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Liverpool Resurgent: How Liverpool used their Arts Festival status in the 1951 Festival of Britain to improve its image

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When Liverpool was chosen by the Arts Council in 1948, to have Arts Festival status for the 1951 Festival of Britain it gave the corporation a timely platform to make improvements to their city, restore civic pride and have some fun.¹ The damage by enemy shelling in 1940 and 1941 was still visible, and the dilapidated state of the city centre was the focus of criticism. Corporation departments, volunteers and Festival Directors got to work, restoring buildings, reinstating cultural institutions and showcasing new housing with the intention to boost civic pride. Exhibitions and pageants were planned, ballet companies and orchestras booked. Festival organisers strove for wide participation in the Festival, including residents marginalised by location or funds. This paper is not suggesting that without the Festival of Britain that these restorations, reinstatements and events would not have happened, but simply, that the Festival celebrations were a *catalyst* for Liverpool's urban cultural development in the summer of 1951.

In May 1948 the Festival of Britain was announced in The Times, Initially proposed as an international exhibition, the celebration that took place in 1951 focused instead on cultural, scientific and industrial advances, national and community pride, endeavouring to promote faith in the future as part of post war optimism.² The Festival was celebrated with a series of exhibitions sanctioned by central government and The Arts Council. There were permanent exhibits in London, Belfast, Edinburgh and Glasgow.³ Two London designed touring

¹ Anon, 'Festival plans Liverpool to take part' *Express*, 27th October 1948.

² Rennie, P., *Festival of Britain. Design 1951*. London: Antique Collectors' Club 2007, p.13.

³ Festival of Britain. *Information Summary*, London, May03 – Sept 30 , p1.

exhibitions, The Seaborne Exhibition on the Festival Ship Campania ⁴ and The Land Travelling Exhibition.⁵

Like twenty other places across Britain, Liverpool, a port city of Lancashire, in the north-west of England, was chosen for enhanced Festival status to run their own Arts Festival. These hosts were given some financial backing by the Arts Council, but had sole responsibility for shaping and execution.⁶

Liverpool Festival makers were a hardworking team. When the Corporation set up a Festival Limited Company in December 1948 it had ninety members making comprehensive decisions from the start. To ensure success they employed a salaried Festival Director, Alfred Francis. His wealth of enthusiasm for society membership, understanding of the artistic culture of Liverpool, alongside his financial skills meant that he was best placed of all 53 candidates.⁷ Tyrone Guthrie, Director of the Old Vic theatre in London, became Assistant Director with responsibility for three processions and the closing ceremony.⁸

The central Government was keen on civic improvement. When Nye Bevan spoke in the Commons about transforming bomb sites into temporary playgrounds, Liverpool was accused of doing the least of all cities to sort these sites out. Bessie Braddock, a Liverpool Councillor, suggested that *'if people wanted to look at something decent during the Festival they had better go away from Liverpool as the centre was a disgrace'*. Conservative Lord Woolten agreed: *'When I come out of Liverpool Station I find the place so derelict I see danger'*. Bevan agreed. He hoped that visitors to the future Festival would not leave the country believing that Britain was a *'bad housewife'*.⁹

At the public launch of their plans for the Festival, The theme of Liverpool being re born, was identified by the Festival Director:

'The dominant note of our pageantry and ceremonial must be one of resurgence – To-morrow's Tide – a theme to reawaken self-confidence, regenerate energy, and so enliven the local scene that our very blitzed sites, become symbols of resurrection. Not for us the casual backward glance, [or the] merely historical pageant'

Its timing was perfect. That day, Liverpool Corporation heard that they had missed out on regeneration funding from the Government. This must have been quite a blow and may have

⁴ Conekin, B., *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p.127).

⁵ Rennie, *ibid*, p37.

⁶ Ebong, I. I. I., *The Origins, Organisation and Significance of The Festival of Britain 1951*. University Edinburgh: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1986.

⁷ Anon '£3,000 Festival Post, Appointment of Mr A E Francis', *Liverpool Echo* n.d.

⁸ Anon, 'Producer for Festivals Ceremonies', *Express*, 22nd May 1950.

⁹ E. Braddock, 'Liverpool, City of Neglect', *Daily Post*, 9th November 1949.

prompted Francis's proclamation that their Festival '*would be the 'largest outside of the capital'*'.¹⁰

It can't be doubted, that a renewed sense of pride in Liverpool was needed. Mayor Shennan (himself an architect) implored residents and visitors to stop criticising the city centre, reminding them that many areas were under private ownership, thus, not directly under the corporation's jurisdiction. A great master of spin, he referred to the bombsites as '*honourable wounds*'. A later Mayor, Cleary, echoed this saying that '*The blitz sites and grime only throw in to greater relief [our] beautiful and graceful buildings*'.¹¹ Over many months, the city centre, underwent a transformation.

