

2021 – Timisoara European Capital of Culture, the urban regeneration opportunity for the city

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ABSTRACT

The term “culture” can be used to refer to any space or building, from architecture, patrimony buildings and tourist attractions to performing arts, festivals and events or relaxing activities, as well as people’s way of life. More and more cities are using culture as a tool to save non-functional spaces, or old buildings, trying find new functions (former factories or abandoned train stations are transformed into museums, galleries, libraries, polluted lands are decontaminated, former industrial platforms are cleaned and rehabilitated into new public shared spaces) thus preserving the identity of each place around the world.

Timisoara, through its experiences and history, is a courageous city, that stands for its values, being the host of over 30 different cultures: Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, Serbs, Croats, Italians, etc. Throughout history, this city located in western part of Romania, generated sparks and stimulated transformation across borders, created a strong personality, always on the map of Europe. However, today the city is confronted with a number of problems, particularly moral and civic and lack of interest for its assets (historical buildings, old great factories, riverfront across the city), laying on indifference, risking to lose all its beauty.

The “2021 – Timisoara European Capital of Culture “ is an opportunity for Timisoara to generate considerable cultural, social and economic benefits and to help encourage urban regeneration, change and reactivation of the city’s image on an international scale. Assuming this title, Timisoara can become a city where cultural excellence confers self-confidence on the citizens and the power to change through participation and involvement in the city’s cultural life.

The goal is to center on the title of European Capital of Culture and regenerate/reactivate the forgotten spaces of the industrial heritage, but also the “dark places”, neglected of the city and to solve the problem of intolerance towards the marginal groups, by capturing the civic interest, through cultural events. To base “the regeneration” it is required a site analysis, a theoretical research to understand all the terms and principles involved and a social analysis to see the city through people’s eyes. To achieve this goal the city’s people need to understand and acknowledge the importance of this title and start caring about the city they live in.

Keywords: urban regeneration, culture, art, public spaces, connections, awaiting spaces.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cities are cultural entities. The texture of social and economic life in them is defined by their cultural energy or lack of it, and cities all over the world - Glasgow, Barcelona, Seattle - have demonstrated that by changing the way their cultural life is perceived, you can change everything about them" [1].

The previous quote emphasizes the importance of culture in the life of any city, demonstrating that changing the way to perceive culture can change the whole city.

Art, beauty and taste have become important drivers in postmodern economic development, in which this symbolic title has the potential to add much value to economic processes in postindustrial societies. From graphic design, architecture to music, these forms can encourage new consumer behavior, inspire ideas that may generate new content to consume, and foster new technologies [2]. But all this cultural events and festivals are connected to the historical legacy and the cultural activity of the city and they can hold a central role in the formation of its identity and fame.

The European Capital of Culture is a large scale cultural event that can have major economic and social impacts on a city, not only on its cultural infrastructure and local art scene but also on its image and brand [3]. The quality of planning bears the imprint of its representative values and it determines confidence and involvement in the proposed measured.

Timisoara is a city where the civic values and democratic rights have always been essential. The city of Revolution from 1989, where the private initiative is encouraged and respected, Timisoara, has always embraced the changes of times, offering many opportunities for researchers and policy makers to discuss the connection of culture and urban development, in order to create a sustainable regeneration plan, that will bring the city back to life and glory on the map of Europe.

II. TIMISOARA – THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2021

2021, when Timisoara is going to celebrate the title of European Capital of Culture will be a very

important year, but people also need to understand that the next years are also important too, and many problems need real solutions. It is essential for the city's complete regeneration to continue the development and to keep the ecosystem created by this opportunity, alive. In order to do that, the paper aims to provide answers to some simple questions that will build an accurate image of the present context of Timisoara and show how the people involved in the event can keep the image of the city alive:

- How to regenerate the city, the public spaces and reactivate the lost spaces?
- What is the role of culture in this process?
- What factors influence this process?
- How can the community get involved?

To find the answers, first we need to understand the main keywords: culture and urban regeneration and their meanings for a city:

The term "culture" comes from the Latin word *cultivatio* which translates into "cultivating" / "honoring", which generally refers to human activity. The definition given by UNESCO considers culture as a series of distinct features of a society or social group in spiritual, material, intellectual or emotional terms. Culture is an inheritance that transmits gestures, rituals, theoretical knowledge, abstract rules, or religion. Culture can be acquired through various forms of subjective memory (reflections, words, images) but also through objective memory (objects, landscapes, books, numbers, rules).

