

CHAPTER 9

Festive Space and Dream Worlds: Christmas in London

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Introduction

Mark Connelly, in his social history of Christmas, begins by arguing that Christmas is ‘England’s single greatest cultural export’ (2012, iv). Though aware that modern day Christmas finds its roots across Europe (McKay 2008) and draws on a range of local Pagan and Christian traditions (Miller 1993), Connelly argues that the Victorian period saw a search for and consolidation of uniquely English literature, myths, stories and practices that have since come to define Christmas across the world. Rather than the commonplace argument that the Victorians invented Christmas, Connelly, much like Storey (2008), suggests they were instead concerned that the ritual was dying out and ‘conserved’ and ‘revived’ rather than originated an entirely new set of customs and practices. Against the backdrop of rapid social and economic changes such as urbanisation, commercialisation, and industrialisation the Victorians became, for Connelly, ‘obsessed’ with finding and compiling English customs from the past in order to save this annual festival. This endeavour was especially driven by the desire to unearth and maintain ancient customs unsullied by excessive commercialism and modernity. The emerging materialism associated with

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Christmas in the Victorian period, the pantomimes, shop window displays and shopping itself, thus came to be legitimated by the 'aura' and 'antiquity' of Christmas.

Connelly's (2012) account raises two key points for this chapter. Firstly, rather than searching for some fixed, originary truth to Christmas, his argument reminds us that Christmas has long been a compilation of different myths, stories, traditions and rituals. It has also been celebrated, and indeed ignored, in different ways across time. Second, and related to this point, debates about commercialisation, authenticity and the legitimacy of certain practices are not unique to contemporary culture. While bearing these two points in mind, this chapter argues that we have recently seen an intensification and expansion of activity around the festive period, in both spatial and temporal terms. Despite frequent claims that there is a 'war on Christmas', one being fought by those wishing to remove the sacred nature of the festival from the public realm (Feldman 1997; Davis 2010), Christmas is now an integral part of London's entertainment and tourist offer. Christmas Day itself remains a predominantly domestic and family occasion in London, as it does across the UK, but the months leading up to Christmas have now become a period of much cultural activity in the capital. According to data from the 2015 Day Visits Survey, for example, during the month of December, London received 32.7 million day visitors¹, an increase of 18.5 per cent in comparison with the month of November and a 29 per cent increase over January and February. Even more strikingly, overnight domestic visits to London were up by 59 per cent in December 2015 in comparison with November, January and February of the same year². In a report by the New West End Company (NWECC 2016), in the Business Improvement District covering Regent and Oxford Streets, footfall during the festive period was projected to be 30 per cent higher than at other times of the year, while passenger figures to nearby tube stations typically increase by between 20 and 40 per cent. In the six weeks preceding Christmas, West End shops' till receipts were also forecast to rise by £2.34 billion, and employment by some 4,500 to cater for increased footfall and extended opening hours (NWECC 2016).

Other chapters focus on the spatial expansion of tourism; this chapter highlights the way tourism has also extended temporally – into different parts of the year (November–January) and into different times of the day (after dark). The turning on of the Christmas lights on Oxford and Regent Streets in London's shopping heart begins a period that is now characterised by office parties, lighting displays across other shopping streets, Christmas themed pantomimes, films, plays and ballets, Winter Wonderland in Hyde Park, Christmas carols and the lighting of the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square, Winterville on Clapham Common, Winter Festival on the South Bank and the opening of numerous temporary ice rinks. Theme parks such as Warner Brothers' Harry Potter World have their own Christmas themed displays and then there are the extended shopping hours, Boxing Day sales, mulled wine in many pubs and bars, the media focus on the Christmas number one single, and the fireworks festival

on New Year's Eve. Other festivals such as Diwali and Bonfire Night, the more recent addition of Lumiere to the cultural calendar (an illumination festival held in January), and in some cases the celebration of Chinese New Year (Bell 2009), effectively extend Christmas festivities and other cultural events from November to early February. While we can only speculate as to what extent these events, both secular and sacred, from 'here' and elsewhere, represent London's diversity, they do indicate the ways London's Christmas offer mirrors that cobbling-together found in the Victorian period. In turn, we now have a period of several months, all under the auspices of Christmas, that brings together and celebrates a range of different events, traditions, and ways of experiencing the city.

