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CAN SMALL CITIES HOST MEGA EVENTS? THE CASE OF ELEUSIS EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2021

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S9 - The 'European Capital of Culture' initiative and the new urban challenges

Résumé / Summary

Organizing and hosting special events is increasingly used by European cities as a means towards attracting visitors, strengthening city marketing strategies (including internal marketing) and reinforcing local economies. The bigger the event's scale, higher are usually the targets of the bidding cities, since the nomination for hosting a mega event requires a long preparation period, the involvement of multiplicity of

local stakeholders, the support of local governments and the engagement of considerable funds. When a small city bids for a large scale event, the effects may prove to be catalytic for the city's subsequent evolution, signifying a bend on its developmental course, while often there is skepticism concerning the city's ability to host the event successfully, mainly due to its size.

In the case of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC), one of the oldest and most prestigious urban European initiatives, a number of cities contest every year for the title, competing with one another for funds, sponsorships and publicity. Among the important contents of the bid book for the title, has to be the city's urban facilities, with an emphasis on the cultural infrastructures. The adequacy of cultural facilities is considered a determining factor for a candidate city's ability to host the event, just as it is for the final success of the project. A general 'rule' in Special Event Management, with specific value in the case of the ECoC, is the optimum exploitation of the infrastructures after the hosting period. In this context, building new facilities should be the last option, and only if there is a definite provision for their subsequent usage. Although contributing to sustainability, this rule makes it difficult for small cities to contest for mega events, as they usually lack infrastructures of the required capacity, and even if they are both able and willing to construct them, there is no easy solution for their subsequent usage.

In the case of Eleusis, which is a small city with a stunning history, both its size and its special industrial character have created some skepticism concerning the capacity of the city's facilities to host such a mega event. Thus, the city's candidacy was at first faced with surprise. Eleusis is not the first small city to bid successfully for the title of the ECoC. Especially in recent years, quite a few small-sized cities have been designated as European Capitals of Culture: Avignon, France in 2000, Santiago de Compostela, Spain in 2000, Maribor, Slovenia in 2012, Mons, Belgium in 2015, Paphos, Cyprus in 2017, Galway, Ireland in 2020. Nevertheless, Eleusis is the smallest (population around 30000), till now, city being awarded the title confirming the underlying policy of the European Commission to favor (or at least not to exclude) minor cities with major goals from the European culture and creativity agenda, provided, of course, that they can prove their adequacy to host the event. This was, probably, the major challenge for the small city of Eleusis when bidding for ECoC 21.

In this context, the scientific team of LaReTour* undertook a research recording and evaluating the city's infrastructures, in order to ascertain whether, and how, they could prove sufficient for hosting the event. The research examined the present status of the health, transport, cultural (monuments, festivals, special events, museums, theatres), tourist (accommodation) and entertainment (cafés) infrastructures, as well as the quality of the urban environment (atmosphere/water quality, quality of the built environment and open spaces) concluding in suggestions for their best development during the Eleusis21 period. The emphasis was given on the cultural facilities and all possible prospects for their reinforcement, given the small size of the city.

Eleusis disposes a rich industrial building stock, with unique characteristics, which determines the city's landscape, setting specific constraints, but also offering unexplored possibilities for future urban development. Overcoming the constraints and taking advantage of the emerging prospects is the city's next challenge to be met, while preparing for the event. The process of registering and evaluating the city's infrastructures led to the conclusion that there is a remarkable, both in terms of quantity and quality, deposit of former industrial shells, providing the sure base for the city's strategic turn towards revitalization through their use for new cultural activities.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture, mega events, urban infrastructures, cultural facilities

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