The concept of urban regeneration has become a very common word used in urban and territorial studies and planning, and is often associated with rediscovering the city or areas of the city that have fallen physically, economically and socially. Numerous publications on this issue highlight this approach, but very few emphasize the role of culture in the regeneration process. In this context, there is a major interest in culture and the role it can play, acting as an instrument in local and global urban regeneration strategies.

The public space also plays an essential role being a place accessible to all, both physically (pedestrians, cyclists, people with disabilities) as well as from a legislative, moral and cultural point of view. This is a place for all and no one at the same time, meant to attract visitors and

host social activities, in a pleasant atmosphere. Thus, a public space must promote social activities and human interaction, it should be safe, welcoming and fit for all users, have architectural features and design elements that are visually appealing, encourage community involvement, reflect local culture and history, and the character of the place, not to be an inconvenience to the locals, to be well maintained and to have a well-defined and highlighted character. One of the biggest public space that Timisoara has, are the riverfronts of Bega, that can provide various public spaces for projection of films, performances, dances, festivals, all possible without major interventions, but only through the active involvement of people in the activities, managing a natural transformation of the spaces, bringing them to life through cultural activities. So, Timisoara European Capital of Culture title provides the scene where all this keywords can be implemented in a realistic manner, requiring the involvement of communities, authorities, artists, for the temporary or even definitive transformation of spaces, to solve the problems that are still existing after the implementation of various urban rehabilitation projects, in order to create the optimal framework for the development of cultural events, festivals, reclaiming neglected spaces and using them for cultural purposes.

II.1. The role of culture in urban development

Starting from this premise, the paper's objective is to define several strategies for a sustainable development and urban regeneration across city through proposals for conversion and reactivation of old historical buildings, abandoned public spaces, regeneration of the riverfront on the Bega banks, at the same time, transforming Timisoara into an area dedicated to contemporary culture, through mechanisms of public involvement and creation, connecting the people with the city.

A lot of programs based on communication and connections between individuals, that will change the public spaces are also mentioned in the BidBook Timisoara - European Capital of Culture 2021.

Recent international studies have shown that

culture all over the world is one of the main pillars of urban regeneration. Different areas of a city that are socially, culturally and economically widowed can rebirth by applying appropriate cultural policies. "We all recognize how important it is to respect local culture, heritage and tradition; with regeneration, we attempt to focus on quality, balanced with economic opportunity for the population, optimizing the visitor's experience by applying a creative mix of cultural, environmental and historic resources linked with social and economic aspects. The new term 'placemaking' does not only measure a physical structure by its aesthetic design; it also defines the integrity of the experience had by the individual, which contributes to the economic viability of public spaces, the resources used and the health and wellbeing of the community. Culture regeneration may be used as a tool to create cultural districts, cultural hubs, etc. and to utilize these zones in order to begin the gentrification process, with all its positive effects" [4].

It is important to mention that culture was, for a long time, an unfairly neglected element of spatial planning with important long-term effects on the wellbeing of a community. When analyzing the role of culture in urban regeneration concepts, most of the past approaches tended to focus mainly on cultural production schemes, where culture, the arts and other creative production were regarded as important supportive elements that added to the functioning of society and economy. Bianchini (1999) described such use of culture and creative potential in urban policies as the 'age of city marketing' where culture was 'increasingly seen as a valuable tool to diversify the local economic base and to compensate for jobs lost in traditional industrial and services sectors' [5].

In today's cities, high quality of life and cultural, ethnic and economic heterogeneity may very well be considered important aspects of urban diversity, affecting local production and consumption. In these circumstances, where global context plays an important role for the future of the city, 'culture' becomes an extremely important factor that supports reorientation from economies of scale to high-value industries and

a key element of transition from the modern to the post-modern phase of urban development. In other words, cities have become aware that culture has the possibility of providing distinctiveness in relationship to other cities, by localizing network flows, constructing representational images, enabling events, promoting the development of interesting public spaces and allowing the formation of unique situational settings.

II.2. Present situation of the city - strengths and weaknesses

The role of the European Cultural Capital title is to highlight the richness and diversity of European culture, to promote it among European citizens and to encourage the feeling that we all belong to the same European community.

The potential of Timisoara can be seen judging by the perspective of history, being the most important industrial, commercial, financial and cultural city in the region, admired for its artistic excellence, thus developing a multi-cultural community, which is currently suffering from the loss of regional identity and a clear position within European culture.

