**European Green Capital: Environmental Urbanism, or an Addition to the Entrepreneurial Toolbox?**

**Abstract**

*Since 2010, cities across Europe have served as 'European Green Capital' [EGC], an initiative celebrating the contribution of environmental action to urban life. Drawing together the experiences of initial EGC winners, for the first time this paper considers what EGC means to city managers as a way of celebrating and driving forward environmental performance, as well as promoting their own cities. Through a discussion of the experiences of the initial host cities, the paper outlines a typology' of EGCs. In doing so the paper notes a shift to a more hard-edged economic outlook, which increasingly incorporates themes of entrepreneurial economic growth and competitiveness.*

1. **Introduction**

In pursuit of the footloose global capital which can so-often drive urban growth, many cities will attempt to seek out a competitive advantage in line with the urban entrepreneurial model ([Harvey 1989](#_ENREF_31), [Jessop 1997](#_ENREF_34), [1998](#_ENREF_35)) . One predominant way in which cities do this is through international awards and events which are seen as a useful way to allow them to stand out from a crowded field. Such events come in all shapes and sizes. Some, such as the Olympics or Commonwealth Games are centred on sport, and are hosted by a city for a period of a month, inspiring infrastructure development worth billions of pounds ([Flyvbjerg and Stewart 2012](#_ENREF_19)), whilst often generating revenue on a similar scale ([DCMS 2013](#_ENREF_17)). Others are premised on year-long celebrations, such as the European Capital of Culture which has operated since 1985 as a means to recognise and celebrate Europe’s artistic and cultural centres ([Griffiths 2006](#_ENREF_26)), and which has led to national-level spin-offs such as the UK’s City of Culture award. In these cases, although the costs are substantially lower, nonetheless, the rewards can be significant in terms of both visitor numbers and revenue. These awards have enjoyed a popularity and longevity in part because of a verifiable track-record in not only delivering significant financial benefits, often in timeframes deemed unattainable by regular planning processes ([Jones and Ponzini 2018](#_ENREF_37)), but also as a vehicle for reputational change and place promotion ([Gold and Gold 2008](#_ENREF_24)). Here examples include Glasgow and Liverpool, both of whom successfully used the European Capital of Culture award to transcend negative images of their city as a result of post-industrial decline ([Mooney 2004](#_ENREF_46), [Garcia 2005](#_ENREF_21), [2017](#_ENREF_22)).

Although the exponents of such events are keen to point towards the riches they can bring, both in terms of reputational gain and physical improvements ([Sykes and Brown 2015](#_ENREF_57)), there are questions as to how widely that wealth is shared. Here [we](#_ENREF_27) hear pervasive arguments that successive Olympics have failed to deliver benefits to the most socially excluded sections of the host city ([Minnaert 2012](#_ENREF_45), [Bin 2017](#_ENREF_8)), whilst similar accusations surround the Capital of Culture ([Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004](#_ENREF_36), [Boland 2010](#_ENREF_9)). Going further, others question this growth narrative in its entirety, suggesting that headline figures for such events are either overestimated, or mask an unequal spread across sectors ([Baade, Baumann et al. 2010](#_ENREF_4)). In seeking to deploy a major event or award to rebrand or promote the city [Garcia-Ramon and Albet (2000)](#_ENREF_20) caution against the limits of transposing successful events into different institutional contexts, whilst ([Garcia 2017](#_ENREF_22)) notes that media narratives, as opposed to concrete outcomes, can determine how ‘success’ is defined and perceived. In a similar vein, [Béal, Epstein et al. (2015)](#_ENREF_5) caution against the massive proliferation of such urban events – each trying to drive urban revitalisation – resulting in a ‘labelisation’ which, in effect, creates the same indistinguishability that [Lovering (1995)](#_ENREF_41) argues can diminish and weaken the broader entrepreneurial efforts of cities.

Against this backdrop, this paper considers a comparatively new urban award: European Green Capital (EGC). Awarded since 2010, and seen as a sister-award to the European Capital of Culture, EGC was initiated by the European Commission to celebrate environmental performance within European cites ([Gulsrud, Ostoić et al. 2017](#_ENREF_28)) at a time when environmental concerns and, specifically, climate change appear near the top of many urban agendas ([Bulkeley, Broto et al. 2012](#_ENREF_12), [Davoudi 2014](#_ENREF_16)). Yet, amidst wider concerns that environmental policy making is merely being co-opted into traditional growth agendas ([Owens and Cowell 2002](#_ENREF_49), [Krueger and Gibbs 2007](#_ENREF_38), [While, Jonas et al. 2010](#_ENREF_58)) and urban entrepreneurialism more widely ([Andersson and James 2018](#_ENREF_3)), the aim of this paper is to consider the experiences of cities which have hosted EGC as a means to see how the designation has been deployed. In doing so, it considers the ways in which EGC has been deployed to celebrate and support environmental planning and policy-making and, in light of the limitations discussed above, the extent to which it has be used as an entrepreneurial tool through which cities can brand themselves as ‘green’, as well as discussing the limitations therein.

