European Perspectives on Cultural Ecosystems in Cities

Sylvia AMANN[*]

Abstract

A city that aims to develop through culture first requires vision as a starting point. The city of Linz in Austria is an interesting case of a long-term transformation from a city with an industrial image to a cultural city hosting one of the world's most influential global digital arts festivals. Such a development needs a solid foundation. The cultural development plans of the city were built on a future vision made possible by the comprehensive involvement of stakeholders and a high-quality process.

The development process for a cultural city requires an understanding of a broader ecosystem involving individuals, organisations, and governance. These collaborative ecosystems also need the involvement of cross-sectoral partners from areas like tourism, green transformation, and urban development. Furthermore, research support including the generation of meaningful data plays an important role to demonstrate the social, economic, environmental, and urban impacts of development with culture. The city of Leeuwarden, the European Capital of Culture in 2018, is a good example.

Keywords: culture for development, urban impacts, narratives, participation, ecosystems, transformation

* Sylvia AMANN, Director of Inforelais, was member of the European Capital of Culture selection and monitoring panel from 2015 to 2020. She graduated from the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration and completed her studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris and the Kings College in London. As chair of the EU expert group for creative industries development, she published on innovation and entrepreneurship in culture and the creative sectors including the thematic focus of cross-sectoral innovation. Furthermore, Sylvia initiated several activities for an enhanced international exchange of European Capitals of Culture in Asia and Africa, working with cities in South Korea and globally. E-mail: office@inforelais.org.

The application of ecosystemic approaches to culture requires a deep understanding of such systems and reflection on related interconnections. This implies reflection on a vision for the development of a city with culture, a strategy built on these long-term objectives, including reflection on the local ecosystem. The analysis of cultural, social, economic, environmental, and urban development questions is relevant in this context. The whole endeavour needs accompanying research including data collection and communication. An ecosystemic approach allows for integrated considerations of connected elements. This article highlights experiences and good practices from the European continent.

1. A Vision for the Development of a City with Culture

A narrative addressing the decision-makers and the inhabitants is a very powerful instrument to tell the story of a city and to attract visitors. The narrative requires careful attention to get support from the inhabitants. This approach will generate positive effects on the readiness to co-implement related activities. Good narratives also have the potential to increase social cohesion in the city, both in culture and beyond. Another area of attention is the readability of the narrative for visitors who are not familiar with local history and stories. The city narrative needs to be an appealing story that triggers the interest and curiosity of (potential) visitors. However, a marketing approach will be too short-sighted. The narrative requires translation into real on-site experiences and concrete offers.

During the last decade, the city of Linz in Austria has invested considerable effort in shaping a new image, transforming the perception of an industrial site into a cultural and creative hotspot. The challenge was considerable given the geographic situation in proximity to cultural heritage hotspots in Vienna and Salzburg, both historic cities with a considerable cultural offering that attracts a large number of international visitors. Following these cultural city examples that are strongly anchored in heritage would not have been a viable option for the city of Linz due to

the limited perspectives of being competitive edge. The city of Linz has a rather small historic centre and does not have the potential for a full narrative based on the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Such an approach would also have insufficiently reflected the perceptions of the population. An alternative narrative had to be found, built on the city's industrial heritage and technology reflecting the strong local steel industry and the already well-established Ars Electronica Festival, which was founded 1979.[1] With considerable investments in the cultural development of the city and the nomination of Linz as European Capital of Culture in 2009,[2] the city was perceived as a cultural hotspot. These efforts were further backed by the Ars Electronica which was already a global player.

Linz Tourism, Post Cards 2022-2023. © Sylvia Amann.

1. https://ars.electronica.art/futurelab/en/our-journey/.
2. https://www.linz09.at/en/ueber_linz.html.

Today, the city of Linz displays well-anchored cooperation between tourism and culture, which was strongly accelerated by common initiatives during the European Capital of Culture year. The Linz Tourism Board has invested in a new vision for participatory and engaging tourism. The related award-winning promotion videos build on the images of a city of workers and ordinary people.[3] Activities for guests (which is different from using the term "visitors") encompass tourism-related offerings involving creative industries in the city and tourism packages covering the whole Danube area with a strong focus on storytelling. The storytellers are writers, researchers, philosophers, and influencers sharing their discoveries in Linz and in other cooperating cities and sites. This new tourism culture narrative also has a strong environmental dimension that furthers new ways of mobility and innovative tourism operators.