The main problems of the city, marked also in Timisoara BidBook, European Capital of Culture 2021, points out the decline of civic interest, intolerance to marginalized groups, loss of public space, lack of a common urban vision and an insufficiently developed international profile of the city.

In spite of its favorable geographic position, Timisoara does not exploit the potential of the Bega-Danube connection at the DKMT Euroregion, both at infrastructure and tourism level, as well as from the cultural point of view, a link with the other European cultural communities. The problem is not only physical (an improvement on infrastructure is needed, and build more highways), but especially ideological, as people are not opened to knowledge, communication, connection to the European context.

The material base of the city, known in time as a city with prosper industry, is rich, there are a series of industrial buildings, old industrial halls and warehouses, oversized and heavily adaptable to current uses, that have been abandoned,

causing an overload of urban space in former industrial areas. These decommissioned industrial areas have now been proposed in the New General urban plan for urban reconversion, but the process of restructuring and rehabilitation is slow, with investors preferring to build new industrial buildings at the level of Western standards. Going further, a lot of historical buildings are found in an advanced stage of degradation, because of the lack of communication between the local authorities and the owners, that cannot afford to rehabilitate these architectural jewels by themselves. The same situation applies to public spaces, that are localized a bit further from the center, where because of the intolerance of marginal groups and the lack of common activities, a lot of parks and squares are empty.

Given this situation, Timisoara must wake up and focus on mapping its resources: cultural spaces (actual and potential), cultural operators (organizations and public institutions) and cultural events (that had success can be successful bases on people's preferences), and start spreading them around the city, in unconventional spaces.

An analyse of the current cultural situation of the city is made, shows that the cultural spaces are those where cultural activities take place with a constant or occasional public, like the art galleries or the museums, showing us that we have a double problem: lack of space for free artistic creations and workshops and lack of programs to support and motivate contemporary creation. A series of events can be easily recognized, because they have already become tradition, but there are no significant events at a large scale. In fact, studies show that half of the inhabitants of Timisoara have never been in an art gallery, or at a performing art show, although in the past several years the city began to be systematically explored by institution organizing performing arts in parks and town squares. The natural area of the city, the riverfront, has also hosted outdoor events. The Bega Boulevard event "a project of ecological accountability by emphasizing the cultural and tourism potential of Bega river, organized by the Municipality of Timisoara" [6] transformed the riverfront into

an open scene, significantly increasing the number of spectators, with new categories of audiences, up to 62% of the city's inhabitants. This event is a proof that the riverfront and the spaces around it have a great potential and reactivating this natural part of the city may be one of the keys of a successful regeneration plan.

"Cities seek a waterfront that is a place of public enjoyment. They want a waterfront where there is ample visual and physical public access – all day, all year - to both the water and the land. Cities also want a waterfront that serves more than one purpose: they want it to be a place to work and to live, as well as a place to play. In other words, they want a place that contributes to the quality of life in all of its aspects – economic, social, and cultural" [7].

The quote emphasizes the importance of the urban waterfront, as a public space, full of life, a place forgotten by many cities around the world, that can be always brought to life by the simple presence of the people.

Only using all his resources and applying a the local urban rules, the city can succeed, and grow a healthy urban regeneration.

According to "The cultural strategy of Timisoara 2014-2024", there is a set of principles that need to be followed:

- Recognition of heritage values and their capitalization;
- Support of contemporary culture;
- Considering freedom of expression as a fundamental element of creativity and innovation;
- Recognizing the importance of the links between culture and society;
- Recognizing culture as an engine of individual and community development;
- Democratic respect for citizens and cultural operators in the development of public policy;
- Capitalization of the culture's economic potential"[6].

Applying this set of rules and the fourth pillars of sustainability we can generate a strategy of urban regeneration based on human interaction in the public space, exchange of cultures and tolerance, activating abandoned places and making the city alive again.

II.3. Preparations for 2021

2021 may be a year of new experiences, that gives the city the opportunity to create partnerships between local authorities and citizens, local or European investors interested in promoting culture, and making it the link to urban regeneration.

