

# The Festival Cities Conversations

## EFA, Cities and Europe

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This paper by Simon Mundy stems from the series of meetings held on the Zoom remote link platform between May and July 2020 and is compiled from the contributions of participants (see detailed reports and video recordings of the five meetings on EFA's website and here below).

It is divided in 5 parts reflecting the role and responsibility of conversation partners that were and are involved: the cities, festivals, heritage and tourism representatives, society and Europe.

It aims to invite festivals, cities and European stakeholders alike to deepen this conversation in the 2 months to come leading to the Berlin Conference on 8 and 9 November 2020 in Berlin under the topic of 'The New Culture of Common Responsibilities'.

### 1. The Cities

A city is not just physical, an arrangement of streets and dwellings, public buildings and open spaces. As we have discovered during the COVID crisis, a city is nothing without activity. As we rethink our skills and working practices we also need to rethink our cities; their purpose, life patterns and infrastructure.

Protection from infection is by necessity a process of isolation. That, though, is exactly what cities exist to counter. So, as cities emerge from the need for isolation, they must reconnect their citizens with each other and help them to engage safely.

Festivals can constantly reinvent the city, not the other way round. Within each city are artistic clusters, whether in highly visible organisations or in small groups of professionals. Festivals can showcase these clusters, link them together, show the strength in depth of local creative talent to give the city a redefined and enhanced reputation.

Cities can use festivals to revive their open spaces and landscapes, turning under-used or ignored areas, abandoned factories, disused railway yards, run-down parkland, into hives of activity and invention. For this to work, Arts need to be at the centre of city development, education and economic planning.

A city can be a province, not just a centre of buildings and streets. Every city has a hinterland, outlying villages and smaller towns that gravitate towards it, landscapes and heritage sites that give the area character and potential. Imaginative festivals can spread themselves, holding satellite events, drawing the people of this hinterland together by using the possibilities of outlying places to generate important inclusive energy.

As we rethink our mobility, so the local potential becomes increasingly vital. Bringing in visitors from outside is always helpful but the lasting benefits come from changing the mindset and aspirations of those who live and work in a city and its surrounding countryside. Invigorate them and long term prospects and reputation improve out of all recognition.

## **2. The Festivals**

Festivals are having to reinvent themselves in response to the continuing COVID disruption and are likely to have to deal with the effects on their finances, patterns of programming and of audience caution for many years to come.

Many are in any case in a process of considering how they operate, experimenting with new ideas and moving on from the assumptions of the last century. Some need reinvention, others maybe just reconnection with audiences that have drifted away, and with host cities that take them for granted.

Festivals have to have a local reason to exist. Without that they cannot inspire loyalty from the host community or offer a distinctive image to the outside world. Many have perhaps become a trifle comfortable with themselves over the decades. Now, though, is a good time to reaffirm the authenticity of the festival, to reconnect with audiences, artists, business, civil society organisations and city authorities.

While big city festivals can always be impressive, they tend to merge into the general flow of city cultural life and find it harder to carve out an identity that rises above the overall reputation of the city itself. Usually small and medium-sized cities (less than 500,000) are ideal in their cultural and creative mix for a festival to thrive and be outstanding. They make excellent creative hubs and can specialise, gaining a reputation for a particular art form or festival format.

## **3. Tourism, the City, Heritage and the Arts**

Visitors to a city and a festival – whether business travellers, tourists or dedicated festival goers – are essential for vitality and income. However, the type of visitor and how they fit into the complex demography of city life requires careful management. Mass, unthinking and short-stay tourism can destroy the character of a place just as surely as a natural disaster. Locals can be alienated (and frozen out by property prices), businesses can become unstable as the nature of city-centre retail changes, and the physical heritage can be damaged.

Citizens want tourists to be more responsible. Increasingly the emphasis is to encourage deep travel – explore further, stay longer, behave better. Tourism flows in historic city centres need to be monitored, just as air quality and traffic movement is.

The role and authenticity of tourism is being reviewed with more cultural routes, connections, city networks and themed links. There can be no sustainable tourism without sustainable culture which has to be cared for and maintained just as assiduously as hospitality standards.

