COVID briefs

BUILDING BACK BETTER: POST-PANDEMIC CITY GOVERNANCE

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LARGE EUROPEAN CITIES' POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY STRATEGIES FOR THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE SECTORS

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Abstract

The pandemic shock has proven a powerful stress test for the cultural and creative sectors of large European cities. Immediate relief packages have been designed and implemented in many places, but the level and depth of disruption has nevertheless been substantial and will only be reversible in part. However, the shock is also opening up new possibilities for innovation and structural transformation in the long term. The new opportunities have largely to do with a broadened scope for culture as a platform for stronger citizen engagement in collective problem-solving, in the innovative tackling of major societal challenges, and in addressing some of the weaknesses exposed by the pandemic in urban areas, such as the social disconnection and isolation of fragile individuals and the marginalisation of disenfranchised communities. The New European Agenda for Culture provides a coherent policy framework for experimenting with these new policy routes, but cities will need to cooperate through existing networks and purposely designed ones to scale up local experimentation and take full advantage of peer learning and creative exchange. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed culture's potential for mental health and social cohesion, paving the way for unprecedented transformational experimentation with culture-driven social innovation practices.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily affected all cultural and creative sectors worldwide, causing a structural shock of unprecedented size and uncertain duration that is threatening to provoke vast disruption and will certainly have long-lasting consequences beyond the crisis. The shock will change habits, forms of social interaction and attitudes to

mobility. According to the OECD (2020), these factors will have profound consequences for the demand for culture and creative products and experiences, not always and necessarily in a negative sense, but certainly in ways that will impact upon many areas of cultural and creative production. However, the crisis is also reinforcing the social perception of the public role of arts and culture in supporting the common interest and in meeting basic human needs for emotional connection and engagement and mental health preservation (Meyrick & Barnett, 2020), paving the way for new forms of policy intervention.

Such permanent social and cultural changes will deeply influence the models of socioeconomic organisation of cities and the use of public space, with long-term consequences for urban cultural quarters and institutions. The transition from a "high-touch" to a "high-tech" society, where close physical contact between people is seen as potentially problematic, will involve the reshaping of leisure habits and demands, a shift from physical to remote access to cultural venues, and the potential downsizing of the night-time economy and global mobility related to cultural events. A simple return to the status quo ante appears impossible, and regaining pre-pandemic levels of activity may take years. Existing business models will need rethinking and innovative approaches to structural adjustment must be sought. A massive injection of public funds may provide relief in the short term, but cannot secure long-term sustainability without real transformation on the supply side.

This is a challenging scenario for large European cities, whose economies often rely heavily upon the cultural and creative sectors – including cultural tourism – and the attractiveness of their cultural life and institutions. The required changes to urban cultural supply are complicated by the fact that different kinds of cultural and creative activities and services face different issues. Live events, for instance, are high-touch activities whereas museums or libraries can more easily facilitate physical distancing. Venues with seated audiences such as theatres and cinemas may be redesigned to reduce physical proximity among attendees, but only at the cost of reduced box office revenue.

Even when the pandemic is over, the fear of close social contact and of future pandemics is likely to see the changes to habits remain (IPBES, 2020; Kleinman, 2020). Expectations of a bounce back to business as usual seem unlikely to transpire. In trying to anticipate future scenarios, it is important to discuss how cities are preparing for the "new normal" and experimenting with new solutions during the current transition phase (Giles-Corti, 2020). Specifically, we need to distinguish between short/medium-term measures and long-term ones. Despite the political pressure to focus on the former, the latter will determine the role of the cultural and creative sectors in the future socioeconomic makeup of large European cities.

2. Short-term measures: keeping the boat afloat

In the short-term, the goal of most large European cities has been to provide immediate relief to their cultural and creative sectors, which have faced exceptional levels of pressure and the threat of permanent closure (Montalto et al., 2020). A distinctive characteristic of the cultural and

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creative sectors is their extreme fragmentation and vulnerability, with a very high incidence of small and micro firms and individual freelancers (Comunian & England, 2020). The latter are particularly vulnerable: losing practically all their revenue overnight, as happened during the pandemic, in most cases limits their capacity to stay in the market to a few months at best. This also affects large cultural institutions that outsource services such as lighting, audio-visual supply and transportation to smaller businesses. Once the micro-structure of services across the sector begins to crumble, even institutions that receive public subsidies struggle to function.

Timely access to relief funds has been of great importance during the past few months to prevent irreversible damage. However, targeting the most fragile groups, including small businesses and individual freelancers, quickly and precisely, is often difficult. This is especially the case in large cities, where there is often no mapping of such actors and activities due to the sectors' extreme heterogeneity and fragmentation and with many players not being affiliated with professional associations or formal networks (Lee & Gilmore, 2012).

