

CULTURE-LED CITY BRANDING AND THE IMPACTS OF MEGA EVENTS: THE ECO C 2021 BIDS IN GREECE

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Abstract

Cultural events and festivals are connected to the historical legacy and the cultural activity of a city; they can hold a central role in the formation of its identity and fame. The European Capital of Culture is a large scale cultural event that can have major economic and social impacts on a city, not only on its cultural infrastructure and local art scene but also on its image and brand. In October 2017 Elefsina was elected as the ECoC city for 2021; this was considered as a surprise as it had to compete with 13 other strong candidate cities in Greece. The bidding process discussed in the paper, especially in relation to the creation of awareness within a city branding strategy for these cities. The paper reflects on the connection of the ECoC event with the impact measurement regarding elements such as the improvement of cultural infrastructure, the improvement of reputation and the boosting of the local cultural industries. Furthermore, particularly referring to the situation of cities in Greece and the financial difficulties they are facing, the need for effective cultural strategies and possible opportunities and threats of hosting such a large scale cultural event are discussed critically.

Key words: *European Capital of Culture, culture-led urban regeneration, city branding, Greek cities, bid books, Elefsina 2021*

1. Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) event has been offering many opportunities for researchers and policy makers to discuss the connection of culture and urban

development. As argued in the article the new selection criteria that have been decided and the competition process that allows cities to nominate themselves within a national context has renewed interest in the event as the whole procedure is characterized by a different, more competitive but also more productive preparation. Apart from that, taken into account that this discussion is developing within an austerity context for many countries after 2008, the focus has been shifted from emblematic infrastructure and expensive events to bottom-up initiatives and sustainable cultural strategies (Garcia and Cox 2013). This was quite evident in the efforts of the Greek candidate cities for 2021, but it also characterizes the ECoC cities the last decade since the rules have changed (Palmer et al. 2011, Bianchini et al. 2015, Karachalis and Deffner 2016). One of the elements that hold a key role is the connection of the ECoC event with a city branding strategy and generally the effort to improve the image of a city.

Cultural heritage and contemporary culture are recognized as main identity elements of cities and as important assets because of their relation to tourism, economic development and social cohesion. Different types of events (mega events, festivals, celebrations, etc) are associated with rebranding purposes (Quinn 2005, Getz 2007, Langen and Garcia 2009). The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is one of these large scale events: it can have major economic and social impacts on a city, not only on its cultural infrastructure and local art scene but also on its image and brand (Garcia and Cox 2013).

2. Culture-led urban development and the ECoC event

Mega events such as the ECoC form a unique category within city events: their distinguishing factor is that they are organized on the basis of political decisions, they are characterized by a pre-event preparation that lasts many years and they have major impacts on the city that hosts them because of the need for new infrastructure and the high expenditure (Evans 2003, Lucas 2005). These events are usually a subject to competitive bidding, they are characterized by their long term effect or “legacy” and have a strong impact on tourism development (Throsby 2001, Langen and Garcia 2009). The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) constitutes a

special case among mega events: since 1985 this annual mega event is often associated with culture-led urban regeneration and important economic and social effects; it is generally acknowledged as one of the successful initiatives of the European Commission (Palmer et al. 2013). An event of this scale can boost the cultural industries of a city; a characteristic example is Antwerp that was able to establish and highlight its fashion industry during and after the ECoC year in 1993 (Garcia 2004, Palmer 2004a & 2004b).

An important goal for most city policymakers organising cultural mega-events or festivals is to improve their image and to position themselves as attractive cities that will appeal to visitors or new inhabitants. In many cases city marketing - branding strategies are planned and executed in relation to a mega event (Kolb 2006, Plaza et al. 2009); for some cities, such as Edinburgh, festivals and events are recognized as the main characteristic and competitive advantage of the city (Richards and Palmer 2010). Therefore culture and special events hold a key role in the current discussion regarding city marketing and branding practices which are gaining increasing popularity among local government administrations (Deffner and Karachalis 2012). For many cities worldwide drafting and implementing a marketing strategy becomes a central element of their urban management policies – a process which is increasingly moving away from the notion of competitiveness (Kalantides and Kavartzis 2015). The last few years the ECoC event, as explained further on in the article, is characterized by a shift to more participatory city branding strategies.

3. The 2021 bidding process in Greece and the role of city branding

Assessing the bid books of the Greek cities that applied for ECoC 2021 doesn't reveal all the reasons that made their decision-makers decide to take part; still some indications that this was seen as an opportunity to improve the image of the city are evident. It has to be taken into account that in times of economic austerity the organization of the ECoC 2021 event by a Greek city is characterized by challenges and threats for the city that was finally chosen, Elefsina, but also for the other 13 cities that applied. In the past 32 years, for many cities the ECoC event proved to be

a milestone that led to regeneration or improvement of the cultural infrastructure - Antwerp, Glasgow, Lille, Graz being some of the most characteristic examples - however there have been cities such as Patras and Riga that faced financial problems and difficulties during the ECoC year leading to a less satisfying implementation.

