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## The Morning After: Cultural City Development after the ‘Creative Hype’

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# The Morning After: Cultural City Development after the ‘Creative Hype’

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## Abstract

Massive challenges accompany Europe’s increasing urbanisation, argue Gottfried Wagner and Philipp Dietachmair (European Cultural Foundation). Urban planning must take greater account of local cultural policies and how they are developed. Development solutions will have to go beyond the fashionable hype surrounding the role played by the ‘creative class’. There is no size-fits-all urban cultural policy: regard must always be paid to the specificities that make up a city’s unique DNA. Joint thinking by a diversity of professionals is essential. Experimental projects in (local) cultural policymaking and arts management training are currently being carried out by the European Cultural Foundation in (often post socialist) transition countries. Indications are that success depends on the creation of an open, interactive, collegial and trust-based learning environment – one that involves interaction between civic, public and policymaking stakeholders.

## Introduction

Today, approximately 75% of the European population lives in urban contexts. Forecasts suggest the figure will go up to 80% or higher by 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Massive cultural alterations and challenges accompany these developments and have an impact on all sectors of public life in Europe’s cities. It was therefore suggested that local cultural policy development might have to develop progressively into an indispensable, if not key feature of socio-economic urban planning and management.

The following text looks first at a few fundamental positions in this respect - provocatively, yet also stemming from comparative practice. Secondly, it discusses cultural policy development in the context of cities in the EU neighbourhood.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.eea.europa.eu](http://www.eea.europa.eu)

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# I. Some Positions

## EXCHANGE BETWEEN GOTTFRIED WAGNER (GW) AND PHILIPP DIETACHMAIR (PD)

*FETISH CREATIVITY?* Creativity is a competitive advantage, but it also has become a fetish; it can be used against others ('elimination' of competitors - a simplistic approach) or with others (progress that serves all, which is a more complex approach). The latter is a challenge that pays off in the longer run. Creativity related to culture and arts has always aimed at sharing, as a human 'win-win' game (indeed, fun!) that enriches our common global heritage. Sharing/having their share made cities famous and attractive sustainably. GW

*FACTS – NOT ASSUMPTIONS.* Indeed, recent years have seen a tremendous hype regarding the role of the 'creative class' in urban development contexts worldwide. Some books have turned into proper 'bibles' for city developers tapping into the 'creative capital' as a central urban resource. Fine, if we take that as an indicator of substantially greater attention being paid to the role of the arts and the cultural field in tackling pending urban dilemmas. However, many of these assumptions, which were probably quite workable at first, have not been tested in (hard!) practice. Such thorough reality-checks in East and West, North and South have demystified 'creative simplifications' in complex urban contexts. It is time to refine the analytical and methodological framework; and maybe also the inherent political assumptions that stem from a Darwinist model of competition. PD

*QUICK AND DIRTY?* Of course, cities must forcefully develop their creative potential - without fooling themselves. There is more needed for growth than creativity, and more than creativity prescribed by the fashion doctor. Cities must be generous and patient with their creative assets; gains can flow from the sources of the seemingly useless, unexpectedly and often late. Feverish instrumental overkill dries up these sources. Art, science, need humble generosity. Don't invest in quick returns only. GW

**Cities must be generous and patient with their creative assets; gains can flow from the sources of the seemingly useless, unexpectedly and often late.**

*GENUINE PARTICIPATION.* Any functioning change needs real participation (and time) by the key stakeholders across the board, as well as a genuinely felt sense of shared interests by the citizenry at large. Individual citizens living in our cities are the carriers and beneficiaries of vibrant cultural community life. Hence the starting point and central subject of inclusive urban cultural development and policymaking are the various communities interacting within the urban space, comprising a wide range of citizens. Developing a viable urban cultural life which harvests creativity requires strong, supportive and long-term policies. By the way, the conditions for that are still utterly uneven across the wider continent of Europe. PD

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## Developing a viable urban cultural life which harvests creativity requires strong, supportive and long-term policies.