Many cities are currently trying to assess the damage and take countermeasures. Some have adopted short-term relief measures providing broad, generic coverage to reach a diverse mix of corporate and professional profiles, which can be difficult to track directly. For example, in March 2020, Berlin opted for a broad relief package of €100 million aimed at small businesses and freelancers. Emergency aid grants of up to €5,000 were provided, which could be requested more than once. A second €500 million relief package caters to small and medium-sized enterprises with up to 250 employees. Other cities, with more data available on the cultural and creative industries in their territory, went for narrower measures targeting specific sectors and actors. For instance, London launched a £2.325 million mayoral Culture at Risk Business Support Fund, targeting grassroots music and LGBTQ+ venues, independent cinemas and affordable creative workspaces not covered by national government grants but which the city considers to be both fragile and essential to preserving London's cultural diversity and inclusiveness. Paris provided a €15 million relief package and paid all dues for outstanding contracts, irrespective of the actual provision of services and has fully anticipated the €100 million annual public budget supporting cultural institutions. An additional one-time €12 million has been channelled toward municipally subsidised cultural institutions facing outstanding contractual commitments and budget deficits.

The different support measures cities have opted for tend to reflect two alternative policy orientations: supporting the entire cultural and creative scene versus focusing on strategic and/or fragile sectors and beneficiaries. Both approaches have trade-offs: broader relief packages ensure wide protection but no specific support for those most critically affected; narrower ones leave many out but might successfully support target groups. It is difficult to determine which approach is most suited to a given urban context in the absence of detailed data. Currently, the choice seems to be driven by local political consensus building, the micro-structure of public financing, established institutional support for specific areas of the cultural and creative ecosystem, and/or the negotiating power and visibility of certain cultural actors.

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Cities need to support their cultural institutions and creative businesses in the effective management of the digital transition, which has been accelerated by the pandemic.

Municipal relief funds have often been complemented by regional and national governments, mostly to the benefit of large cities' cultural sectors. However, even this flow of resources from various scales of government is only a temporary buffer in the absence of a long-term strategy. The socioeconomic transformations that have occurred with the pandemic urgently require a complex, financially demanding restructuring of the cultural and creative sectors. Yet, with the emergency enduring, even the more dynamic large European cities have paid little attention to the long-term scenario.

3. Long-term scenarios: adapting cities' cultural and creative sectors for the future

In the absence of long-term municipal strategies to adapt urban cultural and creative sectors to the "new normal", all activities and planning related to the post-pandemic scenario are speculative. Yet, city governments should think ahead and anticipate the future challenges and opportunities their cultural sectors will face. Cities need to support their cultural institutions and creative businesses in the effective management of the digital transition, which has been accelerated by the pandemic. A second important issue is the need for cities to develop a long-term strategy for securing their future international cultural projection and attractiveness in times of reduced global mobility and leisure travel. This will also involve rethinking local cultural demand and the engagement of local audiences. Large cities are generally better positioned than medium-sized and small ones to address both the digital transition and changes in cultural projection. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, cities need to recognise and foster the new, powerful role of culture in the post-pandemic recovery of their public space and social fabric. Few cities have strong public policies that promote the social role of culture, but efforts must be channelled in this direction.

Managing the digital transition

The pandemic has accelerated the digital transition and deepened its impact on social and professional relations. The cultural and creative sectors need to adapt to the complex effects of permanent, ubiquitous digital connectivity on people's perceptions and expectations, and on their future dispositions and habits. For cultural institutions, it will be crucial to use smart technologies to keep existing audiences engaged, and to reach out to new ones.

Large and innovative cultural institutions with solid organisational structures and sufficient human, technical and financial resources have already begun exploring new digital opportunities. For instance, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, whose pre-pandemic figure of 10,000 daily visitors has dropped to about 800 (Siegal, 2020), has launched a cutting-edge digital access project, From Home. Other responses include experimentation with active forms of participation, such as the re-enactment of famous artworks at home as a playful form of viral engagement. While these efforts are no substitute for in-person visits, they demonstrate how the notion of a "visit" is evolving as a consequence of the accelerated digital transition.

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In their adaptation to the digital transition, both cultural institutions and independent creative producers are treading uncertain terrain, for which they often lack the necessary skills, technical equipment and financial means. City authorities should provide an enabling environment for the cultural sector to access investments in new technologies and human resources, as well as training. Large cities with the ability to attract capital investment and talent will have an advantage over medium-sized and small ones (Montalto et al., 2020). However, in the context of an economic recession, even large cities will struggle to direct financial and human flows towards the cultural and creative sectors.

International cultural projection in times of decreased mobility

With decreased global mobility for leisure and enduring travel restrictions, cities' international cultural projection and attractiveness will increasingly depend on their capacity to digitally engage and attract prospective visitors. Even before the pandemic, Rome had launched a digital platform to promote its cultural heritage and motivate future in-person visits. Other large cities are soon expected to follow.

The engagement of local audiences will also become more important. This process is part of a broader effort to catalyse citizen engagement through digital platforms (Wray, 2020). Again, large cities have an advantage over medium-sized and small ones, given their greater potential audience pool. For example, Barcelona has launched the innovative online citizen deliberation platform Decidim, which makes use of mechanisms of cultural exploration and expression to foster new, pro-active forms of civic engagement (Platoniq, 2020). Citizen engagement through digital cultural participation is likely to grow in large urban environments. Moreover, new impact playbooks are being developed to enable cultural institutions to measure their social impact in terms of citizen engagement in a variety of spheres of public interest.

