

# Research on the Impact of Cultural Festivals on Urban Regeneration

-- A Case Study of Edinburgh as A Festival City

**Xiaoqian Gao**

Xianda College of Economics and Humanities, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

---

**Abstract:** In recent years, an increasing number of cultural festivals have been organized around the world with the aim of revitalizing urban economies, promoting creative industries, enhancing urban social cohesion, achieving urban regeneration, and introducing or repositioning cities in an increasingly competitive global stage. Examples of using cultural festivals for urban regeneration include The Holland Festival that set up in 1947 in order to stimulate economic development of Amsterdam, the Notting Hill carnival that regularly attracts over 1 million visitors, the West End Festival in Glasgow that promote tourism development in the city, and so on. Cultural festivals have now become one of the most popular way of culturally-led urban renewal strategies. In this paper the author takes Edinburgh, which is famous for its annual festivals, as a case study. The results show that while cultural festivals bring many positive effects to urban development, they may also have the potential to bring negative effects to cities. Therefore, it is essential for cultural policymaker to carefully balance the needs of city residents and visitors in order to maximize the positive impact of the festival.

**Keywords:** Urban Regeneration; Cultural Festivals; Edinburgh Festivals; Festival City.

---

## 1. Introduction

Starting with the definition of urban regeneration, it is a prospect that can reverse urban decline and bring improvements of economy, society and environment in those areas [1]. Turok further categorizes urban regeneration into three areas: 'people', 'business' and 'place'. "People" here means the purpose of improving personal skills and gaining benefits from participation. In terms of "business", the meaning is to boost the competitiveness of economy to bring more job opportunities to the local area. For "place", regeneration can improve the overall attractive of the place [2].

The use of cultural as well as arts activities to stimulate urban revival could be considered as culture-led regeneration, which has become a universal trend of urban interventions. Cultural festival as an means to celebrate and promote culture has been using by government as strategic measures to solve the problem of social exclusion, the decline of industry as well as transforming cities into service-oriented economies. According to Allen and Shaw, in the period of post-war, the development of cultural festivals in Europe was heavily supported by governments [3]. This is because these countries recognized the importance of festival providing cultural values, which contribute to encouraging boost morale and social stability. Over time, more and more national states have used festivals to further political aims. According to Tallon, city authorities have long recognized festivals as a means of urban revitalization [4]. Law further points out that festivals is an essential part of cultural regeneration in most post-industrial cities [5]. In addition to that, annual cultural festivals are usually the focus of the culture-led regeneration in many urban areas.

Festivals as the strategic measure for culture-led regeneration can bring cultural, social, economic benefits to cities. Regarding to economic benefits, Evans and Shaw points out that culture can contribute to job creation, attraction

of investment, the development of new industry in a direct or indirect way [6]. For cultural and social benefits, culture-led urban revitalization can not only contribute to changing image of cities, developing creative industries, but also is a means to enhance the quality of lives of residents through offering various leisure activities [7].

## 2. The Background of Edinburgh as a Festival City

Edinburgh is well known as a festival city in the world. Starting with the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947, it was established after World War II in order to offering an chance to gather artists and people from across the world together to improve human spirit. Nowadays, there are fifteen major annual festivals hosted in Edinburgh. These festivals range from the internationally renowned Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Edinburgh International Film festival to less famous but also significant festivals such as Edinburgh Mela and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. These festivals plays an important role in Edinburgh, with impacts on the areas of economic, cultural, and social benefits.

As cultural festivals plays an increasingly important role in urban regeneration, Scottish government begins to attach the importance of using cultural festival to achieve domestic and international policy aims. To be Specific, in 2001, the Edinburgh Festivals Strategy was created, encouraging the Festivals in association with the City Council , Tourist Boards and The Audience Business to work closer together. It was commissioned and funded by the City of Edinburgh Council and received financial support from the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian. In 2007, the Directors of Edinburgh's leading Festivals gather together to establish Festivals Edinburgh which is a strategic organization, in order to maintain and develop Edinburgh as the leading festival city in the world via collaborative projects. With the purpose of overseeing and facilitates the

implementation of all advice, support and investment for the maintaining of Edinburgh's reputation as the world's leading festival city, Festivals Edinburgh established the Festivals Forum. The members of Festivals Edinburgh consist of people from British Council Scotland, City of Edinburgh Council, Creative Scotland, Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland and so on, which can be seen that the Scottish government attaches great importance to the development of arts festivals.

