

EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE. AN EXERCISE IN EIGHTEEN WAYS.



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Of course it's not possible to explain something as complex and versatile as an European capital of Culture (ECoC) in merely 18 articles. So what you will read are different aspects that are part of organizing an ECoC. It's an exercise to understand the mechanisms of such extraordinary event.

As a producer of quite a few internationally valued theatre and dance productions, I was already in close contact with many of the ECoC cities during the eighties and nineties. We realized performances with among others Berlin (88), Amsterdam (87), Glasgow (90), Antwerp (93), Lisbon (94), Copenhagen (96), ... My brief passage as programming director during the preparations of Brussels 2000 was a first inside experience. But it goes without saying that my period as a intendant for Bruges 2002 was by far my most beautiful and most important ECoC experience. I kept following the subject by visiting

several ECoCs throughout the past years, by having a lot of conversations with the constantly growing numbers of competing cities and by eagerly reading many studies about the subject.

The 'the Decade after' congress in Bruges was an ideal opportunity to bring order into all these experiences, thoughts and insights. During the preparations of the congress I started with my first notes. The discussions during the congress inspired me to finalize the summary. To be able to organize Brugge 2002 ECoC is a wonderful experience. It was very challenging but I look back at this project with great satisfaction. And I could personally experience how the city benefits from it. It still remains a marvelous project. Therefore I found it necessary to unravel the phenomenon. As an exercise. This means reading it critically. So I invite you to do the same!

1

A MOMENT DURING A PROCESS.

A city or a region carries the title of ECoC for one year. This is the 'moment'. This cannot be isolated in time and in the local cultural policy. The year is a moment during a process. It isn't just any moment, it is the engine to give a better chance to an enduring policy. The process starts years before and has to reverberate many years after. So the years before and the years after determine the quality of the ECoC moment. The ECoC year links up perfectly with this process. To fit this exceptional process to whatever lives and works in the city, determines the feasibility of the process and the success of the ECoC year. It's a process in which the unique historical, economical, social and political context of every city or region must be recognizable and undeniable. The question 'what after' is as important as the question 'what before'. In the years before we lay the humus on which the cultures can grow and blossom in the years after. The context defines the cultural project as it can only be realized during that moment and in that city. And it remains also important to realize that 'before' and 'after' also requires a budget.

2

A CITY OR REGION ONLY PROFITS FROM AN ENDURING CULTURAL PROJECT, EMBEDDED IN A GLOBAL VISION ON SOCIETY.

With a vision and thus with a well elaborated content. An ECoC doesn't fall out of the sky: there is a 'why'. It's a deliberate choice to grow gradually and with passion towards a well balanced cultural vision for the future of the city and the region. By organizing ECoC, the long term ambition becomes more clearly expressed. That is why ECoC is not a single event, how successful it may be, it is a process for cultural development. It takes years of hard work, sometimes struggling, to acquire the title. The motivation of a city to put itself forward is in itself a great part of the success of an ECoC. That is why the social embedding of the cultural activity can be maximized. It explains and defends the ambition of city marketing. Although don't choose to organize an ECoC as the most effective and feasible solution for the need of an intensive city marketing. A cultural process is an undisputable part of the urban and regional development. The cultural programme is often considered as a unifying strength. Thanks to the culture the confidence and pride of the citizens about their own environment will only grow.

3

ESTABLISHING AND INTEGRATING!

The process is only a process when it is established and integrated in the field of local cultural organizations and players. In a close relationship with different social actors and with the inhabitants of a city and region. If it's embedded in the cultural policy of a city and region, the process will be applauded and supported. The involvement of the different social actors in the city, especially the cultural ones, is central in the process. It is mainly in the cultural area that the policy reaches the social basis for the ECoC and completes the process.

It is a big responsibility for the cultural field. Most certainly because full involvement is not the same as self-service and seclusion. The need of establishment and integration cannot be a reason to concentrate on the familiar activities, just with some more attention and a bigger budget. It is the responsibility of the cultural players to keep an open mind and give a platform to the new and the unknown. It's a unique opportunity for the cultural actors to exceed themselves and to grasp the opportunity to welcome many different influences.