This chapter starts by exploring the history and leverage of Christmas. How this annual ritual has developed and expanded, and the extent to which it has become an important component of London's tourism offer is examined. Its status as a liminal time-space, distinct from the everyday, leads us into a discussion of theming and the wider issue of authenticity and the staging of cultural events for commercial purposes. While, as indicated above, debates about the commercialisation of Christmas are not new, the extent to which these concerns intersect with more recent debates about the privatisation of public space points to an important theme of this chapter (see also Chapter 10). Christmas in London now takes place across a number of private, public, and semi-private spaces. As well as the Christmas lights in central London often being tied in with Hollywood films, large parts of the city's semi-public spaces such as Hyde Park, Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square, and the South Bank become heavily commercial, featuring themed markets, ice-rinks and lighting displays. Many of these events, as explored below, are also commissioned or directly managed by partnerships between local councils and Business Improvement Districts; business-led organisations covering specific geographical areas. After exploring these debates, the discussion turns to more recent work on illumination and the production of Christmas 'atmosphere'. What we find is a very different type of night-time economy developing over this period; similar in terms of the commercial focus and use of alcohol, but quite distinct in terms of being more family-focused and embedded in discourses of pleasure, ritual and tradition. The chapter, in summary, explores the expansion of London's Christmas offer and, echoing Connelly (2012), suggests we are not so much witnessing an entirely new series of behaviours and practices here, but rather an expansion, deepening, and consolidation of both Christmas rituals and debates about the 'proper' meaning of Christmas.

Christmas Spirit and Leveraging

The Christmas experience is multi-sensual and multi-sensory, from the smell of mulled wine to the tactile feeling of unwrapping gifts (Makulski 2015).

Evidence from the UK Office for National Statistics even suggests that Christmas is the most popular time of the year to conceive (BBC News, 2015). The sensuous (Crouch and Desforges, 2003) and embodied (Jokinen and Veijola, 1994) nature of Christmas celebration is therefore key to understanding this annual festival. Hedonistic consumption, including shopping, drinking and eating to excess, plays an important role, often explained by reference to the elusive notion of 'Christmas spirit'. Clarke, in his analysis of the meaning of this concept, defines Christmas spirit as an attitude involving 'a combination of bonhomie, dejected and gay abandon feelings', which is further associated with goodwill, generosity and altruism (2007, 10). In parts of the world where Christmas is widely celebrated, such as Europe and the USA, most businesses and voluntary organisations attempt to leverage the sense of celebration linked to Christmas, and to benefit from association with the 'Christmas spirit'.

The concept of event leveraging refers to those activities that are planned around an event by a sponsor or a host region to maximise potential positive outcomes (Chalip 2004). Chalip's analysis (2006) is very relevant to our discussion, as it links the opportunity for leveraging events with their 'sense of celebration' and 'sense of sharing' or 'camaraderie', two important characteristics of Christmas festivities. According to Chalip (2006), effective strategies to lever the 'emotional and symbolic power' of events (Smith 2014a) include facilitating sociability and informal social opportunities, producing related ancillary events, and theming. As the remainder of this chapter highlights, all these leveraging tools are in evidence during the Christmas period in London.

Pretes (1995) illustrates how the iconic image of Santa Claus was successfully levered to promote Lapland in Finland as the 'real home' of Santa in the 1980s and 1990s. Pretes notes that the Santa Claus village in Lapland offers tourists the opportunity to consume the spirit of Christmas (and associated positive emotions linked to family and childhood) as a cultural commodity. He refers to Santa Claus as a product of the western, postmodern society of spectacle, 'a simulacrum, a copied image for which no original exists' (1995, 14), but a more contemporary analysis would highlight that authenticity is subjective, symbolic and socially constructed. Culture is not static but rather in constant development, which means that objects can become authentic over time (Cohen 1988). For example, Cluley's research (2011) shows how both children and adults suspend their disbelief in Santa in order to enjoy him as if he were real. More importantly, following Wang (1999), authenticity can be seen to be about individual experiences and the state of mind they facilitate, rather than about the actual cultural object and how it is perceived. If visiting Santa's village in Lapland, shopping in a Christmas market or taking a photo with Santa at the shopping mall can help people experience spiritual or aesthetic nourishment (Wang 1999), then that cultural experience is, indeed, authentic. Creative participation is likely to further enhance this type of 'existential authenticity' (Wang 1999): this is perhaps why many people are more likely to engage in

creative activities during the Christmas season such as decorating, drawing, crafting, acting or dressing up. Rippin's analysis of Christmas headgear at office Christmas parties (2011), for example, shows the importance of these symbolic head decorations in providing relaxation and a sense of celebration and transgression. Paper crowns, Santa hats, tinsel halos and reindeer antlers all contribute to bringing the Christmas spirit to the office and relaxing organizational rules and power structures (Rippin 2011).

