

Evaluation of Manchester's Guest City Programme at La Mercè

Final Executive Summary Report prepared by Santra Consulting Ltd.

La Mercè is Barcelona's biggest annual outdoor festival and features street art from around the world, a diverse range of music genres and a huge traditional cultural programme of music, dance, fireworks, parades and human towers (the Castells). The free festival runs for five days in September and has been taking place since 1902. Each year, Barcelona invites an international Guest City to the festival. In 2025, Manchester became the Guest City – the first English city ever to do so – creating a major moment for cultural exchange.



Manchester's selection was the result of long-term relationship-building led by XTRAX, a Manchester-based organisation specialising in international outdoor arts networks and collaborations. Over two decades of work in Catalonia, including Manchester's presence at La Mercè in 2022, helped establish trust with key partners such as MAC (Mercè Arts a Carrer), Catalan Arts/ICEC, and Institut Ramon Llull. The proposal for a Manchester-Barcelona Guest City partnership was accepted in April 2024, and funding was secured through Arts Council England, the British Council, the British Embassy/Consulate, and Manchester City Council. The programme also benefited from clear civic endorsement on both sides, visible in formal ceremonies and senior political participation during the festival.

Santra Consulting was commissioned to evaluate the impact of Manchester's Guest City programme at La Mercè, especially the Street Arts strand and Manchester's participation in Catalan parades, examining the outcomes for artists and cultural professionals, civic and placemaking impacts, audience and community experience, and anticipated legacy. The evaluation was rooted in a Theory of Change, using formal interviews with 24 stakeholders, informal field interviews during the festival, surveys covering artists, audiences, delegates and panellists, and onsite observation across the full six days of the festival.

Manchester's Guest City Programme at a Glance

Manchester delivered an unusually broad and visible Guest City programme at La Mercè Festival.

Showcase performances and events

- 14 outdoor arts companies delivering 28 performances and 16 installation sessions
- Manchester artists and community participants joined 6 public parades
- Over £150k paid in professional artist fees
- 8 music acts involving 23 artists delivering 6 performances

New artistic commissions

- 2 large-scale parade pieces: *Queen Bee Gigante* and *Worker Bee*, created by Global Grooves (MCR) and Catalan artists Pau Reig and Dolors Sans
- 6 new artistic commissions
- 2 new music commissions

Collaborations and artistic exchange

- 2 residencies involving Barcelona and Manchester artists
- 9 research, planning and exchange visits conducted by the festival directors and lead organisations
- 6 new, co-created outdoor arts works, including the parade pieces by Global Grooves (MCR), Pau Reig and Dolors Sans (CAT) and shows co-created by Company Chameleon with Clémentine & Lisard, and Ghetto Fabulous with Xavi Palamino
- 1 new music collaboration, by Werkha and Queralt Lahoz

Audiences and communities

- An estimated 1m+ audiences attending La Mercè venues or events involving Manchester artists
- 50 community participants engaged, including 30 from Manchester and 20 from Barcelona

Industry programme

- 4 networking events including an informal dinner, an afternoon tea at the British Consulate, a Creative Sector Reception and an informal drinks event
- 1 day of Industry panel sessions, including 2 panel discussions and 1 artist pitching session
- 101 UK, Catalan and other international delegates attended the industry panel day

International partnerships

- 9 key UK organisations: XTRAX, Without Walls, Manchester Music City, Brighter Sound, Manchester City Council, Arts Council England, Unlimited, British Embassy (Consulate), British Council
- 6 key Catalan partners: Barcelona City Council (ICUB); Catalan Arts (and their various divisions which included Generalitat de Catalonia and SDE); Institute Ramon Llull, Institute of Arts Barcelona (IAB), British Council in Spain, Consulate in Barcelona

Artists' & Creatives' Outcomes

The Manchester Guest City programme delivered clear artistic and organisational benefits by significantly **expanding international exposure for participating Manchester artists**, 86% of whom were presenting the specific work in Spain for the first time and 57% who had never toured the piece internationally. Artists described the current context of international touring as difficult due to costs, constrained UK funding, post-Brexit bureaucracy, and sustainability pressures. Against this backdrop, the Guest City programme helped to rebuild confidence in post-Brexit European touring through practical demonstration that mobility barriers can be navigated. 69% of artists reported increased awareness of overseas opportunities and greater confidence in securing them.



The Ultimate Player's Handbook by Company Chameleon and Clémentine&Lisard © Ivan Wadeson

The programme stimulated meaningful relationship-building, particularly through informal events. **New connections** were strongest within the UK cohort and among Catalan peers, reflecting the density of these stakeholder groups onsite. Companies reported raising their profile in both the UK and Catalonia. Outcomes with wider international promoters were more limited because the international delegate pool was relatively small.

