

Co-creating a culture of participation in Europe

Three perspectives on innovation in cultural policies

BART GRUGEON PLANA



**Cultural
Creative
Spaces &
Cities**

CO-CREATING A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE

Three Perspectives on Innovation in Cultural Policies

How different cultural operators can build more inclusive cultural policies and more democratic societies. Lessons from the EU project Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

CONTENTS

1. Why do cultural policies need to change? 4

2. Public authorities' apprehension to give up control 6

3. Grassroots culture: innovation from the bottom up 13

4. Hybrid platforms in between grassroots culture and public authorities 20

5. Conclusion: how to become more participative 28

6. Annexe. Towards a culture of participations: the main lessons learned ... 30

1. WHY DO CULTURAL POLICIES NEED TO CHANGE?

Based on their experience, cultural organisations, artists as well as local authorities all believe there is something fundamentally amiss with cultural policies. Whether at the urban, regional or European level, a gap is palpable between public authorities and local cultural initiatives. Cultural projects breathe life into and bring cohesion to our cities and communities. Nevertheless, their value is not properly acknowledged. Numerous subsidies, grants and regulations are in place for the cultural sector, but they are not always in tune with the actual needs. Cultural centres often compete with one another to secure limited public resources. In the current model, public authorities and cultural organisations have an asymmetrical relationship, and the mistrust is bridged by control and accountability mechanisms.

Could culture be organised differently? Could cultural centres and governments cooperate more? Can the logic of competition be transcended and can actors at different levels build relationships of trust instead? Can more people and the organisations concerned be involved in this process? In so doing, can culture regain a more central place in society as a common good that we all contribute to and that brings us all together?

For more than two years, various cultural organisations worked side by side to come up with answers to these questions. Cultural centres, grass-roots organisations, public authorities and innovation labs exchanged experiences and ideas with their members and partners as part of the EU's Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities (CCSC) project. Thanks to various workshops, experiments

and participatory processes, they gained new insights into a topic that might seem trivial but that is actually infinitely complex: how can we collaborate better and more efficiently? In this article, the participants analyse the lessons learned and share a number of recommendations, each from their own particular perspective.



2. PUBLIC AUTHORITIES' APPREHENSION TO GIVE UP CONTROL

Lund Municipality and the Skåne region in southern Sweden have been striving for some time already to develop cultural policies in a more participatory manner. They have been seeking out strategies to involve more local cultural actors, both in the creation of cultural policies and in culture funding mechanisms. Both authorities organised multi-stakeholder processes during the CCSC project, which convinced them to continue pursuing this path: in assuming a facilitating role rather than a steering or controlling one, they are creating new dynamics that bear a much greater impact.

“Now we have a recipe for being more participative”

Katarina works for Lund Municipality, where she is in charge of reviewing and giving impetus to cultural policies. She soon realised that there was little cooperation within the cultural sector and that most organisations are focussed on their day-to-day running. The grant system was oriented towards individual projects and this fostered a “one-for-one” mindset, in which each project did their best to secure funds in order to survive.

“When it comes to collaboration in the cultural sector, we are good at carrying out specific tasks, such as organising a major international festival. We can bring people together for this one project,” Katarina explains. “But when we sit down together to broach broader social issues, such as how we can involve more younger people, how we can share more resources and be more cooperative, and how we can become more

ecologically sustainable, we are not so good at tackling these complex challenges!”

The city of Lund availed of the two years of the CCSC project to find a solution to this broader ambition. They organised a joint arena, a safe place, where cultural actors came together to reflect on their concerns and to work together on shared values. Katarina tells us that it took more than six months and six sessions before enough common ground, trust and understanding were achieved between all the participants to set down to work.

Once beyond this “preparatory phase”, a number of people identified a shared interest and took on some responsibility. They gathered in small groups on a specific topic. During this process, new partnerships and new collaborations emerged. By way of example, a cultural centre that had difficulties reaching out to Lund’s student population began collaborating with a local student radio station, planning joint activities and pooling their resources. Other organisations were interested in working with volunteers and leveraged their common expertise to work out a programme that matches volunteers to organisations.

