# Urban Activism and the Rethinking of Cities’ Cultural Policies in Europe

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This chapter explores how urban cultural activism can contribute to the development of European urban cultural policies, in part by drawing on examples from cultural programming in recent European Capitals of Culture and UK Cities of Culture. The chapter also briefly discusses the idea of “cultural planning,” in particular to explore how its principles can help encourage critical cultural activities at the city level.

## Cultural policies and changing cultural and political values in Europe

The political culture in Europe is changing. More than ten years of austerity policies across Europe after the 2007–2008 financial crisis contributed to the fueling of deep social and political transformations. The current phase of globalization had profound socio-economic impacts.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wealth and power were increasingly concentrated in the hands of very small elites. The erosion of the welfare state contributed to a return of widespread poverty, in some cases with problems of malnutrition, a reduction of life expectancy and deep social exclusion, even in countries such as the UK,[[2]](#footnote-2) which played a key role in building the European welfare state after the Second World War. The “precariat”[[3]](#footnote-3) emerged as a new political class, consisting of unemployed or insecurely employed young people (doing jobs requiring relatively low qualifications despite being well qualified) and older people made redundant by automation, the shrinking of retailing in many town and city centers and continuing industrial restructuring and decline. Many European citizens felt that their living standards were being damaged,[[4]](#footnote-4) while the professional middle classes were squeezed.

Important generational differences in political attitudes as an aspect of broader social fragmentation were exposed, for example, in the case of the 2016 EU referendum in the UK. According to polls, only about one quarter of those in the 18–24 age group voted to leave the EU, in comparison with 64 percent of people aged 65 or over.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To some extent, we are witnessing a return to “tribalism”—understood as the instinct or willingness to belong to a group, but also to exclude those who do not[[6]](#footnote-6)—since political decisions appear to be strongly influenced by the opinions of those belonging to the same group. Feelings of empathy and affection connect voters to the new “hyperleaders” via social media[[7]](#footnote-7)—also through personalized forms of communication, such as the mass production of selfies by ordinary people with well-known politicians, which became a key ingredient of campaigning by, for example, Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing Lega in Italy.

A conflict between locally rooted “somewheres” and supposedly rootless, cosmopolitan “anywheres”[[8]](#footnote-8) also took shape, with people working in the cultural sector overwhelmingly belonging to the “anywheres” category. Traditional social democratic and conservative parties, academia and cultural institutions faced a crisis of legitimacy, as a lack of trust in “elites” hit politicians, economists, and other experts, as well as in many cases journalists and artists. There was a growing lack of political rationality, as decisions—both by voters and politicians—often seemed to be taken on the basis of instinct and emotions such as fear, hate, and shame.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The resulting climate of hostility targeted, among others, artists, intellectuals and the European Union, which was often seen by the re-emerging populist nationalism as symbolizing elite privilege, bureaucracy, technocracy, remoteness, lack of transparency, waste and as a threat to national sovereignties and identities. There was a worrying rise of ethno-nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and nostalgia for an imagined simpler and brighter past,[[10]](#footnote-10) which was coupled with a growing suspicion of secularism and a link between right-wing populism and religion[[11]](#footnote-11) in countries including Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Turkey.

Since the 1970s, cultural resources gained an increasingly relevant role in public life and policy, for instance in relation to urban regeneration, tourism, the development of the creative economy and social inclusion.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, cultural policies were severely hit since the late 2000s by austerity regimes characterized by heavy cuts in public funding. The role of cultural policies in certain key domains was eroded, for instance in the marginalization of the arts in school curricula in favor of a greater role for sciences, technology, coding and math. The cuts in public funding strengthened the trend towards the commodification of cultural activities, often seen by urban policy-makers as tools to attract tourists, shoppers, and businesses,[[13]](#footnote-13) despite the problematic social and cultural impacts of such policies,[[14]](#footnote-14) including the problem of „overtourism” in cities like Barcelona, Venice, Florence, Amsterdam, Paris, Prague, and Dubrovnik.

