‘European Capital of Culture’ and the primacy of cultural infrastructure in post-industrial urbanism

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**Introduction**

In the final quarter of the 20th century, theorising around the emergence and importance of a ‘new economy’, central to ‘post-industrial’ cities and regions flourished. In many versions of this theorising, an emphasis was placed on the key role that cultural, artistic practice could play in creating value in these new economic times. Although the urban environment has long functioned as a catalyst for myriad forms of cultural activity, the idea that culture has come to occupy a place “at the very centre of urban development” (García 2004: 313) has become ever more prominent. It is increasingly held that the successful city of the 21st century is one which employs policies which explicitly work towards providing a strong cultural offering, and one that values and promotes ‘creativity’ in some form.

This chapter examines how one example of a cross-national political project, the European Capital of Culture (formerly ‘City of Culture’ - henceforth ‘ECoC’) competition, emerges and develops in this time period. This competition is perhaps the most prominent and successful of the now global ‘capitals of culture’ movement, which has proliferated in recent years (Green 2017: 7). Currently, there are two ECoC host nations each year, with a selection panel judging potentially successful; locations within these nations against criteria including artistic content, capacity to deliver and ‘European dimension’ of their prospective cultural programme (Green 2017: 29). Subject to assessment during the planning phase, the EU will award hosts €1.5m, but recent host cities generally see total programme budgets over €20m, with some budgets in excess of €100m. (Green 2017: 32). The ECoC is used here as an example of the shifting position of cultural policy within the contemporary city, which develops alongside transformations in the meaning and uses of culture within cities. In order to substantiate these contentions, the chapter considers both the development of the manner in which this programme narrates and mediates the role for culture within the city, and how the programme exists as a technology to implement this role. As the ‘capital of culture’ model has been adopted in some form across the globe the title is considered here as the most prominent example of an international trend towards cultural policies which aim to leverage artistic and/or ‘creative’ practice to deal in part with the challenges presented by post-industrial cities. These challenges, to which we refer throughout the chapter, refer to, since the late 1960s, the rise of unemployment and the relocation of industry away from Western cities; urban inequalities associated with social policy questions of housing, education, health, and crime; and depopulation. Although Western cities have reversed trends such as depopulation, the other challenges we note have remained. There has yet to be a single urban policy fix to these issues, and this is the context in which to understand the turn to culture-led approaches.

Although cultural investment such as the ECoC has become a somewhat common tool in attempts to achieve urban transformation in recent decades (and continues to be so), it should be noted that as the urban environment changes, so too does the role which such investment is deemed to play. We can, therefore, trace the development of contrasting ‘models’ for the ECoC title and as such, a change in the outcomes expected from such interventions. It is thus necessary to examine how the title serves to mediate not only *specific* cities, but also the idea of ‘the city’ itself, and in so doing how the ECoC plays a part in augmenting a range of discourses and practices regarding the nature of culture within specific cities, and ‘the city’. By setting out the possibilities that have been attached to the ECoC, we outline the emerging dominance of a narrative around the primacy of cultural infrastructure in post-industrial urbanism. In particular, we consider the developing role of creative and media industries within these emergent ECoC models.

Using the ECoC to exemplify the way in which narratives aligning cultural festivals with post-industrial urban success emerge and proliferate, with a focus on the juncture between creative, communicative activity and the cultural festival, allows us to conclude with some notes of caution on the potential success of cultural programmes such as the ECoC. This is particularly the case if they are too readily understood in terms of the role culture may play in ‘the city’, generally speaking, as opposed to specific cities with specific histories and locations, and caution too about the all-too easy possibility of confusing evidence of a successful *narrative* around the role of culture with evidence of success in the actual *outcomes* from such cultural interventions.

