



Architecture and city. Learning from European Capitals of Culture



Edited by: Thomas Bisiani, Sonia Prestamburgo and Adriano Venudo

What happens when culture becomes a tool to rethink the city? How can architecture, urban design and cultural policies converge to transform the city?

This volume explores forty years of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) Programme as a critical lens through which to read, design and imagine the contemporary city. Beyond celebratory narratives, the volume analyses ECoCs as complex devices of cultural diplomacy, civic imagination, participation and morpho-functional regeneration of urban space.

Through the investigation of 40 case studies, thematic essays and comparative mappings, the thesis of the "city as a cultural project" explores the possible combinations between architecture, temporary and ephemeral events and short, medium and long-term urban strategies, as a vector of new city paradigms. From Athens 1985 to Nova Gorica/Gorizia 2025, the book traces the evolution of the European Capitals of Culture from symbolic events to political and structural projects for the city.

The volume is the result of the study and design activity carried out within the RRR Lab - Integrated Design Studio of Architecture and Building in the academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25, thanks to the work of the student Collectives COLGO! and VAGO, the teachers of the Laboratory and the partners who in these two years have accompanied and supported the teaching and research activities carried out. Written by architects, scholars and designers involved in these paths, between local and global, the book proposes an interdisciplinary approach, which claims the city as a space of collective authorship, as a field of experimentation for the future of Europe and its communities.



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COLGO! Collective, VAGO Collective

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DEGLI STUDI
DI TRIESTE



dipartimento
di ingegneria
e architettura



Comune di
GORIZIA



GO! 2025
NOVA GORICA
GORIZIA



CONSORZIO
PER LO SVILUPPO DEL
POLO UNIVERSITARIO
di GORIZIA



ORDINE DEGLI INGEGNERI
PROVINCIA DI GORIZIA

This book is the result of a didactic and research journey developed by the RRR Lab – Integrated Design Studio for Architecture and the Built Environment at the University of Trieste.

Over the past two academic years (2023 – 25), the Design Studio has systematically explored the urban and architectural impact of the European Capitals of Culture, initiating collective design experiences through two student groups – COLGO! Collective and VAGO Collective – and involving numerous faculty members, researchers, teachers, and institutional partners.

The volume brings together contributions from both teaching and research: comparative analyses, critical essays, thematic maps, and case studies. It represents the first organic attempt to systematize the urban projects generated by the ECoC programme over the past forty years.

Edited by Thomas Bisiani, Sonia Prestamburgo, and Adriano Venudo, with contributions from faculty and researchers affiliated with the RRR Lab (Alessio Bortot, Luigi Di Dato, Michela Lupieri, Giulia Piccinin) at the Department of Engineering and Architecture, the book documents an experimental teaching experience and, at the same time, a research project developed in dialogue with institutions, territories, and communities involved in the GO!2025 Nova Gorica - Gorizia European Capital of Culture initiative.

The **COLGO! Collective** is composed of the following students from the Integrated Design Studio for Architecture and the Built Environment RRR Lab, academic year 2023 - 2024:

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The **VAGO Collective** is composed of the following students from the Integrated Design Studio for Architecture and the Built Environment RRR Lab, academic year 2024 - 2025:

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The contents of this book are one of the outcomes of the teaching and research activity carried out within the Institutional agreement RRR Lab 2022–25 between the Department of Engineering and Architecture (University of Trieste), the Municipality of Gorizia, the EGTC-EZTS, the ATER of Gorizia, and the CONSUNIGO.

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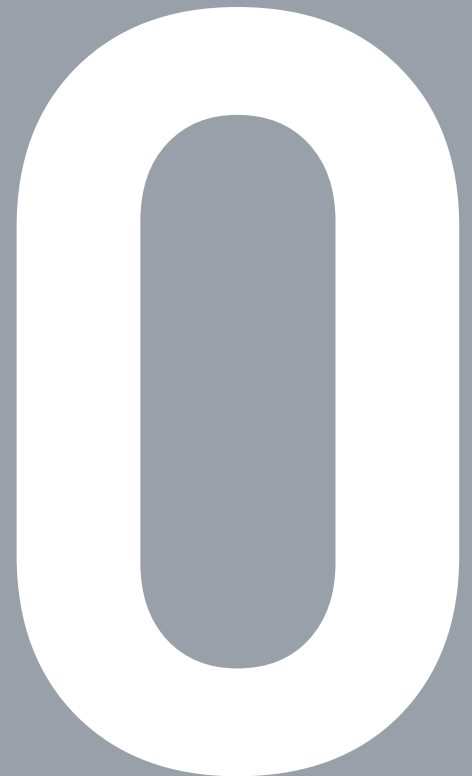
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INTRODUCTION

8 Forty years. Just a blink or something more?
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Adriano Venudo



Forty years. Just a blink or something more?

