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Charlotte J. DeWitt

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Waterfront Festivals : Agents for Sustainable Tourism Development

Charlotte J. DeWitt*

Riverfronts both nationally and internationally are undergoing tremendous transformation, most notably changing from what was once the working riverfront to the walking riverfront. From Boston to Baltimore, Bahrain on the Arabian Gulf to Bristol, England, planners and developers are joining forces in innovative public-private partnerships to convert neglected riverfronts into Twentieth Century showpieces.

In the United States, to keep pace with the physical improvements to our country's shorelines, the imaging of the waterfront is changing from one of sweaty tattoos and stevedores, rough language and rouged ladies, to sweet shoppes and souvlaki, yachts and Yaleburgers. In that mysterious way that progress, has, *what was «out» is «in»*, and people are beginning to migrate from the sterile safety of their suburban suites and leisure suits for weekend rambles in search of local color along what was once the derelict waterfront.

It is a big step, however, to move from the restoration of a tumbling, decaying old port to its transformation into the success stories that we now call the Olde Port Exchange or Harbourfront or Docklands.

Private developers and city planners alike are now realizing that new piers, improved bulkheads, flood control systems, docking facilities, and pretty flowers along the boardwalk promenades in and of themselves are meaningless, not to mention economically unfeasible, without people.

The challenge, then, has been to entice people to the new waterfront, and increasingly, the vehicle that these visionaries are utilizing is waterfront programming, and in particular, the waterfront festival.

Indeed, the great rivers are part of the world's cultural and economic wealth, and nowhere is this more evident than in the celebrations that take place along these riverbanks.

In bringing together the diverse cultural groups of a city, in uniting the business community and the government as financial backers of these events, and in creating an on-going attraction for visitors and residents alike, the successful waterfront festival serves as both an agent of civilization and an economic agent of sustainable development.

Economic Impact

Recent economic impact studies in the United States resoundingly document that when the bottom line is economic impact, waterfront festivals mean business. Thus, to ensure the economic viability of a riverfront development, it is absolutely critical for communities to include a waterfront festival in their overall marketing masterplan - a festival that will showcase the rich cultural, historical and ecological heritage of their river while uniting people in both active and passive festive activities. Such a festival captures the personality of the river through sporting and other water-related events, food, music and folklore, interpretive areas, environmental exhibits, and the arts. In the Midwestern heartland of America, for example, the Wichita, Kansas River Festival features ten days of waterfront festivities, including jazz concerts, antique bathtub races, river raft races, water sports, and fireworks. According to the festival's executive director, Marion Gruber, the event generates US\$ 6 million in local spending, and yields an economic impact of US\$13.5 million[®].

The Kentucky Derby Festival, a ten-day festival leading up to the running of America's most famous horse race, the Kentucky Derby, has a number of events which take place along the Ohio River, such as The Great Steamboat Race. This popular festival boasts an economic impact of US\$17.5 million - in other words, for every US\$ 1 spent on the festival, approximately another US\$ 17-18 dollars is generated for the community[®]. Since the study was completed, however, increased expenditures in every study category have led to a projected, corresponding increase in the economic impact to about US\$ 34.5 million.

In America's *Deep South*, Macon, Georgia's Cherry Blossom Festival recently released the results of its 1990 economic impact study: the total estimated tourist expenditures associated with the 1990 festival were US\$

4.29 million in Bibb County, Georgia, including food, lodging, transportation, shopping and event attendance. The festival created the equivalent of 62 full-time jobs[®].

Festivals need not be fair weather friends, either. In Canada, Ottawa, Ontario's Bal de Neige/Winterlude festival has an economic impact of C\$ 33.9 million in Canada's capital city and a national impact of C\$ 40.6 million during ten of the coldest days of the year[®]. Most of this festival's events take place along the frozen Rideau Canal, where people ice skate from event to event. Creativity abounds, and one year the festival even featured a wedding on ice, where the bride and the groom each wore full-length fur coats.

Even as far back as 1985, studies of Texas' Fiesta San Antonio, a portion of which occurs along the lovely Paseo del Rio/Riverwalk, showed that the event created an estimated 2,000 jobs annually, generated approximately US\$ 75 million into the local Texas economy, and had an economic impact of US\$ 95 millions.

Changing Tides

To ensure the economic viability of a waterfront development, it is absolutely critical for communities to plan for waterfront programming from the beginning, along with architectural designs for the bricks and mortar and all the rest of the concomitant waterside amenities.

In the typical waterfront redevelopment timeline in the United States, a city announces its intent to redevelop the waterfront. Through a series of public hearings, guidelines are drawn up for this redevelopment, and the city then searches for a private developer with whom to pursue this development.

Waterfront programming deserves the same care, the same advance planning that the physical redevelopment gets, yet too often the biggest obstacle to its success is that it is perceived to be easy, something that anyone can do... and do overnight.

The basic attitude in the past has been to *Scotchtape* two or three events together with a clown and a juggler, add a few food vendors, and call it a festival. With any luck, the event will be staffed by some concerned citizens from the Lion's Club, augmented by the Girl

* Mrs Charlotte J. DeWitt is President, Waterfront Festivals Ltd, Boston, USA.

