Regenerating a coastal town through art: Dismaland and the (l)imitations of antagonistic art practice in the city

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ABSTRACT

Coastal cities have increasingly welcomed initiatives for producing temporary urban art spaces to lure tourists and revitalize the local economy. This article examines the under-explored contested relationships between a major temporary art event and social (dis)engagement in the context of coastal urban regeneration. During the pop-up art event Dismaland (2015), led by the reputed graffiti artist Banksy and company, the coastal resort of Weston-super-Mare in England experienced an upsurge of international visitors. Banksy envisaged this “Bemusement Park”, situated in an abandoned lido, as an antagonist twist of Disneyland and the commercial modus operandi of theme parks. Drawing on discourse analysis of expert and public perspectives and autoethnographic experience, this article challenges the experienced extent of antagonistic art practice in juxtaposition to the formal discourse of creators and urban policymakers. The examination of the event’s artistic, behavioral, spatial and temporal frameworks shows how it ambiguously navigated between authentic and engineered trajectories of involving its target audiences. The creators’ anarchist plea for radical change was hyperbolically met with appreciation of an urban art space for serious contemplation as well as a perceived lack of local community investment – the latter rendering Dismaland an urban ‘art colony’ that fostered an elitist global art market rather than urban-citizen-led participation. The in-depth case study concludes that greater attention, both in urban policy and scholarship, is needed to the implications of the production of temporary urban art spaces for immediate inclusive engagement with end users as well as sustained community development. The study particularly calls for caution in assuming inclusive community benefits of art-led regeneration as abundantly ascribed in creative city theories and urban policies.

1. Introduction

Overseas competition, economic stagnation and continuing austerity since the 1990s have led to the decline of visitors to seaside resorts in middle-sized cities across the British coast, including Margate, Barry, Liverpool and Weston-super-Mare (Purdue et al., 2002; Davies, 2009; Edensor & Millington, 2013; Ward, 2016), which were once traditionally attractive as ‘bucket and spade’ holiday destinations (Rickey & Houghton, 2009). In the wake of increasing levels of social deprivation, these coastal towns have explored ways for economic revitalization (Beatty, 2011). The medium-sized town of Weston-super-Mare with a residential population count of over 77,000 (North Somerset Council, 2016b) is one of them and forms the geographical locus of this article. This previously popular seaside resort, situated under the unitary authority of North Somerset in England, received worldwide media attention when a Banksy-led art collective launched the temporary exhibition Dismaland (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), lasting from 21 August through 27 September 2015, and henceforth attracted a significant number of national and international visitors. It was hosted in a 2.5-acre disused Tropicana recreation facility, featuring Europe’s former vastest outdoor swimming pool (Swirsky, 2015).

Although urban scholarship has largely attended to post-industrial art-led regeneration in metropolitan urban contexts (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Grodach, 2013; Markusen, 2014; Thompson, 2016), hitherto there has remained little consideration of coastal contexts of the production of urban art-spaces, and especially of the social implications of a short-lived but impactful event such as Dismaland. This event showcased multimedia artwork, installations and performances by 58 established artists, including Damien Hirst, Ben Long and Jenny Holzer, and various live shows with concert finales by De La Soul and Pussy Riot. Hudson (2015) contemplated the exhibition as, à la Wagner, Gesamtkunstwerk: “a single total work of art of which Banksy is the author”.

Banksy’s installation of a life-size inflatable doll of a Guantánamo Bay inmate in Disneyland in Los Angeles in 2006 (see Nath, 2013) set a notable precedent for reading Dismaland as an antipode of Disneyland...
and theme parks in general. *Dismaland*’s leaflet satirically advertised itself as “Bemusement Park”: “UK’s most disappointing new visitor attraction! A festival of art, amusements and entry-level anarchism” (Banksy, 2015, NP). Banksy’s radical rationale for fighting against “global injustice” (ibid.) resonates with academic debates on antagonistic social art practice (e.g. Kester, 2011; Bishop, 2012). From here, this article steers further attention to the medium of a celebrious temporary art event in an urban subcenter location.

Bishop (2012) stressed how antagonistic art practice typically highlights the unequal power relationships underlying social problems.

Fig. 1. *Dismaland*’s location as announced in the *Daily Mirror* on 20 August 2015. National and international media profusely reported about this urban pop-up art event. Credit: Mirrorpix.

Fig. 2. The official *Dismaland* exhibition brochure and leaflet including park legend. The limited editions of these memorabilia, originally for sale at the exhibition venue only, have become collectors’ items. Photo credit: Martin Zebracki.
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