Urban cultural policy is no longer a relatively consensual area of policy making. It is increasingly being politicized––also by the rise of right-wing populist parties and movements––and becoming a field of conflict between different visions of the world. For example, Almeida[[15]](#footnote-15) observes that the Front National (renamed “Rassemblement National” in 2018), the French nationalist right-wing party led by Marine Le Pen, pursued “cultural retaliation”—i.e. “counter”-cultural policies to openly contrast progressive and liberal democratic groups’ cultural projects—and criticized and explicitly opposed artists whose work did not conform with the party’s political project. Staged folklore shows in a town in the Moselle department of France, governed by a coalition led by the Front National, were examples of this tendency. Initiatives such as the *Semaine de la paix* (“Peace week”) were discontinued and replaced by *bals-musette* (traditional French music and dance) and other folkloristic events, while *La fête du cochon* (“pork festival”) was promoted from an anti-Muslim perspective and as an expression of patriotism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Similar policies were put in place in some Italian towns and cities where the Lega—a formerly separatist Northern Italian party now transformed into a political force with an ideology very similar to that of the French Rassemblement National—had taken power, often replacing long-standing center-left majorities. This produced “distant worlds, on a collision course,”[[17]](#footnote-17) as reported in the case of Càscina, near Pisa, where a number of more experimental and internationally oriented theater productions were cancelled and replaced with a more traditional offer.[[18]](#footnote-18) In such political contexts the arts are vulnerable due to their connections with established cultural institutions and the fact that they are mediated by discourses that involve education and dialogue and the exploration of complex ideas.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nativist assumptions, prioritizing the interests of native residents, unite the understandings of cultural identity by right-wing populist movements and are not effectively questioned by the EU’s cultural diversity agenda.[[20]](#footnote-20) Vickery and Dragićević Šešić also argue that there is conflict between aspects of contemporary populism and the critical and questioning ethos characterizing many arts activities. The latter is “intolerable to those who require reality and the world to be instantly categorised by good or bad beliefs, or evaluated by inherited or customary measures […] or subject to political rationalisation and communicated as either supportive or a threat to the national or local interests of the people.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

In many towns and cities across Europe, artists and cultural organizations that were not aligned with right-wing local majorities’ values often experienced funding cuts and opposition. Right-wing populism, in many cases, promoted the return to tradition, nationalistic heritage, and the denial of multiculturalism and dissonant cultural narratives. Heritage populist narratives were often linked with discourses of whiteness,[[22]](#footnote-22) Christian Europe, national glory, and hostility towards elites, the EU, and migrants.[[23]](#footnote-23) Policy makers appeared to aim these initiatives at narrowing people’s mental horizons and fuelling intolerance. This is part of political strategies aimed at identifying “enemies within,” which can include gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities (e.g. the Roma in countries including Hungary and Italy), immigrants, and liberal “elites.” Such political strategies acted as catalysts for a new politics of anger, grievance, and resentment. These strategies were in some cases promoted through nativist slogans referring to “cleaning up the country” and making it clear that there are different categories of citizens, e.g. *Perussuomalaiset* (“True Finns,” now “Finns Party,” a Finnish populist party) or *Prima gli italiani* (“Italians first”, a slogan used by the Lega). Such strategies were founded on attacks on social and ethnic diversity and, in some cases, even bio-diversity, through the reckless exploitation of natural resources despite worrying evidence of ecological and climate breakdown (as, for instance, in the case of the reiterated attempts by the Polish government to allow the cutting of a large number of trees in Bialowieza, one of the last remnants of Europe’s primeval forests).