The new social role of culture

Playing a role in urban recovery will stretch conventional conceptions of culture. It will be central to driving the post-pandemic reimagination of urban public space as a hybrid space where new forms of social exchange and interaction are emerging. A recent United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) briefing highlights how innovative cultural mobilisation strategies in post-pandemic cities can foster social sustainability – especially social inclusion and solidarity. It calls for a more mature deployment of participative community art projects, enabling social exchange by including fragile, marginalised social groups (Sacco et al., 2019).

The "collective trauma" of the pandemic calls for public space to be rethought and redesigned to make people feel safe and motivated to participate not only in cultural, but also in social and civic events. The cultural and creative sectors will play a vital role in formulating solutions to these problems, using sense-making and new forms of cultural and creative engagement to foster social cohesion.

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Digital and hybrid solutions will also play their part. Humans have developed rich, ingenious forms of socialisation in the most challenging environments and the digital sphere is no exception (Fredericks, 2020). Urban cultural policies are natural laboratories for such experiments. City authorities can invite artists to imagine hybrid cultural playgrounds where people communicate and interact while maintaining physical distance. For instance, Budapest's Cup 4 Creativity project, financed by the EU's Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) programme, has created a digital community to tackle social isolation and loneliness, which had already been exacerbated by growing online social exchange before the pandemic. Cup 4 Creativity engages its members in both online and physical cultural activities, which will gradually be scaled up to include non-traditional venues such as corporate and retail spaces, as a way to foster new forms of bottom-up, self-sustaining urban culture.

4. Policy implications

The survival and redevelopment of urban cultural and creative sectors will depend on cities' capacities to design relief strategies that approach the sectors as embedded in a wider innovation ecosystem, rather than limited to the local entertainment and cultural tourism economies. Important as the latter may be, the future rebooting of the cultural and creative sectors cannot be anchored in spheres of activity that will struggle for years to come. Instead, successful redevelopment will require rethinking and upscaling culture and creativity to the level of basic resources for tackling future societal challenges in innovative ways, thereby broadening the scope of the contributions of the cultural and creative sectors to the wider economy and society. Such a broadening not only concerns innovation in experience and interaction-oriented technologies and the construction of hybrid digital/physical public spaces, it is also about social innovation. Four areas of action will be of particular importance in the recovery phase:

1. *Expand the policy scope of cultural participation beyond the well-known and obvious*. Culture can act as a platform for the promotion of mental and physical health, social cohesion and social and ethnic diversity, as well as a lever for the development of innovative educational models – all issues that will become extremely relevant in the recovery phase. There is a solid, trans-disciplinary scientific literature that fully supports this perspective and provides many concrete ideas for implementation (Sacco et al., 2018).
2. *Create a community of practice for culture-driven urban social innovation*. There is a wide range of possible policy developments to explore the potential of cultural participation for urban social innovation. The COVID-19 crisis should be regarded as an opportunity to bypass the tyranny of the status quo. Beyond isolated, unsystematic occasional experimentation, what is needed now are communities of practice for city policymakers, planners and community activists to enable peer learning and exchange, to validate and discuss possible strategies and policy protocols and to scale up good practices through city networks and other forms of municipal cooperation.
3. *Empower the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme as an urban laboratory of culture-driven social change*. The ECoC has been an important programme for urban experimentation in areas such

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as culture and health, culture and social cohesion, and culture and innovation. For example, when Turku was ECoC in 2011, the city launched a Culture Does Good project that involved family physicians giving "cultural prescriptions" as a supplement or even alternative to medical treatment, and which remains a milestone in the international policy casebook. Chemnitz, a forthcoming ECoC, is pursuing a cultural participation strategy to tackle issues of social conflict and xenophobia. Leeuwaarden 2018 explored the relationship between cultural participation and environmental sustainability, and Aarhus 2017 focused upon culture's capacity to accelerate innovation processes. The ECoC programme is a world leader in experimentation with transformational cultural projects at urban scale. This role could be boosted, with the programme becoming an engine of social innovation not only for European cities, but also globally.

4. *Deploy the potential of the New European Agenda for Culture as a blueprint for future policy design*. The New European Agenda for Culture already highlighted these lines of strategic development as key pillars of future European cultural policies before the pandemic. With the COVID-19 crisis demanding that we adapt and reinvent our lifestyles and habits, steering cultural policy in this direction has become even more urgent. Major European cities will be the natural laboratories of these changes in cultural policy and practice. The possibility of relying on dynamic cultural and creative sectors will likely make the difference in terms of cities' successful adaptation and future strategic and competitive leadership.

Successful redevelopment will require rethinking and upscaling culture and creativity to the level of basic resources for tackling future societal challenges in innovative ways.

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