

Linz09: Culture as a Source of Fascination for Everyone

It's been a wonderful year, no less. Hopes, wishes, dreams have come true – for Linz, for Upper Austria, and, most importantly, for the people who have turned Linz09 into a Culture Capital in which everyone has been able to claim a stake, including the many guests from all over Austria and from abroad who have kept making a beeline for Linz all year.

Admittedly this sounds almost too rose-tinted an assessment to be taken at face value. But it's the truth – or at least a close approximation to it. Of course everyday life went on with all its struggles – against uncertainties, sceptics, second-guessers, time constraints, inadequacies, mistakes (home-made and imported), budgets, bouts of bad weather. Linz09 was not paradise – but at times it was difficult to tell the difference.

Another of our struggles was directed against the notion still prevalent in Austria and particularly in Vienna, that Linz is still the dirty, smelly, provincial steel city of yore – a ridiculously mistaken assessment, which is nevertheless proving difficult to eradicate and has been causing considerable irritation in Linz.

Be that as it may. The success of Culture Capital Linz09 puts the toil and the sweat into perspective and has been grist to the mill of those who have always felt that Linz has no less to offer as Culture Capital than in its other capacity as the country's most vibrant economic region. This is a point everyone agrees on in the meantime – the cultural actors; the local, regional and international press; the political animals; the relevant groups in the EU; and, above all and most importantly, the Linzers themselves. One of our project partners confided to us at the end of the summer that he had had a feeling for months as if each and everyone in Linz was toying with the idea of having "Ich bin ein Linzer" tattooed on his forehead.

It goes without saying that the road to this kind of self-confidence was a tortuous one. It began even before the application for the Culture Capital title for 2009 was considered a realistic option. Linz underwent massive and lasting changes even then – from an industrial, working-class city in the old mould with its catastrophic air parameters to a place with a high quality of life and with cultural ambitions. This meant that Linz, almost without being properly aware of it itself, was already offering a combination almost unique in Europe of a modern, highly productive industrial infrastructure, a growing cultural potential rapidly approaching top standards and attractive nature enclaves both within the city's boundaries and in its immediate surroundings.

However, a sense of uncertainty continued to beset Linz. The city remained typecast in the role of the destination that failed to be one, the place you only took note of as you drove or rode past it, the prime candidate among Austria's towns for the palm of provincialism. The joke of Linz rhyming with »province«, which had already been sickly when it first saw the light of day in the 19th century, proved remarkably long-lived.[1]

All this is now a thing of the past. A multitude of day visitors (more than 2 million) and an increase in overnight stays of more than 10 per cent during Culture Capital Year have their own tale to tell. This is all the more remarkable at a time when the other Austrian cities and the tourist destinations of neighbouring countries all have to cope with significant setbacks. Investments in cultural infrastructure[2] directly connected to Linz09 or in its wake have been doubly welcome at a time of economic crisis. It is owing to them that there is now a new city to be reckoned with, situated halfway between Vienna and Salzburg, that is determined consistently and successfully to cut its own path and to defend the economic position it has attained.

Listening to what the city's saying

There is an impressive array of reasons that together account for this highly positive state of affairs. At no point was Linz09 ever that tsunami of events which some people had felt in duty bound to warn of beforehand. On the contrary: Linz09 has been a standing invitation to the city and to all its parts to contribute their share to a moment of the city's history that is going to decisively shape its urban culture for a long time to come.

This involved above all attempts to spell out for a large number of participants the demands inherent in the host role in as concrete terms as possible. Initiatives such as hotspots, in which a wide range of hospitality industry businesses managed to improve their quality standards are to be cited here as well as the achievement of Austria Guides, who developed a new style of guided city tours to do justice to Linz09's cultural programme. The results in both cases were quite spectacular and endorsed the energetic alliance between culture and tourism that had been struck up regardless of the religious wars of a bygone age. It was with astonishment and pride that the Linzers noted the unexpected inundation of the Hauptplatz with visitors speaking an impressive variety of tongues. Even the rather sedate Linz hotel landscape felt a burst of rejuvenation and many a taxi driver of either sex suddenly found themselves in great demand as committed spokespersons for the Culture Capital.