Scouts and the local hospital association. And, of course, since it's only a two-day event, two months is generally regarded as sufficient lead time.

But the changing tides have necessitated the growth of a new industry, the festival industry, and the most radical idea currently being expounded is this: *there is a science to producing a waterfront festival.*

Current Trends

Planning for special events along the waterfront starts immediately after the selection of a waterfront developer. It starts at the same time the landscape architect begins drawing people and boats in the rough sketches of the new waterfront. It begins in the inner sancta of city governments and private real estate developers when goals and objectives are identified for this new life which they are bringing into the waterfront world. It grows in city tourism offices and corporate marketing offices.

In the same way that corporations plan ahead for the marketing of vacant retail space or bed nights, so must a waterfront developer plan ahead for empty event nights.

Indeed, the single most important part of waterfront marketing is the development of an integrated, on-going program of events and activities which are compatible with the city's and the developer's overall goals and objectives for the waterfront. Moreover, through the interaction with other festival organizers in organizations such as the International Festivals Association, sister-city exchanges between river festivals can be created which lead to the development of an international network and increased international participation in the development of sustainable tourism worldwide.

The Wave of the Future

There are four basic steps to planning a waterfront festival. First, a *festival feasibility analysis* will examine the goals and objectives of a proposed festival in the context of qualitative and quantitative research on the community profile, available human resources, and potential waterfront sites. This analysis will determine the feasibility of continuing onto the next step, *festival design*.

Secondly, working with key community leaders, the festival professional creates the *festival design*. Events are conceptually and thematically linked in a logical sequence, a production timeline is delineated, and a staffing plan is outlined. A production budget is drawn up.


Perhaps circumstances surrounding the festival suggest the need for a large-scale celebration honoring the city's centennial, for example, or citizens' pride at the successful reclamation of a polluted riverfront. Whatever the rationale, the overall design of the festival will reflect the uniqueness of the host community, encourage communion with the water, and present a grandeur of vision.

The *marketing masterplan* then outlines the step-by-step procedures involved in properly marketing the festival to patrons, sponsors and participants alike. Market research includes an evaluation of demographics and the design of an advertising and promotional campaign for the event, including the sources to utilize in implementing this campaign and a budget.

The final phase involves the *financial packaging* of the festival. Once a comprehensive budget has been completed, a fundraising feasibility analysis is performed to determine the community's ability to finance the festival. A strategic fundraising plan is outlined, and direct corporate sponsorship programs are designed. Training programs for fundraising and community leadership are conducted.

For those festivals which have already followed the first four steps outlined above, an *economic impact analysis* of their current festival will yield information on direct and indirect spending which will strengthen their ability to secure funding of the festival in the years ahead.

Smooth sailing, safe harbor

The leadtime for charting the proper course of a successful festival ranges from one to two years prior to the date of the event itself, depending on community organization and support. Architects, construction companies and subcontractors take at least this long to design and build boardwalks, marinas, condominiums, hotels and other waterfront amenities. The festival industry is in the same boat, and in the long run, it is the one thing which will keep the completed waterfront redevelopment project afloat. 

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Les festivals comme moyen de promouvoir des activités en rives

Charlotte J. Dewitt

Les fleuves sont une richesse à la fois culturelle et économique et on peut les célébrer par diverses manifestations et notamment, par des festivals. Par une mise en marché appropriée, on peut ainsi intéresser des publics à fréquenter de nouvelles rives.

La présence d'un festival

Un festival sur les rives d'un fleuve peut manifester la richesse du patrimoine culturel et naturel de celui-ci; il s'agit donc d'une activité importante dans un plan de mise en marché visant à contribuer au développement économique du fleuve.

On a procédé ainsi avec le festival du Derby du Kentucky qui a généré des retombées économiques brutes de 34,5 millions de dollars US.

Mais l'organisation d'événements de ce genre le long d'un fleuve pour en assurer la mise en valeur économique est une tâche complexe. Il y a d'une part de nombreux intervenants mais ceci n'assure pas que les festivals soient en nombre suffisamment grand et varié pour atteindre la rentabilité. L'industrie des festivals, récemment constituée, peut prendre en charge la création d'un ensemble de fêtes le long d'un fleuve: elle coordonnera les actions des promoteurs en rives, d'architectes, d'entreprises privées, d'offices du tourisme, de bureaux de marketing et d'agences gouvernementales pour arriver à un produit culturel cohérent et personnalisé.

On peut découper en quatre étapes la démarche pour élaborer un tel plan de mise en marché de festivals fluviaux: l'analyse de faisabilité, la conception d'un design d'événement pour assembler des concepts et des thèmes, un plan de marketing proprement dit pour faire la promotion et la publicité du festival et, à terme, une évaluation financière de l'événement.

Les festivals, aujourd'hui, forment un réseau mondial et contribuent aussi du tourisme international. Liés aux grands fleuves de la planète, ils peuvent toucher à des thèmes universels.