## Urban cultural activism

The conditions in which cultural activism operates, as well as the challenges it is facing, have changed significantly since the late 1960s. Historically, urban cultural policies have attempted to respond to the issues raised by cultural activism including the widening of the definition of “culture.” Until the mid-1960s, urban cultural policies were relatively non-political and often characterized by a paternalistic vision.[[24]](#footnote-24) Small groups of people, predominantly men, were in charge of defining what constituted “culture” and of making decisions about cultural policy. Modern forms of urban cultural activism emerged from the late 1960s, in parallel with the emergence of forms of counterculture and student protests, in relation to a raising awareness of exploitation, subordination and “false consciousness.” Within the Fordist society, cultural movements challenged the bureaucratic and somewhat authoritarian Keynesian city.[[25]](#footnote-25) This led to the rise of cultural forms of activism—such as the birth in the late 1960s/early 1970s of the community arts and media movements in Britain, fostering an alternative network of cultural production and distribution, as well as (during the same period) *animation socioculturelle* in France and the *Soziokultur* movement in West Germany. These activist networks focused on promoting cultural participation and widening the definition of “culture.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The community arts movement in the UK[[27]](#footnote-27) promoted broader accessibility to culture, which would also contribute to greater political awareness.[[28]](#footnote-28) The 1980s were characterized by a focus on the politics of representation and community development: marginalized social groups were encouraged to represent their interests.[[29]](#footnote-29) This period was characterized by the rise of neo-liberal ideologies, related cuts in public expenditure, and growing unemployment and poverty, which strengthened claims by neo-conservative parties concerning the belief that it was no longer possible to afford welfare-state provisions. Such claims aimed at providing the rationale for the dismantling of the welfare state and widespread privatization of collective goods and services. In this phase, cultural policies were politicized from the right, from a neoliberal perspective. Their main focus was on local economic-development policies and culture-led urban regeneration. The late 1990s and 2000s, with New Labour in Britain and Bill Clinton in the US, were characterized by the idea that—without seriously challenging high levels of social inequality—it was possible to encourage people to adopt more socially constructive forms of behavior by urging them to follow the example of community leaders. This period was characterized by a more behavioralist idea of the city as a “school” and by the intention to change people’s behavior through “nudging”[[30]](#footnote-30) and performative actions.

Today, after more than a decade of weak responses to the economic crisis that started in the late 2000s, it is clear that the neoliberal strategies that—to some extent—worked in the 1980s and early 1990s are no longer effective in rebalancing the economy and reducing inequality. This raises concerns about the risk of a crisis of liberal democracy[[31]](#footnote-31) and the emergence of authoritarian regimes based, in some cases, on the idea of “illiberal democracy,” proposed among others by Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.[[32]](#footnote-32) In this context, transformative urban cultural activism becomes more difficult.

In the current phase of capitalism after the 2007–2008 economic and financial crisis, different kinds of urban activism coexist. Recent years have heralded the rise of a considerably diverse range of global and nation-wide activist groups and anti-austerity movements, such as Occupy, the Indignados in Spain and the Gilets Jaunes in France. However, due also to the declining presence at the grassroots of traditional social-democratic and liberal parties and movements, extreme right-wing cultural counter-activism also emerged, such as the activities of CasaPound in Italy[[33]](#footnote-33) and Golden Dawn in Greece.[[34]](#footnote-34) CasaPound activists are using methods of intervention that, particularly from the late 1960s to 1980s, had characterized the left, including squatting buildings,[[35]](#footnote-35) as well as creating alternative cultural centers and organizing free music events.[[36]](#footnote-36) More left-wing forms of urban activism consist of a heterogeneous mix, which includes anarchist and leftist organizations, middle-class urbanites defending their lifestyles, groups characterized by precarious forms of existence,[[37]](#footnote-37) artists and creative professionals, environmental groups, and groups of socially and economically marginalized citizens.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Contemporary urban cultural activism is often the result of autonomous actions aimed at outlining alternative futures. An example is the debate on post-capitalist socio-economic arrangements around the concept of the “commons.”[[39]](#footnote-39) This concept, originally referring to commonly-owned land, has been extended to a range of tangible and intangible cultural resources—such as the arts, design, heritage, local traditional knowledge—as artists and cultural professionals are actively campaigning against the erosion of these collective resources perpetrated through neoliberal policies.[[40]](#footnote-40)