To do so, the paper firstly sets out the process by which cities are designated EGC. Following this, the analysis considers the experiences of the first four cities to host EGC (Stockholm, Hamburg, Vittoria, Nantes) between 2010 and 2013 respectively, alongside the sixth host city, Bristol. These first four EGC cities, at the time therefore representing 100% of the potential sample, were visited through an ESRC-funded project which sought to explore how EGC might serve as a viable tool to assist UK cities in their own low-carbon transitions ([North, Nurse et al. 2017](#_ENREF_47)). As the first UK host, Bristol was also visited to reflect on the extent to which the assessments of the first four EGCs were reflected in UK practice.

In considering each city, our analysis draws upon a mixture of documentary analysis, site visits during and following host years, and interviews with key actors familiar with each city’s experiences. Those actors included Green Capital managers, local officials, community groups and critical voices of the EGC movement. Our interviews, developed by the project team, were designed to reflect a mixture of public and private-sector interest in what opportunities and dangers an EGC might hold for a host city.

1. **What is European Green Capital?**

Since it’s initiation in 2006, the European Green Capital (EGC) award has served to celebrate and promote both a host-city’s environmental achievements, and plans to develop a sustainable future ([Gulsrud, Ostoić et al. 2017](#_ENREF_28)). At the time of writing, ten cities have hosted EGC. To host EGC, a city must demonstrate that it;

* *Has a consistent record of achieving high environmental standards;*
* *Is committed to ongoing and ambitious goals for further environmental improvement and sustainable development;*
* *Can act as a role model to inspire other cities and promote best practices to all other European cities*

([European Commission 2018](#_ENREF_18))

Importantly, the commitment to ongoing and ambitious goals demonstrates that EGC is not simply an ‘end product’ which celebrates a city that has achieved a utopian model state, but rather one recognising a city which continues to strive for better performance. Here, the European Commission’s rationale states that while ‘progress is its own reward... the satisfaction involved in winning a prestigious European award spurs cities to invest in further efforts to boost awareness within the city, as well as in other cities’ ([European Commission 2018](#_ENREF_18)). This courts the entrepreneurial tendencies of many modern cities ([Jessop 1998](#_ENREF_35), [Harvey 2001](#_ENREF_32)) who can often seek major accolades that can result in significant boosts to reputation, business and tourism ([Garcia, Melville et al. 2010](#_ENREF_23)). Going further, and reflecting this entrepreneurial nature, the process of becoming EGC is competitive, and each year numerous cities submit their candidacies. As an indication of the nature of the strength of the field, previous unsuccessful applicants include Amsterdam, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Oslo and Reykjavik – well-credentialed cities of global standing. Now conducted on an annual basis, the award is given out following a multi-stage bidding process.

Following a declaration of interest – which must come from the candidate city’s municipality as a means to safeguard against rogue bids which are either not appropriately supported or resourced – EGC candidates must submit a detailed technical bid document which outlines the city’s performance against twelve subject areas. At the time of writing, those areas are;

1. Local Contribution to Climate Change
2. Local Transport
3. Green Urban Areas
4. Nature and Biodiversity
5. Ambient Air Quality
6. Quality of the Acoustic Environment
7. Waste Production and Management
8. Water Management
9. Waste Water Treatment
10. Eco-Innovation and Sustainable Employment
11. Energy Performance
12. Integrated Environmental Management

These topics clearly demonstrate that the award is not simply given to cities which are ‘green’ in parkland only, but rather those which do consider sustainability (environmental, economic and social) in the round. Indeed, one of the most recent additions to the list: ‘Eco-Innovation and Sustainable Employment’ explicitly shows that the EU Commission considers economic development to be well within the parameters of a sustainable city. The criteria also monitor to ensure that the award cannot be brought into disrepute through negative stories of poor practice by a bidding authority.

When compiling their bids, candidate cities are asked to provide three types of data against each category. The first is existing environmental performance of the city. The second set of data involves analysing the city’s actual performance against its stated plans and strategies. Thirdly, candidate cities provide an outline of their future plans and strategies in each area, referencing the notion host cities will be committed to ‘ongoing and ambitious’ environmental goals.

Upon submission, the technical reports are assessed by a panel of experts who produce a shortlist of cities. In this second round, each short-listed city is invited to make a detailed presentation comprising its plans for the EGC year and its individual selling points. This is a high-stakes affair, with cities sending large delegations which usually includes civic leaders, in a way which mirrors Olympic and World Cup bids. Here distinguishing the bid from the rest of the field would be important ([Malpass 1994](#_ENREF_43)). Finally, the winner is announced at an event held in the current host of EGC. Once the announcement is made, the winning city has approximately 18 months to prepare. At this point, and in the spirit of acting as a role model to other cities, the technical documents from the winning city are made available as a means to draw comparison.

1. **The experiences of the first European Green Capitals**

Now the paper turns to the experiences of the first four cities to host EGC between 2010 and 2013, alongside Bristol, the first UK city to host EGC in 2015. With the EGC serving as an entirely new concept, we visited the first four EGCs and Bristol (as the sixth) to explore the ways in which it might serve as a viable tool to help UK cities to engage with their own processes of low-carbon transition or otherwise ([North, Nurse et al. 2017](#_ENREF_47)).