Learning from... ECoC

Thomas Bisiani, Sonia Prestamburgo, Adriano Venudo

Cities are, they change, more or less rapidly, over time. Sometimes these transformations lead to economic, civil and cultural growth of the social context, which can be recorded in an improvement in the quality of life of those who live or work in that place. On the other hand, changes can push towards an involution, demonstrated not only by demographic and employment declines, but also and above all by environmental, social and behavioral degradation.

For this reason, it is useful to question the meaning of the metamorphoses that have occurred in European cities in the last forty years between the old and new centuries. In relation to the centuries-old history of European cities, forty years may seem like a short period of time. However, in the period from the birth of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in 1985, on the initiative of Melina Mercouri, to the experience underway in Nova Gorica and Gorizia in 2025, profound, rapid, often radical innovations have accumulated.

These are innovations that cannot be explained only by the evolution of urban policies or architectural innovations, but that are intertwined with the major events that have shaken the world: the collapse of the Eastern European regimes, the European integration achieved to date with 27 member states, 11st September 2001, the international financial crisis of 2008, the new migratory flows, the climate emergency and, more recently, the pandemic and the ignition of new war fronts on the central-eastern border.

Trying to evaluate the plurality of factors that interact on the urban scene in the full vortex of such a storm of new cultural, social and economic winds differently oriented is a task as difficult as it is essential. The present is the most elusive of the moments in which we are accustomed to dividing time: past, present and future. Assessing the impact of all these different aspects on the structure, functions and roles of the contemporary city is one of the main objectives of this publication, especially in a time like the present, where the

extreme availability of information and data makes the exercise of evaluation and the formation of a valid and coherent judgment more uncertain than ever.

In this context, ECoCs offer themselves as a privileged observatory: not only cultural events, but concrete laboratories of urban transformation, regeneration devices that have activated up to now, in the most diverse contexts of Europe, new urban economies, new geographies, new relationships, new symbols, and above all new ways of living and making the common space live... Europe.

From “apparent ornament”, culture has become an engine of change, capable of putting marginal cities, abandoned industrial areas, degraded neighborhoods, forgotten suburbs, spaces and places of waste back into motion throughout Europe.

And this is precisely one of the strongest nuclei of meaning of this “little history of European cities” told in this publication through the “pretext” of the European Capitals of Culture: a history of culture and European cooperation, of regeneration and rediscovery of the city as a common good to be protected and enhanced.

The volume is divided into four parts: the first section collects the curators’ critical essays, which introduce and discuss the theme of ECoCs as a long-term urban and cultural phenomenon from three different conceptual angles; the second part presents forty case studies of European Capitals of Culture and some Italian Capitals of Culture, cases chosen, analyzed and commented by the students of the Integrated Design Laboratory of Architecture and Building – RRR Lab of the University of Trieste to offer a comparative vision of the different strategies – and solutions – adopted in various European contexts; the third part hosts the thematic contributions of the teachers, who participated and collaborated in the various teaching, research and third mission activities of the Laboratory itself, from which the idea for this publication was born; the fourth part tries to draw the conclusions of the various issues, starting from the assumption that the original intent remains that of offering a selective critical synthesis, a “bird’s eye view” on the theme of the Capitals of Culture.

This section, starting from the common issues that emerged in the forty cases analyzed, highlights the variety of the solutions tested, the convergences, the contradictions, the challenges still open in the form of “good practices” or “pre-manual”. The critical approach taken has led to conscious evaluative choices, rather than omissions: rather than flattening the complexity into a single interpretative scheme, it was preferred to follow the multiple trajectories in which the ECoCs have declined, as places of cultural production, spaces of urban innovation, platforms of active citizenship and imagination. A transversal element that emerges in almost all cases is the function of urban regeneration, not only understood as architectural renewal, but as a social, economic and cultural process of reactivation of cities.