Culture is Europe's main attraction: 4/10 tourists choose destinations because of it. That begs the question, what do we want our immaterial heritage to be? There is a need for stronger partnerships between tourism and culture organisations, promoters, marketing agencies and business.

The vocabulary of discovering a city has to change over the next decade so that there is a virtuous circle. Tourists must become visitors, who become festival audiences and heritage students, who return as repeat visitors, no longer tourist strangers.

A city's well-being has to be natural and cultural, slow but volcanic, with steadily rising commitment and long term vision. The importance of contemporary art and architecture in raising awareness has to be recognised. For a time, an era, to mean something in the future, a city must constantly invent its future heritage otherwise a generation will be forgotten.

Coming to a festival in a fascinating city must be a voyage across time and space. It must link rural to urban, the journey with the shock of arrival and, as the experience changes visitors, the local people can be helped discover and participate in their own heritage anew.

#### **4. Society**

The World Health Organisation recognises culture as a transformative force. When used well it can be complementary medicine not just for an individual but for a city. Living in a city proud of its artistic achievements can raise levels of aspiration and increase contentment throughout the community.

Festivals can be, and often are, driving forces in social transformation. By increasing self-confidence they can help citizens define themselves in more positive ways that enable them to engage with 'the other', removing the fear of strangeness in communities that share streets but not life. Participation removes barriers. Festivals can draw together identities and pluralism with the local, helping to build a new urban memory. At a time of fear, the arts can nurture social cohesion.

For many new creative professionals, contributing to social and political aims is a poetic necessity. They are not so interested in the approval of aesthetic gatekeepers. Issues like climate change, diversity etc. become the impulse for expression, a reason to create.

The challenge for cities is not to see creative people and their festivals as peripheral but as crucial collaborators central to new policy – frame-makers who preserve the significance of cultural expression. That significance can be measured by statisticians and social scientists to understand the effect of the creative projects and effort.

#### **5. Europe, Cities and Festivals Together**

How can the city remain relevant for Europe as its nations struggle for equilibrium and prosperity? While nations may seem to be the main focus of the European Union and Council of Europe, change and prosperity will be driven from the cities. They are the litmus test for any policy. Their success will

be Europe's too and without successful cities, Europe's combined achievements will fall short and feel shallow.

Europe, Cities and Festivals come in many definitions. Europe in one definition is the European Union, in another is the continent from Iberia to the Urals It can be all the countries in UEFA or the Council of Europe, reaching from Reunion and Martinique to Vladivostok. Cities are sometimes defined as settlements that have a mayor and a council, sometimes only those that have cathedrals. Arts festivals can be just as hard to pinpoint. They can be anything from a weekend concentrating on a niche artistic genre to a programme spreading over several months and locations.

Europe is not alien; it is a political concept rooted in local life and cities need to realise their own European nature. Often cities existed as European entities many centuries before the nations of which they are now part. A good example was highlighted in 2019 when Plovdiv was European Capital of Culture (ECOC). As a city it can trace its origins back at least 3500 years while its present country of Bulgaria is less than 200. The city can bring that sense of time perspective to contemporary European life, showing the continuity of our heritage and way of life.

The ECOC programme is not about one way communication, from the city to Europe, though. It is about bringing Europe to the city and helping its people understand how they are part of the bigger picture. That is one reason why it is important for candidate cities to carry on with the planned programme whether or not they are awarded the title. They are all part of the new narrative on European values, not top down but coming upwards from communities across the continent. Without this sense of inclusion and mutual recognition the European project will fall apart.

ECOC has been so successful for more than 30 years that the idea is now being copied worldwide. So as well as being a flagship for Europe and its cities, it has everything to do with a global conversation. Cities want to be sharing new peace throughout Europe and beyond. They can do this in many ways. They can form links and partnerships across time zones, connecting territories, from villages up to metropoli to the rest of the world. Festivals, cities and the institutions of Europe are bound together in a creative partnership to end isolation, inspire citizens and celebrate the astonishing richness of heritage and contemporary artistry.