

## **Idealism or self-promotion in the European Capitals of Culture**

The joy was indescribable, the day that Leeuwarden was chosen as the European Capital of Culture 2018. The victory was already a bit in the air: the Frisian team had prepared for days on end for the last meeting with the international jury. The presentation in Amsterdam went perfectly. The Frisian flag was flying confidently on the Wester tower.

The thorough preparation and authentic idealism, carried by a new generation, convincingly decided the case in favour of the Frisian capital.

### **Bottom up**

The plans were inspiring and spot on. Leeuwarden invested in the 'Iepen Mienskip', the open community that wanted to work hard to tackle challenges that affect us all. For example, the city was and still is one of the ten poorest municipalities in the country.

One of the sophisticated trajectories envisioned by the Cultural Capital was a multifaceted project on Water Technology: playfully preparing children in deprived neighbourhoods for a professional future within the theme of Water, making resources available to small entrepreneurs and start-ups in water technology and promote the Leeuwarden Water Campus as a hub of the Dutch and European water technology sector. Add to that the controversial 'eleven fountains', the ultimate connection between water technology and Art, and you have a plan that kicks ass.

But in the end, only the fountains were built, which truly put the principles of working with the 'open community' to the test.

Next to being 'open' and innovative, the Cultural Capital mainly wanted to be bottom-up. The governments would deliberately not act directive but leave the course of things to an independent management organization, which in turn would offer resources and opportunities to dozens of producers from the broad cultural field, who in turn worked closely, often directly from society. So on the first presentation after the victory, the main hall of Stadsschouwburg de Harmonie was packed with expectant residents and entrepreneurs who already calculated a decent income for themselves.

The 70 million euros invested was indeed swiftly recouped by the city and province. But whether that openness, that social relevance, that dreamed social cohesion within the mienskip and that bottom-up approach in Leeuwarden have also succeeded... history is free to judge.

### **Building real connections or city marketing?**

I regularly speak to cities that are or have made an attempt to become, or have been, a Cultural Capital. The same thing always stands out.

First of all, the bid book processes are surrounded by a pool of consultants for whom advising candidate cities is their livelihood: they move through Europe at rates of around 2000 euros per day. That has nothing to do with idealism. Yet it is idealism that the international jury falls for. Usually, it is young people, idealists and artists who provide the substantive drive to the ambitions of the candidate city.

But once the bid is won, the problems begin. First of all, there is a tendency to declare smaller cities as Cultural Capital, in the hope that they will be able to work their way up from a disadvantaged situation. The city of Lille succeeded very well in 2004. Lille invested in sustainable projects from

which the city is still benefiting, but more and more often the winners are not well equipped for the gigantic task that lies ahead. For example, amassing the many tens of millions required for a European Capital of Culture (ECOC) alone is an immense task.

### **Governors**

In addition, as soon as the loot is in, the governors step in to rattle themselves on the chest and the idealists from the first hour disappear to the second plan. This turned out to be a breeding ground for internal conflict in many European capital. Ideals such as bottom-up organizing and social cohesion give way to conflicts of interest, hard play and misplaced arrogance, with the dearly paid ECOC advisors as the laughing third.

Lieven Bertels, the director who left the Frisian Capital of Culture prematurely, has a say in this. A year after his sudden departure, he stated in the Leeuwarder Courant: "A lot of things went wrong, it is what it is. There were a lot of tensions at the time. Also internally, in that team. If a number of people say: this is how it will be played, and if a number of other people are forced to leave... You can make a decent list of people who have written the bid book and are no longer participating. The game is sometimes played hard here, eh. If people expected me to be able to reconcile that as well... I was not given that nuance of history. "

This conflict also has to do with the prevailing view on what a European Capital of Culture actually entails. In my view, it ideally brings together European culture and connects Europeans through the celebration of high-quality art and culture. But you can also see the Capital of Culture as pure city marketing in the hope that your hotels will be fully booked for the next fifteen years. In Leeuwarden, hotel prices rose to Abu Dhabi-like proportions of sometimes 650 euros per night.

### **Self-promotion**

The question is whether the heavy effort on self-promotion and less on connection will pay off in the longer term. Openness can be an uplifting theme, but without building real in-depth connections it rarely becomes inclusive. This applies to most European capitals, which, sometimes under pressure from their own population ('what does all that cost'), are more committed to economic gain than to a sustainable future in connection with the international community.

The young, idealistic generation with new ideas is not getting the floor. Learning from each other, at an international level, coupled with investments in sustainable cultural and social projects is, despite good intentions, hardly an issue, as a result of which many ECOC degenerate into a packed year of events.

Architect Nynke Rixt Jukema, in the preliminary phase still the great young talent with which the Leeuwarden lobby explicitly profiled itself, vented her heart to Omroep Friesland in May 2017: "We had great ideals when we started, but when money came, people became arrogant. The creativity was zero, but like birds of prey they picked up on the plans. There was no money for the performers, the people who really had to do it".

### **Discussion**

"I would have expected more discussion from journalism about the question: are we heading in the right direction with Cultural Capital? Taking a critical look at yourself is one of the things in the bid book that Leeuwarden has won. We are a new generation with our own ideas. We would learn from other people, for example from abroad. But now it is: we must do like others. Ideas from above are imposed on us, such as the fountains or the great giants of Royal de Luxe from France. They are so

old. They have been everywhere and now they are coming here again. That's not what Cultural Capital is for! What does that have to do with the quality of Fryslân? What is the connection with our culture or landscape? Cultural Capital will soon be nothing more than a festival with events for which people can buy tickets. ”

At the same time, its potential strength manifests itself in describing the weakness of the Cultural Capital concept. Especially now that the future has to be reinvented as a result of the corona crisis, the ECOOC can be of significance. But a single chance is not enough.

With everything that has been learned, I wish Leeuwarden can have a second opportunity to do it right this time.

Jeffrey Meulman