Another powerful Christmas symbolic ritual is, of course, the giving of presents. Like paper crowns, gift giving may have its roots in the commemoration of the visit of the Magi (Rippin 2011). This ritual, which is key to family and work Christmas celebrations alike, is associated with Christmas values such as altruism and generosity, as well as showing love and appreciation for each other (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). Gift giving naturally results in shopping, which we explore in more depth below.

Shopping and Commercialisation

McKay (2008) argues that Christmas brings together a range of social and commercial practices that are further shaped and informed by Western capitalism and its effects on the domestic and public realm. Like many other leisure and tourism experiences, Christmas celebrations are rich in 'habitual enactments' and 'never entirely separate from the habits of everyday life' (Edensor 2001, 61). While several authors refer to the festive season as a liminal (Nash 1981) or a carnivalesque experience (Rippin 2011; Winchester and Rofo 2005), in this chapter we frame the Christmas experience as an extension, rather than simply a suspension or inversion, of the everyday. It would be almost impossible to discuss Christmas without exploring how it has become entwined with and extends consumerist lifestyles, advertising, and shopping practices. As early as 1867, Macy's first extended its Christmas shopping hours and late openings are now ubiquitous in both the United States and the United Kingdom. For Johnes (2016) the act of giving and receiving gifts was well established by the Great War but, despite now being one of the key elements of the Christmas season, it is also heavily criticised for being a consumeristic and hedonistic activity, in contrast with the 'traditional' (Christian) Christmas ethic of altruism and generosity. Some authors have argued that Christmas was reinvented in the nineteenth century specifically to support the booming mass production economies of Europe and the USA (for example, Storey 2008). Certainly, in the Victorian era the development of mass production in Europe and North America encouraged the commercialisation of gift-giving and Christmas-themed marketing after a period (1790–1836) when Christmas was hardly mentioned at all in the media (Miller 1995). The first Christmas card dates from 1843; and by the 1860s mass production of Christmas greeting cards had become common practice (Hancock and Rehn 2011). In the following half century, iconic

Christmas imagery such as Coca Cola's Santa Claus and Harrod's Christmas shop windows in London started to represent – according to Hancock and Rehn – 'a model of global economic ambition and cultural aspiration' (2011, 738).

The tension between the religious, holy meanings of Christmas and their secular, hedonistic counterparts – referred to as the paradox of Christmas (Pimlott 1962) – has characterised much academic discussion around Christmas. Many criticise the way Christmas has developed over time into a 'global festival of production and consumption' (Hancock and Rehn 2011: 737), a 'period of self-indulgence' (Rippin 2011: 830) and the 'greatest holy day of the consumer culture' (deChant 2003, 12, cited in Bartunek and Do 2011). According to Bartunek and Do (2011), commercialism has gone through a process of sacralization whereby sacred aspects of Christmas (e.g. religious hymns, charity giving) are embedded in typically commercial venues (e.g. shopping malls, advertising). This process has made commercialism 'more prominent than the religious celebration of Christmas' and 'from a commercial standpoint, Christmas is indeed the most sacred day of the year' (Bartunek and Do 2011: 803). Truzzi (1968, cited in Cluley 2011) notes the fundamental role of Santa Claus in bridging the sacred and secular realms, while Boyer (1955, 481) goes so far as claiming that Santa has replaced 'God as the figure to be worshipped at Christmas' (cited in Culey, 2011).

Before tackling these debates in relation to the specific case of London, it is worth recalling Johnes' (2016) argument that to focus only on Christmas as a time of commercialisation ignores that society in general is already commercialised. As argued earlier, the framing of Christmas as an inversion, transgression or suspension of the everyday goes some way to explaining how it has become strongly articulated with pleasure and entertainment not available at other times of the year. However, we should not ignore how Oxford, Bond and Regent Streets, across the entire year, are dedicated to shopping, entertainment, and advertising. To single out Christmas as somehow different obscures how every other time and day of the year the capital is equally embedded in capitalist relations. Similarly, Deacy argues that complaints about the commercialisation of an otherwise sacred festival imply that 'Christianity... exists in some sort of economy-free zone' (2016, 72). Equally, and while not discounting that there is a focus on commercial activity associated with Christmas, it is notable that there is an expansion of free and accessible events occurring in London at this time. Winter Wonderland (excluding the rides), the free carols in Trafalgar Square, the elaborate window displays across Bond, Regent and Oxford Streets, the New Year's Eve fireworks, as well as concerts and live entertainment are all free to the public.