This was the kind of framework and the kind of Linz for which we developed our programme.[3] Expectations and hopes had been rising for a long time on the part of the city's cultural institutions, artists and cultural managers and had begun to soar sharply after European Cultural Month in 1998 at the latest. It was obvious that disappointments would be inevitable, particularly

since in the view of some people the role of the artistic directorate of Linz09 was best defined in terms of coordinating pre-planned projects.[4]

The commitment of the Linz09 directorate brought about a total change of perspective. The fact that the directorate is made up persons who were initially unfamiliar with Linz meant that the decision makers both in the City and in the province were exposed to a perspective from outside, which considerably reduced calculability in their eyes. This in turn meant that decisions regarding the programme became tight-rope walks rich in conflicts, disappointments, surprises and impassioned arguments. The task was to distil more than 2,000 submitted projects into a programme that was both compatible with the artistic directors' own ideas and with a host of partly contradictory expectations that had developed outside of Linz09. There were those who counted on an extensive involvement of Linz and Upper Austrian artists, while others were looking forward to pronounced European or even global dimensions. Artistic niches and the bastions of political resistance were to be taken into account alongside issues such as justice in gender questions. Metaphorically speaking, some wanted Culture Capital Year to bathe Linz all year round in the lightning and thunder of big bangers, beacons and fireworks – to the extent, of course, that it wasn't entirely given over to peace, silence, and the simple poetry of everyday culture, while at the same time the whole range of different styles and disciplines guaranteed in terms of cultural policy had to be kept in sight.

This assortment of all conceivable wishes, which precluded dubious compromises from the word go, was an ever present challenge for us. It was paramount to remain mission-focused and to concentrate on getting the right mixture – the one that would embrace in equal measure what Linz has got to offer and what Linz lacks and that would take charge of the legitimate needs both of locals and visitors.

A welcome exceptional state

The right mixture is not something you can conjure out of a hat. It needs time and dramaturgical specifications. For instance, we set great store by being on air on 365 out of 365 days – as a signal that the only way of showing your appreciation of such an extraordinary year is to make good use of every single moment.

All this amounted to a simple message: Whenever you're in the mood to get extra kicks out of your city, dear Linzers, whenever you want to have a great time here, dear Culture Capital tourists: we're here to offer you a round-the-year programme that is second to none.

Quality however does not materialize when you snap your fingers or when the bells ring in the New Year. This is why we wanted to give ourselves and the city a headstart with regard to the internal and external challenges of Culture Capital Year. We decided to crank up the

programme two years early. "Art into the City!!", as the motto had it at the time, was supposed to give Linzers a first taste of what being Culture Capital might actually be like. And it did indeed work out according to plan: Using the experience gained from the contemporary art exhibition Schaurausch (in the shop windows of more than 50 stores in Linz's old city) and Tiefenrausch (in the city's system of tunnels and horizontal mine shafts) as perches, we found it much easier to reach for the stars in the concluding HÖHENRAUSCH. This exhibition on the city's rooftops turned out to be Linz09's most successful project. It attracted 270,000 visitors, more than any other exhibition of contemporary art in Austria. The approximation to Europe was likewise supposed to be a gradual, step-by-step one. Therefore the LINZ EUROPA TOUR 2007 – 2009 dispatched Hubert von Goisern first to the Black Sea as Linz09's musical ambassador and, a year later, to the North Sea, before his friends from all the countries bordering on two of Europe's great rivers were invited to take part in the LINZ EUROPA HAFENFEST in the summer of Culture Capital Year.

There was one more key project that demanded a great deal of attention. A city that is going to be the focus of European attention for a whole year is well advised to confront its own history in a self-confident and self-critical manner. That Linz addressed the topic of the Nazi era and its terror earlier and more thoroughly than other Austrian cities is a point in its favour. In Culture Capital Year it has been possible to ensure that the City is now getting the recognition it deserves for its courageous attitude. Linz09 has managed to stage this encounter with Austria's history in the time between 1938 and 1945 in the public space and to give it a face; it has found ways of telling stories that were by no means unknown but that had not been told in that way before. The decision to have the controversial exhibition "KULTURHAUPTSTADT DES FÜHRERS" open at the Schlossmuseum several months before the official start of Culture Capital Year achieved its end: in this way the road was clear for today's Linz when Linz09 kicked off in earnest.