Collaboration sat at the heart of the programme, a clear advance on earlier Guest Cities at La Mercè. Co-creation was embedded not only in the street arts, but also in the music and parade strands, producing a sense of shared ownership rather than a one-way presentation.



This time, there was real collaboration, not just presenting artists.

Catalan Delivery Partner



Over half the companies collaborated directly with Catalan partners, involving 61 Catalan and 58 Manchester artists. For many, this was their first substantial international co-production, and the experience was characterised by high trust and described as culturally balanced.

The festival scale, the quality of audiences, and the cultural exchange context helped **raise artistic ambitions and innovation**. Many companies (63%) described the experience as leading to innovation and expanding their artistic practice. Even more artists (85%) reported raised ambition for future collaborations and readiness to tour internationally. Catalan traditions and public-festival dynamics stimulated new creative thinking, and the programme reinforced the importance of embedding inclusive practice when touring abroad.

The Manchester cohort was intentionally diverse, including a very high proportion of Global Majority lead artists (43%) and some representation of disabled, neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, and varied-age performers. Catalan partners repeatedly highlighted this as a visible point of UK leadership, and international delegates indicated that it increased their willingness to commission diverse UK work. **For participating artists from under-represented backgrounds, the programme delivered a clear boost in profile and recognition.**

Placemaking & Civic Outcomes

The Manchester Guest City programme generated strong placemaking and civic benefits by **elevating the international reputation of both Manchester and the UK outdoor arts sector** through a highly visible, high-quality, inclusive showcase at one of Europe's largest civic festivals, thus helping to reposition perceptions of UK culture as modern, diverse, collaborative, and tourable post-Brexit. Stakeholders highlighted the scale of the showcase *"it's the biggest UK outdoor arts programme at an international festival in a long time"* (UK Delivery Organisation) while the programme also demonstrated Manchester's 'proof of capacity' to lead complex international cultural projects.

Manchester's profile as a dynamic, creative tourist destination was enhanced. The symbol of the bee provided a coherent and memorable identity across the programme, helping it to stand out within a tradition-rich festival. *"It helped create that iconic status"* (Artistic Company).



Bee for Barcelona with Cllr Bev Craig, Leader, Manchester City Council © XTRAX

Prior familiarity with Manchester among audiences was limited (only 19% had visited), but the festival experience shifted sentiment in a positive direction: 83% of surveyed attendees said the work made them more likely to visit Manchester. Media monitoring recorded 270 positive mentions across Spanish, Catalan, UK, and international outlets, alongside significant digital reach. While some stakeholders felt onsite marketing could have been stronger, overall visibility was judged high compared with previous Guest City editions, collectively strengthening the city's cultural identity abroad.

At the civic level, the **project 'turbocharged' relations between Manchester and Barcelona.** City councils and cultural institutions collaborated smoothly, supported by strong political buy-in and a signed Memorandum of Understanding, building trust:

The sincerity and commitment, the investment and care in the cultural collaborations prepares the ground for other collaborations in other business areas. It allows us to go deeper, it builds trust.

UK Strategic/funding partner

Stakeholders noted that the programme helped reposition Manchester as an equal European peer and broadened the UK's international identity beyond London. This new civic capital is already **catalysing wider cross-sector and policy conversations** – around trade, digital innovation, housing and regional strategy – with momentum towards formalised cooperation. Thereby, it also demonstrates how outdoor arts can function as effective *"show, not tell"* soft-power (UK International Relations Organisation): building citizen-level connection that creates conditions for broader international partnership working.

Audience & Community Outcomes



Left to right: Joe Manning, Managing Director, MIDAS; Pau Reig, Artist; Dolores Sans, Artist; Xavier Marcé, Councillor for Culture and Creative Industries, Barcelona; Jordi Valls, Fourth Deputy Mayor, Area of Economy, Housing, Finance and Tourism, Barcelona; Cllr Bev Craig, Leader, Manchester City Council; Cllr Garry Bridges, Deputy Leader, Manchester City Council; Dave Moutrey, Director of Creative Industries and Culture, Manchester City Council; Anna Lleó Albà, Cap departament de Festes, Festivals i Esdeveniments, Barcelona; Lloyd Milen MBE, Consul General, British Consulate General, Barcelona; Rebecca Wignall, Principle Policy Officer, Manchester City Council; Esteve Caramés, Director Programes Culturals, Barcelona

Audiences and communities experienced the Guest City programme as a vibrant, welcoming addition to La Mercè that **deepened appreciation of Manchester’s creativity and cultural diversity**. Performances and parades were rated very highly, helped to reframe Manchester as contemporary and multicultural, and left most attendees curious about the city: 88% wanted to discover more about Manchester culture while 95% felt Manchester added something unique to La Mercè. By thoughtfully adapting work with bilingual or locally resonant elements and weaving Manchester traditions into Catalan contexts – especially through shared themes and symbolism of fire or demons – **the programme fostered cross-cultural understanding** between the two cities at a time when Brexit has made UK work less visible in Europe: *“It allows me to see shows from a different point of view and helps me break mental frames that we believe are universal”* (Audience Member).