As noted earlier, debates about the commercialisation of what is otherwise a religious festival have long reverberated but have perhaps become even more intense, and are now articulated with wider issues about public space and urban development. Hannigan's (1998) notion of shoppertainment becomes especially important here. In his *Fantasy City* Hannigan lays out a typology

of shoppertainment districts in the United States. Some of these features are beyond the focus of this chapter, but the term does encapsulate how the Christmas period sees a synergy 'of form, content and structure as a key business strategy' (Hannigan, 1998, 63); a convergence, in other words, of shopping, entertainment, food, design and culture. In effect, Christmas shopping becomes more than just an act of buying, but also entails free entertainment in the form of shop windows, carols and lighting displays, alongside consuming roasted chestnuts from pavement sellers, as well as drinking mulled wine from nearby pubs. These otherwise distinct experiences merge into what Hannigan refers to as 'experiential retailing' (1998, 69), which finds its ultimate form in modern themed environments.

Theming in London's Public Spaces

Themed environments are spaces where there is a single narrative operating, where the dress, music, food, architectural and symbolic motifs coincide to tell a specific story or produce a singular atmosphere. Typically, we might think of such spaces as bounded, such as traditional theme or amusement parks. An early debate within the study of theme parks was precisely that they were typically walled off and distinct from their surroundings in economic, social and aesthetic terms (Moore 1980, cited in Hochbruck and Schlehe, 2010). As Hochbruck and Schlehe (2010) argue, this is not necessarily the case and themed spaces are no longer considered extraordinary or liminal; they are now integral to everyday life. In the case of London in the festive period, this is especially the case. While the period has an atmosphere of liminality and specific spaces accord with a traditional understanding of themed spaces, we might instead say that rather than being walled off, there is instead an intensification and expansion of Christmas motifs, food, dress as well as sounds, smells, and symbolic codes across different sites. Equally, this intensification typically occurs in areas already marked by a year-round commercial, touristic or entertainment purpose.

London's Christmas offer is not centralised in spatial or managerial terms, as it might be for a single event or, indeed, a themed park. There is a much more complex layering of disparate management structures, competition between different areas, and different intensities of Christmas-ness across the festive period. London is governed by a two-tier structure, the Greater London Authority (GLA) plus 32 borough councils and the City of London Corporation. The GLA is responsible for transport, strategic planning, policing and fire services amongst other tasks, while the local councils take responsibility for such everyday services as libraries, environmental health and waste disposal, as well as education, planning and social services. Both play an active role in promoting and celebrating Christmas, with local councils typically providing lighting and decorations for local high streets, while the GLA promotes and is

responsible for ticketing of the New Year's Eve Fireworks Festival. Westminster Council, in which Trafalgar Square is located, manages the ceremony for the lighting of the Christmas Tree gifted annually from Norway. Local shop owners, events companies, and leisure providers also provide their own decorations and events.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDS), which were introduced to England and Wales through the Local Government Act, 2003, also play a unique role. BIDS function as representatives for local businesses within a defined geographical area and businesses within those boundaries pay a levy, which is then used to fund specific projects. The largest BID is New West End Company, which includes 600 businesses across Bond Street, Regent Street and Oxford Street in central London. Other BIDS play an equally active role in partnering with other events or charitable groups, or promoting their own Christmas related events. The BID Angel London, for example, in the city's north, hosts a market on Islington Green while also providing decorations on the main retail area, Upper Street. Baker Street Quarter Partnership, the BID north of the New West End company, also hosts their own Christmas market, capitalising on the area's food offer and partners with children's charities to collect toys for underprivileged children. Fitzrovia Partnership stage their own street lighting event, while the South Bank BID promote Christmas related performances in local theatres. What we see here is rather than a single, top-down policy for Christmas, or a single theming taking place, there is a coming together of diverse political, economic and leisure groups across multiple sites. The theming of London across the Christmas period is therefore far more dispersed and subject to multiple layers of management and indeed intentions, much more so than found in a traditional themed environment.

Other debates about theming continue to remain important, however. Much has been written from a US perspective on theming, especially in terms of how it might challenge authenticity, or condense specific histories, cultures, and spatial forms into commercialised products to be consumed (Gottddiener 1997). The commercialisation of history, and the profit motive underlying it, finds accord in Miles' argument that themed environments act as 'physical manifestations of consumer society' (2010, 142). For Bryman (2004), themed shopping malls and centres serve an important function in terms of providing an alternative to home-based internet shopping, but he remains concerned by what he refers to as 'Disneyization' creeping into wider society. As we have noted these concerns are not new, but around Christmas debates about corporatisation, commercialism, and the synthesis of specific marketing strategies become especially acute.