*RISK-TAKING VS. ENGINEERING.*<sup>2</sup> Social engineering failed in many systems, and cultural engineering fails too. Cultural development is a mix of 'change towards the expected' at very different societal levels; and yes, participation, but also risk-taking on a larger scale, allowing for the 'luxury' of thinking, breeding and experimenting: the city as a laboratory of future excellence. Aristocracy did it; bourgeois Maecenas did it. How can modern governance allow for it, without suffocating creative revolutions with participatory, democratic or authoritarian bureaucracy? Without a deep tolerance for the as yet 'intolerable', it is hard to conceive of not being 'killed in the middle of the road'. GW

*HOWEVER AVANT-GARDE YOU MAY BE, MAKE SENSE TO THE CITY'S INHABITANTS!* Many cities and towns had to 'reinvent' themselves and replace the classical local economies of a declining industrial age. As inspiring as new international hotspots for arts and culture may be, the risk of failure is high. Failing can mean: creating mere copies of such success stories – being detached from local realities. Failing can mean: investing substantial amounts of taxpayers' money for short-term effects and ultimately sterile 'cultural theme parks' in an attempt to replace a city's battered image with that of a fashionable creative hub. Failing can mean: missing out on citizens' real aspirations, lacking authenticity and rootedness in the local fabric. Any cultural urban development project (e.g. a bid to the European Cultural Capital scheme or a new spectacular art museum) must make sense to the people who live there! PD

*SPACE AND TIME.* The appropriation of difference in public spaces is an issue of struggling for the right balance between confrontation and hospitality.<sup>3</sup> Cities need to re appropriate public spaces and fight the paradigm of citizens being charged, under surveillance, for every free move they make. Intimacy, which is essential for cultural encounter, cannot be secured by privatisation; and public space, which is essential for 'sharing' communities, cannot be reduced to shopping malls, celebratory domes or cyberspace financed by ads. Making space available is costly. Understanding difference is a sine qua non for capitalising on diversity. There is no fast track to cultural integration. GW

## There is no fast track to cultural integration.

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<sup>2</sup> Dobricic (2008).

<sup>3</sup> [www.almostreal.org](http://www.almostreal.org)

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*SPACE FOR PEOPLE AND SPACE BETWEEN DISCIPLINES: NO PILLARS!* Urban life gets more and more complex. Viable urban development solutions need to be found for cities growing speedily and diversely as well as for dangerously shrinking cities. There is no size-fits-all general urban cultural policy. Yet there is the one 'no silos!' rule that has proven comparably vital: No urban policy field can act detached from its neighbouring disciplines any more. This is particularly true of cultural policies, which became more and more indispensable for other urban policy areas, such as economy, housing, social policy and equality policies. They all flow together in the concept of a true sharing of urban space, and shared public spaces. PD

## There is no size-fits-all general urban cultural policy.

*RESTLESS AUTHENTICITY.* To be or not to be isn't normally the alternative for cities in 'creative' competition. Instead, the demand is to be specific within the cultural mainstream. Futile every-city aspirations all too often overcast the specificities that make up a city's non-interchangeable DNA – which will have been harshly tested by history and economics. Scars can sharpen minds, and dust can enrich the prism's colours. Restlessness (often of incomparable historic impact) grows in peculiar places, and needs encouragement as opposed to standardisation. Cities of that kind make the absolute majority of the hinterland. It all depends on whether they play their role rebelliously authentically or as if flattened out to indistinctiveness. GW

*GENIUS LOCI - REVISITED.* Not every city in Europe can be a second Bilbao. Not every mid-sized or small town can become an internationally praised centre of the global art circus. However, for its inhabitants every urban settlement has a distinct feel and identity influencing their life and creating their locally genuine lifestyle. Every town has a particular past and present, the 'soul' for citizens' quality of life there (good or bad). As in many of the transitional urban contexts (across the EU neighbourhood) in which the European Cultural Foundation is working, local specificities might still be hidden, forgotten, destroyed, taboo or even painful at first sight. Nevertheless, to truly engage a city's cultural actors in tapping into locally ingrained cultural resources, ideas and potential (probably less focused on immediate return) will always deliver more sustainable solutions, a stronger sense of distinctiveness than cost-intensive models imported from somewhere else. PD

*AGENDA 21 FOR CULTURE* is well placed to move on towards recuperated 'quality parameters' on new levels vs. parameters of quantity and fashion. GW

*PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES – SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES.* Joint thinking by a diversity of professionals (artists, art organisations, related infrastructure, experts, universities, etc.) is essential in urban cultural policies. Where the development of such communities of professionals has been delayed or disrupted (e.g. in the transition countries of the EU neighbourhood) decision makers will sometimes fail to find counterparts in the practising cultural field whom they can invite to participate in policymaking. An unorganised, dispersed professional field lacks sufficient weight, thrust and coherence to genuinely question, debate and inform the making of real participatory urban cultural policies. At the same time, local cultural administrations and political decision-makers in the field of urban culture need cutting-edge knowledge, skills and working methods to be taken seriously and really share responsibility for successful cultural planning processes with the professional field. PD

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## II. Some Predicaments from Practice in the EU Neighbourhood (PD)

by **Philipp Dietachmair**

Based on its undertaking of promoting cooperation for the cultural integration of Europe (beyond EU borders), the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) has for several years been involved with the post-socialist or otherwise transitional challenges of South East-, Central- and Eastern Europe and more recently Turkey. The underlying philosophy is one of a shared culture at all levels, and of citizen engagement in policymaking. The ECF invests in building the conditions and capacities for creative individuals to work together across borders/boundaries in a collegial spirit.

