

ABOUT THE LEGACY OF EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE



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Dear Mr. Yves Roose, alderman for culture, dear Hugo, thank you very much for the invitation. I feel very honored about this opportunity to share some thoughts and ideas with you on the occasion of the anniversary of Brugge, Cultural Capital 2002.

Dear Guests, colleagues and friends,
please allow me to start with some very personal remarks, they should help me to define the overall context of the topic „European Capital of Culture“

I belong to a generation, that still has some vivid memories of the second world war. Being a child in these terrible times in Germany, what we learned about Europe was about enemies. I myself, having a Jewish mother, a fact that in its consequence I did not yet understand, but

realized that for some reason my parents were not allowed to work in their profession as musicians. But when they played at home, music became a moment of peace and happiness. For the first time, more or less unconsciously I felt the power and chances of art and culture in the middle of troubled everyday life.

Later when I lived with my mother in a small town, where she had found a possibility to work as organ player in the church, the people there took her presence for granted, she was an artist, nobody questioned her background. To give us, a group of children, being a bit lost during the last months and weeks before the end of war and the complicated period that followed, something to do and think of, somebody suggested we should create a theatre with all the work that belonged to it. We organized a space and „produced“ performances to which we invited people from the town, neighbours and friends. And here we learned something again – in these threatening nervous days our“ artistic „activity could for moments change the mood, give the „audience“ something to enjoy. We saw what „culture“ could do, bring people together, create tolerance and some kind of hope.

We longed for the end of war and fascism, for a time of openness and communication. But then, in the years afterwards, we as young Germans, had also to understand and accept a heritage, that had made us the enemies in Europe. We had to develop a new consciousness, to try and win back trust and friendship to become part of Europe, hoping for a common future, based on cultural and artistic cooperation with international partners.

But with the rise of the cold war, new frontiers were set up, new ideas of „enemies“ were produced and a united Europe seemed an unrealistic illusion. Between East and West contacts, information, any chance of collaboration was lost. With ideological phrases culture was divided – social realism against capitalistic bourgeois art, culture was used as a weapon, as destroying argument. For me it's quite important to remember this situation to understand the visionary importance of Melina Mercouri's idea to create the project „Cultural Capital of Europe“ 1985.

It was also in 1985 that Günter Grass had proposed to the Kulturforum in a KSZE meeting (Konferenz über Sicherheit und Zusammenarbeit in Europa) in Budapest to set up a „Gesamteuropäische Kulturstiftung“, but had failed to get the necessary number of European governments to agree. In 1987 the context of Amsterdam, Capital of Culture gave Steve Austen the chance to take up the idea and to invite artists and intellectuals from all over Europe with the aim to start an ongoing dialogue across borders. The group that called themselves „Gulliver“, had some remarkable moments, especially in Leningrad and Bucharest, with more or less subversively organized debates with local colleagues. This was one way in the early years to use the chances and challenges of the „Cultural Capital“ project.

A year after Amsterdam, Berlin took over the programme „Kulturstadt Europas“ (we did not use the „Capital“) and it was very much aware of this challenge. When I was appointed as programme director, the responsible secretary of culture of Berlin, Volker Hassemer gave us some guidelines to follow – first, to try and include projects or presence not only from western Europe, but from as many east European countries as possible – to be remembered, that still meant through the wall! Using tricks and subversive procedures we succeeded quite remarkably. But the result was sometimes nearly shocking – with some of the projects and encounters it became visible how much the world had been divided, how differently art and culture had been developed and sometimes been used for ideological reasons. But on the other hand it was a chance for audiences to discover a world, a part of Europe, until then mostly unknown, to meet people, to make contacts and offer to artists first ideas of collaboration. That was the other line we followed with the programme as Cultural city of Europe – to invite as many people as possible for participation, in workshops, classes, projects, to be a host city based very much on civil society engagement, a meeting place for Europeans.

As we know, culture and cultural workers played an important role in the ongoing process to overcome the dividing wall, most prominent in some of the East European countries where well-known artists took important political positions.

During the early period of „Cultural Capitals“ this chance of influence on necessary changes – political, artistic, social – through a conscious programmatic concept was evident in several cities. Glasgow, after Berlin for example used the programme for the development of a deeply rooted new role for the city, urban planning, new cultural policy. The city after this year was changed, having found a sustainable way into a promising future.

