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Never mind the quality, feel the width

Having touched down and shaken off the jet lag, Martyn Allison offers some personal reflections of New York and New Jersey, wondering all the while what lessons the UK sport, leisure and culture sector might learn from the American experience.

As I was heading for New York the editor suggested that I check out progress of the High Line (more of which later) but after only a few days I could not resist the opportunity for a wider reflection of this much-promoted, much-loved city and America in general.

I have visited America before and always been sceptical of what it offers but I set off open-minded never the less. We were spending six days in the city and two in more suburban New Jersey at a wedding, a chance to observe and digest the American way of life albeit from the tourist bubble.

Above all, this is a wonderful, exciting city. Five or six days is the minimum to soak up just the big sites: Time Square, the Rockefeller Center, Central Park, the 9/11 memorial, Wall Street, the waterfront and, of course, the High Line. Then there is the food: pizza, burgers, ribs and beer; lots of beer. It is a friendly city and I always felt safe, perhaps because cops are everywhere, visible and accessible.

But there is something under the surface of this glitz that worries me. There is a culture, a set of behaviours driven by values that for me rub against what you see; a culture that leaves me nervous and wondering why the UK continues to aspire to import these same values and behaviours and describes it as progress.

Despite all the hype, poverty and inequality are very visible, not only in the usual way in terms of homelessness but also in a sense of desperation that is written on people's faces and in their conversations. People have to work long hours for low pay and are frightened about being ill. We saw numerous individuals campaigning about losing their jobs as a result of ill-health. During our visit the police shot a woman in Washington following a chase round the city; her young child was in the back of the car. The woman's former employer calmly reported that he "had to let her go" because following a fall her behaviour towards his clients had become unacceptable. I can now see why improving access to health care matters so much to Obama and why hardline Republicans dislike any attempt to remove the fear of ill-health as it seems to drive both the existing economic and social order.

The fear of change on this issue is so strong that it has stopped the government from functioning and I was shocked to find that the country that lectures the world on democracy can end up with the party that was not elected stopping the party that was elected from doing what it was elected to do. It has made me realise even more the importance of the NHS and why it must be protected at all cost from similar minority rightwing movements in the UK who aspire to the American model of privatised services funded by health insurance rather than taxation.

While building my career in leisure, I was repeatedly pointed towards the United States as the exemplar for good customer service. The customer always comes first and you must always "have a nice day". I have to report that this is a myth; service is no better and in many ways

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it is worse. The model has been built on a platform of very low wages with an expectation of a huge 20% tip for even the basic service, income that people need simply to live. Some people we met had been chased after leaving a dinner and challenged for not leaving a tip even though they had complained about the food and service. There is also a lot of commission-based selling, which does nothing for integrity and honesty. Asking questions about the bus tour we had bought from one of at least 250 sales reps in Time Square, the guide on the bus simply laughed, saying, "Oh don't believe them, they just lie." So using the excuse of the recession and austerity to drive down wage levels and introduce a similar incentive-based culture in the UK may reduce cost but from what I have seen it will not improve quality so let's think hard before importing it.

So what else other than the fear of ill-health and not getting your tip or commission adds to this sense of desperation?

The unrestricted and unregulated use of the car has created a nightmare of monster proportions. You cannot move quickly in this city and at times not at all. It has created environmental conditions and driving behaviours that are frightening; I have never heard so many horns used continuously in frustration and rage. But surely it must be different outside the city. We briefly left New York for a wedding in Ramsey, New Jersey and found a different set of behaviours emanating from the car. Having walked the town for about an hour, my son and I suddenly realised we had not seen another single person walking. Nobody walks anywhere; not to the shops, the bar or the diner. Even the banks have huge car parks and drive-through cash machines. Three or more very large vehicles are found on most drives and when we asked if the trend to import smaller European cars was reducing engine sizes we were not surprised to find that this was not the case, with snow the main excuse for both big cars and big engines. The car has created a lifestyle that is not healthy and anyone opposed to controlling the car in the UK should come to the US to see where it will lead. They would change their minds and quickly.