The methodology that builds on “innovation areas” helped each of these groups to detect common needs, to build partnerships and to come up with solutions. Basically, different areas of innovation are identified: “safe” areas where organisations have a clear mandate and control; “uncertain” areas where organisations have no clear mandate to operate; and finally, the “ambivalent” areas of a shared mandate, in which mutual collaboration and dialogue can create some degree of impact. According to the common needs, each partner can determine which tasks are straightforward and safe, which are uncertain and call for experimentation, and which can be carried out concertedly. This collaborative approach makes people step out of pre-determined roles and assumptions since they have to interact with different stakeholders. Katarina recalls that someone suggested that “the cultural sector and businesses could

not work together, since they have very different ways of thinking”, but this changed once they did, even if only to a small extent. As a result, completely new partnerships were created.

When looking back, Katarina believes the new impetus is the outcome of three elements: an effective methodology, neutral facilitation and an awareness of the importance of each step in the whole process. Without these elements, the process might grind to a halt and people would no longer engage. The municipality also needed time to understand and adjust the pace of the process, and to gain confidence that they could assume their new role as a facilitator. One of the insights they gained is that open collaboration in networks only works when the participating organisations are willing to delegate and share responsibilities, and when the public authorities are willing to give up the controlling role.

Thanks to the experience, the Lund authorities have come up with their own recipe for multi-stakeholder processes, which they are now rolling out as a strategy in their local policies. It is regarded as an efficient means to exert an impact in a democratic and participatory manner. Katarina compares her municipality’s new facilitating role to that of a parent holding their child’s bike as they learn to ride it. “Initially, you need to be there to lend a hand, but at a certain point they get the hang of it and no longer need you! After a while, they can run rings around you and can teach their younger siblings”. In technical terms, one can argue that “learning from equals creates a ripple effect on the ecosystem”, or in other words, people assimilate what they have learned from other people and apply it to their own networks, magnifying the overall impact.

“We are learning to swim in the co-creation pool”

As a region of more than one million inhabitants, Skåne is interested in working more closely with cultural organisations to understand their concerns and consequently integrate them into their policy strategies.

Unlike city authorities that are more practical and operational since they have to implement policies locally, regional authorities have to focus on a wider area, developing and coordinating policies and procedures.

As head of Skåne's cultural policy, Ola saw several possibilities to transform the way of working and to become much more open towards external cultural organisations. He wanted to know their viewpoint on several issues:

- How should the region spend its budget on culture differently? Is there any better way of giving money to each “cultural category”, such as the performing arts, music, libraries, or painting? Couldn't there be a more horizontal and cross-sectoral approach that fosters collaboration?
- How can local engagement in developing culture be strengthened?
- How can art and culture play a bigger role when public spaces and meeting places are developed?
- How can more people and organisations decide on the cultural policies and on the resources that should be given to them?
- What is the region's role in all this?

The experimental nature of the CCSC project marked an ideal opportunity to create a participatory process and to start coming up with answers to those questions. As a strategy, they decided to be very open, both towards potential participants and towards the possible topics for discussion. This means that workshop participants were asked to invite new organisations to join the process, and that the methodology was designed to reveal common concerns and points of interest, rather than working around pre-defined topics. While the region of Skåne hosted the process, they were just one of the many participants and they left the facilitating up to a neutral external professional. This setting built the participants' trust and demonstrated that the region's intention to be open and to listen was genuine.

The open approach allowed people from different levels and sectors of society to identify together what they wished to change, and to thereby co-create these new ideas. New relationships and networks were forged, which led to unexpected collaborations and new projects. One of the participants' requests was to receive further training in this methodology, so they could build the capacity to design and facilitate co-creative processes in their own networks. The region of Skåne decided to organise these workshops, in the belief that dialogue and openness could broaden the overall impact. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a major online co-creation event was hosted in which cultural actors from all over Skåne could meet and interact with other civil society organisations and civil servants. It was an opportunity to learn and work together, and to find solutions to the unforeseen needs.

The experience of organising this series of co-creation events has paved the way for a more inclusive approach, according to Ola. "The administration is confident they can take up this role, and the cultural sector in Skåne that participated in the workshops expects things to continue in this direction", he explains. Some of the outcomes of the workshops include redefining the cultural strategy and budget for the Skåne region. Participation and co-creation as well as civil society involvement in the development of cultural spaces have become new key areas.

