

City of leisure image doing no favours for Galway's future

Aidan Kane *

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I moved from Dublin to Galway nine years ago. When my few remaining Dublin friends learn of my continuing exile status, they inevitably and sympathetically respond; "But Galway's very nice, isn't it?".

I nod and inwardly groan. Galway is nice, but for it, and for the west more generally, niceness is no longer enough.

Partly this is personal, but there is a policy issue here, if you will bear with me. The reality of niceness here is the human scale of the place: natives with chip-free shoulders and God's own scenery on my doorstep. The image revolves around the triad of street entertainers, the Arts Festival and Race Week.

Street entertainers remain a mystery to me, unless they are doing what they do as practice or therapy. The Arts Festival does not float my boat, as I only read non-fiction, I only watch television or films based on a true story, and I only like paintings of ships, sculptures of patriots, and poems that rhyme.

Similarly, I feel uncomfortable with Race Week, not being a builder, cabinet minister, or gambler, and still less a prizewinner on Ladies' Day.

On these and on many more cultural and social delights beyond Galway we construct an image of this part of the world as pleasant, a tonic and respite for visitors from more serious places. The image, of course, sustains a vibrant tourist industry and underpin that elusive "quality of life" factor sought by so many who wish to move to, return to or simply stay in the west.

*Department of Economics, NUI Galway.

However, the image also sometimes obscures a deeper and more interesting reality. It allows the west to be sidelined in the public mind as of recreational value only, without serious economic challenges and substantial economic opportunities.

This is beginning to change in a number of ways.

First, the limits to and costs of trading on faux-bohemian mass tourism eventually reveal themselves. For example, Galway's embarrassing ranking in the litter stakes was seen here as a wake-up call to the city. Similarly, Cork's winning of cultural capital status over Galway, partly as a result of the lack of artistic infrastructure, was a healthy signal.

The message was to match the undoubted energy of diverse artistic endeavour with upgraded facilities and institutions comprising all those partners in the creative milieu, to deliver on the cultural promise, and not to presume upon it.

More generally in the wider region, a critical awareness of the environmental pressures of tourism confronts many communities eager to develop their resources in ways that do not compromise their underlying assets.

A second general trend is the emergence of a variety of regional voices concerned with long-term development. These include (but are not limited to) rural development groups, chambers of commerce, and institutions such as regional assemblies and the Western Development Commission. Also, the handing of regional mandates to agencies such as IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, adds to the mix of existing regional agencies such as Shannon Development and Udaras na Gaeltachta.

A further addition has been the grouping of representatives from mainly high-tech industries operating as the Atlantic Technology Corridor, promoting the potential of this emergent locus of activity. Most recently, there is the West On Track campaign, which has taken the initiative in seeking a decent rail service for the region.

The overlapping mandates and boundaries of some of the state agencies, particularly when set against existing local authority structures, suggest to some a case for rationalisation. However, the multiplicity of voices, especially those locally driven, is probably part of a necessary learning process.

The partners in this process are by trial and error negotiating the contours

of regional identities and development goals. It is being recognised for example, that the term “the west” does not really embrace all those who have common interests, that development issues do not neatly align along existing administrative borders.

An important caveat is that, while a natural focus for some policies may be a spatial unit, whether village, county or region, issues such as poverty and disadvantage are not necessarily (if at all) spatial issues, matters of simplistic west/east or rural/urban divides. But some issues are spatial, and are being raised in a way that is diverse, perhaps even messy, but not without an underlying logic.

Whether the policy focus is on an arc from Cork all the way to Donegal, or on a corridor from Limerick to Galway, a key recognition is that balanced development in Ireland requires a counterweight to the eastern seaboard. Like many good things, this basic idea has been around since the 1960s, but it has taken Dublin’s dysfunctional growth to make its potential clear today.

A crucial, newer element in the argument concerns the role of innovation and its spatial dimension. A surprising aspect of innovative activity is how spatially concentrated it tends to be, emerging, for example, in identifiable clusters of third level institutions and associated research institutes, high-tech industries and supportive policy.

Innovative activity concentrates to take advantage of pools of skilled labour and specialised support services, as well as the flows of knowledge generated by sheer proximity of people, or so the story goes.

The west is well placed to unlock this particular economic success by building on the basis offered by existing industry and strengthened educational institutions. Much attention has been given to the potential offered by existing industrial bases in medical devices technology and ICT in the west, for example.

In alliance with third-level researchers, the potential is to embed existing multinational and indigenous enterprises as they move away from activities lost to lower cost economies, and towards more R&D-intensive higher value-added products, and to generate new spin-off companies.

I would not set up a false opposition between the pleasantness of a region and its economic ambition—not least because they might complement each other, especially if the source of that ambition is a truly innovative, creative

society.

But there is a distinction with a difference, and how the west decides to present itself and its case in the current economic environment will prove whether we understand it.

http://www.aidankane.net/writingsetc/2003_kane_galway.html