Therefore the ECoC cannot present itself as a new or different kind of cultural initiative. The ECoC programme is an integrated part of the existing cultural programme. The ECoC project organization acts as a colleague, a partner in the cultural field. It integrates itself in the cultural field as a goal-oriented organization that can only succeed if it prepares, produces and presents its programme with the players of the city and region. Mostly, but not exclusively, it will be cultural players. There are also possible partners in education, the hotel and catering industry, tourist organizations, and many more. The quality of the ECoC organization is mainly to formulate new propositions, to create synergy, to maintain unity in the programme, to introduce new talents, to draw attention to unknown long-term possibilities and to make budgets available. It can only question the cultural status-quo as a result of its established and integrated position.

The same openness and generosity will flow to the many social players. This is not opposed to any visionary policy of the city council, on the contrary, it is a condition.

New architecture, extra budgets, inviting talent from elsewhere, experimenting, questioning, enforcing propositions,.... are mainly the cause of public debate. It stirs up the public involvement and awareness. Materializing a visionary policy involves a social debate, also including opposition. To get through this is part of the involvement, integration and establishment. This will make the inhabitants and organizations aware of the process and of the ECoC.

THE TENSION BETWEEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL.

During the project this will become very tangible, preferably by means of an intensified cultural programme. This tension is a constant concern; it is more like a mission. The involvement of consumers, participants and creative people is very important for the local aspect. It is tempting to be mainly important on the local scale because there is an immediate result which is interesting from a political point of view. And that is fine but it's not just that. The project connects also what is internationally prominent in the cultural field. It also connects with trends by giving it mainly a local identity. The preferably international response is a direct motivation for the ECoC and it increases the quality of the long-term process. There is sometimes a negative connotation to thinking and working locally. But that's not the case when it's part of a bigger context and sometimes it adds to the global cause. If it is not working locally, it will not be working globally either.

THE CONTENT OF THE PROGRAMME COMES FROM TRADITION AND HISTORY AS WELL AS CONTEMPORARY AND CURRENT THEMES.

There is a balanced combination possible. History plays a big part in it because it is about a 'European' capital of culture. Every city and every region in Europe has a history that is interwoven with the continent. Underlining the historic context, using the geographic location, remembering great moments and including cultural achievement into the programme takes dedication. If this history plays an important artistic and European part, than it can lead to projects than could become great hits. For the locals and tourists as well as passionate cultural enthusiasts. But the historic part would mean nothing without the contemporary offer of art and culture. That involves the presentation of different prominent movements of all artistic areas as well as the production of new art works.

EVERYBODY CREATIVE.

The citizens are invited to take part in the programme in their very own creative way, but with respect for the quality standard. Almost every individual can and wants to be creative. In cooperation with schools, clubs, local media, social institutions,... initiatives are developed in which the creativity of the locals takes shape. Possibly it reduces the gap between highbrow and popular culture. An ECoC project programmes the best on offer from the world but it also brings out the best in the local inhabitants. The programme is not only made for the citizens but also partly made with them. The ownership of the ECoC by the local people is real.

A PLACE FOR LOCAL TALENTS.

It is always very delicate to start a partnership with local talents, independent artists and existing cultural organizations. The complexity of the local cultural landscape cannot be underestimated. However difficult it may be, it is necessary to start working relations and gain trust. An ECoC is a unique opportunity for many artists of many different styles. They gain experience, new exchanges are possible, new commissions are entrusted, the attention for the arts has never been so paramount, workshops and master classes are organized,... It will be particularly local talents and their organizations that can materialize a long-term project.

AN EXCEPTIONAL YEAR WITH EXCEPTIONAL PROJECTS FOR THE CITY PATRIMONY.

Obtaining the title of ECoC is a great stimulant for upgrading the city patrimony. It enables exceptional initiatives. Cultural infrastructure, architectural remarkable public projects and the restoration of patrimony are topics on the agenda. Although these are permanent focus points, ECoC still remains a project to materialize these ambitions in a grander, faster and more festive way. A new museum or concert hall, a restored theatre or opera house, a new bridge or tourist pavilions, new streets and squares,... are often the major realisations to materialize the dynamics of the moment in an enduring way.

THE CULTURAL PROGRAMME IS ONE STORY.

