

Beatles Heritage in Liverpool and Its Economic and Cultural Sector Impact."

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I would like to thank World Cities Forum for inviting me to participate in this fascinating event.

I am aware that what prompted my invitation was a visit made to Liverpool by Na Kyoung Kim during which she accessed a report I had co-written, and that was published at the end of 2015:

**BEATLES HERITAGE IN LIVERPOOL AND ITS
ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL SECTOR IMPACT:**
A REPORT FOR LIVERPOOL CITY COUNCIL

November 2015

You will note, perhaps, that the title and date of publication appear at odd angles. When they first received the report Liverpool City Council thought we had made a design mistake, we needed to point out that we were paying homage to the Beatles 'White Album'!

What, I feel, needs to be addressed immediately, though, is this question of timing:

The Beatles made a national impact in the UK in 1963, and early in 1964 they made an equally enormous impact in the USA.

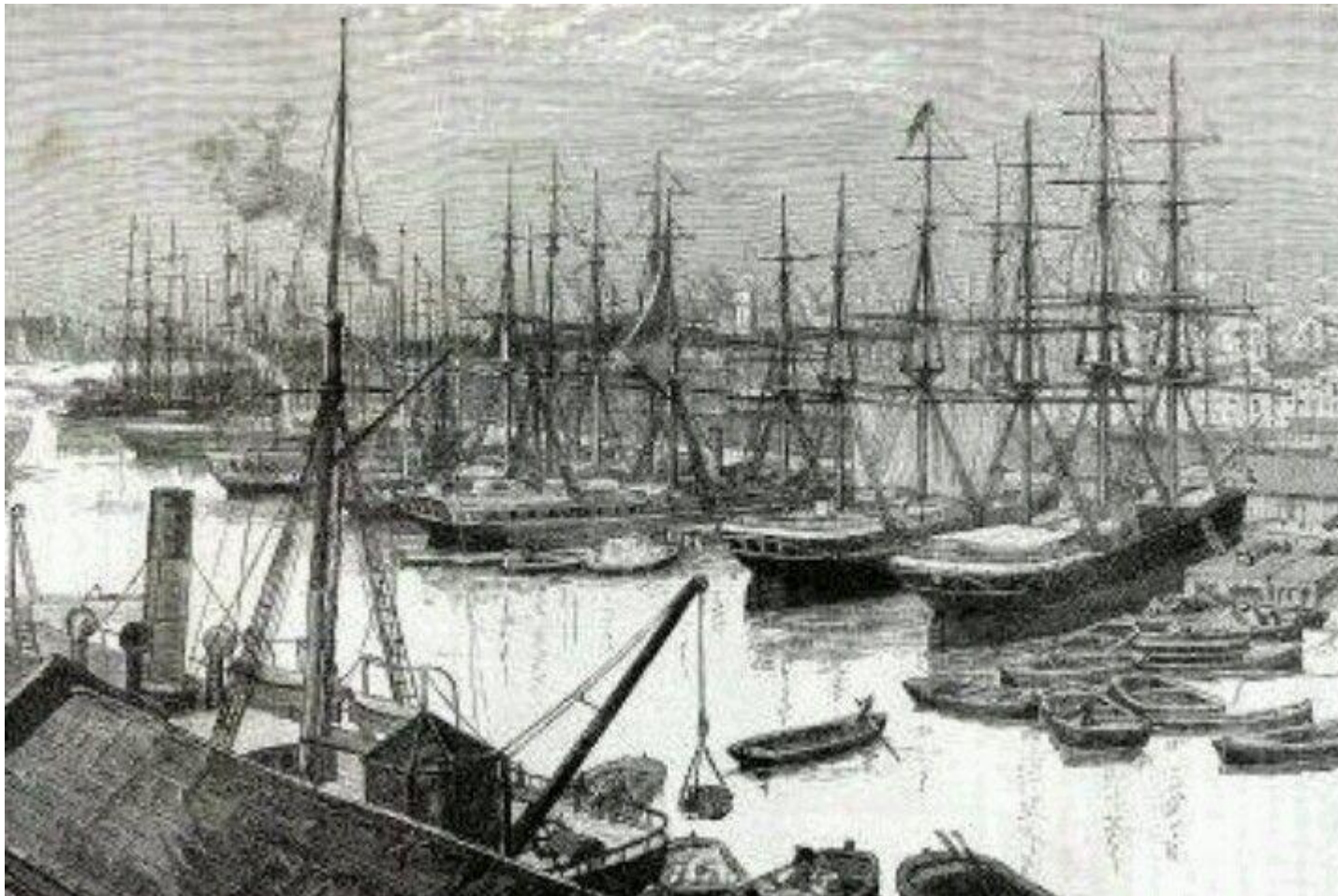
They were, while they lasted, a hugely popular and influential group of young musicians, but the group broke up in 1970.