Dialogue through participatory processes will be used to understand the experience of participants from all levels of society. When many organisations claim something is of great importance to them, the region will launch specific thematic calls for proposals to try out these new ideas and to foster local bottom-up initiatives that can explore them. The content of participation processes will also be translated to a strategic level, and this will lead to new policies. For instance, several participants discussed their interest and difficulties in collectively trying to reimagine and reinvent the neighbourhoods and public spaces where they live, also known as "placemaking". The region aims to give impetus to these

initiatives and to seek synergies between different responsibilities both within and outside the authorities.

The co-creation experience has given Ola some very useful and practical indications as to how his administration can transform its way of working. He is aware that it will take some time before some real results are achieved, but the methodological framework provides a guideline. Civil society can be involved more in decision-making, not just occasionally but also in a more structured manner. A number of challenges still need to be overcome. It is important that enough people within the administration take part in this process, so that they can bring their experience to the table and influence the different departments. Events should also become more representative of all layers of society, reaching out to a more diverse audience. Besides that, participants should not have to sacrifice their free time to join a co-creation event. That said, overall, Ola is delighted with the progress accomplished and is excited to be “learning to swim in the co-creation pool”.



Cultural
Creative
Spaces &
Cities

3. GRASSROOTS CULTURE: INNOVATION FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Ambasada and hablarenarte are at the opposite end of the spectrum compared to Lund and Skåne. As civil society cultural organisations, they have extensive experience in engaging with their local communities in creative, artistic and social initiatives. Based in Timișoara (Romania) and Madrid (Spain) respectively, they invited their local public authorities to engage in dialogue with other cultural operators in the context of the CCSC policy project. The success was determined by the authorities' willingness and openness to participate. The local culture and the political reality proved to be important decisive factors.

“We can find passionate people within the authorities”

Ambasada is a diverse cultural and concept space that brings together the creative and non-profit community in Timișoara, in west Romania. They grew out of the PLAI world music festival, which began in 2006 as an initiative of local doers. Several informal groups of people cleaned up an old abandoned village museum and turned it into a venue. The festival aimed to create new experiences for young people who too often had negative feelings about their country and were eager to explore other cultures or even to leave their country of origin. The long-term project for a permanent space emerged from this festival, where the community could do things every week. Since all foreign embassies in Romania are located in Bucharest, and Timișoara could only aspire for consulates, they decided to call their place Ambasada, the representation of doers, a free space open to any proposal.

They offer a basic infrastructure where people can connect in the bistro/café/meeting room/conference/event room, and enjoy concerts or live

music rehearsals open to the public. It is a place for capacity building, with regular training and debates, and with a strong focus on the community and on the magic that happens when people simply do things together. Ambasada engages in open communication with the local authorities, who appreciate their social and cultural contributions to the city, and with whom they interact when it comes to defining a local culture strategy.

Ambasada's participation in the CCSC project coincided with Timișoara's designation as the European Capital of Culture in 2021 (postponed to 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Ambasada, as a strategic partner, saw an opportunity to contribute to the programme and to integrate a vision on culture that includes the value of local communities. A first workshop was organised in which over fifty participants worked on a collective analysis of the city in three steps: putting together a collective vision for the city, identifying the main challenges the city is currently up against, and, finally, drafting a theory of change for the city that would bridge the gap between the current and the ideal situation.

“This holistic approach was appreciated by local community associations, culture professionals and researchers,” says Andreaa, Ambasada's community manager. “The city administration, however, was not open to this approach, since they are used to a different way of thinking, guided by budgets and numbers”. The different sensibilities became even clearer in a conversation about citizen participation in urban spaces, where the vice mayor stated that “citizens just need parking, lighting and a kindergarten if they have kids”. Ambasada realised that their expectations were not being met, and there simply was not enough common ground. During further organisation for its designation as the Capital of Culture, many conflicts of interest arose between the organisers and the partners, and Ambasada had to abandon their ambition to include a more transformative agenda.

Nevertheless, they have always pursued a positive relationship with the city administration, involving them in their activities and avoiding any kind of confrontation. Ambasada focuses on building one-to-one alliances. “We can find passionate people within the authorities who support us emphatically when we come with a specific project, but it is difficult to create a framework that can last longer and that could build a more sustainable partnership”, Andreaa explains. The volatile public funding mechanisms, which are revised yearly for each separate project, do not help grassroots organisations to collaborate with one another, and to plan for a longer term.