**From European Identity to Urban Regeneration**

Interestingly, given its later implementation, dominant accounts of the ‘pre-history’ of the ECoC narrate an underlying intention to formulate a programme which could augment and counterbalance a European Community (EC) excessively focussed on economic matters. Gold and Gold note “no specific provision for culture” in the 1957 Treaty of Rome which established the European Economic Community, followed later by an emphasis at the 1969 Hague Summit, which agreed on the enlargement of the Community, on Europe’s ‘exceptional culture’ that “needed preserving” (2005: 221). Mittag (2012: 40) notes how such a position was built on during the 1970s in the Document on European Identity and the Tindemans report considering the nature of European integration, arguing that at this point in time culture was increasingly considered at the European level as a means of fostering and strengthening a common European identity, and broader support for trans-national integration. In the prevailing climate of economic recession and stagnation, Mittag also notes a tendency towards negative perceptions of the EC by the early 1980s, and the proposal for the ECoC comes at this point as part of an overall push towards “relaunching” the European project (Gold and Gold 2005: 222), conceived by many as a means of giving it a “human face” (Bullen 2013: 19). At this time, then, the foundations for the ECoC are broadly based around communicating and strengthening a common European identity, and thus providing a counterpoint to the often problematic economic relations between European nations; at the same time as the ECoC is being proposed, contemporaneous discussion can be seen to be questioning the future of the European Community (as was), and its ability to deal effectively with fundamental social and economic issues in member states. After the failure of the 1983 Athens Summit, for instance, the EC is seen by some to be “in a blind alley” (Hrbek 1984: 3).

Broadly speaking, the use of culture as a tool for communication within and between cities at an international level is a thread which runs through the justification for the ECoC award since this point of its inception in the early 1980s, with the variety of cities and cultures to be celebrated reflecting the subsequent European Union motto of *‘In Varietate Concordia’* (‘United in Diversity’) (Although initially a European Community initiative in the 1980s, the ECoC was formally adopted as an EU programme in the 1990s (Green 2017: 29)). The means by which the particular unifying character of the ECoC title is understood, however, has changed over time, and achievements of the title have similarly been understood in varying ways. It is thus important to separate the multiple meanings and uses of this cultural programme as it coincides, or otherwise, with post-industrial urban policy. In the initial stages of the competition, for instance, the influence of the ‘pre-history’ traced briefly above can clearly be seen. The first cities to host the ECoC programme, beginning with Athens in 1985, were all prominent cultural centres, with international reputations in the field of culture, and so this initial phase can be seen as something of a ‘celebration’ of European culture (cf. Connolly 2013: 168), with an underlying theme of attempting to communicate a unifying sense of ‘European-ness’ beyond the specific cities and nations hosting the title. In these early stages, cities were tasked with acting as a ‘beacon’ to communicate what a ‘European’ city is, could, or should be. Whilst this project was aligned to the wider European project of economic and political integration, and whilst investment was made by the initial host cities, these cities all had significant and visible existing cultural reputations and associated tourist infrastructures, outside of the ECoC competition; indeed Gold and Gold note the low budget for the 1989 Paris ECoC and also the fact that as it was “subsumed into the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution”, it lacked significant visibility as a European event (2005: 225).

As has now become an often told story, however, as the ECoC arrived in the UK for the first time in 1990, the selection of the city of Glasgow as host in an internal national competition marked a new era for the ECoC. Glasgow’s tenure sees the emergence of a persistent discourse around a new ‘model’ - the ‘Glasgow model’ - for using culture to ‘regenerate’ a city facing significant challenges in the post-industrial era. García (2004: 320) notes the *dual* aspects of this model in terms of the issues at hand here: “Glasgow 1990 transformed perceptions not only of the city but also of the ECoC programme”. This transformation takes a number of forms, but its legacy clearly persists in the operation of the ECoC from this point on, in a turn towards a focus on city marketing, image transformation, the promotion of tourism, attracting external investment, the renewal of cultural infrastructure, and so on (cf. García 2004, Mittag 2012). The official European Commission assessment of this turning point in the ECoC programme and the effects it is said to have had is worth considering at length:

Glasgow 1990 is deemed to have rejuvenated a city suffering from urban decay, heavy unemployment and a reputation for street crime, with many positive after-effects on the creative scene and a radical boost to its international image. Not only do cafés fill its streets on sunny days, but it is now considered a major cultural tourism destination. Antwerp 1993, too, had interesting after-shocks: it helped to challenge some of the extremist political tendencies that were emerging there. Key restoration projects were initiated, cultural projects launched and the city has now become synonymous with creativity. (European Commission 2009: 5)

By a position such as the above, the uses to which cultural programmes can be put in dealing with the difficulties of post-industrial urban transformation are varied indeed. What is certainly true is that there is a shift here from celebrating established cultural centres to promoting the development of cultural capacity, with a clear focus on the potential economic results this may have (albeit not *exclusively* on such economic factors). This model is increasingly in evidence throughout the 1990s (Labrianidis and Deffner 2000: 32).

