Culture shapes the contemporary city

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Using culture to reshape and renew our declining cities is a nice idea -- or is it? Dragan Klaic looks at the successes and failures of urban projects, assesses the value of "regeneration through culture" and challenges some of the more conventional assumptions with a revolutionary recipe for cultural development.

Cities today are very much the focus of public attention, not only as a source of trouble and anxiety but as places of pride and development. They are sometimes superficially glorified while they remain complex systems that can be approached in many different ways - as markets and urban battlefields where different political and economic interests confront one another. And even though so much has been invested in the embellishment of the cities, most of them still have their less glamorous zones, their urban ghettos, places of exclusion and marginalization. In the daily behaviour of urban dwellers one can see not only enjoyment, pride and a strong identification with the city, but accumulated fears, anxieties and insecurities that permeate the complex systems of urban agglomerations.

Cultural shifts in the current recession

Culture could be approached as an integrating perspective in the analysis of cities and their prospects. Until the collapse of the banking system a year ago the economic perspective was the dominant one in politics that dealt with culture. This approach was imposed by the neo-liberal ideology that wanted to see everything primarily in terms of financial value. Culture, too, was predominantly appreciated for what it could mean economically.

Here is a surprising indicator of how differently culture is being perceived today. Despite Iceland’s tiny population of 320 000 inhabitants, of whom no more than 120 000 live in Reykjavik, in all the statistics of the past 50 years, the country the highest rate of avid theatregoers. Then Iceland went through a total collapse of its financial system and Icelanders woke up in October 2008 much poorer than they used to be. Yet the cultural consequence is that subscriptions to the National Theatre and the City Theatre of Reykjavik went up 600 per cent in 2009! And subscriptions for the symphony orchestra
series in the concert hall went up 300 per cent! That means there is a tremendous re-appreciation of culture. Icelanders can no longer go abroad six times a year, they cannot speculate in real estate and investment shares, so they are turning to culture as a social meeting-place for debate and confrontation with the essential things in life. This is a surprising impact of the economic recession.

**The creativity hype and the quick fix**

I would plead for us to see culture as a force capable of improving not only the urban economy, but also its quality of life and sociability, and use it to address environmental concerns. Culture becomes the prism through which we look at urban development strategies and policies. But this perspective can only work if we do not impose fantasies on city inhabitants, but engineer a complex process of bottom-up policy making, which means relying on the mobilization of the infrastructure of local civil society. In many cities, civil society is weak and needs to be built up.

There is a good deal of hype about the creative city, as of creativity in general. I imagine that by December 2009, the word “creativity” will have lost any meaning and any capacity to inspire anyone: in this “Year of Creativity and Innovation”, conferences, workshops, congresses and seminars attempting to address the same subject matter are rapidly losing any meaning. In the same way, many mayors think that they can provide a quick fix for their own cities by boosting the creative industry. When one uses that phrase, “creative industry”, one is actually abolishing all distinctions between for-profit and non-profit cultural endeavours: between creative culture and expressive culture on one side and commercial culture on the other.

In the same way, many are obsessed with the erection of emblematic edifices and many mayors in Europe dream of how they can reproduce the Bilbao quick fix: the Bilbao miracle created by the construction of the Guggenheim Museum. I do not think it is a strategy that can be simply reproduced: Guggenheim is not ready to open 10 more museums in Europe. Bilbao’s success is due to Gehry’s daring architecture and Guggenheim’s splendid collection, factors you cannot reproduce elsewhere. The end result of so much urban intervention is a failure: shopping Meccas are vulnerable to oscillations in the economy and consumer spending levels; an alternative, as in so many UK cities, there are those “alcoholic agoras” where young people get drunk by 10.00pm, vomit in the streets, get into fights and are taken away by ambulances and police or totter into taxis to get back home. This is the daily reality of the creative city pipe dream. Or there are the endless fiestas and superficial festivals and cheap entertainment and commercial gatherings with some sort of cultural label, regime-enforced joyfulness in the cities.

