

Capitals of culture and External Projection¹

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What is a capital of culture?

All cities are centres of culture. This is simply because they are centres for people. Cities differ from rural environments by the fact they gather a critical mass of people who must share the same (often, highly condensed) spaces on a daily basis. The sharing of space and the constant interaction of people is at the heart of cultural creation and cultural identity formation.

However, not all cities are capitals of culture. More specifically, not all cities make the most of their cultural capital. This is due to the fact that in some cities it is harder than in others to share spaces in an equal basis and use these spaces to express difference or diversity. Further, in some cities it is harder to appreciate the layers of history than in others; it is harder to understand the background or context of their communities, which in turn makes it harder to figure out their way forward.

A capital of culture is a city capable of reconciling its many layers without the need to suppress diversity nor change. Capitals of culture are places that can bridge their past with their future possibilities by engaging in open and ongoing conversations.

Clearly, the statements above represent an ideal – they are abstractions around the concept of what defines a capital of culture. In the real world, however, there are no perfect capitals of culture. But there are cities that deserve being named so (or are perceived as desirable exemplars) thanks to their capacity, conviction or commitment towards attaining cultural capital goals. Ultimately, we should assume that cities can only aspire to ‘becoming’ or strengthening their cultural capital potential rather than expect that this is a state that can be secured permanently. A capital of culture is never static; rather, it is a city that demonstrates a constant interest in exploring, sharing, celebrating as well as questioning and reframing its culture.

In this article, I build on my years of experience working with leading world cultural centres as well as cities undergoing a significant cultural renaissance to briefly reflect on what I consider key characteristics for cities aspiring to become a capital of culture.

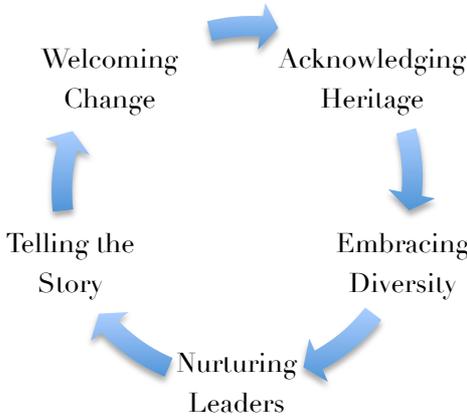
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How do cities become capitals of culture?

Cities as diverse as Liverpool, Berlin, London, San Francisco or Barcelona are often referred to in very similar contexts and, in some cases, even considered as comparable cases in point. This is because, over the last thirty years, they have managed to attract attention as cultural capital exemplars. They do not share the same kinds of strenghts in a equal basis, but they have managed, over time, to excel at, at least, one of the dimensions that I consider essential to become a capital of culture as well as work consistently towards striking the right balance between all relevant dimensions.

In my work, I have concluded that there are five interrelated areas one city must address to strengthen its cultural capital. These are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1:
Becoming a capital of culture. Five key interrelated dimensions



The sections below discuss each of these areas in turn and include brief reference to specific cities which I consider exemplars of achievement. In my view, it is thanks to standing out in one or more of these areas that cities become worldwide cultural capital referrent points.

Acknowledging heritage

A capital of culture is aware of its past. In our age of cultural and creative-led regeneration, an era that seems dominated by the aspiration to grow ever more competitive and surprising creative industries, many cities have opted to focus on promoting the newest, most innovative practices and, at times, have developed initiatives that are insensitive or oblivious to their local heritage. From British post-industrial cities to new Chinese cities emerging out of previously rural areas, the approach to cultural policy in some urban environment seems to oppose heritage to development. This is a seriously mistaken approach that puts a risk on the cultural credentials of cities.

In order to strengthen a city’s cultural capital, it is essential to reconcile historical awareness with a commitment towards innovation. This often means exploring options so that the heritage sector is understood, not only as the guardian of past glories, but rather as yet another dynamic creative industry and a key source of material to refine contemporary cultural priorities and appreciate the added-value of newly emergent cultural practices.

Embracing heritage seems harder in cities whose history has led to injustice or decline. However, cities that have suffered negative image associations should not deny their recent history or long-established roots, no matter how challenging or conducive to potentially damaging stereotyping. Instead, they must make a priority to revisit and interpret their history and associated stories. This is the best way to appreciate previous barriers to positive development and understand the causes of decline. Naturally, this is also an important process in order to lend credibility and depth to any strategy to go forward as well as heal from past damage caused or incurred.