In order to support the development of festivals in Edinburgh, The Scottish Arts Council invests about £3million annually in festivals across Scotland. About £1.5m goes to the Edinburgh International Festival, Edinburgh International Book Festival and Bank of Scotland's Children's International Theatre Festival. Financial support is also given to the Edinburgh Mela, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Edinburgh Art Festival and the Edinburgh International Jazz and Blues Festival. Moreover, National Lottery funding has been utilized to develop the cultural infrastructure of Edinburgh used for the Festivals with the supervision of The Scottish Arts Commission.

### **3. Positive Impacts of Edinburgh Festivals**

#### **3.1. Economic Impacts**

As the number and scale of Edinburgh Festivals grows, the popularity of Edinburgh City has greatly increased nationally and internationally. In addition to that, Edinburgh Festivals also brought many economic, cultural, social benefits to Edinburgh. In terms of economy, Edinburgh Festivals offers several benefits to Edinburgh's economy. It stimulates the economy through increasing output and income, creating more jobs, developing tourism. A study shows that Edinburgh Festivals bring more than £120 million in revenue to the city. It also be claimed by the Edinburgh City Council that the city earn 150 million pounds from the festival every year, which greatly contribute to the development of Edinburgh.

Three parameters is used to measure economic impact, which is output, labor income and employment. The output means that the net new sales generated by all economic sectors due to various new expenditure streams. The definition of Labor income is income from wages, salaries, consisting of proprietor's income and employee compensation. Edinburgh Festivals generated £44m of direct expenditure, £9m of local income and 1300 full-time equivalent jobs in 1990. In addition, in Scotland as a whole, direct expenditure measured £72 million, resulting in over 3000 full-time equivalent jobs. In 2010, the income of Edinburgh Festivals was estimated to be 59 million pounds in Edinburgh and 82 million pounds in Scotland. In addition, there were 5,242 new jobs were created in Edinburgh and 4,917 in Scotland.

The main part of the expenditure of Edinburgh is generated from food and drink, accommodation, transport and shopping. In 2010, the expenditure on ticket only make up 13 per cent of visitor expenditure for Edinburgh in total. The remaining 87 per cent of audience's expenditure is on food and drink, accommodation, transport and shopping. And the majority of visitor expenditure for Edinburgh is accommodation and food and drink, accounting for 70 per cent in total. More specifically, in 2010, spending of audience is estimated 41 million pounds on accommodation, and a further 37 million pounds on food and drink. This demonstrates the Edinburgh Festivals is contribute to the development of tourist economy

in Edinburgh and even Scotland. Festivals play a crucial role in introducing tourists to spend money in the local economy. The reason is that tourists may stay for a longer period of time, which requires spending on accommodation, food, and transportation. Therefore, tourists are particularly important for bringing economic benefits to Edinburgh and even Scotland. Furthermore, Edinburgh Festivals enhanced the image of Edinburgh, contributing to attracting more tourists to generate more economic benefits. A survey shows that 93 per cent of tourists agreed that festivals makes Edinburgh a distinctive city. 78 per cent of all non-local visitors said that various festivals were held during the summer period made Edinburgh a more attractive place to visit [8]. It suggests Edinburgh festivals makes the city attractive and become the main motivation for visitors to come to Edinburgh.

#### **3.2. Cultural Impacts**

In terms of cultural benefits, Edinburgh Festivals not only provide local people with cultural learning and development opportunities, but also contribute to the development of events and creative industries in Edinburgh. As Turok views, the purpose of urban regeneration is to improve skills and aspirations to allow residents to gain benefits from participation [2]. Edinburgh Festivals offer local people a range of opportunities for learning and personal development. The festivals not only committed to working with schools in order to provide young people various learning opportunities and cultural experience, but also support the development of creative talents in Edinburgh and Scotland via the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals EXPO Fund. More specifically, Edinburgh Festivals have engaged with every secondary school in Edinburgh and almost all the primary schools in the city through a wide range of activities which take place during and out with festival time. The festivals are working with children across the city to provide young people with regular education programs and new projects, supporting creative learning about music, drama, visual arts, science, technology, film and many more. For instance, Edinburgh International Festival launched a three-year project to offer pupils from Leith Academy opportunities to work with artists and to learn about marketing and branding with the festival's teams. As well as working with children, the festivals also work with teachers to provide continuous professional development opportunities, enabling teachers to bring creativity into the classroom by seeing the wider creative learning possibilities of engaging with festivals. Taking Edinburgh International Children's Festival as an example, it is in collaboration with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society to create a Teachers' Theatre Club in order to encourage Edinburgh's teachers to see more performance. The ambition of Edinburgh Festivals is to improve the life of more young people in the future via increasing the engagement of local schools participating in education programs of Edinburgh Festivals.

