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Poetics and Politics of the European Capital of Culture Project

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Abstract

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) project was designed to promote European identity and integration. Hosting cities have since carried a variety of visions and objectives, ranging from the improvement of material infrastructure and urban revitalization, over the enhancement of cultural life to the alleviation of poverty through increasing employment, and the attraction of more tourists. This variety of hopes is repeatedly articulated, as cities compete to become the next ECoC. Being an ECoC is seen to offer invaluable marketing opportunities to improve the city and its image. This paper situates the ECoC programme both within and beyond its marketing functions. We review a range of ECoC documents, reports and academic publications with two broad foci. The first deals with the ‘poetics’ of ECoC, that is, the presentation of ECoC in an attractive manner to win local support and attract outside attention. The second is on the ‘politics’, the grubby business of seeking legitimacy, mobilizing community support and managing local dissatisfaction. The review shows a remarkable lack of consensus as to how successful past ECoC tenures were, partly reflecting profound disagreement as to the appropriate methods and criteria for such evaluations.

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1. Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) project was originally designed to promote European identity and integration. Hosting cities have since carried a variety of visions and objectives, ranging from the improvement of material infrastructure and urban revitalization, over the enhancement of cultural life to the alleviation of poverty through increasing employment, and the attraction of more tourists. This variety of hopes is repeatedly articulated, as cities compete to become the next ECoC. Being an ECoC is seen to offer invaluable marketing opportunities to improve the city and its image. This paper situates the ECoC program both within and beyond its marketing functions. For this paper, we review a wide range of ECoC-related documents, reports and academic publications with two broad foci. The first deals with the ‘poetics’ of ECoC, that is, the presentation of ECoC in

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an attractive manner to win local support and attract outside attention. The second is on the ‘politics’, that is the grubby business of seeking legitimacy, mobilizing community support and managing local dissatisfaction.

Let us elaborate. In the bidding for and the hosting of an ECoC tenure, negotiation takes place between different stakeholders: local authorities, tourism agencies, cultural institutions, local businesses and residents. Besides communicating positive messages to the world, an ECoC has to maintain an appropriate brand and story, deliver the products and mobilize local support during its tenure. Promoting, maintaining and being a cultural city entails politicking, although politics in this case does not refer specifically to politicians and matters related to government, it refers to the negotiation processes amongst various stakeholders as the campaign serve different and diverse needs. So, the politics of the ECoC project is defined as the dynamic processes of drawing support and cooperation from different authorities, stakeholders and local residents, so that the tenure is delivered in ways that are accepted by various parties, communicated attractively to the outside world and help in the building of the local community. The poetics, on the other hand, is defined as the process of inventing and presenting the ECoC project in a positive light, so as not only to use the cultural capital title to leverage against the existing brand image of the city but also to draw support and influence the various stakeholders in the local community. The poetics and politics are intertwined.

As each ECoC delivers its tenure, each faces its own set of circumstances and politics. This review shows a remarkable lack of consensus as to how successful past ECoC tenures were, partly reflecting profound disagreement as to the appropriate methods and criteria for such evaluations. It also demonstrates that the ideal mobilization of different stakeholders towards a common goal, such as that of branding the city, rarely happens. As alluded to, local dissatisfaction, opportunity costs and the imposition of an economic/industrial logic onto cultural development are also salient issues. The ECoC project is a laudable one but some rethinking is needed.

2. The poetics of the ECoC

It has become a popular strategy to establish a common marketing purpose and direction through a city brand. Using seductive images and consistent marketing campaigns, many cities are aiming to shape how the world imagines and perceives them. While the branding of cities is becoming popular, discourses of city branding often still refer to general marketing perspectives. It is also within this context that many European cities bid for becoming a future ECoC. The ECoC brand itself is potentially seen as a tool to market and leverage the existing brand image of the bidding city. An ECoC is formally accredited and recognized as a cultural Mecca. And furthermore, heritage, culture and the arts are often used to frame the uniqueness of the place; being an ECoC is then a good opportunity to build and communicate a unique brand identity for the city. As we are going to show next, the ECoC scheme has been celebrated and sold to residents, businesses and other stakeholders in a city and to the European electorate more generally.

