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## The core of cultural development. Agenda 21 for culture and cultural management in Buenos Aires

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# The core of cultural development

## Agenda 21 for culture and cultural management in Buenos Aires

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Agenda 21 for culture and cultural policies in Buenos Aires over recent years have been very much in tune. In both cases human rights, cultural diversity, sustainability, participatory democracy and the generation of conditions for peace are key topics in thinking and management. Moreover, not only is there considerable overlap with current cultural policy in the city but these commitments have also been essential components of cultural management in Buenos Aires since the city achieved its political autonomy in 1996.

**The values of Agenda 21 for culture have been essential components of cultural management in Buenos Aires since the city achieved its political autonomy in 1996.**

Such a degree of symbiosis that predates the signing of this benchmark international document reveals a shared origin, a shared route and a future marked by exchange and constant growth. In other words, the principles of the Agenda 21 for culture are also those which guide the policy in Buenos Aires.

Below there is a description of the similarities and common features that show how Buenos Aires echoes the principles which sustain and validate the Agenda. It is these principles which underlie the Agenda's importance as a statement of a commitment to cultural development and its local implementation.

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“CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS THE MAIN HERITAGE OF HUMANITY. IT IS THE PRODUCT OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF HISTORY, THE FRUIT OF THE COLLECTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF ALL PEOPLES THROUGH THEIR LANGUAGES, IMAGINATIONS, TECHNOLOGIES, PRACTICES AND CREATIONS. CULTURE TAKES ON DIFFERENT FORMS, RESPONDING TO DYNAMIC MODELS OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIETIES AND TERRITORIES”

This same premise guides the implementation of public policies in Buenos Aires. The new legal status it achieved in 1994 is a major challenge for future public policies strategy. The first few years were marked by the need to give substance to the city's autonomy by equipping it with the governance tools required to structure management that no longer depended on the national government. In a globalised world which homogenises beliefs, practices and cultural consumption, in Buenos Aires, we also believe this return to diversity, basically given shape through inclusion, visibility and access to culture for all, to be necessary.

As far as we are concerned, defending the principle of cultural diversity means working in close daily partnership with government representatives, international bodies, associations and civil society, and coalitions of professionals and workers to discuss and subsequently implement agreed cultural policies that are representative and appropriate for all sectors and communities which go to make up a community. This entails fostering opportunities for discussion and group work, analysis and examination of the needs of minorities and groups and giving a say to all members of society who work towards the common goal. It is a question of building cultural policies in order to be able to work for genuine integration.

The outcome is an enormous representative cultural offer with great pulling power which includes public shows, exhibitions, activities run by Buenos Aires museums, the Buenos Aires Theatre Complex, the General San Martín Cultural Centre, the 25 de Mayo Theatre and others which local people turn out massively for with attendance figures rising year after year. To be sure, the richness, heterogeneity and experimentation of the policy implemented through the city's festivals condense the essence of cultural diversity expressed in a process of openness and constant searching which never gives up on the pursuit of excellence.

Having now lasted for more than ten years (a significant period given the average stability of public policies in the city), these activities have gone beyond being mere events to become meeting points with their own dynamics and life.

The International Theatre Festival not only brought together the most original and provocative local and foreign performers at its biennial events but also brought about the emergence of an independent and vocational phenomenon which transformed theatre in Buenos Aires. The quantity and especially the heterogeneity of shows have grown in lockstep with the development of the Festival and the two have influenced each other over the years. Indeed, the functions at the Festival almost always play to full houses. They are not inner circles meetings, but rather the result of the interaction of artists, public cultural management and audiences.

The case of the BAFICI (the city's international independent film festival) is the symbol of diversity in its fullest expression, a celebration of multiple points of view in terms of national, social, cultural, sexual, political and aesthetic identity. And very unlike what often happens in these cases, its massive growth and installation were directly proportional to the complexity, audaciousness and wealth of its offering.

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Musical festivals and tango championships, even though they are based on a local identity with international visibility, have become not a bastion of chauvinism (as happened in the sad decades of Argentinean history) but rather a meeting point for people from different places and cultures who exchange approaches and opinions around this unique popular genre that is such a part of our tradition.

The success of these events is closely bound to the way in which the activity was created; not in a top-down process from the State but rather out of listening to and surveying the preferences and needs of the main players involved, that is to say the people.

“THE MAIN PRINCIPLES OF GOOD GOVERNANCE INCLUDE TRANSPARENCY OF INFORMATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE CONCEPTION OF CULTURAL POLICIES.”

**Management is founded on the need to open up, share and exchange cultural experiences in all their expressions with an active audience which observes, asks and gives its opinion in order to foster creative participation.**

Management is founded on the need to open up, share and exchange cultural experiences in all their expressions with an active audience which observes, asks and gives its opinion in order to foster creative participation. The key factor is breathing life into a society which seeks new ways of living in our diverse and complex world.

Ways of engaging people encompass calling them to public spaces, enabling the conditions required for cultural consumption and information, providing free, open-air activities, and decentralising provision to reach and address all local people regardless of geographical area or socio-economic level.

