English

Future:
community

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Quality of life through arts participation

The world was shifting long before the Covid-19 hit us. The changing cultural participation and consumption patterns put cultural policies under increased stress to be more adaptable, more flexible and more inclusive. The sustainability – both in terms of the cultural significance, economic soundness as well as ecological footprint – of mega events, large scale cultural offering and festivalisation of culture has been under heavy scrutiny. And then the pandemic hit, making policy makers and cultural managers to re-imagine and to re-invent the culture as we know it.

The ongoing changes should be seen as part of a larger movement in our cities, which are the main vehicles for cultural and creative industries development. According to Charles Landry, the cities are moving from City 1.0 (cities as machines with top-down cultural institutions and limited participation) and City 2.0 (cities as high-tech industrial magnets with emphasis on emotional atmosphere and consumerisation of culture) to City 3.0 (using the power of collective imagination to co-create the living environment). This highlights the rather limited view that cities have often taken in recent years to prioritise "smart city" agenda as a tool to put technology in the heart of urban development without linking it to nurturing creativity and "soft urbanism". Being a "smart city" is not an aim in itself but a tool for better quality of life, which is why there is an increase push for linking creative and smart cities into "smart creative cities" (or "creatively smart" if you wish).

Alongside the transformation of our cities, the way we see and relate to culture has been changing with even faster pace. Prof Pier Luigi Sacco calls this the move from Culture 1.0 (top-down patronage model of culture) and Culture 2.0 (cultural mass production with high entrance barriers) towards Culture 3.0, facilitated by the rapid technological development. The Culture 3.0 blurred the distinction between creators and consumers by transforming the audiences into practitioners. Sacco has enlarged the idea onto cultural heritage (and cultural institutions at large), calling the institutions of the first phase "Temples of Knowledge", in the second phase "Entertainment Machines" and in third "Places for Community Sense-Making".

What these and other similar views have in common is the fundamentally changing relationship between people and their surroundings, between audiences and institutions, between inhabitants of a place and co-creators of communities. People don't expect the "state" or the "city" to bring them prefabricated culture, they want to be part of creating it. It is about understanding the value and the impact of the process itself. Allowing space for inclusion, experimentation and innovation at the grass-root level contributes significantly to the shared identity and sense of ownership, but also to capacity building and local empowerment.

This doesn't mean however that there is no role for the "traditional" institutions or practices. On the contrary, the institutional network of culture (including cultural centres, libraries, museums, etc.) can offer the space for the co-creation to take place. This requires the institutions to have two-tier approach. Firstly, their own programming needs to be more open and inclusive. And secondly, they need to come out more from their physical environments and reach out to the population. Cities around the world pay increasingly attention to the accessibility of culture to all citizens. Accessibility not only in terms of engaging people with special needs (which is also of paramount importance), but also breaking down all kinds of barriers, including social, ethnic, economic, age, etc.

Across the cultural sphere, one constant is lack of data and statistics. We simply don't know, what people do or what they want, and we find it hard to ask them. This needs to change. In understanding cultural participation patterns, we sometimes ask those that participate, while we should focus more on non-users, non-participants, non-visitors. We must clearly understand the inhibiting factors in order to create truly inclusive cultural offer. The ongoing EU URBACT funded project ACCESS for Culture for All Citizens brings together 8 capital cities across Europe in an effort to study, test and pilot approaches to widen the cultural participation for the communities. One similar trait in most of the good practices is the brushing aside the "city knows the best" attitude and

approaching local communities with open hearts and minds. It is taking the participatory design thinking methods seriously by truly listening to people (community walks, picnics, ideation workshops, artistic projects involving local communities), empowering people (participatory budgeting, capacity building, grass-root level project development), experimentation and prototyping (mobile cultural services, temporary installations, testing new technological solutions, physical and virtual story-telling platforms), and learning from the experience (new data collection and analysis tools).

Most cities are going through significant urban regeneration, especially in suburban areas. The challenge is to control the impacts of gentrification and support the development of local communities with a distinctive and enabling creative milieux, with active and caring citizens, and with culturally and environmentally sensitive living space. It will decentralise and democratise the cultural life of the city, it grows the sense of belonging and ownership, it can help lower the negative ecological impacts of urbanisation, it builds inclusive and more tolerant societies, and it helps to make our cities more diverse and safer places. In turn, it will also influence the way others experience your city. While cities across the world are struggling with the impact of mass tourism, we often fail to notice that visitors are more and more attracted to novel experiences and acquiring new knowledge, rather than just follow the predefined routes. In other

words, people are longing for reasons to move away from usual tourist hotspots to feel the local, authentic and diverse pulse of the city. B. Rásky called this phenomenon in 1998 as McDonaldization of culture, in which cities are struggling to develop diverse offer as the same cultural offerings can be found in many other places all over Europe – same type of festivals, same events, same artists. Walking in a lively and distinct local district that lives and breathes creativity could well be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, enjoyed both by locals as well as visitors.

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia with its 450 000 inhabitants is subdivided into 8 areas with 84 local districts, many of which are historic with distinctive identity. Some of those districts are lively, bubbly, and culturally, socially and economically sustainable communities, which attract new creative ideas and people, new investments, new cultural offering. These places are like little black holes drawing in all the creative energy. (And no need to mention what does it means for local real estate prices, in all its positive and negative aspects.). And then there are those other places – dull, empty, full of social problems and isolation. What are the defining factors in both of them? The most critical one – engaged, active and motivated people that care enough to take part or chip in. The moment local people stop caring, it's all downhill. Culture and creativity can change this and do it quite rapidly. It is about seeing opportunities where other see problems. Empty house – art residency, abandoned park –

community flea-market, destroyed bus stop – people-to-people library stand. The opportunities are endless. What is needed is empowering people to participate, ask them what they need, create tandems of creative professionals and local institutions to experiment without predefined end results, supporting grass-root ideas. The primary role of public institutions is not to organise projects, rather create a space where new ideas can emerge, grown and realised. That requires places with low entry barriers and high flexibility, it is about allowing people and entrepreneurs to create (surge in small scale maker spaces and fab labs), libraries that provide shared tools and access to technologies (from 3D printing to sound and video studios), co-working and co-location spaces, and much more.

Post-Covid-19 cities that want to offer high living standards and be attractive places need to be less like "museum cities" – places that are so sterile and pristine that you are careful not to touch anything or that are better consumed from distance. They also will be less "cities of festivals", rich in cultural offer brought to you by others, generic in form and hard to differentiate from other places with other festivals. Future cities will be creative cities, not in their empty sense of over-used buzz-words, but truly participatory places with strong local commitment and shared identity, open and welcoming places. A creative city is like a mosaic with its distinctive individual pieces that together form a living and breathing place.