Reflecting the discussions above our interviews, conducted with key actors familiar with their respective EGC celebrations, sought to burrow into how EGC was deployed within each city, in turn seeking to draw out the opportunities and dangers an EGC might hold other potential hosts a host city. In building a profile of these EGCs – something itself not explicitly attempted in the broader literature – we reflect on the characteristics of each host, and the extent to which EGC was used as a means to promote environmentalism within the city, and to externally promote the city in line with entrepreneurial agendas.

**3.1. Stockholm – The First EGC**

In 2010, Stockholm became the first city to host EGC. In some ways, as a major capital city, Stockholm bore similarities to Athens as the first European Capital of Culture in its potential to lend credibility to the award. Indeed Stockholm’s bid document[[1]](#footnote-1) demonstrates clear environmental credentials, with highlights including the provision of over 1m of cycle lane per capita, something which remains amongst the highest of any of the current green capitals ([Nurse and North 2013](#_ENREF_48)), significant open space and high biodiversity.

Yet, and perhaps despite this, one interviewee who worked on Stockholm’s EGC bid indicated that the bid had deep entrepreneurial roots which stemmed from the city’s failed bid to host the 2004 Olympic Games. Here they spoke of how the failed Olympic bid – emphasising a ‘Green Olympics’ – served as the mechanism to bring partners across the city together, whilst also giving credence to the idea that green issues were a viable issue for city branding. Nevertheless, as the inaugural Green Capital, Stockholm’s claims to be one of the greenest cities in Europe ([Metzger and Olsson 2013](#_ENREF_44)) would help to lend credibility to the award, both in terms of setting initial standards and promoting the award to a broader audience – both domestically, to the EU and beyond. This was assisted by the emergence of a green ‘champion’ – Ola Hamilton – who, in the words of a member of Stockholm’s administration, worked to “‘neutralise’ green issues” which were previously seen as partisan, and thus move them into mainstream policy thinking.

However, whilst Stockholm’s post EGC technical report ([Stockholm 2011](#_ENREF_55)) suggested that the EGC celebration was unproblematic, and that city managers remained true to the spirit of EGC there is evidence to suggest otherwise. For example, [Rutherford (2013)](#_ENREF_54) suggests that whilst city managers subscribed to the spirit, principles and values of EGC, the underpinning rationale for hosting the event remained business and economic growth for Stockholm. Here Rutherford identified an increasing gulf between Stockholm’s overarching 2030 strategic vision which used competitiveness agendas to drive the city’s growth, and delivery against real-world environmental issues, specifically citing a 30% cut to environmental work (e.g. climate mitigation) by the municipality between 2006-11. This focus on external image, as opposed to concrete environmental action, is something verified by one interviewee based within Stockholm’s local authority, and who spoke of efforts to ensure that no “embarrassing little stories” of poor environmental performance would emerge – particularly in the run up and during the EGC year.

Combined, Stockholm’s year as the inaugural EGC would set a number of precedents which would become a semi-recurring feature of other EGCs not least the battle between environmental intent and broader economic growth agendas – particularly in a period of urban austerity ([Peck 2012](#_ENREF_52)). Yet, ultimately it was an EGC which was premised on clear environmental credentials. As we will now see the next ECG, Hamburg, would bring some different qualities to bear.

**3.2. Hamburg – The Second EGC**

Selected at the same time as Stockholm, Hamburg, served as the second EGC in 2011. Although the move to identify the first two hosts simultaneously could be seen as a way to ensure some early continuity for the EGC movement, the differing characteristics of the two cities also suggests that this was an early attempt to establish the award’s scope.

Whilst still performing well in its bid document, with cycle lanes and parkland being particular highlights ([Hamburg N.D.](#_ENREF_30)), Hamburg's economic history presents a different kind of city to Stockholm. At first glance and with one of the largest ports in Europe, facilitating an industry which is a significant contributor to global emissions ([Anderson and Bows 2012](#_ENREF_2)), Hamburg does not inherently lend itself to being a Green Capital. However, as well as being geographically vulnerable to the effects of the climate change, and for which early industrial and port cities like Hamburg have geographies of historical responsibility for ([Becker, Inoue et al. 2012](#_ENREF_7)), it is also clear that the city is establishing a strong record in environmental practice and is aspiring to continued better performance. Examples here include the HafenCity ([Helbrecht and Dirksmeier 2012](#_ENREF_33), [Lord, O'Brien et al. 2015](#_ENREF_40)), a mass-regeneration of former dockland which has shown a particular focus on flooding and resilience to sea-level rise, as well as a proposed tram network. To support its bid, and in comparison to Stockholm, Hamburg provided a highly-technical, data-driven, bid document, which eschewed images and graphics in favour of extensive tables outlining their case[[2]](#footnote-2). This suggested that Hamburg’s technocrats sought to make a substantive bid for EGC which played to the hard statistics, as opposed to positive perceptions and marketing. This was confirmed by one of Hamburg’s Green Capital managers who said that whilst city leaders wanted to avoid putting on a ‘green face’ they also wanted to speak honestly and widely about their efforts to address what climate change means for their industrial city, and thus “convey the message of EGC as leading cities for climate protection”. In doing so Hamburg’s EGC success had, in the words of one interviewee, created ‘a momentum for joining forces’ of different interests within the city” which drew together its competing growth coalitions ([Lauermann and Vogelpohl 2017](#_ENREF_39)). However, these collaborations were imperfect, and others spoke of how some EGC activity began to expose cracks in these alliances.