An example that encapsulates many of the debates raised here is Winter Wonderland. First opened in 2007 by PWR Events in conjunction with the Royal Parks, Winter Wonderland takes place at the eastern end of Hyde Park, one of London's eight Royal Parks. It is one of the largest Christmas events in the capital and features over 100 rides and attractions. While it is free to enter, the

rides on offer, which include an ice-skating rink, rollercoasters, and an observation wheel, typically cost between £3 and £8. Again, the event is not entirely extraordinary in terms of its function or its location. It is located close to Park Lane as well as Oxford Street, the shopping and commercial heart of London. Hyde Park also regularly features other entertainment events, notably open-air concerts. The event represents a winter equivalent of the summer festivals that now regularly take over London's parks in the summer (see Chapter 10). The emergence of other park-based events in London, including other 'park in the dark' festive attractions such as at Kew Gardens and Chiswick House, represent a similar trend towards capitalising on an otherwise quieter time of the tourist calendar.

To date, Winter Wonderland has attracted over 14 million visitors and while this would suggest it has a wide appeal, it has also attracted controversy for the way it occupies, commercialises and is believed to 'vulgarise' a large part of a Royal Park. As Smith (2014b) suggests, staging events in public parks has attracted widespread controversy and raised concerns about commercialising otherwise public land (see Chapter 10). While bearing in mind that during the winter months the park would otherwise be closed after dusk, and thus it does expand leisure opportunities, approximately 13 per cent of the park is given over to this event with grassland needing to be cornered off after the event in order for it to regrow. Winter events are particularly damaging for parks, because the turf is less resistant to trampling and regrowth is slower, meaning that grass has to be replanted the following spring (Smith 2016).

Winter Wonderland raises many other concerns that echo the literature on themed environments, from its faux Bavarian market and focus on shopping to its confusing layout. Brida et al. (2016) remind us that people do not spend as much at Christmas markets as initially intended, suggesting either that there is nothing available that visitors wish to buy, or that themed spaces are far less successful in coercing people into parting with their earnings than some critics would suggest. Nonetheless, and while it does not feature the heavy corporate branding typically associated with themed spaces (Gottdeiner 1997), Winter Wonderland does represent a wider process occurring across London at this time; a knitting together of branding, marketing, and event-led strategies that draw upon various winter and Christmas related themes and motifs. In particular, it draws heavily on the aesthetics of a German Christmas market, a trend which has occurred across a number of markets across the capital. Christmas Markets are not unique to London, and as Brida et al. (2016) note, in 2014 there were over 154 Christmas markets and 2,634 smaller markets operating across Europe. Winter Wonderland, like Winter Festival on London's South Bank, London Bridge City Christmas Market, Christmas in Leicester Square (which started in 2016), and Winterville on Clapham Common, all draw upon symbols of traditional Bavarian/German Christmas markets from wooden chalets and artisan toys, to Bavarian sausages and beers. It is worth noting that these markets do not present only a crude staging of German culture, however; vegan

pizzas and Mexican burritos are sold alongside Lebkuchen biscuits and Glühwein, with the music of Michael Jackson playing alongside more traditional Christmas carols.

Explaining the current fashion for Bavarian markets is complex, but Pitcher's (2014) argument in his *Consuming Race* is worth noting. He argues that the recent proliferation of 'Scandinavia cool' and all things Nordic in British culture, while not racially motivated in crude terms, represent 'ethnically appropriate' forms of consumption in a complex and global city. Spaces such as Winter Wonderland and other Christmas markets are not racially exclusive, but they are racially coded in the sense that their symbolic reference points privilege a very narrow imagining of what Christmas is and what it allegedly once was. With Christmas having become marketed through foods, music, weather patterns, and other symbols of northern Europe, the popularity of Bavarian-style markets rests on an assumed cultural and historical affinity with all things northern European. This line of argument also finds accord in Armstrong's (2008) discussion of the intricate and complex connections between German and English Christmas literature and rituals. He argues that:

the desire for German Christmas market phenomenon indicates a desire for authenticity that reveals continuing tensions between familial or emotional expectations and consumer realities, tinged with apprehensions that something that might be described as spiritual has been lost. An investment in a 'traditional' German Christmas has the potential to allay these concerns ... (Armstrong, 2008, 489).