Following their experience of the participatory process, Ambasada decided to focus on their strengths: building community, raising the quality of life for all, and using culture to draw attention to social needs. They worked together with an NGO in a socio-cultural initiative on affordable social housing for adults who need to reintegrate into society, relying on social services. Ambasada designed micro-homes in former ship containers where they can start living autonomously and in a community. They are trying to secure support in the municipality to make some unused land available for the project.

Thanks to their social projects, they take responsibility for needs that the public sector does not always manage to fulfil. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ambasada coordinated the care for a refugee camp and helped the local hospital with a volunteer programme.

Despite the obvious difficulties and precariousness, Andreaa is positive about and satisfied with the value of their work: “There is a widespread mindset in Romania that things cannot be changed. When we come up with new ideas, people often tell us that it is impossible, that no one will support us. But, at Ambasada, this motivates us, and we feel challenged to prove that change is possible”.

“Opening institutions up to participation means opening them up for young and old alike”

hablarenarte is an independent platform that supports contemporary art and culture. They develop projects in cooperation with public and private institutions, and work with several cultural agents. The platform has been active in grassroots culture, conceiving and organising cultural projects in Madrid’s neighbourhoods together with local communities, and has been involved in co-creation events that aimed to reform cultural policies. These projects were carried out in a period marked by tremendous interest in social innovation and citizen engagement in Madrid, under the influence of the movement known as “Los Indigados” [The Outraged] and the citizen platform that governed the city.

hablarenarte therefore boasted privileged experience that could be further explored and that other CCSC-partners from the north of Europe were eager to learn from. Nevertheless, times have changed with the election of the new conservative City Council. They governed with the support of the far-right Vox party and decided to withdraw the reforms that had been initiated, re-establishing a top-down view on politics. It was futile to expect that any improvements could be made in building a bridge between civil society and the public authorities during the CCSC project. The strategy had to change.

Instead of initiating a dialogue with institutions, hablarenarte proposed challenging the actual meaning of dialogue. Why do we take it for granted that citizen engagement with public institutions is just an adult affair? Can’t children and young people be at the heart of the decisions? Can’t they make decisions about culture, cultural institutions and city life? Can public life be organised without the adult-centred reflex that is so dominant in our cultures?

To find answers to these questions, several co-creation events were planned in Madrid’s schools. Children could discuss and test how their

playground and the streets around the school should be designed according to their needs. The school management, parents' associations and neighbours were enthusiastic to be part of the process, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden closure of all schools changed the plans. Everything had to move online and was more conceptual in the first phase, and depending on how the pandemic evolved, some different interventions with children were programmed for a later date.

A debate concerning the role of children in cultural organisations had never taken place. When youth representatives, children and art centres in Madrid were brought together to discuss the matter, the participating institutions realised that they had been planning activities for children without involving them. Several small-scale proposals to better adapt the institutions to children's needs were co-created, proving that contemporary urban cultural spaces can lend much more visibility to children and their needs. In addition, the idea of a permanent "children's board for the museum" was explored, where children can have a voice in the programming of activities. An exchange with a museum in Rotterdam where a similar pilot project had been undertaken was an eye-opener for Madrid's cultural centres.

Once the COVID-19 restrictions were loosened and the public was allowed to join offline, families were invited to a number of cultural institutions to "revolutionise the playground". In a co-creation session with artists and families, the children imagined how to make the space more child- and young person-friendly. What rules made them feel uncomfortable and should change, what should and should not be allowed? Could families be involved in organising the cultural association? Several artists were invited to host workshops in different culture houses, building a new kind of awareness and sensibility.

Flavia, who coordinates *hablarenarte* in CCSC, describes the interventions with children as "acupuncture": baby steps that spark a discussion and exert an impact on the cultural system within and outside the city.

Listening to children and their needs can prove highly transformative for society: “Children claim back more time to play, more time to spend with their parents, and streets with less cars”, argues Flavia. “A number of generations ago, children played in the squares and the streets. Adults looked after them and they were part of the commons. Now they have become privatised; they belong to their parents, children no longer belong to public spaces”. hablarenarte aims to draw attention to this shift by directly giving a voice to children so they can reclaim the public space.

