



# Do we hear the voices of local citizens when we arrange cultural megaprojects for them? A case of the European capitals of culture

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## ABSTRACT

Culture-led urban regeneration projects can be an answer for tackling current depopulation challenges in specific regions due to aging and outward migration. Existing literature stresses the importance of citizen involvement in culture-led projects for successful urban regeneration. However, traditional top-down business approaches, including the dominance of external accountability, often limit our ability to hear local citizens' voices. Therefore, comprehensive reporting on practices of citizen participation may bring value to future culture-led regeneration projects. In this viewpoint paper, we investigate the case of the European Capitals of Culture and analyze their own evaluation reports understand *to what extent and how citizen participation is described in evaluation reports of culture-led regeneration projects*. We use an established framework to classify citizen participation by the degree of citizens' right to decide and exercise power in decision-making. We demonstrate that smaller cities that need urban regeneration tend to mobilize cultural initiatives as an arena for citizen engagement. Although we do not find evidence of citizen participation in larger ECoC cities, their participation is still essential for local value creation. We finalize our viewpoint with policy recommendations that can be relevant globally for initiatives that aim at urban regeneration.

## 1. Introduction

Culture is an underlying dimension of future sustainable development that may foster a paradigm shift to renew policymaking towards an inclusive, people-centered and context-relevant approach (UNESCO, 2023). Academic discussions on the importance of culture-led regeneration projects at the local, national, and international levels are ongoing (Biondi et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2023). The literature underlines that culture can help gain a competitive advantage in the struggle to attract or retain investors, residents, and tourists (Środa-Murawska, 2020; Nermond et al., 2021), but it is reported that the traditional top-down business approaches may no longer be suitable for the current urban regeneration processes (Li et al., 2020).

Therefore, citizen participation in cultural initiatives and their evaluation is proposed to be essential as it drives socially inclusive innovation processes and social value creation (Nakagawa, 2010; Sasaki, 2010). Yet, external accountability dominates in this context; therefore, comprehensive reporting on practices of citizen participation may bring value to future culture-led regeneration projects (Chiaravallotti & Piber, 2011; Knardal, 2020). This paper analyzes *to what*

*extent and how citizen participation is described in evaluation reports of culture-led regeneration projects?* We investigate the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) initiative, which is aimed at sparking cultural, social, and economic development of cities as well as raising local inhabitants' life satisfaction and increasing their desire to remain in the area (Nermond et al., 2021). In our study, we analyze ECoC's own evaluation reports as an example, as they focus more on local impacts than the EU general evaluation. These reports may provide a benchmark for citizen participation in other culture-led regeneration projects.

Since launching in 1985, over 60 cities of different sizes across Europe have been designated as ECoC. This mega-project initiative is primarily publicly financed and aims to enhance the value of the local public sector. This study is based on a documentary analysis of available practical evidence, namely ten evaluation reports from the designated ECoC. In these reports, we traced evidence of the various types of citizen participation – from non-participation to tokenism and citizen power (in terms of Arnstein, 1969). We have found that smaller ECoC cities engage citizens in the ECoC's evaluation to a higher degree – in the form of tokenism to citizen power. Our analysis contributes to the literature on culture-led urban regeneration and citizen participation (Biondi et al.,

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2020; Gong et al., 2023; Grossi et al., 2023; Hui et al., 2021) by demonstrating how citizen participation is applied in practice – to a limited degree and in specific cases. The paper ends with policy recommendations for future culture-led regeneration projects.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Existing studies investigating citizen participation in culture-led regeneration projects provide evidence for the relationship between citizen participation initiatives and the overall success of cultural arrangements (Biondi et al., 2020; Grossi et al., 2023; Wang & Richardson, 2021). Citizen participation can be organized as multistakeholder round tables, focus groups, community advisory councils, and the direct involvement of citizens and civil society groups in the evaluation processes (Gray, 2002; Ferry & Slack, 2022). Citizen participation ensures that citizens and civil society collaborate to create value (Vakkuri & Johanson, 2020), allows policymakers to find answers to the real needs and expectations of a community (Correia et al., 2023) and plays a crucial role in urban planning and regeneration (Hui et al., 2021). Therefore, in this paper, we focus on citizen participation as an essential instrument for culture-led urban development and regeneration (Grossi et al., 2023; Sasaki, 2010).