Much has been made about the obesity problem and the health implications in this city. I am not sure I spotted a huge difference between NYC and London in people's shape and size but maybe that is because we are catching them up fast. Diets do not look healthy, particularly with lots of after-work eating of the wrong types of food, but what is more obvious is that people in New York work very long hours. During our subway trips in and out of Manhattan we were surrounded by many exhausted individuals. I am left to conclude that it is overall lifestyle that may be the big killer here and in the UK if we focus on exercise alone without looking holistically at lifestyle we may be missing the boat.

What is clear is that the counterbalance to these lifestyle issues is accessibility to fantastic parks and open spaces, including a wide variety of sport and leisure activities within them. Central Park is fantastic and used incredibly well by all communities, not just the members of the rich list who surround it. The quality of maintenance is high, and development and improvement continues despite the recession. Regeneration is creating many new spaces equally as important as Central Park and equally as loved by locals and visitors alike.

Having been asked to check on progress of the High Line, we duly obliged. Read the editor's article if you do not know the High Line's background but simply put it is a former disused high-level railway line converted to a park. It is fantastic, not only for its environmental impact but as a source of tourism and local community enterprise. Locals run the catering and the gift shops; other locals use it for learning and socialising. It sits above the hustle of busy streets like some temple providing solace. I can well imagine the challenge for the community to

retain this piece of valuable real estate as a park but this bold decision has certainly paid off.

Then there is Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan. Running, walking, fishing, playgrounds, golf, volleyball, skateboarding are all to be found across the street from Wall Street and the World Trade Centre Memorial. In fact all the former dockland area and former warehouses on the west coast of the island have been given over to leisure in all its forms, including a multi-sport after-school club and a trapeze school.

Across the river from Manhattan is a new project, the Brooklyn Bridge Park, that is equally exciting. The park is still under development but again the former warehouse sites are now football and volleyball pitches, a "pop-up swimming pool" and many playgrounds, all joined up by landscaped walkways. Local artists are making a pitch to convert an empty warehouse to artist studios and already the regeneration has attracted restaurants and a fantastic Sunday food market. Although big in scale, it has a real local community feel, making it potentially very sustainable for locals and visitors alike. And a note for the FA: men and women can play football together safely, very competitively and to a very high skill level. Perhaps this is something which can be imported to the UK?

Seeing these big regeneration projects, I cannot help asking what went wrong with our garden festival sites. They were one of Heseltine's better ideas and all fantastic experiences but I am sure we did not maximise their legacy. Maybe it is time for the idea to return.

It is clear that the residents of New York love their parks and open spaces, and see them as a relief from the negative effects of their lifestyles. I am sure we could do far more in the UK to see open space as a driver of economic and social change rather than a drain on the public purse, celebrating them as central to a holistic approach to health improvement.

Spectator sport is big business, dominated by the big two – baseball and American football – across all the media, just as football is dominant in the UK. I would love to see the figures for the numbers of people watching compared to those playing but watching fits ideally with the lifestyle: drive, sit, eat and get excited. Commercialisation is intense and in your face wherever you look. It is clear to see where the Premier League and football in general is heading if we continue to let it aspire to the American way. Other than the parks and open spaces, I saw little evidence of publicly provided facilities. Private fitness clubs are on every street corner but appear expensive and inaccessible to those that need them most. Although this was perhaps only a limited glimpse, I saw a UK future without public funded and accessible opportunities to participate in sport and leisure, leaving only private clubs and spectator sport. This is not a future I want to see.

So we left this great city and headed home. It has been a fantastic experience, one I would certainly recommend if you have not been, but my overall impression is a fear that we in the UK will continue to aspire for much that this city offers without thinking about the implications. Individual freedom may be great but uncontrolled and unregulated use of the car will bring chaos. The desire to create a low-wage, long-hour economy with a focus on self-reliance with no safety net creates a poor lifestyle at best and at worst a sense of fear and desperation. The place may be fantastic but the culture that sustains it is not what I would like to see in this country. Come and learn but please think before we copy.

Martyn Allison is a consultant with extensive experience of, and insight to, the sport, leisure and culture sector. He is a regular

contributor to *The Leisure Review* and other titles in the field.

Read *The Leisure Review's* 2009 report on the opening of the High Line.

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