We set up numerous working coalitions with local 'agents of change', mostly in cities; they are incubators and the main public arenas of culture-related and culture-driven transformation in the EU Neighbourhood,<sup>4</sup> and hubs for international cultural cooperation. Our assistance aims at systemic action. Up to 2006, more than 20 ECF supported local initiatives in smaller towns and larger cities in South East Europe realised local cultural policy debates involving civil society and local administration alike – mostly for the first time ever.<sup>5</sup> Today, several regions and cities in Anatolia, Moldova, Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) and Ukraine are undertaking 'acupunctural' but in-depth and long-term cultural capacity development processes; we support them through partner organisations.

While preconditions for change and local challenges differ greatly from city to city, some patterns appear to be generally valid for (in most of our cities, post-socialist<sup>6</sup>) transition in cultural policymaking.

The starting point for development processes in such cities is often characterised by a mixture of fresh, sometimes challenging artistic ideas and alternative creative concepts that are vigorously present in the new independent local scenes with inspiring force. Their encouragement, however, is often combined with a huge frustration about petrified, at times openly corrupt, conceptually outdated local cultural administrations that are overwhelmed by the challenges of a collapsing system (and public-funded cultural infrastructure). At the same time, those emerging scenes of cultural NGOs as well as civic activists promoting social change through the arts, as well as new generations embarking on contemporary artistic expressions, often remain widely dispersed, largely unorganised, and structurally weak. The result is a sometimes quite diffuse demand for change coming upon them from above. A fatalistic atmosphere of deep distrust between the various individual and organisational players and stakeholder levels is accompanied by an enormous need to acquire new knowledge, up-to-date management and policymaking skills (especially in the public sector) and (international) cooperation channels to master these challenges.

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4 <http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp>

5 [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org)

6 In this article the focus is on the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe; Turkish projects have only recently started.

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The field usually has little appreciation for the previous (often entirely politicised and ideologically charged) cultural policies. Many policymakers are often initially reluctant to understand the deep need for cultural policy reform: reform often happens in unguided transition towards a free market (cultural) economy. However, civil-society-based cultural scenes of Eastern European cities forcefully demand local cultural (policy) reform and development. Naturally, the focus of influential international donors (such as the Soros Foundation) on civil society development and participation (through contemporary arts and culture) had its share in bringing these independent players to the fore as well.

### The ECF in shared ownership with its local partners assists cities to activate participatory processes with a holistic capacity-development approach addressing different policy levels and players.

In this situation, the ECF in shared ownership with its local partners assists cities to activate participatory processes with a holistic capacity-development approach addressing different policy levels and players: a multi-layered and long-term concept. It supports local and predominantly cultural initiatives rooted in civil society, but progressively also publicly funded cultural institutions, in strengthening their human and organisational capacities (through arts management training, strategic advice, elaboration of organisational development plans, structural support, etc.). This is intertwined with a community-based approach whereby local professionals reach out to their external working environment (colleagues) and the responsible city authorities, including policymaking bodies (e.g. through knowledge and awareness building, advocacy, lobbying campaigns, roundtables and public debates).

Some features have repeatedly proven to be critical for this work – even if ready-made models cannot seriously be designed in an all-encompassing manner and in circumstances that are still turbulently marked by (post-socialist) transition.

#### NEW KNOWLEDGE & SHARED LEARNING

Arts management training and the development of a body of knowledge in (local) cultural policymaking are still relatively young disciplines even in Western Europe. Given the ideological importance assigned to cultural education, some socialist countries (e.g. Yugoslavia) knew teaching and academic analysis in the field of (public) cultural administration even before cultural management emerged in the West.<sup>7</sup> Still, contemporary books and learning concepts/materials available to professionals and administrators in Eastern European cities (and in their own language!) remain scarce. Local cultural (policy) development in the transitional urban contexts of Eastern Europe represents a singular phenomenon, and calls for the development of new knowledge bodies and learning materials. The ECF's local experts and trainers, in cooperation with academic partners, have tried to answer this demand to some extent by formulating and publishing new analysis and training materials (in various languages).<sup>8</sup>

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7 Dragicevic-Sestic (2009).