The European City of Culture programme, as it was originally called, started in 1985, on the initiative of the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri and her French colleague Jack Lang. The objective was to elevate culture to the same level of importance as legislation and the economy in fostering European unity. Since then, over 40 cities have become ECoCs. Each ECoC showcases its cultural offerings, while upgrading its cultural and physical infrastructure. It was observed that (European Commission Education and Culture DG 2010, p. 19):

After 25 years of European Capitals of Culture, their urban, touristic and economic potential and the role they play towards promoting social cohesion is undeniable. They offer a unique opportunity for urban regeneration and image-boosting both at a European and an international level [...] There are three things, however, that an ECOC cannot do without; the quality of its cultural programme, support from the business community, and support from the political authorities. Indeed a key challenge for ECOCs is to ensure that the project is embedded as part of a long-term political commitment and strategy by the city to using culture to develop itself into-and to remain-a creative city.”

The ECoC project, by bringing political, cultural and commercial interests together, contributes to the local community-building programme. It has been celebrated as “arguably one of the most successful projects ever launched by the European Union” (Palmer, R. & Richards, G. 2007, p.5):

This does much to distance the ECOC from other EU programmes, which are often perceived as being overly bureaucratic, allowing the host cities a high degree of autonomy on deciding how to implement the event [...] The growing popularity of the ECOC can be judged by the number of cities competing for the title.

A number of cities have been identified as successes or role models. The so-called ‘trinity’ includes Glasgow (1990), Lille (2004) and Liverpool (2008). Glasgow, as a working class industrial Scottish city, faced harsh economic conditions during the Thatcher years in the 1980s. The year 1990 is often regarded as a turning point for Glasgow. The city was rejuvenated, as it moved away from urban decay, high unemployment and its infamy for street crimes. The ECoC project “with many positive after-effects on the creative scene and a radical boost to its international image, not only do cafes fill its streets on sunny days, but it is now considered a major cultural tourism destination.” (European Commission Education and Culture DG 2010, p.5). Glasgow 1990 offers a lasting legacy, as the event was the initial embrace of the city’s creative and cultural economy. Infrastructural improvements and bringing the arts to traditionally deprived local communities increased the confidence of its residents and improved the image of the re-energized city. Nonetheless, the significance of Glasgow 1990 should not be overstated. The Director of the project, Robert Palmer was cited as saying (European Commission Education and Culture DG 2010, p.18):

An ECOC can never and never has been a quick fix to repairing a broken political mechanism, or a tarnished city image, or a city that is divided culturally or ethnically, or that has a failing economy. A European Capital of Culture can be one part of a process that may lead to solutions to some of these problems, but it cannot in itself be the solution...preparing a European Capital of Culture is a monster and epic task, filled with headaches and delights, for future cities, I can only say ‘it is not all easy, so think twice before you say ‘yes!’”

Lille 2004 was significant in its own ways. Often regarded as a small French regional centre, its ECoC tenure elevated the perception of Lille into a European cultural centre (Palmer, R. & Richards, G. 2007, pp.56-7). This change of perception could only be realized through the city stepping up into the role of delivering the event and the contents in a professional manner and at an ambitious level. Its status was also enhanced when the city and the residents themselves felt that they had delivered. This positive evaluation of Lille was appraised via a ‘balanced scorecard’ approach by Palmer and Richards. They gave Lille four out of five stars, as measured against other cities based on planning, organization, programming, financing, marketing and communication, overall short-term impact, legacy, and planning/sustainability. The assessment used both “qualitative, subjective judgments as well as quantitative scores relative to other ECoCs” (Palmer, R. & Richards, G. 2007, pp.58-9).

Liverpool 2008 is well regarded because of its economic achievements gained through the year of cultural festivities. It was also selected because its bid promised to deliver the Glasgow 1990 effects. Warren Bradley, the Leader of the Liverpool City Council for Liverpool 2008 trumpeted (European Commission Education and Culture DG 2010):

The City is confident again. Investors from outside are more ready to invest here; they see Liverpool in a different light. Over the last six or seven years, there’s been an investment of some 10 billion pounds in the city, and the city council has been driving the economy towards new opportunities. Of course, the recession has come at the worst time, but Liverpool is still buoyant.

Outside the trinity but with the same positive note, Copenhagen 1996 was celebrated and seen to have a strong impact on the Danish capital city, mainly in terms of lasting cultural legacies (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012, p.48)

There had clearly been an impact on the cultural sector, with 18 infrastructure projects, all of which continue to function well. Cultural projects were also sustained after the ECOC, with 110 of the 630 projects still running one year later, and 50 surviving as long as 10 years after the event.