ECoC projects are seen as a powerful tool to regenerate local economies, create social value, and strengthen local democracy (Nermond et al., 2021). However, the decision-making and planning of such megaprojects often entail a predominately political planning strategy (Pappas, 2014), which questions the possibility of involvement of local inhabitants and hearing their voices. There are various frameworks to evaluate citizen participation, but the most established one is Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969). It classifies citizen participation by the degree of citizens’ right to decide and exercise power in decision-making (Fig. 1).

The non-participation dimension implies the situation when citizens either do not participate or participate nominally without being heard. In the degrees of tokenism dimension, participants may be heard and be able to advise, but the powerholders still own the right to decide. Finally, in the degree of citizen power dimension, participants’ power goes from negotiation and trade-offs with powerholders to full managerial power.

## 3. Methodology

We conducted document analysis to analyze textual data (Karppinen & Moe, 2012) – the internal evaluation reports of designated ECoC, written in the English language, that were accessible online (see Appendix). We applied the framework of Arnstein (1969) to classify the gradation of citizen participation found in the reports – from non-participation to tokenism and citizen power. We separately read the reports, noting any evidence of citizen participation, and went through the notes together afterward to check and discuss the found evidence. In our categorization, we relied on the description of citizen participation provided in the reports and evaluated if the citizens were given the right to decide and exercise power (Table 1).

As illustrated above, the sample contained data for both larger and smaller cities in Europe in the period 2008–2020. Although we expected to find higher degrees of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), which would allow us to identify the relevant practices, only four of the ten available reports mentioned citizen participation in the form of

**Table 1**  
Designated ECoC with available internal evaluation reports in English.

No.	Year	City	Approx. population	Evidence of citizen participation in ECoC evaluation
1	2008	Liverpool, Great Britain	454,000	
2	2008	Stavanger, Norway <sup>1</sup>	119,500	Non-participation
3	2013	Marseille-Provence, France	855,000	
4	2015	Mons, Belgium	95,200	Tokenism
5	2015	Plzeň, Czech Republic	169,500	Non-participation
6	2017	Aarhus, Denmark	336,400	
7	2018	Valletta, Malta	6500 (350,000—metropolitan area)	Tokenism
8	2019	Matera, Italy	60,000	Citizen power
9	2019	Plovdiv, Bulgaria	347,000	Non-participation
10	2020	Galway, Ireland	82,000	Tokenism

<sup>1</sup> Read in original language.

tokenism and citizen power, yet still lacking a comprehensive description of methods, stakeholder analysis, and an overview of the processes that were followed.

## 4. Analysis

Our analysis revealed that the four cities with a population of under 100,000 (Mons, Valletta, Matera, and Galway) reported greater evidence of citizen participation. When applying Arnstein’s (1969) framework, we can allocate them to tokenism and citizen participation, yet keeping in mind that these dimensions are not homogeneous but have different gradations.

First, we found that evaluators/organizers in Mons were “collecting the data in collaboration with identified local actors and assessing the need for changes in the strategy on the basis of the results” (Mons, 2015, p. 29). Galway used an “inclusive approach to program development by including stakeholders, communities and residents in the program development” (Galway, 2020, p. 67). However, there is no further description of how the citizens’ voices were heard and acknowledged, and no evidence of delegation of decision-making power to citizens in these two ECoC.

Similar evidence is found in Valletta. For example, its organizers conducted participatory planning workshops, dialogues, and qualitative interviews with stakeholders to “give residents an opportunity to submit their own views on the issues and identify their concerns and issues regarding the strategy of Valletta 2018” (Valletta, 2018, p. 56), using these findings to generate new questions that were examined in the later stages of data collection (Valletta Participation Survey, pp. 6–27). Thus, we see that citizens’ voices were used to some extent in the later stages of strategy development. Yet, we cannot assess whether citizens were actually heard and empowered, as there is no further description of the use of the data received from citizens. Based on this, we classified these ECoC as exercising the lowest degrees of tokenism (Arnstein, 1969).