Today, political tension is palpable in Madrid between civil society organisations and the municipal government, which recently even closed down Medialab Prado, a pioneer organisation in social innovation that has been an international benchmark. The circumstances are challenging, but hablarenarte avoids a belligerent attitude towards the city authorities. They reiterate that “the institutions are also ours”, and keep looking for cracks and small openings to carry out creative and transformative work.



4. HYBRID PLATFORMS IN BETWEEN GRASSROOTS CULTURE AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Some cultural organisations operate in between the authorities and civil society. They enjoy a direct link to several levels of public institutions, but are autonomous. This seems to be an advantage when meeting the needs of different levels of society. Their “hybrid” make-up is very different in each situation. Kaapeli is a huge venue in Helsinki (Finland) that is home to roughly 300 tenants, ranging from individual artists to cultural industries. CIKE is a non-profit organisation in Košice (Slovakia) that supports and develops cultural and creative industries. CoboLAB is a public laboratory for social innovation in Sant Boi de Llobregat (Catalonia) that brings together public, private, academic and civic actors for the purposes of collaboration.

“We have the keys to open the space up for everyone”

Kaapeli is a cultural complex in the centre of Helsinki, located in the former reconverted industrial buildings of the Nokia Cable Factory. With a total surface area of around 100,000 square metres, they host some 300 diverse cultural actors, ranging from individual artists to cultural organisations, band rehearsal spaces, creative industry companies and museums. Despite the wide range of existing programmes, there is still a great demand for space for citizen-led activities, spontaneous cultural initiatives, neighbourhood gatherings and various uses by non-governmental organisations. In recent cold winter months, for instance, young people organised a picnic in the warm underground metro sta-

tions of Helsinki, sparking some debate on the news and in social media about the use and ownership of public spaces. Kaapeli was set up to meet these needs and the CCSC project provided the setting to explore ways of opening up their spaces to citizens.

Initially, some researchers and practitioners of citizen participation were invited to consider strategies to invite citizens to use the spaces of Kaapeli that were occasionally underused. The roundtable identified two alternative approaches: curated use and wild use. Curated use referred to a strategy in which an outside citizen group would curate the use of the space for a specific purpose. In contrast, wild use referred to a strategy whereby citizens were merely invited to use the space however they wanted. The benchmark for this model drew its inspiration from a public cultural centre in Paris, the CENTQUATRE-PARIS, known for opening its doors to Parisians every now and then to use their space however they wish.

Kaapeli decided to opt for the wild approach, probably because it sounded more exciting and bold, and at a certain point they wanted to get down to action instead of spending more time on discussions with experts. The largest venue was made available, the Sea Cable Hall, with more than 3000 square meters, and the event was announced on social media as “Take over Cable Factory!”. Coincidentally, a couple of weeks before the event, one person from the community posted a video on his Facebook page where he danced at the CENTQUATRE in Paris and asked to do the same in Kaapeli. Needless to say, this marked an ideal opportunity to advertise the wild use initiative. The Facebook exchange quickly received numerous likes from people in the dance community, and finally some hundred people showed up, mostly dancers and circus performers. People were very cautious and respectful, even asking if they had to remove their

shoes to enter the venue. The response was unanimously positive and the continuation of the experiment was encouraged.

The second event attracted completely new participants: besides dancers and acrobats, there were martial arts enthusiasts, performance artists, a pop-up cinema and a music crew, who made a video clip. The event was covered by the main commercial TV news broadcasters and reached hundreds of thousands of Finns. The initiative was undoubtedly a success and these events have become a permanent part of the programme. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the project, but it is to be resumed very soon.

Ironically, many seminars and studies conduct research into “empowering citizens” and opening up spaces for temporary cultural use, but the Kaapeli experience is proof that the task is simple and straightforward. “When cool things happen, people join in and the process feeds itself,” explains Kai, Kaapeli’s manager. “Of course, we have the venues and the keys, and we are well connected to the grassroots community in Helsinki, so we are in an ideal position”. Kaapeli only takes care of the security and the cleaning, but is not focussed on the activities or the participants, and wants to keep it that way in order make the whole concept “as free as possible”. In the future, they may consider attracting some specific groups, such as elderly people or children, but they are confident that it will happen spontaneously. “There is no need to use any co-creation methodologies that would “over-think” this process”, asserts Kai. He hopes to inspire other urban spaces to start out with some baby steps and to just have faith in people.

