



Future Festivals South Africa Report:  
Cape Town Carnival 2020/2021



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# Cape Town Carnival 2020/2021 Report

## Introduction

Established in 2010, the Cape Town Carnival (CTC) is a street parade that showcases and celebrates the diversity of Cape Town and South Africa. The parade usually features around two dozen elaborate floats, puppets and vehicles, 50 participating groups and almost 2000 colourful performers with 44 900 spectators lining the parade route in 2017 (SACO, 2017). This is followed by a family-friendly Carnival party which showcases prominent and emerging South African musicians. However, most of the CTC's core objectives are achieved in the months leading up to their annual spectacular. The Cape Town Carnival aims to provide opportunities for community participation in arts and culture and to promote social cohesion. Throughout the year, the Carnival creates employment opportunities and training in costume, float design and production, set-building as well as large event logistics, and has become a significant hub for these industries in the Western Cape. The Carnival helps to build networks and give a voice and visibility to a wide variety of communities while the main event itself helps to boost tourism and economic development in Cape Town with an estimated economic impact of R41.14 million in 2017 (SACO, 2017).

Around the same time that the 2020 Cape Town Carnival was due to be held, South Africa announced that a nationwide lockdown to try to curb the spread of COVID-19 would take effect from 27<sup>th</sup> March. This resulted in the immediate cancellation of the live CTC parade. Unable to hold large public gatherings or continue with their normal in person skills development and training programmes, the Cape Town Carnival transformed into a carnival without the carnival by refocusing their activities towards their main purpose - to "ignite joy and unity through creativity". The Carnival community became their audience as they completed a programme of online training workshops, discussions and performance demonstrations throughout 2020 and provided support to their communities.

The CTC is continuing to innovate and adapt to a new normal. In 2021 and 2022, the CTC intends to offer a new COVID-19 compliant live carnival format. Five carnival hubs will be strategically placed in Cape Town's city centre where live performances will be conducted for small audiences. This will be a more personal experience as audiences will be able to see the floats, costumes and performances in more detail and engage with the stories they are telling.

The "Future Festivals South Africa" project conducted some research on the Cape Town Carnival's 2020 festival edition. The research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK and looks at how South African festivals have adapted to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Researchers from King's College London and Rhodes University are collaborating on the project, with support from the South African Cultural Observatory.

## South African Festival Responses to COVID-19

Festivals have been one of the sectors most affected by COVID-19 globally. A recent national mapping study of the South African creative economy showed that the “Performance and Celebration” domain, which includes all live music, performance arts, and festivals, grew at a faster annual rate (3.4%) than the rest of the economy (1.1%) between 2016 and 2018 (SACO, 2020a). Part of the work of the Future Festivals South Africa project is to track the impact of the lockdown and social distancing measures put in place, as well as the adaptation strategies used by festivals that did continue.

Of the 214 cultural festivals mapped, the largest groups were mixed Arts and Culture festivals (43%) and Music festivals (38%), with smaller numbers of Film (9%), Literary (8%) and Comedy (2%) festivals. Of the cultural festivals that occurred in 2019, only 115 took place in 2020 (see figure 1). Approximately half of the Arts and Culture and Music festivals that occurred in 2019 were cancelled due to COVID-19. However, Film, Literary and Comedy festivals adapted quite well to the COVID-19 restrictions by mainly pivoting to online “virtual” festival formats. With only 28 festivals having occurred before lockdown, adaptation strategies included having smaller COVID-19 compliant in-person live events (17 festivals), a hybrid (online and "live") event (7 festivals) or moving online to have a "virtual" digital festival (63 events) (see figure 2).

The Western Cape Province where the Cape Town Carnival occurs, hosted 93 cultural festivals in 2019, making it home to the largest number of festivals in the country. Gauteng was the next largest hosting province with 54 cultural festivals held in 2019, followed by KwaZulu-Natal with 22 festivals, the Eastern Cape with 16 festivals while the Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and North West provinces all hosted less than 10 festivals.

Within the Western Cape, 18 festivals happened before the national lockdown began at the end of March 2020, 47 festivals were cancelled while those that did go ahead chose to go virtual (25), hybrid (3) or hosted small COVID-19 compliant live events (4). The most popular adaptation across the Western Cape and South Africa as a whole was a virtual format. Most virtual festival adaptations involved the recording and streaming of the usual festival programming (theatre, music, dance etc). The Cape Town Carnival followed this virtual festival trend but put their own unique spin on it by hosting a carnival without the usual carnival procession in 2020.