This would have been unthinkable, if the organizers had not understood the need for a very close cooperation between the political decision makers, the representatives of business and economy and the strengthened civil society in their city. A common understanding, a common language between all parts of society create the necessary base for a sustainable future of a city and culture can take the leading role in this process. Here again is a very good argument for the programme of „Cultural Capitals of Europe“

With the fall of the Iron Curtain the East /West debates have become less urgent, although there still exist many troubling differences, as could be heard some short time ago in a discussion during a debate in Vilnius provocatively titled, „why is the East not sexy anymore?“. Colleagues from several former East European cities stated it as an obvious fact, that after a first period of interest from producers and presenters in the west, now, some years later the necessary curiosity had vanished. It has become much more difficult to provoke enough interest for coproductions or even visits to new performances by young unknown directors or companies. In addition to that, private sponsorship, at first fairly strong after the opening of the borders to „new eastern markets“ has stopped and public budgets for new artistic development have also been cut seriously. And to make it worse, the budgets for touring and travelling all over Europe are also getting smaller.

Instead of East/West topics, the question of the European dimensions in a European Capital of Culture became more obvious. Melina Mercouri wanted to highlight the richness and diversity of European Cultures with the Capital of Culture in 1985: „To celebrate the cultural ties that link Europe and foster a feeling of European citizenship“.

There is no doubt that the „ECoC“ has become an ambitious cultural initiative. In principle it has become a success story for cities, for the EU – visibly reflected in a huge amount of studies, papers, reports. Today, nearly 30 years later, it seems to be more needed than ever. The financial and political „crisis“ has made visible the fragility of „European citizenship“. People in European countries seem to be afraid of a united Europe, imagining they would have to pay for other countries deficits and others hating the pressure being put on them from „Europe“. This creates new nationalistic ideas and bears the danger of democracies on risk. If a high-ranking French politician can lobby for the proposal to close borders again and turn the back on „Europe“, something seems to be completely wrong.

At the same time we realize with some kind of relief, that governments do look for new arguments for the European process and turn to culture as a chance for better communication of the European future. This makes the ECoC project a very important issue again and a task for a serious and careful development and definition.

It cannot be just about a glamorous one year program, it is about the legacy and lasting impact on cities that have to serve the idea of being the basis for Europe, to adopt a European aspect and to give something back to Europe and its citizens.

It is not enough to look back and believe in the success of the program, it is necessary to realize and analyze the challenges and listen to critical voices. It is not a simple story of success or failure – anyhow all ECoC are different, because all cities are different and there is not one unique legacy, nor one single way to be successful. Each city has to decide on what constitutes success for them and for whom. Is it a success to rely on the number of events, on the sold tickets or number of

tourists, when at the end of the programme there is a hole in the city's finances for years, local artists and cultural projects suffer from lack of sufficient support, are pushed from the city centre to the suburbs? And who benefits from maybe glamorous new buildings erected for the planned events, although in several cases not even ready for use during the ECoC, and afterwards empty because the city has not taken care of a sustainable use, of artistic development and process oriented initiatives.

How to overcome sometimes huge disappointments of local actors and artists that have not been included enough in the programme or even more damaging to the whole project – political interferences into the preparation, implementation and follow-up phase. It happens again and again that local or national governments are trying to control the programme and neglect it's cultural core. This also can lead to a big discontinuity from the application process to the title and the implementation of the programme which covers a spectrum of 6 or more years: cultural actors, civil society groups were good enough for the application but not involved in the programs implementation. And most important – the lack of the European dimension.

Thinking about legacy – in a report from a European Commission conference „Celebrating 25 years of European Capitals of Culture“ in March 2010 it says – „the two central questions that raised during the conference were, what kind of legacy can the ECoC really strive for, and how can these desired legacies best be planned and achieved“ ?

Of course there is a large variety of possible legacies – an economic, social, cultural impact on a city, some measurable others less so. It is relatively easy to quantify material legacy, as for example new cultural venues, or the increase of hotel stock, or the creation of new festivals or network events.

A positive result can also be the creation of new organizations, structures or networks. More difficult to measure is artistic quality, improvement of image or improved skills among local cultural operators. Legacy can also be a raised awareness about the potential of culture in

long-term local development – a new understanding of cultural policy, although many of the numerous studies confirm that it is harder to realize the long-term impact on local people, or if the ECoC improved the interest and involvement of people for culture. And there is even little proof, if an ECoC made people learn more about Europe and feel more European.