A cultural offering can be expanded by means of austere yet effective investment made viable through agreements with companies to subsidise or enhance heritage assets along with carrying out exhibitions, recitals, plays and international festivals.

Programmes which provide access to information and the opening up of archives have enabled the circulation and participation of the public in a memory and heritage that have often been banned. Instances of a policy open to the community include access to the digital network of cultural heritage contents; the audio and video library at the Recoleta Cultural Centre which has recovered the work, life and testimony of men and women writers; the Buenos Aires Audiovisual Centre at the San Martín Cultural Centre which has a catalogue consisting of thousands of documentaries and videos; and the opening of the library and documentation centre at the Buenos Aires Theatre Complex.

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Nonetheless, the participation of local people can be stepped up even further to the point of having a positive and decisive impact on the city's cultural life. The recovery of the historic 25 de Mayo Movie Theatre in the Villa Urquiza district is perhaps the iconic example. With its buildings and land abandoned and about to be auctioned off, the Theatre where Carlos Gardel performed in the 1930s was rescued by a local residents' organisation that, in partnership with Buenos Aires council, began and went through a long process of purchase, redesign and refurbishment of the building. The 25 de Mayo Movie Theatre is now a driving force behind the cultural offering in the northern part of Buenos Aires.

The outcome of these policies is auspicious: it enables the meeting, integration, growth and formation of new audiences and points to a revitalisation of the city based on measures that articulate the interests and benefits of all urban sectors.

“DIALOGUE BETWEEN IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY, INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP, IS A VITAL TOOL FOR GUARANTEEING BOTH A PLANETARY CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AS WELL AS THE SURVIVAL OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURES.”

Once again there is a direct match between the priorities and the actions carried out in Buenos Aires and Agenda 21 for culture. Enhancing and structuring the local identities which define the city's collective identity is the way of reaffirming a regional identity in a world which tends to impose the same rules and conditions for consuming and interacting.

It is a question of recovering the impetus provided by local cultures, of enhancing assets, looking inwards and denaturing the beauty and quality of practices, architecture, art, conventions, rituals and celebrations that make us into a society.

When are we faced by a genuine integration process?

It basically means going one step beyond the integration of markets, or rather of the distribution of products, by including the cultural dimension in the way in which we present ourselves to the world as a community and how we interact from this place.

Thereafter what is left –on the basis of the internal assessment of the components which go to make up a local culture– is to go out and show it to the world and get Buenos Aires recognised internationally for the intensity and variety of its cultural life, while also turning this multiplicity of proposals and actors into something which attracts tourism. Only a city which can clearly define its seal of identity, which can identify the items which go to make it up and keep its internal movements alive and visible, can subsequently display to the world the richness of its international festivals and events and deliver a brand which attracts investment and visits by closely linking the region's productive development and its cultural experience.

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Among the many programmes we are putting in place with embassies and groups (for instance with India, Bolivia and the Czech Republic; the exchange with Brazil; the Flamenco Festival with Spain and the increasingly close and prolific twinning with Berlin), Buenos Aires's participation at Interlocal and at Mercociudades networks deserves a separate paragraph due to their firm commitment to Agenda 21 for culture.

In April 2009 more than 40 representatives from South American countries attended the meeting of the Unidad Temática de Cultura (Forum on Culture) of the Mercociudades Network. The meeting took place in Buenos Aires. The event enabled attendees to exchange experiences and draw up joint strategies based on the importance of social inclusion in cultural policy. Buenos Aires spends a lot of money on culture, and cultural policies need to be constantly upgraded. Given this, Mercociudades is the ideal hub for strengthening our bilateral links with each of the cities in the network, as nowadays cities play a key role in improving the quality of life of everyone and those of us who work in culture can make a decisive contribution in this respect.

“CULTURAL HERITAGE, TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE, TESTIFIES TO HUMAN CREATIVITY AND FORMS THE BEDROCK UNDERLYING THE IDENTITY OF PEOPLES.”

This case is also marked by the profound belief that cultural heritage is not a testimony handed down to us by the past but rather social capital which enables us to build a future.

It is a matter of generating awareness of the importance of heritage as a means of consolidating an identity, getting across the message that it is what we are, what we were and without doubt what we want to be. The State has to signpost the pathways for protecting and enhancing heritage in order to be able to continue supporting it. Hence it is vital to generate strategies that help to raise awareness among the public about the importance of knowing what is yours as the way to love and protect it.

The work of artists, architects, musicians, writers and anonymous creators which gives shape to a collective identity must be disseminated and protected. This duty translates into specific, inclusive actions as part of a global vision of the spread of cultural heritage. An open-air festival in Avenida de Mayo; funding for heritage collections and research; cataloguing of cultural assets and research into heritage legislation; concerts in the city's leading bars; enhancement of cafés, merry-go-rounds, ice-cream parlours, pizzerias and bookshops; technical advice for the community and professionals; work on moveable property and real estate with heritage value; a focus on archaeological heritage – all of these reveal the responsibility assumed from the perspective of a strategic conception. But no other outcome speaks more clearly of heritage enhancement as social capital than its repositioning in the collective imaginary and public opinion. Cultural heritage today has an undisputed place on the city's agenda. This milestone is an undeniable product of a consistent and constant public policy put in place over almost a decade.

