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Who remembers the European Capitals of Culture? Is the ECoC title an opportunity for cultural and economic development, or another city marketing tool?

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Résumé / Summary

The history of the European Capital of Culture begins in 1985 with the initiative idea of the Greek Minister of Culture, at the time, Melina Mercouri. After 32 years, more than 50 cities of Europe have hosted the title of the European Capital of Culture. Throughout all these years of mostly successful examples of Cultural Capitals in Europe, not many changes have been made in the institution. This is probably because the main goals remain extremely well-timed. Highlighting the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, celebrating the cultural features Europeans share, increasing European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area and fostering the contribution of culture to the development of cities are among them.

From a city's standpoint, being a European Capital of Culture may also mean so much; it can raise its international profile, it can boost its tourism and, of course, it can reinforce the city's culture domain. The title has been considered through the institution's long history as an indisputable opportunity for a city to generate positive cultural, economic and social long terms impacts.

Given the fact that at the beginning state capitals and larger cities were usually awarded the title, the connection between the culture domain and the potential growth was considered for granted, due to the recognizability of the cities. More recently, though, the title of the ECoC is usually awarded to smaller cities. This is a 'democratic' practice in terms of diffusing the benefits, however it has also created some skepticism about the ability of smaller cities to achieve the osmosis between national and European culture.

The subject of this paper is whether and to what extent the objectives raised both by the institution and the hosting cities are met. Under what conditions being awarded and organizing the event can signify the city's strategic turn towards culture oriented development? Is the award a landmark for the hosting city, providing long-term effects, or is it used as a city branding strategy, in order for the city to attract visitors, promote its cultural domain or even simply increase the community's pride and sense of place? Finally, do the ECoC events address to Europeans, or tend to be consumed domestically, without being followed by a strategic plan for long-term results as far as the host-cities are concerned? A related key issue to be examined, is to what extent the hosting cities manage to communicate the institution's concepts, not only to the city's residents but, also through the country and on the European level.

Investigating the previous questions is of specific interest for the ECoC institution, but also for the contesting cities, in terms of meeting the expectations raised. Setting ambitious but realistic visions, when bidding for the title, can help cities meet achievable goals and also the institution to evolve successfully.

In order to investigate the questions raised above, we examined selected cases of cities that have held the title of the ECoC beyond 2006, regarding the objectives, programs and cultural infrastructures that are included in the organizational program, by examining the event's aftermath. Our aim, though, is not to evaluate the impact of the event in economic terms, but to follow the imprint of the institution on the later development of the hosting cities. Furthermore, due to the fact that enhancing the European dimension is considered to be a central pursuit of the ECoC, it is of great interest to examine the diffusion of the concepts and ideas that each ECoC launches. For this reason, a survey was conducted through google docs questionnaires, in order to examine the awareness of the former European Capitals of Culture.

The results are interesting, as they bring light in better and worse examples of former ECoCs, highlighting differences in the organizing approaches but also in the opportunities between small and bigger host cities, contributing in the greater discussion about the institution's objectives.

KEYWORDS: Special Events, ECoC, host cities, culture, urban development, impacts

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