Increasingly, cities are also being turned into theme parks and this is dangerous. I live in Amsterdam and am fully aware how much Amsterdam, with its concentration of seventeenth-century architecture, has to watch that it does not become some kind of seventeenth-century Disneyland. Finding myself two weeks ago at Billund airport in Denmark, I was surprised to confront so many people there on a Sunday afternoon, in an airport in the middle of nowhere, in the midst of Jutland. Then I realized that Billund airport is near Legoland, the corporate theme park of Lego, that the airport exists because of this attraction and that the people where all there on their way home after a
Demographic shifts challenge cultural infrastructure

There are many inherent limitations in city development, a good deal of repetition of the same mistakes and much less common learning through comparison. You cannot expect culture to be the quick fix for all the long-standing failures of urban planning, all the architectural and urban development fiascos of the 1970s and 1980s. In the same way, every cultural intervention strategy has to take into account not only the demographic shifts and increased multicultural nature of most European cities, but also the greying of most European cities – the rapid aging of the population. Cities that are not capable of organizing themselves to hold on to young people are condemned to the greying and shrinking population, and the negative growth this implies. The rapid greying of the entire European population is the result of the baby-boomers, my generation. Born between 1945 and 1955, we are becoming senior citizens and that is a huge number of retired people. Cultural organizations everywhere would be foolish not to understand that this generation, with its higher education, material comfort and expanded free time that retirement brings, is potentially a huge public.

In terms of alternative scenarios – no scenario will be fulfilled to the last detail, but scenarios are ways of organizing some sort of critical thinking and stimulating the imagination – some cities will be losers others will be winners. You can see the growing division between loser cities and winner cities in Europe. The shrinking cities, the divided cities, the cities that are polluted or clogged with traffic, cities that cannot cope with de-industrialization: these are the cities that are the probable losers of globalization. Zygmunt Bauman’s books on globalization, demonstrate his critical perspective on globalization as some kind of ordering process that assigns roles and determines fates in terms of winning or losing. He shows politics wasting time in indecision or trying to rush the decision-making process by manipulating the players involved, by applying pressure for everything to be decided here and now at super-speed. This is actually a means of preempting debate, eliminating alternatives, jumping over processes to the outcome of debate and imposing some ready-made solutions.

The essential feature of European cities is the affirmation of the quality and accessibility of the public space. Unlike many cities on other continents, where corporate and private elements are more dominant, European cities have a tradition of public space and public engagement within it. They must, therefore, constantly develop modes of governance that will ensure public participation, despite usurpation by private parties and corporate dominance. The challenge today is to make migrant populations, including their second and third generations, take part in the decision-making process and identify with this public space as their own. Amsterdam has a large migrant population now on the threshold of its fourth generation. Purely as a statistical indicator: more than half the children in elementary schools in Amsterdam and Rotterdam have at least one parent who was not born in the Netherlands; this gives some sense of the radical demographic change. Such demography creates constant tensions and problems but should not be seen only as a source of the problems; it is a potential advantage. The challenge is to find a balance between the celebration of cultural diversity as richness and social cohesion as a necessity.
Demographic shifts caused by migration and accelerated de-industrialization are major processes that affect European cities. Urban regeneration is seen as some kind of magic process that will address de-industrialization and overcome it. The end result is often gentrification, which means reappraisal of real estate values, the polishing and upgrading of some chunks of real estate, but also the marginalization of the socio-economically weaker parts of the population and their forced dumping out on the periphery of the city.

In the same facile way, tourism is seen as a panacea, but mass tourism can also be a cause of trouble. In Barcelona, for instance, one can see how a tremendously successful development, with an unprecedented investment in first-rate cultural infrastructure, enabled the city to position itself as the fourth most popular European tourist destination. But Barcelona is now losing some of its appeal and attractiveness because it has become too much a place of cheap tourism, of UK stag and hen parties, of heavy-drinking consumers, dominating the urban scene and causing turmoil and trouble. You can see the same bingeing crowd in Riga and Tallinn, where cheap travel with Easyjet also enables frivolous consumption of cheap alcohol rather than cultural consumption.