“It is imperative the operators active in the culture and creative industries be identified and mapped regularly”

Creative Industry Košice, CIKE, is a non-profit organisation that supports cultural development on many levels in the city of Košice and in the wider region of Eastern Slovakia. CIKE was actively involved in putting the city forward to become the European Capital of Culture in 2013, and continued afterwards to promote cultural and creative

projects in several cross-sectoral partnerships, in particular at the intersection of art and business. CIKE reaped the opportunity of the CCSC project to develop a “city strategy for culture”. It will guide cultural policies for the coming years as part of a new master plan for Košice’s economic and social development.

To lay the foundations for this strategic task, CIKE engaged a very wide community in a co-creation process. In a preparatory workshop, relevant cultural actors were identified and mapped, starting from citizens, communities and cultural institutions to creative industries, social innovators, the IT sector and also the local government. A number of focus areas were identified: the city identity, networking patterns, audience building and cultural participation. Approximately 100 representatives of the Košice cultural scene were brought together at a multi-stakeholder event, the People of the Creative City. A filmmaker, a travel agency owner and a community worker shared a worktable with a representative of the municipality, a landscape architect and a swing musician to explore the city’s future and the role of culture therein.

On the one hand, there is a desire to continue developing an authentic bottom-up culture by giving impetus to a social environment of creative people and communities. This can strengthen Košice’s identity as the creative centre of the East, attracting people to the city to live a fulfilling life. On the other hand, more mainstream cultural institutions, such as museums, art galleries and classical music venues, emphasise the importance of not just concentrating on modern art forms and to lend equal importance to preserving the traditional ones. The challenge facing CIKE was to strike the right balance between these sensibilities, and to actively link traditional sectors with creative people.

Some of these new forms of cooperation, often across sectors, were explored during a workshop on the data that are available to the city. Together with experts in service design and data analysis, participants were invited to a new way of looking at the city and the services it pro-

vides. The participants learned how to find interesting solutions in a co-creation process. For example, a group of designers and activists came up with a way to heighten the interest of Košice's inhabitants in the city's air quality, namely, by visualising smog data in the form of animations at public transport stops.

The COVID-19 measures that stopped the artists and cultural workers from continuing their work in Slovakia, affected the development of the cultural strategy. CIKE found a new kind of support for cultural workers, artists and researchers, thanks to which they could continue to create in the safety of their homes, while adding inspiration to the cultural strategy. Three projects were selected to help conceptualise key topics in the urban lab: public spaces and quality of life, Košice's multicultural understanding, and public spaces and public participation. The unique idea of Home Residencies caught the eye of the local government and the second round of grants for artists and creatives was funded by the city of Košice.

Zuzanna, project manager at CIKE, stresses the importance of “regularly identifying and mapping the people who are active in the culture and creative industries, in order to determine how the city can support them and adapt the cultural policies”. She considers it to have been an “important change in the city's cultural strategy that allows the widest possible range of people to be reached and ensures access to culture for the various inhabitants and creatives in the city”.

“Through social innovation we are changing our cultures”

CoboiLAB is a public laboratory for social innovation in Sant Boi de Llobregat, a city outside of Barcelona. It is an open and flexible centre where members of the city and the regional administration can work collaboratively with private companies, civil society and academics to come up with answers to common problems or challenges. CoboiLAB has a team of facilitators that employs a solid methodology to analyse

needs and test possible solutions. Their cross-cutting methodology was deemed particularly valuable for the CCSC project, since most partners were interested in forging a lasting dialogue between the authorities and civil society.

During the CCSC project, CoboLAB has endeavoured to ascertain how to mobilise citizens to participate in city innovation projects. As a public laboratory for social innovation, they are well connected to public authorities, private companies and researchers, but to a lesser extent to networks of organised citizens or cultural initiatives. With a view to exploring how to better involve and integrate them in their projects, they began a series of workshops to understand the interests and needs of the different collectives, and to create some new synergies. As a result, some groups chose to work on the design of a large public square in the city centre together with city planners. Others worked out a proposal to organise conferences on co-creation processes. Some participants realised that artistic settings often lack methods that can structure the creative process. They suggested using the new co-creation methodologies they had learned in their community.