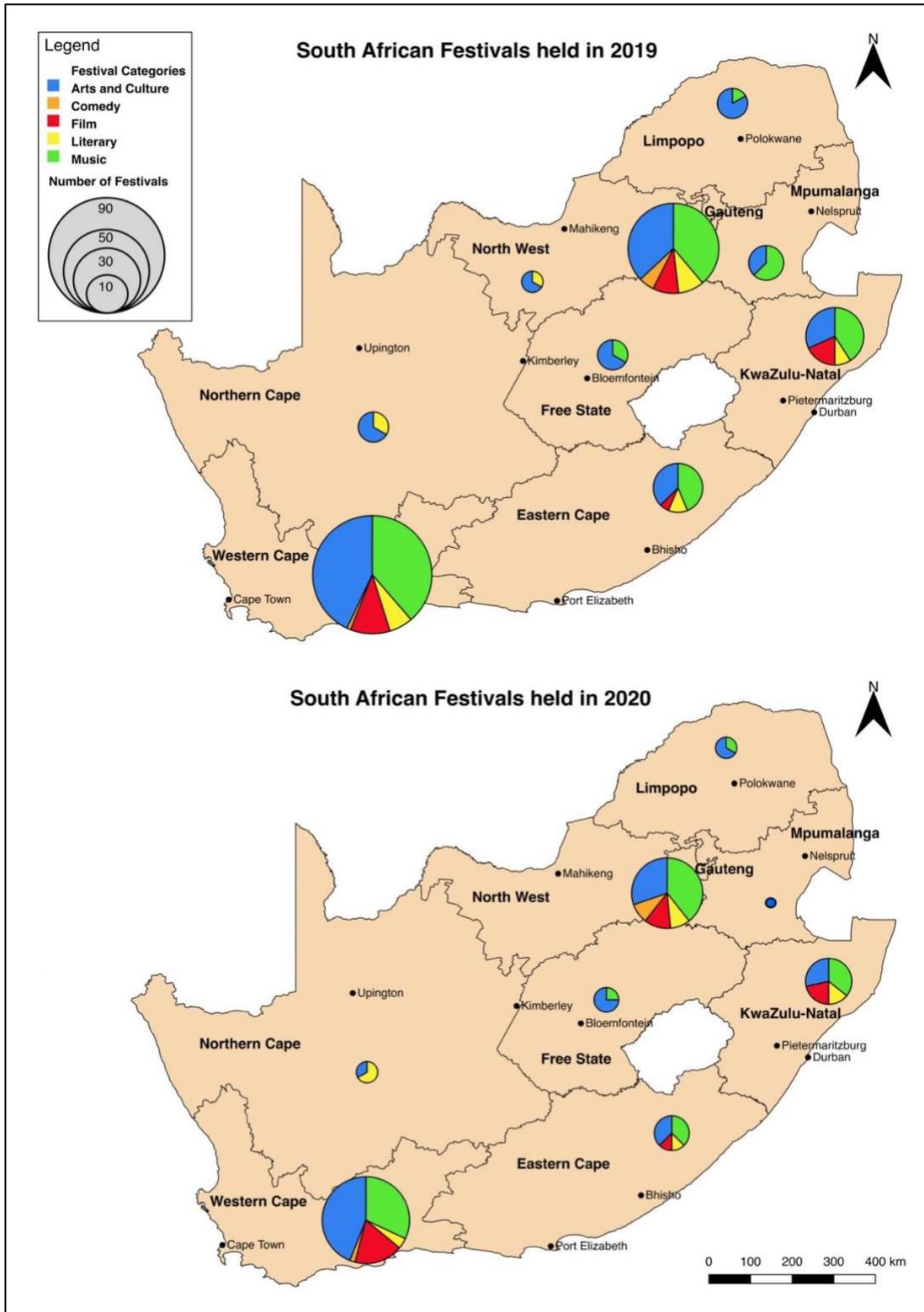


Figure 1 Comparison of South African festivals held in 2019 and 2020 by theme

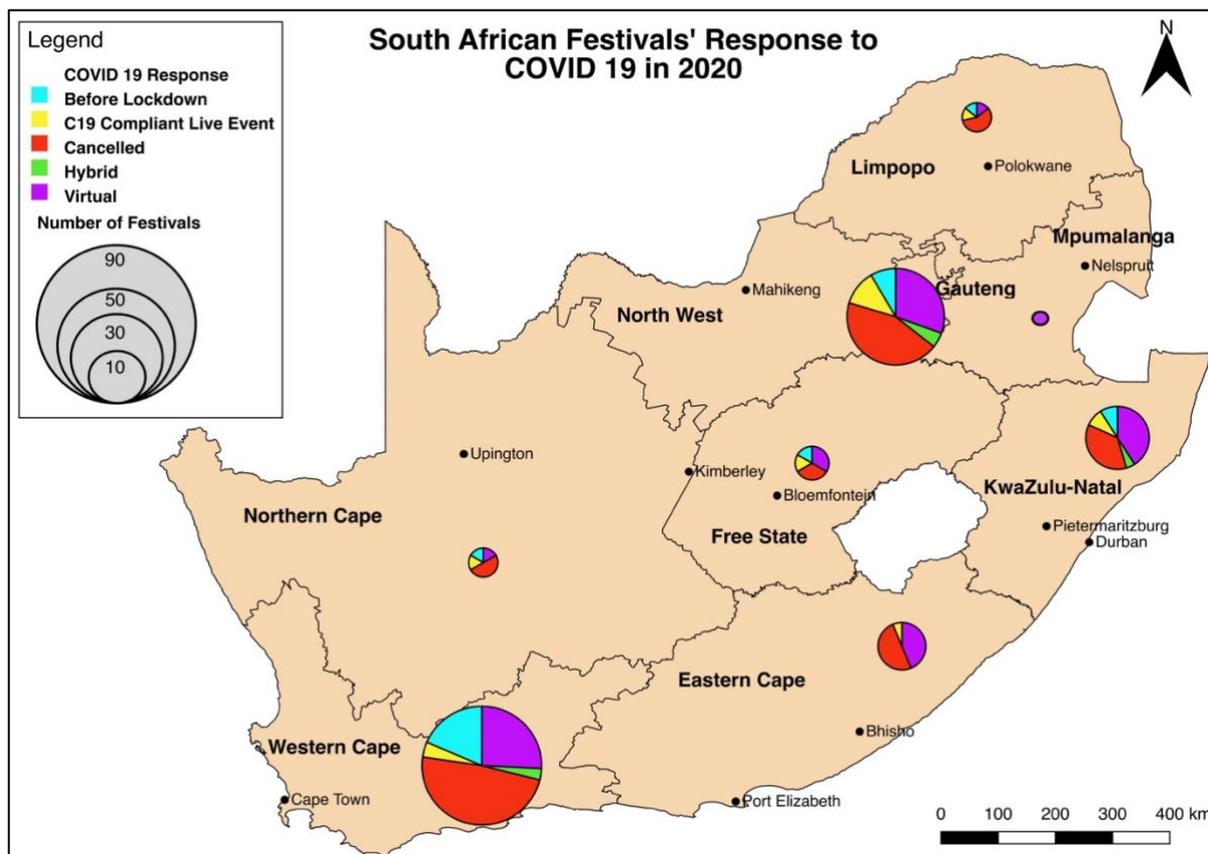


Figure 2 South African festival responses to COVID-19 in 2020

## Research Methods

Following the completion of the Cape Town Carnival's cultural creative workshop series, an online focus group discussion was held on 29 April 2021 with five members of the carnival's management team to collect information. Participants included the CTC CEO, creative director, creative artworks department manager, logistics and production department manager and the workshop co-ordinator. The focus group investigated the organiser response to COVID-19 in terms of planning and implementation as well as lessons learnt and plans for the future, should social distancing restrictions continue. Representatives from the CTC were also invited to share their experiences and plans for the future at an online industry stakeholder workshop hosted by Future Festivals South Africa and the South African Cultural Observatory on 19 May 2021. The Cape Town Carnival serves as a case study in the Future Festivals South Africa research into the adaptation strategies of South African festivals to COVID-19.