The European Capitals of Culture initiative is designed to:

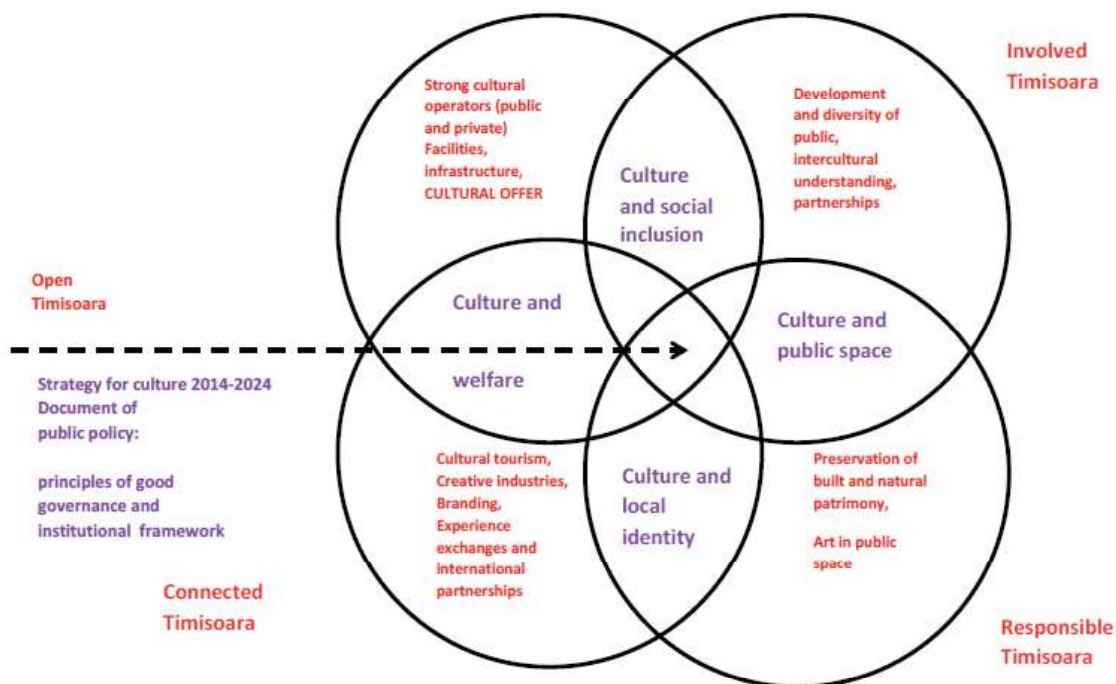


Fig. 1. Fourth pillar of sustainability

- Highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe;
- Celebrate the cultural features Europeans share;
- Increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area;
- Foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities.

In addition to this, experience has shown that the event is an excellent opportunity for:

- Raising the international profile of cities;
- Regenerating cities;
- Enhancing the image of cities in the eyes of their own inhabitants;
- Breathing new life into a city's culture;
- Boosting tourism;

That is why, to preserve the identity of the cities, it is necessary to practice a quality urban design regeneration, that fulfils the need to save the modern city from an industrialized trading market. By using art in public spaces it is desired to articulate the spaces with the landscape, inviting the audience to relive experiences.

For the cultural dimension to succeed and help to regenerate the city it is important to understand city's history, the urban heritage, and most important, the public spaces, the abandoned buildings and the dark places with potential of transformation. It is also important to understand:

- the importance of individuals. Local opinion leaders, stakeholders, political leaders, cultural stars, journalists, academics and personalities who serve as drivers for cultural development in the city;
- open communication. The socially liberal climate of cosmopolitan milieus and open discourse in a city, allowing controversial communal dialogues and debates on cultural projects and issues;
- networking. The physical, social and economic preconditions in a city that allow cultural networking and enable local actors in the field to cooperate;
- organizational capacity. Public and private organizations that have the competence and manpower and the political support to manage cultural and creative projects and events, and that are flexible and open for new strategies to

promote creativity in a city;

- the recognition that there is a crisis or challenge to be solved. Experience shows that a challenge or even a local crisis helps to nourish creative action;
- catalyst events and organizations. Cultural events that attract cultural communities, media and visitors to a city, events that require the cooperation and facilitation of public and private institutions;
- creative spaces. The existence of creative spaces, such as cultural districts, museum quarters or locations that determine the cultural and creative image of a city [5].

III. CONCLUSIONS

Timisoara 2021 - The European Capital of Culture is just the impulse, manifested at a large scale that can have major economic and social impacts on a city, not only on its cultural infrastructure and local art scene but also on its image and brand and the urban regeneration needs to continue after this year.

Starting from this impulse, a natural regeneration is expected to grow and develop over time, involving citizens in civic and cultural activities, revitalizing lost spaces and generating new places for recreation and leisure activities, and last but not least by redesccovering Bega river as an important part of the city over time.

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