European Economic and Social Committee

Culture, Cities and Identity in Europe

Executive summary

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This study was commissioned by EESC from Culture Action Europe and Agenda 21 for Culture. It provides an overview of the factors in EU city development linked to culture and identity through selective qualitative and quantitative analysis of research in the public domain. Culture is examined thematically in terms of its use as a vehicle for economic growth, a tool for reconverting cities, for integration and inclusiveness, and as a pillar of European identity within Europe and beyond.

The methodology for the compilation of the report included a literature review of these four themes. A public call was issued to cities and other stakeholders to supply supporting evidence and examples of best practice. These were then analysed by the research team as case studies.

The introduction notes the political and economic context at the current time: the rise of nationalist parties antagonistic towards the EU, the pressure on European cities and societies caused by the influx of people fleeing war and deprivation in the Middle-East, Africa and other zones of unrest, and the continuing effects of the 2008 recession. For the first time in a generation the key values of European integration are under serious challenge. It is observed that there is a symbiosis between the inherited culture of the city space and the people who live, work and pass through; a process which influences the identity of each.

It is noted that cities are increasing in population both in absolute terms and in relation to rural areas. Within this rise there is also an increase in city districts with multicultural characteristics and with a diversity of inhabitants in stark contrast to smaller towns and villages.

The combination of identities within a city (and within its individual neighbourhoods) is crucial to the image and prosperity of the city itself. The inevitable exchange of ideas and cultural attitudes within cities has a strong and positive impact on their creative energy and innovation. A concern is flagged up that public spaces essential to this exchange are under threat from a combination of commercial and security pressures.

The social and economic climate of the study was put into context by a miscellany of facts and figures that tie culture into the issues that govern European activity. These were extracted from Eurostat sources, UNCTAD, Ernst and Young (EY) and a study on regional cultural diversity by WWWforEurope.

These demonstrated that cultural diversity is unevenly spread across European cities, with greater concentrations in large urban conglomerations, and in Western and Middle Europe. Culture – defined as arts, literature, traditions, languages, values and beliefs – is almost universally thought of as being important to tolerance and integration, while the expressive activities that derive from it are important to at least three-quarters of Europe's population, with a higher percentage still among those with good educational attainment.

Cultural participation is reasonably constant across the age spectrum, there is (unsurprisingly) more emphasis on communal and social attendance among young people, though this is not true of all art forms. While a good overall majority attend events a far smaller percentage are active as amateurs. The market for culture, though, continues to be a major driver of city economic health.

Alongside culture itself are the industries associated with it, including the media, advertising, fashion,

design and publishing in all its forms, together with the new industries of video gaming and digital enterprise. If these are grouped together as activities that are heavily dependent on intellectual property for their income, they contribute around 39% of the EU's GDP. The knock-on effect of cultural industries through the infrastructure put in place to allow them to flourish – from offices to the cultural centres, concert halls, theatres, cinemas, museums, heritage sites and studios – is felt throughout a city, from the restaurants, hotels, shops and bars to the transport system.

The study divided these effects into three categories: a narrow view of culture, limiting it to just the arts and heritage; a broader view encompassing the cultural industries too; and an extended view including the impact on the commercial operations that benefited from the economic traffic generated. A series of examples are detailed in the study, ranging from the 5.5% of city GDP acquired from Bilbao's cultural policy initiatives, through the positive effect of Umbria's Jazz festival in 2007 to that of Salamanca's year as European Capital of Culture in 2002, which is said to have generated over €700m to the Spanish economy.

For all its impressive financial impact, culture (and especially its subsets of arts and heritage) has a value in terms of human expression that transcends the economic benefit accruing from it. That value is not negligible and is increasingly useful to economies that have a diminishing base of natural resources and manufacturing industries. Culture drives tourism as much as sea and weather. It also provides the catalytic element around which other service industries can gather and grow.