Nevertheless, CoboLAB identified the need for a more specific purpose to build real and more structured cooperation with civil society. The initial goal “to involve more citizens and cultural organisations” was excessively generic and did not bring about a truly engaging and efficient co-creation process. They understood that the challenge needed to be narrowed down, and the communities invited should really care about the issue that brought them together. This realisation was put into practice when the city delegated the methodological support for a “city strategy” to CoboLAB following the COVID-19 pandemic. A core group comprising 25 members was set up, with representatives from political parties, labour unions, companies and civil society organisations. They worked on a joint agenda and on specific tasks to rebuild the local economy and to fight inequality.

In the meantime, CoboLAB applied all the insights gained through the CCSC process to devise a comprehensive “Method for Tackling City Challenges”. It is a practical guide to begin to resolve complex issues that modern cities may come up against by working collaboratively with many stakeholders. The guide builds on the existing methodologies of design thinking, systems design, collective impact and transition arenas. The methodological framework covers four steps that any complex multi-stakeholder process should follow, namely, observation, exploration, action plan and implementation. It is open source, available to one and all to use and to share.

Sergi, CoboLAB’s coordinator, is convinced that hybrid organisations like theirs are necessary and constitute useful tools to solve the complex problems facing today’s cities and societies. “Climate change, digitalisation, new work relations, population changes and the energy transition are all rapid and disruptive changes that affect our way of living on a scale that we cannot anticipate”, he explains. Hence the importance of a systemic approach, whether it is to improve a system, to change a system or to replace one system with another. Such a complex process calls for coordination and the development of a kind of roadmap. This is the role of urban labs: they frame a shared understanding of current challenges, engage stakeholders and build communities to come up with the most appropriate solutions. According to Sergi, “in the long run, it is all about creating new ways of working together, building communities around shared resources and commons, and changing our cultures”.



5. CONCLUSION: HOW TO BECOME MORE PARTICIPATIVE

CCSC's seven partners have explored new approaches to collaboration between cultural organisations and public authorities. They initiated a dialogue between relevant cultural operators, often under a different format, testing new methodologies. These methodologies seek new interactions, based on common concerns, and often endeavour to overlook the existing hierarchies and roles.

To guarantee success, enough common ground and trust must be built between the participants and effective facilitation and an efficient methodology must be ensured to support the process. At the outset, time should be spent on observing, listening, exploring and experimenting.

There does not seem to be a single approach to go about this task. Public authorities can acquire the necessary expertise and lead such a process, or delegate it to external facilitators. They will need to convince participants that it is not a marketing tactic or fanfare, but a genuine attempt to listen and collaborate. Besides that, grassroots organisations can mobilise and bring together wider communities. However, they seem to have more difficulties when it comes to involving public authorities, which are generally reluctant to surrender their power and control. The more hybrid organisations may be ideally placed to create a neutral platform that all participants can rely on, as they are accustomed to working in diverse networks and have an established relationship with public institutions.

The specific setting may be different in each context. In some countries, grassroots organisations have a tradition of working together with the authorities, and building trust may be relatively straightforward. In other parts of Europe, the mistrust between civil society and public institutions may be deeply rooted for historical or cultural reasons, and can be more difficult to overcome.

The current European Commission has called for a “push for European democracy” and considers it a priority that “citizens play a leading and active part” in this process. New resources are being made available to create “opportunities for democratic innovation and experimentation”. The seven processes of the EU project “Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities” already provide a number of interesting paths to continue exploring. It seems that democracy is not just about representation, but about building a culture of collaboration between different actors from all levels of society.

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION: THE MAIN LESSONS LEARNED

1. More cooperation between grassroots cultural organisations and public authorities is possible and necessary.

2. There is a general desire to be more inclusive and participative, and a recognition that existing structures are often too hierarchical.

3. Changing ways of working is not easy and does not happen overnight; it is a process.

4. Recognising the complexity of some issues and the need for a new approach is an important step.

5. Building trust and mutual understanding is key.

6. Learning more about methodologies of co-creation and about systems thinking can prove beneficial. CCSC made a practical and

visual methodology guide available online!

7. Some degree of uncertainty, trial and error is inevitable.

8. Inviting relevant players to take part in an open and transparent manner can change pre-established roles and assumptions.