## Urban cultural activism and critical programming in Capitals of Culture (CoCs)

Schemes such as the European Capital of Culture or the UK City of Culture provide frameworks for cultural activism to take place. On the one hand, cultural activism has, on some occasions, targeted the top-down approach adopted by dedicated culture companies, as in the case of the initiative “Turku – European Capital of Subculture 2011.”[[41]](#footnote-41) On the other hand, some CoCs displayed elements of critical cultural programming with the aim to fight rising racism and populism and encourage a positive view of immigration and social/ethnic diversity.

Early examples of critical cultural programming were Antwerp European City of Culture 1993 and Rotterdam European Capital of Culture 2001, both European port cities with a diverse population. Open Stad (“Open City”), a cultural project about architecture and planning and part of Antwerp 1993, was aimed at encouraging international exchange. “Rotterdam is many cities” was the slogan of the ECoC 2001, where events such as “Preaching in someone else’s parish”[[42]](#footnote-42) attempted to promote multiculturalism. Linz European Capital of Culture 2009 focused on the principle “Culture for All” and on a participatory approach, aimed at actively engaging migrants and promoting the ideas of connectedness and democracy.[[43]](#footnote-43) The event also engaged with dissonant heritage and re-elaborated painful memories in relation to Hitler’s heritage.[[44]](#footnote-44) Hitler, who was born in a nearby town and grew up in Linz, assigned the status of “*Führerstadt*” to five cities—Berlin, Hamburg, Linz, Munich, and Nuremberg—for which mega urban projects by German architects, such as Albert Speer, were planned. Among these five cities, Linz was the “*Kulturhauptstadt des Führers*” (“cultural capital of the Führer”) and should have become a cultural hub along the Danube. Engaging with the city’s Nazi past—for example through an exhibition about the ambitious spatial plans commissioned by Hitler to implement this transformation—was seen as crucial.[[45]](#footnote-45) In Derry-Londonderry, the UK City of Culture 2013 brought the city’s Catholic and Protestant communities together after the era of “The Troubles”[[46]](#footnote-46) and was fueled by the belief that culture could help building a new identity of the city.[[47]](#footnote-47) Similarly, Donostia-San Sebastián’s bid for the European Capital of Culture 2016 was designed around the idea of culture as positive energy to overcome political violence and conflict in the region.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Recent European Capitals of Culture, either designated or at the bidding stage, appear to be more inclined to this kind of cultural programming and are in some cases selected in part also in relation to their ability to challenge current social and political trajectories. Plovdiv 2019 was founded on the concept “Plovdiv Together,” understood as: “a togetherness of minorities and majorities, of generations, of different religious groups, an inclusion of people with special needs, a re-adjustment of urban spaces according to the needs of the citizens, a re-connection of our heritage and contemporary culture, a together that makes the city a place where people like to live and feel a sense of ownership.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

In addition, “Together” is also seen as “a call for action for other European citizens affected by the economic recession and questioning the European future of their states.”[[50]](#footnote-50) In a similar vein, local policy makers portrayed Rijeka as “a port of diversity.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Rijeka European Capital of Culture 2020 based its program around the themes of water, work, and migrations. The Seasons of Power project—which is presented through the slogan “Great European Art Responds to Crisis”[[52]](#footnote-52)—makes use of the arts to explore displays and structures of power across history, including for instance totalitarian regimes of the past. *Dopolavoro*, another of Rijeka’s flagship programs, aims at reflecting about contemporary working conditions and the city’s social composition, underlying that “[i]t is typical of people working in culture to observe things from an unusual perspective, to ask questions, provoke and design.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