Richer evidence is found in the report from Matera. Organizers in



**Fig. 1.** Degrees of Citizen Participation, inspired by Arnstein (1969).

Matera applied an interesting tool for citizen participation – the Project Leaders Program. According to the report, “27 local cultural organizations were selected as Project Leaders for certain projects included in the cultural program before the designated ECoC title year” (Matera, 2019, p. 2). These organizations had the opportunity to interact with citizens, institutions, and other stakeholders to “assess the technical and economic feasibility of their projects during so-called crash tests, which allowed them to refine and calibrate their projects’ objectives and activities” (ibid). As it is stated in the report “citizens played a central role in the Project Leaders’ artistic and cultural production and triggered dialogues and reflections on the key themes of each project” (ibid). We see that citizens in Matera were given the right to negotiate and decide on the content of cultural program. Therefore, we categorize Matera as the only ECoC with a citizen power dimension (Arnstein, 1969).

Finally, the remaining ECoC reports were primarily descriptive, reporting on statistical results and post-event evaluation of citizens’ satisfaction with the cultural offerings, accessibility, the city’s international reputation, tourism increase, etc. Thus, we allocate them to the non-participation dimension (Arnstein, 1969).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The key theoretical arguments used in this paper are that citizen participation helps increase social value (Biondi et al., 2020; Gray, 2002) and contributes to urban regeneration (Nakagawa, 2010; Sasaki, 2010), making the implementation of such practices in cultural mega-projects essential, which is in line with the findings of Crossick & Kaszynska (2016). We have witnessed that smaller cities report engaging their citizens to a greater extent, which leads us to assume that smaller cities might have a greater need for urban regeneration and retaining citizens, which is also confirmed by the literature (Nakagawa, 2010; Sasaki, 2010; Biondi et al., 2020; Gray, 2002). That is, smaller cities might mobilize large cultural initiatives as an arena for citizen engagement, meaning their intent to arrange culture-led regeneration projects not for the citizens but with the citizens.

However, based on the reports alone, we cannot claim that the designated larger ECoC have not engaged citizens at all. It is possible that citizens participated, but reports do not reflect this. Thus, we can raise another question: Why do evaluators not mention it in the reports? Perhaps it was not considered essential to report on citizen participation because no discourse was held regarding its benefits, or evaluators deliberately did not disclose the information regarding citizen participation as it was mainly a negative experience. Another possible explanation may be that the European Commission does not give precise recommendations on citizen involvement, its benefits, and possible practices, even though in the new framework for cities’ own evaluation (European Commission, 2018), the importance of assessing local value is highlighted.

We can give the following recommendations for culture-led urban regeneration projects. On the one hand, it is essential to create adequate conditions for citizen engagement at all project stages, from planning to monitoring and evaluation. Because decision-making power creates awareness and a sense of belonging, it can lead to citizen retention and increased wellbeing (Biondi et al., 2020; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016; Gong et al., 2023). On the other hand, there is no approach to citizen engagement that fits all cities, as there could be different local value dimensions for different cities that should be acknowledged by the cities themselves. Finally, the European Commission should acknowledge and convey more precise recommendations about practices and challenges of citizen participation for future ECoC. We assume our recommendations are generalizable to other culture-led urban regeneration projects and other city development initiatives.

The main methodological limitation of this study is the availability of reports in English prepared by ECoC-designated cities. Further, we acknowledge that these documents may not be explicit enough on presenting different dimensions of citizen participation than other in-depth

studies, as academic papers. Therefore, we suggest exploring the value dimensions of different forms of citizen participation in greater detail. Exploring the legacies of ECoC projects in the context of citizen participation would provide valuable insights, particularly whether and how participatory practices helped sustain the positive effects of the ECoC title year. Finally, we acknowledge practical problems of citizen involvement, such as unwillingness to participate due to citizens’ perception of nominal participation without being heard and critique towards budget spending on culture rather than more critical social needs. Therefore, we highlight the importance of further investigation into the best practices and failure cases of citizen involvement.

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We declare that this research has not received any specific funding. We declare that this paper has been written in a co-authorship.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Alena Nelaeva:** Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Olga Iermolenko:** Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

## Declaration of competing interest

We declare that we do not have any conflicts of interest.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105227>.

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