It is not our intention here to find some original Christmas truth. Christmas is a conflation of different rituals, but the recent proliferation of festive markets with a decidedly Germanic theme does raise questions about the extent to which these events promote a less accurately cosmopolitan London, and one instead decidedly oriented towards a Christmas imagined, and appropriated, as more authentically northern European. The recent popularity of ice rinks poses similar questions, especially given the rarity of snow or freezing temperatures in the capital. While Bell (2008) frames them more in terms of entrepreneurial governance and broader cultural and leisure-led regeneration strategies, ice rinks also represent a similarly northern Europeanisation of Christmas in London.

What is perhaps most significant about the markets, fairs and ice rinks discussed here is that they clearly demonstrate the expansion of London's Christmas offer, both temporally and spatially. Parks that might otherwise be closed or areas not otherwise orientated towards tourism in the winter months become instead integral to the promotion and experience of Christmas in London. The cold and dark streets and parks of London in December are brought to life and become instead brightly lit, atmospheric and appealing. Dusk in London's winter occurs early in the afternoon, at approximately 3.30pm around the solstice,

so of central importance to the allure of London at this time of year is lighting. As evidenced in the now famous Lower Morden Lane in suburban south-west London (*Time Out* 2017), elaborate lighting displays occur across the capital, including, as Maitland's chapter explores, in suburbia. As well as pointing back to the sensual, atmospheric and experiential component of Christmas celebrations, lighting and illumination also turn the mundane and relatively bleak atmosphere of London's winter streets into bright, festive spaces.

Christmas Illumination

Lights have long been a fundamental part of Christmas. The tradition of decorating Christmas trees inside the home with candles (and more recently electric illuminations) originates from Germany and is probably linked to pagan celebrations of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year (Puiu 2016). In London, the most famous Christmas tree is the Norwegian spruce in Trafalgar Square: a twenty-metre tall tree donated by the country of Norway to London every year since 1947. In recent times, light displays on people's homes and gardens have also become popular, 'producing a particular geography of Christmas illumination' and attracting criticism from the media for being 'immodest' and 'tacky' (Edensor and Millington 2009, 104). It is public illuminations, however, that really contribute to the development of a magic Christmasscape, engaging tourists and residents alike in an aesthetic Christmas experience.

One of the first streets to ever set up a Christmas light display was Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, USA in the 1920s. The street took advantage of the local cinema industry to provide an elaborate display and temporarily renamed itself 'Santa Claus Lane' (Isenstadt 2015). Visitors were astounded: 'you would blink your eyes and believe yourself transported to some other planet... in a new world, modern, splendid, gloriously illuminated with winking, colored lights' (Wilcox 1936 cited in Isenstadt 2015, 53). It took a few decades for this invented Christmas tradition to be exported to Europe. Selfridges, the iconic London department store, provided an illumination display as early as 1935 (*The Guardian* 2007). However, public Christmas illuminations of shopping streets did not appear in London until 1954 when the local association of retailers and businesses of Regent Street decided to provide this type of display for the first time in London (BBC News 1997; Johnes 2016). This initiative was such a success that the House of Lords tried to discipline the organisers for causing chaos and obstruction (BBC News 1997). Although this practice went through times of decline (it was, for example, interrupted in the late 1960s/70s for financial reasons), Christmas illuminations have now grown in popularity and have become a fixed feature of most British shopping streets during the festive season.

In London, the most famous and elaborate light displays are those in the West End, particularly Regent Street, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, Carnaby



Figure 9.1: Regent Street Decorated with Lanterns and Christmas Trees in 1954 (Photo: John Maltby/RIBA Collections).

Street and Bond Street. Other shopping districts provide Christmas illuminations, including Hampstead, South Kensington, South Bank, Camden, Marylebone and Kingston. These are funded by local councils, as well as partnerships between different groups, such as events companies and Business Improvement Districts. A number of tour companies now offer guided (walking, cycling or bus) tours of Christmas illuminations. As Linden and Linden (2016) note, lights generate excitement and guide the (shopping) way, while a dark street at Christmas is perceived as uninteresting and un-happening. Light displays in non-shopping locations are less common, but in the past few years the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens have organised a (ticketed) illumination event featuring botanic-themed light installations, a fire show and music. This event is aimed at drawing visitors to a prominently spring and summer attraction, thus further extending London's offer into the colder off-season months and into the night. Each year in November Christmas lights 'switch on' events are also staged all over London, to signal the (early) start of the shopping season and enhance the sense of celebration. These 'family-friendly' street festivals generally involve music and celebrities who are invited to 'switch on' the Christmas illuminations (Bell 2009). In 2016, Oxford Street became traffic free throughout the day for the switch on event on 6th November. Regent Street provided a 'toy parade' sponsored by the famous Hamleys toy shop which was allegedly attended by 750,000 people, despite the cold weather (Evening Standard 2016). Switch on events can also be used to promote charitable causes or raise awareness of social issues. For example, in 2016, Berwick Street in Soho used the switch on event to raise awareness about plans to privatise the local street market (Linden and Linden 2016).