### Obsolete institutions

The dominant cultural infrastructure in European cities is, typically, 200 years old: those national theatres, galleries, museums, concert halls that have emerged in the course of the past two centuries of cultural development, mainly through the ambition and philanthropy of the enlightened liberal bourgeoisie. This has to a great extent become anachronistic. There have been only two major phases of cultural innovation and infrastructural renewal in Europe in the past 100 years: after World War II and again after 1968, but even this is 40 years ago! We need to rethink the essential typology of cultural institutions and to shape and design a new typology that will be more suitable to the demands of the cities and their inhabitants today – and it will be shaped by the information technology revolution.

There are many different ways in which cultural policy researchers look at cities. The work of a colleague, Dorte Skot-Hansen, who has been working for project Eurocult 21, a consortium of cities, universities and research organizations, and with Eurocity, the advocacy organization subsidized by the European Commission, for three years, exemplifies one approach. The emerging organizing pattern seeks to find some balance between culture as a way of empowerment, culture as enlightenment, culture that is creating some economic benefit and culture that is offering entertainment. The problem is that it offers more a balancing act than synergy. The four different ways of looking at culture in the urban development to some extent pull in opposite directions and the synergy impact of the policy approach is actually missing.

Traditional cultural institutions have been destabilized by demographic shifts and the consequent waning of the nation state, many of whose institutions were originally created to enhance, represent and embellish the idea of a nation state and national culture, and especially by the growth of a cultural industry that has become so overwhelming, so globalized with its mass marketing of high quality products for a low price. Moreover, many traditional cultural institutions have been slow to grasp the implication of the information and communication technology revolution, and consequently late in jumping on the Internet bandwagon. All over Europe, the websites of cultural institutions are no
more than electronic fliers or folders, a digital version of the printed brochure. They do
not understand that they are actually being forced to work simultaneously on two tracks:
alive and digitally; that the fact they are on the Internet is not about them, it is them. Yet
they are not putting in the work to change this. Many cultural institutions do not
understand the 24-hour economy and its implications and retain odd and arbitrary
notions of working hours and of the speed and scope of the services visitors expect them
to provide. Consequently, they are disappointing and frustrating their public instead of
winning its appreciation and loyalty.

Cultural institutions have also been further destabilized by the mixed messages they have
been receiving, especially from politicians. Politicians are telling them, “Behave like a
business,” but they are not businesses and although they could learn a lot from the
commercial world they should not behave like it. Or they are put into a national,
representative, emblematic role that is stifling and restrictive; the representational
authority of any cultural institution has been significantly weakened.

International cultural cooperation has been seen as one way to “dynamize” cities. The
main change in international cultural cooperation today is that it is no longer an exclusive
prerogative of national governments; cities and regions have been becoming more
engaged and ambitious players in international cultural cooperation. We are not talking
about promotion or export, but about exchange as a dominant model in the Cold World;
about true cooperation with all its complexity and panoply of cooperation models,
especially those prolonged multilateral projects. International cultural cooperation was
conceived after World War II and practiced predominantly bilaterally as long as national
governments were furthering it, organizing it and funding it. Today, multilateral cultural
cooperation is advancing steadily as several players or partners form consortiums. While
international cultural networks remain the rudimentary infrastructure of international
cultural cooperation, consortia are appearing increasingly as ways of organizing long-
term cultural cooperation. Such forms of international cultural cooperation are widely
practiced in the urban cultural scene. An international dimension appears not as
something exceptional that happens two or three times a year, but as a regular, fully
integrated characteristic. Which means that an increasing number of cultural
professionals are functioning continuously in an international context.

**Proliferation of festivals**

Another part of this cultural change is the proliferation of festivals. The number of
festivals across Europe is growing steadily but there is little research on them. That
insight prompted me to set up with several of my colleagues the European Festival
Research Project (EFRP), a consortium of researchers but also an ongoing research
process in several locations - in Novi Sad at the Sterijino pozorje (a festival of
performances based on the national drama heritage and one of the most important theatre institutions in Serbia Ed.) in May 2009, next time in November in Leeds, UK, at
Leeds Metropolitan University. We hold periodic research workshops, where we try to
focus on some aspects of festivals and to research and debate them. And we see that the
festivals originally had a compensatory role, to offer the cultural life of a city something
that local producers and programmers did not offer. Today, many festivals have acquired
a clear developmental function and are having a complex impact. There has been a
number of studies on the economic impact of festivals, most of which rest on dubious
methodology and are quick to jump to foregone conclusions such as: “Yes, festivals are indeed good for the local economy.” It is difficult to design a convincing methodology that will prove the economic impact of festivals, especially if this is in short supply.

