Culture and dynamite

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20 November 2013

The legacy of the European Capital of Culture project of 2012 in Maribor is characterized by the project's steady implosion, writes Boris Vezjak. After the hype and the corruption, and in the absence of any new infrastructure whatsoever, the city has learned its lesson.

During these past few months the eagerly awaited moment of truth has arrived for the European Capital of Culture in Maribor. The moment we were promised. Not only because in 2012 there was a series of about 5000 events in the city along the Drava, accompanied by huge expectations and fanfares about the exceptional opportunity that had come to little Slovenia. And, as they told us, the likes of which will not occur again for a long time. No, the final moment of truth does not relate to the opportunity that the title of European Capital of Culture offered or to an assessment of our abilities, but to two inescapable outcomes that we dared to expect the whole time: to the cultural legacy of the project after its conclusion, and to the final financial and other balances of the project, which ought to have demonstrated its credibility.

Just about everything has already been said about the lasting impacts of the project: for the European Capital of Culture Maribor, there won’t be any. This is what we all apprehensively suspected, and even the individuals responsible for the project did not dare to promise anything in this regard. It appears that in this respect, the project’s failure was already programmed in advance: no new physical infrastructure was built, something that even the official documentation on the continuation of the program after 2012 did not in effect reckon with. In contrast to the fulsome rhetoric of predictions and the panegyrically inclined media that we had to listen to for two years ad nauseam, the reality is considerably harsher. From the promised renaissance of the spirit and the “explosion” of culture there has remained precious little: instead of an explosion we have experienced a steady implosion of the project and its effects. Cultural life the day after appears to be even more impoverished and defeated; it has been eaten away by the economic crisis and, as a result, many artists are struggling harder than ever just to survive. The prediction of the programme director, who at the beginning promised nothing less than a redefinition of culture, has fallen even shorter of reality. Put simply: after the European Capital of Culture project, culture was supposed to have undergone a complete transformation, and not be what it had been before. However, even the final evaluation of the European Commission has shown that the European Capital of Culture
project will not have any particular influence on other sectors in the city, that the cultural infrastructure has not improved in Maribor or any of its partner cities, and that the long-term impact will be very modest. That the city would manage to “redefine” culture, whatever that was supposed to mean, was just a hollow play on words aimed at the naive.

And along with the absence of lasting effects comes another moment of truth: the financial audit. The exaggerated and boastful media coverage, in which many journalists played an ignominious role, can no longer bail out those responsible: the numbers show that there were multiple violations in how the money was used. Over time, the judgments of some critical voices on the “European Capital of Corruption” have been proven to be correct, if somewhat exaggerated. Financial inspections have found many violations in how authors’ and works contracts were concluded, with an inadequate system of oversight and the retroactive arranging of contracts. Some were simply missing (in one case for work performed with a value of more than 40,000 euros), and there was an illegal fragmentation of low-value orders. Both responsible persons, the managing director and the president of the council, were fined for violations.

The project maintained an appearance of success and prestige up until November 2012. The oft-repeated phrase “explosions of culture” was not just spontaneous demagoguery, it also became one of the main official slogans. However, a key role in the public image of the Capital of Culture’s management was likely played by the protest movement that arose in Maribor last autumn. There was explosiveness, all right, but it had nothing to do with cultural events. Rather, it erupted in the people who took to the streets with their demands. Successfully, because the corrupt leadership of the city, which had also started to pilfer people’s pocketbooks, was swept out of power, with the mayor at its helm. Something happened that we haven’t seen for decades: a street movement emerged that gave rise to unexpected success after just a few repeat uprisings: something very rarely seen in this region. Moreover, municipal corruption so revolted the masses that they came out onto the streets of Maribor and, later on, other Slovenian cities too. The uprisings were followed by mayoral elections and, following the inauguration of a new mayor associated with the protests, it was time to bring out the broom. What we knew all along was confirmed: the European Capital of Culture project was largely the product of close collaboration between municipal political circles and the cultural elite; the fall of the first chipped away at the integrity of the second. The media became somewhat less credulous and demanded more transparency. The widely advertised principle of the most visible European Capital of Culture propagandist, namely that “PR is the poetry of capital”, was an exceptionally accurate description of the course that the project took: true poetry was successfully replaced by PR poetry. And most people fell for it. If the propagandist was given a prize because, ironically, in the framework of the project he could submit his first literary work for an award, the tasteless local journalists had no difficulty glorifying events, turning the actors into heroes and censoring critical thinkers. In short: PR poetry was indeed the winner of the project.

Thus it is today interesting to observe the defensive rhetoric of all the actors involved, as the massive stain continues to spread rapidly. The managing director unhesitatingly invoked conspiracy theories, and characterized the audits as “politically motivated”. She used the jargon frequently employed by the pathetic figure of the deposed mayor, who not only succumbed to the weight of numerous criminal charges but also came to symbolize the quintessentially corrupt politician in the country, who looks for and finds a
hidden enemy everywhere. The cultural editor of one of the local daily papers, instead of demanding an explanation of the disgrace that had occurred, encouraged ignorance and averting one’s eyes: “The carrousel of sin and guilt will of course spin on, even though the question of who was and will be at fault has long been unimportant. We all lose, and we are losing much more than it appeared eight months ago, when we handed over the ECC title with relief. Hopefully to more fortunate cities.”

So if they spent at least two years persuading us through constant celebration how Maribor awaits a spiritual and cultural rebirth of unimaginable dimensions, at the final stop of the odyssey, the appeal is for us all to turn a blind eye. Now they are telling us that we must forget as quickly as possible about the whole story of the capital of culture. A wonderful example of the absolving of blame, in which there are presumably no guilty parties, and of the fatalistic shedding of responsibility, where the main role is played by the goddess Fortuna, who doles out luck to some but not to others. Appeals to call off the quest to establish who is responsible are of course most convenient for those individuals involved in key respects.

The most tragic moment of the whole affair was probably that during which the excited, boastful discourse of the European Capital of Culture anticipated its own inglorious end the entire time. The moment of truth, which always comes only when dusk falls and Minerva flies away, was emphatically recorded in the discourse of the project’s protagonists. It was evident the whole time for anyone who chose to see it. A nice illustration is the following: at the outset, those in charge promised nothing less than that the European Capital of Culture project would become “the truth of this city”. The promise has been fulfilled, but in a manner entirely contrary to the one intended: they wanted cultural surpluses to provide for some new spiritual state, but instead of enrichment, another truth has been laid bare, one of a gaping void from behind the fancy façade of a Potemkin village.

The implosion of culture was practically already an integral part of the predictions about its explosion, referred to so often by the ousted corrupt mayor with his team of cultural workers. The next time merchants of culture pass through our town with dynamite strapped to their bodies, let’s be careful. Culture and dynamite do not go together. And we mustn’t lose even a minute before stopping them. Because we will be feeling the negative effects for a long time to come.

**Published 20 November 2013**

Original in **English**
Translation by **Dialogi**
First published in **Dialogi 5-6/2013**
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