Christmas illumination displays have been accused of being environmentally irresponsible, certainly a reasonable argument considering, for example, that the carbon footprint of the Oxford Street and Regent Street Christmas lights alone would take each year over 200 trees (and 100 years) to offset (Evening Standard 2006). As a consequence of the amount of energy they consume as well as production costs, Christmas illuminations are also very expensive. Depending on the location, costs are usually borne by local authorities, local businesses (often through a Business Improvement District or similar partnership scheme) and sponsors. Local authorities, however, are increasingly reducing funding due to budget restrictions, and even local retailers have occasionally opted out due to doubts about the actual impact on Christmas sales (Linden and Linden 2016). Corporate sponsorships have become a popular option to help with the cost of illuminations in shopping precincts with high footfall. Despite complaints that sponsored lights are too commercial and vulgar, prompting attempts by architects from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to improve their design (Linden and Linden 2016), corporate sponsors have now become an accepted feature of illuminations in central London. Partnerships with charitable and cultural organisations have also been developed, including children's charity NSPCC (Oxford Street lights in 2016), the Royal Opera House (Covent

Garden switch on event in 2016) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (Carnaby Street lights in 2016). Associations with cultural institutions and charities are perhaps more likely to be welcomed by the public, as they may be perceived as more consistent with traditional Christmas values (generosity, family, altruism) and the cultural fabric of a place.

While Christmas illuminations such as Christmas tree decorations, candles and fairy lights are a traditional feature of family Christmas rituals inside the home, what makes public street illuminations and switch on events particularly notable is their role in leveraging the Christmas spirit. They encourage a sense of celebration and create an appealing atmosphere in public spaces. Edensor's work on the role of light, darkness and light events in the creation of atmosphere (Edensor 2012; 2015) is particularly helpful here. Atmosphere is produced by a variety of tangible and intangible factors, including other people, light, sounds, architecture, sensations and representations (Edensor 2015). Research conducted in London's East End, for example, found that the presence of other people was as important as the quality of the urban environment, if not more, in the creation of an appealing atmosphere for visitors (Pappalepore et al. 2014). In this sense, atmosphere is co-created and 'prosumed' by space users. Therefore, the fact that Christmas light displays and switch on events draw visitors and residents to specific public spaces during the festive season is very important in developing that sense of celebration and conviviality sought by retailers and hospitality businesses during this crucial shopping season. But light itself is also a very powerful producer of atmosphere, as exemplified by the use of light in landscape gardens (Böhme 1993) and cathedrals of light (Edensor 2015). Illuminations enrich space with 'oneiric and phantasmagoric qualities' (Edensor 2012, 1107), thus actively contributing to the Christmas spirit atmosphere, which combines elements of dream, emotions and nostalgia (Clarke 2007).

Christmas illumination displays and Christmas light events are also important as they provide the kind of family-friendly nocturnal entertainment that can contribute to extending the urban leisure experience into the night for a wider range of audiences. This is consistent with the London Mayor's vision to enhance the city's night-time economy and improve the experience of the city at night for its users (GLA 2017). As part of this vision, a 'Night Czar' was appointed to nurture London's night-time economy and night-time transportation was improved including for the first time a 24-hour underground service. In his 2017 '24 hour London Vision', the new London Mayor highlighted the importance of decorative illuminations and the use of 'Nuit Blanches' (white nights) as tools to achieve his objectives (GLA 2017). The second edition of the Lumiere (white night) festival in London took place in January 2018, further extending the festive season to an otherwise quieter month for tourism. Light Night events – including Nuit Blanches, Lumiere festivals, late night and light art festivals – have grown in popularity around the world thanks to their potential to attract visitors, produce a festive atmosphere and change image perceptions of places in decline (Jiwa et al. 2009). In the UK, such events have also



Figure 9.2: Winter Lights – An Annual Light Festival staged at Canary Wharf every January (Photo: Andrew Smith).

been developed as part of a drive to make city centres at night more inclusive and offer a more appealing alternative to mass drinking (Evans 2012).