How elaborate and diverse each cultural activity may be, its meaning still comes from the combination of all projects. All parts, valuable on their own, are a complementary within a broader entirety. All ECoC programmes are related to one another. Sometimes hidden, sometimes explicitly. The number of programmes is limited and knows priorities, accents and highlights. An excess in options, avoids choices and ignores the opportunity for a certain sharpness. It should be very ambitious but still feasible. An ECoC programme is unique because of its scale, its limited duration, its focus and the involvement of many partners. Programming a cultural year is not just filling up an agenda. Why one concert follows another or why a certain dance recital follows a certain play does not only depend on the artist's availability or an individual artistic appreciation. It's not programmed as a way of communication. Cultural quality, reaching as many people as you can and a balanced agenda are the results of what the cultural year is all about. The more distinct the story, the clearer the significance of this cultural year. And that is what counts when making and presenting culture and art: generating significance.

**THE OPEN SPACE, IN ALL SENSES OF THE WORD,
IS CRUCIAL FOR THE CAPITAL OF CULTURE.**

This refers not only to public space but also to virtual open space and even the way of thinking and the attitude during the entire project. Public space is filled up with specific, temporary and enduring projects. Here we pay attention to the animation, art in public space and architecture, but also parades, flags, decorations... The tangible open space is translated into hospitality, tolerance, readiness, cultural diversity, ...!

**DISTINCT RULES AND WELL-DEFINED RESPONSIBILITIES
ARE A CONDITION FOR THE QUALITY OF THE REALIZATION.**

Preparing the cultural year, realizing it and taking care of the after-effects are made possible by a combination of specific and autonomous responsibilities. Choosing who, what and how these responsibilities are taken, is every bit as important as the programme itself. Each of their specific responsibilities have their own assignment and can only work if they take up a complementary role. First and utmost is politics. There is also the cultural sector which is autonomous and sometimes dominant but always sensitive to context. There is also touristic policy and economical dynamics.

The civic organizations in the city will organize part of its activities as part of ECoC. In consultation with all other stakeholders, politics will establish the central ECoC project organization. This is a crucial step. If they do not take the right decision, there is an immediate pressure on the project. A project organization should get full responsibility, they must have ample autonomy in the assignment and be able to meticulously realize the concept that was at the beginning of acquiring the title. It should acquire the necessary budget and professional staff. The cultural programme may not be influenced by political interests or interference and the operational structure must have artistic independence.

To organize a successful ECoC, it is necessary to make strong arrangements about the objectives of the project and about the definition of every partner's responsibility.

CHOOSING A STRONG PROJECT ORGANIZATION IS A CONDITION.

The quality of the organization and the realization of all these responsibilities are obvious requirements but delicate. Especially for the ECoC project organization that designs, produces and realizes the cultural year. Preferably the project organization starts at least three years before the cultural year. A project organization requires professionalism, autonomy in the realization and sensitivity to the environment. There is a thin line between keeping distance and seeking rapprochement. In most cases it will turn out that a professional input from outside the city or region is necessary. Preferably national and if necessary even international. The management of the ECoC project organization must also be in hands of an independent management with international experience and vision. An ECoC cooperates with the leading national cultural organizing talents. To acquire this talent, it is essential that local politics are brave. The city councils are under a lot of local pressure to assign the designs and realizations to the local cultural field. This must be questioned. More specific, the cultural sector itself needs to motivate its policymakers to look beyond the local cultural landscape.

THE VISITOR IS A REAL FACTOR TO MEASURE SUCCESS.

Off course, the number of visitors is preferably as high as possible. However the quality of the visit is also essential and it surely needs to be an ambition for the programme.

An ECoC is an event for many people in the city, the region and elsewhere. There is a classic pattern that is rarely broken: the majority of

the visitors are locals, followed by domestic visitors and then foreign tourists. Although not every part of the programme can welcome 'a lot of people'. The programme combines great diversity with a maximum attendance per activity – sometimes a lot, sometimes not. The visitor can find his place in each phase of the process. Even in the years before the cultural year. He is being informed and invited. The manner of inviting and informing stimulates the visit. But also after the cultural year. It is the ambition that the visitor also returns afterwards.

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THERE MUST BE A BUZZ ABOUT THE CAPITAL OF CULTURE AND ABOUT THE CITY...

