A third strand of the bid, 'Made in Belfast', is a strange mixture offering 'Legendary Belfast', as though we are an ancient and mythic city (which we are not), but in fact providing prosaic enough routes into aspects of our history in a space age 2008 when we will not need the assistance of museums or libraries but, in a nightmare vision of the future, will access ATM-like 'legend points'. The Cathedral Quarter is at least a locale found in the real world, and its future as a cultural quarter is a further sub-theme, albeit headed by the cry, 'put the heart back into



the city', and they mean 'the very centre', when it is anything but. In the event the bid added little to existing and developer-led aspirations for the quarter.

And still we held our peace, and hoped that perhaps we had read the wrong pages, and that if Belfast was shortlisted there would be a chance to change the agenda. We had not allowed for the capacity of the main promoters of the bid to catastrophically damage the chances of what was their own venture. Apart from the formal visits of the judges, we may be sure that they had their ears to the ground in other ways. How was the bid gelling? They would not have had to listen too hard to hear the roars of anguish at a series of own goals. In January 2000 the Northern Ireland Arts Council's refusal of regeneration funding for the Grand Opera House, the Old Museum Arts Centre, and the Crescent Centre offered depressing evidence of the lack of available funding for critical infrastructure. Much worse was to follow.

Just as the bid was launched, Belfast's arts organisations discovered, via the City Council website, that they were going to suffer a 20% cut in core funding with immediate effect. The funds were still available but only via a new outreach approach working with partners in deprived inner city areas, and through mechanisms which are still unexplained. The immediate loss of direct funding plunged the entire sector into crisis and public protest, which was also backed by many of our expatriate luminaries who had already lent their names to the City of Culture bid. Apart from the immediate dislocation, there was growing concern that the new policy threatened a tribalisation of arts provision in the city, with single identity communities and councillors picking the arts they wanted. The 'One Belfast' slogan of the City of Culture bid was being by-passed with disastrous effect.

And now that we have lost, how do we pick up the pieces? The immediate reaction of those involved in *Imagine Belfast* – that they had got it right and the judges had got it wrong – is hardly encouraging. It is as though the captain of the Titanic, having hit the iceberg, ordered full steam ahead. The failure even to be shortlisted is the clearest possible signal that a sea change in thinking is required. Impoverished and beleaguered though the cultural and arts practitioners of the city are, they remain the key to ways out of our cultural impasse and to wider civic enablement. They should be given the chance and the resources to prove it.

ABOVE: Image from *Imagine Belfast* City of Culture Bid