8 Arts Management in Turbulent Times (Dragicevic-Sestic & Dragojevic, 2006); The Arts, Politics & Change (2006); Guide to Citizen Participation in Local Cultural Policy Development for European Cities (Pascual & Dragojevic, 2007); Strategic Planning for Cultural Organisations (Varbanova, 2009), Cultural Policy in Turkey (2009). All available via [www.eurocult.org](http://www.eurocult.org)

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Success in applying newly developed materials largely depends on the creation of an open, interactive, collegial and trust-based learning environment – one that involves civic, public and policymaking stakeholders alike. Ideally, new approaches in this respect will replace the usual top-down, frontal and passive teaching traditions and rigid conceptual planning frameworks prevalent in many of our project locations. Such attempts to trigger shared learning and joint action requires experienced trainers who are familiar with local sensitivities and challenges, and capable of animating sometimes very heterogeneous groups throughout a long, complex and difficult process.

#### SYSTEMIC THINKING & SOLIDARITY OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Systemic thinking focuses on the relation between different actors (or obstacles to their interaction) in total rather than looking into the issues of individual groups and stakeholders alone.<sup>9</sup> A typical phenomenon we regularly meet is indeed fundamental isolation and lack of communication between different stakeholder levels (independent scene, artists, public sector, local administration, policymakers, academia, etc.). Frequently, these levels are even further fractionalised by segregation, personality driven competition and power struggles from within their own constituency.

Often we mark the beginning of a capacity development project with a public forum (sometimes the first-ever of its kind on the spot). This makes the process accessible; stakeholders can express opinions, get to know different players and take a look at the various ends and actual issues of ‘the system culture’ in a particular city.

In the next step, we launch a long-term series of organisational capacity building workshops; if successful, these motivate a critical mass of local cultural activists and organisations to really become the driving force behind the envisaged local (cultural) policy development changes. Arts management skills and strategic advice deployed in such training processes tend to have a positive effect on strengthening individual management capacities and the organisations of those involved in a project.

A collegial group spirit is essential for the next steps, which range from organisational/human capacity building to the more systemic development of (policymaking) capacities on multiple levels. Ideally, this spirit originates in the training series. New confidence gained in these sessions allows participants to be more self assured in entering into debate with local administrators; it also helps them gradually to become a real force in local cultural policy development processes. Increasing solidarity among a number of key professionals from sufficiently profiled local cultural organisations (a solidarity emerging from learning together closely and repeatedly) can give project groups surprising weight and newfound appreciation in commencing reform processes. The core of such processes is the transformation of individual capacities into collaborative capacities and practice.

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9 Fritjof, Capra (1997).

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## INTERNATIONAL LINKS & INSPIRATION FROM 'OUTSIDE THE BOX'

Establishing cooperation across borders and lively links with partners in the wider Europe represents at the same time a goal and an effective means of urban cultural capacity development for the EU neighbourhood.

Professional exchange (excursions, study visits, placements, etc.) and international cooperation – firstly at a concrete project level, and secondly aiming at long-term working partnerships – are a central source of inspiration for developing and motivating structural reform in EU neighbourhood cities. Exposing emerging professionals to new and largely differing working realities can result in a deeply enlightening exchange of new concepts and professional approaches. If translated into lasting working relationships across the continent, such new professional links and channels can become a stabilising structural factor in city development.

## PASSION, FLEXIBILITY & PERSISTENCE

Developing capacities for viable cultural development and achieving successful bottom up policy reform is a cumbersome task for cities in transition. The complexity of structural challenges, prevailing fatalistic attitudes, lack of resources, and vicious turbulence can endanger the processes of reform. Even small steps forward sometimes call for an almost inexhaustible sense of optimism and long-term thinking. Relentless passion for the arts, a strong will to develop new cultural paradigms as well as flexibility and inventiveness in structural adaptations are key (but not self-evident) qualities for change.

While the independent cultural sector in cities of the EU neighbourhood often display more of these key virtues for real progress – particularly passion, imagination and flexibility – consolidation can only happen in coalition with public institutions and local policymakers, whose positions in administrations are far from easy.

To negotiate compromises that will lead to working coalitions for real cultural development requires persistence. This can be significantly facilitated by offering international assistance, insights and solidarity from cities facing comparable challenges around the world. Agenda 21 for culture is therefore a leading reference framework for all EU Neighbourhood cities undergoing processes of local cultural policy reform and development.

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