Such economic evidence underpins but is not alone in explaining the role culture plays as a tool for reconverting cities – in helping them to reinvent themselves as dynamic and attractive centres. Cities have always known this but in this century culture has increasingly been used to give them a competitive edge over rivals, not only within their own region or country, but across Europe and the wider world. It has also been used by smaller cities to draw attention away from national and regional capitals, allowing them to promote their energy and distinctiveness.

It is understood that urban transformation requires not only investment in hard infrastructure, but also in soft skills and competences generated by education and lifelong learning, internal networking and stronger social capital. In this respect, attention needs to be paid to the active participation of citizens as co-creators of regeneration, moving from top-down to more balanced processes, where civic renewal replaces more restricted views of urban reconversion.

Attention is drawn to four processes in which culture and city regeneration go hand in hand: culture-led regeneration, using arts buildings and projects to redefine an area and draw in other businesses; cultural regeneration, which uses cultural lifestyle integration in an area strategy; culture and regeneration, where culture is part of but not integral to a strategy; and artist-led regeneration, where the establishment of artists' studios and galleries leads to an area becoming more desirable and trendy to live in. The study points out that it is important to place the inhabitants of a neighbourhood at the heart of regeneration attempts. It warns of the risks of social homogenisation and gentrification if cities regard culture just as a way of making run-down areas fashionable and tidy. While this may improve the appearance and the statistics of an area, it shifts the problems somewhere else by driving tenants the regeneration was supposed to help out of the area as property prices rise.

In a number of places the report raises the argument about whether culture, both contemporary and heritage, is best treated in terms of its own importance or as a contributor to other social and economic benefits. It suggests that, while strategies that leave out the cultural dimension are unlikely to be more than superficially successful, in the long term it is when culture is valued on its own terms that it plays the most positive role in giving a city its life and reputation. Moreover, valuing it on its own terms involves providing cultural organisations with space, continuing investment and visibility – the benefits are lost if support is seen as one-off or time limited.

The reinvention of derelict spaces or abandoned urban areas is helped considerably when artists and cultural organisations are given the freedom to use their imagination. They help citizens and businesses rediscover territories, often with a fresh sensitivity to the environment and community well-being. While the infrastructure for mainstream cultural buildings remains important, the emphasis is shifting towards providing the basic facilities so that more informal and organic cultural initiatives can form and thrive – a process that appeals especially to young people who are best placed to provide the forward-looking energy a city needs to compete. This also helps to protect the city from imposed and destructive modernisation planning which redevelops cities without paying attention to local history and tradition: well-intentioned action that often leaves the city less vibrant than before and has to be rethought after a few years.

When designing new spaces to improve the quality of urban life culture is the key element that makes the process innovative and sustainable. Where those cities that have enjoyed the title European Capital of Culture have followed this path their renewal has proved to outlive the original programme by an impressive period of time. Equally the cities illustrated among the best practice examples bear out the observation.

In looking at culture as a tool for integration and inclusiveness, the study reports that this has been recognised by a significant number of intergovernmental organisations, including the EU itself. UNESCO places intercultural dialogue at the heart of its policies on inclusiveness. Indeed it is seen as crucial to allowing migration without serious social unrest. The EU's outline for National Action Plans for Social Inclusion points out the role the cultural sector can play in alleviating the risk of exclusion. Similarly the joint action by the EU and Council of Europe in creating a network of Intercultural Cities illustrates the belief in the potential of such policies. The necessity of enhancing intercultural inclusion goes beyond the realm of pleasant cities and healthy prosperity to the duty of protection; doing all that is possible to divert the frustration that builds from exclusion and leads to unrest and terrorism.

Despite the clear imperative to use culture as part of the integration and conflict alleviation process, and its recognition by policy makers, there is a need for more research and effective evaluation of the tools. While there is good anecdotal and isolated project evidence – and an awareness that the opposite of intercultural dialogue, hostile separation, is plainly dangerous – more will need to be gathered so that adequate resources and political will can be devoted to the work. A section of the study is devoted to statements from international reports that link closely the notions of human rights, citizenship and cultural inclusion.