Moreover, Edinburgh Festivals help creative talent from Scotland gain profile and opportunity. Specifically, talents in Scotland have been supported by Edinburgh Festivals which use the resources of the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund. This Fund was created in 2007 in order to increase the funding available to talent from Scotland. The Expo Fund invested 88 per cent of all funding to help the production and promotion of the work of Scotland-based creative professionals, which contribute to the development of creative talents in Edinburgh and Scotland. Because the

funding help creative talent from Scotland have chance to take part in the Festivals to gain more market opportunities as well as higher profile. The international networking and inspiration that the Festivals provide for creative talent are also crucial to the future development of Scotland's creative and cultural sectors.

### 3.3. Social Impacts

Holding Edinburgh Festivals also bring social benefits to the city to help the city rejuvenate. To be specific, Edinburgh Festival help enhance social cohesion through developing pride in the local area, bringing the community together, as well as providing chances for people who are from other background to meet and communicate to develop the understanding of other cultures. Firstly, Edinburgh Festivals make Edinburgh special and famous in the world, developing residents' feeling of local pride. This feeling is largely due to the continuous improvement of the city's status on the world stage through festivals. According to the survey, 94 per cent locals agreed that the Festival is one of the reasons that makes Edinburgh a special city. In addition, among all local audiences surveyed, 89 per cent of audiences agreed that the festival increased their local pride of Edinburgh[8]. It is important for residents to have a positive image of where they live. It means that a positive image could bring local pride which contribute to community cohesion. This is because local pride is closely related to a sense of belonging. If people feel a sense of belonging within a community, then they are more likely to actively maintain and improve the area in collaboration with the community. Thus it can be deduced that Edinburgh Festivals contribute to community cohesion by increasing local pride.

Secondly, Edinburgh Festivals help to bring the local community together. Festivals are occasions to express collective belonging to a group or place. This is because the Festivals offer opportunities for 'informal sociability'. The meaning of the term, 'informal sociability' is face-to-face interaction which generate or maintain social networks[9]. It include communicate with friends and interaction with people who are from the same community. The meaning of community is broad, including ethnic, religious, geographical community and so on. Festivity can be used as a means to solve the problem of the increasing alienation in public spaces. All of Edinburgh Festivals offer chances and places for people to socialize, particularly, some Festivals focus more on providing communal experiences, such as the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival, the Edinburgh Mela, Edinburgh's Hogmanay and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The point can be proved from the survey conducted at those festivals, which shows that 62 per cent of audiences at Edinburgh Festivals felt the Festivals were platforms that can bring the community together and they did communicate with people they thought were from their own community during the event [8].

Moreover, holding annual cultural festivals in Edinburgh can improve wellbeing of locals by increasing the percentage of residents participating in cultural activities. A survey shows that two thirds of residents participate in shows and events at the Festivals each year, and every festival has at least 50 per cent of residents attending [10]. It is contribute to improving the residents' wellbeing. Taking part in culture activities is considered essential to maintaining wellbeing and happiness. A study shows people participating in cultural activity regularly have higher levels of life satisfaction regardless of their age, level of education as well as economic status [11].

Therefore, participating Edinburgh festivals have beneficial impact on people's well-being. 55 per cent of audiences of Edinburgh Festivals felt that the festival had improve their well-being. More specifically, in terms of well-being effects of Edinburgh's festivals on children, 65 per cent of parents said the Festivals made a different to their children's well-being, especially Bank of Scotland and Imagine Festival as well as the Edinburgh International Science Festival. In addition to that, 71 per cent of people working for the Edinburgh Festivals as volunteers also felt the Festivals have a lasting influence on their well-being, such as feeling useful and valued[10].

## 4. Negative Impacts of Edinburgh Festivals

Edinburgh Festivals promotes the development of tourism of Edinburgh by attracting more and more tourists in recent years. It is important for Edinburgh's economic growth. However, the large number of tourists have also put a certain pressure on Edinburgh, affecting residents' quality of lives. From 2012 to 2018, the number of tourists who stay overnight in Edinburgh soared by nearly 30 per cent, to 4.26 million, while the number of international tourists to Edinburgh has increased by more than 1 million in seven years. Specifically, from 2012 to 2018, the peak season saw a 58% increase in visits from 520,000 to 820,000. The large number of tourists in Edinburgh made Edinburgh one of the world's "over-tourism hot spots" along with Rome, Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona by a CNN Travel report. It led to the decline of the quality of life of its locals to some extent. According to a survey of 5,000 residents in Edinburgh, even though 72% of residents felt the Festivals make Edinburgh a better place to live. The number is the lowest in the last five years and has fallen by 6 per cent in the past two years [12].