As Festival preparations took shape, private owners of blitzed land in the city centre were happy for the council to make improvements by levelling, creating paths, sowing grass and establishing flower displays. Two of these sites hosted seating and a Festival Band and a 71 stand *Daylight on Industry Exhibition*. Using coloured awnings, the exhibition was designed to be as '*bright as a fairground*' with industrial artefacts displayed like sculpture.¹² Elsewhere, window boxes, bunting and Festival banners were put in place. The city underwent a make-over.

A number of premises were identified by the corporation or charitable bodies for restoration, so the Festival became the impetus for both commencement and completion of these renovations. The Bishop of Liverpool pitched for St Nicholas: '*The Parish Church should be among those buildings that are restored as soon as possible, in order to get that sense of restoration to the whole city*'.¹³ St George's Hall was restored and hosted *The Story of Liverpool Exhibition*, taking the visitor from pre-history to the present, ending with a tableau about the cities development plan. It made sense to house this exhibition at St George's because the place was a focal point of Liverpool's 1947 plan and those that followed it. During the interwar period, the building and its plateau was '*cemented*' as Liverpool's civic centre because of its spatial relationship with public transport hubs.¹⁴ With its cells and law courts and a gathering place for protest, the nineteenth century St George's Hall had gravitas. But it was also a place that had hosted Music Festivals, literary events, dances and boxing matches. A building of significant scale then, of scenographic importance to the city centre and a place that signified good memories of pre-war gaiety. The eighteenth century Bluecoat Gallery was restored opening to the public again in time for the Festival.¹⁵ In 1948 there had been calls for the Walker Art gallery to reopen a letter to the press noted: '*How can our children grow up to be other than Savages if we don't see that they are inculcated in the arts?*'¹⁶ The Ministry of Food had been in residence for ten years, but was now forced to find a new location to allow for repair. Mayor Cotton lamenting, that there '*was a generation of young Liverpool people, to whom the Walker*

¹⁰ Anon, 'Liverpool Festival Will Transform the City', *Echo*, 5th May 1950.

¹¹ Anon, 'Cathedral Floodlit?', *Daily Post*, 28th March 1950.

¹² Anon, 'Daylight will be ready', *Echo*, 20th May 1951.

¹³ Anon, 'Liverpool 'Symbol of Rebuilding' Lord Mayor's Visit To St. Nicholas', *Express*, 28th June 1951.

¹⁴ Wildman, C., Urban transformation in Liverpool and Manchester, 1919-1939. *The Historical Journal* 55 (2012) :119-143.

¹⁵ Anon, 'Bluecoat Hospital, Work Steadily Proceeds', Extracts from Local and other Papers no 85, Clecut38liv, Liverpool Archive

¹⁶ Anon, 'Plea for Walker Art Gallery', *Daily Post*, 27th August 1948.

Art Gallery was merely a place to obtain food tokens'.¹⁷ Opened by Kenneth Clark, former Director of the National Gallery, on its first Saturday it received more than a thousand visitors.¹⁸

In London, a *Live Architecture* exhibition, Lansbury, at Poplar was held and is well documented.¹⁹ Liverpool was also keen to showcase its recent domestic architecture. Two flats at Evelyn Street, part of the city's Central Redevelopment Area went 'live'. One flat was furnished for £500, more than £13,000 in today's money.²⁰ A Festival bus ferried people eight miles from the centre of Liverpool to a larger exhibition held on the Speke, estate. It showcased a continental approach to the planning of mass housing its roots in European Modernism, not in style but in the estates mix of domestic, retail and public units containing all that a community could want for on their doorstep.²¹ The *Daily Post* wrote of the impact this exhibition was having: '*Housewives, who visited with their children in the afternoon, took their husbands in the evening to point out improvements which could be made in the home*'.²²

Housewives were not the only ones enamoured with what the Festival had to offer. J L Hodgkinson, Regional Director of the Arts Council was impressed that Francis had had the foresight to pair the Liverpool Philharmonic with the Saddlers Wells Ballet because the city would be the only place in Britain, outside of London, where a ballet had ever had full orchestral support. He raved about how Liverpool's programme was of an '*international scale*'... '*In one bound, [Liverpool] has reached international festival status*'.²³

