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Culture as primary political action in city governance

Three key concepts and ten policies to start with

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On the 30th of May 2016, the EU Minsters responsible for Urban Matters reached agreement on the establishment of the Urban Agenda for the EU, as set out in the Pact of Amsterdam, a working document indicating the guidelines for the sustainable growth of cities. The twelve Priority Themes–which include migrants and refugees, urban poverty, climate adaptation, urban mobility and digital transitions–make no mention of culture. This absence is alarming, and it is worth reflecting on, especially in light of the non-central role given to Cultural Heritage within the concluding stage of the framework programme Horizon 2020. In the following document, the authors have set out several conceptual schemes that can be used to re-insert culture within the bedrock of primary political action for city governance and, therefore, subtract culture from a merely accessory or ornamental function, where its role is seen as a pure cost. From this standpoint, culture–understood

as the continuous actions taken by every actor in a city to create common value and public good out of the affairs of a city—is not a policy like any other and neither is it a set of optional extras to be supported as long as there are the funds to do so. Culture must, instead, be a primary political action linked to the process of regenerating a city, especially in connection with cultural built heritage.

1. Circular Cities

CPCL Agency supports the idea of a circular city, where cultural heritage is not seen as the static presence of objects embodying consolidated values towards which finance must be channelled, but rather as the best—and continuously renewed—outcomes of all the actions taken to transform a city. The proposed cultural mode, which is underpinned by the vitality of European historical cities, hinges on the unceasing work to give cities a distinctive identity, to recognise what is permanent and what is in transformation and to endorse their values as common heritage and common good. In this process, conservation and innovation come together in an unbroken fluid process. One aim of the project is to strengthen the role that cultural heritage with consolidated value has within a city, in order both to retain this value and to use cultural heritage as a route to social inclusion. Another major objective is to include new places and new subjects within a city's cultural heritage and, alongside these, new social and economic actors. The final objective of the project is to engender integration between actions of remembrance and actions of innovation, in order for each to be reciprocally strengthened.

2. City of Knowledge and of Creativity

CPCL Agency promotes a city where any transformation has its roots in well-targeted knowledge-conveying actions undertaken by weaving closely together all the potential and/or useful skills that can be derived from university research into the sciences and the arts, as well as relating to political and administrative matters, entrepreneurship and the third-sector. These knowledge-channelling actions are at the basis of an informed and ongoing renovation of a city, and, therefore, reinforce the creative actions dealing with cultural heritage that engender material, social and economic improvement within cities. When planning technological adjustments, the measures are weighted according to the specific features and sensitivity of the places under scrutiny, and their efficiency is continuously measured against the work required to carry out the updating process. The experimental processes implemented are geared towards transforming gathered data, initiatives and experiences, cultural exchange and of ideas and relationships into knowledge. All city actors must be able to access this knowledge, while pointing out that everyone has the right to use the material continuously flowing from the city. This creative flow is necessary to support the collaboration provided by the inhabitants to the city-wide processes

of social and economic development, establishing the fertile ground for putting their own skills into play within the network. This project also operates on the processes of communication between the various categories of users and among the various types of knowledge within the city, to enable skills to be shared, consolidated and used effectively, thereby overcoming the sectorial fragmentation which is typical of local government, in a process to stimulate the dynamics of exchange between data, people and places. The city of knowledge becomes the stage for the citizens of knowledge.

3. Cosmopolitan Citizenship

The process of listing all the heterogeneous and distinctive features of the unrestricted profusion of life forms whose horizons are broader than the mere concept of themselves and their own life, while giving them a set of regulations that could apply to anything or anybody, can be seen as a critical stress system of opposing tensions. The connection between such disparate and distant facets—which in practice means translation on an anthropological scale—can take many different forms and modalities. These forms can either be in agreement with or oppose the pervasive hegemony that contemporary capitalism deploys towards life forms, and the ensuing stress system is the result of the co-presence of these different and sometimes conflicting pressures. The urban process is one of the main theatres for this stress system. Culture—in the form of cultural heritage, historical architecture and tangible and intangible experience—constitutes one of the principle keys through which the "extractive" nature of modern-day capitalism is configured in environments such as those with which we are most familiar. In this sense, the connection between culture and urban dimension is a particular modality through which cosmopolitanism is "captured" within the logic of contemporary capitalism. Under certain conditions, this connection is inspired by "bottom-up cosmopolitism" directed towards some kind of "deep democracy", highlighting the political meaning of cosmopolitism in its role as a project for emancipation. In this perspective, culture, in all its manifold manifestations, is the main playing field where the principles of universalism and the local life forms can be translated from one to the other, re-inventing the present-day conditions so that the air of a city can truly bring freedom to its inhabitants. As one of its objectives, CPCL Agency is committed to ensure that, in its every action, specialist and non-specialist skills are assimilated together. The actions of CPCL Agency are founded on the belief that the cosmopolitan structure of citizenship is an actual wealth. By cosmopolite, the authors do not only mean varied geographical provenance and sometimes transient permanence in the city, but rather the term indicates an inclination towards the understanding and interaction between the various cultural, social and economic identities of a city, as well as hanging onto the distinctive aspects of vision, knowledge and skills that merge together into shared actions.

Suggested Policies

1. Capitalise on the benefits of a still thriving urban model based upon historical European cities, as an alternative to the metropolis or the model for metropolitan transformation.

2. Debunk the concept of cultural heritage as an element of rigidity and an obstacle to the transformation of cities, replacing it with the idea that cultural heritage is an ongoing creative process that is extended to intangible values and is experienced and understood as an agent for transformation in a city.

3. Retain the consolidated elements of cultural heritage, but increase its social inclusion to counteract the risk of city districts becoming, to all intents and purposes, museums.

4. Avoid committing culture to financial or marketing logics—considering it as a cost—and, instead, place culture back at the centre of urban policies, seeing it as every city stakeholder's sustained action to create value and common good out of the affairs of a city, transforming culture into an agent for social and economic development.

5. Combine the two aspects of remembrance and innovation within the city-wide actions of co-creation and co-production.

6. Encourage the processes to create cultural heritage out of the new and sometimes unexpected elements that a city can come up with.

7. Unite what is cultural and what is creative, transforming personal aspirations into collective projects, while taking a good look at all the skills and talent found in the city and overcome the sectorial fragmentation typical of local government, so that the city of knowledge becomes the stage for the citizenship of knowledge.

8. Ease the processes of cultural exchange to calibrate the specific features of a place and the use of data and technology, observing that everyone has the right to share and use the output and material that the city is able to produce.

9. Develop bottom-up cosmopolitanism, understood as a project for emancipation, giving culture—in all its many manifestations—the task of translating the principles of universalism and the local life forms from one to the other.

10. Interpret internal and external migration in a logic of transient citizenship, upholding the elements of positivity and enrichment of a city's identity within a formal, inclusive framework.