The three European Capitals of Culture for 2021 also display similar critical programming. In the case of Novi Sad, the city and its surroundings are represented through the concept of Area 21, recalling the idea of unity in diversity. The program is structured around three principles: *Re-Connect!* focuses on social cohesion and intercultural dialogue through creativity; *Empower!* attempts to encourage participation in culture, economy and politics; *Localize!* sees the improvement of local cultural facilities as a way to promote cultural encounter and creative entrepreneurship.[[54]](#footnote-54) The Eleusis 2021 program tackles the very concept of crisis: “[C]risis means decision, and Eleusis’s desire to candidate for the title of ECoC…is related to the entire city’s irrevocable decision to turn page in its history and make its definitive transition to a new growth model.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

The bid book also mentions that Eleusis’s socio-economic and environmental challenges are also those of the whole of Europe, as the city can be considered an example of what is happening in the Union. In this context, the concept of *EUphoria* is deployed to stress the role of arts and culture as catalysts for transition.[[56]](#footnote-56) Timisoara 2021 seeks “to address the crisis of values shared by Europeans” and underlines that “the artistic vision maps a cultural Journey to overcome passivity.”[[57]](#footnote-57) This is essential to keep alive the revolutionary spirit of Timisoara, the city where the Romanian Revolution sparked in 1989.

Finally, the border cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica are preparing a joint Italian-Slovenian bid for ECoC 2025 (launched in May 2019 with the event “Go! Borderless”) with the idea of showing that culture and cooperation can overcome national boundaries. This sounded as a response to former European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, who—at a ceremony in February 2019 commemorating Italian victims of World War II massacres in the area—said: “Long live Trieste, long live Italian Istria, long live Italian Dalmatia, long live Italian exiles” and was harshly criticized in Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia[[58]](#footnote-58) for fostering division and even raising territorial claims.

Lastly, some initiatives in European Capitals of Culture have been inspired by ideas concerning radical place making and cultural planning based on the mapping of local cultural resources.

## Responses from cultural planning

In a moment where a radical approach to cultural policy appears much needed to face the challenges arising from current social and political change, cultural planning can provide key tools for more critical cultural programming. Cultural planning can be understood as “a culturally sensitive approach to urban and regional planning and to environmental, social and economic public policy making.”[[59]](#footnote-59) As a “critical, inquiring, challenging and questioning” approach to urban cultural policy, it helps “revealing and valuing hidden and neglected cultural assets, including aspects of popular memory and intangible heritage, alternative social imaginaries, and the creativity of marginalized social groups (in some cases, children, young people, immigrants and the elderly).”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Cultural planning approaches can support critical cultural policies in a number of ways. Collaborative approaches and cultural mapping enable active participation and social construction of knowledge. Cultural mapping practices have informed the activity of some recent Capitals of Culture.

For example, in the case of the project “Subjective Maps” as part of Valletta 2018’s program, residents were asked to produce maps of their neighborhood and city on the basis of the way in which they experience those spaces. A similar experience was undertaken by Matera 2019, where residents and artists worked together to produce maps and other resources based on residents’ emotions and feelings, which were part of the exhibition *Atlante delle emozioni della città* (“Atlas of the City’s Emotions”). Another example outside the European Capital of Culture scheme is the work of cultural organizations and activists within spatial planning processes. In the late 2000s, the *Pravo na grad* (“Right to the City”) movement in Zagreb was committed to empowering citizens and denounce corruption in urban development.[[61]](#footnote-61) Also in the late 2000s, the “Free Riga” movement focused on the mapping of vacant properties and on liaising with planning officials and owners to create low-cost creative spaces. Critical listening and dialogue and cultural and heritage participation can counterbalance rising populist narratives and empower local communities. Examples include the projects focused on the recording of collaborative heritage that formed part of the Valletta European Capital of Culture 2018 program and, in the case of Hull UK City of Culture 2017, the way in which the performing arts—in particular theater—and art installations were used to engage residents and visitors with local history and heritage.[[62]](#footnote-62) Heritage participation, communication, and learning, involving young people can also help to bridge generational gaps. Young people do not have the same preconceptions and fixed views about local history and heritage and can therefore explore and disseminate new narratives. Examples include maritime and fishing heritage in the case of Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and the history of urban living in the Sassi—the formerly overcrowded historic cave dwelling districts—in the case of Matera European Capital of Culture 2019. Finally, cultural planning approaches can help stimulate intercultural exchange, for example through festivals and architectural experimentation. An example is the Zinneke Parade, a festival included in the program of Brussels European City of Culture 2000 to represent all cultures in the city. Since then, the Zinneke Parade has become a biennial cultural festival organized around a general theme, and a parade that runs through different areas of the city and reflects the idea of “urban togetherness.”[[63]](#footnote-63) The event brings together migrants and their Belgian-born children (originally from former Belgian colonies, Morocco, Turkey, but also other European countries such as France, Italy and Romania), asylum seekers, the Flemish and French communities. It is also a participatory cultural project, with several workshops involving artists and citizens throughout the year. These forms of exchange can help reclaim the idea of patriotism as locally rooted yet internationally oriented.