Work reflecting on the role the ECoC is deemed to play in the early 21st century continues to focus on factors aligned with urban ‘regeneration’, conceived in myriad ways, with many noting the interplay between cultural, social and economic goals (e.g. Bergsgard and Vassenden 2011, Bullen 2013, Connolly 2013). In a report on the preparation for the country’s second hosting of the ECoC, for instance, the UK government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport explains that:

The purpose of the title is not simply to highlight existing cultural excellence, but to encourage cities to develop and innovate in the cultural field. It will be an opportunity to show that culture is central to the life of a city, and demonstrate its contribution to regeneration, social inclusion, education and business. In addition, the European Capitals of Culture scheme aims to foster European cultural co-operation and understanding (2003: 2)

It should be noted, however, that whilst the notion of the communication of a shared European identity, and thus some emphasis on the international links of the cities hosting the award, the reality ‘on the ground’ is often one in which such communication becomes somewhat opaque. Sassatelli (2002: 444) notes how, even in 2000 when nine cities hold the title simultaneously and so such linkages could be made more explicitly and directly across nations, “that Europe is not so much an issue, the real focus of attention is on the specificity of the city itself and on big events, regardless of their having a European dimension or not”. This ‘falling away’ of initial aims of augmenting the non-economic side of European integration in favour of a consideration of local practice in the host city and how the desired ‘regenerative’ outcomes of cultural practice, European or not, can be leveraged seemingly intensifies as the 2000s continue. Lähdesmäki (2014: 193) emphasises the wide range of scholarship which identifies an absence of the ‘European dimension’ to cultural programmes, and specifically that evaluations of the 2007 and 2008 programmes note this as “the least emphasized aim”, a point emphasised in Bullen’s work considering the place of communication between cultures in the 2008 case:

In Liverpool much rhetoric was initially linked to a model of multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue. But this was soon deemed not to fit with the ‘world-class’ aspirations of the city elite. We see a shift to a more mainstream understanding of culture, with cultural policy positioned as subject to the economic regeneration policies of the city. (2013: 84)

**Creative Industries in Creative Cities?**

As we move towards the 2010s, then, in concert with broader economic regeneration theories and policies, we can see cities bidding for and hosting the ECoC being more explicit about the ways in which they expect the programme to be of specifically economic benefit, and more precisely to assist in the development of the ‘creative industries’, seen by many to be central to economic prosperity in post-industrial cities. In this period we thus see references to the ECoC being “used as a shaper of creative economies” (Comunian et al. 2010: 7)

The success of Liverpool's bid for hosting mentioned above, for instance, was in part justified on the benefit to these creative industries (albeit unusually defined, cf. Connolly 2013), and the subsequent expansion within the UK of a *national* City of Culture competition was partly justified using a narrative of a successful impact on creative industries being achieved (Campbell 2011), with other ECoCs also expressing a desire to replicate a ‘Liverpool model’. This desire to use the ECoC to diversify and develop the urban economy can also be seen in the other 2008 host city of Stavanger (Bergsgard and Vassenden 2011), and, although focussed more on a region than a single city, we see claims subsequent to this that RUHR.2010 was to be “the first European Capital of Culture to integrate the creative industries in its overall concept” and a focus on creative industries persisted in the bid documents for subsequent cities such as Riga 2014, San Sebastián 2016 and Valletta 2018 (García and Cox 2013: 60-61).

This represents the current iteration of policy orientation towards both ECoC specifically, and urban cultural interventions more generally. Whilst much of the fever associated with creative industries can be traced to the influence of narratives of the need to attract or retain a ‘creative class’ within post-industrial cities (Florida 2002), the engagement with creative industries as a new economic driver is driven by a wider set of factors. Whilst the UK was the site of a new ‘model’ for utilising the ECoC, the UK has also been influential in its position and policies regarding creative industries. As these have spread, so too has a conflation and confusion between the sorts of urban spaces governmental cultural policy is capable of creating and supporting (for example the gallery or the museum); the vision of the uses of these spaces to attract and retain a specific demographic of artist, performer and cultural worker; and the actual location of a major part of the economic growth associated with ‘creative industries’ in those subsets of IT and computer services workers that are less interested in traditional cultural venues and practices than are the rest of the cultural workforce (O’Brien et al. 2016, Campbell et al. 2018). The conception of the ECoC as a catalyst or driver for creative industries sits within a broader trend towards the development of ‘creative cities’, and can be used to reinforce the same conflation that underpins this trend.