The construction of new architectures, in some cases becoming new urban symbols, the strengthening of transport infrastructures, the promotion of cultural events and festivals, the interaction with art are not isolated episodes, but pieces of a broader strategy of rethinking the city as an open, dynamic, interactive and multilevel system. The thin line between the ephemeral and the lasting – between cultural event and spatial transformation, between architecture and urban planning, between planning and government – becomes here one of the crucial aspects to observe and interpret. In this sense, the ECoCs demonstrate that culture can be an urban infrastructure, as much as a road or a train station, a device capable of building networks, generating meaning, consolidating belonging. If today we can say that “the city is culture” and that “the European city is a culture”, we also owe it to this extraordinary experiment of comparison and cooperation, which has crossed Europe for four decades. In the end, therefore, the question remains open: if forty years seem few to you, how much can a city really change when culture becomes the engine of its rebirth?

RRR Lab. Ten years of design studio, two years of studies and projects on ECoC. “The Collective” as a form of experimentation and research.

RRR Lab was born from an idea by Giovanni Fraziano, about ten years ago, within the Integrated Design Laboratory of Architecture and Built Structures. It was born from the desire

to apply project teaching to real case studies, specifically that of Nova Gorica and Gorizia. For about a decade, the Laboratory has developed design themes directly connected to the places and architectural, landscape and infrastructural problems of this particular cross-border urban context. All of us, together with Giovanni Fraziano, have participated and contributed to the development of this educational project, which we are still carrying forward today, also finding true expression in scientific research.

This publication is a living testimony of this. It is an ancient idea, but always current, we believe, that of doing not only “research in teaching”, but also “research with teaching”.

RRR Lab, together with all the internal and external teachers who have worked in and for the Laboratory over the years, has developed a profile strongly characterized by this direct connection with the territories and with real cases, so much so that the relationship with the Institutions has materialized in various forms of institutionalization.

Proof of this is the fact that this volume is part of a framework of institutional collaboration (2023–2026 agreement between the Municipality of Gorizia and the University of Trieste) and represents one of its most concrete outcomes.

The entities with which RRR Lab has established collaborations over time, developing research and experimentation activities, third mission, public engagement, dissemination and partnerships, currently in place, are: the Municipality of Gorizia, the Municipality of Nova Gorica, the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Ljubljana, the GECT, the ATER of Gorizia, the Order of Architects of Gorizia, the Order of Engineers of Gorizia, the Municipality of Romans d’Isonzo, the CARIGO Foundation, the Isontina Library, the Dora Bassi Gallery and the Authority managing the Petrarca Hall.

This direct relationship with local, regional and international bodies has allowed us to develop numerous studies, surveys, mappings, feasibility projects, master plans and architectural and urban projects. For students, these experiences have represented concrete opportunities for planning and creativity; for teachers, moments of research and experimentation; for institutions, an

added value not only for the advanced tools adopted, but also for the passion that has animated every phase of the work. Each study, analysis and project activity has been approached with a critical sense and deep responsibility: this is one of the most significant results of RRR Lab. It is important to underline how this form of collaboration, passionate, critical and responsible, has meant that the fifth year Laboratory, RRR Lab, has been configured as a “single body”, a sort of “super studio”. This has made it necessary to experiment with different forms, tools and teaching processes, generating, we can say, pure innovation.

This volume on the European Capitals of Culture, together with the other recent publication *Il corpo della città. Telo Mesta* (EUT, 2024), constitute part of the outcomes of this varied experimental path.

In the last two academic years, the first phase of work of the RRR Lab took place in a choral way.

The laboratory operated as a “single team”, with a shared objective. At the beginning of each year, students were asked to form a “collective”, adopting its organizational and self-organizing methods, in an almost *neo-avant-garde* experience, to study the phenomenon of the European Capitals of Culture. The Laboratory, with the two “Collectives” 2023-24 and 2024-25, organized two international conferences – in 2023 and 2024 – to map, census, study and analyze the ECoC. Representatives of the various entities mentioned above participated as discussants in these events, in particular the organization promoting GO!2025 Nova Gorica – Gorizia European Capital of Culture.

