REVIEW


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With all the commentary about the proliferation of festivals and the rise of festivalization in recent decades, it can be easy to forget that festivals have played important societal roles for centuries.¹ John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, both human geographers, remind us of this in their latest monograph, *Festival Cities: Culture, Planning and Urban Life*. The colorful image on the cover of this book takes us straight into medieval times and into carnival as performed in Venice’s Piazza San Marco, an urban square and a city that, perhaps beyond all others, epitomize the staging of public events. This attractive cover sets the tone for a book that draws the reader into engagingly written historical discussions on how “regular, non-ambulant, place-based festivals have become embedded in the life and planning of cities in the developed world since the end of the nineteenth century” (p. 29). The focus is mainly on urban arts festivals and carnivals, and a key concern throughout is to understand the interplay between the development of these events and their planning and management by the host cities. For these authors, this necessitates investigating the importance of festivals as cultural phenomena, as activities that always have economic ramifications, and as events that are intertwined in an infinite number of complex ways with the places that host them.

In an introductory chapter, the authors set out the book’s purpose and explain why they think that understanding festivals is best advanced by considering the roles they play in the transmission and reception of culture and their contributions to place identity and to the urban economy. Following this are seven chapters of substantive content. Chapter 2 presents an interesting historical overview of urban festivals which will be helpful for students and researchers approaching the study of festivals for the first time. It leads well into the next four chapters (chapters 3–6), all of which are case studies of western European cities that feature prominently in the historical evolution of arts festivals: Venice (Italy) with respect to the visual arts and the Biennale; Salzburg (Austria) in terms of classical music and the Salzburg Festival; Cannes (France) in relation to film and the Cannes Film Festival; and Edinburgh (Scotland), with the Edinburgh International Festival and the further development of multiple arts festivals, including Fringe. Together, these four chapters, along with chapter 2, are coherent, and the book is well worth reading for these alone. All of the studied cities host internationally renowned, influential festivals. The authors trace the emergence and development of festivals, including the Salzburg Festival and the Cannes Film Festival, in a style that is fluid and engaging. The historical analysis is rich in detail and promotes, in an accessible way, an understanding of how the trajectory of the festivals is bound up with the temporal, cultural, and political contexts encasing the cities.

However, it is clear that all of the festival cities studied in depth come from specific temporal and spatial contexts. All are western European and all have their origins pre–World War II.
is a strong preoccupation with the “high” arts in the discussions of Venice, Salzburg, and the initial story of Edinburgh’s rise as a festival city. This concentration on the high arts reflects the predominant nature of the arts festivals associated with the time period under study. Overall, and as clearly stated early in the book, there is a focus on arts festivals as opposed to any other kind of festivals. Arguably, criticism could be leveled at the authors for limiting their in-depth discussions to these specific contexts. In a book titled Festival Cities, including a detailed analysis of a younger festival city located outside of western Europe would have been novel and important, although the authors themselves admit that they realize the need for such an approach. Similarly, an interesting counterbalance could have been created with the inclusion of a case devoted to a different kind of festival.

Next, chapter 7, “Proliferation,” discusses key features characterizing the expansion of festivals and the festival form in more recent decades. Theater and literature festivals as well as biennales receive particular attention in individual sections. While this chapter differs from the preceding chapters, it continues to maintain a focus on festivals that privilege “high” art forms in western Europe and North America. Somewhat surprisingly, given that the authors say that their book focuses on both urban arts festivals and carnivals, a singular focus on the latter only comes in chapter 8. Here, carnivals like the Mardi Gras in New Orleans and the Notting Hill Carnival in London come center stage, as do the carnivalesque dimensions of St. Patrick’s and Pride Parades. The authors use these to underscore how processes of identity formation and assertion and of commodification characterize the workings of carnivals.

This book is engaging and accessible. Throughout, individual chapters are supplemented with notes sections, many of which recommend further reading for those wishing to delve further into specific issues. Overall, it will be of interest to those coming to the study of festivals for the first time as well as to those interested in appreciating, and gaining deep insight into, the long-standing relationships that interlink the historical evolution of festivals and their host cities in the developed world. I hope that it will inspire other researchers to add to the stories presented here by producing historical and contemporary accounts of how festivals have been, and continue to be, integral to the reproduction and representation of cities beyond western Europe and North America. Such work could yield important insights into a great diversity of cultural forms and practices and enrich our understanding of how different kinds of geographical, political, and economic contexts and interrelationships influence the interconnected development of festivals and their host cities.
AUTHOR BIO

Bernadette Quinn is a human geographer who works as a senior lecturer and researcher at Technological University Dublin, Ireland. She has written extensively about arts festivals and cultural events and is specifically interested in the roles that they play in transforming space, reproducing place, and shaping identities. Her current research interest is investigating how arts festivals are evolving in the context of digitization. Her work has been widely published in social science journals and edited collections. Among her latest publications is the book *Festivals and the City: The Contested Geographies of Urban Events*, coedited with Andrew Smith and Guy Osborn and published in 2022 by the University of Westminster Press.

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HOW TO CITE


*The Journal of Festive Studies* (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.