During its EGC year Hamburg embraced the opportunity of exporting itself to other places – principally by deploying a ‘Train of Ideas’: A modified train which travelled around other European Cities promoting environmental values and good practice, as well as Hamburg itself. Visiting 17 European Cities, and showcasing over 100 environmental projects ([Hamburg 2013](#_ENREF_29)), Hamburg’s post-event statistics suggested that the Train engaged with over 70,000 people during its tour, both promoting Hamburg, EGC more broadly, and exporting best practice to other cities – including future EGC hosts Nantes, Copenhagen and Oslo. However, whilst one interviewee cited the ‘positive international profile’ that the Train of Ideas created, they also noted that it received criticism from Hamburg’s senate and media as a ‘marketing ploy’ for the city which could have gone much further in showcasing environmental good practice.

Reflecting upon this activity, in Hamburg we can observe a second type of EGC. In contrast to Stockholm, Hamburg’s case is premised on a city which aspires towards (and achieves) good practice in many areas, whilst acknowledging that some aspects of the city do not align with traditional conceptions of environmental policy-making. Consequently, we argue, Hamburg’s year as EGC serves two purposes. For the EU Commission, Hamburg serves as a vehicle to open up EGC to cities which might be discouraged from entering – perhaps owing to an industrial past or better-performing cities in their country - e.g. Freiburg far outperforms Hamburg as a German model of urban sustainability ([Beatley 2012](#_ENREF_6)).In the words of one interviewee: “Brussels acknowledged that a big city like Hamburg was making an effort”. Simultaneously, for the host cities which fit this model, winning EGC presents an opportunity to move away from a previous image and, in entrepreneurial terms, also attempts to push its environmental performance further so as to carve a unique offer within a crowded market ([Parkinson and Harding 1995](#_ENREF_51), [Gross 2010](#_ENREF_27)).

Beyond this, Hamburg also presents the opportunity to reflect upon debates regarding the legacy of major events once the ‘show has left town’ ([Boland 2010](#_ENREF_9), [Minnaert 2012](#_ENREF_45)). Indeed, Hamburg has faced significant questions about the long-term outcomes of its EGC year and its broader legacy. For instance, one interviewee spoke of how, in the post-EGC year, some public companies switched back to non-green electricity tariffs whilst, following elections in 2011, the incoming political leadership scrapped plans for a tram system that formed a centrepiece of Hamburg’s EGC bid. To some, it could be argued that this is simply the danger of bringing forward long-term infrastructure projects in changeable political environments, but to others, it can be seen as a clear reflection of the difference between the ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ of climate action ([Bulkeley and Betsill 2013](#_ENREF_11)). Regardless, and contrary to the stated rationale of EGC in celebrating cities that are committed to "ongoing and ambitious goals for further environmental improvement and sustainable development" ([European Commission 2018](#_ENREF_18)), Hamburg’s scrapping of its tram not only ran counter to this spirit, but set a dangerous precedent for other potential EGC hosts whereby unachievable or unrealistic legacy targets could be set as part of a gaming strategy to win an award which might benefit the city.

**3.3. Vitoria-Gasteiz** **– The Third EGC**

Located in the Spanish Basque Country Vitoria-Gasteiz is arguably the least known of the European Green Capitals and, with a population of 235,000, is the smallest by some margin. However, this size belies Vittoria-Gasteiz’s major selling point as an exemplar of ‘Compact City’ planning ([Aguado, Legarreta et al. 2013](#_ENREF_1), [Gulsrud, Ostoić et al. 2017](#_ENREF_28)), achieved through a strategic planning outlook spanning three decades, and focusing upon good transport links coupled with easy access to amenities. Illustrating this, almost all of Vitoria-Gasteiz’s residents live within 300m of key amenities (e.g. shops, schools and hospitals), and a citizen living on the very edge of the city is only 3km (a 40 minute walk, 10 minute cycle or 5 minute bus ride) from the city centre. As such, and with economic development being seen as a low priority in terms of the rationale for bidding (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2011), Vittoria-Gasteiz can be considered in the same vein as Stockholm – an EGC which demonstrates idealised concepts of good urban practice. In bidding for the award Vittoria’s leaders engaged with previous winners and sought to learn from them – perhaps best exemplified when, alongside technical experts, representatives from all five political parties contributed to Vittoria’s final presentation to demonstrate wholesale political support for the idea – something Hamburg had previously done well.

Despite this work, and whilst Vitoria-Gasteiz’s EGC celebration was predicated on its strong urban design principles, the year itself was undermined as the effects of the post-2008 economic crisis began to hit the Spanish economy ([Cuadrado-Roura and Maroto 2016](#_ENREF_15)). Vitoria-Gasteiz was not immune to the effects of the crisis, and city managers spoke of how they felt forced to scale back their plans for EGC in response to pragmatic political concerns about how they deployed increasingly scarce resources. The result was a modest celebration – with Vitoria-Gasteiz perhaps best described as the ‘Austerity Green Capital’. While grassroots support was clear, with shopkeepers, bars and restaurants evidently proud of the city’s designation and displaying promotional material in windows, only a handful of small city centre displays and the main event pavilion served as reminders that Vitoria-Gasteiz was the serving EGC.