Information, promotion campaigns, communication... are therefore centre of the activity. It is the task of the project organization in the first place. But the tourist organizations and marketing services of the city cooperate in a complementary and strengthening way. Communication is almost as important as a good programme. This has certainly some budgetary consequences. The way of informing and promoting colours the ECoC. It says something about the quality of the work, it respects the visitor and invites the ones who are interested in that quality.

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THE ECoC IS A EUROPEAN PROJECT AND SHOWS IT CONSTANTLY.

It is one of the EC's rare initiatives that gives Europe a positive image and makes it tangible for the citizens. It is an important instrument to make people aware of the fact that Europe is also about culture and values. It is the task of both local and European governments to work together and value this dimension through specific agreements. The ECoC title is awarded by the European level based on carefully made propositions. It is too often the case that local influences cause the final project to be very different from the original proposition. The

complex preparation process and implementation of the year has to be controlled by the EC after the title is awarded. An independent self-control and a decentralised assessment mechanism must be installed. A body different from the implementing body. The control and decisive competency can be left with the communal level and civic actors, under criteria jointly set up by the Commission and the cities, including participation of independent experts, not top down, but bottom-up. Almost all experienced ECoC responsible welcomed an expanded role for the EU in relation to ECoC in the future.

On the other hand it is time Europe invests radically to maximally involve the ECoCs to confirm the European integration as something obvious for the European citizens. Europe as a cultural reality, a Europe for the citizens! An ECoC has the potency to be an instrument of promoting European integration and cooperation. Europe can assign the cities to do this but it can also strongly increase its own investment. But an ECoC is about telling a story in which the local is a part of the European entirety.

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THE FINANCIAL POSSIBILITIES ARE EXCEPTIONAL.

It is no surprise that sponsors want to spend a budget on a cultural festival. Companies and citizens, governments on every level (local, regional, national and international), tourist organizations and all kinds of relations,... are prepared to make the festival possible by investing financially. That is if the project is vast, characteristic, convincing and clear. The city and region play a central role in the financing of a festival. Off course by providing a great part of the budget themselves. But also by inviting other parties and partners to finance and to remind them about their social and civil responsibility towards the local community. Especially for an ECoC the term 'good citizenship' is no false concept. The total investment in cultural activities in a city is a one-time high. It goes without saying that the financial management has to be profes-

sional with an open mind and knowledge of artistic creation and the cultural activity. To be able to do this right, it is necessary to know a confirmed budget as soon as possible during the preparation phase.

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THERE IS OFF COURSE NO SOUND RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.

However there are success factors. These alter a lot and they are very diverse. There is the themes as well as the context of the event, the scale of local involvement, the need of partnerships, the importance of planning, the necessity of political independence and artistic autonomy, the expectation of clear goals, the value of an intrinsic strong programme, the necessity of sufficient means, powerful leadership and political benevolence, ... and many more. Success can be hidden or overrated. Or even both! Communicating that the project is successful can definitely generate a certain international credibility but it will not hide the local insolvency. Each evaluation study organized by city and project organization is overwhelming positive about the past year. Let us assume that this is right. It has nothing to do with the feel good sensation of the own inhabitants and the perception of the distant interested visitor. There can be a great difference in the assessment of success between study results, the feeling of the citizens and the opinions of foreign specialists.

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TIME TO PARTY.

Let us not forget to party, the honour of being a capital of culture during a whole year is definitely worth a party. It's a festive happening, a feeling of excitement and enthusiasm throughout the whole city. A lot of happiness and craving to do things. Mostly you party when there is a good reason to party. A city has to be ready to party. There has to be a general feeling that it is the right time to build a party. During the entire year, there has to be a pleasant and festive ambiance hanging around the programme.

Al those who were passionate about ECoCs or still are, will definitely know what I mean with these 18 notices. The different angles might of course be formulated otherwise, with accents and different priorities, depending on one's own experience and reflection. Surely everyone can add or alter something. That's why it is mainly an exercise. An elaborate sketch that can take shape by taking on the exercise and improving it.

And I repeat: consider this to be an invitation.

Clearly, every ECoC is different. They are not exchangeable. A lot is decided by which city and when it is organized. This is what this exercise stipulates but it must be highlighted extra because every interpretation has its own context. This doesn't mean that the essence, the spine isn't comparable and counts for almost any city. The body around it though makes it unique.