After so many years questions remain or have to be asked again:

How to make sure that the Capital of Culture is really

– a cultural project

– a citizen's project

– an incentive for new thinking, projects, networks, policy in the years after

– and a European project

Regarding the cultural project – all ECoCs should develop their programme built on their very special history and tradition, presenting the unique potential and specificity as special part of Europe's diversity and offer it as basis for international cooperation. The more a programme is based on this uniqueness of a city, it's cultural scene, the more interesting and attractive it will be for audiences from all over Europe.

The cultural objective is the basic starting point for new ideas, projects and visions for the future of the city. It is crucial to support and initiate contemporary development, support it with offers for workshops, create contacts and networking possibilities and make citizens aware and proud of their culture –it is a vibrant local culture with its mixture of international artistic life that gives a city a European dimension –even beyond the year of „European Capital of Culture“.

The creation of a legacy for a city or a region has to be rooted in the project from the very beginning. For a successful lasting impact the participation of all possible partners will be a kind of guarantee. With this shared spirit a legacy can become more than an administrative paper, it can promote a lively ongoing activity and a changed atmosphere.

The ECoC process offers all local players the chance of inventing new creative projects, ideas, even visions for the future of their city. Such it can be seen as a symbol for the responsibility, cities and citizens have to accept related to the development of Europe as a bottom-up process.

To build such a programme requires knowledge and experienced people, it offers tools for participation and integration and with it will be a chance for many local persons and initiatives to be included in a training and learning process. In the end an experienced team will also be an important legacy and a lasting achievement, as can very clearly be seen here in Brugge.

Strategic investment in cities should therefore first and foremost be an investment in people – resulting in improved city life, increased citizen's participation and wide access to culture.

Of course a legacy can also include new venues that support the cultural life for the coming years. But it has to be guaranteed that a budget is secured for the use of the building and even more important, that the planned use is based on a realistic need from the inhabitants of the city or opens a door to the introduction of new artistic activity, again Brugge can be seen as a successful proof of that.

As said before, each city will create another legacy but they all should mark a contribution to the development of Europe, should be a proof of the diversity and wealth of European heritage, the immense potential of culture and art as well for the capacity of the citizens to use it for the development of society as a whole.

In a period of the appearance of a „Wutbürger“ – this is a new expression, selected 2010 in Germany as „the word of the year“ at first meaning the indignation of citizens that political decisions are taken without any way of their participation and turning away from politics all together, but now rather for members of rightwing populist movements – in times of a threatening growth of radicalism, of signs of anti-democratic tendencies, we have, more than ever, to use all our creative conviction, all our arguments, our professional skills, our personal beliefs and experience to make people, and mostly the coming generation, but

also political decision makers on all levels, understand the significance of culture as the most important element in our societies. Coming back to my memories as a child I think that as many people as possible should be given the chance of participation in cultural or artistic projects to discover the personal and social enrichment. This might be one small, but important element to give European societies another vision about Europe than the allover present and threatening „crisis“. Therefore we need the project of Melina Mercouri – to celebrate the cultural ties that link Europe and foster a feeling of European citizenship.

Let me close my remarks with a quote from Heiner Müller :

*„Der Mensch lebt in der Welt und die Welt ist Planet, Region und Kontinent in einem. In Zeiten der Krise ereignet sich ein Deutungswandel dieser Welt. Kultur aber ist die freie innere Seite der Deutung, die der Mensch sich und seiner Welt gibt. Ohne diese Deutung ist er weltlos und ich verloren. Zeiten des Wandels sind daher auch Zeiten neuer Ursprünglichkeit, wieder gewonnener Offenheit, Zeiten neuen Verstehens, neuer Wahrnehmung, Zeiten der Entdeckung und Wiederentdeckung. Sie sind den Künsten günstig, es zieht sie zueinander“.**

* The human being lives in the world and the world is planet, region and continent in one. In times of crisis happens a change of interpretation of this world. But culture is the independent inner side of this interpretation, humans give themselves and their world. Without this interpretation he is wordless and lost Times of change therefore are also times of new simplicity, (naturalness), newly found openness, times of new understanding, new awareness, times of discovery and rediscovery. They are favorable for the arts – they attract each other.