## Conclusions

The recent evolution of cultural policies and activism in response to the social and political changes in Europe suggests that cultural activities are increasingly an ideological “battleground.” Since urban cultural policies are becoming highly politicized, consensus can no longer be taken for granted. The high visibility of alternative lifestyles within the cultural sector becomes a political target in the new “culture wars,”[[64]](#footnote-64) which are landing in Europe from the other side of the Atlantic. The assumption that there would be a continuous liberalization of society and the economy—ultimately bringing more tolerance and acceptance—is proving to be incorrect, particularly for Europe’s small cities and rural areas.

Similarly, heritage represents a battleground as well. The reinterpretation of heritage from a nationalist perspective appears as an attempt to rewrite history. This is arguably the phenomenon behind recent attacks against religious buildings and war memorials mentioned by Bianchini and Borchi.[[65]](#footnote-65)

What are the possible cultural activist responses to this crisis? As suggested earlier, some responses are emerging from aspects of the critical cultural programming of some recent Capitals of Culture and from bottom-up and collaborative cultural planning experiences. Other possible responses may arise from attempts to create dialogue between social groups holding different ideological and political views through hedonism and fun, as well as through critical listening, empathy, mediation, conciliation and creative syntheses. Intergenerational cultural projects could also help, such as in the case of Switched On, a project undertaken in Portishead, near Bristol, where children from a local primary school and elderly people were encouraged to explore digital technologies together.[[66]](#footnote-66) Forms of resistance, including counteracting prejudices and fake news may contribute to containing the impact of populist thinking. Examples are the efforts by the Council of Europe[[67]](#footnote-67) and organizations and experts such as Imacity and Dani de Torres[[68]](#footnote-68) supporting the idea of anti-rumor strategies as policy documents to help fight misinformation, stereotypes and prejudices, against migrants and refugees, for example. Locally rooted, yet international oriented patriotism—see for example the work of singer-songwriter and activist Billy Bragg[[69]](#footnote-69) on promoting a different English patriotism—can reframe the idea of “citizens of nowhere” into a positive concept[[70]](#footnote-70) in response to Theresa May’s critique of the “anywheres.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Another key response is encouraging mass cultural participation, for example through City of Culture schemes[[72]](#footnote-72) to stimulate pride and hope, and reduce fear, loneliness and social isolation.

Among the key goals of cultural planning is greater intercultural exchange and more internationally oriented urban cultural strategies. The latter could be built on the mapping of the international links of municipalities, business, universities, third-sector organizations, and local diasporic communities, as well as of the cultural sector.

New alliances and advocacy for cultural investment in times of austerity need to be sought. There is a need for urban cultural activism to go beyond existing linkages with sectors including tourism, city marketing, economic regeneration and property development, and to develop closer collaborations with environmentalism, social innovation, public health and social care. However, it is important also that cultural planners and activists continue to be a ‘nuisance’, to challenge established thinking and encourage the search for alternative urban futures.

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