Consequently, and especially compared to Vitoria-Gasteiz’s immediate predecessors and successors, the scaled-back EGC celebrations meant that the opportunity to entrepreneurially ‘export’ the city was lost. This was also reflected in the lack of policy where, at one point after being designated EGC, Vitoria-Gasteiz had received no approaches from Spanish cities to learn from its best practice – though this did change as EGC came closer. Combined, the view was one of disappointment and a missed opportunity for the city, with one interviewee representing an NGO summing things up by stating that ‘the celebration isn’t what it could’ve been’.

**3.4. Nantes – The Fourth EGC**

In many ways, Nantes’ selection as EGC mirrored that of Hamburg: an industrial port city which presented a view of how other industrial cities might embrace a green agenda over the long term. Whilst Hamburg demonstrated how a city might face down its climate responsibilities, Nantes’ strengths could be found in its longstanding commitment to inclusive and sustainable growth, led by its 20-year socialist mayor Marc Ayrault. In this way, EGC was a ‘natural development of [Nantes’] long-term strategy’ and consequently, many that we spoke to agreed that the EGC bid was driven by ‘a rationale of place marketing’, typified by a giant animatronic walking greenhouse built by Nantes’ world-famous *Les Machines de L’Ile*. They also argued that the award was justified, perceiving it ‘as a crown’ which acknowledged nearly 25 years of positive environmental work led by Nantes’ mayor – Jean-Marc Ayrault.

In the year itself Nantes municipality was praised by interviewees for their work in connecting with green and community groups in the city – something, several interviewees argued, was previously absent. Here, interviewees highlighted the concrete actions that stemmed from this approach, including cleaning local green spaces, supporting local food, and encouraging cycling uptake, as well as engaging with schools, whilst a call for ideas for local projects also received 88 applications for projects worth up-to €5,000. Despite this, however, many argued that the city did struggle to make the most of this approach beyond those who were keen to engage, and failed to connect with the broader citizenry beyond a ubiquitous poster campaign and *Les Machines de L’Ile*. This reflects findings from both Stockholm and Hamburg, and suggests that hosting EGC is not a guarantee that environmentalism will capture the mainstream. Beyond this, however, whilst one interviewee representing an environmental NGO argued that whilst *Les Machines de* *L’Ile* was symptomatic of an external branding (i.e. entrepreneurial) exercise for Nantes, they conceded that the city did experience some success in pushing beyond those approaches – pointing towards a successful ‘Ecocity’ event held in September 2013, which was co-organised by Nantes Metropole, drawing support from major actors such as SNCF, EDF and Siemens, and which, in the words of another local Senator, went beyond representing ‘a way to fill the conference centre… for a few days’ to engage with green issues for the city .

However, like Hamburg, Nantes’ year as EGC did not simply portray an uncomplicated image of an industrial city wholeheartedly 'embracing' a green agenda. Whilst Hamburg found controversy in the scrapping of its proposed tram network, Nantes found controversy for a development which was buried amidst the bid process - a new airport to the North of the city. Though approved in 2008, the €500m proposed replacement for Nantes Atlantique Airport would emerge as a major issue during the EGC year, and spark major protests both within the city, and on the proposed site itself ([Pieper 2013](#_ENREF_53), [Pailloux 2015](#_ENREF_50)). As part of this, our interviewees pointed towards what one termed ‘generational political change’ as Jean-Marc Ayrault (who had been in-post since 1989, and oversaw Nantes’ successful EGC bid) stepped down as Mayor of Nantes in 2012 to serve as France’s Prime Minister, and a new raft of politicians vied to impress their own vision on the city. In many ways this mirrored the experiences of Hamburg, whose post-event criticism over its cancelled tram expansion came as a result of political change.

Consequently, the experiences of Hamburg and Nantes allow for a number of reflections. We can legitimately ask how, given repeated testimony that EGC can provide a vehicle for the entrepreneurial marketing of their city, candidate cities balance the need to take fundamentally sound environmental decisions as part of their development strategies. Are industrial cities truly engaged with the environmental agenda, or are awards like EGC simply an entrepreneurial means to an end? Going further, within this we can also ask how much events such as EGC rely on political stability and consensus – and thus reflect on the extent to which this can affect project delivery, and legacy.

**3.5. Bristol**

Bristol, England was announced as the 2015 EGC having been shortlisted, unsuccessfully, in 2014. By this point, in Bristol we could observe the repeating of a number of issues which had previously characterised previous holders. In light of the prevailing trend of host-cities seemingly alternating between ‘idealised’ and ‘post-industrial’ urban approaches, it could be argued that Bristol – which perhaps embodies both elements – brought about an end to this pattern. Despite its maritime-industrial past, compared to other UK cities, Bristol is an exemplar of good environmental practice, leading English 'Core Cities' in a host of environmental indicators including recycling and emissions ([Nurse and North 2013](#_ENREF_48)), and having been designated a UK cycling city in 2008 ([Stratton 2008](#_ENREF_56)). Going further, one of Bristol’s Green Capital manager pointed towards a vibrant network of organisations committed to environmental/green action which underpinned the city’s bid.