The *Golden Days in Copenhagen* festival was inaugurated during the city's ECoC's tenure. It subsequently evolved into a biennale event celebrating Danish cultural heritage. The expertise developed during the first festival was one of the reasons why the authorities kept the series going (C.-S. Ooi, 2001).

Looking into the bids of cities wanting to be future ECoCs, the year of festivities is believed to provide a strong impetus to improve a city's image and cultural development, to bring local communities together, to attract visitors and to enhance its physical and cultural infrastructure. Achievements are often highlighted in the evaluation reports – important aspects of the poetics of the ECoC project.

But this is only one side of the coin.

3. The Politics

Being an ECoC entails the garnering of resources, building support from various stakeholders, selecting projects and managing overt or potential dissatisfaction from different quarters. This involves the grubby politics of allocating limited resources, selecting specific cultural projects, the management and coordination of diverse interests and agendas, the generation of enthusiasm from the ground-up, and addressing and marginalizing discontent. Palmer, Richards and Dodd (2012) explicitly recognized the importance of managing the “actual narratives of success” in their fourth report on the ECoC: “By talking about the successes achieved, and minimising the perceived failures, a city can attain a successful image even when the objective criteria may be more ambiguous” (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012, p.51). More commonly, however, studies discuss the challenges of the ECoC project and question its celebratory achievements, highlighting its political nature.

One line of critique focuses on the lack of long-term impact studies (Langen, F. & Garcia, B. 2009), emphasizing the potential for short-term boosterisation (Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004, p.343), festivalization (Richards, G. 2000) and commercialization (Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004) of the city. Apart from some evidence of increased cultural employment as new cultural institutions offer lasting legacies, more commonly critics lament that cultural and economic boosts experienced during the cultural capital year are not repeated in subsequent years. Sustained impacts are typically not measured or measured only in a narrow set of dimensions (Evans, G. 2005, p.975). In the case of Liverpool 2008, for example, the event was largely seen as an opportunity for symbolic reinvention, with little improvement to the social and economic equality in the city (Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004, p.357). Similarly, in the case of Glasgow 1990, the event's specific contribution to the rejuvenation of the city remains unclear. The “most valuable cultural legacies interrelate with other elements that are inherent to the fabric of the city and result from many dimensions beyond [ECoC] 1990” (García, B. 2005, p.862). The long term implications of the ECoC project have always been celebrated in the buildup to the year, but there have been no follow-up concrete plans to ensure that the legacy actually lasts. Essentially, the promised long-term rejuvenation helped to create legitimacy for hosting the event, but the eventual fulfillment of the promise has remained largely unverified. The above-mentioned “balanced score” card approach fails to address the long-term impact of the ECoC project.

A second and related series of debates tackles the discrepancy between early promises and actual effects (Steiner L., Frey, B. S. & Hotz, S. & 2013), (Anderson, B. & Holden, A. 2008). In the celebrated Liverpool example, “...the range and scope of hopes hoped for included poverty alleviation, employment, better

consumption practices (of images, experience), an improved material infrastructure of everyday life (environment, transport, etc.), and fewer “incivilities” (litter, “antisocial behavior”) [...but] hope flickers between appearance and disappearance in one of the focus groups held in inner-city South Liverpool as the discernible effect of the Capital of Culture is an increase in house prices” (Anderson, B. & Holden, A. 2008, pp.153-4). While lofty promises are often made, actual implementation is often dictated by resource limitations. Each city has its own context and reasons for wanting to host a ECoC festival; unsurprisingly, the marketing of the bid often promises too much, and eventually practical deliberations dominate programme execution. And many people ended up disappointed.

Istanbul 2010 offers an interesting example. The ECoC platform was used to push Turkey’s bid for acceptance in the EU (Paris, D. & Baert, T. 2011). In response to political conflicts, Cyprus 2017 is seen as a springboard to peace and unity to the divided island, an argument Donostia-San Sebastian 2016 also used in its successful ECoC bid to bring together rival groups within the city (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012, pp.26-7). But fulfilling such exalted promises and aspirations entail solving complex issues. The actual purposes behind the bids and the embedded social political and economic contexts matter in how tenures pan out.