Despite these tensions and conflations, by the mid-noughties, Schlesinger (2007: 377) had identified creativity as a hegemonic term “in an increasingly elaborated framework of policy ideas”, and in work towards the end of the decade identified how the creativity game leveraged by competitions such as ECoC was increasingly one that cities were compelled to play regardless of the problems it presented:

…the terms of the discourse may become so compelling that *not* to buy into these is tantamount to self-exclusion […] This is demonstrably the case in the debate over “creativity” that has dominated thinking about the cultural industries for more than a decade in the United Kingdom and that has increasingly been exported elsewhere by its exponents (Schlesinger 2009: 5)

Culture and creativity in the post-industrial city thus becomes almost ‘compulsory’. The hegemonic status of creativity is not just concerned with bidding to stage festivals or improve or develop creative industries. Rather, cities are now tasked with narrating themselves as creative in a broad-ranging, generalised sense to attract a creative class to live, work, and pay taxes, in the creative places and spaces constituting the contemporary European urban settlement. In theory, as Schlesinger (2007) and many others (e.g. Garnham 2005, Oakley 2014, O’Brien 2014) have pointed out, creativity can in theory be open to all, applicable in any site. This perhaps accounts in part for its continuation. Many aspects of our lives, and many aspects of any city, could conceivably be framed as ‘creative’ ones. What this apparent universality hides, however, is the inevitable hierarchies in the practices with which creativity is most often aligned; for instance culture and the arts, with the inevitable hierarchies and contestations over value and worth; or urban regeneration, with explicit winners and losers in terms of property, capital and residents.

Just as the ECoC mediates specific cities as well as the idea of ‘the city’ in the abstract, so it is useful to consider how the role for such festivals and culture more broadly is itself mediated. The rise of creative industries has been closely aligned with specific modes of evidence making. Models constructed and developed by social science assist in sustaining the hegemonic discourse aligning cultural festivals with urban regeneration interventions and creative industry policy noted above. Again, this issue in part returns to Florida (2002), with his urban economics argument as to the benefits of a ‘creative class’ for a city. It is also underpinned by narratives of economic success of ECoCs in Glasgow and Liverpool that have jumbled the economic impact of a specific set of regeneration plans, property development, EU structural and regional support funds, and a pre-financial crash moment of public sector investment. In Liverpool this moment was buttressed by the cultural and sporting infrastructure, which provided a strong tourist offer as well as an attraction to potential investors. The ‘£800m’ case created from Liverpool (Campbell and O’Brien 2017), reliant as it was on an almost unique confluence of circumstances, was wrapped up with creative industries policy so as to be both the blueprint, along with the evidence based policy case, for ECoC interventions elsewhere. The ability of current research practices to demonstrate the effects of cultural programmes such as this, however, remains open to question (Campbell et al. 2017).

**ECoC- a cultural policy for the creative city?**

The ‘evidence bases’ collected around the ECoC thus assist in the conflation of the cultural festival with urban regeneration interventions with creative industry policies. In the post-industrial society, there is thus a core tension between the most recent ‘creative industry’ strands of the ECoC and the broader ‘cultural’ focus of the initial driver of pan-European community building. This tension, and the concurrent conflation, is mediated by both the faith in the economic benefits of creative industries for economic growth and employment, alongside the research data, taken out of context, to support this belief. The latter is the ‘£800m’ case that has now embedded itself in British discourses of cultural festivals and is likely to move beyond that context in conjunction with the UK’s export of creative industries discourse (O’Brien 2015, Campbell et al. 2017, Campbell and O’Brien 2017). Indeed, although subsequent ECoC host cities have tended to be more cautious in assertions recording the economic benefits likely to accrue from the award, the stress on new forms of urban economy, particularly through creative industries remains.