European Capital of Culture Year was experienced in Linz as a time brimming with new impressions, surprises and experiences – from the glitzy opening night, when 130,000 people gathered along Nibelungen Bridge and the Danube Embankment to usher in the New Year in tandem with Culture Capital Year, to the soft farewells at the year's end. And the space in between housed a programme that combined a superlative density of events, high artistic standards and the need for a Culture Capital to make sure there is a place at its tables for everyone and to make everyone feel welcome.

The theatre festival SNOWSTORM, the opening of the ARS ELECTRONICA CENTER, the CULTURE CAPITAL NEIGHBOURHOODS OF THE MONTH, the Lentos exhibition BEST OF AUSTRIA, the lunchtime readings at the StifterHaus, the opera FOUCHÉ, the KEPLER SALON and other programme elements were designed to signal to Linzers and to Upper Austrians that Culture Capital was off to a flying start and that they were invited to explore new territories. During those first weeks, before even the most seasoned of city tourists showed any inclination to venture forth, we were overwhelmed by the reactions we got: 86% capacity utilisation in Hafenhalle09, record numbers of visitors in museums and other cultural institutions, and the

Linz09 Infocenter humming along in top gear were living proof of the public's inquisitive and adventurous spirit.

Part of the local media, it is true, were decidedly less generous in the treatment they gave the Culture Capital. The keen interest in the programme shown by the general public and the extremely positive echo it found in international media left little trace in the versions of public opinion some local journalists felt called to propagate. Perhaps this is best accounted for by pointing to the new composition of the audiences: it was obvious that Culture Capital was appealing to groups not traditionally associated with so-called high culture. And when spring and its mild temperatures enabled Linz09 to move under the open sky and make use of public spaces as planned, when some 8,000 youngsters joined forces for choral song in the Hauptplatz and 300 boys and girls from ten cities took part in a European Soccer Cup, when the great theatre project for schools I LIKE TO MOVE IT MOVE IT started to unfold, when the CIRCUS and the HÖRSTADT project with its oases of quiet began to weave their different kinds of magic and when Linz, on the evidence of the languages spoken in its streets, was becoming more cosmopolitan by the day, most people agreed that this was as good as it can get.

The sense of euphoria that resulted from this took even the most sceptical Linzers by surprise and made even the most persistent gripers pause. The holiday months, usually a season of cultural drought, saw countless young visitors turn up at the highly unusual venues chosen by the theatre festival SUNBURN, travel around the world in the Ars Electronica cyber project 80+1 or marvel at an uncommonly lively and cheerful Linz from the Schlossmuseum's new South Wing. The temporary structure of the yellow house on the hill, BELLEVUE, designed as a venue for a wide range of cultural activities sponsored by various Linz neighbourhoods, proved the runaway success of the rainy summer months.

Linz's Indian summer witnessed an unending trek of beasts of all shapes and sizes traversing the city; it had taken roughly one thousand Linzers several weeks to create these animals from the blueprints and according to the instructions of a wellknown South African puppet maker. The FLOOD – a "Klangwolke"[5] for which there is no precedent – provided unforgettable images on the cusp to Brucknerfest. And when many were quite sure that Linz09 was already beating the retreat, we were able to announce another 600 events for the last quarter. This was just as well because the stream of visitors showed no sign of subsiding. In October we welcomed more international delegations than in any of the previous months, and after Anton Bruckner's overwhelming TE DEUM sung by a thousand voices at Linz's Mariendom the dark, meditative months are also becoming imbued with an intense cultural aura, which is alleviated by the self-irony of the lighthearted retrospective currently on at the HOUSE OF STORIES.

Curiosity is the Key

This sketch of an overview must suffice in the present context, even though it is very far from doing justice to the complexity of Linz09's programme landscape. Fortunately our Memory Book can now be consulted as well as all those pictures that we ourselves carry around in our heads, which mean much more to us than any photograph and which preserve for each and everyone of us what was unique about this year.