The first negative impact of Edinburgh Festivals on residents is that the growth of tourism in Edinburgh has increased Edinburgh's house prices and rents. The reason for that is tourists are more willing to pay higher rent in a shorter period of time than locals could pay for the same property in the long run. It led to house prices and rents in Edinburgh have risen rapidly. In 2019, rents in Edinburgh have risen by 5% and prices have risen sharply during the month-long festival. In addition, the average real estate price in Edinburgh in 2019 was 255,300 pounds, which is higher than the most of other UK cities. As a result, many local people are forced out of town because of the high level of rent.

Secondly, the privatization and commodification of public space by the Festivals is a growing problem that affects the quality of lives of Edinburgh residents. Specifically, some big festivals have been allowed to privatize or block off many of Edinburgh's most iconic public areas or parks for profit. For example, some public spaces such as George Square, Bristo Square, Charlotte Square and parts of the Meadows were all blocked off throughout August, which caused great inconvenience to local residents. Residents from Local Old Town can not even freely go to the streets where they live or work due to blocking public areas. Another example shows that in August residents are denied to access a large area of footpath on Prince Street where are blocked with a "curtain style" barrier. The barrier also extends around a large area of Princes Street Gardens where only can be accessed through a £35 ticket. Free access to parks and the use of urban spaces for the public good are basic rights of citizens. However,

blocking off of squares, parks and footpath actually means that the privatization of public areas, which led to more and more residents can not fully access and free use of public areas, which will significantly affect the quality of lives of the residents.

Furthermore, the large number of tourists have impacts on the environment of Edinburgh, especially during the summer peak. This is because 5 major festivals in Edinburgh take place during the month of August. In August, there are about 500,000 visitors pouring into Edinburgh, doubling its population and hundreds of events and performances are taking place every day in the city. It brought some negative impact on the local environment, such as traffic congestion, street noise.

In terms of traffic congestion, it has been a big issue in Edinburgh. The development of tourism brought the increase in road traffic, which has exacerbated the already serious traffic congestion and pollution problems in Edinburgh. The reason for that is because many tourists tend to travel to Edinburgh by car. A survey of 649 Edinburgh Festival tourists shows 61% per cent of the tourists travel to festivals by car. Moreover, 70 per cent of visitors during the Festivals believed that festivals is one of the reason for traffic congestion [13]. Traffic problems will not only cause local disturbances and delays, but also affect air quality. To be specific, there are still a large volume of harmful CO<sub>2</sub> emissions produced during cars stopped in traffic. A study shows visitors travel to Edinburgh festivals make up most of carbon emissions, which is calculated to be almost 44,653 tons [14]. This means that each ticket sold is equivalent to 1.34 kg of CO<sub>2</sub>. Although the increase in total carbon emissions leads to global warming, these emissions may cause many issues in local areas, including poor air quality and the consequent increase in respiratory problems in local community.

During Edinburgh Festivals, street noise is also a challenging issue affecting the environment in some specific local areas. Sources of noise may include music, fireworks and sound effects from major events, street performance and busking, traffic, audio bus tours, walking tours and so on. For some residents, street noise affect reduce their quality of life. Enduring the occasional noise disturbances has become a part of Edinburgh's life. Many residents of Edinburgh choose to take a holiday during summer festival period in order to avoid noise pollution.

## 5. Conclusion

With more and more festivals have been held across the world, cultural festivals have become a strategy to achieve urban regeneration for many cities. In this paper, it has firstly explained the definition of urban regeneration and culture-led regeneration. The paper then has taken Edinburgh Festivals as a case study to deeply analyze the positive impacts of cultural festivals on urban development, after presenting how Scottish Government support the development of Edinburgh festival city. The first positive impact the paper has demonstrated from Edinburgh Festivals is that cultural festivals are able to bring economic benefits to the city, such as increasing output and income, creating more jobs, developing tourism. As can be seen from Edinburgh Festivals, the second positive impact of cultural festivals is that festivals can bring cultural benefits to the city through providing residents with cultural learning and development opportunities and developing the city's creative, cultural and events industries. Apart from that, cultural festivals also contribute to social cohesion in the city

via improving local pride, bringing the local community together.