The question then is, why did it take Liverpool, as a city, such a long, long time before its local government began to ask the question 'What Value Do the Beatles Represent to Our City?'.



Ultimately, the answer to that question is that successive elected City Councils were never sure whether the Beatles presented the desired mage to the rest of the world.

I will explain this tension in a moment but, firstly, we need to understand the city Liverpool had been and had become.





From the 18th Century onwards, Liverpool became, after London, the most important port in what was then the British Empire.

As the port that faced the Atlantic Ocean, Liverpool became wealthy as the main port of African slavery. Arguably, the repercussions of forcibly transporting millions of Africans to the Americas is still creating humanitarian problems to this day.

Liverpool became a very rich city because its docks became the point of entry for the cash crops produced in the Americas – among them, tobacco, sugar and cotton. Simultaneously, it became the point of export of goods refined from these and other raw materials.

So wealthy did the city become that it enjoyed its own considerable financial sector with, at one time, seven locally-established banks, together with a Stock Exchange, commodity exchanges and an extensive Insurance sector.

At one point the city was home to more millionaires than London.

Liverpool was not only a cargo port, it was also the UK's key passenger hub for Atlantic destinations. This made it the point of departure for vast numbers of Irish people fleeing famine and harsh landlords in the mid-19th Century and Jewish people fleeing waves of anti-semitic attacks in Russia and Eastern Europe at the end of that century.

The idea of it as a 'global city' derives, in part, from this history.



Liverpool always experienced extremes of wealth. The poor lived in some of the worst conditions in the UK. Further, Liverpool's topography meant that, unlike in London, the very rich and the very poor lived in comparatively close proximity. This gave Liverpool a unique culture and also arguably a unique *political* culture. This recognition bears on later developments

I will do my best to unpack this claim, but it does indicate that, when considering how to mobilise a city's intangible resources, close attention needs to be paid to how that city 'thinks of itself (and that, too, is a problematic notion! We reify 'cities' but it is dominant and contested cultures to which we should respond).



Liverpool's decline from being a world-recognised port was precipitous:

The two World Wars hit Liverpool extremely hard – essentially, the USA grew to power partly through the contraction of the British Empire; former UK markets were lost to the Americans.

The rise of transatlantic flights destroyed the sea-borne passenger trade and Britain's increasingly close relationship with Europe in the post-Second World War years switched the focus of trade to that with continental Europe.

Meanwhile, Liverpool's infrastructure needed to be restored following severe aerial bombing by Nazi Germany.



Imagine, then, a city, used to being rich, but which lost its economic rationale.

It also lost the vast majority of its wealthy citizens.

The population shrank as skilled workers left to find work not just in other cities but on other continents (many Liverpudlians emigrated to Australia).

What was left behind was a city containing many poor people which had been ruthlessly bombed. Liverpool needed to re-invent itself almost from the ground up, and this is no easy task.

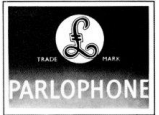


Liverpool's economic and social problems were considerable, and even though the Beatles became an enormous phenomenon two negative conditions surfaced:

Firstly, the group's members left the city never to return (although it must be said that Sir Paul McCartney remained close to his extended family and has made a range of important contributions to the city over the years, as has Yoko Ono).

Secondly, the wealth generated by the Beatles was enjoyed by record companies and music publishers more than by the group itself and *none of it* came back into the city.





with
the
beatles

mono



Imagine, then, when it comes to generating an accessible account of the city's relationship with the Beatles, the extent of the underlying tension – the city is lauded for being the 'Birthplace of the Beatles' and yet there is no immediately obvious benefit to this status.