Greece' legacy regarding the ECoC event can be characterized as diverse; the three previous ECoC cities that were decided on the basis of a political decision and, apart from Athens, were associated with financial and management problems. The launching of the event in 1985 was decided to be in Athens as Melina Mercouri was the initiator of the idea; it was considered successful although it had a very moderate budget and experimental character. Thessaloniki in 1997 was characterized by its impact on the regeneration of the harbor and the public overspending; although the spatial interventions and some of the events (e.g. the Mount Athos monasteries' exhibition and the U2 concert) were considered very successful, the general feeling was that the management issues and the high costs got more attention than the actual positive effects on the city (Deffner and Labrianidis 2005). In the case of Patras 2006 the situation was worse: as Tsiliras (2015) comments, the delays in finalizing the programme, the problems within the organizing committee and the difficulty to find a use for the infrastructure after 2006 led to a problematic situation. The hosting of the ECoC event can therefore be considered as a lost opportunity for Patras but also, to a great extent, for Thessaloniki (Athanasopoulou and Sapounakis 2006, Karachalis and Deffner 2016).

Since 2015, according to decision 445/2014/EC, the criteria and the procedure of selecting the ECoC city have changed; most importantly the city is not appointed but decided by an expert panel on the basis of a bidding process following a competition on a national level. The decision to allow competitive bidding between all cities of a specific country seemed to have breathed new air into the event. Before the greek competition, previous open calls such as the ones in the Netherlands for 2018 and Italy for 2019 – the latter having 21 cities bidding in the first round and 6 being shortlisted in the second round – showed that the process allowed the representatives of the participating cities to become dedicated to a very creative and stimulating process (Richards 2014). A characteristic fact in this new era for the

event is that “underdogs” seem to be winning most of the competitions: Pafos over Nicosia and Lemessos for 2017, Leeuwarden over Maastricht and Eindhoven in 2018, Matera over the other five cities for 2019 as well as Plovdiv over Sofia. Elefsina can be considered as an underdog in that sense: both other finalists, Kalamata and Rhodes, are established tourist destinations and invested in the preparation. It also becomes quite obvious that cultural heritage, the image or the size of the city and touristic appeal do not play a key role for the experts in the decision process; the content of the bid book and the goals set are the main focus point.

For 2021, the Greek cities had to finalise their bids until November 2015 in order to be assessed by the expert panel of experts. Fourteen Greek cities applied: Corfu, Delphi, Eleusis (Elefsina), Kalamata, Larissa, Lesvos, Messolonghi, Piraeus, Rhodes, Salamis, Samos, Tripolis and Volos. The pre-selection meeting took place in February 2016 and three cities (Elefsina, Kalamata and Rhodes) were short-listed. They were given until October 2016 to complete their applications and then invited to a final selection meeting in Athens on 10-11 November, where Elefsina was announced as the winner. Apart from the procedure, the criteria have also been adjusted; the six criteria were addressed in different ways within the 14 bid books (European Commission 2015, www.ECoC2021.gr). More particularly:

A) “Contribution to the long term cultural strategy”. This first criterion refers to the objectives, the mandate and the mission of the ECoC city and should include an integrated approach towards cultural planning, while great emphasis is being given to the monitoring and evaluation processes – with some recent ECoC cities such as Liverpool in 2008 being very successful in this part (Garcia et al. 2010). The existence of a cultural strategy is not self-evident for medium scale cities; especially for the Greek cities that took part in the bidding process for 2021 this proved to be a very interesting element, as a discussion on a national level was triggered regarding local cultural policies in a country where long-term strategic planning is not so common for local governments in Greece¹.

¹ A national conference entitled “Culture, for local development and social cohesion” was organized on July 2016 by the Ministry of Culture on this topic see <http://ECoC2021.culture.gr>

B) “Capacity to deliver”, where the infrastructure’s (cultural infrastructure, tourist infrastructure, etc.) effectiveness and the possibility to achieve wider co-operations and achieve long term commitment by all the local stakeholders within the city are examined. Actually, for Greece there are only a few cities that have an important cultural infrastructure in terms of concert halls, library buildings, etc. and most cities rely on open air theatres or other sites for their festivals and concerts (Konsola and Karachalis 2009, 2010). In many cases building new infrastructure is not unusual (e.g. for Mons in 2015 five new museums, two concert halls and one conference center were delivered), but for Greek cities this doesn’t seem to be an option (European Commission 2015).