There is a particular irony at the current point in time. As the above account attests, it seems that key changes in the operation or understanding of the ECoC have been driven, or intensified, by the two occasions on which the programme has been held in the UK. The UK, or at least large sections of British politics and media, now seeks to turn its back on a common European identity by leaving the European Union and repudiating the European narrative associated with the EU (May 2017). Two of the cities bidding to host ECoC 2023, Milton Keynes and Nottingham, are home to populations of which a majority voted for leaving the EU. Ironic, given the explicit European community building elements of the original ECoC iteration, but also in keeping with previous uses of the event where the ‘European’ elements have been side-lined in favour of more local celebration and the inevitable economic dimensions. This ECoC thus risks being starkly detached from lived experience in these cities. We may well look at patterns of cultural engagement, though, and ask to what extent a cultural festival such as the ECoC is inherently susceptible to being an elite project, at a distance from those making everyday cultures, whether as consumers or producers, in European cities.

Whilst the creativity discourse may be framed as a way to break apart such cultural hierarchies, similar social hierarchies are reflected in the reality of work in the creative industries. In particular, the mode of organisation of many creative labour forces still privileges the same middle origin, white, well-educated men who are a core audience for ‘elite’ or ‘high’ culture (O’Brien et al. 2016, Oakley et al. 2017). This structure is underpinned by working conditions, commissioning assumptions, and broader forms of firm and institutional organisation that act to exclude those from outside of the cultural sector’s ‘somatic norm’ (Saha, 2013; Conor et al., 2015; Yuen, 2016; O’Brien and Friedman 2017).

Despite the potential for a form of cultural democracy (Hanquinet 2017) to come via creative industries’ broader understanding of culture, then, the structure of these areas of economic and social life mitigates against a truly transformative impact on a host city without any activity in this area being part of a broader-reaching set of interventions or transformations. The economic growth associated with creativity is primarily evidenced through activities that have little ‘cultural’ connotations, for example via the design of databases or through software consultancy (Campbell 2014). Even those sectors with large economic benefits that do draw on cultural activity, are either not the type of sector a city would base a bid or a festival upon, for example advertising, marketing and PR, or have specific cluster effects that are hard to replicate outside of existing centres, for example the film and television industries. *Development* of, and through, creative industries is thus a very tricky prospect for those places unable or unwilling to celebrate a creative city of advertising executives, or get into competition with Holly- Nolly- and Bolly-wood. Once the advantages of many of these industries have been established, the first movers have moved, and the centrifugal force of successful clusters results in unbalanced geographies of economic growth that are not easily rebalanced. The dominance of London over cultural production in Britain is the obvious example (Oakley et al 2017).

**Conclusion**

What then is the place of an ECoC in a new Europe of mediated cities? As we have demonstrated, the ECoC has moved through various iterations, with equally varied forms and impacts on host cities. It may be appropriate to view it as a constructed and contested idea with a ‘social life’ (Campbell et al. 2017). This social life has gone with the grain of other transformations in culture and cultural policy across Europe, notably the challenge to cultural hierarchy; the rise of urban regeneration; and, for now, the triumph of creative industries discourses.

To move to a conclusion it is worth reflecting on the ironies of ECoC’s pre-eminence within Europe’s ‘second order’ urban settings. The project of a pan-European identity faces several strains, from the British decision to attempt to leave the EU, via the refugee crisis and post-crash economic problems, to the rise of far right, explicitly anti-European, political movements in France and Germany. It is uncertain how an urban intervention designed to use culture to boost creative industries would speak to any of these issues. Indeed, the danger, given the inequalities associated with creative industries, would be the exacerbation of the social divisions reflected in the challenges confronting the EU.

This danger then is the test set for the future of ECoC, of how to build a festival in the mediated city that is open to all. Indeed, this is a particularly difficult problem as fragmented and mediated *cultures* in cities create (entirely justified) cosmopolitan demands for recognition and resources. If the original vision of ECoC was reflective of an elite narrative of culture, and the urban regeneration and creative industry approaches were open to similar critiques for their distance from host populations, an ECoC that lived up to the promise of such a cultural intervention would be one placing democracy, both urban, cultural and creative, at the centre of its practice. However, at present, the policy imagination for such an intervention has yet to be realised. Here, perhaps, is also the place for future academic practice.

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