This is why I argued in the 2015 report that Liverpool should be re-framed as the '***Cradle of the Beatles***'. If this designation is embraced and explored Liverpool justifiably writes itself into the story of the Beatles.

Such an undertaking is not without its complexities and I will return to these in my conclusions, but, again, consider that it took 45 years before someone (me) was enabled officially to make this suggestion.

Before we can ask, or, truly, as a way of asking, how Liverpool can 'own' and benefit from its association with the Beatles, we need to understand the resistance to celebrating the city's connection with the group over that time.

From their breakthrough in 1963, tourists began to come to Liverpool to 'connect' with the Beatles - and, clearly, tourists come to enjoy themselves and, consequently, spend money. Yet there was no provision for such tourists and the city seemed reluctant to make any.

For example, in 1973 the Cavern Club (a venue the Beatles played almost 400 times) was demolished for no good reason. Similarly, the city council refused all overtures to raise a statue to the group.



It would take me too long to explain the various, 'amateur' processes that led to provision for tourists but most praise must be reserved for Cavern City Tours (CCT).

It was CCT, with much dedication, who re-established the Cavern Club, who created the Magical Mystery Tour of Beatles-related sites in the city, and who donated the marvellous statue of the Beatles which is positioned looking out to sea at exactly the point passengers would board and leave the ocean-going liners that were for so long synonymous with the port of Liverpool:



What accelerated the 'turn to Tourism' was the need to address the city's deep and seemingly immovable social problems, dramatized as these were by the 1981 riots:



It was the riots that acted as a catalyst for change.

Even so, nothing about that change was clear-cut or uncomplicated – rather, with resistance from central and from local government, some of the early initiatives taken lacked a sense of being ‘joined up’ and ‘thought through’.

Almost accidentally Liverpool found itself partially re-imagined as a tourist destination, and certainly no constructive and imaginative relationship with the Beatles emerged from the first, important forays.

It was still left, essentially, to the fan-focused, private sector to do what it could to provide points of interest and articulation for visitors.

What so long-delayed an organised response from within the governance of Liverpool to the potential and to the needs of Beatles tourism and Beatles tourists was a combination of some intractable, though understandable, reservations:

1. Firstly, confusion reigned in the city for decades – ‘Who are we, now?’, ‘Where are we going?’, ‘What direction will address our deep problems?’.
2. Secondly, particular forms of ideology impeded the surfacing of dedicated responses to tourism and to tourists – from a Conservative resistance to be seen to be allying with musicians known for their hedonism and their radicalism, to a Socialist resistance to conceding that sometimes a local economy needs to be built not on jobs in factories but jobs in the ‘service’ sector.
3. Thirdly, a specific resentment towards the Beatles needed to be dispelled – it was true that John left for New York and George settled in an enormous mansion in the South of England, and true also that Beatles wealth did not come back into the city, but the Beatles became so famous that it was inevitable they would seek personal forms of self-realisation.

Again, it would take me far too long to identify and discuss the various turning points in Liverpool's halting embrace of Beatles tourism, but my feeling is that, however distinct are the experiences of cities over time, there are lessons to be drawn from the Liverpool experience that may be of use to any of you who have responsibility for mobilising and articulating what you believe are a city's intangible resources.

In my teaching, I identify the constraints that continue to act inside Liverpool against a more coherent and productive Beatles tourism strategy as not simply ones stemming from the city's past failure to embrace that tourism, but from a perhaps unrecognised tension between three competing *idealisations* of the Beatles; namely,

- 1. LEGEND**

- 2. HERITAGE**

- 3. BRAND**

What I mean here is that that the Beatles stimulated powerful stories and ways of thinking about what was positive in their lived experience and what could be positive about their legacy, but the questions always must be: 'positive to whom, and why?.'

The problem then is that different ways of configuring stories emphasise different aspects of lived experience and sometimes competing interpretations of the past. Because they can, and do, they may demand different forms of 'evidence' to support the stories that are favoured.

LEGEND

The Beatles have remained a source of inspiration for people long after their break-through and their break-up; to give you an idea of their continuing power to inspire, four members of my current MA class in the Beatles: Music Industry and Heritage were born *after* 2000.