## The Cape Town Carnival's Response to COVID-19

The Cape Town Carnival's response to COVID-19 has evolved over time just as the pandemic situation in South Africa has changed. In the immediate aftermath of the strict national lockdown taking effect from the end of March 2020, the CTC pivoted to a virtual carnival

format. Rather than recording a carnival procession with floats and performers in COVID safe environment to be streamed online, the CTC hosted a number of virtual behind the scenes of the carnival activities and carnival community support programmes under the Cultural Creative Workshop Series. They therefore continued to deliver on their core purpose and main aims of sparking joy and creativity, encouraging participation in the arts, creating employment opportunities and developing skills as well as supporting communities and bringing people together. In essence, the CTC delivered a carnival without the main carnival event. However, this was a short-term adaptation as it was delivered during the height of the pandemic in South Africa when there were strict regulations on movement and the type of work that could be conducted offline or outside of the home.

Once regulations eased, the CTC began to develop new possibilities for a COVID safe carnival event. In 2021, they plan to have small live static carnival performances across Cape Town's city centre. This live CTC format was due to be held in March 2021. Unfortunately, this coincided with the second wave and the country returned to a strict lockdown which forced the CTC to cancel again. The roll-out of the COVID vaccine in South Africa during 2021 brings with it new opportunities for live events. The CTC are hoping to stage their new live carnival adaptation towards the end of the year.

### A Carnival without the Carnival: Refocusing on the Core Purpose and the Cultural Creative Workshop Series

Just a few days before the Cape Town Carnival parade was due to take place on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020, the South African national government declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national disaster. Even though the floats, costumes and performances had all been prepared, the CTC organisers and participants felt that they could not continue with the live parade that usually draws large crowds and so cancelled. This was devastating to the CTC community who had been working on the various aspects of the carnival over the course of a year. However, the carnival organisers were able to find a more positive perspective as they felt that they had fulfilled their main aim of job creation and skills development.

*“Well, the thing is that the event's the cherry on top. There's no question about it, [the carnival parade] is the icing and the cherry and the balloons and the champagne. People rehearse for the year, people make beautiful art for several months, and [we had already] put all these things into place. So, it was a huge let-down, especially for the communities. It's their one opportunity to be on this international stage with these droves of people cheering. It's an incredible experience.*

*But, if we had to only have the event and not the other stuff, then it would have been devastating because there'd be nothing. But our purpose is social cohesion and development of arts and culture and job creation and training and all of that, which is really the stuff that's actually quite difficult and quite heart-warming” (Cape Town Carnival CEO, Personal Communication, 2021).*

Since the CTC parade was due to take place just before the national lockdown was enforced, there was no time to “change track and try to do something smaller. And in any case, that definitely would not have been allowed” (Cape Town Carnival Logistics and Production Department Manager, Personal Communication, 2021). When it became clear that a return to business as usual would not happen quickly, the organisers regrouped and began workshopping ideas for how they could continue with their programme of events in a COVID-safe manner. This resulted in a refocus on the CTC’s core purpose and the introduction of the Cultural Creative Workshop Series.

The core purpose of the CTC is to “ignite joy and unity through creativity”, a purpose that seemed all the more important in the COVID climate. Organisers realised that the main aim of the CTC is not to have the large carnival parade but to provide job and training opportunities, encourage community participation in the arts and create an environment of social cohesion (Cape Town Carnival, 2021a).

*“The spinal column that we were able to gravitate back to and which was incredibly galvanizing for us to realize, appreciate and act on, was the recognition of the work we had done on clarifying our core purpose as an organization. And our purpose was not to throw an event. The event was a means for achieving our purpose and an expression of us fulfilling our purpose, but it is not the sole way through which we can fulfil that purpose. Inspiring joy and unity through creativity is our purpose and that kept us conscious of particularly unity, community, inspiration, joy, and a whole bunch of fundamental things that we could immediately see was the polar opposite to what the pandemic was bringing into being. So, it actually gave us a rallying point that I feel was very powerful in propelling our planning, going ‘yes we can, yes we must’. And we’re the right ones for this, we’ve got to do this because this is what we’re here for” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021).*

This refocusing on the core purpose resulted in the Cultural and Creative Workshop series (see figure 3). Over the course of eight months (September 2020 – April 2021), six interactive online workshops were held which were designed to inspire joy and creativity (Cape Town Carnival, 2021a).