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“ACCESS TO THE CULTURAL AND SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE AT ALL STAGES OF LIFE, FROM CHILDHOOD TO OLD AGE, IS A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT IN THE SHAPING OF SENSITIVITY, EXPRESSIVENESS AND COEXISTENCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITIZENSHIP. THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF EACH INDIVIDUAL IS DYNAMIC.”

Everyone should be able to access and take part in cultural production in Buenos Aires. The mission would not be accomplished if it does not engage the variety of social strata and geographical origins. All sectors need to be involved with no distinction between them. This makes it possible to re-establish social ties, meet the cultural concerns of producers and spectators and build bridges between people who, were it not for the cultural experience that brings them to the same time and place, would not otherwise come into contact.

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The instruments are diverse, designed for and adapted to changing circumstances, asymmetric needs and dissimilar conditions. Finance for cultural microenterprises enables the local council to drive cultural dynamics in a range of social sectors which can only find support for their expression through public funding. Buenos Aires Polo Circo, a programme to foster and publicise the arts of the circus, works on the four key topics: training, creation, dissemination and documentation, using the Parque de los Patricios district, in the poor southern part of the city, as its basis. The Cultural Inclusion Programme consists of 150 cultural workshops given at points of high social vulnerability which foster creativity, buttress social bonds and further citizen participation. The Youth Orchestras project has been running since 2004 and drives the inclusion of young people who have been unable due to a range of social and economic circumstances to access cultural activities by promoting their creative abilities through an artistic experience. The creation of orchestras made up of children and teenagers has been extremely successful in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia and Chile. UNESCO's General Conference has provided its support for these projects in order to grow a world system of orchestras for children and young people.

All of which, conceived as a global and simultaneous process, helps to create citizenship, engage the people of Buenos Aires in their territory and, above all, initiate the consumption and experience of culture among neglected groups who would otherwise have remained outside a centralised or pyramidal offering.

Decentralisation is another strategic line here. The reopened Parque Centenario Amphitheatre in the centre of the city (the biggest in Buenos Aires), the Southern Cultural Centre in the ancient Barracas district, the Music Conservatory in Abasto, the city's museums and the neighbourhood libraries and cultural centres scattered all over Buenos Aires are just some examples of how the cultural offering gets closer to local people and provides increasingly open and widespread access.

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“THE CENTRAL NATURE OF PUBLIC CULTURAL POLICIES IS A DEMAND OF SOCIETIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.”

It is for this reason that we believe it is crucial to make provision for the conditions which will help to define the future cultural panorama in Buenos Aires and not just manage “for today”. The city is getting ready to celebrate (on 25 May 2010) the bicentenary of the first National Government Assembly, that is to say the start of Argentina’s movement towards independence, which it would achieve in 1816.

### The city is to start the groundwork for a cultural strategy, which will be a road map for culture in Buenos Aires over the next decade.

This anniversary, which brings the challenges of the future from the past, finds us seeking to begin to outline the cultural objectives for the next decade. Buenos Aires is to start to lay the groundwork for drawing up a plan for the next ten years, noting its strengths and weaknesses, setting its goals for the new decade, defining general guidance parameters that are flexible enough to save them from rapid obsolescence, and mapping out relevant strategies for their elaboration and start-up. The project seeks to set out a road map for culture in Buenos Aires over the next decade.

The hoped for the long-term impact of this 2010-2020 Strategic Plan begins with strengthening culture as a factor for social development both by training people and through its inclusive and integrating potential, without neglecting the generation of excellence or the production and job creation possibilities offered by the creative industries. The decade covered by this Plan will also see political decentralisation in Buenos Aires. This process will call for a firm commitment to consensus, dialogue, pluralism and diversity. In this challenge the role of culture transcends the borders of the agendas to become an indispensable value for community living and the democratic evolution of citizens.

We thus fully adhere to the text which provides for a central role for the cultural development of cities and nations. We also say that there is a need “to support and promote, through different means and instruments, the maintenance and expansion of cultural goods and services, ensuring universal access to them, increasing the creative capacity of all citizens, the wealth represented by linguistic diversity, promoting artistic quality, searching for new forms of expression and the experimentation with new art languages, as well as the reformulation and the interaction between traditions, and the implementation of mechanisms of cultural management which detect new cultural movements and new artistic talent and encourage them to reach fulfilment. Local governments state their commitment to creating and increasing cultural audiences and encouraging cultural participation as a vital element of citizenship.”

It is a question, as provided for in Agenda 21 for culture, of seeing culture not just as an instrument for integration in the here and now of our realities, but rather as a means of transformation, stimulating the ideas and work of creators, backing independent initiatives that come out of the passion of artists and fostering inclusion, access and diversity so as not only to drive cultural activities but also to build the future.

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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