Few festivals have a clear and unequivocal economic impact on their cities, but many do not have one at all. That does not mean they are worthless: they may have other benefits in the artistic, cultural, educational or social field. This is especially true if they are rearranging traditional, established spatial patterns of cultural activity and cultural consumption by moving the former from the centre of the city and established cultural zones in the less prosperous and prestigious urban periphery where they may be able to modernize and recruit a new public.

Festivals can be seen as complex programming templates, where either a broad range of disciplines figures or a narrow sense of disciplines prevails. But we increasingly see festivals with complex intellectual and social topics. Among the outcomes of EFRP research I particularly want to bring to your attention the discovery that many cities, regions and national governments fund festivals but do not know why. They do it as a matter of a routine. They do it because they did it in the past. They do not have a set of clearly formulated objectives or expectations, no clear funding criteria and no convincing methodology for monitoring and evaluation. Even self-evaluation of festivals is rather rare. Hence the recommendations we articulated for public authorities on the development of festival policies. Hence our decision, when we met in Barcelona in 2007 to discuss the role of public authorities as festival funders, to call our meeting “Festival Jungle, Policy Desert”. From that research we formulated recommendations. Our message to cities, regions and national governments is this: if you want to fund some festivals, here is what you have to think about. Not how to do it, but what has to be taken into account and considered carefully before funding decisions are made.

**Proximity, concentration, clustering**

Which brings me to a reflection on the urban space and its configuration through the concentration of cultural facilities. You can engineer this concentration by clustering similar or complementary resources and initiatives, which are then in a spatial concentration where they are competing but also learning from each other, have greater visibility and may develop some synergy. These zones of concentration are called cultural quarters, creative hubs, cultural routes and corridors.

In the Ljubljana context, Metelkova (an autonomous network located on the site of former military barracks comprising an art gallery, bars, artists studios, space for designers, cultural organisations and concerts in the centre of Ljubljana, Slovenia Ed.) would be an interesting example of this type of clustering with all the tensions, contradictions and problems that emerge from spatial proximity. Models are very different: different institutions sometimes operate in an autonomous way under one roof, or are located close to each other, each in its own premises. There are also different models of governance.

It is worth looking at the practice to see how various functions can be combined, how cultural enrichment is achieved and also how added sustainability is obtained through some commercial functions. Even in Moscow, St. Petersburg and a few other Russian cities there are interesting developments in this regard: city authorities are happy to get
rid of the many abandoned factories everywhere by giving them to use as small-scale commercial initiatives of a cultural kind. To create more buzz, more appeal and more programme diversity, they bring in non-commercial cultural initiatives. The cohabitation of commercial and non-commercial cultural initiatives in one space works quite well: while the commercial initiatives secure economic sustainability, provide heating, electricity and Wi-Fi zone, non-commercial players provide the diverse cultural programming. Cultural production and cultural presentation, a lab-oriented cultural production and cultural presentation for the public are also intertwined. Synergy, however, is not a given, it must be created and carefully nurtured – and this can be from something quite banal.

If you have several museums and cultural monuments in one quarter on one square kilometre, their collaboration can start with shared signposting, with the coordination of opening times, with a joint advocacy of proper traffic flows, public transportation schedules or quality street lighting. From there, it can take off into more advanced levels of shared facilities, shared resources and, finally, shared programme ideas and joint programmes.

But when cultural institutions are so often reluctant collaborators, this is not easy to achieve. Their staff is afraid they might lose more than they win; they might also be afraid that others, with whom they are supposed to cooperate, will see their own internal structural weaknesses, or they are afraid that partners will get more mileage out of the cooperation than themselves. Building trust is very much the essence of these processes before cultural organizations can discover themselves as self-confident and successful partners.