*Figure 3 The Cape Town Carnival Cultural Creative Workshop Series 2020 - 2021*

The audience for this virtual edition of the CTC became the carnival community. The online workshops were all interactive and developed skills in dance, music, art and design as well as bringing the community together to reflect on their experiences, develop cultural understanding and find inspiration for their creative work (see table 1 for the workshop themes). The workshops were thus applicable to participants across the range of activities associated with the CTC including float and costume design and performance. Having a smaller community audience allowed participants to feel more connected and supported during a otherwise quite isolating period. The smaller audience and interactive nature of the workshops allowed participants to have more personal and reflective experiences as individuals and as a community (Cape Town Carnival, Personal Communication, 2021).

Table 1 Online Cultural Creative Workshop Series Themes

Workshop Title	Date	Theme
<b>In the footsteps of the first artists</b>	12 September 2020	The art and music of the First Peoples in South Africa.
<b>Honouring our African cultural roots</b>	3 October 2020	Exploring African cultural roots in South Africa with a focus on African art and traditional design, dance, music, and language and speaking.
<b>Marabi kwela: Sophiatown's uniquely South African sounds and jive</b>	24 October 2020	The significance of Sophiatown and the ability to be creative and thrive in spite of adversity with a focus on marabi and kwela music and dance.
<b>Umswenko: Move to your own beat</b>	14 November 2020	Umswenko and amaswank fashion with a focus on the symbolism within these styles.
<b>Honouring women</b>	13 March 2021	The voices of women in society. A celebration of passion, purpose, professionalism and performance.
<b>Freedom and the future</b>	24 April 2021	Imagining possible Afrofutures - acknowledging and remembering Freedom Day, what it meant for the people of South Africa 26 years ago and what it means for us today as we step into the future.

In addition to the workshops, the CTC offered support to the community by ensuring that no jobs were lost, contracts were not cancelled and food parcels were delivered to those in need. Despite their own difficulties during the COVID-19 lockdown, a surprisingly large proportion of cultural and creative industry freelancers and firms were involved in social welfare and outreach programmes. A recent survey of the impact of the pandemic on the CCIs in South Africa by SACO (2021) found that 31% of respondents reported being involved in social welfare projects or support (such as distributing food parcels or supporting local schools); and 37% provided creative industries support (such as running or hosting workshops for creatives on things like business in the digital environment, or artistic techniques and skills).

### Returning to a Live Carnival Event: The Planning Process

The Cultural and Creative Workshop Series was a short-term response which allowed the CTC to continue and deliver on their core purpose and main aims under strict lockdown conditions. With restrictions likely to gradually ease to allow live events and audiences to return, the CTC team began to plan for longer-term possibilities of what a new COVID-safe Cape Town Carnival could be. The planning process was collaborative and brought the CTC team together in a manner that mirrored their main aims of participation and giving a voice to different communities. Collaboration between different festival groups including organisers, artists, technical crews and sponsors has been a common theme across South African festival responses to the pandemic. Together, these festival groups have been working

together to come up with ideas and determine what is possible for both online and COVID safe live environments.

*“It wasn't just a top slice of senior management who were unpacking the problems and [coming up with] the solutions and the ideas. It was amazing because some of the most revolutionary shifts in thinking that contributed to that development process came from people whose responsibility normally isn't to concern themselves with the event format or the logistics. They were coming up with fundamentally fresh and game changing ideas that really gave us a lot to work on” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021).*

A number of event format options were considered including a drive-in scenario, a fully virtual experience and multiple iterations of static floats and mobile audience scenarios (Cape Town Carnival, Personal Communication, 2021). The CTC planning team found this to be an exhausting process as regulations kept changing. As in other countries (Anheier et al., 2021), creative industry practitioners experienced local government (who were themselves uncertain of how lockdown regulations would change as the pandemic spread) as uncommunicative, providing little feedback on suggested new event formats (Cape Town Carnival, Personal Communication, 2021).