c) “Cultural and Artistic Content”, a criterion where the artistic vision and programming is evaluated. Audience development and events that will not only attract an artistic crowd are examined. A programme that will focus on a “gentrified” version of culture and not on an everyday approach that will discourage the crowd to visit or participate will not achieve this. In past ECoC programmes many quite innovative ideas can be spotted in order to involve a wider audience, from the open cooking event on the National Road near Essen in 2010 to “Café Europa” to 2015 in Mons (European Commission 2015).

d) “European Dimension”, which focuses on mutual understanding and common aspects of European cultures. Often this is being achieved through the cooperation with the other ECoC cities; for Elefsina building on networks with Timisoara and Novi Sad in 2021 is a way to empower the European dimension.

e) “Outreach”, which is a rather innovative criterion as it connects the ECoC event with citizen participation and the involvement of the whole local population. Tsiliras (2015) indicates that despite the problems, Patras 2006 gained a lot from the volunteers that were involved in the preparations and created the conditions for citizens’ initiatives the following years from citizens’ groups. Apart from the volunteering culture, open processes of participation and having different groups of the population being attracted to the artistic events are considered as important factors. Not excluding specific segments of the populations is of major importance.

Massive participation in events is also a goal as citizens feel a direct connection to the event: 600.000 spectators took part in the opening ceremony in Marseille 2013 and an “open” choir for citizens was organized in Turku in 2011.

f) “Management capacity” where the feasibility of the fundraising strategy and the contribution of the public and private sector are assessed, the budget and the managerial structure is examined and – finally- the promotion strategy is considered. The latter is also connected to city branding efforts as for some cities improving their though the event is a major motivation. For greek cities that are facing the effects of the crisis, city branding obviously cannot be about polishing the surface but about negotiating a common future vision.

The basic goal of the ECoC event the last few years has shifted from presenting a prestigious annual artistic programme to launching a strategy for culture-led development with social impact. This shift can be followed in the literature: apart from the studies commissioned by the EC (Palmer and Rae 2004a & 2004b, Palmer and Richards 2007, Palmer et al. 2010) there are many studies on particular cities, e.g. Graz (Mettler 2005), Sibiu 2007 (Richards and Rotariu 2010) Ruhr 2008 (Pachaly 2008), Pafos 2017 (Dova 2013), the unsuccessful bid of Eindhoven and Maastricht for 2018 (Richards 2014). Many of these studies try to evaluate the ECoC event and refer to the evaluation method, although there doesn't seem to be a general agreement on the method. The ECoC's new guidelines are quite specific on this issue and lately more information is requested within bid books on this. According to Van Bommel et al. (2011), the average profit a ECoC can exceed more than two times the actual expenditure – this can be quite high, taken into account that the expenditure is 38 million Euro in average. In addition to that the ECoC event can have multiplier effects on several other sectors. In each ECoC year the budget changes, it can reach quite high amounts - such as the nearly 200 million Euros of Liverpool 2008. The fundraising methods have also become much more creative: for Marseille 2013 and Mons 2015 local enterprises contributed an important amount to the event, while Thessaloniki holds a negative record receiving 99% of its budget from state funding. The bid book must give a clear picture of the budget and the contributions of other stakeholders. Most of the Greek cities were not able to describe in a coherent way

how they are going to work on fundraising apart from the local and central government funding (see expert report – ECoC 2016).

3. Elefsina 2021, the 13 other bid books of the Greek cities

By cross-examining the 14 bid books of the Greek cities and the two reports of the Evaluation Committee some general points can be developed. First of all, it is quite obvious (and this is also mentioned in the expert reports) that not all cities were able to deliver a high quality bid book, as in some cases the preparations started in a very late stage. Secondly, the way each city reflected upon the new guidelines was diverse with some cities not being able to incorporate them. A third positive element is that most of the cities have stated their interest to use the occasion as a re-branding opportunity and treated the bidding process as a first step to negotiate with local stakeholders. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of each candidate city regarding the latter: the main slogan, if tourism is considered the most important activity in the city (characterizing it as a tourist city or not) and if it is already following a city branding strategy.