However, through a case study of Edinburgh Festivals, the paper has also argued that even though there are many positive impacts on urban development that cultural festival brought, festivals also have possibility to bring negative impact on the city. It means if festivals attract excessive tourists in the city, which will largely affect the quality of life of residents. Firstly, the paper has shown that the growth of tourism in Edinburgh has led to an increase in house prices and rents of the city, which put a certain pressure on locals to pay such high level of rent. The second negative impact that Edinburgh Festivals brought is that many public spaces were blocked off during festivals, bringing many inconveniences to the life of residents. In addition to that, the large number of tourists also affect the environment of Edinburgh in a negative way, such as severe traffic congestion and street noise, which also hugely reduced the quality of life of residents.

Therefore, it is crucial to local government to understand the potential consequences of continued tourism growth that festivals brought on the city. In order to minimize the negative impacts that cultural festivals might bring to cities, Cultural policymaker should carefully balance the needs of urban residents and visitors in order to maximize the positive impact of the festival. Moreover, the scale and number of festivals in cities should be properly controlled in order to avoid attracting excessive tourists to cities. Meanwhile, more attention should be paid to the quality of festivals taking place in cities and the participation of local people in festivals should be increased in order to maximize the positive impact of festivals.

## References

- [1] Roberts, P. (2000). The evolution, definition and purpose of urban regeneration. *Urban Regeneration: A Handbook*, 1, 9–36.
- [2] Turok, I. (2005). Urban regeneration: what can be done and what should be avoided. In *Istanbul 2004 International Urban Regeneration Symposium: Workshop of Kucukcekmece District*, Istanbul: Kucukcekmece Municipality Publication, 57–62.
- [3] Allen, K., Shaw, P. (2000). *Festivals mean business. The shape of arts festivals in the UK*. London: British Arts Festival Association.
- [4] Tallon, A. (2014). Festivals, Carnivals and Urban Regeneration. *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal*, Henry Stewart Publications, 7(4), 301-306.
- [5] Law, C. M. (2000). Regenerating the city centre through leisure and tourism, *Built Environment* (1978-), 117–129.
- [6] Evans, G.L., Shaw, P. (2004). *A Review of Evidence on the Role of Culture in Regeneration*. London: Department for Culture Media and Sport.
- [7] Foley, M., McGillivray, D., McPherson, G. (2012). *Event Policy: From Theory to Strategy*. London: Routledge.
- [8] Edinburghfestivalcity.com. (2016). *Edinburgh Festivals 2015 Impact Study*. [online] Available at: [https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/assets/000/001/964/Edinburgh\\_Festivals\\_-\\_2015\\_Impact\\_Study\\_Final\\_Report\\_original.pdf?1469537463](https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/assets/000/001/964/Edinburgh_Festivals_-_2015_Impact_Study_Final_Report_original.pdf?1469537463) [Accessed 6 July 2024].
- [9] Hall, P.A. (1999). Social Capital in Britain, *British Journal of Political Sciences*, 29(3), 417-416.
- [10] Etag.org.uk. (2011). *Edinburgh Festival Impact Study*. [online] Available at: <https://www.etag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/>

- 2013/11/110520-edinburgh-festivals-finaloverall-report-bop\_final.pdf [Accessed 6 July 2024].
- [11] Allin, P. (2015). Healthy Attendance? The Impact of Cultural Engagement and Sports Participation on Health and Satisfaction with Life in Scotland, *Cultural Trends*, 24(2), 202-204.
- [12] Scotsman.com. (2019). Survey Of Edinburgh Residents Finds Dwindling Levels of Support For Festivals. [online] Available at: <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/edinburgh-festivals/survey-edinburgh-residents-finds-dwindling-levels-support-festivals-545735> [Accessed 6 July 2024].
- [13] AGF. (2020). Traffic Congestion and Travel. [online] Available at: <https://www.agreenerfestival.com/traffic-congestion-travel/> [Accessed 6 July 2024].
- [14] Scottish Enterprise Newsroom. (2011). Edinburgh Festivals' Impact On Local And National Life And Economy Revealed. [online] Available at: <https://www.scottish-enterprise-mediacentre.com/news/edinburgh-festivals-impact-on-local-and-national-life-and-economy-revealed>[Accessed 6 July 2024].