2. The Co-production of Answers from Culture to Areas of Opportunity and Challenges

Future-oriented action of policymakers in cities first requires a vision. In the case of Linz, this is a clear understanding that culture provides a framework to overcome a rather negative former image. A vision alone does not lead to successful implementation. This requires a clear understanding of existing challenges and opportunities in the cultural and creative sectors. The city of Linz already opted in the late 1990s to invest in the Cultural Development Plan—a multiannual framework for the development of culture. The first related strategy was published in 2000 and is based on a participatory approach involving more than 600 stakeholders for a cross-sectoral definition of common objectives and aims. The current Cultural Development Plan[4] which was published in 2013 addresses four main areas of attention: Increase Equality of Opportunity,

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3. https://www.linztourismus.at/en/leisure/discover-linz/linz-inspires/planetlinz.
4. https://www.linz.at/english/culture/3895.php.

Nurture Potential, Facilitate Access, and Open This City Up.[5]

The first priority, "Increase Equality of Opportunity," focuses on a city culture policy which commits to the following objectives: "In the spirit of Linz's overall political orientation as a socially just city, the principle that equal opportunities must be created at all levels also applies to the cultural sector. The city of Linz is therefore committed to equality for all individuals and groups in cultural policy and thus to equal opportunities and fair social participation for all. It is important to remove existing barriers to access and use, to establish gender equality at all levels and to view social diversity in ethnic and religious terms as normal. These aims constitute the indispensable preconditions for putting the concept of Culture for All into actual practice."

The second priority is to "Nurture Potential": "Cultural development and planning are the engine for cultural progress and the basis for dealing with socially relevant questions and artistic tendencies. In order to ensure this, the existing creative potential of a city must be promoted in the best possible way: on the one hand in the form of a commitment to support art and culture as a public task, which includes financial support for public cultural institutions and the independent art and culture scene, and on the other hand through ensuring an adequate infrastructure that makes cultural and artistic production possible. In addition, art and cultural creation in Linz focuses on interdisciplinary cutting-edge action."

"Facilitate access" is the third priority highlighting the following commitments: "Participation and mediation are the prerequisites of Culture for All. In this sense, cultural education is a key concept for real participation of the broadest possible sections of the population in cultural events. One of the focal points of Linz's cultural policy is therefore concerned with the target groups of children, adolescents and young adults, who have a right to art and culture regardless of their ethnic origin and social background. In this connection, the prime settings for providing access to arts and culture are public spaces, which are defined as not only physical urban space but

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5. https://www.linz.at/images/KEPneu.pdf. The details of the priorities are translated from the German version of the culture development plan of the city of Linz.

also as media space that enable people to intensively engage in discussions, encounters and criticism."

With its fourth and final priority, the city aims to be more open: "Urbanity stands for openness, complexity, networking and densification. Linz, as the urban center of Upper Austria, has a special role and task in this sense. Not only as the administrative center of the state, but also as a cultural force field in a booming economic region. For the cultural city of Linz, this means further expanding participation in supra-regional and European networks, further promoting the internationalization of art and cultural creation and further optimizing the density of the city's cultural offerings through cooperation between cultural providers. Reflecting on the past and dealing with the future in this city should be the basis for responding to an increasingly complex world with solutions and projects that consolidate Linz as an innovative, cosmopolitan and sustainable location. Because taking responsibility for one's past, especially for the National Socialist legacy of the city of Linz, creates the conditions for a humane, democratic present and future."

The cross-sectoral nature of culture is visible in these priorities, which equally address social and infrastructural questions as well as the important role of public space and the deeper understanding of urbanity. The cultural development plans in the city of Linz are also built strongly on wide participation, which also implies an understanding that a whole ecosystem of active participation is required to achieve positive change.

3. Understanding that All Can Be Actors of Positive Change and Impact

Based on the experiences highlighted from the city of Linz and from a wide range of other European cities, a broad mobilisation of active forces in the urban ecosystem are required to generate frameworks on which positive development can be built. Such a setting is also a firewall against inertia if built on a common narrative and related goals. Who are the actors of change? The cultural ecosystem comprises three main types of partners,

How can we build a collaborative eco-system?

The Eco-System of (CCS) Policies of Transformation builds on

collaborative individuals	collaborative governance	collaborative organisations
from and beyond the CCS	of the CCS and beyond	from and beyond the CCS

Cooperating provides a win-win framework and deepens the understanding of interlinked future scenarios in which single sectors will not be able to come up with sustainable answers without the involvement and understanding of the wider environment.

COPING WITH STORMY WINDS AND NEW HORIZONS

Source: Sylvia Amann, *Creative FLIP* (2023).

governance, organisations, and individuals, based on the collaborative transformation policies approach published by the author in 2023.[6]

Individuals include artists and cultural employees as well as audiences, while organisations include cultural administrative bodies like cultural departments in cities. It equally encompasses the wide range of cultural institutions in cities like museums and theatres. Organisations are also companies like enterprises in the creative industries. The governance part of the ecosystem includes the decision-makers and the politicians in charge of designing the regulative frameworks for cultural action and providing the required budgetary means. As most of the challenges and opportunities cannot be addressed by the cultural sector alone, this ecosystem highlights

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6. https://creativeflip.creativehubs.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CREATIVE_FLIP_ Transformation_Policies_FINAL.pdf.

the need for collaboration with other sectors. For example, if a city aims to green the cultural sector, it relies on the green transformation readiness of other areas of the economy and society such as the availability of green transport options. Another example is the development of local cultural heritage which links to a wide range of interrelated international historic backgrounds. Related economic development options are most often linked to tourism which requires the cooperation of cultural stakeholders with tourism industry representatives.