The visibly inclusive artistic cohort and participatory projects also **expanded representation in Barcelona’s public celebrations, enabling under-represented local audiences to see themselves on stage and in parades**. It strengthened community pride and belonging, and some stakeholders felt that it encouraged more inclusive programming practice at La Mercè.

“**People felt well represented.**”
Catalan Delivery Partner

Creative Sector Outcomes

International creative sector representatives benefitted from the Guest City programme as a **platform for both networking and professional learning**: industry events brought together a strong mix of UK, Catalan and wider international peers, leading to clear growth in international connections – especially with UK artistic companies, but also with Catalan artists and other delegates – supporting future collaboration and exchange. The panel programme was rated highly (with sessions rated between 4.2 and 4.5 out of 5) and enabled rich, cross-cultural dialogue. 89% of participants reported **increased understanding of inclusion, representation, and access challenges in outdoor arts**. Manchester and UK practice was widely recognised as a leader in inclusive public-space programming and 87% of attendees felt that concrete models and ideas to address challenges were advanced:

“**Because of the knowledge that exists in Manchester around key issues such as access and inclusion, we could not let pass the opportunity.**”
Catalan Delivery Partner

While a few participants wanted more space for more ‘difficult’ sector debates (*“we perhaps skirted around the difficult conversation and where there are big challenges and what work still needs to be done”*, Panellist) the overall professional development impact was clearly positive.

Medium Term Impact: The Project Legacy



Although the evaluation window was too short to measure medium-term change directly, stakeholders anticipate a clear legacy: sustained UK-Catalan collaborations and reciprocal showcases (notably a Catalan return programme for Manchester Day 2026), emerging touring pipelines and co-production conversations for Manchester artists, and even prospects for tri-city links with future guest cities.

Civic partners expect Manchester's reputation to consolidate as a trusted, high-capacity European cultural peer, with the Manchester Guest City programme at La Mercè setting a new standard for relationship-led international exchange and opening pathways into wider trade, investment and policy cooperation with Barcelona and Catalonia.

At community and sector level, follow-on heritage and participation projects (e.g., Global Grooves' collaboration with stick dancers from Morris and Indian dance traditions), the continuing symbolic presence of Manchester's bee figures in Barcelona's festival memory, and professional learning around inclusive, accessible and sustainable festival practice are all expected to ripple forward – potentially increasing representation of under-represented artists and influencing how both cities design future civic and cultural programmes.

Factors of Success & Project Limitations: Lessons Learned

The programme's success was driven by several factors that provide key learning points for future city-to-city, creative-led collaborations, such as through guest city programmes:

- **Long-standing relationships and trust** between Manchester and Catalan partners created credibility and shared commitment.
- **A strong shared curatorial and civic vision** ensured coherence, high programme quality and shifted the model from 'presentation' to 'collaboration'.
- **Deep cultural understanding and sensitivity, as well as a commitment to reciprocity** built mutual respect and rich co-creation, respecting Catalan traditions while contributing something new.
- **Strong leadership and experienced teams** led to a highly professional delivery supported by clear logistics and good communication.
- **High-level institutional buy-in and robust funding** and resourcing from bodies like Arts Council England, Manchester City Council, the British Council and the British Embassy/Consulate made the ambition and scale feasible.
- **The favourable timing and strategic context**, including heightened attention in Barcelona during MONDIACULT and a post-Brexit appetite for city partnerships, increased institutional commitment.
- **Strong audience engagement** in prime festival settings amplified impact for artists and communities.

Limitations were relatively minor but included capacity and time pressures (especially for Catalan teams stretched by the scale of collaboration), some friction between La Mercè's civic-festival priorities and UK ambitions for industry-marketplace style engagement, some under-developed links with non-core partners, occasional gaps in administrative clarity and single-point communication, and a few scheduling choices that placed physical strain on artists.

Overall, Manchester's Guest City programme at La Mercè delivered a high-visibility cultural partnership with clear artistic, reputational, audience, professional and diplomatic value. It renewed international pathways for artists, re-positioned Manchester in the European imagination, and strengthened a city-to-city relationship now expected to expand into future cultural and civic collaboration. As one stakeholder concluded, the programme established a benchmark for what guest-city work can be when it is genuinely co-authored.

This is the new standard

UK Strategic/Funding Partner

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