Increasingly gripped by post-2008 urban austerity ([Lowndes and Pratchett 2012](#_ENREF_42), [Peck 2012](#_ENREF_52)), Bristol found itself in a similar position to Vitoria-Gasteiz: celebrating a comparatively straightened and locally-focused ECG which placed greater emphasis on initiatives such as pledges by local citizens to *‘do 15 in 15’*, and volunteering ([Bristol 2015](#_ENREF_10)). Like Vitoria-Gasteiz, and in contrast to other EGCs, during the EGC year there was little physical evidence of celebrations around the city, which much of this coming by way of either civic projects showing individual citizen support, and a climate installation in the city’s *Bearpit* – a frequent site for protest. Similarly, opportunities for the large-scale export in the style of Hamburg or Nantes appeared lost. However, despite this, our interviewees drew comparisons with Nantes’s EGC – i.e. where citizen activity and the support of this grass-roots network supporting green action, propagated over a longer period of time were the defining features of Bristol’s offer.

Like Hamburg, a change in the political composition of the city took place shortly after Bristol relinquished the award – with independent directly-elected Mayor, George Ferguson, replaced by Labour’s Marvin Rees. Here, the Rees administration sought to build some distance between Mayor Ferguson and questions surrounding the finances of EGC, particularly in the wake of the post-event report ([Bundred 2016](#_ENREF_13)). For its part, this report again spoke to an EGC celebration which focused on community empowerment which, nonetheless granted opportunities for broader city-branding and reputational gain. Ultimately, therefore, in Bristol what can be seen is another repetition of many of the same broad issues seen in earlier EGCs and, as such and as EGC continues to develop, we must be wary of their broader implications.

1. **Conclusion**

Whilst European Green Capital can increasingly be seen as a way for the European Commission to promote an urban sustainability agenda, the award has quickly been co-opted into entrepreneurial agendas. As such, EGC is not simply a vehicle to reward those at the cutting edge of urban environmental practice. This is demonstrated not only by an increasingly competitive bidding process, but also by the numerous host cities which have extolled EGC’s benefit as a marketing tool to seek economic advantage within traditional competitiveness agendas. Reflecting the discussions above, the experiences from the first EGCs allow us to observe the emergence of two broad EGC typologies which suggest at the ways in which cities can deploy EGC.

<INSERT TABLE ONE HERE>

*Table 1. Typologies of European Green Capital*

As EGC developed, other host cities such as Bristol began to embody characteristics of both models – leading environmental performance domestically, but still trying to come on terms with idealised best practice. Nonetheless, the frequent awarding of EGC to ‘*aspiring*’ cities suggests that there is a desire to ensure that EGC does not become the preserve of ‘*idealised*’ cities, many of whom are the product of decades of pro-active planning decisions in this regard, and consequently which could be viewed as unattainable in the short-medium term by many of Europe's industrial, or post-industrial urban areas. Rather, there is evidence to suggest that, rather than exclude them, the EGC award can serve as a vehicle to foster (and often celebrate) environmental policy-making in those cities, and thus try to bring other similar cities into the environmental fold as much as possible. In doing so, however, there is a danger that other idealised cities which may contain the truest best practice may be distanced from the spotlight. In attempting to balance these two different approaches towards EGC the core tenant - ‘*act as a role model to inspire other cities and promote best practices to all other European cities’* ([European Commission 2018](#_ENREF_18)) – becomes important, and raises questions regarding how EGC defines best practice, who it is for, how transferrable this is ([Castán Broto and Bulkeley 2013](#_ENREF_14)) and, ultimately, what purpose it serves?

Beyond this, and regardless of typology, the experiences of the initial EGCs shows a number of issues emerging. Most notably the underlying political will, taken in tandem with the scale and scope of EGC activity matters to how the award is perceived both pre, peri, and post award. The ways in which the award was deployed also showed some common characteristics with entrepreneurial tendencies emerging in almost every EGC context. However, the success of these approaches varied. Some cities used EGC as a naked marketing attempts – touring their brand in other cities to great effect. However, in some places, the limits to these entrepreneurial benefits of EGC were exposed by the effects of austerity urbanism ([Peck 2012](#_ENREF_52)) in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. This austerity also exposed the importance of municipal buy-in and support – not least in in Vitoria-Gasteiz, and to a lesser extent Bristol. As such, even when they are prioritised, the variance in approaches and the challenges faced which can make EGC entrepreneurial ‘branding’ events less conspicuous in comparison to those of other major awards - e.g. European Capital of Culture ([Garcia, Melville et al. 2010](#_ENREF_23)) allows us to ask if EGC holds more utility as a branding tool, as opposed to as a vehicle to address environmental performance.

Beyond the effects of austerity urbanism, the experiences of a number of EGCs suggest that the award can be vulnerable to local political change. In particular, there is real danger that, as a result of the lead-in time to the award, political change within the city either during, or immediately following the award has resulted in former host cities abandoning legacy projects as a new political reality took hold. Whilst perhaps not surprising, in the longer term, this presents a challenge for EGC judges – validating the nature of claims made in bid documents to insure against gamesmanship which risks bringing the award into disrepute.