The study suggest that, while the arts and cultural industries are ahead of many sectors of the economy, there is considerable progress still to be made before policies on gender and special needs can be regarded as satisfactory. This applies equally to cultural activities themselves as to the projects in which they are used for regeneration or education. However there is great potential for the cultural sector to lead the way, as the examples of good practice show.

The contribution of culture to European identity and its reach is greater than the effect of emblematic actions within Europe, or of cultural diplomacy to the rest of the world. Identity is forged in a global context, where necessarily it escapes border definitions, often to the discomfort of governments. Quite apart from the struggle between regional, national and European identity which bedevils political debate (and which leads to tension in the interpretation of heritage sites), cities are home to many people who regard their identity as multiple and flexible. They are perfectly certain of their identity but they express it in ways that are unpredictable and which go against authorities' preference for easy categorisation.

To its credit the European Union has generally acknowledged that identity is not something that can be imposed on individuals. The European Cities of Culture programme has in one sense become a way of embracing the inherent diversity and including it in a deliberately vague definition of European identity. It is therefore presented as being the sum total of the cultural identities of all the people who live in Europe, rather than the official cultures of the EU's Member States. Consequently cities are more useful in spreading the impression of Europe as an inclusive cultural space than nations, anxious to promote their own territorial histories. Cities therefore become autonomous cultural actors in Europe's global story and they develop strategies that position themselves as of local and international importance, rather than primarily national as they would have done a century ago.

Cultural networks have proved to be an effective tool for bringing in partners from beyond Europe's borders, and for extending projects across the borders of Member States. Cultural mobility is often more natural and easier to organise than employment or political mobility, thanks to the ability of creative professionals to develop their work at the international level. Networks of cities have been particularly active in joining forces across borders and in putting cultural exchange and co-operation at the heart of the plans they invent.

The recommendations that conclude the study are grouped into four general requests - that the EU: recognises cultural rights as fundamental to human development; acknowledges culture as a necessity for sustainable development; supports exchange between cultures to foster social and economic development; and empowers cities' decisions on culture to shape our future.

Within these there is a call to view culture, not as an output of cultural organisations but as an enabler of citizens, using common spaces within cities for dialogue and exchange. There is a warning that cultural rights can sometimes be used as an obstruction to wider human rights, defending practices that in reality have more to do with social restriction and control than freedom of cultural expression. It is stressed that cities need to use cultural policies to remove such obstructions.

Sustainability is becoming a crucial element of city economic and social policy and regarding culture as a stand-alone pillar of this should be normal practice. There is a natural connectivity between culture and all the other areas of sustainability. Similarly a strong policy for culture will have a positive impact on other public and private initiatives. This should be reflected in cohesion strategies and measures aimed at increasing economic growth.

The recommendations call on all levels of government to place dialogue with civil society at the heart of decision-making. True intercultural dialogue will flow from this. The initiatives taken by individuals and community groups at the grassroots level are essential to the process and need to be properly supported.

Promoting cultural exchange to increase mobility is seen as important to fostering a sense of European identity that transcends national labels. Cities, already thinking in networks and looking for opportunities to widen co-operation, are perfectly placed for this. They are also best placed for helping individuals and community groups develop projects across borders.

City networks should be encouraged to increase their co-operation internationally outwith as well as within the EU. This should be seen not only as a policy in support of sustainable development but one which sees migration and mobility as part of the solution to contemporary pressures, not as a problem. Cultural organisations are well placed to make this aspiration a reality. While infrastructure is important it is less valuable than the work done within the buildings.

Finally, cities should be empowered to rethink their policies with culture as their starting point. Regeneration strategies should be aimed at bringing peripheral communities back into the centre by

reversing the social geography of cities. Security would be enhanced by encouraging the creative use of public spaces for dialogue. Cultural buildings can play a huge part in this if they are open, welcoming and natural meeting places.

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