A third area of discussion in the literature deals with the politics of selection. The showcasing of culture entails a selection process of what is to be highlighted, what messages are to be communicated and which cultural activities are to be presented. The selection process is inescapably political (Gunay, Z. 2010, p.1184). Different ECoCs accentuate different cultural offerings. The Beatles were an important feature in the bid by Liverpool 2008. It also included the romanticising of Liverpool’s Somalian community in the effort to re-brand Liverpool as a prospering multicultural community, glossing over racial problems and conflicts (Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004, p.353). Karlsruhe 2010 was unsuccessful in its bid as it pushed for a theme of ‘justice’ and ‘bill of rights’, along with a focus on high-class culture (Sutherland, M., Besson, E., Paskaleva, K. & Capp, S. 2006). Karlsruhe’s plans were seen as too highbrow with festivities alienating both locals and visitors. In contrast to such criticisms, Stavanger 2008 attempted to engage ‘broad segments’ of the population in ‘*high quality cultural events*’ (Fitjar, R.D., Rommetvedt, H. & Berg, C. 2013, p.79), explicitly not assuming that a person with a lower income cannot also be interested in ‘high quality’/highbrow forms of cultural production. In the context of Norway, class and income distinctions are less significant than other countries and may account for high and broad participation in Stavanger 2008. More common is the experience of Cork. The overwhelming interest at Cork forced tough decisions. Large-scale international events were chosen and funded, inevitably at the expense of local cultural activities, escalating ill will amongst local arts and cultural communities (Sutherland et al 2006). Who should define what is to be selected, and what ignored?

A fourth stream of research on the politics of the ECoC deals with the effect on ‘creative industries’, where often-cultural development is subsumed into economic development (Anderson, B. & Holden, A. 2008), (Ooi, C.-S. 2011), (Campbell, P. 2011). Grouped under the umbrella of ‘creative industries’, the fine arts become industrial cousins to advertising, the design of trendy lamps and the programming of computer games. In the context of the creative industries project, the arts and culture must also consider economic sustainability; their intrinsic value is inevitably toned down (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012), (Langen, F. & Garcia, B. 2009), (Sjøholt, P. 1999), (Andersson T. D. & Lundberg, E. 2013), (Herrero, L. C., Sanz, J.Á.S., & Devesa, M., Bedate, A. & del Barrio, M. J. 2006), (Sacco, P. L. & Blessi, G. T. 2007). ‘Culture’ is seen as an ‘asset’ and as local ‘capital’. As a result, cities becoming ECoCs find economic justifications, such as increased visitor numbers, improved cultural infrastructure to attract talented workers (Florida, R. 2002), enhanced city infrastructure that attracts investments and an improved brand image for the city, offering interesting examples of the industrialization of the arts – an emerging area of research.

Related to the points above, the fifth stream questions the community level of engagement (e.g. Palmer, R. & Richards, G. 2007, Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004, García, B. 2005, Anderson, B. & Holden, A. 2008, Sacco, P. L. & Blessi, G. T. 2007, Sassatelli, M. 2002, Sykes, O. 2011). Local participation and community engagement are bidding criteria and are seen to be essential to an inclusive festival (see Evans, G. 2005, Sykes, O. 2011,

Connolly, M. G. 2013, O' Callaghan, C. 2012). But a survey of Luxembourg residents about their involvement (Sutherland, M., Besson, E., Paskaleva, K. & Capp, S. 2006, p.22) found that only 12 % felt they had been involved in the programme. Jones and Wilks-Heeg (2004) interrogate the idea of Liverpool's successful bid as 'the people's bid'. The panel judges had mentioned local involvement/community engagement as a decisive factor in the city's winning the title. But the authors point out that there was considerable local opposition to the bid in local arts and media communities. Sacco and Blessi observed that Lille was a success in terms of community building but that the same did not hold true for Genoa (Sacco, P. L. & Blessi, G. T. 2007, p.138):

Admittedly, the goals pursued were different. Genoa did pretty well on its own premises, i.e. focusing evaluation on the economic impact of the program, the change of the city's perception in the local, national, and international public opinion, and the city's positioning as a major tourism venue in the coming years [...] Lille's concern has been with community involvement, the creation of a cooperative web of relations among institutions and local communities, attraction of foreign resources, emergence of new models of cooperation between culture and the corporate sectors. Genoa has focused upon physical infrastructure, Lille gave equal importance to the physical and the intangible ones, especially in terms of social capital accumulation.

The comparison between Lille and Genoa illustrates the challenges involved in mobilizing support from diverse stakeholders and in serving different agendas. The difficulties of bringing diverse stakeholder interests together are the sixth area of discussion in the literature. Benefits are never distributed equally, and they are rarely seen to be distributed fairly (Fitjar, R.D., Rommetvedt, H. & Berg, C. 2013), (O'Brien, D. 2011). A bottom-up consultative process is desirable but impracticable (Jones, P. & Wilks-Heeg, S. 2004). Eventual decisions will almost inevitably irk certain members of the community. Their dissatisfaction must be allayed and/or marginalized. And different stakeholders squabble with each other, as they elbow their way to resources (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012), (O' Callaghan, C. 2012).