The working group – already an important result in itself – has produced original documents (comparative tables and reports), documenting what has been done in the architectural and urban fields in the last forty years by the cities that have obtained the title of European Capital of Culture. The mapping has allowed us to bring out issues and tools, outcomes and aspects that no one had yet systematized: from urban and architectural design strategies, to the extension of the areas of intervention, to the types and number of interventions, to the participation of the inhabitants, up to the forms and times of structuring and realizing the projects. In particular, the comparative analysis has allowed us to evalu-

ate their effectiveness both in terms of the event and of the urban “legacy” left by the ECoCs themselves.

The work carried out by the two “Collectives” (COLGO! and VAGO) has allowed us to open a specific focus on the impacts of the European Capital of Culture experience and on the most suitable tools to understand it in its many facets.

Such evidence, which we partly return with this publication, therefore becomes worthy of absolute consideration; to date there are no updated and specific national or international publications that have carried out a systemic analysis of the architectural and socio-economic impacts of ECoCs over time.

This volume, between teaching and research, scientific data, creativity and experimentation, is configured as a pioneer within this forty-year journey of the European Capitals of Culture; a star map, which traces a first path to orient in the silvery light of the dawn of the future the infinite path of Europe and its communities on the road to erecting a strong, united, possible, safe and happy “common home”.

For an introduction to the themes and places of Culture Cities

The phenomenon of the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) appears as a crossroads of reflections on urban identity, collective memory, and transformation dynamics, configuring itself not only as an annual cultural event but as a laboratory for the future of Europe. The disciplinary essays in the *Comparing ECoCs* chapter, in addition to a historical overview embracing the experience of the European Capitals of Culture from their “invention” with Athens 1985, up to the designation forty years later of Nova Gorica - Gorizia in 2025, reflect on the proximities and distances between these cities. They aim to highlight not only analogies and differences but also methods and tools for addressing this new cultural and, consequently, political geography. A transversal reading of these essays can offer various insights related to paradoxes, antinomies, legacies, and identities; however, one figure emerges with greater clarity than other themes: the figure of stratification. This concept allows for framing European cities in terms of eminently cultural artifacts, defining interpretive and evaluative models, as well as intervention and transformation strategies.

Adriano Venudo identifies the European city as a foundational element of a possible *Ecumenopolis*, where the “cultural” dimension defines its nature, contributing to shaping a shared urban landscape. In this vision, urbanity constitutes one of the fundamental reasons for Europe’s existence as a recognizable and defined entity. The city, as a spatial manifestation of the positive tension between innovation and permanence, is thus a diachronic stratification of value systems, formed by the conservation and transformation of concrete places. This stratification is multidimensional, a process of “blend” or integration, a characteristic that distinguishes European cities from American or Asian urban models, which are characterized by more homogeneous planning and less sedimentation. Within this framework, ECoCs amplify this tendency towards stratification, translating it into a resource for urban innovation.

The concept of stratification, in the essay on the *Analogous Capital*, thus becomes an intrinsic characteristic of the city as a complex artifact. The urbs, the physical dimension of the city, is understood as the raw material of ECoCs, a built archive of history and culture. The key operation for the constitution of an ECoC, therefore, becomes re-signification, through the inscription of new signs and traces into the existing stratified architectural body of the city. The objective is to overcome the dichotomy between ephemeral and permanent, leaving a lasting legacy that strengthens the sense of belonging and European citizenship. It represents a mystical body that embodies the sense of belonging of European citizens to a common cultural area.

Sonia Prestamburgo, in her focus on evaluation, consequently recognizes the need to consider both direct and intangible, long-term benefits. To act in this regard, it becomes necessary to identify advanced evaluation methodologies for the complex transformation operations underlying ECoCs, proposing the adoption of diverse, multi-criteria theoretical models and evaluation tools specific to environmental economics. The objective is to support programming, spatial management, and public decisions oriented towards transformation.

ECoCs are thus understood as a tool for building European identity and strengthening citizenship, through the development of a shared urban culture.

ECoC compared: 40 case studies.