From the very successful (and innovative) Slavery Museum in Liverpool to countless Holocaust memorials around Europe, there are excellent examples of heritage initiatives that, rather than fix cities in their past, have actually been a catalyst for innovation and creative repositioning, opening up new avenues for cultural exchange and positive (responsible) external projection.

Indeed, a note of warning is also due for those cities that are keen to celebrate their past but rely excessively on historical accounts, at times blocking initiatives which may challenge the coherence of the approved version of their story. A narrow fix on heritage can be as damaging to a flourishing capital of culture as its denial. As noted in the next section and at the end of this article, awareness of heritage should never come at the expense of silencing diverging voices and embracing change. A thriving capital of culture can only be so, in fact, by accepting that heritage itself cannot be set irrevocably and is, rather, subject to ongoing reinterpretation and renewal.

Embracing diversity

The last few decades have seen a flourishing of specialised literature noting the importance of tolerance and openness to enable creativity. Certainly, a common staple of all cities with strong cultural capital is their capacity to embrace difference and accept that such difference may not necessarily lead to a harmonic or consensual view of the world across all communities. Although it is essential to share common democratic values, it is equally important to acknowledge that vibrant cities are made possible by the creative tension generated out of conflicting opinions. The task of successful capitals of culture is to enable platforms for such conflict to be expressed in safe environments that also guarantee mutual respect and encourage exchange rather than just unmovable opposition between parties.

For cultural policy, accepting difference means that there will always be a need for dialogue. A capital of culture does not expect to reach a definitive consensus on its identity and aspirations; instead, it understands identity as an ongoing conversation which will become richer and more fruitful the more empowered and diverse its contributors. Ultimately, the cultural strength of cities is measured by the strength and visibility of its communities. A city that is only known through its established landmarks and iconic figures (be them historical or contemporary) cannot be a credible or inspiring cultural capital. As proven by tolerance and diversity havens such as San Francisco, all respected capitals of culture are known and celebrated by their ‘people’ as much as their ‘celebrities’ and this can only be the result of active and continuous engagement with and by their citizenship.

Nurturing leaders

The above section focuses on the need for active and diverse citizenship to enable the constant renewal of cultural capital in cities. This may take place quite organically in a myriad environments at specific points in time. The point of distinction by widely acknowledged capitals of culture is the capacity to support strong grassroots communities with inspiring leaders.

Leadership is thus the third key dimension in this article. Like ‘tolerance’, it is also a term much debated by urban cultural policy experts and has become a focus of many specialised management courses. Importantly, however, effective leadership is only possible when two key conditions exist:

- 1) credible and strong leaders that embrace the principles discussed so far;
- 2) acceptance and support towards leadership by the city’s diverse communities of interest

It is not uncommon for inspiring and potentially transformative leaders to fail helping a city go forward. This happens in cities that become overprotective of their perceived assets and develop a mistrust towards excessively dynamic individuals keen to challenge the status-quo or to interrogate its causes.

The role of leaders is to navigate the potentially paralysing conflicts or differences in opinion by diverse communities and propose a way forward without losing sight of those groups who may not find their hopes immediately realised. Their role is to remain aware of ongoing issues while being able to take risks by choosing to champion one amongst many other possible options for action. Effective leaders should also be receptive to the need to amend the causes they support while being able to sustain the integrity of their vision.

Deserving capitals of culture understand the importance of effective leadership. Further, they are keen to embrace leaders, irrespective of their background and political inclinations. This requires maturity on the part of elected governing bodies as de-facto leaders are not always those formally in power. Cities like London have shown a strong capacity to nurture and support local leaders – this explains, in part, its resurgence as an exciting capital of culture over the last decade, rather than remain just a global financial capital culturally lagging behind New York or, even, Berlin, as had been the case in the 1980s and 1990s.

Telling the story

Historical awareness. Diverse and empowered communities. Respected leaders. These are all powerful factors to nurture cultural vibrancy. But, beyond doing the good work, successful capitals of culture are those that know how to make this known. The story must be told, and in the hyper-saturated information society we live in, this requires a distinctive narrative as well as savvy ways of reaching out to both traditional and new media.

A say in major-event hosting circles, from previous Olympic cities to European Capitals of Culture, is that, in order to secure a sustainable legacy, the city must, not only deliver a sensational event fully in line with its long-term strategic priorities but also learn to

‘manage the myth’. By ‘myth’, we do not mean a distortion of the reality. We simply mean a powerful and memorable way to tell the story about what happened accounting, in particular, for its emotional impact.