Recycling former industrial sites

A tremendous amount of know-how has been generated in the recycling of former industrial facilities into cultural resources; the network Transeurohalles has brought together several generations of operators who run such venues. Started by squatters and cultural anarchists, followed by various cultural innovators and visionaries, it has been recycling former industrial sites for a variety of cultural and social usage. In this way, the network itself has become a platform where people can learn from each other and avoid repeating mistakes already made, where they can articulate the innovative models and strategies of conversion and partnership with public authorities and real estate developers. The Cable Factory in Helsinki, where differentiated rents are implemented, is particularly interesting: not everyone pays the same rent per square metre. Rents are divided into several categories according to the economic capacity of the partner in this complex building that comprises over 100 individual artists in their studios and dozens of organizations, museums, theatre companies, research and lab initiatives. When the French Cultural Centre realized this had become a cultural hub and decided to move there from the centre of Helsinki, a big debate – a collective soul searching – ensued among the tenants: should they accept the Centre? Finally, they agreed to let the French in, but created a new, higher category of rent for them.

European Capitals of Culture

I have been watching the European Culture Capital programme for many years. Recently,
I found myself involved in a candidacy of one, when the Polish city of Lublin approached me, together with my friend Krzysztof Czyzewski of the Borderland Foundation, and asked us to advise and develop its application for 2016. It was immediately evident that this would be a fierce Polish battle, with Gdansk, Wroclaw, Lodz, Katowice, Warsaw, Lublin and possibly more all developing strong, competitive applications.

The Palmer-Ree study of 2004 analysed recent experiences with the ECC programme and is still a valid critical mirror of common failures, delusions and problems. It is essentially a political and not a predominantly cultural programme. Originally a political initiative, it was not something that culture operators wanted, needed or invented. Politicians came up with it and politics keeps it going; politicians need it more than the culture operators. Mistakes are constantly repeated in the preparatory process, where the long-term effects of the events can be promised but not fully delivered. Above all, lasting effects can be assumed in the sphere of changes in mentality among the audience, in the network build-up and in the longer lasting partnerships established, rather than in physical infrastructure. The main gain is when cultural operators in the city recognize that in spite of being thought competitors, they still have some mutual strategic goals and can come together to realize common strategic objectives on the basis of raising mutual trust. Then one can see that the game of the ECC project is not only an exercise in cultural thinking, but in the build-up of a social notion of “capital” in the city’s cultural sphere and, at best, in the civil society of the city in a broader sense. Palmer lists a panoply of negative outcomes that happen before the intended result. Disappointments and considerable delay in the delivery of infrastructure are common, as are budgetary problems and sponsorship targets that cannot be met. There is a possible shift in how a city is perceived from outside as well as from the inside by its residents and cultural operators.

The essential challenge is how to invoke the complexity of Europe as such, not only of the European Union but of a broader Europe, and how to make a city truly function for a year as a European cultural capital. How do you make the mind-boggling diversity of cultures in Europe come alive in your own city, at least for a year? This seems an almost impossible task. Ambitions tend to outstrip what can be achieved in realistic terms, and this can bring alienation, conflicts, jealousy and marginalization of important players and social groups. Universities, for instance, need to learn how to play a substantial role in the project. The ECC project is not purely about institutional culture – a great deal of the current cultural production is always of a non-institutional nature today.

Prolonged planning may also create its own pathology: a certain implementation fatigue. After working on a project for four to five years, by the time the big year of expectation finally arrives, you are sick and tired; you are bored and your team is falling apart because it has been working for several years. There is often programming overkill: too much is stuffed into the programme to fulfill the unreal expectations and the assumptions that immense tourist hordes will descend on your city, which frequently fails to materialize. The culture operators must not forget that they are putting up most of the programming for their local population that may well have only a limited absorption capacity. That was the experience of Copenhagen in 1997, a relatively small city of 750,000 people, not a tourist Mecca. The design of its ECC programme was over-ambitious. It started in January and by April the citizens of Copenhagen had had enough, even of international culture. Nevertheless, the programme was designed to continue until December. This kind of programming overkill is quite common.
Successes have been few and far between. Lille 2004 was certainly a success but Vilnius 2009 collapsed in its third week because it had been for several years the plaything of conflicting political interests who wanted to control it, profit from its budget and feed their own nomenclature and clients from it. Pécs 2010 is destined to be a disaster: this has been obvious for the past two years and can no longer be prevented! Istanbul, on the other hand, has no cultural dimension at all since its essential purpose was real estate speculation. But with the current economic crisis, the expected investment from the Gulf states evaporated and bank loans the Turkish capital was counting on are impossible to get; the artistic dimension remains underdeveloped and incoherent because the initiators of the real estate development and the politicians never entered into real dialogue with the cultural representatives of the city.

