Abstract for Global Events Congress VII

Engaging the senses to explore community events

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Background

Previous research has considered the way in which events impact society and community, although this has been less of a focus for researchers than the economic impacts (Mair & Whitford 2013). The key positive social impacts have been identified as including opportunities for socialisation and enjoyment, volunteering, learning new skills and boosting community pride, whilst some of the negative impacts include disruption due to increased traffic, noise and pollution, loss of local amenities during the event and the potential for anti-social behaviour among attendees (inter alia Holmes, Hughes, Mair & Carlson 2014; Allen, O’Toole, Harris & McDonnell 2012). However, less research has focused on understanding the experience of community members and attendees during events. This paper takes a case study approach and draws upon the field of sensual geographies to explore how attending or otherwise being affected by community events engages the different senses.

Sensual geography

Pink (2004) has suggested that by turning to the senses we can expand our understanding of everyday life beyond the conventional parameters of analysis. This in turn means thinking about our bodily interactions with our world and with others. According to Horton and Kraftl (2006), “our body determines—or, rather, is—our encounter with the world” (p. 77). We also need to recognise that our bodily encounters in, and with, the world are “not simply perceptual, but always involve emotional, cognitive and imaginative engagement; they are always relational” (Ansell, 2009, p. 200). The significance of the everyday seems important, yet the mundane habits, practices and experiences of daily life often go unnoticed, even though recent arguments in social and cultural theory propose that such things matter profoundly (Horton & Kraftl, 2006; Lorimer, 2008). This approach has not been widely used in the events field to date.

Case study

The location for the case study reported in the paper is Noosa, on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. The town has a population of approximately 35,000, and is around ninety minutes’ drive from the state capital, Brisbane. Noosa is an area of above-average
income and has a significant proportion of second homes and retirees. Each year in September, Noosa holds the Noosa International Jazz Festival. Part of the festival is a celebration of local food, wine and jazz called ‘Tastings on Hastings’ and this community event forms the basis for exploration. During this event, the main street in Noosa Heads (Hastings Street) is closed off to traffic and a range of local restaurants set up tables and chairs in the middle of the street (see picture), and offer a set menu, drinks and plenty of jazz music. The event is a sell-out each year, and is particularly popular with local residents who often book well in advance to be sure of getting a seat (personal communication with Festival Director). Tickets for the lunch were priced at $85 Australian Dollars, which included both lunch and drinks.

Data collection

The data collection for this paper took a qualitative approach, primarily using participant observation, but also including document analysis of the festival website and annual reports and interviews with key stakeholders including the festival director, and representatives of local business and council. Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities (Kawulich 2005). Both authors attended the event in the role of observer as participant, where the researcher is an observer who is not a member of the group under study (in this case attendees at Tastings on Hastings) and who is interested in participating as a means for conducting better observation and, hence, generating more complete understanding of the group’s activities (Kawulich 2005). Data included field notes, photographs and event maps and programs. Data were analysed using coding, with the five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) used as a priori codes.

Findings

What we explored in this event were the ways in which the Tastings on Hastings constructed those present; that is, differing ways of participating in this event constructed individuals inhabiting the festival space in differing ways. For example, participating in the actual lunch marked an individual as resident of Noosa (as noted, on the whole local residents quickly purchased most of the available tickets). Only participants experienced the event through taste. There was then a clear demarcation between those participating in the event, and those who were simply spectators, suggesting a sense of exclusivity for some, matched with
the concurrent exclusion of others. Yet even those spectating were still able to participate using their senses, through watching the lunch unfold, perhaps smelling the food, as well as watching the street parade that occurred just before the lunch and listening to the jazz music that accompanied the lunch.

Interim conclusions

Sensuous geography has been significantly under-utilised in festival and event studies. This research offers the opportunity to understand not just the attitudes and opinions of attendees (common research topics), but rather to get a better sense of the embodied experience of being a participant, or indeed being a spectator at a community event. This paper will provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the senses of sound, smell, sight and bodily movement generate festival bodies and senses of connection to place and community.