Table 1: Branding the 2021 candidate cities

City	Slogan	Tourist City	City Branding strategy
Corfu	Corfu - Be My City	Yes	No
Delphi	Delphi, We bring the values	Yes	No
Elefsina	Transition to Euphoria	No	No
Ioannina	Ioannina , Ipeiros - Here and Beyond	No	Yes
Kalamata	Kalamata Rising	No	No
Larissa	Larissa - Bridging Perspectives	No	Yes
Lesvos (Mytilene)	Mytilene – Lesvos, Poetry Designs the City	Yes	No
Messolonghi	Mesolonghi - Sacred City	No	No
Piraeus	Floating City	No	Yes
Rhodes	Rhodes, Journey to the Light	Yes	No
Salamina	-	No	No
Samos	People ² +Creativity ² =Culture ²	Yes	No
Tripoli	Tripoli – InArcadia	No	No
Volos	Attracting Evoloution	Yes	No

Source: 2021 bid books, www.ECoC2021.gr

In a period of socio-economic the way these type of mega events affect urban development seem to change: cultural strategies and culture-led city branding is nowadays not associated with cultural re-imagining through iconic museums – according to the Guggenheim paradigm - but mostly with everyday culture, citizens’ participation and education (Konsola and Karachalis 2010, Comunian 2011). Moreover logos, although they don’t play a key role, still can be used in order to understand the way city officials imagine the ECoC year in terms of semiotics (see figure2). Apart from that the discussions on the urban agenda have shifted from mega-projects and urban competition to citizens’ participation and the concept of “commons” that encompass a variety of fields such as culture, technology, education, creativity, intellectual property, open access, etc (Ramos 2016).

It is interesting to examine the next day for both the winner, Elefsina, and the other 13 cities. Since the 11th of November when the decision was announced that the city of Elefsina was selected to host the event in 2021, the city has been organizing its management team and discussing the next steps and preparation (Eleusina2021, 2017). Other cities have been searching for ways to integrate the actions of the bid book in their city agenda. Kalamata is searching for a way to implement some of the ideas of the bid book (in May 2017 a thematic study was organized with European experts by Eurocities in order to give advice on the next steps), Larissa will be presenting its long term cultural strategy soon, Samos was able to take advantage of the momentum to organise some very effective events (e.g. Mobility week in 2016, which got awarded).

Figure 2: 2021 Candidate City Logos



Source: 2021 bidbooks

5. Conclusions

The ECoCs have grown in scope and size, contributing to the cultural, social and economic development of many cities and their neighbouring regions across Europe. The role of events such as the ECoC in urban regeneration, their impact on the local

economy and employment and the boost they give to local cultural policy is highlighted in the relevant literature. The challenge is to combine the above with everyday life, the quality of life of the inhabitants, etc. The image of a city is formed by mega events; this doesn't mean that, as the experience of Patras 2006 has proven, it will necessarily be towards a positive direction. Furthermore in times that populist movements become increasingly influential and the European Union as an idea is being questioned, the ECoC event seem to be more relevant than ever. Allowing Europeans to learn more about each other's cultures and to work on their shared history and values is of major importance. Elefsina has the opportunity to propose a new model for cultural policy for medium sized Greek cities; at the same time it has started planning a very participatory, open cultural programma – e.g. in 2017 a common artistic project called *Mystirio Kanali* was organized with Golden City theater group from Bremen allowing locals in both cities with the help of a skype connection to have a main role in the performances². The new guidelines on the measurement of impacts is expected to upgrade the conversation on the event in general. At the same time, the social dimension of the ECoCs and their connection to everyday culture is also highlighted.

For Greece the bidding process has brought an interesting discussion that needs to be extended. More particularly:

- First of all, it triggered off a conversation on local cultural policies as part of sustainable development strategies to the center both on policy-level but also for the research community. The fact that the bid books had to be linked to a long-term cultural strategy led most of the candidate cities to start a conversation on a local level in order to set specific goals for the future – not only for the cultural sector but generally for local development.
- For many cities the bidding process led to some next steps despite the disappointment from not being selected. Kalamata, Larissa and Samos are some of the cities that are trying to implement ideas and actions described in their bid-book.

² See www.goldencity-bremen.de [ass. 3.7.2017]

- For Elefsina the hosting of the event is connected with opportunities and threats. The high expectations must be met within a difficult macro-environment and many challenges on the local level. Already, for many ECoC cities the impact of the economic crisis (e.g. in the case of Pafos 2017) or an unexpected event (e.g. closing down of the national airline in Riga 2014) had a major impact on the organization. The fact that the contribution of the EC is limited to the Melina Mercouri award of 1,5 million Euro, taken into account that the average budget of an ECoC is 38 million, means that fundraising plays a key role.
- The ECoC event preparation phase has been an opportunity for Greek cities to look into issues of identity and city branding, a fact that seems to be the most important outcome of the competition as many cities are now considering the possibility of a city branding strategy.

Generally, the fresh ideas and innovative approaches constitute the most important surplus for the 13 cities that did not make it to the next round. Further research is needed in order to focus on the specific elements of the bid books, make a full comparison and reflect on the next steps.

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