



culture 21

UCLG Committee

PEER-LEARNING GABROVO

JULY 2019



ACTIVITY

Peer-learning.

DATE

10-12 April 2019

PLACE

Gabrovo, Bulgaria

TITLE

How to involve artists,
cultural teams and citizens
in shared artistic adventures,
by **Catherine Cullen**

PEER
LEARNING





CONTEXT

As part of a peer-learning visit to Gabrovo within the framework of the **Pilot Cities programme** of the UCLG Committee on Culture and Culture Action Europe, a workshop took place in Gabrovo with 14 cultural stakeholders and members of the city's Cultural Department, including the Deputy Mayor for Culture, Mrs Rachevitz. The peer visit representative from the UCLG Pilot City of Terrassa, Spain, was Imma Vilches: she has 12 years of experience working in Terrassa's neighbourhoods on participatory projects, and she was interested in visiting Gabrovo to exchange on the cultural practices of the two cities. The workshop was coordinated by Emmanuel Vinchon, a French cultural consultant who has a rich experience in organizing participatory projects in European cities – often candidates for European Capital of Culture (e.g. Lille, Mons, Nitra, Kaunas, Esch-sur-Alzette, Rouen and others). Catherine Cullen, special advisor for the UCLG Culture Committee and named expert for the Gabrovo Pilot City process, was also present to follow-up and participate in the workshop.

The objective of the workshop was to bring together people with different cultural, social and professional practices to reflect on the development of participatory processes and projects in Gabrovo. The design of this activity was based on earlier observations and discussions in the context of the **implementation of Gabrovo's work programme as a Pilot City**.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISIT

The methodology consisted in examining and questioning a specific territorial 'inhabited landscape' (i.e. Gabrovo) to see what kind of shared cultural projects could be imagined and proposed. While it is impossible to design and build such a project in one and a half days (Emmanuel Vinchon usually works on a project with the inhabitants of a neighbourhood for 6 months before it can be launched), the aim of the workshop was to raise awareness and begin a discussion amongst the participants as to where and how Gabrovo's inhabitants could imagine and produce participatory projects together.

Emmanuel Vinchon asked the participants to reflect and express themselves on different subjects to do with their city, its past and future, its good points and weaknesses, and how they enjoy living in it. There were numerous exchanges between them, ideas and suggestions going back and forth across the table, with the experts from Terrassa and UCLG contributing through examples based on their own experience.

The 3 workshop sessions were organized as follows:

1. The 'inhabited landscape' of Gabrovo was examined and analysed by looking, thinking and commenting on the map of Gabrovo (and Terrassa for Imma), focusing on the participants' own living and working places (and those of their best friends), their leisure activities, lifestyles, the local cultural activities and cultural infrastructures.
2. The participants were then encouraged to talk about their specific leisure activities (or hobbies), dreams and aspirations both for themselves in the private sphere and for the town they choose to live in, Gabrovo. The 'clichés' about their country and their city were then discussed leading to the 'reality', i.e. what, in their eyes, are Gabrovo's good and bad points as a city to live in? From the rich list of their leisure activities, a number of open, participatory projects were evoked involving hiking, photography, knitting, cooking, painting, music, cinema, reading, etc. The objective was to provoke new ideas on cooperation with their family, friends and neighbours to imagine localized participatory projects.
3. How to construct a shared event and with whom? This session was a general discussion on the possibilities of developing participatory projects in Gabrovo, addressing both the weaker points and stronger points of life in Gabrovo:

The weaker points:

 For reasons that are understandable, since the end of the communist era individualism has been a key word and many people have turned away or even disdained the collective aspects of living together. However, with the world as it is and will be more and more, shared culture is important and should not be left just to smartphones or Facebook.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISIT

- »»» A dynamic city with real potential, Gabrovo seems to close down at 7pm, with few language skills in shops and restaurants to cope with tourists, and next to no nightlife for its young people.
- »»» Small groups (e.g. skaters and other sports and cultural practitioners) are not recognized although they contribute to the city's liveliness.
- »»» There still seems to be a regrettable general lack of trust between the municipality and the NGOs, although around the table everyone recognized the hard work of all parties involved to improve culture in Gabrovo.
- »»» The need for a visual identity for Gabrovo - 'the visual environment should be sending a message' - was evoked many times (with key words such as aesthetics, beauty, rehabilitation, artistic interventions in industrial sites and on the city landscape, etc.). A more inclusive, participatory cultural communication was also discussed.
- »»» In several instances, the word 'abandoned' was used – about people (the homeless), about dogs and cats (too many strays), about buildings (the dozens of industrial sites), all of which could call for a collective response.

The stronger points:

- »»» The rich past of a pioneering city: Gabrovo's history of innovation has initiated many 'first times' which does and should continue to inspire the future: heritage, industrial sites, avant-garde in education, specialized technical competences, innovative businesses, a lot of creative energy and an entrepreneurial spirit. These points could be gathered into an inclusive vision of the cultural potential of the city, shared by the citizens through new communication tools and a participatory process.
- »»» An abundance of nature set in an original geographical situation: along the Yantra river and between the mountains, despite its ever-present industrial past, abandoned sites and ungainly architecture, nature is everywhere in Gabrovo, both all around and within the city and Gabrovians are very aware of this and take pride in it.
- »»» A potential for ecological tourism: hiking, trails, healthy food, arts and crafts, heritage villages, a great opportunity for the development of a specific brand of Gabrovo cultural tourism ('mindful tourism', 'green tourism', 'slow tourism'...) within which many participatory projects could be imagined.



CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, three themes with a particularly strong potential for participatory projects seem to have emerged from the discussion during the workshop:

THE CARNIVAL

Although most people in Gabrovo attend the Carnival, it was clear from the discussion that it could go much further in involving the active participation of the Gabrovians who both love the Gabrovo Carnival and are very proud of it, but do not think it concerns them directly (unlike other major European carnivals where the population is passionately involved in their making). There is room for much more active participation in the carnival so that it truly belongs to everyone in Gabrovo

ARTS AND CRAFTS, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

The arts and crafts as an historic, aesthetic and attractive tool for tourists and a source of pride for the Gabrovians is one of the most powerful elements in Gabrovo's cultural life and could lead to more contemporary design through a 'design hub' based on the old crafts and techniques – including residencies for young Bulgarian and world designers. The excellent Technical University could become involved in teaching the aesthetics of everyday tools and artefacts (design) and link it to the Etorá museum with its high-quality tourist offer and local development.

There is nowadays among some European architects a fascination for the industrial past and its rehabilitation for new uses, and there again through a residency or a cycle of conferences on this type of architecture so abundant in Gabrovo, its citizens could be motivated to take new pride in its industrial heritage and lead them to contribute to their rehabilitation – both in the private sector and the public sector supported by the citizens

WALKING, HIKING, GASTRONOMY, CULTURE

During the discussion, so many of the participants enthusiastically mentioned hiking, gardening, cooking and love of the countryside that the experts were convinced that there is serious potential for a major participatory project on urban people's relationship with nature, food and culture - already such projects as 'Take me to the countryside' are good signals for future collaborative initiatives.

The workshop was intended to open doors on the possibility of developing new participatory projects in Gabrovo, helped by the peer visit representative of Terrassa and a consultant with experience in cultural participation. The city, with its 113 surrounding villages and important cultural infrastructures, needs to work more on internal links and ways of working together across neighbourhoods and the sharing of cultural experiences. The workshop participants fully engaged in the challenge of reflecting on their own preferred leisure activities and wishes as well as those of their families, friends and neighbours in the context of Gabrovo life today, and how to imagine new ways of bringing people together in shared cultural experiences.



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