Ultimately, the experiences of the first EGCs present several transferrable lessons, both for potential hosts, and for the administration of the award itself. Whilst EGC clearly aligns with the entrepreneurial toolbox as a means to distinguish a city in a crowded field ([Parkinson and Harding 1995](#_ENREF_51)), there is particular utility for those in the ‘aspiring’ cities where a marketization of the environmental agenda appears to be deployed more readily. However, if embracing this approach cities must reach internal consensus so as to be able to fully commit to the year itself. Otherwise the opportunities for both branding and environmental action, can be seriously diminished – now observable in the multiple EGC which are suffering from legacy issues, as time and shifting political sands diminish the likelihood of realising projects. In the medium-long term, and in order to stave off accusations of greenwash ([Greer and Bruno 1998](#_ENREF_25)), ensuring that EGC is awarded to cities that can meet those objectives should be a key priority for EGC decision-makers.

**Acknowledgement**

This paper is produced as a result of research from ESRC Grants RES-185-31-0113 and ES/J010618/1

**References**

AGUADO, I., et al. (2013). "The green belt of Vitoria-Gasteiz. A successful practice for sustainable urban planning." Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles(61): 181-194.

ANDERSON, K. and A. BOWS (2012). "Executing a Scharnow turn: reconciling shipping emissions with international commitments on climate change." Carbon Management **3**(6): 615-628.

ANDERSSON, I. and L. JAMES (2018). "Altruism or entrepreneurialism? The co-evolution of green place branding and policy tourism in Växjö, Sweden." Urban Studies **0**(0): 0042098017749471.

BAADE, R. A., et al. (2010). "Slippery slope ? Assessing the economic impact of the 2002 winter olympic games in salt lake city, utah." Region et Development **31**: 82-91.

BÉAL, V., et al. (2015). "La circulation croisée. Modèles, labels et bonnes pratiques dans les rapports centre-périphérie." Gouvernement et action publique **3**(3): 103-127.

BEATLEY, T. (2012). Green cities of Europe: global lessons on green urbanism, Island Press.

BECKER, A., et al. (2012). "Climate change impacts on international seaports: knowledge, perceptions, and planning efforts among port administrators." Climatic Change **110**(1): 5-29.

BIN, D. (2017). "Rio de Janeiro’s Olympic dispossessions." Journal of Urban Affairs **39**(7): 924-938.

BOLAND, P. (2010). "'Capital of Culture—you must be having a laugh!’ " Social & Cultural Geography **11**(7): 627 - 645.

BRISTOL (2015). In It for Good: Bristol European Green Capital Citywide Review.

BULKELEY, H. and M. M. BETSILL (2013). "Revisiting the Urban Politics of Climate Change." Environmental Politics **22**(1): 136-154.

BULKELEY, H., et al. (2012). "Bringing climate change to the city: towards low carbon urbanism?" Local Environment **17**(5): 545-551.

BUNDRED, S. (2016). Review of Bristol 2015 European Green Capital Year. Bristol, Bristol City Council.

CASTÁN BROTO, V. and H. BULKELEY (2013). "A survey of urban climate change experiments in 100 cities." Global Environmental Change **23**(1): 92-102.

CUADRADO-ROURA, J. R. and A. MAROTO (2016). "Unbalanced regional resilience to the economic crisis in Spain: a tale of specialisation and productivity." Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society **9**(1): 153-178.

DAVOUDI, S. (2014). "Climate change, securitisation of nature, and resilient urbanism." Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy **32**(2): 360-375.

DCMS (2013). London 2012 meta-evaluation London, Department for Culture Media and Sport.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2018). "European Green Capital - FAQs." Retrieved 26th March, 2018, from <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/about-the-award/faqs/>.

FLYVBJERG, B. and A. STEWART (2012). "Olympic proportions: Cost and cost overrun at the Olympics 1960-2012."

GARCIA-RAMON, M.-D. and A. ALBET (2000). "Pre-Olympic and post-Olympic Barcelona, a ‘model’for urban regeneration today?" Environment and Planning A **32**(8): 1331-1334.

GARCIA, B. (2005). "Deconstructing the City of Culture: The Long-term Cultural Legacies of Glasgow 1990." Urban Studies **42**(5-6): 841-868.

GARCIA, B. (2017). "‘If everyone says so …’ Press narratives and image change in major event host cities." Urban Studies **54**(14): 3178-3198.

GARCIA, B., et al. (2010). Creating an Impact: Liverpool's year as Capital of Culture. Liverpool, Impacts08.

GOLD, J. R. and M. M. GOLD (2008). "Olympic cities: regeneration, city rebranding and changing urban agendas." Geography Compass **2**(1): 300-318.

GREER, J. and K. BRUNO (1998). Greenwash: The reality behind corporate environmentalism, IBON Foundation Incorporated, Third World Network.

GRIFFITHS, R. (2006). "City/culture discourses: Evidence from the competition to select the European capital of culture 2008." European Planning Studies **14**(4): 415-430.