The overall narrative and overarching objectives for a city's development with culture will define the range of stakeholders necessary to develop meaningful action plans. This means that a strong cultural tourism approach as one element of cross-sectoral cooperation should be built on a clear and related narrative as previously highlighted in this article with the example of Linz. This approach would also imply that the broad range of stakeholders involved in cultural development plans has endorsed that focus on cultural tourism. This anchor will build solid ground for a long-term commitment of all the stakeholders. And as a final step, it is necessary to work out a concrete short-term action plan with clear common follow-up implementation.

4. The Availability of High-quality Research and Data to Support Decision-making and Communication

The whole ecosystemic process should also be accompanied by high-quality data collection and management with academic support. This will allow for the gathering of facts and figures such as whether further budgets will be made available, which are relevant to the decision-making process. Meaningful data and research are also necessary to nurture the improvements of projects for development by culture. Furthermore, information is required to raise public understanding of the effects of cultural action in the city. Also, meaningful data will help journalists to report accurately on cultural development in cities.

The city of Leeuwarden was a European Capital of Culture in the

year 2018 and opted for comprehensive research and data collection in four different areas of consideration: social impact, economic impact, sustainability, and European dimension.[7]

Considerable social impact was reported from Leeuwarden-Friesland 2018 (LF2018): "Overall participation in LF2018 was massive: 5,3 million visitors in total, a record year for the number of tourists in the region. 68% of the people living in the region felt involved in the year. About 10% of the population served as volunteer. (⋯) 78% of LF2018 events included cooperation between different generations with a view to share knowledge. Traditional craftmanship skills such as carpentry and furniture-making— but also set design and textile—were at the centre of exchanges between people over 65 and younger generations."

Economic impact was seen in a wide range of areas: "Visitors spent around €119 million. Investments realised, originally estimated at €74m, turned out to be €104,5m. Research findings depict an economic impact ranging between €230m and €320m. This figure includes the spending by extra visitors and tourists, the extra turnover in the cultural sector, the capital expenditure elicited, and the derivative spending effects. Several initiatives contributed to the improvement of the tourism offer, especially experiential and cultural tourism. Projects such as the 11 Fountains formed a new cultural heritage that became a must-see in the region. The art project consists in 11 fountains in the 11 Frisian cities, designed by 11 artists from different countries."

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7. https://eurocities.eu/latest/leeuwarden-friesland-european-capital-of-culture-2018-was-a-sustainable-success-on-all-counts/. All details on the four impact areas are from this good practice description.

Jaume Plensa, "Love" fountain in Leeuwarden, 2018. Photographer: Sjaak Kempe-cc-by-2.0.[8]

Sustainability and positive impact on the ecology were at the core of LF2018's endeavours: "The food served was locally produced for 80% of the main programme's projects, renewable energy was used, and materials were reused. LF2018 brought about innovation, socio-economic change and sustainability. For instance, the regional initiative Innofest used festivals as living labs for innovation and helped start-ups to test their prototypes

8. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Love_fountain_Leeuwarden_11F.jpg.

in festivals. (⋯) One outstanding example, praised for its communication effectiveness, was the Elfwegentocht: two weeks during which the whole Friesland province functioned without fossil fuels, culminating in the largest parade of this kind ever, including electric vehicles, cars and boats."

The European dimension is transversal to the European Capital of Culture initiative: "In 2018, nearly 1600 international collaborations took place with artists, students and museums from 87 countries; 76% were with institutions from EU countries. Partnerships with foreign universities increased, consequently boosting the number of students and university employees participating in international exchange programmes. The number of international alliance partners of the WaterCampus, meeting point of the Dutch water technology sector, doubled. As a result, the international profile of Leeuwarden in the sector has improved. This is a concrete example of LF2018 spillover in other sectors, such as water."

Based on these considerable achievements, the city of Leeuwarden and its partners considered follow-up actions, one of which was for the city to become a UNESCO Creative City of Literature.[9]

5. The Comprehension of the Need for a Process of Renewal

The examples from European cities demonstrate the need for clear visions, participative development of plans, and related implementation accompanied by high-quality research and data availability. These experiences also show the need for understanding the long-term process of permanent transformation. The ecosystem requires adaptation to new challenges and new opportunities and a regular update of visions and plans.

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9. https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/leeuwarden.