Effectively there are something in the order of five 'waves' of Beatles fans – from the first generation, to those who came to their music in the 1970s, those whose attention was drawn to them after the murder of John Lennon, those attracted by Apple's efforts from the release of *Anthology* onwards, and those who have discovered them via digital platforms in the more recent past.

What all this means is that, because they have different 'starting points', later and later waves of those drawn to the Beatles will have different ways of understanding what makes the group so special and therefore they will have different expectations of forms of what we might refer to as commemoration.

At the very least, this means that there needs to be nuance in, and sensitivity about, how offers of contact with 'history' are made to those with different investments in past epochs.

It also asks that there be some kind of flexibility in presentation, articulation and exemplification to allow for change while still honouring a story that is 'larger than life'.

HERITAGE

I feel the key lesson from Liverpool's stuttering and protracted working out of how to present its relationship with the Beatles is a combination of two factors:

1. A reluctance to establish clearly and productively what that relationship might be and, therefore how to celebrate it, and
2. A confusion about whose 'Heritage' should be celebrated. Liverpool goes on wanting to emphasise its own heritage over that of the Beatles – so there is a kind of 'hierarchy struggle' still in play. To an extent, this is understandable – despite its origins in the Slave Trade, Liverpool as a city passed through many epochs and eras, all of which are fascinating to be connected with – it is understandable that some agencies believe that the history of the city cannot be reduced to the 'pre-history' of a pop group, however influential and admired.

Again, my own address to this thorny issue was to suggest that the city conceive of itself as the 'Cradle of the Beatles'. Re-presented in this way, Liverpool can begin to explore and celebrate its own uniqueness in providing the resources that the young men who became the Beatles absorbed in order to become that distinct and inspirational entity. This is one of the approaches I take in my own teaching and there is much to learn this way.

BRAND

I am not very enthusiastic about the way in which the terms 'Brand' and 'Branding' have permeated discussions about how cities must represent themselves.

'Branding' began an act of burning symbols into the skins of cattle so that ownership could be established when herds grazed on common land.

As consumer goods industries took off, manufacturers learned that consumers attributed certain qualities to certain trademarks. Now *people* are urged to 'work on their brand', as if they, too, can reduce themselves to a tiny handful of (supposed) qualities and to remain fixed to them for life!

The same is true of the ways in which cities are being sold to tourists, but how can an entire population, along with its businesses, be disciplined to behave only in certain ways? Unless sensitively handled, city Branding can be a recipe for disaster.

A further complication is that Liverpool faces the problem in relation to the Beatles that it does not own the Beatles brand. This means that it has limited room to manoeuvre when contemplating innovations and making changes – it owns no title to the Beatles logo, or to related images and certainly not to their music.

Ultimately, the Beatles company, Apple Corps, seems to offer a kind of tacit approval to Beatles initiatives in Liverpool, but this cannot be guaranteed to always be the case.

The overarching challenge, though, and the one I want to leave you with, is that it is not clear that **BRAND** will always cohere with **HERITAGE** and with **LEGEND**. The need always to remain ‘on Brand’ can become a point of constraint and conflict where innovation is concerned.

What I want to leave you with is a point I made previously, *We reify 'cities' but it is dominant and contested cultures to which we should respond.*

Branding tends to be inflexible, and reductionist, and constrained to always being 'feel good'. At the very least, narratives change as times change, and Brands can be argued to be resistant to change and incapable of confronting hard questions when they are asked of the product in question.

In a similar way, Heritage is always contestable – there are too many examples of what is considered to be the important and defining dimensions of some past event or person being imposed by those currently in power. This imposition of 'top down' narrative is at odds with everyday culture which is open to change.

If we recall another, earlier observation, that there was in Liverpool, historically *Conservative resistance to be seen to be allying with musicians known for their hedonism and their radicalism.*

My point here is that there is always a contest between those with and those without power. It can be empowering to the under-privileged to be shown that 'legendary' figures had their own weaknesses, or else had strengths that have too long been over-looked and that deserve to be celebrated. We learn much in the 'cradle' and those of us with the power to offer interpretations of the past to current and future generations should always build openness and flexibility into our constructions of the past.

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