GROSS, D. (2010). "3rd European Fair on Education for Sustainable Development, Hamburg." Journal of Education for Sustainable Development **4**(1): 23-24.

GULSRUD, N. M., et al. (2017). Challenges to Governing Urban Green Infrastructure in Europe – The Case of the European Green Capital Award. The Urban Forest: Cultivating Green Infrastructure for People and the Environment. D. Pearlmutter, C. Calfapietra, R. Samson et al. Cham, Springer International Publishing**:** 235-258.

HAMBURG (2013). Hamburg - European Green Capital 2011: Final Report.

HAMBURG (N.D.). Hamburg Application, EU Commission.

HARVEY, D. (1989). "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism." Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography **71**(1): 3-17.

HARVEY, D. (2001). From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. Spaces of Capital. D. Harvey. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

HELBRECHT, I. and P. DIRKSMEIER (2012). New urbanism: Life, work, and space in the new downtown, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

JESSOP, B. (1997). The Entrepreneurial City. Re-imagining localities, redesigning economic governance or restructuring capital? Transforming Cities. N. Jewson and S. MacGregor. London, Routledge**:** 28-41.

JESSOP, B. (1998). The Narrativeof Enterprise and the Enterprise of Narrative: Place Making and the Entrepreneurial City. The Entrepreneurial City. P. Hubbard and T. Hall. Chichester, Wiley**:** 77-99.

JONES, P. and S. WILKS-HEEG (2004). "Capitalising Culture: Liverpool 2008." Local Economy **19**(4): 341-360.

JONES, Z. M. and D. PONZINI (2018). "Mega-events and the Preservation of Urban Heritage: Literature Gaps, Potential Overlaps, and a Call for Further Research." Journal of Planning Literature: 0885412218779603.

KRUEGER, R. and D. GIBBS (2007). The sustainable development paradox: Urban political economy in the United States and Europe. New York, Guildford.

LAUERMANN, J. and A. VOGELPOHL (2017). "Fragile growth coalitions or powerful contestations? Cancelled Olympic bids in Boston and Hamburg." Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space **49**(8): 1887-1904.

LORD, A., et al. (2015). Planning as ‘market maker’. London, RTPI.

LOVERING, J. (1995). Creating discourses rather than jobs:. Managing Cities: the New Urban Context. P. Healey, S. Cameron, S. Davoudi, S. Graham and A. Madani-Pour. Chichester, John Wiley and sons**:** 109-126.

LOWNDES, V. and L. PRATCHETT (2012). "Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the ‘Big Society’." Local Government Studies **38**(1): 21-40.

MALPASS, P. (1994). "Policy Making and Local Governance: how Bristol Failed to Secure City Challenge Funding (Twice)." Policy & Politics **22**(4): 301-312.

METZGER, J. and A. R. OLSSON (2013). Sustainable Stockholm: exploring urban sustainability in Europe’s greenest city, Routledge.

MINNAERT, L. (2012). "An Olympic legacy for all? The non-infrastructural outcomes of the Olympic Games for socially excluded groups (Atlanta 1996–Beijing 2008)." Tourism Management **33**(2): 361-370.

MOONEY, G. (2004). "Cultural policy as urban transformation? critical reflections on Glasgow, European city of culture 1990." Local Economy **19**(4): 327.

NORTH, P., et al. (2017). "The neoliberalisation of climate? Progressing climate policy under austerity urbanism." Environment & planning A **49**(8): 1797–1815.

NURSE, A. and P. NORTH (2013). An Environmental Audit of Liverpool. Liverpool, Low Carbon Liverpool.

OWENS, S. and R. COWELL (2002). Land and Limits: Interpreting Sustainability in the Planning Process. London, Routledge.

PAILLOUX, A.-L. (2015). "Deferred Development Zone (ZAD) versus ‘Zone to be protected’. Analysis of a struggle for autonomy in/of rural space." justice spatiale-spatial justice **7**: <http://www>. jssj. org/article/zone-damenagement-differe-contre-zone-a-defendre-analyse-dune-lutte-pour-lautonomie-dansde-lespace-rural/.

PARKINSON, M. and A. HARDING (1995). European Cities toward 2000: Entrepreneurialism, competition and social exclusion. Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration. M. Rhodes. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

PECK, J. (2012). "Austerity urbanism." City **16**(6): 626-655.

PIEPER, A. (2013). "Land Grabbing in France: The case of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport." Land concentration: 78.

RUTHERFORD, J. (2013). "The Vicissitudes of Energy and Climate Change Policy in Stockholm." Urban Studies.

STOCKHOLM (2011). Stockholm: The First European Green capital - Fina Report.

STRATTON, A. (2008). Bristol mamed UK's first 'cycling city'. The Guardian. London.

SYKES, O. and J. BROWN (2015). "European Capitals of Culture and Urban Regeneration: An Urban Planning Perspective from Liverpool." Urbanistica **155**: 79-82.

WHILE, A., et al. (2010). "From Sustainable Development to Carbon Control: Eco-state restructuring and the politics of urban and regional develolment." Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers **35**: 76-93.

1. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Stockholms-application-for-Europan-Green-Capital-revised-version.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/winning-cities/2011-hamburg/hamburg-application/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)