GO!2025 Nova Gorica/Gorizia read and interpreted by RRR Lab.

This is a special occasion, which takes on the characteristics of a challenge against and in time to test, verify, imagine and create events and works capable of leaving traces and signs in an infinite variety of forms and expressions to connect the past to the future of this cross-border territory, singular in its development, a space divided, but also deeply united, today as yesterday, by memories, peoples, communities, languages and places.

It is in this light that we must read the experiences of the two years of teaching and research on the European Capitals of Culture of the RRR Lab. Laboratory, which involved the two student “Collectives”, COLGO! and VAGO, in 2024 and 2025 respectively, with the aim of offering a design contribution at different scales, in the large area and in detail for the two cities involved, Nova Gorica and Gorizia.

In both cases, the students were asked to choose and analyze some cities named European and Italian Capitals of Culture, in order to study their methods of organization and management of the event, evaluate its performance and the direct and indirect effects generated by it in the medium and long term.

The cities selected by the students and from which to “learn” were forty, 16 for the COLGO! group and 24 for VAGO, a kaleidoscope of colors, stories, traditions, anthropized spaces, water lines, natural and semi-natural greenery, woven together to form different textures of cities and lively resident communities proud to be part of them.

The filing of the sample cities followed a common development:

1. identity card of the “capital” city;
2. presentation of some architectural projects of urban regeneration of particular relevance for their capacity to attract tourists and revitalize the space;
3. evaluation of the impacts generated by the “capital of culture” event through the use of SWOT Analysis.

For each city, in addition to the basic information, the following were highlighted: the “theme” of the event, the expected budget, the number of visitors and the sectors affected by the enhancement initiatives.

In operational terms, it was decided to have the students use the SWOT analysis tool, in its classic matrix form with four opposing quadrants, with open fields¹.

This was particularly useful for knowing, deepening and integrating the study of the components of the city territory, evaluating their role and functions in the construction of the relational texture.

In detail, 39 SWOTs were created under ex post analysis conditions; 1 in itinere. The in itinere analysis, for the case study of the double Italian Capital of Culture 2023, Bergamo and Brescia, allowed us to select the different intervention hypotheses and to test in real time the efficiency of the chosen devices. The ex post analyses allowed us to monitor the results and the effects of economic, social, cultural and environmental impact produced by the project actions carried out in the different cities and at the different project scales.

The knowledge framework was completed, where possible, by the collection and analysis of data on employment performance, tourist influxes, participation in initiatives, social inclusion, strengthening and/or creation of economic activities.

And it is precisely in this perspective of supporting the collection and validation of information to optimize the programming and intervention activity in the management of space that the key to understanding these 40 case studies on ECoCs is found and, simultaneously, the possibility of combining the typical objectives of territorial and urban landscape planning is realized, with the construction of scenarios and with alternative methods of use and valorization of the constituent elements of the same, with the themes of evaluation, aimed at determining from a qualitative-quantitative perspective the positive and negative externalities generated by the impacts produced by human actions on the balance of the environmental ecosystem, also and above all as an aid to public decisions in the construction of strategies aimed at valorizing the cultural and environmental heritage of cities.

Cultural grafting and lasting traces: Urban transformation in European Capitals of Culture

The European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) program, now in its fortieth year, has often been considered an accelerator for territorial revitalization and has established itself as a globally influential model. As highlighted by Maria Elena Buslacchi, it has inspired similar initiatives at national and international levels. Although the designation does not guarantee direct funding from the European Commission, the title provides significant visibility, stimulating support from public and private entities for the execution of projects on various scales. The analysis of the various thematic contributions collected in this book reveals a possible interpretive thread identifiable with the complex dialectic between the ephemeral and the permanent in urban transformation driven by cultural events, with particular attention to the involvement of local communities and the search for a lasting impact. These contributions explore the various ways cultural initiatives can catalyze processes, emphasizing the necessity of a critical approach rooted in the territory.

Since the 1990s, the ECoC initiative has progressively evolved into a tool for urban regeneration. This change has often favored a model that, while leading to significant urban transformations, has also drawn criticism for prioritizing top-down governance and an exogenous audience over local communities. According to Marta Grimolizzi, this process of “festivalization” risks shifting attention from residents’ needs to mere tourist attractiveness, linked to the themes of “eventful cities” and the “experience economy”.

