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CULTURE-LED CITY BRANDING AND THE IMPACTS OF MEGA EVENTS: LESSONS FROM THE ECOC 2021 BIDDING PROCESS IN GREECE

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

Résumé / Summary

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 connected to the historical legacy and the cultural activity of a city and can have a central role in the formation of its identity and fame; especially large scale cultural events that are associated with urban regeneration efforts are being used for rebranding purposes (Deffner and Labrianidis 2005, 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).

In times of financial crisis, the way these type of events and cultural strategies in general affect urban development has changed: 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). Apart from that the discussions on the urban agenda have shifted from mega-projects and urban competition to the circular economy and the concept of "commons" that encompass a variety of fields such as culture, technology, education, creativity, intellectual property, open access, etc (Ramos 2016). This was quite evident in the efforts of the Greek candidate cities, but it also characterizes the ECOC years the last decade since the rules have changed (Palmer et al 2011). In October 2017 Elefsina (Eleusis) was elected as the ECOC for 2021 alongside with Timosoara and Novi Sad. This was considered as a surprise, since Elefsina had to compete with 13 other candidate cities and some of these cities had important advantages.

The bidbooks and the main ideas of each city are compared and discussed in the paper, especially in relation to the upgrading of cultural infrastructure, the promotion of local cultural scenes and the creation of awareness within a city branding strategy. The main points that led to the final decision in favour of Elefsina are presented. The paper reflects on the academic discussion regarding the connection of the ECoC event with the impact measurement of the event regarding elements such as the improvement of cultural infrastructure, the economic impact 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 “new” cultural strategies and the possible opportunities and threats of hosting such a large scale cultural event as part of a local development agenda are discussed critically.

Key words: European Capital of Culture, culture-led urban regeneration, city branding, greek cities, bidbooks, Elefsina 2021

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