The entire ECC application and selection procedures have become quite complicated and drawn-out. While starting work on Lublin’s candidacy for 2016, I spoke at a conference that was like a travelling circus, moving every day from one to another town on Jutland. Trevor Davis, who did Copenhagen 1997, is now preparing Arhus’s 2017 candidacy, trying to build a support base in the entire Jutland region. In the Netherlands, Utrecht is positioning itself for 2018, but so is Maastricht, so is The Hague. This is starting to produce some fierce battles and wasting a lot of energy. On the other hand, I would say to a good, ambitious city: “Do it, try to do it.” Not so much in order to become the European Capital of Culture, but to build and articulate a shared vision of the city’s cultural development, committing all the broad range of players and resources to it.

**Culture as a security issue**

Cities pose a tremendous number of challenges to cultural policy makers. Today, it is especially dangerous to have large cultural gaps and discontinuities between youth culture and the established mainstream culture, between digital culture and non-digital culture. With the present scale of European demographic changes, there is a challenge to create inclusive cities with adequate social cohesion. Cultural institutions that are non-commercial and are publicly subsidized tend to make a mistake when they want to compete with the cultural industry - this is a competition they cannot win. Working among the culture players in Europe, I see them operating in social contexts overwhelmed by an excess of identity anxiety; “Who are we, what makes us special, why are we different from anyone else, how do we make it clear to ourselves, how do we make it clear to others?” These are identity obsessions that can quickly slide into all kinds of populism and xenophobia while expressing various degrees of cultural insecurity.

Culture is a security issue in an insecure world, especially after 9/11, claims Ivan Krastev. The notion of security is closely linked to cultural expressions and a sense of one’s own cultural specificity. I will always argue for a broad notion of culture. The danger of traditional cultural policy, or rather the incapacity of traditional cultural policy to deliver results, comes from its sectarian approach that divides disciplines from each other and lacks any connecting, synergistic vision: we have to do something for the museums, but what about photography? We have to do something for architecture, but what about contemporary dance? We need to have festivals, yes, but we need to have amateur culture as well. This kind of piecemeal approach is fatal because it cannot produce an interconnecting narrative or a joined-up strategy and ends up playing various discipline-based players against each other and frustrating them all.
At the same time, it is quite difficult to design the global, integrative metaphors that are necessary to deliver a synergistic effect, especially in smaller cities of less than 150,000 inhabitants that all over Europe suffer from the loss of their young talent and educated people. The talent drain and the youth drain are fatal for many cities. Economies in the creative field because of the economic recession are, perhaps, a little less fashionable today than a year ago, but whenever one talks about the creative industry or creative economy, one has to put the accent on the money-making element. And, of course, some segments of culture can, under certain circumstances, make money. Architecture, design, fashion, some kinds of music, publishing or digital art can make money. But a large part of culture has intrinsic value without being able to make money; and this is why it has to be subsidized. It is about a public interest that demands public investment, and not only for the sake of national representation but as a distinctive segment of the expressive culture and as a critical culture in itself. This critical dimension as the principal value of public culture is often lost in the cultural policy considerations and debates of today.

When you beef up your institutions as key cultural resources you constantly have to think that not all cultural production can be squeezed into institutional frameworks, and you have to recognize and stimulate those spontaneous, anarchic, fluid zones of experimentation and joy, innovations where a lot of things will be created and, perhaps, later picked up by the mainstream culture and even by the commercial culture.

It is essential that cities devise ways to document their cultural processes and events, to analyse them and debate them, preferably in an international framework. Cities need to look at other cities, at their mistakes and their successes, in order to recognize their own problems and then to mirror their own strategies and issues if they want to go ahead.

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