*“It's like we were grasping at shadows and smoke to try and work out what would get [approved]... It was multiple [iterations]... back to the drawing board once more with feeling and suck it up and find the enthusiasm again and go back to the basics and come up with something else” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021).*

In terms of networking with other carnivals and festivals about ways to respond to COVID-19, the CTC felt quite isolated. Though they attempted to reach out to international and local carnivals, they did not find them to be very responsive and were disappointed in the lack of dialogue and mutual support that would have been appreciated during a difficult period. Despite the lack of communication and networking, the CTC team kept a close eye on the COVID-19 responses of a number of carnivals and festivals in order to help their thinking around possible new formats, what did and did not work well and what could or could not be adapted for a South African market. These learnings were added to their own ideas so that the team felt that they “put [their] own unique CTC stamp on [their adaptation]” (Cape Town Carnival Workshop Co-Ordinator, Personal Communication, 2021).

*“A total lack of dialogue, advice, support, interaction, communication and networks. The image that comes to mind is like meerkats [with] a quick down the barrel, down the hole, hide, bomb shelter. Go inward. Lock the doors, vault down, hunker down, get in the bunker” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021).*

Feelings of isolation and a lack of festival networking has been a theme that has emerged amongst the smaller South African festivals. Before the pandemic, though they were desirable, the lack of networks did not seem to be a major problem for these festivals. However, in times of crisis networks become increasingly important and those that had built up festival networks felt more supported in planning their adaptations to COVID-19.

### A Carnival with the Carnival: A Reimagined Live Cape Town Carnival Event

The reimagined Cape Town Carnival will be a COVID safe live event with three elements, walk the city, energise the city and stream the city (see figure 4). The first element refers to the live physical event which will not be a single live event but will occur across five limited access themed hubs in Cape Town’s city centre to showcase creativity through the ages (Cape Town Carnival, 2021b). The new event format is designed to re-energise the city by bringing people back into the city centre as they walk from one Creative Hub to another with time to do some shopping or have a meal in between shows. It is hoped that this will act as a boost for local businesses that have been hard hit by COVID-19 and bring “a vibe” back into the city after the lockdowns (Cape Town Carnival Logistics and Production Department Manager, Personal Communication, 2021). The last element is stream the city where a recording of the live performances from each of the hubs will be streamed online, interspersed with short interviews and interest pieces (Cape Town Carnival, 2021b). The CTC is thus taking a hybrid approach where both live and online shows will be on offer. It is likely that the hybrid event format will become an increasingly popular adaptation strategy amongst festivals and live events in the COVID recovery period.



Figure 4 A Reimagined Cape Town Carnival

This new smaller event format has the benefit of being more up-close and personal than the single event where large crowds line the parade route. The smaller live shows and recorded performances will allow audiences to see more of the details in the floats, costumes and performances which may be missed on the parade route. It will allow the CTC to tell more of a story within the five themed hubs and offer a deeper, more reflective experience for audiences.

*“So when we do the usual format on the road, you just see a float, you will maybe catch a glimpse of the story. But doing it online [and in the hubs], it allows you to connect with the audience, break up the story a bit and have the people interact with you - the planners and the designers and the makers” (Cape Town Carnival Workshop Co-ordinator, Personal Communication, 2021).*

With the COVID situation in South Africa being so changeable and local governments “shifting the goalposts” in terms of what would be allowed according to the safety criteria, the CTC designed a modular and scalable event so that they could adjust accordingly rather than risk cancelling for a third time (Cape Town Carnival Logistics and Production Department Manager, Personal Communication, 2021). The five event hubs can thus be either scaled up or down in order to allow different audience sizes. Additionally, if the country enters another strict lockdown where no live events are allowed, the CTC will pivot to a fully virtual event where the performances will be recorded and streamed online. The modular design also means that if positive COVID cases are identified in one of the hubs, that hub can be shutdown without impacting the other performance hubs so that the show can go on. This kind of thinking and planning for all eventualities has become a necessary part of the festival and live event landscape in the current COVID climate and is likely to continue during the COVID recovery period.

With the fundamental shift in thinking that has been prompted by the pandemic, questions have arisen as to what makes a carnival a carnival and what is essential to the carnival experience for audiences, participants, sponsors and other stakeholders. Like other South African festivals interviewed for this research, the CTC raised the importance of a live audience, for which they feel that there is no substitute. For carnival performers, a virtual audience where you are met with silence rather than cheering and applause is “very unengaging, un-enthusing and un-energizing” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021). Live audiences following COVID safety regulations also offer different feedback loops to performers. Audiences wearing masks may not cheer in the same way as before COVID and performers will not be able to gauge the audience’s reactions and emotions from their faces. New formats of audience engagement are thus being considered by the CTC and many other South African festivals where physical noise other than cheering becomes the feedback loop and where shows are guided by a host to prompt the engagement between performers and audiences.