Culturally relevant special events are those capable of generating a moment of collective memory. They are supposed to ‘inspire a generation’, as recent Olympic slogans have claimed. This should not just be dismissed as a crafty public relations exercise. Inspiring capitals of culture can deliver on these type of promises by keeping the media interested in them and having the most diverse range of people (their ‘empowered communities’ as well the leaders mentioned earlier) telling the story.

After more than twenty years, Barcelona is a good case in point in this area. This is a city that managed to create the notion of a ‘Barcelona model’ that is still considered a referent point today. This is despite the fact that many other cities have been effective at delivering an Olympic Games and even improved on aspects of the staging process. The important difference between cities that only attract attention at a specific point in time and those that secure consistently ‘positive’ external projection over decades is, precisely, the capacity to engage with opinion leaders and broader communities at an emotional – rather than just objective, materially-based - level. This is only possible when those shaping the narrative feel personally engaged themselves – when they are not just trained spokespeople but spontaneous champions for their city.

It may sound paradoxical to note that cultural interventions often fail to produce meaningful emotional impact or result in memorable narratives over time. But this is frequently the case given the extensive use of cultural activity as a strategic device and the widespread replication of frameworks which, in turn, translate into generalist stories with poor attachment to place. When this occurs, it is difficult to capture the imagination of promoters, journalists and audiences alike. Successful capitals of culture are those that can prevent such vicious circle by providing the right conditions to produce meaningful culture but also ensuring that local champions know how that has been possible and providing them the right platforms to share such knowledge. These are cities that invest in their champions and understand the importance of turning their citizens into ambassadors. By 2014, at a time of globally competitive city branding strategies, the most appreciated cultural stories are those that come, not only from professional city boosters, but common-ground local ambassadors, from taxi drivers to baristas and, indeed, the growing fleet of self-appointed ‘citizen journalists’ committed to report on their cities via social media.

Welcoming change

Cultural decline and irrelevance starts the day one believes that everything has been done and accomplished. Cities should never operate like theme parks nor become museums in the traditional sense of the word. Cities are never finished, they are always work in progress. A worthy capital of culture is fully aware of this reality and keen to embrace it.

Returning to our point of departure, thus, the challenge is to achieve the right balance between a respect for local heritage and the drive to keep changing and moving forward. As discussed in the section dedicated to ‘diversity’, a capital of culture is always a mosaic of previously formed identities attempting to establish new dialogues. A fruitful dialogue should generate new avenues and meeting points that require a diversion from previously

established practice. What was a traditional heavy-industry production factory may become a creative-industry ‘ideas’ factory. In order to remain relevant, that ‘ideas factory’ may later need to become an urban garden or a community centre and so on, in order to address the city’s ever changing needs.

Berlin is both the (financially) poorest and (creatively) richest city in Germany. It has reinvented itself constantly throughout more than a century, and continues to do so today. It remains one of the most interesting cultural capitals in the world and it has managed to achieve such status thanks to its capacity to adapt to the times while, bravely, confronting the worst of its past and trying to make the most of repeated political, social and economic crisis and aggression in its soil. Nowadays, Berlin must confront the possibility of becoming too successful as a capital of culture – and the temptation to ‘fix’ its status, by trying to freeze its creative credentials, contain the diversity of its communities, professionalise its leaders and transform its recent ‘cultural renaissance’ story into yet another urban slogan.

The forces of gentrification are taking over many city neighbourhoods, as it had been the case for Manhattan in the 1970s and London soon after. The artists that took over the many empty warehouses in the 1990s are progressively being outsted by successful commercial art galleries and these, in turn, are being bought off by global real state agents. This is a form of change, of course, but one that risks killing the other dimensions essential to a purposeful capital of culture. It is, however, possible, that Berlin overcomes such risks and retains its credentials thanks to the impetus of its many communities and the commitment of local leaders and independent champions. Community-led tongue-in-cheek messages requesting ‘hipster free’ zones (in the once proudly celebrated ‘hipster capital’ of the world) are growing; an independent artist network has been created and is attracting donations from around the globe to protect neighbourhoods from locally insensitive investment firms. These are just some examples of interesting initiatives that may save Berlin from losing its inclusive cultural strengths to narrow elite’s economic gain.

Overall, it looks like those cities that manage to become capitals of culture by excelling in most of the dimensions identified here may grow the kind of resilience necessary to resist the temptation to freeze and sell out their assets (thus losing the very capital that made them attractive in the first place). We may be able to conclude that, becoming a capital of cultural is an ongoing process, one that never allows a city to become complacent but ultimately, one that may help identify and nurture the conditions required to keep changing, evolving with the times in order to retain the most sought-after and harder to pre-determine asset of all: your cultural capital.

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