9. Neutral facilitators of the process can help to create common ground.

10. A successful co-creation process will generate new dynamics, surprising collaborations and unexpected results.

11. Changing the way we work together will change our cultures.

**Cultural
Creative
Spaces &
Cities**



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union



**European
Cultural
Foundation**



 Universiteit
Antwerpen



KAAPELI



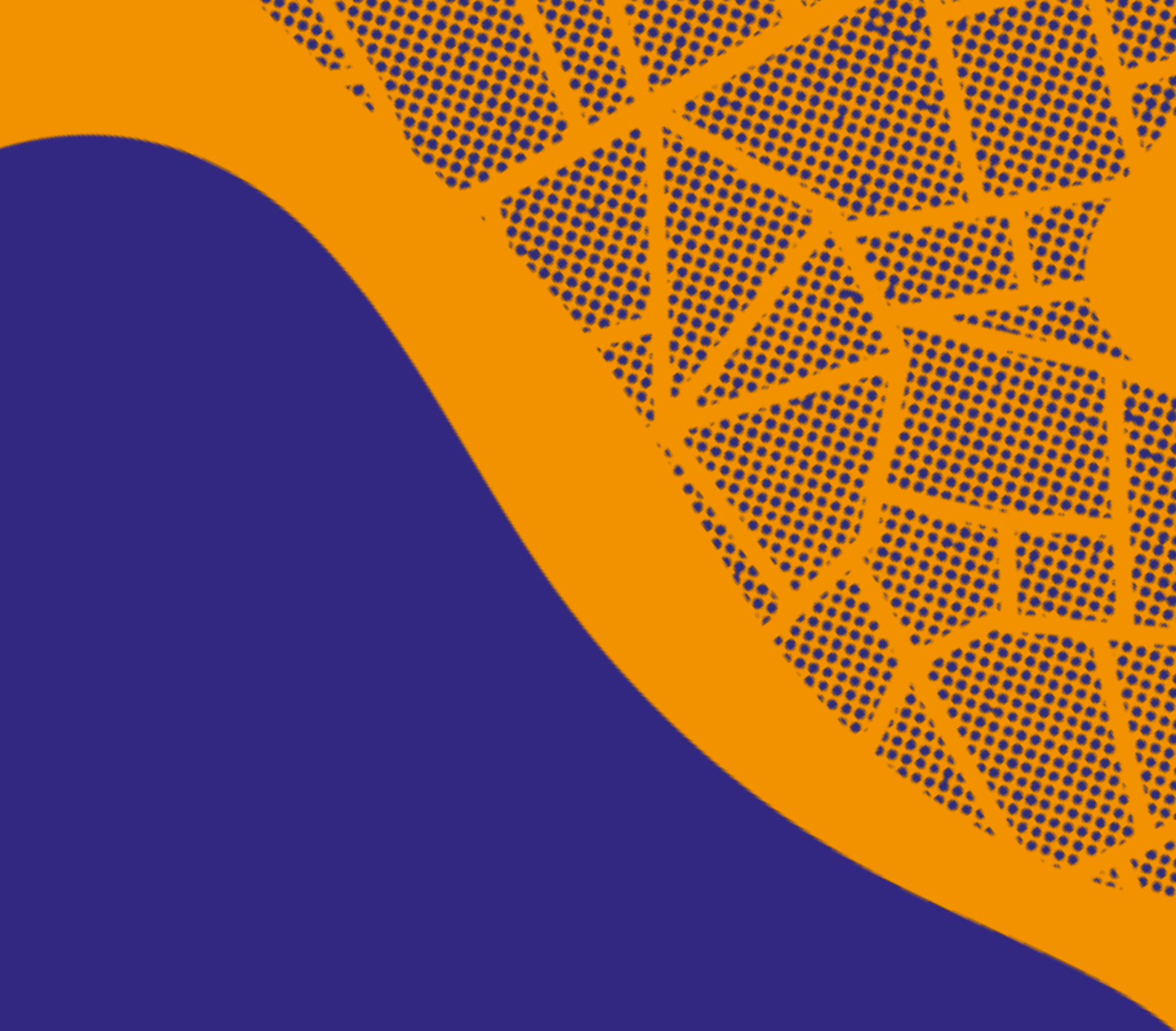
hablarenarte:



[COBOI LAB]

Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities (2018–2021) is a policy project co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. Running from 2018 to 2021, the project aimed to develop new ways for cities and regions to bring together the public administration and the cultural sector to co-create public policies. More information at spacesandcities.com

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



spacesandcities.com