Not everything needed to be highbrow. Festival Director Francis, suggested that the city '*let [itself] go and have some fun*'. He was keen to include regional entertainment, such as Music Hall acts: '*Some people might say that's not the Arts, but for Lancashire it happened to be the Arts, because it was tradition. Music hall had grown up out of Lancashire*'.²⁴

In response to criticism that only people with large incomes could afford theatre, concert or ballet performances, Liverpool launched a voucher savings scheme whereby firms allowed their employees to pay a weekly fee which could be cashed in for tickets.²⁵ When the box office opened the demand was so great that extra staff were drafted in and opening hours extended till the early hours of the morning. With the volume replicated the following day, the Women's Royal Voluntary Service handed out tea to keep the crowd in good cheer.²⁶ There were free theatre performances in Liverpool's parks and extraordinarily a van with performers, a mobile

¹⁷ Anon, 'Entering a new era, only the best for the Walker Art Gallery', *Daily Post*, 8th of June 1951.

¹⁸ Anon, 'Artistic occasions', *Echo*, 29th March 1951

¹⁹ Hillier, B., Banham, M., ed., *A Tonic to the Nation, The Festival of Britain 1951* Thames. London: Thames & Hudson, 1976.

²⁰ The Corporation of Liverpool., *Live Architectural Exhibitions*. Liverpool: The Liverpool Printing & Stationary Co. Ltd. 1951.

²¹ Anon, 'Speke produces its own exhibition', *Garston Weekly*, 27th July 1951.

²² Anon, 'Modern Flats on View', *Daily Post*, 25th July 1951.

²³ Anon, 'Phil to Play for Ballet, Festival 'outstanding'', *Echo*, 23rd February 1951.

²⁴ Anon, 'A bit of Fun', *Echo*, 20th June 1950.

²⁵ Anon, 'Voucher Scheme for the Festival', *Daily Post*, 1st September 1950.

²⁶ Anon, 'Festival Staff Praised', Clecut38liv Liverpool Record Office.

stage, and speakers took performers to ten streets and estates of the corporation's tenants.²⁷ At Myrtle gardens it was estimated that 5,000 adults and children watched the entertainment, turning their balconies into theatre 'circles'.²⁸ Guthrie organised three free processional pageants over the festival period;²⁹ Merseyside and the World, Merseyside and Youth, and on the Festival's final night, Merseyside Resurgent, which culminated in 2,000 torches being extinguished at St Georges Plateau.

The Festival was received favourably, the press praising the Directors for providing 'a revelation of inspiring, civic leadership'.³⁰ Gerald Barry, the National Director General of the Festival of Britain noted that no other city has shown a more true appreciation of the Festival than Liverpool.³¹ Even the usual detractors had to begrudgingly concede the city's success. The Manchester Guardian wrote; that even though they had questioned 'such determined celebration on the part of a naturally morose Northern city', that people venturing to the Liverpool Festival would be 'agreeably surprised'.³²

The 1951 Festival was a catalyst for urban cultural development in Liverpool. Their Festival may have lasted only twenty days, but its planning had been years in the making. Streets and bomb sites, public and private spaces and places were made good and put back in to everyday use. Cultural institutions were restored and opened for business for the first time since the war. Regardless of preference for popular or highbrow entertainment, it is in the Lord Mayor's message, that we see the overarching achievement of the Festival: 'The people of Liverpool' emerged 'refreshed and inspired with a new confidence in themselves and the great city of which they are the citizens'.³³

Anon, 'Bluecoat Hospital, Work Steadily Proceeds', Extracts from Local and other Papers no 85, Clecut38liv, Liverpool Archive

Anon, 'Liverpool Festival', 3rd September 1952 draught report with hand written notes. P.2 Liverpool Archive

Anon, 'Festival Staff Praised', Clecut38liv Liverpool Archive.

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Anon, 'Cathedral Floodlit?', *Daily Post*, 28th March 1950. Anon, 'Part for Everyone in the Festival', *Daily Post*, 21st April 1950.

²⁷ Anon, 'Liverpool Festival', 3rd September 1952 draught report with hand written notes. P.2 Liverpool Archive

²⁸ Anon, 'Festival tempo quickens in Liverpool', *Express*, 21st July 1951.

²⁹ Anon, 'Lord Mayor hits out at Festival critics', *Echo*, 2nd February 1951.

³⁰ Anon, 'Gay Interlude', *Daily Post*, 13th August 1951.

³¹ Anon 'End of the week Notes', *Echo*, 11th August 1951.

³² Anon, 'Liverpool Festival makes a fine show', *Manchester Guardian*, 25th July 1951.

³³ Lord Mayor, 'My Festival message', *Daily Post*, August 10th 1951.

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