However, ECoCs can also offer opportunities for more virtuous transformations, focused on inclusion and the valorization of local identities. From this perspective, Elisabetta Nascig explores the concept of a “welcome village,” which uses the term “village” metaphorically to identify the values of belonging and collective identity. The success of the Capitals therefore depends on the ability to equally balance economic and tourist development with the protection of the social fabric, promoting a truly accessible and representative culture and ensuring the “right to the city”. In this context, the role of art and architecture manifests through strategies that seek

to leave a lasting trace while often operating with temporary interventions. Art, understood in its broadest sense, is seen by Michela Lupieri as an agent of socio-cultural transformation that activates processes of collaboration and dialogue with public space. The concept of grafting proposed by Mariacristina D'Oria offers a powerful metaphor for this relationship between the city, understood as a permanent base, and events, which are powerful yet temporary driving forces. Alessio Bortot and Giulia Piccinin emphasize how, since their origins, the organization of large events has transformed cities, both permanently and temporarily, through urban and architectural interventions. The quest for wonder in this sense is a meta-historical human passion that has evolved through the use of tools and devices, from the Baroque magic lantern to modern projections on building facades and light festivals, with the aim of offering immersive experiences.

The case of Nova Gorica and Gorizia 2025, the first time the ECoC title has been entrusted to a pair of divided cities born from a historical-political split, represents an exemplary laboratory for this complex transformation. According to Claudio Meninno, this territory, despite presenting evident inefficiencies related to administrative duplication, also has the potential to translate into competitive advantages. Meninno introduces the concept of "third spaces," understood as physical and symbolic places of encounter and hybridization to overcome the logic of the border as a barrier and promote the border as a resource. Luigi Di Dato views this border as a connecting element of a very small metropolis with a multiplicity of memories and identities.

Potentially, European Capitals of Culture are thus processes of cultural and urban grafting. Their effectiveness and impact depend on their ability to transcend the logic of spectacle to embrace a long-term vision that recognizes and values the richness of local identities and memories, favoring the deposition of traces – both physical and immaterial – for future generations.

Notes

1 The SWOT analysis, acronym of the quadrants in strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, is configured as a logical-operational scheme aimed at identifying problems, analyzing and identifying solutions and lines of intervention, applying strategies, verifying and monitoring expected and/or potential results in a vision of intertemporal dynamics, with attributes of simplicity, synthesis, clarity, flexibility and resilience to changes in the context/scenario (e.g.: regulatory evolution, structures, functions, objectives and policies, needs, economic and environmental conditions, ecc.).

Thomas Bisiani is an architect and researcher in Architectural and Urban Design at the University of Trieste. He deals with project tools and methods and with the transformations of large architectural complexes within the broader context of urban culture.

Sonia Prestamburgo is full professor of Elements of Economics and Valuation at the University of Trieste, where she teaches Environmental Valuation and Landscape Management. From a research perspective, she deals with sustainability in the use of territorial resources, study of the processes of use and enhancement of urban space and landscape, analysis and application of models and tools for economic assessment and control of impacts at different scales.

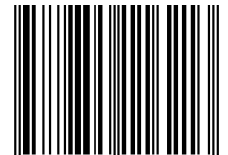
Adriano Venudo is an architect and associate professor in Architectural and Urban Design at the University of Trieste. He deals with architecture and the city, with a focus on reuse, green infrastructures and contemporary urban landscapes, exploring integrated and operational design approaches.

All the authors have been dealing for years, in an interdisciplinary way through teaching and research, with urban culture and the relationship between architecture, city and politics. Their work develops in the wake of Pierre George's thought on the urban milieu, a concept introduced in French geography already in the 1950s to describe, in a geographical-environmental key, the structural relationship between society, man and the urban environment.

What if culture could redesign the city?

This volume explores forty years of the European Capital of Culture Programme as a tool for urban transformation and regeneration. Through case studies, essays and mappings, the text tells how architecture, temporary events, art, happenings and cultural strategies can generate new urban futures. A collective and interdisciplinary journey, which explores the image of the city and imagines and designs its reality in progress.

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