

Cultural leadership – a shared responsibility

The case of Aarhus as European Capital of Culture 2017

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Today I am going to talk about European Capitals of Culture. I am not going to talk about it primarily as an example of European cultural policy but as an example of local cultural policy.

As some of you might know, European Capitals of Culture is what is often called ‘the longest existing and most successful cultural policy program of the European Union’. From an EU-perspective that is probably true. Cities across Europe still join the competition for the title and thus for investing in a program that the union only finance a small percentage of.¹ But to me this is not the most interesting or relevant perspective on European Capitals of Culture. To me it is far more interesting to look at it at a local level, the level on which most of the hard work is done and much of the funding come from.

On a local level, European Capitals of Culture are excellent platforms for practicing cultural leadership.

They are so, because

- being European Capitals of Culture means massive public – and to a varying degree also private – investment in culture.
- being European Capitals of Culture means that political and media attention is given to culture to a degree one would normally only dream of.
- being European Capitals of Culture means influx of international capacities to a local cultural infrastructure and in general capacity building in the cultural field.

European Capitals of Culture thus means that culture for once is moved from the margins of policy to the center being given the role of creating change in society. This is why European Capitals of Culture are interesting examples of cultural leadership. But they are also complex and complicated ones, which I am going to focus on in the rest of the presentation to. The reason for taking a slightly more critical approach to the process of preparing for 2017 in Aarhus is because I think there is value in sharing challenges as well as good practices. The lessons are based on my observations as academic researcher as well as evaluator of Aarhus 2017, one of the two Capitals of Culture next year taking place in Denmark. My talk today is based on observations during the preparation process from 2013 onwards. However the reflections should not be considered as final conclusions.

Aarhus won the title back in 2012 on a project developed not only by the city of Aarhus but by the Region of Central Denmark and all other 18 municipalities in the region. Altogether this is one fifth of

¹ The only EU funding of the European Capitals of Culture is the Melina Mercouri Prize of 1.5 mill. Euros granted the year before the event itself.

the Danish population and a strong and diverse cultural infrastructure second only to that in Copenhagen. When you look at the vision and strategy of Aarhus 2017 they capture a central element of, what I understand as cultural leadership: The idea to use culture as a driver for societal development. The theme of Aarhus 2017 is 'let's rethink' and the vision is: "Aarhus 2017 uses art and culture to rethink the challenges of tomorrow." The ambition of Aarhus 2017 is thus formulated in a way that points towards the long term perspective. This is not just about creating a successful year, but about the sustainability and legacy of being ECoC.

How is this approached and how can it be achieved? I'll point to two aspects of this that I find pivotal.

1) The necessity of involving a broad and diverse network of permanent agents. In Aarhus most of the program is decentralized. Up to 90% of the projects in the programme are developed and carried out by local cultural institutions or other agents. This means that the capacity building of being an ECoC happens not only in the temporary organization, whose employees might not stay in the city and region when the secretariat closes down after the event.

The involvement of a variety of agents has characterized the Aarhus 2017-programme from the beginning. The bid was based on a co-creational bottom-up process in which many voices expressed their visions and dreams. This is valuable because it increases the chances of a shared ownership to the vision. After winning the title and starting to plan the delivery of an extensive cultural programme, the bottom-up approach was challenged. There are unmissable deadlines, budgetary constraints and the need to coordinate and prioritize. During the delivery phase from 2013 and onwards the bottom-up approach was replaced with a stronger top-down approach from the management team of the Aarhus 2017 foundation. Looking at Aarhus 2017 as a case of combining bottom-up and top-down it seems as if the difference between the process in the application period and the process in the delivery period has caused frustration in the networks of agents which is understandable and probably also unavoidable.

The role of the 2017 foundation during this period was double: On the one hand the programme officers continued the co-creational approach to programming by developing the projects together with the partners based on the mind set of rethinking. On the other hand the foundation was also the funding body that had the power of deciding which projects that should have funding and which ones that should not. In this process the theme of 'rethinking' transformed from a shared vision into a criterion that the projects had to fulfill to get their 2017-funding. In this process there is a risk that the sharing of that vision might be weakened. Why discuss and share your doubts and thoughts with the ones granting you money? Is it not better - more safe - just to argue convincingly that you certainly live up to the criteria?

I do know that committed programme officers maintained the co-creational approach to the development of the project, and I do know that there are projects truly committed to rethinking. But the changing role of the foundation that is also naturally more and more focused on the delivery of the cultural programme means that other agents than the Aarhus 2017 foundation important for the process of creating a legacy.

The fact that many different agents are involved in the process of creating long term value of being European Capital of Culture is closely related to my second point which is about the vision. This vision needs to be clear, but yet open and adjustable. When many different agents have to share a vision it must necessarily not be too narrow. It needs to be fitted into the overall political goals of the different cities - and to the visions and missions of a variety of cultural institutions.

Let's rethink as a shared theme lives up to this openness.

But a vision might also be too open producing a vagueness and potential weakness of the vision. Listening to ways in which rethink is interpreted and practiced within the 2017-project this is a risk. There are so many versions some of which are indeed linked to the ambition to 'use art and culture to rethink the challenges of tomorrow', some of them much less so. To me the solution is not to implement strict control and official definitions of what counts as rethinking. To me the solution is to keep the vision in mind and keep the dialogue between the different agents going. Thus I would like to change this way of thinking of evaluation as control and instead focus on the learning potentials of asking questions and allowing also critical and honest discussions of what rethinking is, and thus how cultural leadership is and could be performed in relation to Aarhus 2017.

Having this in mind I would argue that the long term success of Aarhus 2017 is dependent on the willingness to perform cultural leadership from a network of agents: the Aarhus 2017 management team, the leaders of the cultural institutions, the artists, the civil servants, the politicians and probably others as well. All of them need to be willing to face differences and disagreements and be willing to focus on the long term perspective.