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Cultural Heritage Festivals: Belonging, Sense of Place and Identity

This RICHES Think Paper considers the role of cultural heritage festivals in contributing to notions of belonging, sense of place and identity. It argues that with increasing migration across Europe, there is a need for more in-depth research to examine the extent to which cultural heritage festivals such as London's Notting Hill Carnival could add to the promotion of greater European integration and social and economic development.

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This Think Paper is one of a collection of Think Papers issued by RICHES in order to stimulate further debate on the issues arising from the research.

Research undertaken by the RICHES project covers a range of subject areas including digital libraries, virtual performance, crafts, fashion, technologies and spaces.

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Painted: Revellers add a splash of colour to London's Notting Hill Carnival (RICHES 2014).
Photograph: Ernest Taylor.

Migration has become a theme of the 21st Century like other aspects of globalisation. However, while attention tends to be focused on accommodation and other economic support, social concerns such as cultural integration can be relegated lower down the order of resettlement imperatives. Many migrants may end up in a new country with, perhaps, few belongings, but all will bring aspects of their cultural traditions whether tangible or intangible. RICHES research has shown that many migrant groups have various ways of maintaining their culture or cultural connectedness in their new environment. This includes involvement in community groups, cultural events and activities or through online forums and websites¹. Occurrences not only offer migrants the chance to bond with their fellow compatriots, but also provide the opportunity to make new friends, forge relationships with their hosts and overcome cultural barriers.

One of the more visible platforms for maintaining cultural connections, creating new friendships and challenging stereotypes is through cultural heritage festivals. For example, London's Notting Hill Carnival, Europe's largest cultural heritage street festival, was formed to counter racial tension and unease among African Caribbean migrants and the host

1. See RICHES research publication D4.1 European identity, belonging and the role for digital CH:
http://www.digitalmeetsculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RICHES-D4.1-European-identity-belonging-and-the-role-for-digital-CH_public.pdf

community. Britain had experienced serious labour shortages following the Second World War and turned to their former Caribbean territories to fill skills gaps in the UK. Faced with hardships, social exclusion, and missing 'home', the new arrivals organised their own social events and bonding activities. This helped to create a home away from home where they could interact freely thus fostering a sense of cohesion, common identity and satisfying a sense of belonging. Although the Notting Hill Carnival has had issues with crime and anti-social behaviour, the event has been instrumental in laying a cultural heritage foundation for people of African Caribbean origin and their descendants in Britain today. RICHES research shows that the event, predicated on inclusivity, all-year-round activities and cohesiveness, has helped to encourage wider community participation and attendance. This has led to the festival becoming an embodied space in which ideas of belonging, sense of place and identity are transformed and communicated.

Moreover, with an estimated annual attendance of more than one million people, figures from 2004 shows that the carnival contributes in excess of £93 million to London's economy and supports the equivalent of 3,000 full time jobs. An estimated £36 million is spent on food, drink and other merchandise at the carnival's 250 licensed trading sites and a further £9 million on accommodation (Greater London Authority (GLA) 2004). Additionally, music producers, clothing designers, merchandisers, and security firms also benefit from the event. More than 90,000 foreign tourists, mainly from Europe, annually attend the carnival, however, the majority of visitors are from London and other parts of the UK (GLA 2004). With cultural tourism accounting for 40 per cent of global tourism revenues, the Notting Hill Carnival offers huge scope for commercial sponsorship, celebratory art form, job creation, skills training, marketing, and merchandising. Furthermore, the event augments an iconic London image of diversity, distinctive characteristics, lifestyles, heritage, cultural activities and landscape.

As acknowledged by Europe for Festivals, Festivals for Europe (EFFE), a European Commission pilot project for a European Platform for Festivals, cultural festivals such as the Notting Hill Carnival, have been a growing phenomenon across the continent and have become an important feature in the cultural life of Europeans. While festivals provide a direct benefit to culture and arts, EFFE recognises their contribution to social, economic and educational development. Moreover, festivals offer a space of festivity, creativity and audience participation where people from all walks-of-life can come together. Furthermore, festivals are linked to other similar events across Europe and other parts of the world building cooperation, transversal values, social and territorial cohesion, which are fundamental to European integration. Within this context, the Notting Hill Carnival is said to have inspired the Rotterdam Caribbean Summer Carnival and the Berlin Carnival of Cultures. Moreover, in terms of urban street festivals of this type, only Brazil's Rio Carnival is bigger than the London event.



Union joy: Youngsters decked in Union Jack costumes join in the celebrations at London's Notting Hill Carnival (RICHES 2014). Photograph: Ernest Taylor.

RICHES research reveals that cultural heritage festivals such as the Notting Hill Carnival can encourage a sense of identity and responsibility, which enable people to feel they belong to one or different communities and to wider society. Festivals are thus connected to cultures and to places, can help bind people to their communities, foster and reinforce group identity, and are central to cultural heritage transmission and pursuits. Moreover, these features are being heightened by digital technologies, which are used to capture and disseminate events globally. The medium thus enables festivals to extend beyond the local, encouraging wider and more diverse participation, cultural connectedness and sense of belonging.

However, RICHES research found that more detailed and substantive research is needed to assess the full social and economic impact of cultural heritage festivals such as Notting Hill. The last economic impact study of the London event was conducted by the local authority in 2004 (GLA 2004). In a time of increasing migration and with economic and social cohesion seen as an expression of solidarity between EU member states, it seems logical to explore the extent to which cultural heritage festivals could contribute to this endeavour. This would entail detailed research to examine the economic impact of cultural heritage festivals. Moreover, future studies could investigate the role of cultural heritage festivals in providing a space for promoting greater unity between newcomers and existing locals through celebration and appreciation of each other's culture. As RICHES research clearly shows, cultural heritage festivals are capable of instigating balanced and sustainable development, reducing structural variances locally, nationally and internationally and promoting equal opportunities for people from all strands of life.

Reference

Greater London Authority (2004) Notting Hill Carnival: A Strategic Review. Greater London Authority.

*“Bringing cultural heritage and people together in a changing Europe
and finding new ways of engaging with heritage in a digital world”*

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