*“So, for me some of the core questions into the future are going to be how can we deliver enough of what makes a carnival a carnival in these changed modes? How can it be exciting enough? How do you get a sense of immediacy without great physical proximity? How do you feel the sweat and the excitement and the mass movement of things, what are our new versions of that?...Do the [performers] have to wear a mask? Is the audience wearing a mask? What effect will that have on feeling joy if you can't see people smile? And how do we substitute that? Do we urge the audience to clap to show your love? And maybe somebody's saying that, the emcee speaking more in a venue than we've ever had before when you just have this experience wash over you without a narrator? And now you have someone saying, 'show them your love, give them your applause everybody', and sound becomes the feedback loop” (Cape Town Carnival Creative Director, Personal Communication, 2021).*

## Financing

The Cape Town Carnival is a free participation event that is financed by government and private sector funding. In previous years, the lack of ticket generated income made financial sustainability a challenge. Not being reliant on ticket income became a blessing in disguise when festivals across South Africa had to cancel due to the pandemic and so lost a significant portion of their income (Cape Town Carnival, Personal Communication, 2021). The national lockdown also took effect at the end of the CTC's 2019/2020 financial year which coincided with the main carnival parade. The CTC were thus able to satisfactorily complete their year as, barring the event itself, they had delivered on their main objectives over the course of the year.

The 2020/2021 financial year brought the online Cultural Creative Workshop Series into being. The CTC were able to successfully secure funding for this from many of their usual sponsors as they continued to deliver on the main aims of the CTC by sparking joy, inspiring creativity, creating jobs, developing skills, encouraging participation in the arts, promoting social cohesion and giving a voice to diverse communities.

In particular, corporate sponsors were supportive of the Cultural Creative Workshop Series and the continued job creation and training opportunities offered by the CTC. In light of the heavy job losses associated with the pandemic in South Africa, these sponsors felt that it was important to support the CTC's activities. Several South African festivals have expressed their gratitude to their sponsors for their continued support in such difficult times. The cultural and creative industries have been hard hit by COVID-19 with many performing artists being unable to work (SACO, 2020b). In other Future Festival South Africa focus group interviews, private sector sponsors have stated that a major motivation in supporting festivals during the COVID period is to provide incomes to artists and to be a part of innovative approaches to adapting to COVID-19 in order to ensure their longer-term sustainability

## The Future of the Cape Town Carnival

Adapting to COVID-19 has resulted in new opportunities and business models for the Cape Town Carnival as they have explored the online world and new static live event formats in addition to the parade. Organisers suggest that all of these formats will be a part of the CTC in the future as it allows them to diversify their offering and expand their reach.

*“I don't think [the live hubs] will ever replace the classic carnival format. But my feeling is that it could very possibly become a secondary thing that we do. It's a very strong thing that I don't think is just something we're doing now because we can't do anything else. I think it's got the potential to be a very strong contender as something that we do moving forward” (Cape Town Carnival Logistics and Production Department Manager, Personal Communication, 2021).*

The benefits of smaller live and online shows of being more personal and reflective by allowing people to see more details and connect with the stories being told in the floats, costumes and performances, is an advantage which the CTC want to capitalise on. This more detail orientated format may also offer more satisfaction to the makers who spend a year creating the floats and costumes but in the mass movement of the parade, these design elements can easily be missed by audiences.

## Conclusion

The Cape Town Carnival team have evolved in their response to COVID-19, first with a virtual response through the Cultural Creative Workshop Series, and then with a scalable hybrid adaptation that should re-energise the city of Cape Town after the lockdowns. The CTC have been flexible in their approach and so have been able to position themselves well to respond to a highly changeable COVID situation in South Africa. They have built flexibility into their adaptation strategies which will minimise the risk of cancellation and allow them to deliver on their main objectives. Refocusing on the core purpose to “ignite joy and unity through creativity” and determining what was most important to them as an organisation was crucial to their success, inspired their adaptations and allowed them to persevere through the challenges of designing a new COVID safe carnival format. The CTC have positioned themselves well for the future as they have tightened their community bonds and have diversified their range of business models to include scalable live and virtual elements.

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