These night events have drawn criticism, largely for promoting a passive engagement with ‘spectacle’ rather than active participation in the arts (Mercer and Mayfield 2015). This view is certainly debatable in the case of light night events and Christmas events, which, on the contrary, tend to be a participative type of event often involving interactive and multi-sensory installations. If we look at illuminations as just one of the many elements contributing to the production of a Christmas atmosphere, which also include other people and conviviality, the taste of mulled wine and roasted chestnuts, and Christmas music playing in the shops, then the spectacle of lights becomes part of a multi-sensory and convivial leisure experience. The use of illumination ‘has the potential to re-enchant everyday life and ordinary spaces’ (Edensor, 2015: 343); spaces which, certainly in the winter months, would otherwise be less attractive for locals and tourists.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have explored the ways Christmas-themed events and spaces in London continue to expand, extend and intensify tourism and the tourist

experience. The festive season, which now begins in November and extends through to January, plays a key role in drawing visitors to the capital during an otherwise slow season. Thanks to the proliferation of newly created Christmas rituals such as Black Friday, the lighting 'switch on events', Diwali and Lumiere markets and light festivals, the duration of the Christmas season has now been extended to last well beyond December. Alongside the usual Dickens stories, modern romantic Christmas films such as *Love Actually* (2003) and *The Holiday* (2006) have also played a role in attracting international visitors keen to experience London's Christmas atmosphere. In addition to drawing more visitors to London, Christmas contributes to extending the times when residents and tourists experience the city. Temporary themed spaces such as Christmas markets, ice rinks and night illuminations all provide entertainment into the evening; a time, particularly during the winter season, when London would be typically dominated by less family friendly leisure activities such as dining out, drinking and clubbing. Similarly, special events such as Christmas at Kew in the Royal Kew Gardens and Winter Wonderland in Hyde Park provide themed tourist attractions in green spaces that would otherwise be closed to the public at night.

Christmas in London offers expanding opportunities for leisure and sociability in what otherwise would be the quieter months but 'how' the festive period is celebrated has attracted controversy. The way in which Christmas values such as generosity, gift giving and conviviality are leveraged by commercial businesses to increase sales is widely criticised for turning a holy event into a 'global festival of production and consumption' (Hancock and Rehn 2011, 737). Similar to other large events (see Chalip 2006; Smith 2014a), leveraging tactics such as facilitating sociability, producing related ancillary events, and theming are used to leverage the emotional and symbolic power of Christmas. Christmas illuminations for instance, which were created with the intent of encouraging spending in the first place, are now being designed to meet the specifications of sponsors. Another consequence of the commercialisation of Christmas is the proliferation of Christmas-themed markets in public spaces, which is seen by some as an unwelcome occupation of public space (thus reducing rather than extending visitors' and residents' public space experiences in the city). However, contemporary society is already commercialised, and although criticism is important, a more comprehensive analysis of this complex global phenomenon is needed. As alluded to in our introduction, London's great strength, its diversity and multiculturalism, has shaped and informed the ways the festive months are now celebrated and marked. The Diwali festival to the Chinese New Year, and all that occurs in between, are now a fundamental part of the city's offer. And though, as noted above, the coding of Christmas via uniquely northern European symbols and codes at Winter Wonderland and other Christmas Markets perhaps does not do justice to London's diversity, they are components of a greater whole where the secular, sacred, commercial and free events come together. Christmas traditions,

far from having solely religious origins, have always comprised pagan and Christian rituals, symbols and behaviours. And while commercial aspects have certainly intensified in the last century, spiritual aspects such as giving, spending time with family, self-reflection and religious rituals are still important. Meanwhile, creative activities such as the production of Christmas plays and costumes, cooking and crafting of decorations, may contribute to enhancing a form of existential authenticity (Wang 1999), thus further contributing to enhancing the Christmas experience. Themed spaces and events, rather than providing a suspension of the everyday, facilitate the enhancement of everyday rituals such as conviviality, shopping and a multi-sensory, multi-sensual experience of the city. Many leveraging tactics seen as merely commercial and exploitative – such as Christmas markets, illuminations and ancillary events – also provide free entertainment and contribute to the development of a Christmas atmosphere. The expansion and intensification of Christmas in London has therefore led to some new, and some rather more dated, concerns, but it has also enabled the expansion of the tourist season well into otherwise quieter months and added to the capital's tourism offer.

Notes

- ¹ Non-routine leisure day visits of at least 3 hours. Data available from <https://gbdayvisitslightengland.kantar.com/ViewTable.aspx>. Data for 2016 was not available at the time of writing.
- ² Data from the Great Britain Visits survey 2015, available from <https://www.visitbritain.org/online-data-browser>. Data for overseas visitors is only available quarterly for London. 2016 data was not yet available at the time of writing.

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