4. Reflections

The literature on the European Capitals of Culture scheme is found predominantly in cultural policy and urban planning journals. There are also a number of commissioned reports. The latter tends to be celebratory and subtly endorses boosterism of the ECoC scheme. These studies also focus on specific studies and the potential gains, especially in terms of cultural development, urban regeneration and place marketing.

Also because of the bidding framework, chosen cities are encouraged to initiate research partnerships with local institutes and universities for the purposes of cross learning, conducting evaluations, and contributing to the development of evidence based best practices. A good deal of the impact assessment and literature that exists on the ECoC was produced via such partnerships (Palmer directed ECOC Glasgow 1990, Sassetelli, Richards, and Garcia are or have been all involved in ECOC tenures or consultant research). As a result, various kinds of biases may find their way into the evaluations (Evans, G. 2005, p.978).

What seems to be lacking in the academic literature are city specific case studies with more than anecdotal, frequently repeated 'evidence' of the impact of the ECoC and robust studies comparing the ECoC tenure of different cities. Many of the articles related to ECoC touch on a variety of issues in addition to impact such as stakeholder relations; top-down versus bottom-up cultural and development planning; general governance issues; creative industries on the whole; and place branding. While most of the articles articulate the broad areas of academic and empirical inquiry that can be addressed through the ECoC case, few venture to look in one area so in a sustained and substantial way.

There are a few research gaps that we want to highlight. The first is on the methodology of longer-term impact studies. There is a seeming lack of consensus on impact measurement methodology, on both the criteria and indicators [Evans and Sacco typologies/models as attempts to formulate]. What Evans found to be true about

research on the arts and urban regeneration in general seems also true of the literature related to the ECOC: “Where research on the arts and urban regeneration has featured in academic articles, these tend to be either descriptive and uncritical case studies, or highly critical (but lacking in robust empirical evidence), displaying a culture of pessimism” (Evans, G. 2005, p.965). A more systematic longitudinal and quantitative approach would be invaluable here.

A second research gap is in addressing the specific contexts and agendas of ECoC participating cities. There is no single model that would fit and ensure the success of an ECoC tenure. There are different reasons for wanting to be an ECoC. Despite the efforts to be inclusive, studies have shown that many different local contexts and agendas are subsumed under the ECoC framework and schemes. There is limited room for the hosting city to evaluate its tenure in its own nuanced terms and conditions. This concern leads to the next point.

The third research gap is on “cultural industrialization”. The persons behind a number of reports evaluating the impact of ECoC, Palmer and Richards, believe the proliferation of ‘cultural capitals’ concept around the world is evidence of the ECOC programme’s success. In their 4th follow-up report, they write, “it seems cultural capital madness is spreading” (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2012, p.69). As a global phenomenon, they also observe that a variety of non-European cities are gearing to share the same kind of “cultural capital” status, starting from 2012. For example, in 2013, when Marseille and Kosice are ECOCs, Ghazni (Afghanistan) is holding the title of Islamic Culture Capital (Asian region-ISESCO), and Barranquilla in Colombia is American Capital of Culture. Further, they note there are preliminary discussions with UNESCO about a World Capital of Culture initiative (Palmer, R., Richards, G. & Dodd, D. 2011). Globalization is not a bad thing but issues related to the industrialization of cultural development – as in the advent of the creative industries – must be debated.

Fourth, research targeted specifically at local-community levels is needed. There are groups that benefit more than others. There are also opportunity costs in hosting the ECoC. Building consensus amongst conflicting stakeholder groups is difficult. Balancing commercial and local cultural interests is not a given. There is a whole range of social and political dynamics that demand attention. The processes of negotiation are just as important as the end results. An on-going dialogue and discussion while a city is an ECoC would be helpful. Policies to encourage continuous dialogues will be helpful in engaging diverse local communities in the ECoC project. Studies are needed to highlight the opportunities, challenges and “best practices”.

In sum, poetics and politics underline the reality of every ECoC project. The popular media, city authorities, event organizers, and many interested parties celebrate the scheme. They are also aware of the challenges. Nonetheless, this review shows that ECoC is a good marketing tool for the city. And closer examination at the nitty gritty aspects of the project would make the European project more nuanced, and possibly better.

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