This collective treasure is what we stand to gain above all from the Culture Capital project – alongside with the newly built and the newly refurbished buildings, the serendipitous partnerships, the friends that Linz and all of us have made, and the prestige and respect that this small European city has gained for itself.

Such gains are a good basis to build on and to continue to work for Linz. What needs to be cultivated and developed above all are the lessons that Linz has learnt in this exceptional year. Much has been shown to be possible that hitherto used to be considered impossible. Linz09 has been able to bundle under the Culture Capital umbrella occasionally divergent strategies sponsored by Linz and Upper Austria respectively. Cultural managers and tourist experts have been taking cues from each other in matters related to their shared public and have found that acting in concert yields more beneficial effects than splendid isolation. Cooperation in terms of joint ticketing, the Linz09 Card, the Linz09 Insider (with more than 7,000 bookings), a supraregional marketing strategy and, last but not least, the establishment of contacts to the international press – all these measures have set standards that will serve as benchmarks for future activities, even though the environment will be a fundamentally different one after 2009.

What will also remain alive are newly acquired competence, the experiences gained from concrete projects aiming to meet international standards, the high degree of networking among different cultural institutions – and the deep-seated conviction of Linzers that theirs is the most innovative city in the Republic.

The very substantial investments in the cultural infrastructure, which became possible because Linz quite rightly interpreted Culture Capital Year as a cue for a gigantic leap forward, have produced both effects and responsibilities on an extraordinary scale. Linz has its work cut out for the period after 2009. Tasks that urgently need to be addressed include safeguarding HÖRSTADT and the AKUSTIKON, with its location in the heart of the city, as pioneering ventures that are unique in Europe. Clearcut decisions and the activation of funding bodies are needed regarding such projects as KEPLER SALON that have a massive contribution to make to Linz's profile as an agent of cultural facilitation and empowerment. Experiences gained with projects whose very essence consisted in their transitory nature, such as HÖHENRAUSCH and BELLEVUE, need to be translated into new ventures. And, finally, seminal scenarios and

formats in terms of cultural policies must be developed and the city's place on the maps of European city tourism must be guaranteed.

However, even more important than all this is keeping the curiosity of the Linzers alive, to feed it and – to make use of it. This is indispensable in the long run to maintain a climate of openness in the city and in Upper Austria that attracts people or keeps them from moving away – people from a variety of different cultures and nations, young people, whose commitment and entrepreneurship will enable them to make significant contributions to the social climate of a city characterised by a host of mutually compatible lifestyles. If this proves a viable option, the other goal will also be kept alive that was part of the wishful thinking with which we accompanied the unfurling of the Culture Capital: Linz as Austria's most interesting city is still an attractive proposition, even if it may still take time to be realised. The city itself has made the first steps in that direction, Linz09 has encouraged several more and there is no reason why Linz should let matters rest there.

Martin Heller, Ulrich Fuchs
Intendanz Linz09

[1] With almost 190,000 inhabitants Linz is Austria's third most populous city after Vienna and Graz; it is also the capital of the province of Upper Austria. 400,000 people or so live in its immediate catchment area.

[2] The province of Upper Austria and the City of Linz together invested a total of 338 million euros in the cultural infrastructure of Linz in preparation of Culture Capital Year, which included the newly built South Wing of the Schlossmuseum, the extension and adaptation of the Ars Electronica Center, Internationales Atelierhaus Salzamt, the new Music Theater, etc.

[3] For the project Linz09 a sum total of 60 million euros was made available, with federal government, Upper Austria and Linz each contributing one third. In addition to this, 1.5 million euro came from the EU and approximately 11 million euros from private sponsors.

[4] The City of Linz is the sole owner of Linz 2009 GmbH. The Supervisory Board of Directors is in charge of the financial aspects of the company, it has no influence on the cultural aspects. For these, responsibility rests exclusively with the artistic directorate.

[5] "Klangwolke" has been an annual event since 1979. Tens of thousands of spectators follow a spectacular open air event staged above and near the Danube. Linz09 has integrated a large number of existing cultural formats, such as LinzFest, Pflasterspektakel, the Youth Theatre Festival Schächspir and Klangwolke, into the programme of the Culture Capital, having made significant contributions to the respective budgets.